

## **Progress Report: The Promises of Fibre-Optic Broadband: A Pipeline for Economic Development in East Africa (ES/I033777/1)**

**Dr. Mark Graham**

### **Update from September 1, 2011 – April 30, 2012**

This project looks at the effects of the underwater fibre optic broadband internet on the economies of East Africa. Employing two country case-studies (Kenya and Rwanda), this project examines the claimed potentials of broadband Internet and compares those expectations to on-the-ground effects that broadband connectivity is having in three economic sectors: tea production (a core commodity-based export-oriented industry in both countries), ecotourism (a key element of the tourism industry in East Africa) and business process outsourcing (an emerging growth industry in both countries producing intangible products and services).

Our research team is composed of six individuals: Mark Graham, the PI of the project and a Research Fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute. He has a background in geography and Internet studies. Laura Mann, the Oxford RA and a Postdoctoral Research Assistant at the Oxford Internet Institute. She has a background in African studies. Timothy M. Waema is an Associate Professor in the School of Computing and Informatics in the University of Nairobi. He has done extensive research on ICTs and national socio-economic development in East Africa. His RA is Charles James, who has a Masters degree in Computer Science and is based at the same department. Felix k. Akorli is the Coordinator of the masters ICT program from the faculty of Applied Sciences at the National University of Rwanda and has also done research on ICTs in Rwanda. His RA is Claude Bizimana, who has a masters in Development Studies.

The training and support of our Kenyan and Rwandan RAs is extremely important to the whole team. We are in the process of providing comprehensive reading lists and training support for them. During the first two months of fieldwork, we will also be providing one on one training to make sure they are well prepared for the project and for any research projects they may wish to conduct in the future. We also hope the diversity of academic backgrounds that we all bring to the project will enrich the knowledge and research practices of all members.

The project began in September 2011 and the fieldwork stage of the project has just begun (in April) and will run until the end of the year. However, projected highlights arising from the project include:

1. Top quality peer-reviewed publications.
2. Participation and engagement in international and multidisciplinary conferences and workshops
3. Outreach meetings with the relevant stakeholders in Kenya and Rwanda
4. Engagement with British civil servants through our participation in the ESRC-DfID scheme
5. Public engagement through blogging and newspaper articles
6. Training and mutual learning between researchers in Oxford, University of Nairobi and the National University of Rwanda

### **Current Outputs and Progress**

First, we have written a few newspaper articles and blog posts about the project and have also drafted a journal article based on material from the pilot research.

A article about the arrival of fibre-optic cables and the potential effects on the Kenyan business process outsourcing sector has been written and will be submitted to a special issue of the journal *Environment and Planning A* on the topic of 'ICTs and Development.' This special issue is also being edited by Mark Graham.

Two of the project team (Graham and Mann) have also drawn upon the project's literature review in order to write a paper (with the historian Dr. Casper Anderson) on historical and contemporary fears of technological connectivity in East Africa. This manuscript will be submitted to *Historical Geography*.

Our project page which contains links to all of the relevant newspaper articles and numerous blog posts that have written about this project can be accessed at: <http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/?id=59>

Second, key findings have also been presented at a range of meetings and academic conferences. Graham has spoken about preliminary findings at: (1) an invited talk at the DFID headquarters in London; (2) the London Cyberspace conference (on a panel with Helen Clark: the head of UNDP); (3) TEDx LifeOnline; (4) an invited keynote at the Dutch United Nations Student Association; (5) a Ministerial Advisory Group meeting to be chaired by Andrew Mitchell, Secretary of State; (6) an invited talk at SciDevNet in London; (7) a talk at the Association of American Geographers Annual meeting in New York; and (8) a talk about understanding globalisation through the East African Business Process Outsourcing Sector to the *Understanding Globalisation Workshop* at the University of Amsterdam.

A range of other talks are also planned for the near future, including: the 2012 CAS at 50, African studies conference, the 2013 Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, the 2013 International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development. The ultimate goal of these sessions will be to bring together authors who will ultimately contribute to an edited volume on the subject.