

Stranger Than Fiction

It's hardly news that wireless communications is making a big difference in poor countries. But the magnitude of the impact is only just beginning to sink in, as technology enabling the extremely cheap exchange of information is transforming everything from agriculture to finance to education. That, in part, explains why the poorest of poor countries apparently put a higher priority on cell phones than on clean water or transportation infrastructure. And why cell phone penetration in the Third World is hardly lower than in the First. Indeed, arguably the greatest economic liability of repressive regimes in Cuba, North Korea and (until quite recently) Myanmar may be their resistance to a technology rightly feared as a challenge to centralized political power.

Skeptical? Check out this fairly random selection...



COUNTRY	MOBILE PHONE SUBSCRIPTIONS/ 100 PEOPLE (2013)	LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH (YEARS) (2013)	PER CAPITA INCOME (US\$ PPP) (2013)
North Korea	7	69.8	\$1,800
Myanmar	13	65.9	1,700
Cuba	18	78.2	18,500
Afghanistan	70	50.5	1,100
Guinea-Bissau	74	49.9	1,200
China	89	75.2	9,800
Bolivia	98	68.6	5,500
Tajikistan	92	67.1	2,300
Zimbabwe	96	55.7	600
United States	96	79.6	52,800
Nicaragua	112	72.7	4,500
Japan	115	84.5	37,100
Germany	119	80.4	39,500
Mali	129	55.0	1,100
Vietnam	131	72.9	4,000
Switzerland	134	82.4	54,800
South Africa	147	49.6	11,500

SOURCE: World Bank