

**Joint Nordic Day Celebration 20<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

**Speech by Danish Ambassador Mogens Pedersen on behalf of the  
Nordic Ambassadors**

***“Youth - Empowering youth for inclusive development”***

Hon. Okello Oryem, Minister of State - International Affairs

Your Excellences, Heads of Diplomatic Missions

Heads of Government Institutions

Representatives of Civil Society Organisations and Private Sector

Nordic Citizens and their families

Ladies and Gentlemen, (All protocol observed)

A very warm welcome to you all on this occasion of the Nordic National Day 2018. It is a great pleasure for me to speak today on behalf of the Nordic Embassies in Uganda. This event is a good occasion to reaffirm the close collaboration between the Nordic countries and Ugandan partners. It is a great opportunity to meet in a festive setting to celebrate the many achievements from the many years of Nordic-Uganda cooperation.

The theme for this year's Nordic National Day is 'youth'. This is in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which recognises that '... young women and men are critical agents of change' in society. Young people represent the future and are critical in building social cohesion, economic prosperity and political stability of the country. They can play this role if there is a conducive policy environment that promotes collective engagement in democratic processes. Therefore, they need support and encouragement by government, as well as non-state actors in order to meaningfully contribute to national development.

As you may recall from history, 50 years ago during the spring of 1968, Europe experienced a social and political change led by university students who demanded for political participation. The innovative ideas from the youth resulted into a major progress in as far as political, economic and cultural rights are concerned.

One concrete outcome of this youth revolution was that, the students obtained half of the seats in the study boards of the education institutions. This inspired the rest of society, especially other marginalized groups who saw an opportunity to enhance their rights to political and economic inclusion. The main outcome was broadly accepted throughout Europe. Thousands of women became part of the labour market for the first time and started demanding for equal opportunities for women and men. The innovative ideas from the youth resulted into a major progress in as far as political, economic and cultural rights are concerned. In Europe, the year 1968 is therefore a reminder of how the power of youth can potentially herald change.

In Uganda, 78 percent of the people are below the age of 30. This means that Uganda has one of the youngest population in the world. We also know that Uganda has experienced a decline in growth over the last couple of years with the national poverty rate increasing from 20 percent in 2013 to 27 percent last year. Low growth combined with a fast growing population and lack of access to quality education and meaningful jobs, makes the youth by far the most vulnerable group. At the same time, the young population has immense potential as agents of change to propel economic development, if provided with the right set of skills.

At the proposal of Sweden and other likeminded members, the United Nations Security Council recently acknowledged that the youth play a significant role in creating and sustaining peace as well as countering violent extremism. The youth hold the key to increased productivity, if they get access to education and improvement of skills as well as

productive work. Therefore, all UN member states are encouraged to engage the youth in activities to promote conflict prevention and resolution in order to achieve growth and sustainable development.

As Nordic development partners in Uganda we are committed to investing in the youth. We want young people to believe in themselves and to know that they can individually and collectively contribute positively to national development. We have observed in Uganda that youth are often invited to discussions with the elders – including according them special seats in Parliament. However, their views and voices are often not sufficiently taken into account when making decisions that affect them. We therefore encourage Ugandans to promote a culture of broad participation of all persons regardless of age and gender instead of merely providing exclusive space, which does not necessarily translate into inclusive dialogue.

We recognise that Uganda has made significant progress in increasing the number of girls completing primary school. However, but we remain concerned that only about 33 percent of them progress to secondary or higher education. Furthermore, statistics indicate that at present, more than a third of girls in Uganda get married before the age of 18 and almost three in ten have a child before that age. This is worrying and that is why as Nordic development partners, we have made it a priority to focus on the sexual and reproductive health and rights for young people in Uganda. Together with the Government of Uganda, we are particularly interested in reversing the high rates of early child marriages and early pregnancy amongst young girls. We believe that by enhancing access to both knowledge and basic health services, young girls will be empowered to make informed choices thus giving them a chance to create meaningful lives for themselves. This will contribute to building a productive workforce for the benefit of everyone.

On the social-economic front, we all acknowledge and believe that freedom of expression is essential for building sustainable development, political stability and democracy. In this regard, we recognise the Constitutional provisions to protect and promote freedom of expression in Uganda. However, we have witnessed some reversals in the recent past. In particular, we are concerned that the new tax that recently levied on social media could potentially limit freedom of expression of the youth and curtail their opportunity to participate in political dialogue. The youth are the most regular users of these social media platforms for communication. We recognise that Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp are popular and widely used in Uganda as means of quickly getting information and people's voices on a variety of issues from across the country. We therefore encourage government, in the effort to increase domestic revenues, to reconsider other options for taxation that do not reduce participation of the youth and other vulnerable groups in development of this country.

Today, I particularly appreciate the presence of Ugandans who are alumni of Nordic Universities. Nordic Countries have for several decades, provided young Ugandans with opportunity to study in Nordic countries and to acquire higher qualifications in professional fields as well as knowledge skills that are required for the development of this country. Currently, there are hundreds of Nordic alumni in Uganda, who form part of the critical mass of professionals working in key sectors of the economy. The Nordic fellowship programmes are hinged on academic research, learning, and respect for cultural diversity. We therefore believe that through these efforts, young Ugandans will be instrumental in building and sustaining development of the country as well as enhancing partnerships between Uganda and the Nordic countries.

In conclusion, my fellow Nordic Ambassadors and I would like to encourage the political leadership of this country as well as institutions working with the youth to recognize their great potential and responsibility to contribute to the development as prescribed under

the SDG framework. This should translate into comprehensive strategies and plans that build on and learn from young people's experiences, innovation and expertise.

Finally, on a lighter note I wish to inform you that I will soon complete my tour of duty as the Ambassador of Denmark in Uganda. As I leave for another destination, I take with me good memories from this country.

Thank you very much and enjoy the evening.