



UCUSAF ACCESS INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRAM FAQ



What is UCUSAF'?

The Uganda Communications Universal Service and Access Fund (UCUSAF), formerly the Rural Communications Development Fund (RCDF), was created in 2002 as both a regulatory tool and a semi-autonomous ICT development entity. Administered by Uganda Communications Commission, the Fund's primary objective is to enhance access and usage of ICTs in unserved and underserved areas where the licensed telcos find it challenging to deploy because of the commercial unviability of the said locations or services.



What are UCUSAF's targeted programs?

UCUSAF has both demand-side and supply-side programs. The programs include ICT in Education, ICT for Persons with Disabilities, ICT for Agriculture, Digital Skilling, Internet Connectivity, Access Infrastructure, Youth Multimedia, Research Support, and Devices for Underserved Communities.



How does the Access Infrastructure Program address network access gaps?

The program strategically provides coverage to areas not economically viable for licensed telecommunications operators.



How are beneficiary areas identified for infrastructure development?

UCC uses a coverage mapping tool and reports from MNOs to identify sub-counties with less than 30% geographic 3G coverage. Coverage is determined by a signal strength of more than -90dBm.



How is the location of the site determined?

Determining an optimal site for wireless coverage involves precise triangulation of the target area. Strategic placement is critical, maximizing coverage while optimizing technical and financial resources, including spectrum utilization. Notably, a single mast can strategically cover multiple sub-counties.



What is the scope of this phase of the program?

Sixty-three sites have been earmarked and provided for subsidy funding. Of the 63, 7 are fully constructed, and 4 are now live. The 7 sites are Kasimbi, Nyambigha (Karugutu), Kyazirimu (Kyebando) , Kagara (Kabuyanda), Lapono (Agago), Lyabana (Island), and Kyampangara (Kazo). Lapono is the site that is being launched in the Agago sub-county.



What is the implementing entity of this phase?

Tower of Africa Uganda Limited is the infrastructure provider implementing these 63 UCUSAF sites.



What is the projected cost of the subsidy for the 63 sites?

The anticipated subsidy cost for constructing the 63 sites is 12 billion Ugandan shillings. This subsidy is allocated to various facets of the infrastructure rollout, encompassing expenses such as land acquisition, civil works, and complementary infrastructure. The funding is strategically distributed to ensure comprehensive support for the construction and enhancement of these sites, contributing to their practical functionality and extended coverage reach.



What determines the order of implementation?

The infrastructure is implemented based on the telecom operators' roll-out plan, which includes issuing a service order for the needed infrastructure.



How does the subsidy trickle down to MNOs?

When evaluating the best bidder for the infrastructure subsidy, a critical Term of Reference focuses on determining the rate the provider can charge telecom operators for utilizing the subsidized infrastructure. This rate is essentially the rental fee MNOs pay for accessing the infrastructure. To incentivize infrastructure uptake by the operators, these rental fees are strategically set at the lowest level for an initial period of five (05) operational years. This intentional approach encourages MNOs to embrace and actively utilize the subsidized infrastructure, fostering broader and more effective coverage.



What is the projected timeline for completing the 63 sites?

The goal is to complete up to 200 sites over the next five years.



What growth in coverage do the 63 sites represent?

The 63 Sites would cover 42% of the total area of the 117 Sub-Counties Identified.



What demand-side incentives drive usage in unserved areas?

In our drive to boost ICT usage in economically challenging regions like those of the 63 site locations, UCC employs various strategies to drive demand in those areas. Our first focus is fostering the development of locally relevant content that resonates with the people in these areas, addressing their unique needs. Simultaneously, we ensure that essential public services are easily accessible through user-friendly government online platforms.

UCC has rolled out extensive ICT in Education and digital skilling programs, catering to diverse groups. The goal is to build a critical mass of individuals with essential skills to use ICTs effectively and safely, including mobile phones. Our impactful ICT for Education initiatives empower students, teachers, and various population segments. By providing devices to low-income communities, we aim not only to grant access to technology but to integrate them into the broader digital landscape.



