

Study reveals mobile internet access reduces inequality

Access to mobile internet presents revolutionary opportunities for addressing issues of inequality. This is according to a study by Vodafone published via TelecomPaper.



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The mobile operator has commissioned independent experts to explore the ways in which smartphones could reduce inequalities for women, micro entrepreneurs and small farmers. The report highlights the benefits of smartphones for disadvantaged groups and recommends the policy steps that governments can take to tackle inequality.

Mobile internet access has enormous potential to boost income and socioeconomic opportunities in developing markets, but failing to make it accessible to disadvantaged groups could further deepen inequalities, the report shows.

The study, according to TelecomPaper also found that education affects how people use their devices and the value they derive from mobile internet access. Mobile internet access is pivotal in reducing information asymmetries and equalising access to wider social networks and opportunities, but digital literacy is also important in ensuring that potential is realised.

Developing locally-produced information and apps increases the future usefulness of mobile internet access, but represents

a challenge because of the high costs of creating 'hyperlocal' apps, including those offering detailed agricultural information. The study also found that investment is needed to provide access to high-quality broadband networks as well as 2G networks for voice and SMS.

Consumer trust

Access to spectrum in sufficient quantities at market-determined prices is critical to continued investment in mobile broadband networks. The report shows that consumer trust can be increased by launching flexible consumer protection measures that are fit for the digital age.

The report draws on three in-depth studies, including 'Smartphones and gender inequality in Kenya'; 'Smartphones and micro-entrepreneurship in Ghana'; and 'Smartphones and small farmers in India'.

In Kenya, the report indicated that women face barriers to educational, entrepreneurial and social activities. It was found that women place greater emphasis on the importance of smartphones in connecting them to their family and the world beyond. Over two-thirds of business women saw their income increase due to a smartphone. However, even with equivalent education and income levels, women use their smartphone for fewer tasks and less frequently. Education is a central driver of smartphone ownership and use, whereas income is not, the study found.

The study covering smartphones and micro-entrepreneurship in Ghana showed that the availability of mobile technology enhances business survival and sustainability through greater access to new ideas, information and tools. It was found that smartphones increased opportunities and seven out of 10 micro-entrepreneurs would face difficulties continuing their business without a smartphone.

The report on smartphones and small farmers in India found that the impact of information and mobile access can generate up to a 50% increase in a small farmer's revenue where the correct inputs are used and better knowledge is applied. A 1% increase in yields leads to a 0.6 – 1.3% reduction in poverty, having a greater impact than prices alone.

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