



COALITION
TO STOP MATERNAL MORTALITY

COALITION TO STOP MATERNAL MORTALITY IN UGANDA

OPEN LETTER FROM CSOs TO THE PRIME MINISTER ON COVID-19, MATERNAL HEALTH, AND OTHER ESSENTIAL HEALTH SERVICES

Office of the Prime Minister
P.O Box 341
Plot 2-1 A-C Sir Apollo Kaggwa Road
Kampala, Uganda
4th April, 2020

Dear Rt. Hon. Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda:

RE: Deliver maternal health care, family planning, HIV and other essential health services for all during the fight against COVID-19

We are grateful for the commitment and seriousness with which the Government of Uganda is managing the COVID-19 pandemic. We commend the leadership of Hon Dr. Jane Ruth Aceng and the entire team at the Ministry of Health for the efforts undertaken to ensure that people who have tested positive with COVID-19 receive necessary treatment as well as prevention for further spread. We applaud all the health workers at the frontline, ensuring that lives are saved, despite the challenges and limitations they are faced with.

As civil society organisations under the Coalition to Stop Maternal Mortality in Uganda, we are ready to support the Government in addressing the COVID-19 problem, in any way possible. We are appealing to Government to ensure that health services for all other conditions continue to be provided and easily accessible, including, but not limited to: antenatal care visits and deliveries, accidents, dialysis, pressure, heart failure, cancer, ART refills, immunizations, blood transfusion, sickle cell disease crises et cetera. This will ensure that the Government continues to meet its obligation of preserving fundamental health rights during this period when the most vulnerable Ugandans are struggling to get their urgent health needs addressed without any safety net or social protection.

With only a few days into the lockdown, women are delivering by the roadside, abandoned. Already one woman whom we know of has died. People who require urgent health services such as blood transfusion are struggling to easily access services. These are grave violations of rights which need to be addressed by our health system, despite the stretch by the COVID-19.

We therefore strongly recommend that your task force address these issues by taking the following steps:

- 1.** We note that the World Bank in Uganda has given \$15 million towards the fight against COVID-19, which funds are re-allocated from the bank's Reproductive Maternal and Child Health Services Improvement project. This is an opportunity for the Health Ministry to prioritise reproductive maternal and child health services in the fight against the pandemic. However, we need to ensure that this funding is additional and is allocated transparently, with consultation from civil society.
- 2.** That Cabinet makes a revision to the supplementary budget request to give further prioritization to health sector expenditures. There must be a new investment in a stimulus package for Ugandans in the form of cash transfers and other interventions during this unprecedented time.
- 3.** Designate emergency vehicles for each Sub-County that are solely to be used for responding to non-elective, urgent and emergency health issues earlier outlined. The contact information for this driver shall be made available to all residents through Local Council Offices (LCs) and Village Health Teams (VHTs), and published locally and nationally to ensure transparency and accountability. Health facilities shall be made aware of this service and must share this information with their patients to enable responsiveness to bona fide urgent health needs.
- 4.** The rights and needs of health workers at the frontline of giving services during COVID-19 should also be prioritised. Beyond safety gear and equipment, which needs to be expedited, their living conditions and welfare should also be considered.

5. Cases of sexual violence, including rape and defilement are likely to increase in this period. The current precautions have limited Judicial services and how fast they can handle these cases. We therefore request the taskforce to prioritise the identification of these cases so that justice prevails.

6. Ensure continuity of blood donation services by giving exemptions to the Uganda Blood Transfusion Services to collect blood. Also, make provisions for people who would like to donate blood to do so.

7. The national toll-free call centre shall be upgraded to include a designated number only for Ugandans who have urgent non-COVID-19 health queries, for example, people who need to know the contact details for their sub-county ambulance, or need to know how they are expected to travel to the clinic during this lockdown period. This line will be staffed by trained people who understand how the Government is managing urgent health issues during this period and can communicate that effectively.

8. Immediately direct NGO partners implementing maternal health care programmes in the health sector to work during this period under a waiver that authorises their movement, so that they are able to support women visit clinics safely. Our request is not about convenience, it's about survival of the mothers amidst the war against COVID-19.

9. Supply three months of family planning commodities to clients; rapidly develop and implement new protocols for community based family planning outreach and service provision so that gains in sexual and reproductive health and rights are not lost due to concerns regarding infection control.

10. That government provides psychosocial support services for people affected by COVID-19, including patients, their families, and healthcare workers.

11. Finally, we call on the government to immediately take action against the brutality and unwarranted detention of Ugandans. Warnings, education and sensitisation are what is needed; not violation of human rights with impunity. Furthermore, we request for the immediate release of all who have been arrested so far, for curfew violation, as well as the 23 people who were arrested for residing in close quarters. These are extraordinary times and everyone is trying to comply with rapidly shifting expectations, but most Ugandans have no safety net at all and are struggling to cope. Nothing is gained from brutality, and further congesting of prisons and jails during this crisis.

Sincerely,

Coalition to Stop Maternal Mortality in Uganda

1. Action For Rural Women's Employment (ARUWE)
2. Action Group for Health, Human Rights HIV and AIDS (AGHA Uganda)
3. Akina Mama wa Afrika
4. Center for Health, Human Rights and Development.
5. Coalition for Health Promotion and social Development (HEPS UGANDA)
6. Community Health Advocates Association of Buikwe District
7. Community Health Advocates Association of Kiboga District
8. Community Health Advocates Association of Kyankwazi
9. Global Coalition of Women against AIDS in Uganda(GCOWAU)
10. Health Gap
11. Health Advocates Network -(HAN) -Uganda
12. Institute for Governance and Social Justice -Uganda
13. International Community of Women Living with HIV Eastern Africa (ICWEA)
14. Uganda Youth and Adolescents Health Forum - UYAHF
15. Uganda network of young people living with HIV/AIDS (UNYPA)
16. Uganda Network for sex worker led organizations
17. Women's Health Foundation-Uganda(WHF-UGANDA)
18. Naguru teenage information and health center
19. Nakawa home based care givers alliance
20. Sexual reproductive health and rights alliance
21. The Community Agenda
22. Women's Probono Initiative (WPI)
23. White Ribbon Alliance