

Ignored by telecoms, Mexican village runs own cell service

VILLA TALEA DE CASTRO, MEXICO: Ignored by telecom firms, a remote Mexican mountain village now runs its own mobile phone network to communicate with the outside world.

Tucked away in a lush forest in the southern state of Oaxaca, the indigenous village of Villa Talea de Castro, population 2,500, was not seen as a profitable market for companies such as billionaire Carlos Slim's America Movil.

So the village, under an initiative launched by indigenous groups, civil organisations and universities, put up a perch-like antenna on a rooftop, installed radio and computer equipment, and created its own micro provider called Red Celular de Talea (RCT) this year.

Now, restaurant manager Ramiro Perez can call his children and receive food orders on his cellphone at a cheap price in this village dotted by small homes painted in pink and yellow.

The local service costs 15 pesos (US\$1.2) per month, 13 times cheaper than a big firm's basic plan in Mexico City, while calls to the United States, where many of the indigenous Zapoteco resident have migrated, charge a few pennies per minute.

"I have two children who live outside the village and I communicate with them at least two or three times per week," Perez, 60, said.

Before, Perez had to use telephone booths where he paid up to 10 pesos (US\$0.75) per minute.

Aiming to increase access to mobile communications

The coffee-producing village installed the network with the help of Rhizomatica, a non-profit with US, European and Mexican experts who aim to increase access to mobile telecommunications in communities that lack affordable service.

In a statement, Rhizomatica, a civil group named Redes and a town official said they hoped that a telecom reform pushed through Congress by President Enrique Pena Nieto to open the market will "break the obstacles" that prevent the development of such community-based projects.

"Many indigenous communities have shown interest in participating in this project and we hope that many more can join this scheme," the statement said.

The equipment used in Talea, which was provided by California-based Range Networks, includes a 900mhz radio network and computer software that routes calls, registers numbers and handles billing.

Calls to the United States are channeled via a voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) provider.

The village received a two-year-permit from the Federal Communications Commission to have the right to test the equipment.

When a cellphone user arrives in the village, a text message automatically appears saying: "Welcome to the Talea Cellular Network (RTC), to register, go to the radio with this message."

One catch: Keep it short

There is one catch: phone calls must be limited to a maximum of five minutes to avoid a saturation of lines.

Israel Hernandez, a village resident and one of the volunteers who helped set up the system, said the network uses the radio-electric spectrum that "telephone (service) providers refuse to use because it is financially unviable."

Slim's Telcel is part of his America Movil empire, which controls 70% of Mexico's mobile phone market and has 262 million subscribers across Latin America but never made it to Talea.

Alejandro Lopez, a senior town hall official, said the village had approached big telecom firms but that they had required 10,000 potential users as well as the construction of a path where an antenna would be erected and a lengthy power line.

"Despite some technical problems, because we are in a test period, the project has been a success" with 600 villagers signing up since the service opened three months ago, Lopez said.

Buoyed by the system's success, the village has decided to buy its own equipment that will allow RCT to run 35 lines simultaneously and plans to install in the coming weeks.

The next step, RCT volunteer Hernandez said, is to form cooperatives with other indigenous villages to request concessions from the Mexican government in order to resolve "this lack of free frequencies for cellphone communications in the country's rural communities."

Source: AFP, via I-Net Bridge

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