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Is Internet Important to Economic Development?

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The World Bank says 9 billion electronic devices are connected to the Internet today.

But the bank says more than half of the world's population is still not connected.

Technologists and government officials say getting connected to the Internet is **critical** to improving the lives of millions of people.

Joe Mucheru is Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for the Ministry of Information, Communications and Technology. He says technology is good for business.

"We have got huge fights in terms of corruption, transparency, openness - and technology is really the vehicle we're using to ensure that whatever transactions are taking place, you can see them. They're digital."

But there are still many areas without Internet connections. That is what Hilton Romanski says. He is the Senior Vice President and Chief **Strategy** Officer for the

technology company Cisco.

“Obviously we look at Africa, we look at Southeast Asia; there are large swaths obviously of the population that are not connected.”

Denis O’Brien is chairman of Digicel, a mobile telephone service. He says once people start using smartphones, they talk less and use more computer data, for text messages, pictures and video.

This makes for high-speed service or broadband a requirement for nearly all users. O’Brien said building the telecommunications **infrastructure** in developing areas is difficult but needed for economic growth.

“Everybody’s built the easy bit, in other words they’ve done the towns and the cities, but going into rural communities they haven’t done it because the business case is very thin.”

Technology experts say businesses and governments need to come together to bring the Internet to developing areas to drive economic growth.

O’Brien says **broadband** is not a secondary need.

“Any country that wants to create investment and be a location for investment to create employment, the first thing you need is broadband.”

Is technology the answer?

But others do not think technology is a cure-all for economic growth.

Kentaro Toyama is Associate Professor of Community Information at the University of Michigan. He has a warning for developing nations that see modern technology as the solution for economic growth.

Toyama says the world has changed over the past 45 years because of developments in technology. But all this digital innovation did not reduce differences between rich and poor people in the United States.

"During that same span of time, this country has experienced rising inequality. The median income has declined."

He adds that, in developing nations, a smartphone alone will not help people who are uneducated and lack technological skills.

"If they do have a mobile phone, people, for example, who are physical laborers on farms where it doesn't make too much of a difference if you can have access to the latest **agronomic** research paper as a way to improve your farming."

Denis O'Brien disagrees.

“Once you get broadband, you can educate people. You can create jobs for people, and people from an agricultural point of view become much more efficient.” He also pointed to cultural differences in each country.

Joe Mucheru sees the issue as many Kenyans do.

“The fact that maybe some of the people in the West haven’t come out of poverty because they have not used their devices well is not the same for Africa.”

Cisco’s Hilton Romanski says it takes cooperation between private, government and non-profit groups to make technology effective.

“It’s going to take all the parties coming together to drive the right cultural shift and the right education into these countries so that the developing market can over the long term enjoy the benefits of economic growth.”

The experts do agreed that good things can happen if education about technology is combined with the right policies.

I’m Mario Ritter.

Elizabeth Lee reported this story for VOANews.com. Mario Ritter adapted it for Learning English. George Grow was the editor.

Do you think Internet access is necessary for development? Leave your thoughts in the comment section below.

Words in This Story

critical – *adj.* very important or necessary

strategy – *n.* a long term plan

infrastructure – *n.* important physical structures like roads, bridges, and power plants that are needed for a society to operate

broadband – *n.* a wireless communications network that provides Internet access

innovation – *n.* a new idea, device or method

savvy – *adj.* practical understanding or knowledge of something

agronomic – *adj.* having to do with the science of producing plants

