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Covid-19 – A Call for Socio-Economic Policy Implementation and People's Socio-Economic Behavior Change in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of COVID-19 has called for proper policy implementation on the side of the government of Uganda. Uganda has a policy on food and nutrition that is responsible for maintaining food reserves (or funds to be used for staple food purchase) at household, sub-county, district, regional and national levels, to boost disaster preparedness. But this and many other policies that are intended to support socio-economic lives have never been fully implemented. The government has also been called upon to strengthen financial institutions to encourage people to save. Ugandans too, are encouraged to embrace the culture of saving. Therefore, COVID-19 lockdown has awakened Ugandans to change their spending behavior given the uncertain future. Besides, the pandemic has also checked on Uganda's socio-cultural behavior, calling for a change in terms of greeting gestures and personal space, religious beliefs, land ownership, hygiene, and educational accessibility.

Keywords: Coronavirus; Policy Implementation; Socio-Economic; Behavior change

INTRODUCTION

An outbreak of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was declared by the Peoples' Republic of China on 31st December 2019.1 To most countries, this outbreak seemed to be very far and no one could easily imagine its devastating effects. The outbreak was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30th January 2020 by Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General, following their first field visit to Wuhan, China on 21st January.[2] Following the release of the International Community's Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan by WHO on 3rd February,[3] the Ministry of Health in Uganda started isolating travelers from 16 high-risk countries (China, Italy, San Marino, South Korea, Iran, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, USA, United Kingdom, Malaysia, Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and Austria) for 14 days.[4] Isolated travelers were being monitored daily by the MOH surveillance team. It was during this time, preventive measures were emphasized by MOH. In an effort to prevent as well as to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus disease, on 7th March 2020, the WHO issued a document entitled, "Responding to Community Spread of COVID-19" [5]in which it recommended "Public Health Measures" for each country to implement when they see it fit. WHO characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11th March 2020. Since then all countries were on alert for this pandemic spread.

On 18th March 2020, the President of Uganda addressed the country regarding the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, he ordered to implement some public health measures recommended by WHO that were intended to scatter concentrated populations like schools, banned big gatherings of public worship, and also discouraged big gatherings such as weddings, entertainment clubs. On 30th March 2020, lockdown measures were fully implemented. It was at this point that all Ugandans started feeling the impact of this pandemic.

COVID-19 IMPACT

Following the closure of public transport and non-food markets on 25th March 2020, the outcry to the government for food and other life necessities were overheard. On 30th March 2020, when a complete shutdown was announced, the outcry increased. Although the government of Uganda set up a task force to distribute food and some essential items, it did not meet the needs of every Ugandan due to limited capacity. Therefore, this paper examines the pandemic as a call for Socio-Economic Policy Implementation and People's Socio-Economic Behavior Change.

The Need for Policy Implementation

In the political setting of the Ugandan government, it has a constitution that guides its activities and rulings. The constitution provides a good number of policies that are intended for the well-being of people while protecting their individual rights. It should be noted that most of these policies are in line with international treaties and conventions.

International treaties and conventions emphasize that the right to adequate food is a fundamental human right. Article 25 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[6] and Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)[7] both provide for the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living including adequate food.

Uganda endorsed the ICESCR in 1987 and recognizes the importance of food and nutrition in the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda[8]. The National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution provides that the State shall: 1) Take appropriate steps to encourage people to grow and store adequate food; 2) Establish national food reserves; 3) Encourage and promote proper nutrition through mass education and other appropriate means in order to build a healthy state.

Uganda pledge to have remained committed to the resolutions of international conferences on the right to food and has developed national goals. In 2003, a national seminar on the implementation of the right to adequate food in Uganda discussed issues relating to the right to food including the draft of this Uganda Food and Nutrition Policy (UFNP)[9]. The policy was formulated to promote food security and adequate nutrition for the population.

The guiding principles of the Uganda Food and Nutrition Policy (UFNP) include; adequate food is a human right; food is treated as a national strategic resource; the cross-cutting nature of issues of food and nutrition as they affect men, women and children; strategies for responding to food and nutrition concerns at all levels and; the needs of all vulnerable groups being integral to all components of the policy. The overall goal of the UFNP is to ensure food security and adequate nutrition for all the people in Uganda, for their health as well as their social and economic well-

being. To achieve the stated goal UFNP strategy was to support, promote and guide the establishment of national food reserves In its formation in 2003, some of the areas of focus of UNFP were:

Food Supply and Accessibility

In this area of food supply and availability, the government intended to ensure an adequate supply of, and access to, quality food at all times for human consumption. The major objective was to ensure food security in times of disaster. This was to be achieved through promoting the establishment and maintenance of food reserves (or funds to be used for staple food purchase) at household, sub-county, district, regional and national levels, to boost disaster preparedness.

