Telenor keen to expand health services by mobile

Matthew Guilford speaks on how mobile technology is taking healthcare to people in outlying areas

PORIMOL PALMA

TELENOR, the majority shareholder of Grameenphone, is looking to build greater partnerships with the government, and nongovernmental organisations to scale up healthcare services through mobile phones, a top official said.

"Partnerships with NGOs, governments and development partners are going to be central to what we are doing both in terms of providing content and advice," Telenor Group's Global Head of Health Matthew Guilford said in an interview with The Daily Star during a recent regional health informatics conference in Dhaka.

As the use of information technology and mobile phones in health system is coming up in a big way, Telenor and its business units across the globe too are making great strides in its promotion.

In Bangladesh, Grameenphone, of which Telenor owns 55.8 percent shares, offers a service—'health line'—through which customers can call and get instant health advice from physicians round the clock.

It is partnering with an initiative called Mobile Alliance for Maternal Action, which uses mobile phones to provide life-saving health information to parents-to-be and new parents.

Grameenphone is also experimenting with a telemedicine project to enable patients suffering from skin diseases and general health problems to consult with

Matthew Guilford

specialised doctors via video conferencing, reducing the number of hospital visits and saving time.

"Our focus is on complementing the healthcare system that the health ministry or other government agencies have built, and contributing to help lower the economic burden on the health system," said Guilford.

"In the coming months we will be working to build regional and global partnerships with different parties who can complement our potential contributions to the health value chain," he said.

Telenor, the sixth largest global telecom company, already has a strong partnership with Unicef where it works almost in every Asian market, specifically on maternal and child health. It also has global partnerships with internet services companies like Facebook and Google.

"We really believe that to get telecom industry to break out of the cycle of small pilots in health, we need a partnership-based approach," he added.

On challenges of mobile health, Guilford said they acknowledge that talking to a physician over the phone is never the same as talking in person.

"But we think that you do not always need to see a doctor in person. In a situation where a physician may simply say that you should go to the emergency room or take for now some paracetamols, providing that advice over the phone can save someone a lot of time and effort."

As Bangladesh grows in 3G adoptions and smartphones, the gap between in-person experience and phone-based experience is getting narrower, he said.

Mentioning various mobile health services in Asia and Europe, including introduction of health apps and services for old people so they can be more independent, he said they are experimenting with many different things and considering ways how it can scale up.

With Bangladesh as an advanced market for mobile health in Asia, he said what Grameenphone is doing here is among the best of Telenor Group.

"The only way we can scale up a service is if it has a business model that is sustainable," Guilford said, adding that resources of the NGOs or development partners are not limitless.

"So if we want to reach tens of millions of people, to have the impact that we believe we need to have services that are at least self sustaining," he said.

There are people who could question the mobile company's providing of financial and health services.

"But we clearly see the private sector's contribution as it reaches many places not serviced otherwise. And I am convinced that we will look back at mobile health ten years from now on, and see that it was the same story," Guilford said.

Steering Asia along a low-carbon path

BINDU N LOHANI

ASIA'S economic rise has yielded enormous dividends. Much of the region is transitioning to middle income status. Poverty, though still chronic in parts, is ebbing in absolute terms.

For example, the number of extremely poor people living below $1.25 a day dropped by more than 150 million between 2005 and 2010.

Epochal challenges remain, however, impeding the region's progress toward a sustainable future. One of the most daunting is climate change. If current emission trends continue, mean global temperatures by the end of this century are expected to rise between 2 and 4 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels.

Rising sea-levels will expand the number of people living in Asia's flood-prone cities by more than 100 million to 410 million by 2025. Nine out of 10 mega cities most at risk from climate change are in Asia and the Pacific.

Agricultural crop yields will fall and food prices will climb—with every 10 percent rise pushing another 64 million Asians into poverty.

Rising energy demand across developing Asia doubled its share of global green house gas (GHG) emissions in just 20 years to more than 40 percent in 2011.

