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## **Mobile Phones and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria: A Review of Extant Literature**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the relevance of mobile phones in the alleviation of poverty in Nigeria. The researcher depended solely on secondary sources of data to arrive at the conclusions made in this paper. The paper argues that the invention of mobile phone and its subsequent ownership by a large majority of Nigerians can be instrumental to poverty alleviation in Nigeria as it does in other parts of the world. The mobile phone can provide sustainable poverty alleviation through its use in generating Gross Domestic Product (GDP), job creation, increase in productivity, increase in revenue from taxation, aiding disaster relief, social capital and social cohesion and in health and education among others. The researchers concluded that mobile phone is a very useful tool that can eradicate poverty in the society because its impact on economic development that serves as the focal point of all other forms of development is enormous.

**Keywords:** Mobile Phones, Telecommunication Technology, ICT, Poverty Eradication

### **Introduction**

Poverty is defined as being unable to afford basic human needs such as clean water, nutrition, healthcare, education, clothing and shelter. World Bank (2001) defines extreme poverty as living on less than US \$1.25 per day and moderate poverty on less than US \$2.00 per day. In absolute poverty, Obayelu & Ogulade (2006) opine that individuals lack adequate food and shelter, education and health deprivations that keep them from leading the kind of life that everyone values. They also face extreme vulnerability to ill-health, economic dislocation and natural disasters and are often exposed to ill treatment by institutions of the state and the society are powerless to influence key decisions that affect their lives (World Bank, 2001). If one is a low income earner, he would have little to save and then little to invest, Lynn (2006). Hence, low investment means low productivity and low production leads to continued low income. Poverty is,



therefore, a point of contradiction between the resources available to an individual and the demand and condition of his environment (Zubairu & Nakaka, 2006).

Poverty is a global phenomenon. The World Bank report estimates that in 2001, 1.1 billion people had consumption levels below \$1 a day and 2.7 billion lived on less than \$2 per day. The report also shows that 6 million children die of hunger every year; 17,000 every day. UNITUS (2007) also reports, that every year, more than eight million people around the world die because they are too poor to stay alive and that over 1 billion people; one in every six people around the world, live in extreme poverty. Also, that over 100,000,000 primary school age children cannot afford go to school. Back in Nigeria, the story is not different, 70% of Nigerians wallow in absolute poverty (Oshinonebo, 2002). Nigeria also ranks 139<sup>th</sup> of the 157 countries on the Human poverty index, and out of the 108 developing countries, she ranks 80<sup>th</sup> (UNDP, 2007).

Research by Obayelu & Ogulade (2006) shows that some of the programmes seemed to have benefitted those who were already economically buoyant. Moreover, the lack of affordable access to relevant information among the poor, particularly those in the rural areas, can be a source of increased poverty. Traditionally, information is regarded as a critical element in the efficient functioning of markets. According to Chipchase (2006), access to information is also essential for the emergence of global information and knowledge based economy and has the ability to empower poor communities, enhance skills and link various institutions involved in poverty reduction. The poor has little access to advances in information and communication technologies (computers and internet) that open a wide range of opportunities to improve their livelihoods; the benefits from ICT investments have been unevenly distributed between and within countries resulting in what has widely been referred to as the digital divide and information poverty. Most of the beneficiaries of the ICT revolution have been those with resources and skills leaving out the majority of the poor.

The poverty level in developing countries of the world, Nigeria inclusive, keeps growing day-by-day, even with the country's abundant natural material resources notwithstanding. All hope is, however, not lost. Individuals and societies worldwide are making frantic efforts to reduce poverty to its barest minimum, particularly with the revolution in the telecommunication industry. With this revolution, the global ICT sector has witnessed an unprecedented expansion driven by the growth in the use of mobile phones. The mobile industry has experienced expansive growth in a relatively short time span. It was reported that the first billion mobile phones took around twenty years to be sold. The second billion were sold in four years and the third billion in two years (GSMA, 2006). Moreover, current statistics also indicate that 2 billion people currently have subscriptions for cellular phones, enough for one third of the planet's population. In the United States, 66% of the population of 279 million people owns a mobile phone (Katz 2005). In Africa, mobile subscriptions have increased by over 1,000 percent between 1998 and 2003 to 51.8 million. The total number



of mobile phone subscriber's continent wide at the end of 2004 was 76 million (ITU 2008). In 2001, the GSM was introduced into Nigeria and by 2002, mobile subscribers stood at 1.5 million (ITU Report, 2008), but by the end of 2003, MTN alone had 1,650,000 active subscribers on its network, Econet (Zain) had over one million, while Global communications and M-Tel had not less than one million subscribers (ITU, Report, 2008).