Food Storage, Marketing and Distribution

The aim of the Government in the area of food storage, marketing and distribution were to promote the availability of and access to, affordable, safe and nutritious foods. The major objectives being: (i) to support the establishment and maintenance of minimum strategic food reserves at the district and national levels; (ii) to develop and expand local and external food markets. These objectives were to be achieved through (i) establishing the overall storage requirements for strategic food reserves at all levels; (ii) encouraging the construction of appropriate storage facilities at all levels; and (iii) developing a well-coordinated system for collecting and disseminating information on food marketing and distribution. Besides, the constitution founded a National Policy for Disaster Preparedness and Management (NPDM) of 2010[10], whose major aim is to establish institutional mechanisms and capabilities to reduce vulnerability to disasters at all levels.

It should be noted that, although the 1995 constitution proclaims the right to adequate food through UNFP and the need to establish a contingency fund and commission responsible for disaster preparedness, these remained in writing. This is in line with the research findings of Peter Milton Rukundo which stated that Uganda experiences inadequate preparedness mechanisms and capabilities regarding food security and contingencies fund[11].

In this current COVID-19 outbreak, the National Food Reserve was found with limited capacity, which could not be adequately used to provide Ugandans with enough food to sustain them during the 5 months of lockdown and subsequent months. Following the lockdown, the government set out to distribute food in Kampala and Wakiso districts among the many districts but it could not supply enough food to all people in need in only these two districts, yet there were outcries for food relief in many other districts. It is also important to note that most of the food that was given to adversely affected people was contributed through individual and Organizational donations to the Uganda Task Force. Yet Uganda is a predominantly agricultural country, which grows a lot of food crops that many times the surplus goes to waste. This is because the government ignored its role regarding UNFP and NPDPM.

The Need for Economic Behavior Change

The culture of saving is not embraced by many Ugandans. In other words, planning for uncertainties is rarely thought of. People are driven by optimism, hoping that even tomorrow will be a good day for economic activities. Therefore, there is a tendency of spending daily, weekly, or monthly earnings without considering the uncertain future. Of course, there are many excuses for

not saving; ranging from low income to high cost of living. In the Daily Monitor interview by the Bank of Uganda, it was concluded that the many excuses for not saving are a result of a poor savings culture and people's inability to resist unwarranted expenditure.[12] Saving using either formal financial institutions such as commercial banks or informal financial institutions such as Savings and Credit Co-operatives (SACCOs) is beneficial in many ways. To mention a few: i) it helps to accumulate wealth to finance household's long-term goals; ii) it safeguards against uneven income streams due to seasonal variations; iii) it helps to save for future investments in such things as education and other human resource development investments; iv) and more importantly, it acts as insurance against disability, disease, retirement, sudden income losses, and other contingencies.[13]

Among the contingencies, we are undergoing now is the COVID-19 unexpected lockdown consequences. As soon as lockdown started, there was a lot of outcry to the government for food supplies because some people had no cash reserves to run to since they tend to consume whatever they earn in a day. For instance, taxi drivers and conductors, road sellers, non-food market vendors, were adversely affected since most of these people don't have a habit of saving, they always fight to spend whatever they earn in a day, hoping to make more money tomorrow. A situation COVID-19 lockdown could not allow. Indeed, Covid-19 economic challenges have necessitated Ugandans to embrace a culture of saving for the future, instead of working for daily bread.

However, the government has got a role to play as regards arousing people's morale to save. The government should improve on Uganda's economic structures. First, by strengthening the financial institutions: formal, semi-formal, and informal in order to build people's confidence to save without worrying for savings loss due to unexpected bank closure. The formal financial institutions include Commercial Banks, Microfinance Deposit-taking institutions, Credit institutions, Insurance companies, Development banks, Pension funds and capital markets. Commercial banks are closely regulated by the Bank of Uganda and are authorized to hold checking, savings, and deposit account for individuals and institutions in local as well as international currencies. Commercial banks are also authorized to issue letters of credit and offer loans to its customers.[14]

People can also save using credit institutions since they are authorized to take in customer deposits and to establish savings accounts. They are also authorized to make collateralized and non-collateralized loans to customers. Microfinance deposit-taking institutions are another category that can be used for saving because they are also allowed to take in deposits from customers in form of savings accounts. However, most of the low-income earners may not afford to use formal banks because they require high opening balances and the minimum balances are too high. But they can use semi-formal and informal institutions

