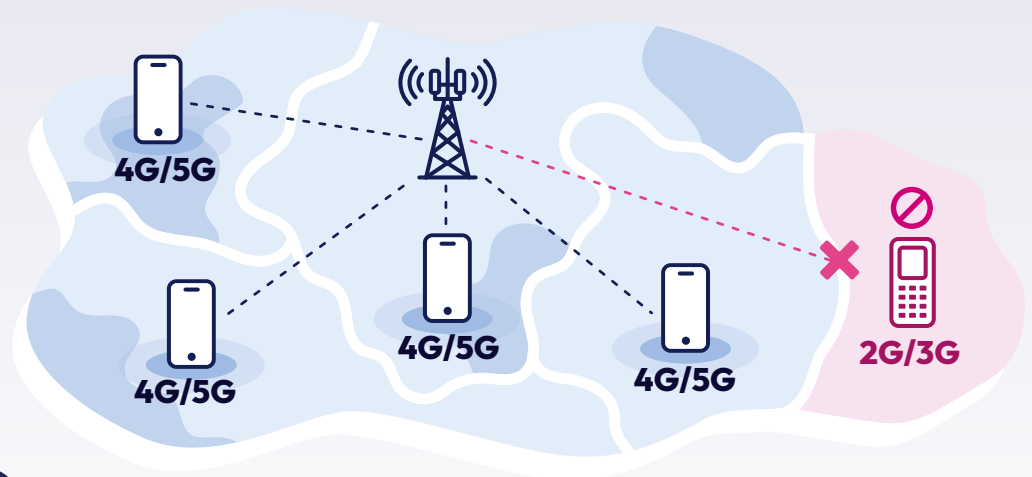




DID YOU KNOW?

The shift to 4G and 5G can deepen the digital divide

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Why it matters

Operators and regulators are retiring 2G and 3G networks to reallocate spectrum, reduce costs, and expand more efficient 4G and 5G services. The transition can improve connectivity overall, but it also creates exclusion risks for people who cannot afford compatible devices.

Many users still depend on older handsets. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 60% of mobile Internet users still rely on a 3G smartphone or feature phone. When older networks are switched off, these users may lose mobile Internet access and, depending on national network design, reliable access to calls, SMS, emergency communications, telecare devices, and other basic services.

Country examples show why a managed transition matters. In Vietnam, more than 10 million 2G-only users were expected to replace handsets ahead of the 2024 2G-only service cutoff. In India, operators warned that a forced 2G shutdown could push low-income and marginal consumers away from basic telecom services, increasing the digital divide. Reports estimate that a \$40 4G smartphone could bring mobile Internet within reach for 20 million additional people in Sub-Saharan Africa, while a \$30 handset could enable access for up to 50 million.

The solution is not to delay modernization, but to make migration inclusive: phased switch-offs, clear public communication, subsidized handsets, trade-in programs, free upgrades for high-risk customers, and targeted support for rural, elderly, low-income, and digitally excluded users.



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