



VIRTUAL CSO LEADERS' REFLECTION DIALOGUE

**CSO Resilience and Relevance
in the Face of a Pandemic.**

DIALOGUE REPORT



**13TH
JULY**

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About the Convenor

The Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF) is an independent and inclusive national platform for Ugandan CSOs in their diversity, UNNGOF has a membership of 658 district networks, national platforms, and international NGOs.

UNNGOF brings on board a robust SPAN¹ infrastructure that includes 65 District Networks, and a Citizens Manifesto infrastructure of 35 regional governance CSOs that it directly works with to deliver on its Governance, Campaigns, and Citizen mobilization work, and along which the Strengthening Citizens' Engagement in Elections (SCENE) Activity is anchored. UNNGOF hosts various civil society platforms through which it coordinates collective civil society engagements.

Over the past two decades UNNGOF has emerged as a respectable platform, that provides thought and institutional leadership, and with convening power for multitudes of CSOs to collectively engage on civil society health issues, national governance processes, and international processes.

CSO Leaders Reflection Dialogue on Resilience and Relevance in the Face of a Pandemic
13th July 2021.

Convenor: Uganda National NGO Forum.

Rapporteur: Wobusobozi Amooti Kangere

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¹ SPAN is the Support Program for Advocacy Networks, which bring together several organizations in the District to engage on collective policy and rights advocacy

Introduction

On Tuesday, 13th July 2021, 409 CSO leaders in Uganda gathered for a virtual conference organized by Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF). Its purpose was to explore ways to increase the resilience and relevance of Ugandan CSOs affected by new restrictions on movement and public gatherings, which are becoming the “new normal” as the world grapples with a global health crisis.

Since first coming to global attention in December 2019, the outbreak of COVID-19, a viral pneumonia with flu-like symptoms, governments across the world were forced to lockdown vast sections of their populations to control the spread of the virus. By July 30th 2021, COVID-19 had claimed 4.1 million lives on six continents, according to data by Statista.com². Approximately 215 countries have been affected by it worldwide.

Uganda was among the first countries to respond to WHO’s call for national lockdowns, starting with a 32-day nationwide lockdown (announced on March 18th, 2020) that was later extended to 60 days. The severe restrictions of movement during this lockdown affected CSO operations significantly. ICT penetration in the sector was still low at the time so few organisations were prepared to shift to virtual operations automatically, especially grassroots organisations (the majority in the sector) with low ICT capacity. Most could only access beneficiaries within walking distance from staff.

The additional factor of funding baskets shrinking due to prioritisation of the COVID-19 response forced many CSOs to employ difficult measures to stay afloat. Some cut down staff numbers. Others reduced pay to maintain all staff. Others, still, suspended regular programming to join the COVID-19 response.

When the lockdown was eased on 26th May 2020, it was expected that the worst was over and business would eventually return to normal. Uganda had recorded only 145 confirmed cases and zero deaths at the time; and compared to the devastation experienced in countries like the USA and Italy, it appeared that Uganda had beaten the odds and defeated the virus. The public relaxed.

By June 19th, the level of infection had risen to a point where the Government of Uganda was forced to declare another lockdown to control the spread. According to the Ministry of Health’s COVID-19 response hub, the number of cumulative cases and deaths had risen to 49,757 (cumulative cases) and 336 (cumulative deaths), yet barely 750,000/4,000,000 Ugandans had received their first dose of the vaccine. Uganda was facing its first major wave. So, on June 07th, 2021, the government announced Uganda’s second lockdown. And once again, CSOs found themselves unprepared for a second lockdown.

Although many CSOs in Uganda had by now improved their ICT capacity to operate online, the new wave implied a grim reality. “New Normal” was no longer a mantra for coping with the difficulty of working online. Uganda had not yet “beaten” the pandemic, and there was no telling when — if ever — business would return to normal. The sector urgently needed to rethink its mode of operation.

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/#statisticContainer>

³ <https://covid19.gou.go.ug/statistics.html>

Speaking to these issues at this edition of the CSO Leaders' Reflection Dialogue were two eminent thought leaders in Uganda's civil society space — Jackie Asiimwe⁴ (CivSource Africa) and Arthur⁵ Larok (Action Aid International). Jackie Asiimwe's presentation on the theme, "*anti-fragile: surviving inside to thrive outside*", offered strategies for psychosocial support to boost staff productivity in an environment of virtual operations. Arthur Larok's presentation on the theme, "*Do not waste an opportune crisis: CSO resilience and relevance in the face of a pandemic*", argued for the repurposing of CSO programming to build strength at the community level.

