

Mobile Telephones Changing Lives in Africa



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The World Bank estimates there are about 650 million mobile phone users in African countries south of the Sahara Desert. That is greater than the number of users in the United States and European Union.

Samia Melhem works for the World Bank to increase information technologies in Africa. She says mobile phones are the fastest growing technology on the continent.

“Faster than TV, definitely faster than electricity. More people have access to mobile phones and hence communication. More people have internet access today in Africa than they have access to water, clean water, or even sanitation. So we can say that this has been the most significant revolution in terms of changing the African landscape and how people live their daily life.”

CNN television recently named seven ways of life it says have been revolutionized because of mobile phones. They include political activism, education, entertainment, disaster management, agriculture and health.

Another area is banking. Reports say half or more of the adults in Gabon, Kenya and Sudan use mobile money. Rene Mendy sells goods in the streets of Dakar, Senegal. But he never had enough money to open a bank account.

Now he uses a mobile phone banking service called Orange Money. With his telephone, he can add or take out as little as one dollar. He can make payments and send money to family members who live far away.

Orange Money says it serves four million customers in ten countries. The World Bank’s Samia Melham notes that the French company is facing competition from other mobile banking services.

“The mobile banking is a huge trend. And people in the West don’t understand it, because most people have bank accounts and they have credit cards. It [mobile banking] is the instantaneous acquisition of cash at a much lower cost. The cost is the cost of sending an SMS, which is almost nothing compared to what traditional transfer agents, like Western Union, would charge - 10 dollars or more for a particular money transfer.”

In education, the United Nations agency UNESCO is holding its second Mobile Learning Week in Paris later this month. Conference delegates are to discuss how mobile phone use can increase the number of people who read. Other issues include how mobile technologies can support teachers, and make it easier for girls and women to receive an education.

And that's the VOA Special English Technology Report, written by Karen Leggett. Transcripts, MP3s and podcasts of our reports are at voaspecialenglish.com. I'm Steve Ember.