New Telecommunications Network in Papua New Guinea

After a long wait, telecommunications services are becoming available to even the remotest regions in Papua New Guinea, supported by a private-sector loan project.

Ulumani Treetops Lodge owner Warren Dipole says business is good thanks to the mobile phone network provided by Digicel and supported by ADB. Photo by Kymberley Kepore

Alotau, Papua New Guinea—Warren Dipole is the owner and manager of Ulumani Treetops Lodge—a remote and environmentally friendly vacation destination. Dipole needs a good, reliable mobile phone network to carry out his business, but that was elusive until recently.

"The mobile phone signal used to be very inconsistent. Sometimes it would disappear for days, sometimes months at a time," says Dipole.

"My business could not survive without a reliable mobile phone service. I need to be able to contact eco-lodge guests, staff, and suppliers." - Warren Dipole, owner and manager of Ulumani Treetops Lodge

Things changed for the better when the private telecommunications company Digicel (PNG) built two mobile base stations in the Alotau district. An ADB $25 million loan funded the construction of the mobile phone towers, as well as phone towers in other remote locations across Papua New Guinea.

As soon as the towers were built and operational, Dipole was able to set up his now successful eco-lodge business, which employs 10 people and has visitors all year round.

"My business could not survive without a reliable mobile phone service. I need to be able to contact eco-lodge guests, staff, and suppliers," says Dipole.
Alotau is in Milne Bay, a maritime province around 360 kilometers (km) east of the capital, Port Moresby, and where people make their living from fishing and working on boats.

"The towers have definitely improved communications and people here carry mobile phones for safety when they are out in their boats," says Dipole. Dipole is not only a father of two, but he is also responsible for a further 20 dependents. Having a mobile phone makes it possible for him to keep in touch with his extended family.

Bridging the communication gap

Before 2007, telecommunications in Papua New Guinea - the largest economy in the Pacific region, with a population of 6.7 million - were dominated by the state-owned company, Telikom PNG. The result was fixed-line communications of around just 1% and mobile penetration of less than 5%.

Now, Papua New Guinea is joining a wave of Pacific island countries liberalizing their telecommunications industries and developing the private sector. The ADB Digicel Mobile Telecommunication Expansion Project, launched in 2009, is at the forefront of those efforts. The project is helping the privately owned telecom company Digicel to expand network capacity and coverage.

"The partnership between ADB and Digicel in the Digicel Mobile Telecommunication Expansion Project has resulted in remote centers in PNG - including Manus, Fergus Island, Trobriand Islands, Kerema, and Alotau - being connected to the rest of the world via mobile phone," says Charles Punaha, chief executive officer of the National Information and Communications Technology Authority, the government's telecommunications regulator. "This new connectivity has many time- and money-saving implications. People in remote areas can even receive weather alerts via mobile phones, which can be lifesaving."

Networks for emergencies

Marcelo Minc, country director of ADB's Papua New Guinea Resident Mission, says improved telecommunications via Digicel's network will help residents of remote areas have better access to information.

"Villagers will soon be able to use mobile phones to access their bank accounts, and fishermen and farmers will be able to check market prices for their produce," he says.

But Peo Luke, liaison officer at the Tawali Dive Resort in Milne Bay, points to more immediate benefits that are already in place. She says life at the remote resort has become a lot safer since the mobile phone towers were built at Alotau, enabling mobile phone reception for the first time.

"Reliable phone signals ensure we can react quickly if one of our guests or staff is hurt or sick," he says. "Now we can communicate without having to travel long distances by boat."

Meanwhile, landowner Josiah Fegani, who lives in Sakita, in Milne Bay's neighboring Oro Province, says he is impressed with Digicel's network coverage, particularly in remote areas.

"In my community, Digicel's services have benefited us greatly, especially in times of emergency," he says. "We use the service to assist with pregnant mothers when they need help, and use it to call for ambulances, seek medical advice, or to just phone a friend who is far away, living on the other side of the country."

Dial Digicel for jobs

The priority for the project is providing an expansion of affordable telecom services for low-income users countrywide - and not only for providing information and making it easier to react to emergencies.

"Communication is a basic human right, and ADB helped us make this right a reality for the people of Papua New Guinea, many of whom had never had access to communication services," says Digicel Pacific CEO Vanessa Slowey.

Digicel says that mobile penetration has quadrupled since it arrived in PNG, due to increased network coverage in urban and rural areas. It says 4.5 million people or 75% of the country's population now have access to mobile phone services through Digicel.

In remote Milne Bay, Monica Jacob, principal of Wagohuhu School, says that life is better since the mobile phone towers were
installed in Alotau.

"The phone signal is now good, and we no longer have to rely on our relatives to send us phone credits from town, as we now have people here selling phone credits," says Jacob.

Meanwhile, mother of four Lucy Bonai earns a living selling betel nut, cigarettes, home-cooked food, and, now, mobile phone top-up cards.

"Before Digicel came here, mobile phones seemed only for big shots," Bonai says. "Now, with Digicel, communication is affordable and I can phone my relatives back at home in Laigam District, Wabag, which is very far from here."

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