



2022/23

Universal Access Service Fund Annual Report

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I. INTRODUCTION

This report is an account of the Universal Access and Service Fund (“UASF” / “Fund”) activities carried out in the duration of the financial year 2022/23. The activities carried out are aligned to mandate the Fund as per the Electronic Communication Act of 2013 and the Universal Service and Access Regulations of 2015. The year in review also gives an account on how the Fund performed against the 2021-2024 strategic objectives and also in line with the Eswatini Communications Commission (“ESCCOM” / “Commission”) mandate and 5-Year Strategy.

The Universal Service and Access Regulations 2015 articulate that a three-year strategy be formulated which will cover the areas listed below:

- (a) Voice communications services ;
- (b) Data communications services ;
- (c) Infrastructure for the provision of voice or data communications services;
- (d) Equipment and end user devices; and
- (e) Training and skills development.

2. THE UASF STRATEGY

The financial year 2022/23 was the second year of the life of the UASF Strategy which has programmes which promote innovation, and the digital ecosystem. The three (3) year strategy’s vision is *to administer the universal access and service fund and facilitate the design and implementation of sustainable projects that deliver high quality and universally accessible, affordable services.* The mission is *to increase access to broadband, broadcasting and postal services; therefore, enhancing the socio-economic prosperity of the citizens of Eswatini.*

The strategy was developed based on 6 pillars as indicated below:

| Pillar | Description | Objective / Specification |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Subsidization | To use the Fund to create key interventions to address the market access gap | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding to address market access gap, with an Operating Manual to support expenditure. • No ongoing subsidisation of end user subscriptions or usage. |

| Pillar | Description | Objective / Specification |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Availability | All inhabitants have services available | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency in coverage of inhabited geographic territory • Region / area / Tinkhundla |
| Accessibility | All inhabitants can access the services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender, Religion, Language • Persons with Disabilities are able to use the services available. • Relevance of content to accommodate marginalised groups. |
| Ability | All inhabitants have the basic ability / capacity to use ICT services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of services and their benefits. • Ability to use computers and devices. • Ability to navigate the Internet and use ICT services. • Gap between the ownership of data-capable mobile phones and the awareness and ability to take full advantage of Internet information and services, and to do so safely and protected. |
| Affordability | All inhabitants can afford to use the services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic services must be affordable to all citizens regardless of economic bracket. • No one must be disadvantaged by income; services should not cost more than 2% of average household income. • No cost variations due to geographic location, urban or rural factor. |
| Evidence Based Decision Making | All decisions made by the Fund are based on sound research and investigation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The strategy, its programmes and budget are evidence based. • Information is provided in a transparent manner. • Information will be sourced when the annual plan is formulated to inform the programmes. |

The 2021 - 2024 strategy has five (5) programs as per the table below:

| Programme | Description |
|--|--|
| Programme 1: Connectivity and User Interface (Demand Side Measures) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To facilitate last mile broadband connectivity using the most efficient last mile technologies with broadband access of 3Mbps (downlink) for mobile broadband and 4Mbps (downlink) for fixed broadband for public institutions, with a focus on health facilities and schools. • To facilitate affordable services and equipment / devices for identified institutions and end-user communities. • To facilitate access to broadcasting and postal services through innovative mechanisms. |
| Programme 2: Fund Management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To support Fund staff and the Universal Access Committee to perform their duties in relation to managing the Fund programmes and budget and the related monitoring and evaluation activities. • To develop the Fund identity including through national promotional campaigns, documentation and public relation programmes aimed to make projects that promote increased access to ICTs more visible. |
| Programme 3: Network Infrastructure enhancement and Broadband Connectivity (Supply side measures) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To strengthen connectivity through fixed and mobile network infrastructure based on a technology-neutral approach. • To increase universal access and service (measured by population and geographic coverage) and to improve network reliability and redundancy. |
| Programme 4: Digitisation, Enabling Technology and Services (Usage and Uptake) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To support accessible local content with 3 focus areas: (1) digitizing and sharing government content, which will primarily be digitized; (2) facilitating user generated content (3) broadcasting content that can also be streamed online. • To support platform and application development. |
| Programme 5: Digital Literacy and ICT Impact Training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide capacity building and training to support the use of ICTs by all end users across sectors and economic segments (i.e., SMMEs, households, schools etc). |

| Programme | Description |
|-----------|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To ensure that all programmes that are rolled out by the Fund (Programmes 1 - 4) include an appropriate element of capacity building and training to ensure sustainability and maximum impact. |

3. UPDATE ON PROGRAMMES

In the year in the review the fund was able to complete 95% of the projects planned for the financial year. A detailed breakdown of the intervention to bridge the digital divide through universal access and service is detail in-line with the sector of influence below.