To ground the discussion in the sector's response to date were two cases studies presented by Primah Kwagala (Women's Probono Initiative - WPI) and Benson Ekwe (Public Affairs Centre – PAC). They shared experiences on thriving in a context of shrinking funding and leveraging platform bodies to access beneficiaries during periods of movement restriction. In attendance were 409 CSO leaders from across Uganda (Bukedi, Lango, Acholi, Ankole, Buganda, Bugisu, Bunyoro, Busoga, Karamoja, Kigezi, Rwenzori, Sebei, Teso, Tooro, West Nile) and a handful from Nigeria and Ghana.

Setting the Context:

Although less restrictive than the first lockdown in 2020, Uganda's re-entry into lockdown on 7th June 2021 entailed a tough list of measures/orders that caught the public unaware. Movement was restricted to agriculture, industry, manufacturing, cargo transportation, tourism, health and medical services, security, and utilities such as water, electricity, retail, media, and banking sectors. Workplaces were restricted to 10% staff and private and public transport was banned for commuters without movement permits.

Non-food markets were suspended. Mass gatherings were banned. Schools, public transport, open market days, mosques, churches, stadia, bars, theatres, concerts, open-air events, were suspended. Marriage ceremonies and funerals were restricted to 20 people observing SOPs. Inter-district travel (except within the Kampala Metropolitan) was banned. However, shops and markets, tourist and agricultural activities, construction sites and factories, were allowed to stay operational.

In sharp contrast to the 2020 lockdown, where the country witnessed an unprecedented surge in public generosity and corporate giving⁶ the 2021 lockdown was met with cynicism. Many organisations turned inward. Majority of the population found itself trapped at home with little or no savings to depend on, and no hope of receiving any support from their government. The vulnerable poor, with no daily income, savings, or land to cultivate food, were left to fend for themselves.

The timing couldn't have been less perfect for citizens. The CSO sector, still reeling under the effects of the previous lockdown and a violent 2021 election season, was already grappling with shrinking funding and civic space. The private sector had just begun recovering from the economic

⁴ Jackie Asiimwe is a Ugandan lawyer, philanthropy advisor, leadership coach and a social development thought leader. She is the current Chairperson of the East African Philanthropy Network (EAPN) and Chief Executive Officer at CivSource Africa.

⁵ Arthur Larok is the Federation Development Director at ActionAid International. Formerly the Country Director of Action Aid Uganda, he has been instrumental in shaping citizen movements against corruption. He remains active in the growing struggle against various forms of injustice in the country.

⁶ Generosity in the Time of COVID-19, Volume 4, August-September 2020, CivSource Africa.

impacts of the pandemic. And amidst this all was a citizen body ravaged by a rising death toll, extortionate hospital bills, loss of livelihood, a health system so overwhelmed it ignored other life-threatening diseases, and fear of brutal security machinery that had injured (and killed) several citizens while enforcing presidential directives in the previous lockdown.

The biggest scandal exposed by the second wave was the total breakdown of Uganda's healthcare system. ICU beds and oxygen cylinders run out within weeks. Private hospitals charged extortionate fees to take advantage of the crisis. Patients facing other life-threatening conditions were completely ignored, prompting a rush for traditional medical solutions like steaming and herbal tinctures. And as if that was not enough, pregnant mothers were placed at risk, as can be seen in this anecdote:

👂👂 My mother told me of a case she heard on the radio. A pregnant woman walked from Jinja to Luuka (approximately 45 km) to give birth with a traditional birth attendant and almost died on the way. Someone had to carry her into a facility but people were running away from the facility because there's a strong fear that you could go there healthy and end up catching COVID, where chances of survival are low if you don't have money.
Primah Kwagala — Women's Probono Initiative

Had civil society leaders been invited to the planning room as has been the case with previous epidemics, the sector may have negotiated a better outcome for citizens. But with relations between government and CSOs having reached an all-time low — exemplified by the indefinite suspension of DGF⁷ (one of Uganda's biggest funding baskets for NGOs) — the sector was effectively (albeit unofficially) considered an enemy of the state.

While CSO organisations in the service delivery sector are typically exempted from government harassment, many CSOs working in democracy and governance issues were forced to halt activities and bench staff because of DGF's suspension. Barring the fact that the civil society sector employs more Ugandans than the public sector, the government's refusal to grant the sector essential worker status left citizens without a voice to defend their rights. But despite the adversity of these conditions, many CSOs remained steadfast in their missions. Below are some examples of how CSOs adapted their operations to remain relevant to their beneficiaries.

