"We can deliver internet connection where no one else can"

The Danish company BLUETOWN brings the power of the Internet and educational videos to the unconnected.

"Going online is huge!"

These are the words of Mogens Birk, VP for partnerships and alliances at BLUETOWN. Getting online is huge because more than four billion people worldwide still live without Internet access. Huge because the Internet connects local communities, which would otherwise be isolated. Huge because the Internet is much more than social media and mindless entertainment: first and foremost, it is a tool for progress and growth, and a platform with the potential to create a learning revolution in the poorest regions of the world.

The lack of connectivity already threatens to exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities as large groups of people have poor access to information, social networks, markets, education, and public services. Similarly, poor connectivity challenges health systems: according to the World Bank and WHO, around 80 per cent of incorrect medication in Africa could potentially be avoided if clinics had Internet access and could seek advice.

Changing the statistics, however, requires new ways of thinking. This is exactly what BLUETOWN has done with the development of a solar-powered Wi-Fi hotspot and, subsequently, a local cloud that makes information accessible to local communities without needing to download content from the Internet, which is expensive, explains Mogens Birk:

"The Danish company BLUETOWN brings the power of the Internet and educational videos to the unconnected."

SDG Accelerator for SMEs is an innovation programme for small and medium-sized industrial enterprises created by the UNDP in 2018 with support from the Danish Industry Foundation. The programme focuses on developing and accelerating business solutions addressing the Sustainable Development Goals. The programme is implemented in collaboration with Deloitte and is tested in Denmark in 2018-2019 with 30 SMEs, after which the aim is to roll out in other countries.

SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure
Target 9.c: Universal access to information and communications technology

Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in the least developed countries by 2020.
“Needless to say, traditional solutions with masts and cables cannot solve the task of bringing connectivity to the most remote areas. This is why we have developed a Wi-Fi hotspot that runs entirely on solar energy. This allows us to deliver cheap, wireless Internet to an entire community within a radius of one kilometre.”

The base station is run by a local operator who is in charge of daily maintenance as well as helping the community access relevant online content. In addition, BLUETOWN has developed a local cloud that offers free educational videos and other types of relevant learning material.

The learning element is of vital importance, says Mogens Birk:

“With a local cloud, governments, private companies and NGOs can make material readily accessible for rural communities. Just think of the potential! Farming techniques, education, public health information – all of this can be elevated to a whole new level. This might very well turn out to be one of the strongest weapons in the fight against poverty.”

Participating in the SDG Accelerator programme under the auspices of UNDP has been an important step towards viewing Internet connectivity as more than just access to data:

“Even though we are used to being innovative at BLUETOWN, it has been amazing to meet the experts from Deloitte and the UN. Working so intensely with the Sustainable Development Goals has really opened our eyes to new possibilities in terms of improving the living standards in regions suffering from poverty,” says Mogens Birk.

Going forward, BLUETOWN will scale up its rollout based on a pilot project, which has just been completed in Ghana. This involves new, international partnerships as well as a due diligence process in order to ensure the commercial viability of the solar-driven Wi-Fi hotspots and the local cloud solutions.

“Somewhere down the road, we have to make a profit from this solution,” says Mogens Birk. “In addition to the profit stemming from the sale of Internet access, we expect great things from the local clouds and the content that they will make available. Today, many companies and organisations have no other choice than to communicate through radio and cars with loudspeakers on top. We can help change this inefficient practice.”

With the solutions in place, some of the four billion people still living without Internet access can look forward to joining the world wide web.

“In five years, I expect us to run hotspots and clouds in at least 15 countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America,” says Mogens Birk. “First, we are targeting stable countries in which digitalisation is part of the national development plan. In the longer term, the goal is to reach an even wider audience. It is a long process, but we are determined to succeed.”

Facts about BLUETOWN

• Established in 2012.
• Approximately 85 employees.
• Owned by Danish private investors.
• Represented in Denmark, the US, Peru, Brazil, Ghana, Tanzania and India.

This is how BLUETOWN contributes to the sustainable development goals

• BLUETOWN has developed a Wi-Fi hotspot that runs entirely on solar energy.
• In addition to internet access, the hotspot allows access to a local cloud. Here, authorities, private companies and NGOs can upload free learning material to the communities.
• BLUETOWN was declared a joint winner of the USAID Women Connect Challenge, which provides a financial basis for projects that break down the digital gender divide.

“At BLUETOWN, we want to push the boundaries for rural connectivity. We are excited about our progress in the SDG Accelerator, and we believe that the local cloud can accelerate both our business potential and our positive contribution to the SDGs. The more value that we create for our users, the better and more attractive our solutions are, and the closer we get to realising our ambition of connecting the unconnected.”

Peter Ib, CEO, BLUETOWN