



WRITTEN QUESTION

269/2024 Hon. Virendra Lal to ask the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications – Can the Deputy Prime Minister provide a list of the 240 sites identified to receive Starlink or any other similar satellite services and specify the areas they will cover to improve connectivity in remote and rural regions.

MONDAY, 2 DECEMBER 2024

The Universal Service Obligation (USO), as provided under the Telecommunications Act 2008, mandates the provision of telecommunications services to all Fijians, including those in rural and remote areas, ensuring equitable access to connectivity across the country.

240 communities have been identified and gazetted for the purposes of section 49 of the Telecommunications Act 2008, as having poor or no connectivity. The breakdown of these villages by province is as follows:

Province	Number of Villages
Ba	4
Bua	17
Cakaudrove	49
Kadavu	37
Lau	35
Lomaiviti	15
Macuata	2
Nadroga	4

Province	Number of Villages
Naitasiri	18
Namosi	16
Navosa	17
Rewa	2
Tailevu	24
Total	240

The comprehensive list of the 240 villages can be found in the Legal Notice No, 88 of 2022. <https://www.laws.gov.fj/Acts/DisplayAct/2930#>

Additional areas that lack meaningful connectivity are being identified by Telecommunications Authority of Fiji and will soon be gazetted as Universal Service Areas.

In line with this obligation, the Telecommunications Authority of Fiji (TAF) has undertaken extensive assessments and consultations to address connectivity challenges in underserved regions. TAF has evaluated proposals from various industry players for deploying infrastructure and services to these remote areas. However, the assessments highlighted that deploying traditional heavy infrastructure such as towers and supporting power systems is not economically sustainable due to the high costs associated with construction and maintenance in these challenging terrains. High level assessment showed that current universal service funds would not be able to support the construction of infrastructure to cover all 240 identified sites.

With the introduction of rapidly deployable and affordable high-capacity satellite backhaul solutions, a more practical and cost-effective alternative is being identified. This approach will align with the USO's objectives and ensures that even the most geographically isolated communities can benefit from reliable digital connectivity. This satellite-based connectivity will empower these communities to access

vital digital services that can significantly enhance education, healthcare, business opportunities, and overall quality of life.

Since this solution does not involve the construction of heavy infrastructure, it is considered a transitory solution. The idea behind this approach is to provide immediate connectivity to these underserved communities while gathering valuable data on usage and demand. This will allow telecommunications operators to assess the feasibility of future investments in more extensive infrastructure such as tower-based solutions, based on actual usage statistics and community needs.

In essence, this initiative will offer a flexible, sustainable, and scalable solution for rural connectivity, enabling communities to benefit from digital services now, while also paving the way for potential future upgrades as demand and usage grow. In fact, over 90% of the rollout will be future proof if the backbone technology needs to change down the line.

Reliability is a critical factor in this initiative, especially given these communities do not have access to a consistent power supply. To address this challenge, the system deployed will need to be equipped with solar power backup, providing up to two days of power autonomy. The solar backup will enhance the resilience and sustainability of the system, enabling these communities to benefit from reliable connectivity, despite their lack of conventional power sources.

Because it is a managed system, telecommunications operators will have the capability to remotely monitor system health, ensure availability, and address issues proactively. The managed approach includes regular system health checks, enabling service providers to maintain high performance and reliability without frequent on-site interventions.

Additionally, basic training will be provided to villagers to help them manage and perform minor maintenance tasks on the system. This community-driven approach reduces unnecessary mobilisation of technical teams from telecommunications providers, except in cases of

major repairs or upgrades. This model not only enhances operational efficiency but also empowers communities to take ownership of the system, ensuring its sustainability in the long term.

As the procurement of the power systems may take approximately 8 to 10 weeks, the initial rollout will focus on the 37 communities based in the central and western divisions that already have access to the EFL grid supply. This will allow for faster deployment and quicker access to connectivity for these communities, while the rest will receive solar-powered solutions as the process progresses.

The rollout of the managed solution will involve assigning operators exclusive rights to serve designated geographic clusters. This exclusive allocation creates an environment that encourages operators to invest in these areas, as they are assured of a dedicated market for their services. By having exclusive rights, operators will be incentivized to innovate and develop tailored solutions that meet the specific needs of each community, ensuring that the services provided are both relevant and effective. This approach fosters competition among operators, drives investment in infrastructure, and ensures that the connectivity solutions are customized to address the unique challenges faced by each region.

In conclusion, this initiative will be a significant step towards bridging the digital divide in Fiji's rural and remote communities. By leveraging cost-effective and sustainable satellite technology, alongside managed solutions and solar power backup, the project aims to provide reliable connectivity and essential digital services to underserved areas. The phased rollout and monitoring process will ensure that the system meets the needs of the communities, while also gathering valuable data to inform future infrastructure investments.

The collaboration between the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications, Telecommunications Authority of Fiji, Telecommunications providers, and local communities will reflect a commitment to enhancing access to

digital services, fostering economic opportunities, and improving the quality of life for Fijians in remote regions.

Upon completion of the preparatory work, more detailed information on the initiative will be provided to Parliament.