Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) would like to commend the Ugandan Government on all the measures that have been taken so far to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government retains the primary responsibility to protect the human rights of its people and all other persons living in Uganda. Important, now more than ever, a rights-based approach is key for purposes of ensuring inclusion and participation of affected communities, accountability and transparency on the part of those providing interventions; and for preventing Government overreach in the restrictive measures needed for transmission control, among other areas. The government should ensure that private actors especially corporate entities respect human rights of all people including their employees and those affected directly or indirectly by their business operations. Accordingly, ISER would like to put forward the following proposals on the measures that are necessary to maintain the human dignity of individuals and groups and respect social and economic rights during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. **STRENGTHEN THE PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM**

**Adequate financing for the health sector:** Government needs to deploy its maximum available resources towards ensuring the effective functioning of the health system. Priority investment areas include testing kits, treatment of all those in need, emergency services, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health workers, psychosocial support for patients and health workers, ambulances, recruiting health workers. These should especially available in public health facilities in regions and districts. Regional assessments to identify gaps in regional response should be conducted to identify where government should target its efforts.

**Ensure continued access to healthcare for non-COVID19 patients including expectant mothers and persons living with HIV and Tuberculosis, cancer care.** Government should set out measures to ensure access to healthcare is not disrupted for vulnerable groups. This includes ensuring transportation of patients and health workers to health facilities, the availability of workers and essential medicines.

**Comprehensive plan for responding to the pandemic that is adequately financed:** Government needs to urgently develop a coherent and comprehensive plan that details all the measures that need to be taken to respond to the pandemic. So far, the measures seem to be adhoc. The plan needs to be adequately financed, including through seeking support from the private sector and development partners. The specific needs and experiences of persons most at risk of infection and most vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19 should be reflected in the COVID-19 Response plan.
2. **ENSURE EQUALITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION IN ALL MEASURES TAKEN TO RESPOND TO COVID19 AND MITIGATE ITS NEGATIVE IMPACT.**

All measures taken to respond to the pandemic must be implemented in a non-discriminatory manner. The Government should also ensure that response measures to COVID-19 do not target or further discriminate against groups, and that responses are inclusive of and respect the rights of marginalized groups. Governments should ensure equal access to emergency services to people with disabilities, pregnant women and older people.

Government should strengthen prevention and mitigation measures in prisons. This including ensuring access to water and soap, sanitary hygiene practices. Government should decongest prisons including releasing people with petty offenses and refraining from imprisoning those that violate prevention measures.

3. **ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND PARTICIPATION**

**Clear communication:** It is important that the state maintains clear, regular and factual communication during the pandemic fight the pandemic, as well as limit panic, anxiety and misinformation.

**Enable Access to information and ensure community participation:** Ensure access to Information on the prevention, symptoms, testing and treatment of COVID-19, as well as the status of efforts to address it’s spread. This should target all people including those in rural settings and must be dispensed in a language and format best understood by all people. Extra care should be taken to enable access to information for Persons with disabilities.

**Focus on prevention:** Considering the weak health system in the country that would not withstand a surge in cases of COVID-19 and at the same time continue to provide healthcare to the non-COVID-19 patients, there is need to focus on prevention. Government needs to mobilise community health structures to sensitize the masses and put in place other measures like handwashing facilities, particularly in areas that face the challenge of access to clean and safe water.

4. **ENSURE PRIVATE ACTORS COMPLY WITH STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES**

**Businesses That Still Operate Should Be Mandated To Provide Protective Equipment To Workers And To Implement Preventative Measures.** ISER therefore welcomes the calls for social distancing but we call upon the government to ensure that businesses that are still operational especially factories do not expose their workers to COVID-19 as they seek to cash in during the pandemic. Provisions should be made to ensure that those providing essential services especially in the informal sector like people selling foods in the markets have access to hygiene services and safe housing options.
Protection of labor rights: Care should be taken to ensure that employers do not violate labor rights, and only do what is legally acceptable under the circumstances. Government should also work out financial plans that help to protect and stimulate stressed businesses especially SME’s. Care must be taken to balance the economic needs of individuals and corporate entities.

5. SAFEGUARD HUMAN RIGHTS OF THOSE WITH COVID-19

Maintain safety and dignity during quarantine: ISER calls upon the government to take up the costs of quarantine in gazetted centers and at the same time ensure the safety and dignity of those quarantined.

Respect the privacy of individuals and fight stigma: Measures taken to prevent or contain the pandemic should strictly be proportional to achieving that objective. To that end, Government needs to ensure respect for the rights to privacy of individual. Government should also take all necessary measures to ensure that those who have suffered or suspected of having COVID-19 are not stigmatized.

6. SOCIAL PROTECTION AND FISCAL INTERVENTION TO MITIGATE EFFECT OF PANDEMIC

Continuation of Social Security programmes: There must be recognition of the fact that the negative consequences of the pandemic will impact on individuals and groups differently and that there are groups that will suffer disproportionately including older persons, women, the poor, Persons with Disabilities, Persons Living with HIV/AIDS, Persons with chronic medical issues, refugees and children. As such, existing schemes aimed at assisting these vulnerable groups must be continued throughout the pandemic while taking extra care to avoid infection in the process.

Livelihood support: Government needs to urgently develop a plan for livelihood support that caters for all vulnerable groups regardless of location with clear criteria to identify those vulnerable groups and a clear timeline. Government should also consider cash grants to individuals to cater for specific needs such as nutrition requirements due to sickness.

Interventions to ensure continued access to key social services such as water, electricity and housing: Government should ensure breaks from utility payments including water and electricity especially for the people who cannot afford to pay at this time. However, encouragement should be made to those who are capable of paying the bills to do so to enable the companies meet some of their operational costs. Government should also prevail upon individual landlords not to evict people during the pandemic.

Fiscal interventions: Recognizing the disruption from the pandemic to individual and corporate income, there must be fiscal interventions to mitigate the negative impact and revive the economy. Price ceilings for essential goods should be explored to ensure availability of essential goods and services throughout the pandemic. Government should therefore in the immediate short term take measures such as tax collection breaks, loan repayment breaks including loans by SACCOS, microfinance institutions and banks. In the medium term, government should undertake fiscal measures that will resuscitate and boost the economy and stimulate consumption.
7. ENSURING THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Regulate private actors to ensure they comply with ban. All efforts must be taken to ensure continued learning of children throughout the pandemic. However, private institutions should be mandated to comply with the school ban and refrain from requiring students to take examinations during this time.

Vulnerable students left behind. Government should take cognizance of the fact that there are extremely disadvantaged children whose learning has come to a complete halt following the abrupt closure of schools because they have no access to any of the innovative mechanisms eg online lessons, radio or television programmes that have been devised by various schools to ensure continued learning. As such, once schools resume, care should be taken to look out for children who were left behind due to extra vulnerability to catch up with their counterparts and ensure that assessment systems like national examinations do not disadvantage them in anyway.

8. MEASURES TO CONTAIN COVID 19 MUST BE IN LINE WITH THE CONSTITUTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Proportionality of measures to contain COVID19: Measures taken to prevent or contain the pandemic should strictly be proportional and necessary to achieving the objective. To that end, Government needs to ensure respect for the rights to privacy, physical security, life and liberty. Restrictions on freedom of movement must be temporary and enforcement agencies must desist from use of force.

About the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights

ISER is a registered national Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Uganda founded in February 2012 to ensure full recognition, accountability and realization of social and economic rights primarily in Uganda but also within the East African region.

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