

SERVICE ACCESS THE AFRICELL EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

Access to communication and information technology is in demand throughout the world, in poor and rich countries, developed or under developed, the demand varies but the need is always there.

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Identifying the market players

Two major communication players are on the market in The Gambia; Gamtel the PSTN operator with its affiliate mobile operation Gamcel, and Africell the 2nd licensed private GSM mobile operator who has joined the market in October 2001 .

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Rapid mobile telephony growth

To own a mobile is no longer a lavish luxury but rather an absolute necessity in this day and age. Following a survey conducted by Africell last June; 42% of the people interviewed admitted to having access to a landline, but have never had access to a mobile phone. Obviously there still is a market potential to be tapped.

It is very interesting in this regard to observe that the rapid rate of growth of mobile subscribers compared to landline subscribers, here in the Gambia, like the Honorable SoS stated in his opening speech both mobile operators can boast a subscriber base of 100000 after only one year of operation for Africell and almost 2 years in May/2003 for the competition, Compared to the 40K or so landline subscribers so far.

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Present factors enhancing Service access in the Gambia

1. Availability of a fiber optic backbone infrastructure.

Gambia is one of the tiny countries in Africa, and yet it enjoys one of the few solid back-bone infrastructures on the continent, an optical fiber system owned and operated by the PSTN operator links the Greater Banjul Area on the Atlantic to Basse Santasu the 2nd capital city of the Gambia 500 km to the east, with drop and insert facilities along the route. This has helped facilitate the job of mobile operators by linking their nationwide base stations to their main switch via the fibre, generating revenue for the PSTN operator, for otherwise unused capacity in the process, and providing much needed access to telephone services in the provinces.

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Present factors enhancing Service access in the Gambia

2. Competition

The wise decision to introduce competition in the mobile market have helped in a positive way the Access question – competition have lowered prices to the end user and this made it more affordable for more to use and own a mobile.

3. Instantaneous wide spread radio **coverage** compared and the endless possibilities provided as a result, compared to the copper or fiber needed infrastructures in achieving the same goals.

4. Services on offer

At Africell, we have given a true meaning to the word access by making it possible, and cheaper to communicate amidst the constraints of cost, affordability and sustainability. We have contributed solidly in bridging the Gap of the “digital divide” rich-poor, urban and rural.

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Present factors enhancing Service access in the Gambia

5. Contribution towards the universal access fund.
As per license terms Africell is to contribute 5% of the profit to the USF,I personally was not aware that such a fund existed in the Gambia, however we remain committed to supporting all measures enhancing service access.

6. Nationwide coverage provided by Africell makes all services available to urban areas readily available to remote covered rural areas, in areas where landline services are not yet available.

7. Gambia has the advantage of having two GSM networks offering nationwide coverage and as such areas not covered by one can be covered by the other

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Present factors **Inhibiting Service access in the Gambia**

1. Absence of real up to date tariffs.
The cost of a landline to mobile call per minute is D.92 tax included equivalent to USD \$.036,totally unrealistic figure to say the least. The need for all three operators to sit together and work out interconnection tariffs between them is something we at Africell have been seeking and working towards ever since joining the market in 2001.

2. No permanent interconnect agreement exist between the three operators, again ,something that we at Africell constantly sought and still seeking since 2001.

3. The investor's ever evident dilemma remains in bridging the wide gap between the economics of market efficiencies in service access terms and the total availability of real access. Most if not all of the rural BTS sites operate at a loss.

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Present factors **Inhibiting** Service access in the Gambia

4. Hostile operating conditions
 - Being the competition, meant operating in a very hostile environment; naturally!! we were always viewed by some of the competitor's staff as the enemy .
 - However I'm glad to say that after one year of operation this attitude is now slowly changing towards being viewed simply as a customer contributing to the economic growth of the operators and The country.
5. Regulator role

The full understanding and support of the local regulator in quickly responding to market demands expansions and necessities in terms of allocating more frequency bandwidths, overseeing fair play between the three operators and understanding their needs and reasoning to adopt a flexible tariffing schedule, are indeed of essence to any successful market situation, efficient and revenue making .It is well known that telephone rates in the Gambia remain cheaper if not the cheapest in Africa.

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Present factors **Inhibiting** Service access in the Gambia

6. Indirect USF contribution

Contribution to the USF has to be more direct perhaps 2% of the 15% service tax levied on calls can be the operators contribution to the fund.

The government's contribution can be in kind, like:

- Providing land areas for the services in question.
- Allowing tax free operation in those regions for a limited period of time.

Here are two examples I'm sure we can come up with more.

Only in a joint and collective effort between the private and government sectors can we provide and improve universal-access in The Gambia.

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The Way forward

The Private sector should be allowed to play a bigger role in the telecom sector of the Gambia, from Africell's point of view, we believe that the following can be a possible way forward:

1. The establishment of a new: Gambian Association of Private Telecom Operators GAPTO, in which all private licensed ISP's cellular and TV cable companies are invited to join. Providing the private sector's insight towards better Universal access and working hand in hand with the Regulator and other operators towards that goal to the overall benefit of the end user and the country in general.
2. GAPTO , be given an alternative gateway license to that of the PSTN operator, introducing competition resulting in better competitive rates for the end user, and also providing a redundant alternative to the PSTN gateway, This will bring in more revenue and not the other way around .

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Africell Service Access Summary

- *"Bringing people closer"* is our logo & *"GSM for all"* is our Motto and as such our commitment to promote access is obvious.
- Apart from the usual services and after only a few months of operation, Africell has introduced international **"Short Messaging Service"** to The Gambia with SMS access to over 500 operators worldwide in more than 150 countries, becoming at everybody's finger tips .
- Additionally Africell can proudly boost (20) commercially launched roaming partnerships throughout Europe, Africa , Asia and the Middle East, the latest of which were Vodafone UK, **STC** Saudi Arabia before the HAJJ season started, **Etisalat** UAE and **THURAYA** the satellite communication system also based in UAE. So far more than (50) roaming contracts have been signed ,and all this in the space of one year of operation Africell can also soundly boost a significant active subscriber base of over 32000 subscribers throughout the Gambia.

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