Semi-formal institutions include Savings and Credit Co-operatives (SACCOs) which range in size from a handful to several thousand members. These are deemed to be the best for savings mobilization from the poor and also provide micro-loan to members. Informal financial institutions are mostly village savings and loans associations such as moneylenders, deposit collectors, money guards, informal insurance schemes (Munno mukabi), saving at home, deposits with suppliers, supplier credit, Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs), Accumulating Savings and Credit Associations (ASCAs) and savings in-kind.[15] These are characterized by a wide range of services provided especially small daily deposits, short-term loans, and small loans; low

transaction costs especially on the part of the borrower; the speed with which services are provided; and proximity of the service provider to the clients. This category also appeals best to low-income earners. Therefore, this points to the fact that everyone can save regardless of their level of income.

However, many times the public has lost confidence in saving using the above mentioned financial institutions due to high risks involved in losing money, which include unexpected bank closure of commercial banks by Bank of Uganda. The SACCOs are characterized by high risks, they traditionally suffer from opaque governance and poor accounting and management systems, whereby members have little idea of the financial status of the institution. Besides, informal financial institutions are private in nature, members cannot easily have recourse to legal protection in the event of dishonesty and theft on the part of the money guard.[16] This is where the government should come in to lay down protective measures to safeguard members' savings so as to give confidence to savers regardless of whether they are formal, semi-formal, and informal institutions.

The government should also work to minimize large idle population concentration in cities. The city officials should ensure that people residing in cities and towns are engaged in meaningful and sustainable economic activities, such as small scale businesses. In order to foster economic activities for small-scale business, the government of Uganda spearheaded the establishment of microfinance institutions (MFIs) such as SACCOs in which it injected money to offer agricultural loans for supporting productivity enhancement and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) loan at low-interest rates which allows access to credit by masses.[17] However, it is important to note that microfinance providers in Uganda reach low-income households in rural and urban areas but not the poorest of the poor. This is because people who are SACCO members are those who can save part of their earnings which gives them access to membership credit.[18] But the poorest of the poor remain with no access to microloans because of the following reasons: i) MFIs focus on micro-entrepreneurs with sufficient repayment capacity; ii) product exclusion where the "one-size-fits-all" working loan on offer does not meet their needs; iii) emphasis on credit delivery and little attention to the needs of the poorest for safe and accessible savings services; iv) and self-exclusion by the poorest of the poor due to fear of credit.[19]

Given the fact that the poorest of the poor cannot afford access to micro-credit from microfinance institutions, the government should design programs to sensitize them on proper business management and credit management. The government can then design financial products that fit them such as start-up capital with no attached strings that hinder many from using credit. This will enable the poorest of the poor to become micro-entrepreneur either in agriculture or other sectors so as to begin earning a living. This will encourage savings within this group and also reduce idleness where they are just working for daily bread.

The Need for Socio-Cultural Behavior Change

Greeting Gestures and Personal Space

By culture, greeting here goes along with gestures such as a handshake and a hug. With the COVID-19 outbreak, social distancing is encouraged in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus, since it is human-to-human transmission especially through breathing in, contact with surfaces, and hands with droplets on them. Regarding handshake, the hand-shaker may lightly grip his hand-shaking forearm with the opposite hand. In some instances, to show great respect one may place his/her

left hand over the right forearm when handshaking. It is important to note that besides the spread of coronavirus, many other diseases spread through such gestures. Such diseases include Chickenpox, Cold sores, foot and mouth disease, Common cold, Diphtheria, Influenza, Measles, Meningitis, Mumps, Pneumococcal pneumonia, Rubella, Streptococcal sore throat, Tuberculosis (TB), Whooping cough (pertussis), etc.[20]

Maintaining personal space minimizes such infections and contamination. In Uganda, personal space is very minimal. People often talk very close to each other, with less than an arm's length. For example, in public transportation, personal space is limited or non-existent. People are usually crowded into a bus or taxi with no space in between. And when two people are talking, touching either the hands, arms, or shoulders is acceptable. Nowadays, buses and taxis are carrying half capacity, which allows enough space in-between passengers. Indeed, social distancing as the measure to stop the spread of coronavirus disease is as well helping to stop the spread of those other infectious diseases too. Therefore, this is a positive cultural change where personal space is being observed unlike before.