What is the contracting process?

The contracting process for this program follows a competitive bidding model among eligible entities (licensed operators). It initiates by issuing a call for proposals, and subsequently, the bids are rigorously evaluated by the predefined terms of reference (TORs). The entire process hinges on transparency, with proposals being solicited and scrutinized based on the established contracting TORs.



Factors slowing down the rollout of this Access infrastructure program?

The implementation pace of this program faces challenges due to the non-economic viability of the designated unserved areas. Despite the availability of subsidies, licensed telecom operators are reluctant to issue infrastructure service requests, contributing to the swift slowdown.



What complementary infrastructure needs should be addressed?

In most unserved and underserved areas, particularly remote regions, a crucial challenge lies in the absence of essential complementary infrastructure. These smaller, outlying locations lack basic amenities such as access roads and grid power. The absence of these foundational elements not only hampers the speed of construction but also hinders the operational efficiency of the mast once it is established. Recognizing and addressing these infrastructure gaps becomes imperative for ensuring a smoother and more effective implementation process.



The Challenge of inter-agency approvals for site construction?

Delays in obtaining interagency approvals and structural permits significantly impact the infrastructure rollout. These agencies encompass those responsible for conducting environmental and social impact assessments, district local governments, and entities overseeing structural planning approvals for civil works. The collective involvement of these entities in the approval process can introduce complexities that may impede the timely execution of infrastructure projects.



Public resistance to telecommunication infrastructure?

In peri-urban underserved communities, there's a notable surge in public resistance to telecom infrastructure, primarily fueled by misinformation regarding health-related concerns associated with proximity to such infrastructure. This resistance poses a challenge to initiatives aimed at enhancing network quality of service, especially amidst urbanization. To address this issue, concerted efforts are being made to correct misconceptions through targeted awareness campaigns, ensuring that the public is accurately informed about the safety and health standards implemented in telecommunication infrastructure deployment.



What sustainability aspects are crucial?

A critical facet of responsible deployment involves managing end-of-life scenarios, e-waste, and other sustainability considerations, explicitly focusing on potential hazards associated with improper disposal, notably batteries in solar-powered sites. Proactive measures are essential to navigate the environmental impact and ensure deployment aligns with responsible and sustainable practices.



How does affordability impact commercial viability?

Affordability plays a pivotal role in determining the commercial viability of masts in underserved areas. The accessibility and affordability of devices and services directly influence the uptake of services. Through ongoing demand-side initiatives, we are actively working to increase usage. As usage grows, a noteworthy outcome is reducing the cost of ICT products and services. This interconnected relationship ensures that affordable access enhances service uptake and contributes to the overall commercial viability of telecommunication infrastructure in underserved regions.



Are there challenges in acquiring permits for coverage in protected areas?

Securing infrastructure permits for coverage in protected areas (game parks, forest reserves, and other gazetted areas over large land masses) presents unique challenges, primarily related to cost considerations. The process can be financially burdensome, necessitating strategic engagement to explore incentivized costing approaches. This entails collaborative efforts to negotiate and establish cost-effective measures that facilitate smoother permit acquisition, ensuring environmental preservation and expanding coverage to protected regions.

OUR ASKS:



Streamlining Approval Processes for setting up Telecommunications Infrastructure:

Support and collaboration are crucial to streamline the approval processes, making them more efficient for the agencies involved in infrastructure approval. This includes a call for enhanced coordination, reduced bureaucratic hurdles, and the implementation of streamlined protocols, ultimately expediting the approval timelines.



Advocating for Infrastructure Safety:

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Community Engagement Programs:

Foster initiatives that engage local communities to enhance their understanding of the benefits and safety measures associated with telecommunication infrastructure.



Establish an Industry Collaboration Platform:

Create a platform for industry players to collaboratively address challenges, share best practices, and collectively work towards improving the efficiency of infrastructure uptake and approval processes.