Thriving in Unprecedented Times: Case Studies of CSO Resilience and Relevance in the Face of a Pandemic.

While the case studies below do not necessarily represent the entire sector's response to the impacts of the pandemic on CSO work, they provide some insight into some of the innovations taking place in the context of shrinking funding and restrictions on movement.

⁷ On January 2nd, President Museveni ordered the suspension of DGF activities, stating that its funds were “used to finance activities and organizations designed to subvert [the] Government under the guise of improving governance.”

Leveraging Coalitions to Get Around Movement Restrictions

— The Women's Probono Initiative

The Women's Probono Initiative (WPI) is an indigenous non-profit, legal, and advocacy organisation promoting access to justice for women and girls in Uganda.

Founded to contribute towards ending violence and discrimination against women and girls, WPI uses legal tools for the promotion and protection of women's rights in Uganda. They have been in existence as an organisation for three years now.

WPI was one among many organisations affected by personal losses during the pandemic's second wave. Their team leader, Primah Kwagala, lost her father to COVID-19 early in January 2021. A staff member tested positive. And as the second wave peaked, the deluge of death announcements from various professional and associational quarters took a toll on overall team morale.

I'm almost at the point when I'm fed up with crying. I have run out of money to give for condolences. I feel like saying RIP is not enough. We must do more as a people who are surviving this pandemic.

Primah Kwagala — Women's Probono Initiative

The situation notwithstanding, WPI continued its work and adapted to the situation by adopting the following strategies.

1. Group Vaccination:

When the government acquired the first 900 vaccines, workers in the judiciary, prisons, and health workers were slated to be among the frontline workers eligible to receive the first shots. WPI used its membership in the Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) Alliance to front its team for vaccination because part of their core work involves emergency legal aid to indigent persons in prisons and police. All members of their team, including security and support staff, were vaccinated, which boosted their confidence to continue frontline work free from fear of contracting the virus.

2. Emergency Response Mechanisms:

Before the pandemic struck, WPI had convinced its donors and partners to put in place an emergency response mechanism comprised of a toll-free line, WhatsApp number, and an email contact so that people in need of emergency legal aid could reach them for help at no cost. This was especially useful during the lockdown when many people in need of WPI's their services couldn't afford airtime for a phone call. This ensured continuous access to their services during the lockdown.

3. Remote Working:

WPI equipped all staff with a laptop and data to enable them to work at home. They also acquired licenses for virtual calling and conferencing services like Zoom and Skype. These supported weekly meetings where staff checked on each other to identify who needed support. This is how they discovered that one of their staff had contracted COVID-19.

4. Coalition Building:

While the movement control order prevented many CSOs from moving around to provide services requiring physical contact, WPI was able to obtain movement permits using its dual status as an NGO and a registered legal-aid service provider to secure movement permits for staff working in frontline program areas. As an NGO in the Coalition on Trafficking in Persons, WPI was able to get movement permits through the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development. As a legal-aid service provider, it was eligible to apply for passes through the Uganda Law Society.

5. Continuing Advocacy Work Online:


Uganda's national budget was announced in the thick of the pandemic, when the surge of death announcements had dampened public morale and lowered attention to national issues, WPI decided to engage. Where most CSOs were concerned about allocations for COVID-19 and oxygen, WPI noticed that emergency services critical to pregnant mothers had been neglected yet the constitution requires that women are protected, taking into account their unique status and natural maternal functions in society. 4/10 women giving birth in Uganda every day need obstetric care. Some need blood. Some need oxygen. WPI intervened to raise awareness of their plight.

Thriving in a Context of Shrinking Funding

— The Public Affairs Centre

Public Affairs Centre (PAC) was established in 2006 on the premise that if people with brainpower (the elite) work with people with civic power (grassroots) there would be a transformation in Uganda. In the beginning, PAC worked closely with national campaigns by championing collective action at a sub-national level, galvanizing the national-level agenda and taking it deep to the grassroots where it pioneered citizen parliaments with the help of Oxfam. To date, PAC has helped create 58 grassroots parliaments (social movements completely owned by their communities) that drive the agenda for grassroots activism at the local level.