### **Methodology**

Being a theoretical review, the researcher depended solely on secondary sources of data to arrive at the conclusions made in this paper. The implication here is that, this work was borne out of consultations of both empirical and theoretical studies carried out by scholars in this field of study. Data and conclusions reached were derived from extensive consultation of textbooks, journals, periodicals, magazines, newspapers and a host of other online materials. Information got from these sources was then content analysed to arrive at the conclusions made here.

### **The Mobile Phone: A Conceptual Review**

Pederson (2009) defines a GSM phone as an object that uses the global system for mobile communications to send and receive calls. Cell or mobile phones are game consoles, still camera, email systems, text messages, carriers of entertainment and business data, nodes of commerce (Katz, 2005). It is a telephone system that can move or be moved easily and quickly from place to place. It is a nomadic object- light, small and involves sight, touch and hearing (Colombo & Scifo 2006); it is an object that has accompanied us and simultaneously changed our everyday life- from love to work from the home to the street- over the last three centuries. The mobile phone has changed and continues to change our relationship with time, space and social practice and values. It is a repository of our memories, feelings and professional lives and contains infinite traces of our life style, our history and our attitudes (Cardoso, 2008); thus, the idea of losing our mobile phone is enough to send chills down our spines, not for the cost of the device itself, but for all that it means in emotional and professional terms. The mobility and portability introduced in the mobile phone have changed our society (Colombo & Scifo, 2006) making it more mobile and flexible. Cardoso (2008) regards the mobile phone as the bridge between two central modes of communication; the television and the internet.

Similar to the internet, mobile phones is an interactive media, but has a wider reach, with 3.3 billion mobile phone users at the end of 2007 to 1.3 billion internet users. Mobile phone has several unique benefits over either the television or the internet because it is permanently carried and always connected. It also has the best audience accuracy and the only mass medium with a built- in payment channel available to every user without any credit cards or pay pal accounts. It is often called the 7<sup>th</sup> mass media (Moore, 2007). Dhanaraja (2009) opines that more than one- third of the world's adult population- most living in the developing



world – has no access to printed knowledge, new skills and technologies that could improve the quality of their lives. Mobile phone technology, therefore, is the cheapest technology in the hands of the poor to fix him at par with other members of the society and the world at large.

### **Mobile Phones and Poverty Alleviation**

The central focus of any poverty reduction programme is economic empowerment of the poor. This implies that giving a poor person food to eat, money to spend or a house to live in, does nothing to eradicate the poverty. Rather, the person should be self-reliant economically through good health, education, good social orientation and political participation. The mobile phone has been playing these roles all over the world. According to Professor Jeffrey Sachs, Director of Columbia University's Earth Institute, the mobile phone is the most powerful technology for ending poverty in the world today. With the spread of 3G, 4G and 5G technology, even the most remote schools in the poorest parts of the world can connect to the internet and share ideas with other classrooms a continent away. Also, that the pastoralists, once isolated, can quickly check on local market prices and make important decisions on whether to bring their herds in from kilometers away for sale in the local town. And that critical health data and life-saving information can be sent by text messages ([www.newsafrika.com](http://www.newsafrika.com), 2010). Marcelle (1999) also opines that the availability of the mobile phone has been re-shaping the material basis of the society as well as bringing about profound restructuring of economic, political and cultural relation among states, Nigeria not an exception. Economically, Bhavnani, Won waichui, Janakiram & silarszky (2008) opine that the mobile phone can reduce poverty in the following direct ways: by generating GDP, by job creation, increase in productivity and increase in revenue from taxation.

