A typology of mobile uses among small and informal businesses

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Small and informal businesses in the developing world are rapidly adopting mobile telephony; many have access to mediated communication technologies for the first time. There is a great deal of enthusiasm in the popular press and in the development literature about how this adoption can/will lead to increased productivity or revenue for these small businesses. In addition, in the past few years, a number of academic studies have begun to explore the uses of mobile telephony among small and informal businesses (e.g., (Donner, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Esselaar, Stork, Ndiwalana, & Deen-Swarra, 2006; Horst & Miller, 2006; Jagun, Whalley, & Ackerman, 2005; Molony, 2006; Samuel, Shah, & Hadingham, 2005).

This paper is a step back, primarily a meta-analysis, of the studies released to date. It proposes that reliance on the basic terms “mobile phone use” and “small and informal business” hides the actual processes by which individual enterprises take advantage of particular functions of mobile telephony.

The paper’s core synthesis is a matrix, proposing a set of enterprise types (manufacturing, transport, agriculture, retail, roaming services, professional, etc.) crossed by functions of mobile telephony (micro-coordination, information transfer, journey substitution, etc., as informed by the mobile society and telecommunications and development literature). Common studies from the academic and development literature will populate the cells in the matrix.

The expected outcome is representation and discussion of the fact that not all businesses benefit from mobiles equally, or to the same degree. Suggestions for future quantitative work to assess the relative size of the cells and the robustness of the model will be suggested.