On 18th December 2017, PAC's offices were raided by security agents. Its involvement in *Togikwatako* — a national campaign against the constitutional amendment lifting age limits on elective positions under which PAC had collected 41,000 signatures in Teso and Karamoja — had put the organization in the government's spotlight. For their efforts, their offices were raided and ransacked, their computers and files taken, and their landlord ordered to evict them. PAC has had no donor since 2017 but has continued to remain operational. With only 10% of its former capacity, they have built stronger ties with their community than before. Their secret — a grassroots-driven, civic empowerment agenda

 *For us, a crisis is an opportunity to prove that we are people-centred. Whenever there's a challenge affecting the people we come in; and that has endeared us to the people. All our work is built around civic empowerment derived from building the capacity of the people to actualize what the constitution expects of them. The people's struggle is our agenda.*

Benson Ekwe — Public Affairs Centre

PAC owes its survival to being rooted in the social movement approach. For instance, by defending the rights of vulnerable people like widows and orphans threatened with land grabbing (over 70 widows and children have been saved through PAC intervention) PAC has made itself a darling in Teso and Karamoja, the regions where it operates. These are some of the strategies it used to survive without funding.

1. Securing Housing Finance for Leading Managers:

From 2012-2016, PAC received a sizeable grant from DGF that placed it in a privileged position with the Stanbic Bank (U) Ltd branch in Soroti, where PAC is headquartered. They leveraged their relationship with the bank to secure housing loans for its leading managers, which helped them build houses in Soroti town that relieved beneficiary staff of the pressure to pay rent. When funding dried, these staff were in position to stay on as volunteers, enabling PAC to maintain high-level operations despite having no money to pay salaries. PAC also maintained every asset acquired through the DGF grant in good working condition, except for the computers seized by police, all these assets are still in use.

2. Strategic Alliances with Local Governments:

PAC built strong relationships with district officials and media companies in its region of operation. Because of these alliances, PAC has been contracted to train local government staff in 8 districts, and also facilitated the orientation of new counsellors when Soroti gained city status. Such was the extent of the good relationship PAC had with local governments, that when the government sent instructions for its closure, six out of ten LC5 Chairpersons resisted the order and pleaded PAC's case, securing their release to continue operations.

3. Media Partnerships:

PAC has written agreements with 5 radio stations through which it was able to continue doing advocacy work on sensitive issues. For instance, in a radio program conducted under the SCENE project, PAC tackled the high level of brutality in enforcing movement restrictions during the previous lockdown, as well as the poor state of the region's referral hospital. Local leaders invited to respond took action, and there was easement in the enforcement of presidential directives for COVID-19 prevention. This made citizens happy.

4. Using Technology:

PAC has adjusted to using technology to maintain contact with key stakeholders. For example, its civic mentors under the Strengthening Citizens Engagement in Elections (SCENE)⁸ project established a WhatsApp group through which communication is maintained. They also have a zoom meeting every month.

Lessons from PAC

- Never rely on others to achieve your development agenda. Think creatively and organize differently.
- Build your mission around people's causes.
- Necessity is the mother of innovation. Reform and adapt to changes in circumstances.

⁸ The Strengthening Citizens Engagement in Elections (SCENE) is a USAID-funded consortium comprised of the Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF), Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE), the Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies (GLISS), and a network of 14 regional implementing partners. The project aims to create a citizenry that is proactive and actively engaged in influencing electoral and political processes in Uganda and holding governance institutions accountable.

Reflections for CSO Leaders:

Internal and External Resilience in the Face of a Pandemic

Since Uganda's president slapped on the country a movement control order in an effort to contain the pandemic, many CSOs have had to reframe their activities, repurpose project objectives, and even change the way they work in order to survive. While most CSOs in the country had become accustomed to working under the strain of uncertain funding and shrinking space for civic action, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a different kind of challenge. For those working in areas of influencing democracy and governance, being unable to move was an existential crisis they had never experienced or anticipated. There was a need for spaces in which CSO leaders could talk, share experiences, and exchange ideas on how to navigate these difficult times.


The keynote speakers for this edition of the CSO Leaders Reflection dialogue have been long-standing thought leaders in Uganda's civil society space. Jackie Asiimwe leads an organization pioneering research and advocacy for local philanthropy (CivSource Africa) while Arthur Larok is the Federation Director at Action Aid International and formerly the Country Director of Action Aid Uganda. Both have been influential in shaping citizen movements against corruption and social injustice in Uganda. Their presentations offered CSO leaders insights into how to build internal and external resilience — as leaders and as organisations — with a view to developing strategies of change that will help their organisations emerge from the crisis stronger, more efficient, and more sustainable.

