

African digital villages receive a boost

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10 Oct 2007

Telecommunications equipment supplier Ericsson in partnership with Columbia's University's Earth Institute has set aside Sh600 million to connect African villages to the information super highway.

The Millennium Villages project, as the initiative is known, is currently underway in different African countries.

The African digital villages' project is taking the form of mobile telephony and the roll-out of internet facilities.

The pilot phase of the project involves 80 villages in 10 African countries whose long-term ambition is to take mobile telecommunications and the internet to more than 400,000 people living in rural African communities.

With Africa already lagging behind in bridging the digital divide between the rural and urban dwellers, minimal economic growth can only be expected.

In a wider perspective, upcoming companies cannot expect to make a mark in the market if they continue to sideline rural populations.

Ericsson country manager for East Africa, Thomas Sonesson, says that his firm's intention is to lift the standards of the rural populace in East Africa and the dream can only be achieved through digitising rural societies.

"Providing these villages with mobile telecommunications should not only help improve the provision of basic services such as health care, education and safety but also act as a foundation for fostering economic growth and development."

Sonesson says that his firm's commitment to the Millennium Villages project is in line with their vision to be the prime driver of the information society in Africa.

"It will allow us to apply technology for social, economic and environmental benefits while at the same time stimulating new business development in emerging markets," he said.

Ericsson has for a long time enjoyed the competitive advantage of being a dominant telecoms supplier in Africa and this will help it create a healthy rapport with African operators to provide connectivity to the villages.

On the other hand, the Columbian-based Earth Institute has given high prominence to mobile phone network coverage in different African countries. A case example is in Kenya where the institution has helped roll-out mobile telephony in the

Kenyan village of Dertu.

Jeffrey Sachs, President of the Earth Institute and a former Special Advisor to the UN Secretary General cites the mobile phone as an effective tool in the fight against poverty, particularly for poor communities across Africa.

"Mobile technology will not only facilitate communication across and beyond borders, but will also be an engine for economic growth."

He added that the partnership between his institute and Ericsson is underlined in the four pillars of the Millennium Development Goals, and will work with its mobile division Sony Ericsson to provide applications and services needed for the Millennium Villages project.

In Kenya, the digital villages' project has already taken root after Safaricom and Celtel proposed to develop a comprehensive end-to-end telecommunication strategy in the villages through increased mobile phone connectivity and coverage.

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