God and Religion

In Uganda, we usually hold a very big religious gathering with ten thousand people. When Church gatherings were suspended to prevent the spread of COVID-19, many believers were disheartened. Indeed, the closure of churches for big spiritual gatherings such as Sunday services led to reduced faith among some Christians, moral degeneration among children and youth, and increased family conflicts.[21] However, this was a period to recognize God's Omnipresence.[22] The lesson to believers is that God is not limited by places. Indeed, the first place to worship God is ones' heart,[23] not a temple building. Temple buildings are intended to bring believers together for a common liturgical celebration but not the only place of worshiping and praising God. Solomon Salve, in his reflection on COVID-19 spiritual impact, noted that COVID-19 ceases religious freedom but kindles faith, and a call to pray from home transfers greater responsibility to non-ordained members.[24]

This is because praying from home will bring in a faithful realization that all can have access to God through Christ Jesus,[25] and all have the priestly responsibility of interceding for other people to God.[26] He adds that it is also a time for understanding that, similar to fellowships in physical Church buildings, family members praying together in their homes is also the real Church in a spiritual sense. In fact, the lockdown has encouraged the growth of families as basic Christian communities. During the lockdown period, religious leaders in Uganda encouraged their believers to embrace it as a God-given period for prayer and fasting. Following the president's directives of church closure, bishop Charles Collins Andaku, of Madi and West Nile diocese, wrote a pastoral letter in which he stated:

> *'I call this season to be a season of prayer and fasting for our people and our land, when the Lord shows you areas you need to repent personally, please do.'*
>
> *'When we have a state of emergency, we also need prayers of emergency, don't forget to sing about God's faithfulness in your homes and communities.*[27]

Indeed, this encouraged many believers to reframe the tragic events of COVID-19 lockdown through hopeful lenses so as to transcend stressful times by enabling them to see a tragedy as an opportunity to grow closer to God.

Land ownership and Rural Home

Regarding the history of land ownership in Uganda, article 237(1) of the constitution states that "land belongs to the citizens of Uganda, making Uganda, one of the few states in Africa, to vest the ultimate ownership of land, as property, in its citizens." [28]The land act of 1998 states that land shall be owned in accordance with the following land tenure systems: i) Customary tenure – communal ownership and use of land; ii) Freehold tenure- full powers of owning land which is registered in perpetuity; iii) Mailo tenure – involves registered land in perpetuity, holding of registered land in perpetuity which permits separation of land ownership and developments on land made by unlawful occupants; iv) Leasehold – ownership created by contracts or by operation of law under which a landlord (lessor) grants a tenant (lessee) exclusive possession of land usually for a defined period of time.[29] Previously, most Ugandans owned land either by customary, freehold, or were lawful occupants on mailo land. But some Ugandans sold their land in favor of other investments and moved in cities and towns, where they are now squatters. For example, those who sold their land and bought boda bodas (motocycles) and taxis during the lockdown were temporarily out of work. This is the time they realized the importance of owning land as well as farming.

When the president announced the lockdown, most people sought refuge in the village to avoid the expenses of towns and cities. This worked well for people who still owned land and rural homes, but for those who had sold them, they faced it rough; renting as well as seeking what to eat and other life necessities. It should be noted that the urban poor use a major portion of their daily income on food. This is because they are less likely than rural people to be able to grow their own food due to a lack of land. In fact, the poorest urban dwellers can spend up to 60% of their income on food.[30] Besides, urban dwellers in slums and informal communities face the issue of food insecurity which has increased the risk of malnutrition among children as they are unable to access the right diets to facilitate healthy growth.[31]

Regarding rent payment during the lockdown, tenants sent their outcry to the president. In reply to this outcry the president of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni instructed security agencies to prohibit landlords from evicting tenants defaulting on rent payment during the lockdown period in Uganda. Museveni advised landlords and tenants to reach an agreement on how to pay rent shortly when the situation in the country has normalized.[32] However, this did not mean rent was suspended but just deferred and it kept accumulating until the payment time. After four or six months without earnings, tenants had to find means of paying the deferred rent as well as the current one, which was not easy as many people were still dealing with the consequences of lockdown. Therefore, those who own land and houses did not suffer like those without since they had shelter as well as food. The little they were earning or from their savings were used to cater for other necessities.

