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**Universal Access and Service Fund (UASF)**

**Project Overview Remarks by**

**Major General Bakwena Oitsile (Rtd)**

**during the Occasion of the Launch of the**

**UASF Schools Competitivity and Computerization Project.**

**Mabutsane Primary School**

**07 February 2019**

**Protocol observed**

It is with a great sense of delight that I greet you on this special day that marks the launch of four (4) projects that have been proudly sponsored by BOCRA through the Universal Access and Service Fund (UASF). The projects are:

1. the Schools Computerisation and construction of Local Area Networks (LAN) in primary schools;
2. provision of Broadband Internet Connectivity;
3. Employment of 68 IT Officers for each primary school; and
4. the Upgrade of base stations to 3G/4G networks(these are high capacity telecommunications networks)

These projects have been implemented in a total of 68 villages across three regions, namely Mabutsane Sub-district, Kgalagadi District and Ghanzi District. The total expenditure of the projects is close to 87 Million Pula. We will further incur costs in the sum of over 30 million Pula towards employment of IT Officers for 3 years.

Director of Ceremonies, I would like to first provide a brief overview of the role of the Botswana Communications Regulatory Authority (BOCRA) towards national development, particularly when we look at rural and remote areas that are often deemed unviable.. In my view, the role of the Regulator with regards to rural development has been clearly articulated by these four projects.

BOCRA is mandated by the Communications Regulatory Authority Act, 2012 (CRA Act), ***to promote and ensure universal access with respect to provision of communications services***. To achieve this mandate, the CRA Act enjoins us to ***“impose a universal access and services levy on identified operators for purposes of funding universal access in the communications sector”***.

In the National Development Plan 11, Botswana government made a commitment to ensure that all communities and individuals in the country have access to ICTs. Government prioritises ICTs because they hold the key to economic freedom, job creation, poverty eradication and inclusive economic growth. Today, digital technologies are emerging as key enablers for social and economic development, particularly in developing countries, as people use ICTs to improve levels of efficiency in business and various other spheres of human endeavour. This is why the Government of Botswana wants all Batswana to have access to ICTs. This is where BOCRA comes in through the Universal Access and Services Fund (UASF).

Director of Ceremonies, the UASF was established through a Deed of Trust in 2014 and is run by separate Board of Trustees. At this point, it is only proper that I request members of the UASF Board of Trustees here present, to rise such that they can be recognised.. It is this team of able men and women who carry the big task of ensuring that un-served and underserved areas across the country have access to communications systems and services at reasonable costs.

Today marks a significant milestone in our effort as BOCRA, the UASF and cooperating partners, to ensure access to broadband internet for all communities in unserved and underserved areas of Botswana. The initiation and implementation of the projects dates back to 2017 and has been a long journey full of twists and turns. However, through team work and dedication of different stakeholders, the projects have been a success.

Ladies and gentlemen, the School’s Connectivity project has seen three ministries, being Ministry of Transport and Communications, Ministry of Basic Education and Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, coming together to contribute significantly to the development of the education sector in the country, through providing computer equipment and internet connectivity, together with associated services to government schools across the three regions of Mabutsane, Kgalagadi and Ghanzi.

Each of the Primary Schools across the regions received computer devices (educational tablets and laptops), printers, photocopiers and broadband internet connection at 5Mbps. The Primary schools have been further provided with an IT Officer to impart ICT knowledge and skills to learners and the community. Secondary schools under this project received 30 laptops each to augment their existing connectivity arrangements. They have also been provided with 5Mbps of dedicated internet connection.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to say for Mabutsane Sub-district , a total of 18 villages, being Mabutsane, Morwamosu, Sekoma, Khonkhwa, Keng, Khakhea, Kokong, Kanaku, Mahotshwane, Itholoke, Kutuku, Mokhomma, Seherelela, Sese, Maokane, Samane, Lefhoko, and Betesankwe have been connected to modern technology.

These developments will transform children within the communities mentioned into what we call the twenty-first (21st) century learner.The children will be confident in the use of computers and Internet technology, hence being exposed to similar opportunities that children raised in Gaborone or Francistown, or any of the towns and major villages of this country, have. Through this project our children in these villages will also be able to compete with their peers outside Botswana and abroad when it comes to areas of life related to ICTs. This i in essence the reality of life where we are driven by modern technology be it in education, work, business, leisure, health, agriculture, and many other areas. It is important, ladies and gentlemen to expose and teach our children from grass root level. Our Setswana proverb teaches us that *Botlhale Jwa Phala bo tswa Phalaneng*. It is our conviction that once our children are comfortable with the use of these ICTs, they will introduce them to their parents and the village leadership. The ICTs will also leverage the learners to come up with Out of School Youth innovations. It is therefore appropriate that today’s launch is themed: **Bridging the Digital Communications Gap.**

The expectation is that the IT Officers placed at the primary schools, Mabutsane sub-region will ensure that the gadgets are fully utilised by our youth and the respective communities.

We envisage that the communities exposed to these technologies willaccess Internet based services as envisaged under our National Broadband Strategy. Right now, we all know how some of our parents have difficulties in updating the cattle Ear Tag information on the Ministry of Agriculture website every time they want to add new animals.

Director of Ceremonies, it is at this point that I would like to express my sincere gratitude to , Orange Botswana for providing the schools with broadband Internet and upgrading the networks. May I request Orange Botswana representatives to rise for your appreciation. [APPLAUSE]

Equally, may I say thank you to two citizen owned IT companies named Initech (Pty) Ltd and Maltem (Pty) Ltd for the supply and installation of computer equipment at all schools for the Mabutsane sub-district. May I similarly request their representatives to rise for us to appreciate. [APPLAUSE]

We take pride in our contribution to citizen empowerment through our engagement of these three companies. We all know that the country is currently facing the issue of youth unemployment and it is through efforts such as these projects, that stakeholders assist the Government in the fight against unemployment.

Ladies and gentlemen, I urge the leadership for all the schools, and their staff, parents, learners, and everyone here present to have a hand in taking care of the equipment such that they benefit even the coming generations.

Let me conclude by acknowledging the role of cooperating partners in the successful implementation of this project. The Ministries of Basic Education and Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development will continue to be critical partners to the success of the schools’ connectivity initiative.

I would also like to acknowledge contributors of the UASF levy, which have made the high expenditure on these projects possible. These include Telecommunications Network Operators, Private Broadcasters, Botswana Post and BOCRA.

As we launch and hand over these projects to you:

* We appeal to all stakeholders, in particular, the Ministry of Transport and Communications, Ministry of Basic Education and Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development to implement and honour the obligations outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding;
* we once again ask you to take care of this equipment, so that more children continue to benefit.;
* We encourage you to allow your children to learn how to use these ICTs;
* We encourage parents to take time to be taught these new skills.

In conclusion, I say to the teachers, take time to infuse ICTs in your teaching. They should not just remain in the school computer lab.

I thank you for your attention.

Pula bagaetsho.