

Interview with Sir Richard Branson

Sir Richard Branson is founder and chairman of the Virgin Group of companies.

Sir Richard Branson believes closing the ‘broadband gap’ is essential to boost economic development, attract inward investment and enable people to take advantage of the new generation of mobile phones.

“Making broadband readily and rapidly available around the world could have a significant impact on helping to lift people out of poverty. We have already seen the impact of mobile phones in encouraging trade and wealth creation – good internet connectivity at an affordable cost would allow much further development and knowledge sharing.”

Companies and consumers are 200 times more likely to have access to broadband in developed countries than in the poorest least-developed countries, Sir Richard notes. “Many parts of the world risk missing out on economic growth because of their lack of broadband infrastructure.”

Broadband investment represents “a great opportunity for businesses to use their resources to drive long-term change”, enabling individuals to escape poverty and spurring economic growth that will benefit companies and countries in the long run.

The experience of Virgin Mobile businesses around the world, and Virgin Media in the UK, has already shown how technology can transform people’s lives, he says. “People in developing countries are using mobile phones for banking, to check markets, for health services and a whole range of other activities to help significantly boost productivity.”

However, modern broadband networks open up a whole range of new, better and more economical applications for mobile phones and other portable computing devices that are becoming the technology of choice for developing countries. India, one of the fastest growing countries in the world, added almost 100 million new mobile subscribers in the first seven months of 2010, Sir Richard points out.

He says the Broadband Commission can play a key role in bringing together businesses, governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) “to truly scale broadband at the speed we need to and help ensure that digital inclusion on a global scale can become a reality.”

Governments and NGOs can help drive demand and shape policies, including a supportive regulatory environment, that will help accelerate take-up. Businesses need to focus on innovative market strategies and incentives to make broadband affordable and simple to use.

“Broadband is the information gateway for our global village,” Sir Richard states. “It allows us to truly build a level playing field around the world through equal access to information. The key now is ensuring that it is available to everyone!”