Vodafone (2005) reports that in a typical developing country, an increase of 10 mobile phones per 100 people boosts GDP growth by 6%; it was also reported in [www.newsarica.com](http://www.newsarica.com) on Friday 2010 that the results of the monitoring and evaluation study conducted in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania that 1.2% growth GDP can be achieved in developing countries for every 10 per cent increase in mobile penetration. As a result Nigeria, which has sold over 16 million mobile phones and 32.2 million mobile lines presently is supposed to have a superb return not only from the number of mobile phones but also from the mobile industries in the country. For Ovum (2006), the mobile services industry contributed 17.8 billion to GDP in India. Ubaru (2010) also opines that the mobile phone services provide Nigerians with the opportunity to serve as expatriates to other countries there by contributing to the country's GDP through foreign input. Moreover, due to mobile services, more investors have shown interest in Nigeria because of the rapid increase and return on investments, with the recent issuing of licenses to four telecommunications companies, Kenneth (2010) opines that more benefits are on the way for mobile phone users in Nigeria.



The mobile phone has provided a lot of people with jobs directly and indirectly making them self-employed. For instance, Ovum (2006) reports that the mobile telephony industry has created about 3.6 million jobs in India directly or indirectly. In Nigeria, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) reports that one million indirect jobs have been created and over 10,000 direct jobs have been created in the past five years. This figure indicates that the mobile phone could also boast of job creation and poverty alleviation if the conditions that would stimulate its spin-off are introduced and nurtured in a consistent manner. Through the sales of GSM phones and their accessories, repair or fixing of mobile phones, sale of recharge cards, Nigerians have become self-employed. Richardson *et al* (2000) also found that the mobile phone is important among the poor for it enables financial transaction as well as direct income-generating devices in a rural Bangladesh village through the re-sale of minutes. This is done with the support of micro-loans to make the initial purchase of the phone and subsidise the call rates.

The mobile phone also has brought with it increase in the tax revenue in form of import duties, license fees from the mobile operators themselves, their supplier chain and other retailers industry (Deloitte, 2008). This increase in revenue will definitely improve a country's sources of income, which if well utilised, will have positive impact on the poor. For instance, Ovum (2006) reports that the mobile phone sector contributed 3.6 billion in spectrum fees, license, import duties, etc. yearly to India. Also in Nigeria, GSM was introduced in 2001 after the Nigerian telecommunications commission had issued four wireless licenses to MTN, econet, Communications Investment Limited (CIL) and NITEL. However, the CIL had its license withdrawn due to its inability to meet the deadline for payment (*Nigerian Tribune*, 2003)

Mobile phones are powerful tools to estimate demand and seek out new customers. Elegbeleye (2005) opines that the ownership of mobile phone has been democratised and this has bridged the gap between the poor and the rich. As a result, many poor no matter their occupation or their socio-economic status now have mobile phones. This helps to expand several small businesses. For instance, taxi drivers, artisans, hairdressers, motorcycle riders, bricklayers, carpenters, labourers, market women, transporters, etc. now use mobile phone to improve their trades. Katz (2005) maintains that cell phones affect our environment. The mobile phone allows businessmen and women most notably in the form of widespread advertising to know who their customer is, where he is located, and how to reach him. The situation in Nigeria now is that people leave their mobile phone numbers on walls, notice boards or any other strategic location to advertise their goods or expertise by encouraging calls from members of the society who need their services. For instance, Char (2008) opines that rural female market traders in Obiaruku market in Nigeria use mobile phones to increase their supplies, access information such as commodity prices and contact customers. Jagun, Heeks & Whalley (2007) also add that women in the hand-woven textile



sector in southern Nigeria also testified that the mobile phone facilitated their businesses. Mobile phone also allows farmers to receive free information on the prices of the regional markets in West Africa. For instance, Jansen (2007) opines that a group of poor fishermen in Kerala state in India increased their profits by an average of 80% after they began using mobile phone to find out which coastal market places were offering the best prices for Sardines.

In the case of high unemployment, the mobile phone not only provides, but also helps to search for employment. Mobile phones with internet access enable the users to have information on areas where one could be employed. Moreover, through SMS and voice calls, one can communicate with people who will be of assistance in searching for jobs. Mobile phones also reduce the cost of operating and starting up businesses. Deloitte (2008) reports that in Pakistan, many women have small businesses for the provision of beauty and hairdressing services, without the need to incur costs of setting up beauty salons. The mobile phone also enables women in Purdah to have direct contacts with business partners. Another study by Myhr (2006) also reports that increased access to information through the use of mobile phones by fishermen in Tanzania resulted in empowering them through increased bargaining power and knowledge about market opportunities. Improvements in the information flows between buyers and the sellers allow for the exchange of information without the need to travel. Through mobile phone, transaction costs for many poor Nigerians have drastically reduced. People make calls before travelling and for business transactions. This has also reduced the risk and cost of travelling long distances, since businesses are conducted even in one's room. Traders are also able to ensure that demand exists for their products, before setting out on a journey.

