



Technology Innovation Agency (TIA), an entity of the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) was established in terms of the TIA Act, 2008 (Act No. 26 of 2008), with the objective to stimulate, intensify and exploit technological innovation to improve economic growth and the quality of life of all South Africans.

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

RURAL COMMUNITY NETWORKS FOR INCLUSIVE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN CITY OF UMHLATHUZE, KZN

BACKGROUND

The City of uMhlatuze, located on the north-east coast of KwaZulu-Natal, encompasses Richards Bay, Empangeni, and surrounding rural areas. Despite being an economic hub, rural communities within the municipality face persistent challenges of digital exclusion, limited ICT infrastructure, and high youth unemployment (estimated at 40.8%). These gaps hinder access to education, economic opportunities, and essential services.

This Call is released as part of the Viability and Validation of Innovation for Service Delivery Programme (VVISDP), a DSTI initiative to support the piloting, demonstration, and deployment of technologies and innovations to support the delivery of basic services in the City of Umhlatuze. The VVISDP programme is implemented by TIA.

The objectives of the VVISDP programme are to test and pilot technologies that can improve the delivery of basic services such as water, sanitation, waste management, connectivity, and human settlements. The Programme is designed to facilitate learning by doing and to experiment with innovative models for delivering services, and to use innovation to achieve inclusivity.

The appointed service provider for Amangwe Community Centred Wireless Network, will support the uMhlatuze City's Youth Economic Empowerment Programme (YEPP) and the STEEM initiative (Science, Technology, Engineering, English, Mathematics) in partnership with TIA, the DSTI. The roll out of the innovative, community-centred connectivity / network will bridge the digital divide and foster inclusive socio-economic development, targeting specifically the Amangwe High School and 10 schools, and the communities falling within the 10 km radius of Amangwe High School in Empangeni.

This call aligns with South Africa's digital inclusion agenda, and the DSTI's District Development Model initiatives to support innovation in Municipalities as well as the Decadal Plan. The initiative also supports the realization of Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) 4, 8, 9, and 11) by promoting inclusive connectivity and local empowerment.

PURPOSE OF THE CALL

To identify and support market-ready, scalable innovations that enable community-owned or community-centred connectivity models in rural areas of uMhlatuze. Solutions should promote affordable access, build capacity of local SMMEs, and provide infrastructure for the community centered wireless network, and ensure the empowerment of SMME as operators of the network to bridge the digital divide and ensure connectivity to schools, while addressing barriers such as licensing, spectrum access, and financial support, pricing, training and mentorship as highlighted in South Africa's National Strategy for Community Networks (2025–2027).

FOCUS AREAS

Applicants are invited to submit proposals in the following priority areas:

A. Community Network Deployment

- Low-cost, resilient connectivity models (e.g., Wi-Fi mesh, TV White Space, solar-powered infrastructure).
- Solutions leveraging community/SMME ownership and governance for long-term sustainability.

B. Digital Inclusion Platforms

- Affordable ICT connectivity for teachers, learners, and parents, tailored to rural school, and communities
- Platforms that integrate local languages, cultural relevance, and offline functionality.

C. Capacity Building, Skills Development for SMMEs & Licencing

- Accredited Training programs for SMMEs i.e. local technical coordinators and youth in network management, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship.
- Gender-inclusive approaches to ensure equitable participation.
- Facilitate all licensing requirements including ICASA,

D. Education & STEEM Support

- Provide connectivity for teaching and learning technologies (e.g., virtual laboratory, AR/VR tools, Digital School Communicator already deployed by the DSTI/ TIA in the Amangwe school) to improve STEM outcomes in under-resourced schools.
- Integration with the City's STEEM programme and YEEP objectives.

E. Sustainability & Revenue Models

- Provide Innovative funding mechanisms and support for SMMEs who will participate as operators (e.g., pay-as-you-use models, micro-payments) to ensure financial viability.
- Setting up-pricing and costing model for the selected SMME operators;
- Partnerships with local SMMEs and cooperatives for service delivery.

ELIGIBILITY

- South African SMMEs, start-ups, non-profits, and community-based organisations, including Non-profit organisations
- Solutions must be commercially ready or at advanced pilot stage (not basic prototypes).
- Preference for technologies developed for African conditions and adaptable to rural environments.
- Partnership with local and international bodies where, the proposal demonstrates already similar objectives or co-funding;
- Ability to operate in KwaZulu Natal or have presence in the province.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Increased internet penetration and digital literacy in rural uMhlatuze.
- Improved educational performance through technology-enabled learning.
- Creation of jobs, income and entrepreneurial opportunities through a community networks
- Strengthened social and economic inclusion of SMMEs, youth, women and marginalized communities.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

- Socio- economic Impact: Ability to create socio-economic benefits i.e. jobs, income and sustainable entrepreneurship opportunities for SMMEs or local operators (20%)
- Community Ownership and SMME Empowerment: Degree of local participation, ownership and empowerment of SMMEs or Cooperatives and governance (20%)
- Market Readiness and Licensing: Technical market readiness of the solutions and ability for facilitating licencing with regulatory bodies and ensure compliance. (20%)
- Sustainability: Financial model and long-term viability, including setting up pricing and costing models (10%)
- Partnership Approach: Ability to have other local or international bodies supporting the initiatives (20%)
- Project Administration, Training and Mentorship: Ability to provide on-site training, project administration, monitoring and evaluation and ability for the DSTI to replicate the project as a franchise model (10%).

Submission Details

Email Submission to: Nondumiso.Ngwenya@tia.org.za

Mandatory Email Subject: "Innovation Call: Rural Community Networks for Inclusive Digital Transformation in City of uMhlatuze, KZN"

Format: Detailed proposal including technical description, business model, community engagement plan, and sustainability strategy.

Funding: Pure Grant limited to R1 000 000 (One Million Rand) under TIA's Innovation Intermediaries Programme.

Deadline: 28 May 2026