

Hopes high for wireless in global aid

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From dealing with natural disasters to dealing with the spread of contagious disease, even some of the world's poorest countries could benefit from technological advancements, particularly mobile communications, or so argue corporate executives and international agencies.

"The role of communication is always critical. ... We need to reduce errors, speed up response times," said Paul Margie, senior director for technology partnerships at the United Nations, who spoke at the Wireless Communication Association's annual conference in Washington earlier this week. He added that making full use of both satellite and fixed-line communications network systems allow aid providers to respond more quickly to even the biggest disasters.

Certainly, international aid agencies have been making more use of information technology tools even in some of the remotest parts of the world, as the Asian tsunami disaster of 2004 and Pakistan's massive earthquake last year have demonstrated. Not only do mobile phones in particular allow aid workers to talk to one another on the ground, they also help various institutions to communicate and coordinate efforts to make maximum use of their resources on the ground and back in headquarters.

"We are using technology to protect against hurricanes and floods," said Ralph Diaz, director of engineering at BIVA in Puerto Rico, a privately held telecom company.

Relying more on mobile handsets can also cut administrative costs and decrease dependency on having a paper trail, Margie argued, pointing out that "using paper and pencil takes a lot of time, costs a lot of money, and leads to errors."

In addition, setting up mobile technology in areas where there is little existing infrastructure can actually lead to better service for a smaller price tag, according to Uzoma Udemba, chairman and chief executive of Communication Trends of Nigeria. He pointed out that across Africa, there was a greater willingness to have a common market, but in order to achieve that goal, it was necessary to build up telecommunications infrastructure that went beyond national boundaries.

"There is a huge opportunity for telecom in general and broadband in Africa," Udemba told conference participants. "I urge you to invest in Africa and explore the market."

Certainly, bringing in more private capital is key to ensuring more use of the latest technologies even in some of the world's poorest countries and to help them out in case of an unforeseen disaster.

"There are 2 billion cellular phone subscribers worldwide ... there is a real growth in the number of consumers and manufacturers are increasingly aware of this," said Andrew Bartley, principal investment officer of the global information and telecommunications group at the International Finance Corporation, the private sector arm of the World Bank. He cautioned, however, that while the method for charging a phone is becoming more applicable to where it's being sold, reform of the technology sector is particularly challenging.

With regards to the integration of technology, there are power issues which are challenging but solvable, according to Andrew Bartley, principal investment officer, Global Information and

Telecommunications at the International Finance Corporation.

Private corporate executives agreed.

"Various market segments around the world need our support," said Manish Gupta, vice president of marketing and alliances at Aperto Networks. "It's not about sexy services, it's about basic connectivity and right now the prices are right."

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