Surging automobile use, substandard public transport systems in many urban areas, and rising demand for fossil-fuel fired energy has increased per capita emissions of carbon dioxide (CO2) from about 3 metric tons in 2008 to almost 3.6 metric tons in 2011.

If these trends continue, Asia's CO2 emissions from the energy sector alone are likely to account for more than half of the global total by 2035.

This is a challenge—for the region and for the world. Although there has been progress in steering Asia's economies toward low-carbon pathways, much more needs to be done. One crucial step is to promote the adoption of advanced low-carbon technologies to spur green economic growth.

Developing countries often face difficulties gaining access to ground-breaking technologies that can decouple their growth from GHG emissions. In 2012, parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change agreed to develop new market-based mechanisms to make GHG mitigation efforts cheaper and more accessible.

One such new initiative is the Joint Credit Mechanism (JCM). This is a carbon market mechanism that operates bilaterally between Japan and developing countries to promote GHG emission reduction projects.

It complements multilateral carbon market schemes, such as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), and follows a similar approach to the CDM in financing and accounting for verified GHG emissions reductions, but with simplified procedures.

These emission reductions can be credited between Japan and the partner developing country, based on their respective contributions to the project.

The JCM aims to foster advanced low-carbon technologies that will trigger long-term GHG emission reductions. Its main focus is on proven technologies such assmart grids and waste-to-energy schemes that are not yet widespread in developing countries. Some pilot projects have been launched, including small-scale solar power plants in island states and a high performance biomass power generation facility.

Asian Development Bank (ADB) President Takehiko Nakao and the Minister of the Environment of Japan Nobuteru Ishihara announced the establishment of a new trust fund to support GHG emission reduction projects under the JCM, during a signing ceremony this week for a Letter of Intent for cooperation on environmental issues.

Established with a grant of about $17.65 million, the Japan Fund for the Joint Carbon Mechanism (JFJCM) will provide grants for low-carbon technologies in ADB-financed projects in developing member countries that have signed memoranda of understanding for the JCM with Japan.

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AFP

Pakistani nomad women carry buckets of camel milk on their heads for sale along a street in Karachi yesterday. Camel milk is now growing in popularity in Pakistan's big cities. A traditional drink in the desert, the lighter milk is even recommended by some doctors for a whole host of ailments.

Facebook seeks India revenue boost with 'missed call' ads

REUTERS, *San Francisco*

FACEBOOK Inc wants its users in India to hang up on advertisers.

The Internet social networking company is testing a new type of ad in the country that allows mobile phone users to click a button that calls a brand advertiser, immediately hangs up and then receives a return call.

The return call delivers pre-recorded audio messages about everything from sponsored cricket scores to information about shopping discounts, minimizing data charges for the user.

The so-called "missed call" ad was specially created by Facebook to appeal to users in the world's second-most populous country, and potentially in other emerging markets. Facebook has more than 100 million users in India, with the majority accessing the service on so-called feature phones, which lack touchscreens and other capabilities of higher-end smartphones.

The ads are part of Facebook's effort to bolster its business in countries such as Brazil, India and Indonesia, which could help Facebook boost its overall revenue.

Roughly 84 percent of Facebook's 1.28 billion monthly users are outside the United States and Canada, but the average revenue per user that Facebook generates in international markets is significantly lower than in the United States and Canada.

Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg is in India this week visiting the company's offices and meeting with partners. Last week, Facebook rival Google Inc Inc announced plans to bolster its business there by developing a sub-$100 smartphone that uses its Android software.

Facebook has optimized the ads on its service to work on slower wireless connections in emerging markets and it is improving its tools in individual countries to help marketers better target different groups of users.

The company has also recently opened sales offices in Colombia and Indonesia and it is working with measurement firm Nielsen to measure how mobile phone users react to ads.