The mobile phone is valuable to populations that are constantly on the move due to displacement by drought, floods, wars or weak economies. Mobile services are being used to disseminate locally-generated and locally relevant educational and health information to the people, particularly in rural communities. Examination bodies and educational institutions use mobile phone to communicate with candidates and allow the checking of result through mobile phones. Mobile phone is also used in distant learning for they allow the transfer of data useful for delivering educational content. This can make education available to a large number of people without having to be in the four walls of the classroom. The mobile phone also has facilities such as spelling checks, SMS section etc, which improve the users' vocabulary and their use of language. Valk, Rashid & Elder (2010) see the mobile phone as a suitable tool for advancing education in developing regions as it is the most prevalent ICT in the developing world. Mobile phones, with internet access, also provide the user, irrespective of his socio-economic background, the opportunity to obtain current information from the other parts of the world.

On health, the mobile phone could help in informing the poor about the outbreak of diseases. In Nigeria, mobile phone has been used by the government



to curtail the spread of malaria and the distribution of mosquito nets by the Federal government. Information on the HIV pandemic has severally been passed to Nigerians through the mobile phone. Trevorrow & Mckenna (2006) also argue that the use of the mobile phone SMS could aid collateral health effects; by influencing one person, we may also be reaching thousands of others. This could be beneficial in rural communities where strong family and social networks are evident.

The mobile phone also promotes social capital and cohesion, which may consist of networks, norms, trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. This is also an important factor in the economic development of a society. Goodman (2005) found that there were links between mobile usage, rural communities and social capital in his study of communities in South Africa and Tanzania. Mobile facilitated three types of social capital as an amenity; and shared commodity; to mediate strong links with family and friends and other community members and to mediate strong links with individuals out the community, for example, businessmen, government officials, tradesman, etc.). Butler (2005) opines that mobile phones save people living in the rural areas the financial cost and time involved in travel. As a result, 85% of people in Tanzania and 79% in South Africa had greater contact and improved relationships with friends and families. Taiwo (2008) notes that in Africa and Nigeria in particular, mobil phone is helping the people to communicate effectively; it is also transforming the political landscape of the people by empowering them to participate in their own political affairs. For instance, in Nigeria, text messaging was used in 2007 to monitor the general elections. The Network of Electronic Monitors (NMEM) in each of Nigeria's 36 states recruited additional volunteers and forwarded mass reminders about the programme in the morning of the elections. Multiple messages from the same polling site were cross-checked for accuracy and over 10,000 messages, describing both orderly voting experiences and widespread frauds were received (NMEM, 2007). Moreover, some state governors in Nigeria in states such as Niger, Kebbi, Nasarawa had made public their phone numbers so that people could talk to them about problems facing them. As a result of this policy, many problems (such as water, electricity, roads, etc.) facing the people in their various areas have been looked into.

Furthermore, the mobile phone is a developing tool for citizen journalism, a participatory media-making and a channel between traditional and new media, as it, in some cases enables the interactivity of television. The mobile phone is being used by both the television and the newspaper media to improve their services and ensure people's participation in their programmes. Nigerians irrespective of age, religion, sex and socio-economic status use the 'text us' programme and 'call in numbers' offered by Newspaper and television respectively to air their views on matters affecting them and the country generally.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, mobile phone is a very useful tool that can eradicate poverty in the society because its impact on economic development that serves as the focal point of all other forms of development is enormous. In order to support the mobile phone sector, there should be improvement in power supply so as to ensure an uninterrupted use of the mobile phone. Even though mobile phones can be charged with generators, it is always cheaper if electricity supply is made available; adequate funds should be provided for various phone projects and tariffs on mobile phones should be lowered so as to encourage the spread of mobile phones; there is the need for the legal and regulatory framework to ensure the telecommunication operators follow required standards and provide quality service to customers at all times and the general telecommunication facilities should be improved and spread to all the districts, towns and villages in the country.

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