

Concept Note

Theme: The Africa We Want: Reclaiming Public Services in Africa

Dates: 29-31 August 2023

Venue: Speke Resort Munyonyo, Kampala-Uganda

Introduction

The African Coalition for Corporate Accountability (ACCA) and the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) are pleased to announce their upcoming conference themed **The Africa We Want: Reclaiming Public Services in Africa**. The conference theme draws inspiration from the recent [General Comment No 7](#) of the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights.¹ The seminal General Comment acknowledges African states primary obligation to provide public services for their people and provides a framework to regulate private actors.

This conference, held alongside ACCA's 2023 General Assembly, aims to bring together a diverse range of human rights advocates, civil society actors, academics, practitioners, community members, and policymakers. Together, we will explore the need to reclaim public services in Africa and the impact of commercialisation and privatisation on social services, including, their profound implications on the full enjoyment of human rights, particularly, health, education, water, and electricity, among others.

Background

When Covid 19 hit, 13 out of 47 African countries had less than five health professionals per 10,000 people. On average, Africa had 1.8 hospital beds per 1,000 people.² Current health spending in Africa is \$188 per capita compared to \$4000 in high income countries.³ In sub-Saharan Africa, lifetime learning loss is estimated to be US\$300 million, or 7 per cent of GDP.⁴

Africa's rising debt burden threatens the future availability of public services as debt repayment increasingly takes the lion share of budget funds. Africa is facing its highest debt burden in a decade with the World Bank noting an increase to \$702 billion in 2020.⁵ Africa is projected to spend a staggering [\\$144 billion](#) this year solely on external debt repayments, surpassing the combined annual [funding gap](#) for health and education on the continent.⁶ Its rising Debt-to-GNI ratio which has risen by nearly 20 percentage points in a decade to 44 indicates debt much higher than income which poses repayment challenges.⁷ As Open Society's recent report, "The Human Costs of a Failing Global Debt System," reveals, the impacts of this is often [felt most strongly](#) among vulnerable populations, such as children, the elderly, and the poor.

Amidst budget deficits, with the aim of reducing fiscal pressure and improving efficiency, private sector involvement is promoted as a means to enhance service delivery and efficiency in key public sectors such as healthcare, education, water, and electricity among others. Given the profit maximisation motive of the private sector coupled with limited regulation, their involvement in the provision of public services has raised apprehensions regarding accessibility, affordability, inclusiveness, and equity, particularly for poor and marginalized communities.

¹ African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights. General Comment NO7 (2022). State Obligation Under the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights in the Context of Private Provision of Social Services (last accessed 1 August 2023)

² UN Habitat et al., COVID-19 IN AFRICAN CITIES at p.12, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/06/covid-19_in_african_cities_impacts_responses_and_policies2.pdf (last accessed 1 August 2023)

³ World Bank World Development Indicators; <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators#>

⁴ African Union Commission, UNICEF (2020) Transforming Education in Africa <https://www.unicef.org/media/106686/file/Transforming%20Education%20in%20Africa.pdf> (last accessed 1 August 2023)

⁵ "World Bank. 2021. International Debt Statistics 2022. Washington, DC: World Bank.

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36289> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO. (last accessed 1 August 2023)

⁶ IMF, 2023. World Economic Outlook, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/April> (last accessed 1 August 2023)

⁷ "World Bank. 2021. International Debt Statistics 2022.

Examples, from various African countries highlight the challenges and adverse consequences associated with the state outsourcing public services to the private sector, including water privatization (Zambia, Ghana, Tanzania), health privatisation and private health providers profiteering during the pandemic resulting in exorbitant hospital bills and detaining living and dead bodies (Uganda⁸; Kenya; Zimbabwe); high cost of education when governments outsource to private (Liberia, Kenya, Ghana).

Lately we are seeing rising movements and political momentum to call for quality public services as rights. In Uganda, citizens coordinated by ISER put out a Peoples Manifesto, [Enough is Enough: Reclaiming Public Social Services in Uganda](#). Last year Africans convened [virtually](#) organized by ISER; Haki Jami; Dullar Omar Institute, University of Western Cape; The East Africa Centre for Human Rights to reflect on public services on the continent and resolved to collectively work together to advance public services. Globally, the [Santiago declaration for public services](#) and [The Future is Public](#) Manifesto provide entry points on how to ensure gender sensitive quality public services.

Objectives

The primary objective of the conference is to create a platform for dialogue and knowledge-sharing among stakeholders on how to reclaim public services in Africa building on prior conversations. Specifically, the objectives are;

- i. To reflect on approaches to the provision of public services that centre the public and how to sustainably finance them amidst the Continent's debt crisis and unequal economic recovery;
- ii. To explore the impact of private sector involvement in social services on human rights in sectors such as healthcare, education, water, electricity, and social protection in Africa;
- iii. To develop a peoples' manifesto for reclaiming public services in Africa drawing inspiration from prior manifestos e.g: [Enough is Enough](#); [Santiago Declaration](#); [The Future is Public](#).
- iv. To reflect on how to strengthen intersectional continent-wide movement building and provide a roadmap on key strategic actions to undertake to advance the public services agenda.

About the Organisers

African Coalition for Corporate Accountability (ACCA) is a coalition of 136 organisations from 32 African countries which supports African communities and individuals whose human rights are adversely impacted daily by the activities of corporations, both multi-national and domestic. ACCA's vision is a continent where communities' right to development is fulfilled and their agency to fully participate in the exercise of this right is respected.

Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) works to advance economic social rights. ISER was involved in the development of the [Abidjan Principles on the human rights obligations of States to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education](#) and Resolutions 420 and 434 and [General Comment 7](#) of the African Commission. ISER coordinates a [coalition on public services in Uganda](#), has organised [strategy meetings](#) for reclaiming public services in Africa, is a founding member of the [global coalition on public services](#) and co organized the global conference in Santiago, Chile that culminated in the [Santiago Declaration](#).

⁸ ISER (2021) Profiteering Off A Pandemic: Private Sector and Health Services in Uganda during Covid 19, https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Profiteering_off_a_pandemic.pdf; ISER (2021). How Did We Get Here? Uganda's Medical Oxygen Crisis, https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/How_did_we_get_here.pdf (last accessed 1 August 2023)