

# DIGNITY, SOLIDARITY, SHARED PROSPERITY

## A 2022 CIVIL SOCIETY NEW YEAR'S MESSAGE!

January 2022

### A. Introduction

As the collective leadership of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Uganda, we congratulate all Ugandans for their resilience and making it through a challenging 2021. It is the resolve of Ugandans to overcome the social, economic, and political challenges that continue to inspire Civil Society Organisations to focus on and aspire for a country that is fair, just, and prosperous for all. As we start this new year, we reflect on the continued COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant negative social, economic, and political impact on Ugandans. We also reflect on the state of rule of law in our country, and the freedom of citizens to live dignified lives free from extreme forms of poverty and injustice.

### B. Positive Developments

Despite having a difficult year in 2021, where Uganda's democratization credentials were severely tested, especially during the last general elections, as well as the deplorable state of public service delivery, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we recognize that there have been some positive developments.

**The Response to COVID-19 Pandemic:** The Government of Uganda has secured, through both procurement and donations over 22 million doses of vaccines. We applaud these efforts and encourage all Ugandans to get vaccinated to minimise the hospitalisation rates. In this fight against the pandemic, we also recognize and applaud the creativity and innovation by Ugandan scientists, such as Professor Patrick Ogwang who developed COVIDEX as a supportive drug treatment for COVID-19 and other virus infections.

**Citizen's Performance at the World Stage:** In 2021, Ugandans displayed exceptional talent, and excellence in sports and culture. The Ugandan contingent to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics registered a record number of Olympic medals on the track. We congratulate Joshua Cheptegei for winning two Olympic medals - the 5,000 meters Gold and 10,000M silver; Peruth Chemtai; the first female Ugandan to win an Olympic gold medal - 3,000 meters steeplechase, as well as Jacob Kiplimo for winning 10,000 meters' bronze. We also celebrate the performance of the Crested Cranes, the national female football team, the under 20 national football team at the All-Africa tournament, as well as the qualification of the under 19 national cricket team for the 2022 World Cup. These exceptional performances are an enduring invitation to the state to step up its investment in sports, cultural, and performing arts.

### **C. Outstanding Challenges that We Need to Deal with in 2022**

While we commend the progress that we have made as a people, we remain alive to the fact that to date, Uganda faces several challenges to its social, economic, and political transformation that requires a renewed resolve of citizens and unequivocal commitment of the state to turn around.

**Adherence to the Rule of Law and Respect for Human Rights:** In the period leading to and after the 2021 elections, we witnessed a record low in adherence to the rule of law and respect for human rights in Uganda. Various security agencies arbitrarily arrested, tortured, and detained citizens, journalists, and opposition political actors, as well as civil society leaders. To date, we do not have full accountability of citizens detained or missing at the hands of the state over the last year alone. We call upon the government of Uganda to hold the perpetrators of these injustices accountable. Secondly, the operating environment for civil society continues to shrink. Last year, we witnessed the suspension of operations of civil society organizations and state inspired attacks on the sector. This continues to constrain our operations and ability to contribute to the socio-economic transformation of the country. We call upon the Government of Uganda and all state agencies to work towards creating an enabling environment for CSOs in the year 2022.

**Corruption and Poor State of Public Services:** There is no more doubt that corruption and the theft of public resources have now reached endemic levels in Uganda. Its effect on the delivery of public services in health, education, and infrastructure poses an existential threat to Uganda's development. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and exacerbated the inefficiencies in our public service system, most especially, in the health and education sectors. Media reports indicated that there were several cases of misuse of funds meant for COVID-19 relief and recovery efforts. However, the government has since failed to provide a public account of the funds allocated. The President should also demonstrate a political will to hold individuals implicated in cases of abuse of public funds accountable. As civil society leaders, we ask the government to prudently allocate public resources to priority sectors of the economy and service delivery, avoid wastage and expenditure on non-essential items and provide full accountability for public resources earmarked for COVID-19 response.

**Prioritize the Safe Re-opening of Schools:** One of the worst effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has been on the education sector. Despite government opening, several private schools have been unable to reopen due to financial distress. Those that have opened, continue to charge exorbitant fees that majority of Ugandan parents cannot afford. We have also seen media reports which indicate a very appalling state for some government schools that are not conducive for both learners and the teachers. The future of over 100,000 school girls who got pregnant during the lock down also continues to be unpredictable. All these require that the Government of Uganda invests more attention to the education sector and lead the effort to full recovery and that all children of school going age have access to a decent education. We particularly implore the government to commit to addressing the inequality between learners in rural and urban areas that have been aggravated during the COVID-19 period.

**The Sustainability of Public Debt:** There has been a 15.1% increase in Uganda's public debt, as at end of April 2021 (BOU, 2021)<sup>1</sup>. This has worsened the debt servicing burden on Ugandans, the effect of which is far-reaching. It increases the tax burden on taxpayers and takes away resources from key social services. Domestic debt has a crowding-out effect on private sector borrowing and stifles economic growth. In the past, campaigns by CSOs led to the cancellation of Uganda's national debt. We are, therefore, concerned that in less than 20 years, Uganda has accumulated more debt burden, the servicing of which is now crowding out expenditure on public services. As civil society leaders, we appeal to the government to demonstrate more restraint in contracting further debts that will expose Uganda's strategic assets and sovereignty to foreign economic manipulation.

**Addressing the Working Conditions of Health Workers in Uganda:** Last year the public health services across the country were affected by several legitimate industrial actions by health workers as a result of government's failure to meet their demands for better working conditions. The need for an efficient and decent health care system in Uganda cannot be over emphasized. We continue to express solidarity with Ugandan Doctors and Health Workers who continue to demonstrate unparalleled resilience in the face of hostile working conditions and poor remuneration. We call upon the government to invest in finding sustainable solutions for the health sector challenges and providing better working conditions for health workers.

#### **D. Our Commitment to Building a Better Uganda**

As Civil Society Leaders, we are fully aware of the challenges that stand in the way of Uganda's development and socio-economic and political transformation. We are encouraged by the resilience of ordinary Ugandan citizens whose courageous acts to overcome these challenges are the source of our inspiration, hope, and commitment for a better future. In the year 2022, we commit to building civic agency, facilitating processes that promote the dignity of all Ugandans and the rule of law and challenge corruption, impunity, and apathy. In doing so, we will partner with citizens, the state and the private sector to champion and realize a Uganda that is fair and just for all its citizens.

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[1] State of Economy Report June 2021.