Photo courtesy SasinTipchai/Shutterstock ●●●

Can the satellite industry really bridge the Digital Divide? ●●

The Digital Divide has created a real inequality and division when it comes to accessing information and resources. With satellites becoming popularly understood as a key turning point in the struggle, we spoke to landmark connectivity providers at Forsway, as well as a foremost expert on the subject in Waheed Adam, Board Member at the Mobile Ecosystem Forum.

Laurence Russell, Associate Editor, Satellite Evolution Group

Since the satellite industry aspired to connect people across the vast distances of orbital coverage, there has been an elephant in the room in terms of the subject of the unconnected and underserved population suffering at the wrong end of a global digital divide.

These unconnected peoples, disproportionately situated in the southern hemisphere, have not been waiting for vastly more advanced technologies to digitize their communities and economies, with fiber ready-and-waiting, but economically unviable. Yet the most prominent of LEO broadband brands remain happily patting themselves on the back for providing a vastly more expensive solution than the one the so-called developing world was already unable to finance.

In conversation with Forsway, a company that's part of a leading affordable solution in collaboration with Arabsat called XtndNet, we asked what the industry's been missing.

THE SCOPE OF THE CHALLENGE

"Forsway's research has determined that we have about 2.5 billion people today with no internet access," says Forsway's Bengt Jonsson, Vice Chairman, "down from a relatively recent figure of three billion, which has shrunk thanks to significant rollouts of broadband access to the developing world. These people are primarily spread across Africa, Asia, and Latin America."

"We're entering markets where people are disproportionately underprivileged at an income of perhaps a few dollars a week," adds Anders Brandter, the company's Director of Global Sales & Marketing. "Those individuals are unable to afford their own personalized services, so until development forges a strong quality of life, the only way to connect these demographics in a reproducible way is through aggregated packages. In some XtndNet centers, we can serve up to 500 users, which means one satellite terminal can enable community WiFi for a whole village, giving them all some access to the connected world until more advanced solutions become economically practical."

"Internet access has become a human right," Bengt agrees. "We can't develop and price the devices that enable essential connectivity as luxuries when they're

Bengt Jonsson, Vice Chairman, Forsway ●●●

infrastructure. The Forsway Odin technology is furnishing Arabsat Broadband Services with a competitive, low-cost alternative to VSAT for the new Arabsat Broadband service model and offering."

THE AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Speaking to Waheed Adam, Executive Chairman of iTouch in South Africa, and a Board Member of MEF (Mobile Ecosystem Forum), we wanted to make sure we weren't talking about African solutions without African voices.

"With a population of 1.4 billion, and an average age of around 20, Africa's potential outstrips most in the world," Waheed explains. "And with a continent of unique

Waheed Adam, Executive Chairman of iTouch in South Africa, and a Board Member of MEF (Mobile Ecosystem Forum) ●●●

baseline necessities. Being able to connect large public service buildings does a world of good, enabling technologies where they can do the most. We have a customer in the Philippines that is delivering to small offices and schools, working to this exact model."

XtndNet began as an affordable service tailored for Africa, which specialized in developing key infrastructures across the continent, supporting critical access to community services, education, health information, business opportunity, entertainment etc.
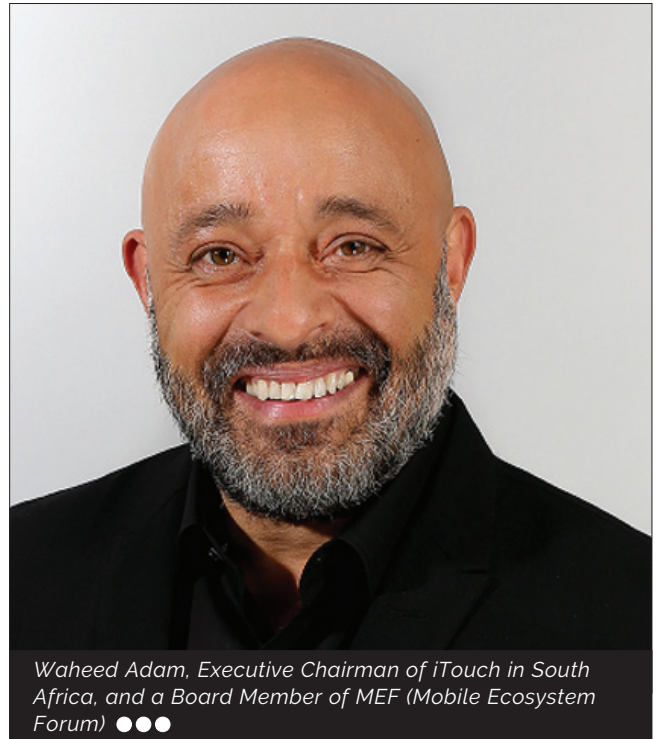
At the time of the initial agreement with Arabsat, Tobias Forsell, Forsway's CEO, stated," We are excited to be working with Arabsat, a leading satellite operator, to create a new way of delivering highly cost-effective broadband services in Africa. Tapping Forsway's hybrid technology, we are helping Arabsat Broadband Services enable rapid deployment of robust, satellite-based internet services and eliminate the need to deploy costly additional

problems, it opens up a world of opportunities to find solutions, making for a very attractive investment outlook. This is evidenced by the growth of foreign investment into the continent.

"Connectivity is key to driving this potential, with a young population where mobile adoption is part of their DNA. Africa is the next 'gold rush' and we are seeing the early pioneers or adopters take their place in the eco-system of African opportunities."

The challenge of bringing this enormous treasure trove of unexplored talent to the global community isn't just one of affordability, but one of regulation. "Africa has 54 countries, making up a continent with a landmass that could encompass all of Europe several times over, each with its own policies and regulations creating a complex environment in which one size does not fit all. This can lead to a lack of investment or in some cases disinvestment, as potential partners lose interest in favor of simpler market opportunities."

Anders Brandter spoke about this very obstacle. "There's a lot of people we're still struggling to reach. It's difficult to approach certain African schools or their governments to negotiate the implementation of our solutions, so we're working with a large satellite operator who has the authority to engage with UN agencies and governments to create the necessary inroads to bring this connectivity forward."

WHO HAS THE COMMON-SENSE SOLUTION?
With a variety of solutions likely being necessary to serve the breadth of the African continent, best practice is still being hammered out.

"Considering the costs of deploying necessary infrastructure," Waheed goes on, "innovative technologies such as RAN, backhaul and renewable/reliable energy will assist in deploying the 4G standard. In addition, Mobile Network Operators (MNO)'s must find new commercial models, and African governments must provide supportive policy frameworks that will serve as the backbone of

improving the commercial feasibility of rolling out mobile internet broadband networks."

While the colossal hurdle of navigating the disparate regulatory frameworks of Africa continues to stand in the way of providers like Forsway, there can, at least, be some consensus around what service models don't present practical solutions.

"We've seen high-profile LEO solutions from some of the world's foremost space companies claiming to be able to do this job," Bengt describes, "but we believe their offering is too expensive and too reliant on complicated technologies unlikely to be found in economically destabilized areas. Our service is robust and built to work with existing technology as painlessly as possible. You won't get ease of use with a VSAT system, and you won't get affordability with OneWeb or Starlink. As much as they pride themselves on it, we think these options just don't do the job." ●

Anders Brandter, Director of Global Sales & Marketing, Forsway ●●●