

ISER'S STATEMENT AT THE COMMEMORATION OF SDGs GLOBAL WEEK

In the wake of COVID 19, achieving the SDGs are more critical than ever

24th SEPTEMBER, 2021

It is exactly six years since the then UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, underscored the significance of Agenda 2030: *"We have a robust agenda before us and now we must strive to make it a reality in the lives of people everywhere,"* he said. In light of the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic, the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) framework remains critical for building an inclusive, just, and sustainable society.

The pandemic and lockdown-related effects have demonstrated our common vulnerabilities and illustrated the interdependence and interconnectivity between the realization of economic and social rights and SDGs. It has brought to light the fact that slow advancement on economic social rights like the right to health and education compromises the overall progress of SDGs.

Even before the crisis, the world was off track in ensuring healthcare (SDG 3) for everybody by 2030. Now we face several alarming setbacks, pushing Uganda's health services to the brink.

The challenges faced in achieving SDG 4 - "Quality Education" – have also increased significantly due to the coronavirus. The prolonged closure of schools has had a number of short-term negative effects which are most likely to cause far reaching implications both in the medium and long-term on the education sector. These include reduced school attendance, no learning especially for vulnerable children who cannot access and afford continued learning, increased dropouts as a result of the raise in teenage pregnancy and child labour (SDG8), among others. This is eroding the gains that have so far been attained towards achieving SDG4 on the right to education and widened educational inequities within Uganda.

ISER's joint research report, '[I Must Work to Eat: Covid19, Poverty and Child Labor in Ghana, Nepal and Uganda](#)' shows that as a result of the high rate of school dropouts, coupled with the prevalent economic crisis and school closures, many children have been compelled to enter the workforce. Unfortunately, the growth in child labour has been matched by a weak legal and policy framework that doesn't facilitate robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

The crisis and its consequences have also highlighted the imperative for affordable electricity (SDG 7) for the enjoyment of social and economic rights, as well as the need for a minimum wage (SGD 10) in Uganda.

[Access to \[affordable\] electricity provides opportunities for additional services such as improved healthcare, education, and business opportunities services](#) by securing lifesaving equipment function in health facilities as well as continued learning through online platforms. It, therefore, follows that [ability to access electricity can mean life or death](#); it is also definitive on who accesses online continued learning. Unfortunately, Uganda posts the highest electricity tariff in East Africa and this curtails the enjoyment of a host of human rights.

The presence of unregulated private actors in key sectors like electricity, health, education, and water has exacerbated the situation and resulted in the commercialisation of social services thus undermining effective planning, management, and delivery of quality public services. [This commercialisation strategy, as evidenced from communities' lived experiences have rendered essential services unaffordable and inaccessible, yet they are the first point of call for the public, especially the poor and vulnerable.](#)

The coronavirus pandemic offers a chance to turn this crisis into an opportunity to accelerate change towards fulfilling the SDGs and ensuring economic and social rights for all Ugandans. We cannot afford to push back the deadline for fulfilling the SDGs,

now that the health crisis has morphed into a social and economic crisis that has deepened the divide between the haves and have nots, and aggravated inequality and vulnerability levels of so many people.

It is in this spirit that we appeal to the government and its relevant departments and agencies to;

- Implement Agenda 2030 in a manner that is consistent with the obligations to respect, protect and fulfill Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCRs) without discrimination.
- Address the growing inequalities exacerbated by COVID 19 and resultant measures that will accelerate progress towards building back better the world's systems during and post the pandemic whilst improving livelihoods. For services like health and education, water, and electricity, they must be accessible, affordable, and of good quality as highlighted under General Comment No.24 of the Committee on International Covenant for Social and Economic Rights.
- Invest considerably more resources in fully functioning and well-resourced public health, education services and regulate private actor involvement in the provision of education, health and electricity in order to stop the commercialization of these services to ensure that no one is left behind.
- Strengthen the legal and policy framework relating to child labour to mandate business entities to conduct human rights due diligence throughout their supply chains to ensure that their activities are not contributing to child labour and other human rights violations.
- Strengthen social protection for all Ugandans. To achieve this, the state must revise its fiscal policies, increase domestic revenue and reduce overreliance on *'hand-outs'* by international donors and philanthropists.