



Interview with Christian Kreutz, Consultant

1. Please introduce yourself and the agency you work for to our readers. What is your job like? What do you focus on?

C.K.: *I am a political scientist. I have worked for the GTZ (German Technical Cooperation) for the last five years as project manager and communication specialist. Now I am independent and work as consultant for knowledge management and information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D). I am also a blogger (<http://www.crisscrossed.net/>) and a knowledge activist because I think it's a very interesting situation nowadays what's happening in the triangle of technology, knowledge and the internet. In the area of ICT4D I focus on mobile telephony because they reach a greater amount of people than any other technologies before and already have a huge impact particularly in developing countries.*

2. Describe to us the programme on ICTs, especially the use of mobile phones for rural development, which you are working for. Why do you find mobile phones to be particularly interesting in your line of work?

C.K.: *I worked for a project on "knowledge systems in rural areas" for GTZ. I look at the topic from different angles such as knowledge sharing, networking and social change and try to identify new potentials. I don't glance at mobile phones from an economical point of view only, but consider them as means for different areas in social development. For example activists around human rights are the most innovative users of mobile telephone technology for their causes. The interesting thing about mobile phones is that they are so different from all the other ICTs. First of all this all-purpose tool is in the ownership by a majority of Africans across the continent and its users have created creative extra usages for mobile phones. Second it is a different approach compared to conventional ICT4D projects, which relied often on huge funding and did not focus enough on the users' perspective. But Mobiles are available for low costs and already are adapted for many purposes.*

3. What positive impacts could you achieve for agriculture, food security and/or rural development? How, in your opinion, can we empower local farmers to really benefit from this application?

C.K.: *Mobile phones are such a powerful tool because they fill a gap of prior limited means of communication. We have just started to use the various potential of mobile phones. At first, mobile phones have particularly connected rural with urban areas.*

Nowadays we witness new forms of information delivery and exchange particular with rural areas for agriculture or health, never before possible like that. There are great examples in Africa of local adapted mobile software solutions (e.g. EPROM) orientated on community needs and dealing with technical constraints. Promising is also the formation of own language spaces and innovative voice recognition solutions to address the illiteracy challenge.

4. Did it also cause a change in working or living habits or even of the whole culture for the locals? Could you give examples, please?

C.K.: *Mobile phones are a communication break through. The interesting question is: What will people make out of it? There are already fascinating examples, how mobile phone users invent on forms to use it particular for business. But the impact of mobile phone usage is not analyzed well enough so far. Studies only focus on some areas such as the famous fishery example. Although it is obvious that the mobile phone has changed a lot in societies, therefore an analysis of local adaptation in different cultural contexts is necessary. Apart from all the possible characteristics of mobile phones for rural development they are still strongest with ordinary communication. Like in Europe in the beginning of integrating mobiles into the everyday life, people want to call their family and friends to talk to them in the first run. Very promising are social mobile applications, which will be very interesting in the next future. What happens if you can deliver information to each mobile phone, but also let users interact in networks or with the web. There are fascinating examples such as Ushahidi or the Freedom Fone. But also money transfers via mobiles are revolutionary. In countries where less than 10% of the people have bank accounts using air time as a way of paying and transferring money has a huge impact on society.*

5. What are the challenges you are facing in your projects? Technically, socially, economically, ...

C.K.: *Everybody is so enthusiastic about mobile phones for development and, of course, I am too, but you also have to be a little bit critical. There is quite a hype around mobile phones. There is a lot of experimentation happening and too little exchange of experiences. The technology itself can't solve problems. Mobile phones are only the means that you can use to improve rural peoples livelihoods through the best fit for each situation. I do believe that there is also the danger of forgetting some important lessons learnt from many ICT4D projects, which failed for a lot of reasons. One was the lack of sustainability, and another, that mobile phones can only be a mean to an end. And of course, there are many challenges that the use of mobile phone faces: high costs, illiteracy and in many cases, mobile phones projects still have to prove the benefit for users.*

There are for example problems concerning gender. In some countries women have difficulties to get access to mobile phones or can't communicate independently. Also the tremendous costs have an impact on the people. Some substitute a whole meal for mobile phone credit. In study in Africa some mobile phone users became even poorer.

6. What are your predictions for the future?

C.K.: We have only started to tap upon the potential of this all-purpose tool. It will be interesting to see the role of development organization. There are potentials to use it in different approaches in development projects, but also to improve their own work. The open source water and sanitation initiative lets mobile African reporters evaluate their projects. It is obvious that access to the Internet will happen in Africa in the future mainly through mobile phones. But it will be a challenge to deal with the constraints of little mobile phone screen. Nevertheless the ubiquitous connection through mobile phones has many advantages and particular in rural areas offer a linkage with urban areas not possible before. It will be interesting to analyze these implications. *Rural areas suddenly have new instruments to broadcast from or analyze their environment. The mobile phone can be already a sensor rich tool with GPS, to measure the velocity or to analyze blood and detect diseases. It will empower mobile phone users to embrace it for all kind daily needed purposes and for social change. The mobile becomes a research tool to give its user the capacity to collect and share information. Open information repositories can be created for development work. One outcome is increasing transparency. Mobile phones can be the key for collectively contributing to new information systems and receiving all sorts of information.*

The future for mobile phones will be in this kind of data exchange or network exchange to empower people with knowledge, like Nokia's weather updates in local languages. Surely, some form of data exchange has to work for that, which still inhibits several challenges. But this form of information exchange and networking will happen – whatever technology is behind it. Tools for information exchange solely relying on SMS prove this is possible for all phones.