3.1 PROGRAMME 1: CONNECTIVITY AND USER INTERFACE (DEMAND SIDE MEASURES)

3.1.1. EDUCATION SECTOR

- The Fund was able to partner with the Ministry of Education and Training in the development of the National Learning and Teaching Platform in partnership with UNICEF and the National Curriculum Centre (NCC). The Learning Passport (LP) was created for students to be able to access their studies online. Focus currently is to do all subjects at high school. The initiative also helps to prepare the country in the unlikely event of another pandemic or almost similar catastrophe.

Deploying the Learning Passport (LP) would ensure that learners continue to access their education beyond the confines of space and time. For Eswatini, deploying a learning management system will complement the traditional brick and mortar type of schooling thus increasing access to education and training. Teachers and learners will be able to benefit from the use of both systems to maximise teaching and learning experiences. Furthermore, the LP will provide a centralized source of learning for all school children including those with special education needs. To achieve this goal, the Ministry used practising teachers to create content for the first six subjects offered at senior secondary. The teachers were selected through subject panels and come from the

different regions in the country. These teachers create such content in addition to their normal teaching workloads. Hence, there was need to bring them together for training, creation of content and feedback provision from time to time. The first group of subjects involved in this phase of the project are the subjects taken by every learner at this level of the education system and they are called core subjects. These include English Language, Mathematics, SiSwati, Biology, Physical Science and Religious Education. Literature in English, though not a core, is also part of the first group of subjects to be offered through the LP.

- As part of support for Students with disabilities, the Fund continued to support young people with Cerebral Palsy and Down syndrome. This project started in 2021/22 and in the year 2022/23 the last group was being supported. For financial year 2023/24 work will continue with the National Curriculum Centre to ensure that the online platform has all the tools required by disabled students.

In addition to the end user devices the Fund also continued support to ensure that every learner including those with special needs and disabilities have access to quality education. The five schools namely Ekwetsembeni Special School, St Joseph's Mission, Mbasheni Primary School (inclusive model), Eqinisweni High and Boyane High (Inclusive Secondary Schools) have a substantial number of children with special needs and disabilities who have also received assistive devices to enhance communication and learning. Each of these school received 30 laptops.

- In partnership with Jenny Eswatini, the Fund also set up broadband for the schools which assisted in improved access to differentiated approaches that are necessary to accommodate the different learning of the students. The internet will enable schools to download software's and upload them in the learners' gadgets. It will further improve pedagogy as teachers will be able to research on topical issues that are geared towards catering for diversity.

The Fund has been supporting the education sector for the past four years in particular the students with disabilities. Some of learners who were supported by the intervention by the Fund have successfully completed their high school education and were further admitted to pursue their studies in local institutions of higher learning. This is an indication that integrating ICT into teaching and learning does have a positive impact not only to active participation during teaching and learning, but also to the achievement of the learners. The supported students with visual impairment were given personal specialized laptops and software's to assist them in their academic studies.

3.1.2. HEALTH SECTOR

The Fund assisted in the rolling out of the Client Management Information Systems (CMIS) to rural areas. CMIS enables facilities to provide quality health care services since real time data transmission is happening across board which ensure seamless continuity of patient care across mobile health services. . For the financial year 2022/23 the Ministry of Health was supported with 60 laptops to be used in the Electronic Medical Records (EMR) system in selected healthcare facilities. An additional 10 will be handed over to Hospice at Home for the same functionality.

3.1.3. AGRICULTURE

- The Ministry of Agriculture launched a livestock tracking platform which was only accessible when in the regional offices or the head office. The Fund upon engagement with the Ministry is working on upgrading the platform in order to enable the extension officers to access the platform remotely via a web server and be able to assist farmers closer to their point of presence of dipping tank. This will improve the livestock tracking and also enable the security forces to be able to do spot checks for those farmers or Emaswati moving around with livestock. The upgrade should be completed in the 2023/24 financial year.