Anti-fragile: Surviving Inside to Thrive Outside

— Jackie Asimwe

CSOs in Uganda work in a context where there's shrinking political space, unstable and short-term funding, poverty, political volatility and instability, and the geopolitical complications associated with Uganda's global positioning as a third-world country. To survive in such a context, CSO leaders must be resilient to speak truth to power, defend rights, and expand the rights that are defended. However, in a time of public health crisis such as this, when many CSOs cannot afford health insurance and are faced with uncertain funding, ICT capacity challenges, and limited knowledge on how to cope with the mental health effects of the crisis, CSO leaders are finding themselves faced with unprecedented challenges in keeping their teams motivated and productive at home. Many leaders in the sector have been forced to revise how they think about human resource.


One of the big conundrums of this pandemic has been its effect on the mental health of several workers. Leaders accustomed to dealing with individuals are finding themselves in a position where they now have to consider the situations that staff working at home are dealing with.

 *When you come to the workplace the assumption is that it is a level playing ground. You don't see what everybody brings. Suddenly people are working from home and you realise that someone has five children and they live in a one-bedroom house; another person is dealing with an ageing parent they are taking care of; another cannot meet their rent... so in a sense, the whole person was brought into a virtual office space as we were leading this time. You're no longer caring for the two or ten staff members you have. You are starting to see them located in their specific homes and what they are dealing with.*

Jackie Asimwe — CivSource Africa

In some cases, the sector's response to the crisis was less than adequate. To take one example, when workers demanded that NSSF releases relief funds during the last lockdown, the civil society sector did not engage with that conversation yet many CSOs remit to NSSF. With staff now being forced to work from home, overheads like rent and utility bills are being called into question as CSOs struggled to raise ICT capacity for remote working. And with the additional burden of the grief and death that came with the second wave, many CSOs are finding themselves in a situation that challenged their grief policies.

The crisis has shone a spotlight on the stewardship of organizational resources. In recent years, the sector has developed resilience mechanisms, like Nafasi⁹ and Ujasiri¹⁰, to support CSOs grappling with financial difficulty in times such as these, however, the number of CSOs willing to believe in them and make them work for the sector are few. How prepared is the sector for the next crisis?

 *Hard times are surely coming,
Asimwe warned*

⁹ Nafasi Multi-Purpose Cooperative Society was initiated by a select group of CSO leaders under the Uganda National NGO Forum and the UHURU Institute for Social Development to help employees in the NGO sector to have financial freedom. Nafasi's mission is to provide a solid infrastructure through which CSO staff and their families can create and accumulate wealth for education, healthcare, housing, leisure, and retirement.

¹⁰ Ujasiri Fund was established as a response to the absence of an independent and locally anchored mechanism for civil society in Uganda. It's vision is to fund the emergence and growth of a strong, independent, self-sustaining, accountable and citizen-responsive Ugandan civil society.

Reflections for CSO Leaders.

When the world stopped last year, one of the things many people looked to was nature. Asimwe's recommendation to CSO leaders was to pay attention to what nature can teach them in this hard time. She picked out four examples for them to reflect on.

1. Build a strong spine:

A cactus keeps water in its spine to help it stand up and keep upright. What are the support systems that keep CSO leaders standing when everything is falling apart? What values and mechanisms do they fall back on to keep their spines upright?

2. Stock resources for hard times:

A succulent stores water for hard times to keep it healthy and growing. What expressions do CSOs have for the storage of water? What are the ways in which they store to enable their organisations to go through hard times?

3. Build shimmering solidarity:

To repel against predators like hornets, honeybees flip their abdomens upwards in split-second synchronicity to produce a wave-like pattern called shimmering. What are CSO leaders doing to build capacity for rapid communication and coordination for aligned action? How do they reach out to each other for help? How do all leaders in the sector move as though they are one?

4. Embrace change:

In trees, when some leaves, fall greener ones grow in their place. It's easier to hoard and hold when building resilience. What are those things CSO leaders should let go that are no longer serving them? How do they let go of them graciously and honourably, acknowledging that they have served them, but will not continue to serve them in a new world?

Do not waste an opportune crisis: CSO resilience and relevance in the face of a global pandemic.

