



INITIATIVE FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS

ISER STATEMENT AT THE CELEBRATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY, 10TH DECEMBER, 2020

Theme: Recover Better – Stand Up for Social and Economic Rights

Today marks 72 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted at the United Nations General Assembly. Commemorating this day during the Covid-19 pandemic – which has and continues to wreak disproportionate havoc amongst the marginalized Ugandans – reaffirms the importance of respecting social and economic rights as enablers to recover and build back better during and post the pandemic.

KEY CONCERNS

Health and Education

The pandemic continues to expose weaknesses and inequities in the public healthcare and education system that is chronically underfunded. Moreover, the measures put in place to fight the pandemic have the potential to exacerbate these inequities. Inadequate health facilities, inadequate healthcare workers, frequent drug stock-outs, lack of personal protective equipment, and fragile ambulance systems continue to undermine access to healthcare. This underscores the need for the government to increase investment in the public health system which is the first and last point of call for the poor. In education, the pandemic has exacerbated the education inequalities experienced by vulnerable groups for example, the Ministry of Education and Sports' framework for continued learning through self-study materials TV and radio leaves out those from vulnerable and poor households.

The unregulated expansion of private actors in both health and education particularly when they exist instead of public options, is detrimental to the accessibility of health care and education for vulnerable populations. There have been reported cases of discrimination and cases of the private health care providers detaining patients for failure to meet their medical bills for essential health services during this pandemic are on the rise.

Business and Human Rights

The pandemic has not only been a public health crisis but also impacted negatively on the employment relations and labor sector in Uganda. The pandemic and resultant restrictions rendered many Ugandans jobless, especially those that were rendered non-essential. Similarly, weak institutional and enforcement measures of contractual labor relations exacerbated the challenges. The governments' response to the pandemic, though well-intended didn't factor in the impact of lockdown on informal sector workers and small-scale business enterprises. As a result, many employers were forced to close businesses or terminate employment contracts. While the government has slowly eased the lockdown, some businesses have remained closed leaving many previously employed persons unemployed and without work.

Poverty, Inequalities and Social Protection

The measures put in place by the Government of Uganda to combat the virus have the potential to deepen the inequalities that are already existing. Although the FY2020/21 budget registered an increase of UGX. 6 trillion from the FY 2019/20, the fiscal policy stance has not shifted to adequately respond to the havoc wrecked by the pandemic. For instance, over 41.5 percent of the FY 2020/21 budget has been allocated to infrastructure (19.6 percent), interest and repayment of external debt (11.9 percent), and security (9.5 percent). In contrast, the overall social protection coverage in Uganda is only 3 percent of the over 9.5 million Ugandans who are in dire need of safety nets. Besides, the budget allocation to social protection for FY2020/21 is a paltry 0.4 percent of the overall government budget. Also, Uganda has the lowest direct cash transfers to GDP ratio of 0.14 percent compared to other East African countries like Kenya and Rwanda at 0.4 percent and 0.3 percent, respectively. Moreover, a large part of these direct cash transfers is provided by donor grants or concessional loans, which threatens the sustainability of the sector.

Although the government has provided over UGX1.277 trillion to Uganda Development Bank, Uganda Development Corporation (UDC), and Microfinance Support Centre (MSC) to increase development finance and cash flows of MSMEs, only 7% of this is allocated to the informal sector – that employs over 68 percent of Ugandans – through MSC under Emyooga initiative. On 2nd December 2020, for instance, the MSC reported having registered over 3.8 million applications for the only UGX. 94 billion allocated to the Emyooga Initiative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government should robustly invest in public services which are the first point of call for the poor and most vulnerable.
- The government should put in a place a strong regulatory framework for private actors in health and education among other social services.
- Government should ensure respect for labor rights amidst the Covid19 pandemic. All businesses must be compliant with the labor rights policies and legislative frameworks.
- The economic recovery response measures put in place by the government especially for Small, Medium Enterprises (SMEs) should continuously be monitored to ensure that the funds trickle down to those that need them the most.
- The government should strengthen and increase investment in social protection programs that are shock responsive, including; social grants to the elderly and people with disabilities, child grants, cash for work, and universal basic income.
- Meaningful participation of the populace is critical to ensuring the measures undertaken to enable a more just recovery trickle down to those that need them the most. This includes providing access to information, for example on how funds are spent, undertaking comprehensive consultations. Consultation of vulnerable groups is particularly important as evidenced by lockdown measures that failed to take their needs into account.