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## ■ A few questions to Mark Davies - TradeNet CEO

**ITC: You are the founder of various companies and your current one, based in Accra, Ghana, is [BusyLab](#). Could you please tell us a bit about this company?**

Mark Davies (MD):

After some dotcom success in London (firsttuesday) and California (citysearch) I guess I was like many people looking for something that was still challenging and combined my interests in Africa (my mother is South African and I've traveled throughout the continent) with my belief that technology is such an empowering development for all of us. I stumbled into the idea of an incubator in Ghana, and since 2000 we've been running one of Africa's only profitable incubators that is focused on exploring entrepreneurship among SMEs. During this time, I looked a bit harder at what software solutions could be developed locally, and realized that the agriculture sector was simply not drawing the risk or vision that entrepreneurs were applying to other sectors. In particular, getting real time market information to farmers was particularly attractive to me; it was a challenge that combined my interest in anthropology, technology and business. So BusyLab was setup in 2004 to attract the brightest young developers we could find and start building innovative products. TradeNet is the first.



**ITC: One of your initiatives is in the same area than ITC's Trade at Hand project (mobile phone use for trade and business information). Could you please briefly explain what it is about?**

MD: As I mentioned, [TradeNet](#) began by simply mimicking what market information systems have traditionally tried to do: provide price information as a public good to small-scale rural producers. But as the team explored this area, we've discovered so many networks of commercial information that are already flowing in these agric/trade communities. All of it by word of mouth, none of it profiled, managed efficiently, nor made available for new market linkages... so we started to focus on the broader opportunity of linking these communities to the transformative nature of the internet, namely by creating usable linkages between the mobile phone and the internet, or mobile2web, if you will. We see all sorts of potential applications whereby stockists can report inventory to their wholesale agents, producers can



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[Mark Davies, TradeNet](#)

report production data to contract buyers, transporters can advertise location and availability of trucks, traders and producers can broadcast buy & sell offers to new markets... There are all sorts of talk about innovating with mobile phones, but we just weren't seeing practical applications that were built from the ground up. That's what we're trying to achieve with TradeNet.

**ITC: How do you think businessmen and SMEs from developing economies will use Information and Communication Technologies ten years from now?**

MD: Well, in the same way we all do. They'll use ICTs as a service (not a pastime), to identify products and services, comparison shop, track inventory etc. The real application of the Internet and these technologies is not so sexy... it just helps you with efficiencies in what you're already doing. Certainly the agric/trade sector in Africa needs more efficiencies and more transparency to stimulate growth and expansion.

**ITC: From your experience, what are the public and the private sector strengths and weaknesses regarding ICT4D initiatives and medium to long-term impact in this area?**

MD: My feeling is that most public sector initiatives are not customer-driven, so often lack the real product specificity that the market would reward. What I am saying is that most projects come up with a good idea, strong on theory, deploy, and then don't follow through long enough for lessons learned to be transformed into market adjustments. If you're private, then you live or die by people buying your product... so our entire philosophy is driven by consumer needs. If we can't build something they want, or pay for, or use, we die. So our energies are focused entirely on product design and consumer focus, and of course on fiscal discipline. I rarely find this focus and these efficiencies in public sector projects, which are often short-lived and donor-driven. Now I don't think there can be private innovation in Africa without public participation, because those markets lack the capital and the markets to roll out innovation and ensure enough successes to justify those risks. But the debate around public/private I think is not entirely honest. The public sector remains highly suspicious of the private sector for all sorts of reasons. We must bridge that and leverage public assistance to help private companies take risks, and possibly benefit financially in the course of that. And of course all of the brightest minds are mostly drawn to profit and the private sector. If we could develop a true, healthy model for PPPs, I think we'd see the development agenda accelerate. And of course, whether public or private, these innovations, especially in areas like ICT4D, need time. So many basic human lessons are being learned about how these communities interact (or don't) with technology that we need a development cycle that allows for that product refinement over time.

**ITC: In your view, and based on your [experience with IFDC](#), what is key to a fruitful public-private partnership?**

MD: The same thing that works for any partnership: communication. I think if you can really be involved in each other's challenges, and understand the constraints of the labor market, or of the donor agenda, then you will pull together and work as a team. TradeNet has benefited enormously from the confidence and relationship building that IFDC, as a public project, has been able to accomplish over time. BusyLab has been able to innovate quickly and independently, and we've been lucky that that has been in line with where IFDC wants

to go. So some healthy conversations, and a good dose of independence, and participants that know each other and appreciate the respective agendas...that's the key.

**ITC: What have you learned during the past few years, by leading the TradeNet project with your IFDC partners? Where do you think it is strategic to spend your time on now? What are the next steps for you and this project?**

MD: We've got to take TradeNet all the way to the village. We've worked with IFDC on the big regional trade associations, but we're chomping at the bit to take a vertical value chain, like cassava, and tie all the stakeholders together through an efficient and regular broadcast of information by SMS -- it's all about enhancing group dynamics. We've got to find community leaders/mediators who can be village custodians of this information network and pass on opportunities to their community. Mapping out the ecology of these communities, listening to them, being realistic about who will and will not use mobile phone for text-based business services is now our challenge. IFDC can keep the international profile high, and help raise awareness among other public institutions, but we need the resources and the time to deploy with our own networks at market and village levels, and measure the results.

**ITC: Thank you Mark!**

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For more information on TradeNet, please visit <http://www.tradenet.biz/>

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