

## AFRICA

# Kenyans Prioritizing Mobile Phone Over Food, Transport

January 22, 2013 6:31 AM Jill Craig



A vendor hawks second-hand mobile phones at the sprawling Kibera slum, one of the largest and poorest slums in Africa, near Kenya's capital Nairobi, August 26, 2011.

NAIROBI — A recent study commissioned by the World Bank suggests that increasing numbers of Kenyans in the poorest socioeconomic group are foregoing food and transport or opting for cheaper alternatives, to buy credit to use mobile phones.

Mobile phones were once considered luxury goods in Kenya. But with decreasing prices, people of all socioeconomic levels have come to rely upon them for both personal and professional needs.

iHub Research and Research Solutions Africa recently released a study commissioned by the World Bank exploring mobile phone usage among Kenyans making less than \$2.50 per day.

Angela Crandall, project manager at iHub Research, conducted research for the report. She

says one out of five people interviewed for the report chose to forgo necessities like food or transport to purchase mobile phone credit. Some would eat cheaper food, such as rice and vegetables, instead of something more expensive like meat so they could buy credit. Crandall says there was a rationale to their decisions.

“What we realized was that the reason behind this was that these folks were foregoing because they thought that by using this money to call their friends or by having this airtime, that they could text someone, they actually could earn more money in the future,” said Crandall. “So, basically by giving almost 60 cents right now, potentially by calling someone and getting a job, they could eventually earn 2,000 shillings [about \$23], say tomorrow.”

Eighteen year-old Martha Bosibori sells mangoes in a market bordering Kibera, Nairobi’s largest slum. She says she has skipped meals to purchase mobile phone credit.

“Sometimes, you know, I’m hungry but I need to talk to someone, for example. So what I do; I just sacrifice that money and I don’t take that food. Then I buy that credit and use it to talk to that person who I was supposed to talk to,” she said.

Bosibori says that by giving up meals, she is able to make money through the business she gets by using her mobile phone.

“Okay, now for example, I have customers,” she explained. “Here, I sell mangoes [and I] take some orders from maybe, let’s say, neighbors. They know that I sell mangoes. So sometimes, they call me and say, ‘Today Martha, you can just bring five mangoes.’ So I take their orders through the cell phone.”

Her colleague, Susan Wacera, sells jewelry in a nearby market stall. She often walks to work instead of using public transport for the same reason. “Instead of going with, going with matatu [public minibus], I decide to buy airtime, then I go with foot,” she said.

However, Crandall advises caution when analyzing this finding from the report.

“I definitely don’t want people to blow this out of proportion. And, the idea that the mobile phone is making people hungrier, I don’t think necessarily is true,” she said.

“Other studies have shown that actually when people at the base of the [economic] pyramid get more money, it doesn’t necessarily mean they’ll spend it on food. And so, I think this is a stereotype or mis-assumption that we make, that people at the BoP [base of the pyramid] are so hungry that any extra coin will go towards food. I don’t think it’s true because we found even a small, marginal income increase will actually go towards

entertainment, so I think that this exemplifies that finding.”

Instead, she says that the study highlights the overall importance of mobile usage in Kenya among low-income brackets.

"I would say that it really shows the value that Kenyans are placing on potentially getting more money or even just the communication aspect of it," Crandall explained.

The study found that on average, respondents who chose phone credits over expenditures on basic necessities, diminished their spending by about 83 cents per week.

The study also found that more than 60 percent of respondents among Kenya's poorest socioeconomic group own a mobile phone.

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