In early tests of the missed call ads by L'Oreal-owned haircare product Garnier Men, the ads led to a 2.5 times year-on-year increase in online sales, according to Facebook. In the coming months, Facebook said it plans to make the missed call ads more widely available.

Modi tries to get India's railways back on track

AFP, *New Delhi*

INDIA'S new government will next week roll out plans to overhaul its sprawling rail network, dubbed the "lifeline of the nation", which analysts say needs hundreds of billions of dollars of investment.

Two days before India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's new administration presents its first budget, a separate rail finance bill will be presented to parliament on Tuesday following a controversial recent fares hike.

The country's railway system is one of the biggest in the world, stretching from the foothills of the Himalayas to the southern beaches.

But observers say it has been neglected by successive governments over the past three decades of rapid economic growth during which car ownership has surged and low-cost airlines have mushroomed.

"I'm very glad the government is addressing the chronic logistics problem," said Arvind Mahajan, an infrastructure specialist at KPMG. "It has a lot of work to cover."

Still the main form of long-distance travel for most of India's 1.2 billion population, around 23 million people travel by train every day.

But some services are booked up for weeks in advance and overcrowding -- especially in lower-class carriages which lack air-conditioning -- means rail travel is often a miserable experience.

The network has a dreadful safety record with a government report in 2012 putting the number of deaths each year at nearly 15,000.

Many are killed falling off overcrowded trains or crossing the tracks. Others are charred to death while perched on coach roofs as high-voltage electricity courses through overhead wires.

As for freight, endemic delays make it sometimes impossible for businesses to predict when their goods will arrive.

Under the previous centre-left coalition, the main governing

AFP

Indian train passengers wait for their train at Sadar bazaar railway station in the old quarters of New Delhi.

Congress party was happy to leave the railways ministry in the hands of a junior partner which showed little inclination to push reforms.

While fares remained low, the ministry's losses grew ever higher and it was haemorrhaging some $150 million a month by the time Modi's right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) trounced Congress in May's general election.

In a speech last month outlining the government's priorities, President Pranab Mukerjee said "modernisation and revamping of railways is on top of the infrastructure agenda".

Echoing similar pledges in the BJP manifesto, the speech included promises to improve safety, expand services in the remote northeast and build a network of freight corridors for farm produce.

The government then hiked passenger fares 14.2 percent and freight rates 6.5 percent -- the steepest rise in 15 years.

Although there was a subsequent partial climbdown, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said India "must decide whether it wants a world-class railway or a ramshackled one".

Mahajan said reducing government subsidies on the railways would help it meet inflation reduction targets.

"The government now needs to educate people ... that subsidies will not help bring prices down, but rather shoot them up," he said.

D. H. Pai Panandiker, who heads the Delhi-based RPG Goenka Foundation think-tank, said Modi -- who as a boy helped his father sell tea on a platform -- wanted the railways to stop being a strain on resources.

"Modi sees the railways network as a commercial enterprise and he realises that it must make both ends meet and can't remain subsidised forever," he told AFP.

"All this hue and cry over the hike is politics and the common man knows this."

But allied to the fares increase, analysts say federal and state governments must be prepared to invest vast sums.

"To expand, modernise and improve safety, the total bill could come to a staggering ... $400 billion over just the next 10 years," Ajay Dua, a former top civil servant, wrote in the Economic Times.

"Currently, China invests $90 billion every year in its rail system compared to our paltry $10 billion. All those funds may not come from commuters and other users."

Mahajan said the government would have to invest "somewhere around $300-$500 billion" in the next decade.

Travellers acknowledge the need for investment but are reluctant to pay.

"It's a wreck," said Hari Sah as he waited for a train at Delhi's main station to take him back to his family in the northern state of Bihar.

"But I also need to see my family from time to time," said Hari, who earns $160 a month driving an auto-rickshaw in the capital and whose ticket cost $25.

"If I spend on travel, rent, food and send money back home then what will I save?"

One of the big questions will be if Modi can develop a high-speed rail network, with China having offered its expertise.