— Arthur Larok

Citing from the book, *Inventions that Changed the World*, by Rodney Castleden, Arthur Larok observed that crises have in the past driven innovations that are taken for granted today. In the ancient world (about 500,000 BCE), the early people invented stone tools in response to a crisis manifested in the harsh environment they found themselves in. In 38,000 BCE, they invented painting, without which there would be no colour in the world today. In medieval times they invented the clock, which helps modern man attend meetings in time. And during the renaissance, they discovered anaesthesia, without which surgery would be a painful experience. He, therefore, challenged CSO leaders to see the current crisis as an opportunity to invent new ways to serve communities better and more effectively.

🔗🔗 *Pay attention to what CSOs on the frontline are going through because that is where the impulses for change — and the impulses for solutions that we can offer to the world and our communities — may come from.*
Arthur Larok — Action Aid International

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the folly of global solidarity. We are witnessing what some people call vaccine apartheid and nationalism — where countries like Canada are today considering second jabs for 12-year old children when health workers in most of Africa havenot even received their first jab. If vaccination is the solution to the crisis, it is clear that it will not be the solution for everyone, so Africans should think differently and disengage from over-dependence.

For CSOs, resilience in this pandemic is about their internal and external ability to rise and prosper after the shock; explore different ways in which local communities can be resilient; confront the realities the crisis has exposed; and redress the brokenness, inequality, and hypocrisy in our society. CSO leaders, therefore, ought to rethink their priorities and engage on the issues the crisis has exposed.

Reflections for CSO Leaders

1. Address the crisis in public health infrastructure:

The brokenness of Uganda's health system was exposed when COVID-19 deaths surged because hospitals did not have enough oxygen and ICU beds — there are more MPs in Uganda today than ICU beds. Now is an opportune time to push for public infrastructure that helps people who have no insurance.

2. Address the debt crisis being worsened by COVID-19:

At a time when Africans cannot get vaccines — and can do nothing about it despite the talk of global solidarity — many states are amassing huge public debt and compromising the future. According to Uganda Development Network, Uganda has so far acquired USD 888 million (approx. UGX 3.197 trillion) in loans towards COVID-19 related support. As of December 2019, Uganda's total public debt stood at USD 13.5 billion (approx. UGX 486 trillion), meaning that children three generations removed from today will still be paying this debt. CSO leaders need to construct a movement against this debt crisis.

3. Invest in local solutions:

In many countries where Action Aid works, they have repurposed their programming to start delivering public health information in local communities. If a CSO is not rooted in communities, chances are that it will become irrelevant when locked down in Kampala.

4. Prepare for the next pandemic:

Not enough discussion has taken place about where this virus came from. COVID-19 is not a natural situation. This pandemic is part of a process to control and reset the world; and if it doesn't serve the purpose for which it was created, they will come up with something else. Are CSO leaders prepared for the next pandemic?

5. Build meaningful solidarity:

CSO leaders should focus on building solidarity that leads to meaningful self-sufficiency. So much is happening that CSOs can ill-afford to not document and learn from. The sector should use these experiences to invent solutions, for now, and the future, without having to depend on the West.

6. Reclaim the state:

CSOs should reclaim the state from a government that has presided over a failing state for a long time. The sector ought to lead that charge to seize back control of the country's destiny.

Conclusion

Although expert opinion is divided on exactly how long it will take for COVID-19 to pass into history, one thing remains clear from recent waves in Uganda and the rest of the world — CSO leaders should brace themselves for more waves. In an ideal world, a national crisis such as this should be an opportune time for a country to galvanize resources and coalesce the population around common solutions. However, what we see happening in Uganda is the reverse. The country seems to be falling apart.

Whereas the threat of raids and shutdowns looms over CSOs attempting to bring government to book, there has never been a more critical time for the CSO sector to have the courage to stand up for the citizens of Uganda. With the government having borrowed USD 888 million (approx. UGX 3.197 trillion) in loans towards COVID-19 related support, despite failing to account for the colossal mismanagement of relief funds donated in the previous crisis, the writing is on the wall: the citizen is on their own.

Jackie Asiimwe advises CSO leaders to stock up resources, review their organizational values and attitudes toward change, and build capacity for rapid communication and coordination for aligned action. If the sector is weak inside, it cannot do what is necessary to speak truth to power, defend rights, and expand the rights that are defended. Arthur Larok, on the other hand, calls on the sector to galvanize itself for action and mobilise to reclaim the state from what he calls a grossly incompetent government.

Whatever strategies CSOs choose to adopt in this situation, the one unavoidable thing is CSOs have to change the way they do business. CSO leaders should think through the major lessons coming up during this pandemic and develop ways to help the people survive the crisis and come out stronger — especially those who are fighting to live the next day every single day.



For more Information,
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