Broadband for development?

You just need the right regulations.

Broadband Commissioner Mo Ibrahim is founder and chair of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation

Mo Ibrahim, a pioneer of mobile telecommunications in Africa, dismisses the notion that broadband is an optional extra for poor countries struggling to provide basic services for their people

"Broadband is a very important tool for development," he says. "The economic benefits of broadband – in terms of injecting vitality into the arteries of business – are amazing."

Nor does he see broadband as requiring massive public investment. As with mobile phones, he believes that businesses and individuals are ready to pay for broadband services, providing a high return for private companies willing to enter the market.

"Broadband is a business, and the experience of mobile operators has shown that you can make real money in Africa," he says. "We're not seeking public money or aid. But we need public policies to create a benign business environment that will encourage the private sector to go in."

All too often, Ibrahim says, "greedy" governments have pursued short-sighted policies to squeeze as much income out of telecoms companies as they can, through windfall taxes, excessive licence fees and spectrum auctions.

Instead of additional taxation, governments in developing countries could amend licence terms for operators to force them to extend coverage and service to rural areas. At the same time, they should be aiming to stimulate private investment by, for example, removing import duties on information technology goods, loosening regulations based on out-of-date telecoms structures, and speeding up approvals.

Ibrahim also downplays how much broadband infrastructure would cost. "It will be far less expensive than investment in mobile networks," he argues. "A broadband network is not like an oil pipeline which has a fixed beginning and end point. It is a modular infrastructure, so there can be a continuous process of adding to the network. Obviously the main population centres will be connected first, but the network can be extended bit by bit."

With the private sector as the driver, public services will be able to 'piggy-back' on broadband networks just as they do with the current telecoms infrastructure, Ibrahim says. "There is a huge economic and business need for broadband, and the fact that it is also wonderful for education and other public services is an add-on benefit."

By acting as major broadband customers themselves through paying for connections to schools, universities, clinics, hospitals and offices, "governments will help finance broadband networks and underpin the business plans of private providers."

The Broadband Commission is an opportunity to push things forward, he says. "It is really important to see how we can provide connectivity to developing countries and bring the benefits of broadband to the 4-5 billion people who don't have it yet."