

“WHERE ARE WE WHEN WE DON’T HAVE PROBLEMS?” A COVID 19 CALL TO BUILD STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS.

**By Dr. Catherine Promise Biira, KASEA UGANDA (Scholarship for PhD in Development Studies, until 2015, University of Bochum)
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COVID 19 containment measures have exposed the veracity of our international alliances, the efficacy of our domestic social security systems and our capabilities for self – reliance. Initially, around the globe, states responded to the pandemic with a knee jerk nationalistic ‘every state for itself’ approach but soon realized that transnational linkages could not just be cut off like a baby’s umbilical cord. In the East African Community, the virtual meeting of EAC Heads of State to discuss a regional response to the pandemic failed to happen when South Sudan requested for a postponement. After imposing a total lockdown of the country effective 1st April, Uganda started flattening the curve. However, on April 24th when all the 11 new cases of COVID 19 in Uganda turned out to be Kenyan and Tanzanian truck drivers, Uganda’s President turned to Telephone Diplomacy. In a televised address on April 28th, he informed the nation that he and the Kenyan and Rwandan Presidents had agreed on measures to handle the issue of truck drivers. On May 4th, he added that the Tanzanian President, had also come on board. If there is one lesson that we can draw from this pandemic, it is that although separate, we are always connected. As such, interstate cooperation in the face of transnational challenges is a necessity for which we must build capabilities through our day to day processes of regional integration.

To cushion Ugandans from economic hardship occasioned by the pandemic, MPs are exploring ways of by passing statutory constraints so members of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) can access 20% of their benefits. However, only 1.5 of the 15 million working Ugandans contribute to the scheme. For most Ugandans therefore, especially the 10 million who live below the poverty line, networks of family, relatives and friends to whom they can turn for help in desperate times are the only social safety net there is. However, social capital tends to suffer from an acute asymmetry between the ‘members’ contributions’ of love, care, emotional and moral support necessary to build strong relationships in normal times and the members’ claims of financial and material support expected in times of crisis. That’s why when the lockdown was announced, I received a distress call from a friend. A relative who had spent years without checking on her had called asking her for money to feed his family during the lockdown. **“Where are they when they have no problems?”** she cried. This question is as valid for international and domestic politics as it is for interpersonal relationships. Where we are in normal times matters a lot in times of crisis.

So whether it be concerns about the depth of our relationships with family and friends (solidarity); our embeddedness in our communities (participation); the distribution of wealth between the rich and the poor (inequality); the disparity between entitlement and responsibility (stewardship); the connection between present lifestyles and future aspiration (legacy); the divide between politics and crisis response (leadership); as individuals, societies, and as a global community, after this crisis subsides, we must mend our fractured relationships. Personally I am going to dedicate more time working on social security for my family and exploring more sustainable models of social security for vulnerable members of my Community. At societal and global level, for each of the spheres highlighted above, in order to be better prepared for the next crises, we must meaningfully address the question ‘where are we when we don’t have problems’?