



TUNISIA

Effective use of a Universal Service Fund and clear targets to improve rural mobile broadband coverage

Key lessons

- A clear vision by governments is a key starting point to any rural coverage plan;
- Close collaboration and communication between governments/regulators, local authorities and mobile operators is key to success;
- Public consultation with the mobile industry, which can inform regulatory approaches and policy decision-making, is an important step to building a coverage road map;
- Universal Service Funds can be an effective mechanism for connecting rural areas, but only when properly structured and monitored and when tenders are carefully designed; and
- Coverage obligations for rural areas can be an efficient tool when used in conjunction with measures to lower mobile operator costs

Background

The notions of a Universal Service Fund to finance the provision of universal service have been in place for over a decade. However, a detailed list of proposed interventions and activities that would be covered by USF funding was only finalised in December 2013, by a Ministerial Decree ([link](#)).

In March 2017, under the National Strategic Plan Tunisia Digital 2020, the Tunisian government detailed how it planned to reduce the digital divide between different areas of the country and improve social and economic inclusion.

To kick it off, the Ministry of Telecommunications launched a call for tenders to designate one or more national operators that would be responsible for providing coverage to 94 pre-identified “White Zones”, or not spots. These White Zones are distributed among 47 delegations, in 15 of Tunisia’s total 24 governorates.





How has Tunisia improved rural coverage?

As part of the tender, the Tunisian government mandated minimum coverage thresholds and quality of service specifications. The designated provider would be accountable for delivering on these in exchange for financing from the country’s Universal Service Fund (approximately \$13.5 million over 7 years). The metrics included:

- Providing mobile voice service in accordance with international standards and mobile broadband as per the following targets. For information, it is estimated that 180,000 people live in the designated White Zones/rural areas, and they make up the population coverage target demographic:

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Geographic and population coverage targets	80%	85%	90%

- The minimum average mobile throughput threshold per user during busy hours (between 18:00 and 22:00) as per the following:

Year 1 to Year 4:	Year 4 to Year 6:
4 Mbps	8 Mbps

- In addition to the provision of population coverage for the designated universal service provider is expected to deploy outdoor mobile broadband coverage to all local roads, all rural access roads, the main administrative establishments , all primary schools (194 in total), all basic health centres (59 in total) within designated White Zone areas. The following definition of a broadband coverage provides context for the programme’s throughput technical specifications for outdoor and indoor coverage:

	Outdoor	Indoor
An area is covered when	Average broadband speed achieved in 95% of outdoor connection attempts	Average broadband speed achieved in 70% of indoor connection attempts

	Year 1 to Year 4	Year 4 to Year 6
Average throughput in the main administrative establishments (including schools and basic health centres during busy hours)	6.5 Mbps	8 Mbps



Impact

Ultimately, the universal coverage tender was granted to Tunisie Telecom, which was only operator to submit an offer.

As of today, after three years of deployment, Tunisie Telecom has achieved the following:

- By the end of 2019 : 82 out of 94 White Zones were covered by the Tunisie Telecom
- By June 2020: 12 remaining White Zones will be covered [the COVID-19 pandemic may delay this progress by a few months]

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