3.1.4. TINKHUNDLA ADMINISTRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

- As part of supporting Government drive to decentralize services, the Fund supported the Ministry of Tinkhundla Administration and Development with multifunctional printers which are used in the service centers. Six (6) Tinkhundla Centers have been supported in 2022/23.
- The provision of Wi-Fi hotspots within the Tinkhundla and Service Centers has made Emaswati to have access to the internet. This internet provision has assisted Emaswati who were under privileged and could not afford data bundles. Based on the feedback from an impact assessment, the frequency in which people come to the centres to access the internet is at an average of three to four times each week. Most users visit the centre for Wi-Fi access during the weekend as this is the time when most people are free. The Ministry of Tinkhundla Administration and Development conducted a functionality assessment exercise at benefitting Tinkhundla Service Centres to evaluate the impact of the Public Wi-Fi Hotspots on the citizens. Beneficiaries responded to a number of questions, including:
 - How did you know about the service?
 - What do you use the service for?
 - Was the service beneficial to you? If yes, how? If not, how?
 - What challenges do you encounter with the service?
 - How best can the service be improved?

Many beneficiaries of the service indicated that they learnt of the programme through word of mouth; radio programme; signage at the Inkhundla Centre; as well as presentations by Bucopho at constituency (*imiphakatsi*) meetings.

Beneficiaries indicated that they access internet through the Public Wi-Fi Hotspots for research projects; social media business interactions and leisure. Whilst the service was viewed by many as highly beneficial, some encountered challenges with logging in and weak signals at times; unstable electricity supply; and some expressed that 500Mbs was not sufficient as it expired before they completed their tasks. It was also expressed by some beneficiaries that they had to travel long distances to the Tinkhundla Centres and expressed a desire to have Public Wi-Fi hotspots at *Imiphakatsi* (Community Centres). In the year in review the Fund set up the WIFI service in 20 additional Tinkhundla Centers.

3.1.5. SOCIAL SERVICES

As part of the mandate to support the elderly and disabled, the Fund supported the Government Social Disbursement Grant initiative by making available 2 925 smartphones for distribution to the recipients of the grants. This initiative started in financial year 2021/22 and the update received was that it has helped some of the beneficiaries start income generating projects, which has improved and sustained the lives of their families as well as bringing about self-sufficiency through venturing into Mobile Money vending. This has restored pride and dignity to the members of this special community as they have become entrepreneurs in their own right. This kind of support has indeed made tremendous contribution to the betterment of the lives of persons with disabilities.

4. PROGRAMME 2: FUND MANAGEMENT

In the year in review the Fund was able to execute its mandate within the allocated funds received from the operators and the Commission as per Universal Service and Access Regulations of 2015. The Commission also caters for all operational cost of the Fund to enable the Funds collected from the operators to fully cater to fund the strategic objectives. As part of the report, there is a detail financial report from the Chief Financial Officer and also an unqualified audit report from the Fund's auditors.

5. PROGRAMME 3: NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE ENHANCEMENT AND BROADBAND CONNECTIVITY (SUPPLY SIDE MEASURES)

5.1.1. Network Upgrade

The fund priorities the continuous improvement of access to broadband for all citizens of the country. In line with the global theme of leaving no one behind the Fund partners with licensed operators to improve the population coverage of 4G coverage to over 70%. In the year in review the Fund, in partnership with MTN, upgraded 23 sites from 2G to 4G. This initiative is in line with the philosophy of leaving no one behind in terms of broadband coverage. This brings the total of upgraded sites to 35 in the past 2 years.

5.1.2. Network Backbone Stabilisation

In an effort to strengthen the national backbone, the Fund supported EPTC with terminal equipment, which will enable the national backbone to connect to the undersea cable in Maputo. This project will bring stability to the country's internet and also offer redundancy in case the original route has technical issues.

6. PROGRAMME 4: DIGITISATION, ENABLING TECHNOLOGY AND SERVICES (USAGE AND UPTAKE)

- The Fund supported the broadcasting sector with equipment in a drive to improve the quality and availability of local content. Eswatini Television Authority (ESTVA) received cameras and other broadcasting equipment. Eswatini Broadcasting and Information Service (EBIS) was supported with broadcasting equipment and computers to be used by the newsroom and the marketing department to efficiently deliver on their mandate.

7. PROGRAMME 5: DIGITAL LITERACY AND ICT IMPACT TRAINING

Complementing the provision of smartphones to the elderly and disabled persons the Fund embarked on a capacity building initiative which equipped the beneficiaries with skills to properly use their smartphones and also how they can use the technology to improve their lives. The initiative covered 14 555 Emaswati in the Shiselweni and Manzini regions. For the 2023/24 financial year, the capacity building will cover Lubombo and Hhohho regions.