**Welcome Remarks by Mr Martin Mokgware, Chief Executive, Botswana Communications Regulatory Authority (BOCRA) at Signing Ceremony of Memorandum of Agreement between UASF and DBS held at Spectrum House in Phakalane, on 24th September 2020**

Director of Ceremonies

Mr Oshinka Tsiang, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Presidential Affairs and Public Administration Members of your team

UASF Board Members

Management and staff

Distinguished Guests

Members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this ceremony that officially marks the beginning of a formalised working relationship between the Department of Broadcasting Services (DBS) and Universal Service and Access Fund (UASF). Director of Ceremonies, as I make these welcome remarks, allow me to use the opportunity to share a bit about the mandate of UASF, its relationship with BOCRA and why we consider this morning’s event important for the achievement of our mandate.

The UASF was established in 2014 as a special purpose vehicle with the responsibility to facilitate the roll out of communications services to unserved and underserved areas. BOCRA serves as the Secretariat to the UASF. The vision of the UASF is to have “**A digitally connected nation**”. This vision, although crafted in 2014 couldn’t be more relevant today when the world is forced by the Covid-19 pandemic to holistically migrate to the digital space. The education system is forced to partially operate on the virtual space. Businesses are forced to change their approach or models in order to remain profitable. The creative sector is forced to find ways to monetise its talent and craft on the digital platforms. Even government has to be digital.

The mandate of the UASF, ladies and gentlemen, is to ensure that all Batswana have access to a set of basic yet essential communication services at affordable prices. Since inception in 2014, the Fund has been creating tracks with communications services across the country in areas which were unserved and underserved.

The UASF has to this date, facilitated provision of WiFi hotspots in public places across the country. The Fund has also facilitated Internet connectivity and provision of electronic communications gadgets being computers, laptops and printers to 68 primary schools and 9 junior secondary schools in Ganzi District, Kgalagadi District and Mabutsane Sub-District. Further, the Fund employed 68 IT Officers to facilitate the use of ICTs in those schools.

In implementing its Strategy of improving access to broadcasting services, the UASF funded two projects to expand FM signal coverage for the cluster villages of Hukuntsi, Tshane, Lehututu and Lokgwabe, and for the cluster of Sojwe, Lephephe, Shadi Shadi, Otse and Boatlamane. Installations were done at Hukuntsi and Sojwe giving residents access to private radio broadcasting services in the nine (09) villages.

While extending internet connectivity and FM services, the UASF acknowledges and recognises that content is King. Therefore, providing the digital platforms and access only without having any initiatives to feed the platforms, will be partially fulfilling the mandate of the Fund. It is in that spirit that another key objective of the UASF 2019-2024 Strategic Plan is to promote local content development. Today, BOCRA through the UASF is fostering this partnership in order to fulfil that mandate.

In pursuit of its vision, the Fund set itself a strategic objective of leveraging on Strategic Partnerships with institutions such as the Department of Broadcasting Services (DBS).

Local Creatives are an integral part of a digital society in that they are central to the uptake and usage of ICTs. As journalists, you would be familiar with the notion that interesting news are about people. Even more interesting are news about people that you know. Therefore, local creatives play a very critical role as they contribute to the economy as well as promote and preserve our national identity and cultural diversity. It is for this reason that the UASF found it important to explore avenues for engaging the Media Graduates in Botswana, in partnership with DBS. The partnership is even more important during these trying times. It will help to prepare the Media Graduates not only for the job market, but more importantly for entrepreneurship so that they can cultivate employment opportunities for those who will come after them.

This MoA launches a Media Graduates Programme which will recruit and engage 20 Media Graduates for a period of three years. During this period, they will be exposed to the electronic creative space as practitioners within Btv will be coaching and mentoring them for entrepreneurship. The intention is to invite other institutions with expertise in specific fields such as business management, human resources, sales and marketing and entrepreneurship incubation to help mould the graduates further by equipping them with the necessary skills and zeal to start content development businesses.

BOCRA promotes the use of local content through initiatives such as; licensing, subsidies and local content quotas in the regulated broadcasters.

In line with the Government Policy of empowering Batswana, majority shareholding of broadcasting licences is reserved for Batswana, with Radio being 80% while Television is 55%. Broadcasting is a sector which is proudly led by locals. Licensees are encouraged to support other local service providers going down the value chain. That is why we’re happy to indicate that all the radio stations have surpassed the set local content quota.

As I conclude, Director of Ceremonies, I would like to thank both DBS and UASF Secretariat teams for crafting the MoA that we are about to enter into. It is commendable that the teams have been able to reach consensus on many issues that were seemingly contentious. This is the spirit I wish to see prevailing as we operationalise this MoA.

With those few remarks, I welcome you all and wish DBS and UASF Secretariat, BOCRA, a fruitful and ever lasting relationship for the benefit of the economy.