Freedom of Access to Information and the Digital Divide:
The Answer's in the Palm of your Hand.

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Freedom of Access to Information

- Access to Information is a human right, defined in Article 19 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights (1947)

- Everyone has the right to Freedom of Expression, including to the right to:
  - Seek,
  - Receive, and
  - Impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Access and Libraries

- Access to Information is a driving principle for Library and Information work

- IFLA's FAIFE Core Activity has sought to protect and promote freedom of access to information and freedom of expression in libraries since 1997

- THE FAIFE Committee and its Chair Kai Ekholm take the principle out to the profession worldwide through publications, statements, conferences and workshops.

Promoting Freedom of Access to Information

- Some nations protect freedom of expression and access to information in the constitution.
    - New Clause 100 of the Norwegian Constitution
- Freedom of the press and media is protected in many countries.
    - US First Amendment
- Over 70 countries have Freedom of Information laws, giving access to official documents.
    - UK Freedom Information Act 2000
- Progressive countries provide good information access facilities such as libraries and encourage good Internet access.

Preventing freedom of access to information

- Many countries have systems of censorship including controls on press and media.

- Churches and other social institutions also seek to hinder expression and access

- Internet is filtered at national and institutional level (including by libraries) in most parts of the world.

- But access to information is also limited by resources, particularly -

- The Digital Divide

The Digital Divide

- 2009 statistics of Internet users as percentage of population (from ITU and other sources)
- Global 25% (consisting of)
  - North America 74%
  - Australia/Oceania 60%
  - Europe 52%
  - Latin America/Caribbean 30%
  - Middle East 28%
  - Asia 19% (from nearly 4 billion)
  - Africa 7% (from nearly 1 billion)
- This is the digital divide in stark simplicity.

Bill Gates bridging the digital divide

- The enormous scale of global inequality explains the anxiety about the Digital Divide
- There have been projects to take Internet access into villages and slums everywhere in the world
  - eg Mission 2007 sought to take access to every Indian village.
- However, this does tend to assume that
  - Digital = Content, or that
  - Digital + Content = Good access
- But is this actually the best way forward?

- Maybe before we set about trying to equalise global digital access, we should ask two questions:
    - What content do people in developing countries actually want?
    - What is the best way to deliver that content?
- The amount of attention paid to the first question has been tiny, and
- Assumptions brought from the industrialised countries have been used to 'answer' the second.

What sort of content to people want

- There have been very few good surveys (meaning surveys that just listen, without suggesting) of people's information needs in developing countries.
- Such evidence as there is suggests that people want
  - Material for their studies (especially for school)
  - Leisure material (poems, stories, songs, moving pictures, games)
  - Information that will make their lives easier (money, business, health, opportunities for assistance from government and NGOs, etc)

How do people obtain the content they want now?

- At present it is very hard for people in the poorest communities to obtain information
  - Government neglects them
  - They are often isolated and distant from schools, clinics, community centres, libraries
  - Corruption leads to withholding of information
  - They lack information skills (literacy in particular).
- They rely on oral communication and trust traditional sources and 'networks of affection'.

Oral communication in Africa

Mobile communication media

- What is needed is a means to amplify and speed up oral communication.

- The people themselves have identified that cell phones perform these functions.

- When state telecommunications monopolies are broken up and competing cell phone companies create a market, people find ways to acquire cell phones.

- They also find ways to pay for them, modify them, repair them, share them, rent them out and exploit them in ways scarcely imagined in the North.

The success of the cell phone in Africa

- Around 2004 the number of cell phones overtook land lines in Africa
- There are now more than 280 million cell phones in Africa and they are increasing at an enormous rate
- This contrasts with a maximum of 67 million Internet users
- The cell phone is genuinely successful technology
- People feel 'ownership' of the cell phone.

