

Mobile phones are getting smarter in rural Africa

By [Kingsley Ighobor](#)

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Imagine you are in Yokadouma, a rural community in eastern Cameroon with little electricity and inaccessible roads. You have an old, inexpensive mobile phone with which you can only make and receive calls. The good news is that it is now possible for that phone to be smarter - to send and receive e-mails, check a Facebook account and chat online, even without internet access.

ForgetMeNot Africa, owned by Lon-Zim and ForgetMeNot Software, developed the Message Optimizer (MO) service in March 2009 to enable telecommunications operators to provide messaging services to customers at no extra cost, without any new applications or phone upgrades. Popular chat services such as MSN Messenger, Yahoo!, Windows Live and Gtalk are all incorporated into the MO.

"Message Optimizer turns every mobile phone into a mobile computing and mobile authentication device," states ForgetMeNot Africa. The MO allows "more and more of our subscribers to get access to the internet without having to purchase expensive smartphones," according to Douglas Mboweni, the chief executive officer of Econet Wireless Zimbabwe, a mobile network.

How does the MO deliver messages without the internet or a personal computer? First, a mobile phone subscriber sends an SMS to a given short code. The message is received in the mobile company's message centre, which then forwards to ForgetMeNot Africa's internet servers. The servers process, route and deliver the message to the subscriber, who can then respond.

Many factors account for why ForgetMeNot Africa's MO is spreading speedily, especially in rural areas. Africa has about 1 billion people. Some 72% of them live in the countryside, while internet penetration overall is just 11%, largely in urban areas.

Yet mobile phone use is increasing at a fast pace. In Nigeria, for instance, there are about 90 million mobile phone users, while only 12 million people are connected to the internet. By providing low-cost access to people in rural areas, ForgetMeNot Africa aims to capture the huge market of mobile phone users.

The company currently has around 48 million users, having made inroads into east, west, southern and central Africa. In late 2011, it started targeting 23 million Portuguese-speaking Africans, beginning with 100 000 Cape Verdeans, following collaboration with T-Mais, a mobile company in Cape Verde.

Jeremy George, the chief operating officer of ForgetMeNot Africa, says that the company "can now serve the vast majority

of people across the continent, no matter whether they speak English, French or Portuguese."

On their success so far, Mr. George adds that the company has been able to offer "a new revenue stream from their [mobile companies'] existing subscriber base, while offering customers a unique service." With every phone becoming smart, Africa's rural dwellers can proudly now hold aloft their inexpensive phones.

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Before joining the Department of Public Information (Africa Section) at the UNHQ, Kingsley ighobor was Head of Community Relations at the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) where he led many national communications campaigns on important social issues. Before then, he worked as a journalist and reported extensively the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia for a Nigerian publication, the African Concord newsmagazine. In 1992, he co-founded the Concord Times newspaper in Sierra Leone, becoming the publication's pioneer editor.

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