

Access to web, phones key to helping the poor: LeWeb

Julie Mollins, Reuters

PARIS, Dec 9 (Alertnet) - Governments worldwide must boost internet accessibility in order to nurture democracy and economic development, entrepreneur Loic Le Meur said at the prestigious LeWeb technology conference in Paris which he founded.

The conference brought together some 3,500 of the world's top digital experts and entrepreneurs from 60 countries to discuss the state of the technology industry and its relationship with economic growth.

"Stage one is to help provide those tools to help people express themselves and get more democracy," Le Meur told AlertNet, the global humanitarian news service run by the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"The next stage is economic development."

He pointed to the potential that remains for technology growth in developing countries.

"You see very few start-ups (companies) from developing countries, but we have a few from North Africa," Le Meur said.

"I should probably do a LeWeb somewhere in Africa."

But, while delegates focused attention on how to develop internet technology and smart phones, others outside the conference have pointed to how the more accessible, standard mobile phone can aid social and economic development.

Millennium Development Goal 8 (MDG 8) - one among a framework of global targets set in 2000 by the United Nations to be met by 2015 to try and alleviate poverty - stipulates that new technologies, especially information and communications technologies (ICTs), should be made available to all, in cooperation with the private sector.

Currently, at least 5.4 billion of the planet's seven billion people have access to mobiles, which means the MDG 8 target is achievable, according to a forthcoming paper to be published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and made available to AlertNet.

Estimates indicate that among those 5.4 billion people over 483 million come from low-income countries and 2.6 billion from lower middle-income countries, according to the paper titled "Mobile Technologies and Empowerment."

The paper also showed ICTs had an impact on democratic governance, poverty reduction, energy use and the environment, crisis prevention and recovery.

SMS TECHNOLOGY

Further development of the existing technology used for text messaging known as SMS (short message service) on basic mobile phones could help African farmers get their products to market in Europe for example, said Raul Zambrano, an ICT policy advisor at the UNDP in New York.

"Most people have a simple, basic SMS voice phone - there are only about 15 percent of people in Africa who can use the Internet," Zambrano added.

"Most of those people are in Egypt and South Africa, the big countries, but in the smaller, poorer countries like Malawi and Mozambique there are very low penetration rates," he told AlertNet in a telephone interview, adding that by 2015 about 80 percent of people will have a device which can connect to the Internet.

Developing countries also need Internet service centers where people can undertake basic business transactions and access basic documents such as birth certificates, land titles and passports to help achieve other MDG targets, he added.

The MDG guidelines were proposed with the idea of providing blanket broadband access before the proliferation of mobile phones, but high internet service provision costs in poor regions have created a barrier for the poor, Zambrano said.

A 2005 study by mobile operator Vodafone showed increased mobile phone ownership is directly linked to GDP growth.

"A developing country which had an average of 10 or more mobile phones per 100 population between 1996 and 2003 would have enjoyed per capita GDP growth that was 0.59 percent higher than that of an identical country," according to the paper.

"I think broadband has probably been oversold," Phil Libin, whose Evernote application for storing text, audio and visual notes across mobile and desktop devices is available on both smart phones and basic mobile phones.

"I think there are probably much more important things in real developing areas," he told AlertNet at the conference. "The prevalence of texting and normal mobile phones and people doing quite a lot with very basic technology is fine."

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(Editing by Rebekah Curtis and Paul Casciato)

Posted by Jason Lomberg, Technical Editor

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