Internet access for Africa!

By Leigh Andrews   23 Nov 2015

It seems everyone has access to the internet these days, especially with the proliferation of mobile phones locally, but as many as 60% of people around the world still don't have regular access to the World Wide Web. Here's how we can overcome this.

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While the supply of international connectivity has exploded since 2009's submarine cables connected even the poorest countries in Africa to the global Internet, we're by no means at saturation point yet. In fact, barely any countries on the continent have met the UN's Broadband Commission's goal, for entry-level broadband services priced at less than 5% of average monthly income. The reality, as reported in 2014's Affordability Report by the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) shows the cost of entry-level broadband is actually at more than 40% of monthly income for people living under $2 per day in at least 46 countries- it's at more than 100% of monthly income in others. If you consider Africa comprises just 54 countries in total, depending on who you ask, that's shocking.

Eckart Zollner, Business Development Manager at Jasco/NewTelco South Africa, was keynote speaker at the first Africa 2015 Global Carrier Community Members' (GCCM) conference in Cape Town, from 16 to 17 November and elaborated on the topic.

I chatted to him during a break at last week's AfricaCom conference about addressing the internet access challenges in developing markets as well as evolution into the digital economy on the continent.

⚏ *1. Talk us through the main issues of internet access in Africa.*

Zollner: From an access perspective, there is little existing infrastructure in Africa so mobile technology becomes the main medium. Unfortunately this is still relatively expensive, but prices are coming down and over the next few years we should see a shift.

Looking to the networks then, in the greater part of Africa they are yet to get caught up in the LTE (or Long Term Evolution) high-speed wireless broadband technology rollout. For that to happen we need greater investment, as that's the only way to reach meaningful geographic penetration for better 3G and 4G services. It's not all doom and gloom though as that will come. It'll likely follow the pattern of the big metropolitan areas getting it first and rolling out to more rural regions from there.

The big focus for mobile operators is to get newer technology into hands of consumers. Affordability of handsets is still an issue, as well as that of mobile data and airtime, but the move from purely using mobiles for voice calls and text messages to the rise of the likes of WhatsApp's data calling brings other ways to connect over the Internet.

⫶ 2. List a few clever ways around this that are already in place.

Zollner: USSD is big in Africa and cheaper than SMSes. Due to economies of scale, mobile operators in Africa have to look at infrastructure sharing and other models have emerged like tower sharing. Operators need to launch a cost-effective way to get the barrier to entry right for the mass consumer. If people are only living on two dollars a day in a specific country, spending 15% of that on telecommunications is a lot. This is where OTT services like WhatsApp and Facebook prove their benefit. They're cost-effective as far as marketing is concerned and in getting people into the market. That's why they're seen as a 'catchment portal' from which consumers get to participate more with the Internet and broadband-based services. They're letting people derive basic benefits, like tapping into the information available, and small scale entrepreneurs can reach out through these models.

If we address the barriers to entry, economic activity can follow. As people become more successful in doing so, their own economic means can be uplifted.

⫶ 3. What are the long-term changes envisioned and their expected impact on the way mobile business is done?

Zollner: Certainly in the fields where we have shortcomings on the continent, like education and healthcare. I expect e-learning to make a stronger impact on this continent than in Europe, where there are qualified teachers and well set up classrooms. Here, e-learning has a bigger role to play, and government needs to enable this better in order to uplift the population, especially as children have a greater affinity for technology. Looking to e-health then, we definitely lack enough skilled doctors and surgeons. The ability to diagnose and treat remotely from such health services would improve the quality of life on the continent.

For the rest of it, I expect the majority of ICT services will follow the US in trends such as cloud services, cloud streaming, video and convergence. That's why an Internet platform is so important as it becomes an enabler.

On the back of that, other government services can also deliver their services over the Internet if they don't have adequate office infrastructure, such as Home Affairs delivering its services electronically. With 2G we've already seen the impact of mobile payment methods, government can also deploy this for prepaid water and electricity, with the internet becoming a channel for those services.

But for this to be a success, we first need better education and digital literacy. That's what will truly drive data demand in the local market and how service providers need to evolve to remain sustainable and competitive in this environment.

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