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PRESS RELEASE

Opening Remarks by H.E. Dr. Albrecht Conze, German Ambassador to Uganda

National Dialogue on Compulsory Land Acquisition

Skyz Hotel, Naguru, Kampala – 21 March 2019

Hon. Ministers,
Hon. Members of Parliament,
Representatives of State House,
Colleagues of the Diplomatic Corps,
Representatives of the Academia,
Members of INGOs and CSOs,
Experts on responsible land policy,
Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my privilege and pleasure as the Ambassador of Germany to welcome you here today. My German colleagues both from the Embassy and from GIZ as well as our partner LANDnet are honored to have you with us to participate in this important National Dialogue on Compulsory Land Acquisition. We shall speak and listen for the better part of the day, and are far from drawing any conclusions at this early hour. However, one thing is for sure before we even begin with our brain storming: you will be discussing one of the hottest and most controversial topics of today's public debate in Uganda. And you will do so in good faith and with the aim of finding some answers, in the interest of your country's further development, and the maintenance of justice and the rule of law simultaneously.

When I look around, I am delighted to see so much brain power and technical expertise gathered here, with the political class ready to listen. We have representatives of the Ministry for Lands, Housing and Urban Development, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Works and Transport, the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, and State House. I see colleagues from national and international Civil Society Organizations, the private sector and academia as well as development partners. Thank you all for coming.

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Why, as your German partners, have we decided to venture into this complicated and highly sensitive debate? I will give you the story in a few words. Over a year ago, in a discussion with State House representatives who were worried – like myself – about the reluctance of German investors to propose new projects for Uganda, I was asked whether the German Embassy could assist the Government of Uganda to facilitate a national dialogue on compulsory land acquisition. I was made to understand that in view of the complicated and often heated discussions in the local media ever since the first attempts to ease compulsory land acquisition had been made, State House seemed adamant to find a neutral broker to facilitate a technical exchange at national level between experts and key stakeholders from Government, Academia, Civil Society and the Private Sector. We then explored this idea further, and came to the conclusion that a structured exchange of arguments was indeed overdue in order to arrive at a better understanding of the different positions and fears, and seek for more common ground. Some of us were reluctant to engage. Too complicated, too sensitive? Were we not at risk of burning our fingers? As you can see today, we decided to respond and to engage. Together with GIZ, very experienced in the related sector, my Embassy has taken the initiative for organizing this National Dialogue. With the full buy-in of the Government of Uganda and LANDnet as our partner, we established a steering committee, bringing together for a free-wheeling dialogue government agencies, development partners, CSOs, and the private sector. The members of the Steering Committee then worked very hard to organize this event. It is thanks to their efforts that we are all here today.

I believe that this National Dialogue is essential and timely. The issue of compulsory land acquisition is now being proactively addressed by the Ugandan government, and legislation is scheduled to be decided by parliament in the course of this year. I sincerely hope that today's proceedings will help you to raise awareness at different political levels, while reducing suspicion, rumors, misunderstandings and uncertainties.

What is at stake? On the one hand, the Government of Uganda is under pressure to speed up the infrastructural development as laid out in Vision 2040. Who would not remember with pain the seemingly endless years it took to complete the Entebbe Expressway? And who would not be frustrated travelling on the Northern Bypass on a Friday afternoon? Ladies and Gentlemen, we all agree that there is a need to accelerate compulsory land acquisition procedures to secure the land for such essential projects. For this reason, the Government proposes a mechanism, according to which in case of an unagreed compensation amount for the land, the infrastructure development isn't stalled, but can continue while the dispute is being solved in court.

On the other hand, however, we have legitimate concerns by Civil Society and Members of Parliament, that this proposal may result in a loss of individual rights of those concerned, and possibly leave them in a precarious position. Given the amount of time courts usually take to decide on land disputes, this may leave people uncompensated for many years. I do not need to elaborate the consequences for poor households depending on the land in question. We are all engaged in alleviating poverty and despair, instead of letting it increase.

I have gained the impression that it is not the need for compulsory land acquisition for the general public interest that is questioned by critical voices. It is much rather the exact definition of general public interest, and its scope which is raising controversy. Today, many

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conflicts about land acquisition by the Government of Uganda are a result of the lack of transparent and clearly defined standard land values in the country. If this is exacerbated by the long time it usually takes to determine the amount of compensation, the conflict can easily get out of hand. We all know that justice delayed is justice denied. Inflation then becomes a parameter, with land prices increasing, sometimes dramatically. When the law suit is finally settled after years of proceedings, the compensation amount may not any more reflect the real value of the land.

Until today, no national public consultations have been held, and hence no consensus could be reached. It seems to me that for now, the situation has become deadlocked, and there is an urgent need to find a way out.

What does it take to find this way out? First and foremost, it takes one thing: open and transparent communication on all sides, and the readiness to engage in dialogue.

That is why we are here today. The title of this gathering says it all: it is the program and the message. It is a dialogue. A dialogue offers the opportunity to listen, to learn and to discuss openly about different perspectives and experiences, about challenges and chances, to give answers to important questions and maybe erase some misconceptions on all sides. Some proposals were already made to find a compromise which suits all. I hope that this dialogue can provide a neutral platform for all interested parties to share their ideas for a solution, but also to inform themselves on new aspects of the topic, to listen to opposing views and argue in a fair and respectful way.

For this purpose, the Steering Committee for the National Dialogue on Compulsory Land Acquisition has invited personalities of high repute. The key note speaker, the panelists and discussants are here to share ideas and promote a rich and informative environment for discussion. I very much hope that we will today be able to render ourselves useful – for our own understanding of the issues at stake, for informing forthcoming parliamentary proceedings, and for rendering a service to the people of Uganda.

I wish us all a fruitful discussion.