

# Cell Phone Usage and Its Impact on Zambian Economy and Society

AGNES NGOMA LESLIE, JACOB PARKER & KALYN WYCKOFF



During summer 2012, I embarked on a study of the impact of mobile phones on the Zambian economy and society. The research was prompted by the dramatic rise in cell phone usage in the last ten years, with almost every household now having a cell phone or access to one. The use of cell phones has risen exponentially among all sectors of the population, including the lowest in income. In 2000, there were 0.97 cell phone subscribers per 100 inhabitants; by 2011 there were 60 subscribers per 100 inhabitants.

Two University of Florida students - Kalyn Wyckoff and Jacob Parker - and I gathered primary data on cell phone usage in the Zambian capital city, Lusaka and its tourism capital, Livingstone. We conducted in-depth interviews with officials managing cell phone companies, government officials and telecommunications policy makers. In addition we conducted surveys of cell phone users, conducted interviews at the three main newspapers (*Times of Zambia*, *Daily Mail* and *The Post*), interviewed University of Zambia professors and students, and surveyed small, medium and large scale business owners and administrators. Our study found that while cell phone usage has grown land phone usage has

decreased, although most businesses still rely on land lines for their businesses. About 75% of the general population and students surveyed had access to the Internet on their cell phones compared to 50% of business people. This is partly because business people use land phones as well as computers in their offices. About 60% of the general population and students owned a computer, while 80% had access to computers. A significant proportion of the population uses the Internet for social networking: cell phones have helped bring about a sense of community and people use cell phones to communicate more frequently with others who may live in distant areas.

The study also found that the most significant use of the cell phones is for the transfer of money among individuals and from companies to individuals. As a result of a partnership between cell phone companies and commercial banks, cell phone subscribers can use their cell phones to pay their loans, bills and salaries. Farmers can also sell their produce at competitive prices using their cell phones. In addition, subscribers seeking specific information such as employment, training health or farming information can have it sent daily to their cell phones for as little as 20 cents a day.

Cell phones have also made it easier for reporters to follow up on stories and provide background details, our study found. According to the media personnel surveyed, the use of cell phones has lessened corruption. In reporting the elections, for example, results were published as soon as they become available, making it difficult for government officials to manipulate them.

One negative impact of the growth of the cell phone industry in Zambia is the proliferation of transmitters across the country. Many people are concerned that cellular radiation emitted from phone towers and antennas represents a health and environmental risk to the human and animal population as well as the environment. Initially each cell phone company placed its own towers everywhere. They now build joint transmitters in order to lessen the impact.

On the individual level, people spend more money on cell phones than they can afford. We found that the daily average amount students spend on cell phone usage was K10,000 (\$2) which was quite high considering the average student income. Adults surveyed spent about K20,000 a day, which was about 20 percent of their daily income. Since young people use texting to cut cell phone communication costs, their writing and spelling has been negatively impacted, since they have to abbreviate or use non-standard language. Overall, the study findings indicate that cell phones and the Internet have great potential to facilitate Zambian development.

*Agnes Ngoma Leslie is senior lecturer and outreach director at the Center for African Studies. Jacob Parker and Kalyn Wyckoff both minored in African Studies. This research was funded by a UF Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER) Research Tutorial Abroad Grant.*