

Project Name	Mosoko (“Mobile Marketplace” in Swahili)
Project Location	Nairobi, Kenya (ideally expanding to other cities in East Africa and India)
Organization	Nokia Research (Cambridge, MA)
Primary Contacts	Jonathan Ledlie, Nokia Research (jonathan.ledlie@nokia.com) Bill Thies (thies@mit.edu)
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Project Category	Economic Empowerment (primary) Community Action (secondary)
Website	http://wiki.nrcc.noklab.com/Mosoko includes links to media articles and background

1 Project Overview

The long-term vision of Mosoko is to bring web services such as Craigslist (classifieds and discussion topics), social networking, and wikis to the developing world in such a way that they can be accessed with the simple phones and low literacy rates found in places like East Africa and parts of India.

Mosoko is motivated by two existing projects and a few empirical observations. First is the observation that markets, at least in their abstract form, assume all participants have perfect information. In developing regions, the lack of information — on where labor is in demand, where goods would fetch the best price, what people beyond your immediate friends and family think — is a significant impediment to economic growth. Robert Jensen’s study of the effect of the growth of the cell phone market in the Indian state of Kerala showed how, as access to information improved, so did market efficiency. A second project, the Kenyan Agricultural Commodity Exchange, directly intervened in creating a more efficient market by giving farmers access to commodity prices throughout Kenya. Mosoko is particularly like the Exchange in that it seeks to explicitly construct a system for information access and does so in a way that is affordable to a wide set of users.

Craigslist, in the US, and similar free classified services in other developed countries have created marketplaces for exchanging goods and services where none existed before. Their web-based access cannot be brought to developing countries in the near future. Instead, what if we could assist people in forming similar types of connections using only their mobile phones? Because this classifieds functionality is our initial primary focus, we call our project Mosoko, for Mobile Soko. In Swahili, *soko* is a local market where people go to sell their goods.

2 Current Project Status

In order to reach a large number of users, we aim to make Mosoko free of charge for most use cases. The way we achieve this is that people call the main Mosoko phone number, “flashing” their number to the system through caller-id. They hang up before the call connects and Mosoko calls them back. Users can interact with Mosoko for free because we have made the call. We have checks to limit the number of call-backs per day and prevent other abuses.

Our plan is to run the service for free for about a month and then consider how to proceed. At that point, we may change the user interface, determine how to make it pay for itself, or find this application simply does not suit the need. Eventually, we plan to move functionality on to the

phones themselves as this becomes possible through *e.g.*, SMS, web, or a custom application.

The current status of the project is that the basics of the classifieds posting and searching are functional. Over the next few months, we plan to expand the code from specializing in apartment postings to jobs and goods, after talking with local Nairobi team members about which jobs and goods are locally relevant. We are also having the prompts recorded so they are not machine generated.

A US version of the project is available at +16174532262 (as just noted, the prompts are currently machine-generated and, therefore, are a bit hard to understand).

We are working with a class at MIT during the Spring of 2008 to develop new aspects of Mosoko. Details on the suggested projects are available on Mosoko's web site.