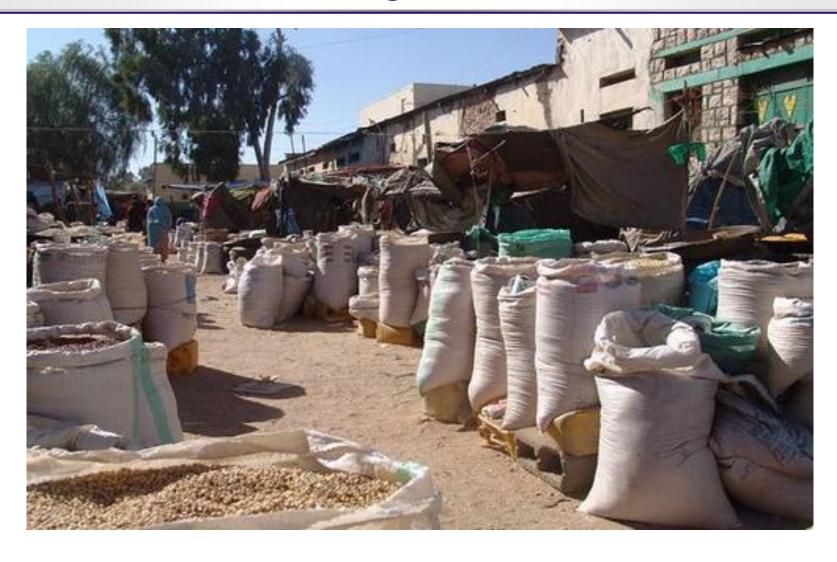# Herdsman with his cell phone

The cell phone changing the world

- People love cell phones and enjoy social talk, but they also:
  - Reinforce their confidence and self respect,
  - Organise the extended family,
  - Budget for the home and work,
  - Tap the networks of affection for loans and support,
  - Seek work and organise earning opportunities.
- Three examples from the small but growing literature will illustrate this.

African grain market

Grain markets in Niger

- Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world.
- People subsist on locally grown millet and sorghum sold in local weekly markets.
- Shortages and large price inequalities were common.
- Suppliers now check the supplies and prices in the markets via cell phone contacts.
- Markets with shortages are now supplied and prices show a tendency to equalise throughout the country.
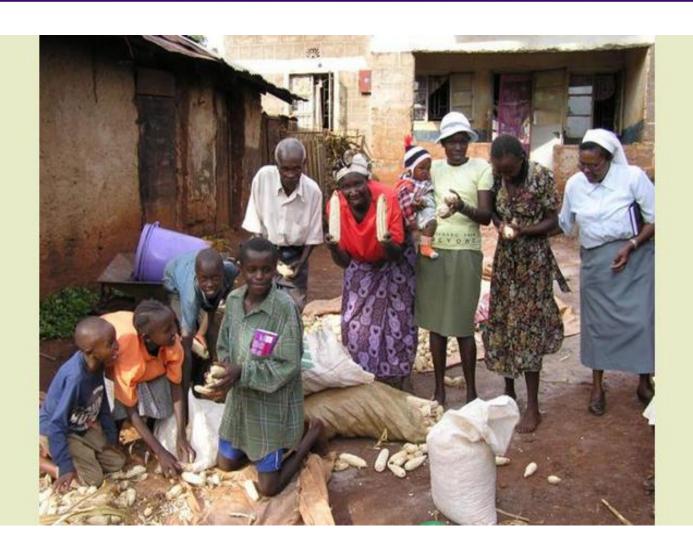
Shop with M-PESA facility

Financial transfers in Kenya (and other countries)

- In countries like Kenya the majority of the population were outside the banking system (too little money and no banks nearby).

- M-PESA is a system (set up 2007) for person to person cash transfers using cell phone technology.

- A cash deposit with one agent is paid out by another.

- Customers no longer have long journeys and waiting times for payments or loans.

- Economic activity and family welfare are greatly benefited.

The extended family

Family management in The Gambia

- Heads of households and extended families are able to deal with family problems and can organise support instantly using cell phones they give to their dependents.

- Budgeting for daily purchases of food and identification of the best bargains can be done by phone.

- Contact with family members working abroad (who can supply remittances and loans) is instant.

The future of cell phone use

- Both the benefits obtained from cell phone use and people's pleasure in using them come from simple devices with only voice and SMS facilities.

- The cell phone has broken through the digital divide before the ability to add multi media access and Internet connection have been added.

- The cell phone is popular technology adopted because people have seen its advantages for themselves and found ways to obtain and use it.

- The developing world has defied predictions and pessimism to take the digital future into the palm of its hand.