

Mobile phones are not always a cure for poverty in remote regions

March 30 2017, by Petr Matous



Ethiopian farmers exchanging phone numbers with a research assistant. Credit: Petr Matous, Author provided

A mobile phone is typically the first and only modern information communication technology for inhabitants of the most remote rural areas around world.

Mobile phones are expected to help poor people with no formal education to connect to the external economy and society, and thus [break](#)

[out of poverty](#). That is the theory, but evidence is rare and mixed.

There are [some reports](#) that mobile phones can help tackle poverty. But we need to look more closely at how the phones are used in certain cases, such as where people live in remote and [rural areas](#).

Mobile phone use

My colleagues and I have conducted social experiments in villages in [Ethiopia](#), [India](#) and [Indonesia](#). The experiments included large-scale donations of mobile phones, long-term surveys of communication patterns, and interventions into people's mobility.

We consistently found that the expectations on mobile phones may be overly optimistic, with the findings [published this week in Transportation Research](#).

We found that mobile phones donated to the poorest and most isolated rural inhabitants are not generally used in ways that could improve their economic standing.

The reasons for this are obvious once you understand what our study showed on the use of mobile phones in these communities.

Whom to talk to

To benefit financially from a mobile phone, you need to be able to be mobile and travel beyond your local neighbourhood.

But if you are one of the many millions of farmers around the world who have almost no access to motorised transport, most of the people you know probably live within a [15-minute walking distance](#) from your

home.

You meet and talk to these people daily. You do not call people who live beyond the walking distance from your home because you do not know enough people who live so far away.

Those who are more mobile and have contacts outside of their village can use the new [technology](#) to substitute some trips, but isolated individuals do not become better connected when they get a mobile phone.

What we observed was that inhabitants of remote communities do not make new contacts by phone.



Ethiopian farmers receive their first donated mobile phones. Credit: Ayako Ishiwata, Author provided

Those who have some access to transportation and whose social networks spread beyond walking distance often use their phones to set up meetings and then discuss what they need to discuss face-to-face.

We found that phone users prefer to discuss important matters in person, even if the cost of transportation is significantly higher than the cost of phone calls. This observation seems just as valid for the poor in remote communities as for the rich in the cities.

Even in urban centres of wealthy countries, people who are less mobile need information communication technologies less. Face-to-face contact is still crucial and goes hand-in-hand with virtual contact.

Economic benefit

If you are an immobile poor farmer, you can potentially use your phone to check whether you might get a better price for your crop on more distant markets.

Buyers can conveniently pay you by mobile money, but if you cannot transport your produce to them, information about prices or [mobile money](#) will not help.

After a couple of weeks or months of trying to use your mobile to get ahead in life, you give up. You start spending the limited cash earned from the crop you sell on the local market to a broker who has a car.

The phone is then used just to make fun calls to your neighbours, take photos and play music.

This is typical of the behaviour we observed in our studies. So where is the [economic benefit](#) to the phone user in that?

After the novelty wears off, most people used their phones for what they enjoyed doing before they invested into these new symbols of status – that is, chatting with friends and family.

These are great activities and a good reason to own a [phone](#), provided that the users do not need to [starve to pay their phone bills](#).

Unfortunately, with shrinking budgets, more public and private money spent on information technologies often means less spent on health and education in remote regions.

Currently, it is easier for many to access a [mobile phone](#) than a [toilet](#) or even a [toothbrush](#).

Information technology cannot substitute for a lack of transport or sanitation in marginalised communities.

To achieve any desired potential of economic benefits for [people](#) in remote rural communities, the development of infrastructure for [information](#) technologies needs to be accompanied with institutional support, access to adequate transportation and provision of other basic services.

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