

Azercell: Going the extra mile

Azercell wants to be a company that Azerbaijan will be proud of. This year has seen the introduction of Blackberry services, and 3G is expected by the end of the year

Reflecting Azerbaijan's buoyant economy at a time of global financial turmoil, Azercell continues to grow and introduce new services. Indeed, part of the reason that Azerbaijan has been able to buck the global economic downward trend has been due to the government's efforts to develop the non-oil sector.

A key industry in this regard is ICT. By 2020, profits generated from this sector will reach the same level as the oil income of Azerbaijan; the development level of the ICT sector is three times that of the country's overall economic development. And more than 70 per cent of revenue in the ICT sector comes from mobile communications, in turn, around 70 per cent of total profits in this area come from Azercell, which in the highly competitive Azerbaijani mobile market continues to grow, maintaining its leading position built up over the last decade.

Established in 1996, Azercell has a subscriber base of 3.6 million, and a more than 60 per cent market share, with a network covering 80 per cent of the country and 99.5 per cent of the population. Over the last 13 years Azercell has invested nearly US\$1 billion in the Azerbaijani economy. The overall amount of taxes paid by the company has exceeded US\$600 million. For many years now it has been the largest taxpayer in the non-oil sector, with tax payments totalling more than 2 per cent of the State budget in 2008. Some 10 per cent of all taxes paid by the non-oil sector come from Azercell. Furthermore, thanks to Azercell's growth, some 120,000 jobs were created last year, and around 100 new companies have been set up in recent years in the telecommunications sector.

As a pioneer and a leader, Azercell works hard to provide a wide range of the newest services to its customers. This year has seen the introduction of Blackberry services, and 3G is expected by the end of the year. The company also offers competitive roaming services: Azercell's RoamCell service allows subscribers to make calls using the networks of 340 operators in 138 countries around the world.

Over the last two years, as part of its commitment to make mobile telephony available to all in Azerbaijan, the company has significantly reduced its tariffs, which have fallen by almost 50 per cent. The company has also gone the extra mile in providing coverage throughout the country, as CEO Ali Agan explains: "Earlier in

the year we set the 1,500th radio base station in the Qusar region. The opening ceremony was held on a snowy winter's day in this remote area. The coverage area of this station encompasses just five or six villages with around 500 mobile users in total. It will take 25-30 years to recoup this investment. But we think that everybody should have a right to talk via mobile phone and use its services," he says, adding: "Azercell wants to be a company that Azerbaijan will be proud of."

This has led the company to increase the number and scope of its corporate social responsibility activities. "The cooperation of the private sector, the public sector and governments, will allow us to do more for the development and welfare of our citizens, and the country," says Mr Agan, adding: "We are active in working with children, youth, and in the areas of sports, arts, healthcare, science, and the environment."

Among the many projects Azercell is actively participating in is the "Every Child Needs a Family" project carried out in cooperation with UNICEF, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, and Ministry of Labor and Social Protection.

Azercell spent US\$2.5 million in 2008 and US\$11.5 million over the last 13 years in the implementation of social projects. At the same time, the company has carried out many projects within the framework of its Shared Development Platform directed to the development of professional journalism in Azerbaijan.

Mobile technology's impact is broad, and is playing a key role in education. Information sharing through mobile networks, and access to the internet via mobile phone (known as m-learning - mobile learning) brings education to geographical areas where people do not have access to teachers, schools and educational resources. As Azerbaijan moves forward with its economic and political reforms, Mr. Agan says that mobile broadband will be the engine of growth that will power Azerbaijan out of the current crisis. "According to the experts mobile broadband will ultimately add the equivalent of US\$211 billion to China's GDP, and could add US\$95 billion to India's GDP," he says.

In short, Azercell will continue to play a key role in introducing the latest technology to expand its coverage, while providing its rapidly growing subscriber base with quality, stable communication, matched by care for people and the environment, and the implementation of community investment programmes. **F**