Hygiene and Regular Hand Washing

Following the need to prevent sanitation-related infections and diseases, in 2006 the Government of Uganda implemented a Ten-Year Improved Sanitation and Hygiene financing Strategy for rural and small towns, which calls for a campaign promoting Hand washing with soap.[33] This was a result of the Ministry of Finance Planning and Economic Development identifying Poor Sanitation & Hygiene as one of the five major causes of the high infant mortality rate in Uganda. Hand washing with Soap (HWWS) and safe household water treatment were identified as the most effective means of preventing diarrheal disease.[34] Evidence indicates that hand washing has a major impact on public health in any country and can significantly reduce two leading causes of childhood

mortality; diarrheal disease and acute respiratory infection (ARI).[35] UNICEF through its Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) program has been promoting hand washing throughout the world, particularly in Africa as well as Uganda. In Uganda, this program has been targeted to schools, health centers, and households. Despite all these initiatives, many Ugandans have not been washing hands regularly. Beginning from the family, through schools, universities, and workplaces, Ugandans have been consciously or otherwise, resistant to hand washing. It has been normal to find someone eating without washing hands. According to observation done by New Vision, only one in four Ugandans washes hands properly- with soap and water- after using a latrine/ toilet and other occasions, explaining why about 75% of the country's disease burden is preventable and linked to poor hygiene and inadequate sanitation facilities and practices.[36] Indeed, the outbreak of COVID-19 has forced Ugandans to wash hands and sanitize regularly. Households and institutions have provided water and soap for washing hands at different entry points and within buildings, to contain the spread of Corona Virus.

Schools as a Place of Learning

In Uganda, learning is equated to formal designated schools. Because of that many, if not all Ugandans know that learning takes place at school. With reference to the education system of Uganda, a child begins attending school right from pre-primary to university or tertiary institution.[37] Commuting daily to school or camping in a boarding section. This practice had left no chance for homeschooling. Because of the fear of coronavirus spread, among the first measures was to disperse big concentration which included schools. By the time, it happened semesters and terms were halfway, a thing that has forced education institutions especially higher education to use different online tools to continue teaching and engaging students while at home. In fact, it has forced many higher education institutions to implement remote online teaching and assessment tools, to cope with lost time. Going forward, many higher institutions of learning have embraced online teaching as educational institutions are not yet allowed to hold face-to-face lectures due to the increasing spread of the disease. Indeed, online teaching has become a new normal for higher education as far as Uganda is concerned. For the case of Primary and Secondary schools, communication Medias such as Televisions and Radios offered to hold study lessons to help kids who are at home, to continue with their education. In fact, online teaching has never been used on a large scale as it is now.

Also, Media houses had never held study sessions on a large scale as in the time of COVID lockdown. Previously, study sessions in the media house have been informational and for a few minutes of not more than 40 minutes. The impact here is the shifting roles - from teachers to parents and learners: Parents are responsible for their students' learning while at home, they are supposed to encourage and motivate; provide a conducive home learning environment. Learners too, have to motivate themselves to attend online, television, and radio sessions and do assignments. Given the prolonged period of school closure, some parents lost control of their children especially teenagers. This implies that parents have not yet embraced the shifted roles from teachers or schools being guards or moral strainers for their children. As a result, many girls were impregnated by their fellow teenagers and other men[38] This has disadvantaged these girls' future education as well as their future life since most of them are more likely not to continue with their education.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected Ugandans in aspects of socio-economic and socio-cultural lives. And at the same time has awakened Ugandans in many ways. Regarding policy implementation, the outbreak has necessitated the government to be prepared to sustain its citizens at any time in case of any calamity, war, and pandemic outbreak. In particular, a policy on disaster preparedness and food availability should be carefully implemented in order to save Ugandans from lacking basic necessities of life at any time a disaster happens.

Ugandans too should develop a habit of saving for the uncertain future in order to play a part in sustaining themselves because the government may not have enough for everyone. It is important to note that every individual has the potential to save regardless of their job and level of earning. This is because everyone's saving is based on what they earn. However, little it may seem to be, it can sustain someone for some days. On average most Ugandans live below the poverty line, but their spending habits are extravagant. It is time for Ugandans to desist from such extravagant consumptions. Besides, the government should strengthen financial institutions by establishing measures to protect people's savings to build peoples 'confidence in financial institutions.

Indeed, the COVID-19 outbreak has called for Socio-cultural behavior change. Greeting gestures, personal space, and regular hand washing need to be paid attention to, not only to prevent the spread of Coronavirus but even to prevent other infectious diseases too. Finally, education learning systems or delivery modes for all education levels (tertiary, secondary, and Primary) should be diversified further to increase education accessibility, which has always been limited to educational sites.

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