



PRESS STATEMENT

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For Immediate Release

LASPNET'S STATEMENT ON ALLEGATIONS OF GRAFT IN THE CIVIL SOCIETY SECTOR

(Mengo, Kampala) The Legal Aid Service Provider's Network (LASPNET), an organization composed of 54 non-state legal aid service providers in Uganda is extremely concerned about the recent wave of allegations of corruption and accountability challenges facing the Civil Society Sector, which have featured in the media in the past few weeks. We join our Development Partners, other Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the general public to condemn in the **STRONGEST TERMS** such practices by some organizations, that have led to suspicion and distrust in the sector as a whole.

While we cannot ignore the challenges of CSOs in building corporate governance aimed at strengthening internal control systems and structures to bolster institutionalized accountability relationships, promote integrity, and good internal governance of the sector, the recent findings arising from a forensic audit by the Democratic Governance Facility are worrying because they taint the sector and should be tackled head on by all concerned. Civil society actors in the past have often been seen as "gap fillers," who complement service delivery shortfalls by government. However, they now increasingly work at national and transnational levels and such emerging roles in large-scale initiatives require new attention to the issues of governance and accountability. Additionally, in recent years, CSOs have increasingly taken on capacity building and policy advocacy roles that make them participants in multi-sectoral governance processes.

This implies that much as they hold government accountable, they should not be exempted from the same scrutiny in relation to their operations and should therefore refrain from any behavior that leads to misappropriation of funds meant to better the lives of those that they advocate for. We therefore agree that if found guilty of any fraudulent conduct, the particular organizations / individuals should be held accountable and brought to book.

We are aware through the media that 4 CSOs are alleged to have had their funding suspended. The public should know that there are over 13,000 CSOs, including Community Based Organizations serving the people of Uganda. Many of the CSOs are faced with internal challenges which include: limited governance structures which affect their ability to strictly observe corporate governance; working within a broader society which is generally affected with deep rooted and or corrupt morals, they hence tap their human resource from the same pool as government institutions, which are riddled with total breakdown of morals, poor governance and corrupt tendencies. This makes it a tall order to say the sector can be entirely free of bad apples which taint the otherwise good image. Needless to say, Development Partners were moved to act following whistle blowing efforts spearheaded by CSOs.

Therefore, this incident should not be used as an opening for government to increase its grip on CSOs or to crack down on the operations of NGOs as has been in the past. The Anti-NGO laws and stringent regulations, arbitrary inspections, harassment, office break-ins and criminalization of NGO operations all contribute to the continued shrinking civil and political space which contravenes national, regional and international obligations of Uganda as a Country. Particularly NGOs in the field of human rights and governance issues have not been spared, questioning their credibility and operations.

Thus to depend on media reports to encourage blanket suspicion on the entire civil society sector just because a few have been reprimanded by donors is to ignore their legitimacy which threatens the progress made in pushing for economic, social, and political reforms, in the promotion of human rights protection, promotion of transparency and accountability, combating social exclusion and inequalities, and above all creating avenues for poverty-reduction, sustainable development and international cooperation for the benefit of the poor, vulnerable and marginalized.

In our efforts to realize ‘**a free and just society**’, LASPNET commits to working with government, development partners and our CSO counterparts to ensure that transparency and accountability reigns throughout our work and the sector as a whole. Indeed, under various segments and clusters of the CSOs, efforts are already on going to cause internal accountability, for instance the Quality Assurance Mechanism (QUAM) led by DENIVA is in place. We commit as a network to continue building the internal systems and capacities of our member to embrace corporate accountability principles.

In the same vein, we also call on the various actors within and outside the sector to undertake the following measures:

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS: We demand that all CSOs address internal and external management systems aimed at ensuring proper management of donor resources in an accountable and transparent manner by putting in place the necessary stringent governance systems; financial accountability structures and early warning mechanisms to manage risk and detect fraud; invest in competent technical personnel and establish policies like whistle blowers polices that promote zero tolerance to corruption.

We further call upon the CSO sector to work in solidarity and ensure restoration of trust and legitimacy in the sector by all relevant stakeholders. This means desisting from any negative tendencies aimed at undermining each other’s mandates and efforts that may lead to ridicule of the sector as a whole.

GOVERNMENT: We call upon government to recognize the role CSOs play to complement its work in the service delivery sector which includes: health, education, governance, rule of law and human rights, among others. The government especially the institutions that work with the sector such as the NGO Bureau responsible for registering, regulating, monitoring and overseeing NGO operations is called upon to play the arbiter role between the affected CSOs and development partners to ensure proper management of incidents of disagreement and to continue supporting the strengthening of the sector to play its ‘watchdog’ role.

To the government institutions especially those responsible for law enforcement, we call upon them not to use this incident to continuously curtail CSO work but instead work jointly with them to address

any regulatory requirements that fall within the law as well as complement each other's efforts to ensure efficient and effective delivery of services to the citizens of Uganda.

DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS: We appreciate their continued financial support that has over the years immensely contributed towards uplifting the lives of many poor, vulnerable and marginalized Ugandans. We do appreciate their action intended to safeguard their tax payers' resources, however, we request them to give the affected institutions an opportunity to discuss and provide a conclusive way forward geared at committing to address the gaps identified.

In addition, Development Partners should consider addressing internal gaps of monitoring the funds disbursed to implementing partners so that the problem within or externally is addressed before it escalates.

We further call upon the Development Partners to provide resources towards developing strong and sustainable structures and systems aimed at strengthening internal controls for CSOs as an enabler for compliance to accountability guidelines and standards. The project led model of funding should be reviewed to support more sustainable and impactful interventions.

AFFECTED CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS: The organizations whose funding has been affected and or suspended should remain calm, and cooperate with the development partners to pick lessons and together devise a way forward to address especially the gaps and anomalies that have caused breach of trust. The organizations are requested to show commitment to addressing these gaps including: holding individual responsible staff, managers and or CEOs accountable. Where the CSO heads are directly responsible, we call upon them to resign to enable the governing board rebuild and restore the organization's trust and confidence. However, in all this, due process which entails principles of natural justice should be applied by all involved including mediators.

THE PUBLIC: We urge the public not to lose confidence in Uganda's Civil Society but get involved in this fight because it is a collective responsibility for us all. Let the public join the LASPNET "BREAK THE SILENCE ON CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN" aimed at whistle blowing on corruption related issues. NGOs have come a long way and continue to strive to make their lives better with the long-term goal of transforming our country as a whole. Let not the good work and achievements realized over the years be forgotten but instead work towards strengthening our service delivery standards.

LASPNET APPLAUDS ALL INSTITUTIONS THAT STRUGGLE TO REMAIN CLEAN AMIDST COMPETING DEMANDS AND EXPECTATIONS AND COMMITS TO WORKING WITH ALL RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS TO ENSURE A CORRUPT FREE CIVIL SOCIETY.

FOR GOD AND OUR COUNTRY

Sandra Oryema

Chairperson Board of Directors, on behalf of the Network

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