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The Potential of Wimax Revolution

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OPINION

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By Andrew Mack

I sat in an internet café in Gulu, Northern Uganda, busily typing away... and suddenly in mid-email, the server went down - the 3rd time in 2 weeks.

And, while technology challenges are nothing new for those of us that work or live in places like Northern Uganda, it made me think about the future of Gulu and the region. Uganda is clearly at a crossroads.

The costs of a return to war in the North are too high, and the opportunities - both human and commercial - are too great for rebuilding to fail.

But can the North's economy recover in time to avoid a return to conflict?

If Government, donors and the private sector work together, I believe that the answer is a resounding YES - and that the use of new technology must be a key component of the recovery.

Today Northern Uganda is emerging from more than 20 years of conflict, battered, isolated and scarred.

The war with the Lord's Resistance Army left over 1 million men, women and children displaced, and tens of thousands dead.

Healing will take time, as communities are rebuilt and trust re-established. Roads and other kinds of physical infrastructure will also take years to be rehabilitated, even with strong commitment from Government. But Uganda needs action now.

Happily, more and more each day it seems that technology is available to help previously left behind regions get on the grid quickly - new products and services that can be deployed in a fraction of the time it would take to rebuild traditional infrastructure.

In recent years a whole host of technologies have been developed that could help war-recovering Africa "skip steps" in re-development, in much the same way that the cellphone revolution has brought personal communications to Nigeria, Senegal, Kenya and yes, southern Uganda.

Consider technologies like Wimax, an easy to deploy broadband wireless technology, that can cover large geographical areas - up to 50km - at fast speeds, up to 72mps.

Wimax is perfect for peri-urban and more rural areas. It could help Government bring new services to the recovering North and facilitate trade. In June 2006, the roll-out of Uganda's Wimax network began.

Can Government, the donors and the private sector help finish the job and make a wired Northern Uganda a reality? Think about new low-cost solutions like Motorola's Motofone, a no frills cellphone designed just for the rural market.

The unit is dust-proof, uses voice prompts to local languages, has extended battery life, and is affordable.

Especially given the difficulty of travel and land-line communication, opening up a strong cell market in places like Northern Uganda would seem to make sense, lowering the costs of doing business, and helping provide security and reliability to potential investors. Can Uganda jump start this market?

Or, how about the highly anticipated \$100 laptop that is already proposed for Emerging Markets like Brazil, Nigeria and Rwanda?

Current plans call for the distribution of up to 15 million of the devices in 2007, which feature full-color, a 500MHz processor, and wireless broadband capabilities. Will Government and the aid agencies help bring the tools of the wired world to Gulu?

Now, I know what you may be thinking. I'm not saying that technology is the answer to all questions. Cellphones, and internet and email can't guarantee that products get to market through rutted roads, and they can't guarantee the peace.

Still, it's time to think outside of the box when looking at post-conflict reconstruction. Concerted, cooperative efforts in Northern Uganda - creatively using new technologies and approaches - can provide a model for peaceful re-development in parts of Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and DR Congo that all face similar problems.

Uganda has a Government that has shown real leadership and won wide international praise in combating HIV/AIDS, and in economic reform.

So, when rebuilding Northern Uganda, why not show similar leadership and farsightedness, focusing on giving Northern Uganda the modern tools that are used so well every day around Kampala to build business?

Three years from now (or even less) I could be in a transformed Gulu, where international and local investors work together seamlessly to get work done.

I could be managing my investment from a distance, speaking with my staff from a Skype phone, or perhaps working with a young entrepreneur who learned how to surf the Internet on a \$100 laptop.

In a race against time, technology is crucial. Wimax? Why not?

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