

Wi-Fi is the way forward

 By [Michael Fletcher](#)

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With more than 650 million mobile users* in Africa and with 50% of internet connections being exclusively channelled through mobile devices, Africa is the second biggest mobile market in the world and the fastest growing.

With access models and demands changing across Africa, consumers are blurring the lines between corporate and personal spaces - becoming more vocal in terms of what they want, and what they want is access.

With Africa's growth, the expectation of increased capacity and coverage by users is exploding, but as more traffic, devices and concurrent connections hit mobile networks, the cost for transporting these bits rises. As a result, these trends are driving a new networks strategy that reduces OPEX and CAPEX, using Wi-Fi to offload non-essential traffic from cellular networks as well as scaling coverage and capacity quickly, using smaller cell sizes.

As a result we are seeing a lot more free Wi-Fi, larger hotspots and Wi-Fi solutions being used in different verticals such as education - and most importantly, interest from service providers as to the viability of Wi-Fi as an alternative means for their users to access data. In fact, Wi-Fi represents one of the most expedient and cost-effective ways to increase both capacity and coverage of cellular networks, with a tight focus on where traffic is heaviest.

Providing an alternative

Ultimately for the mobile network operators (MNOs), Wi-Fi is a far more cost-effective way to provide access to customers and on the reverse, for customers, it's a better experience and a more cost-effective solution, too - especially if their 3G networks are congested. What's more, many rural towns have no broadband at all, and as such Wi-Fi provides an alternative to bring broadband to rural areas for much less than what they would pay for 3G.

Fibre will provide another necessary means to connect Africa to the world and, just like the current undersea cables, will add additional speed, capacity and in maturity, decrease costs of broadband. However, while fibre and 4G/LTE services will certainly help increase cellular network capacity, it still won't be enough, because as we continue to see around the world, there is an insatiable appetite for bandwidth and now, for spectrum as well. That is why it is imperative for cellular operators looking to reduce subscriber agitation to add capacity and coverage as fast as possible.

Much more strategic view

As a result, operators in Africa are now taking a much more strategic view of Wi-Fi, tapping a new generation of smarter technology that gives it the reliability and sophistication to become a full partner within mobile network infrastructures, and on a much larger scale.

This is already happening globally - evident by the recent call by the European Commission, for more spectrum to be made available for Wi-Fi use following [the survey discovery](#) that 71% of all data traffic in Europe takes place via a Wi-Fi connection. The study found that the significant majority of smartphones and tablet users were connecting to a Wi-Fi network to carry out most of their online tasks, largely due to the expense of using mobile data services as a replacement - and that it is predicted to increase to 78% of all data traffic by 2016. In fact, Wi-Fi hotspot numbers are set to grow to 5.8 million globally by 2015, marking a 350% increase, according to research published by the Wireless Broadband Alliance (WBA), and compiled by Informa.

Pervasive Wi-Fi will have massive implications for Africa. Imagine the possibilities of 'always on' connectivity - which is not only positive from a consumer point of view, but it certainly opens up enormous business potential as well. What's more, with MNOs' buy-in not only are we likely to see more pervasive free Wi-Fi in public spaces but users will have a better experience as well.

Consumers need to demand decent Wi-Fi. If they are not happy with the Wi-Fi they receive, they need to let it be known so that they will not only push the industry to deploy better solutions, but also help create the more prominent role for Wi-Fi in Africa that it should have.

**ICTs Delivering Home-Grown Development Solutions in Africa, World Bank*

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