Sovereign Debt and Human Rights: A Focus on Sub-Saharan Africa

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It has been argued that public debt can foster economic growth and this, in turn, can help countries achieve their development goals and contribute to the realization of human rights. Nevertheless, unsustainable public debt burdens often have a negative impact on the realization of human rights. In many countries, public debt payments outweigh government spending on critical social services that support the realization of human rights. In 2019, 25 countries – of which 16 are African - spent more on debt repayment than on education, health and social protection combined.

Furthermore, policy conditionalities typically linked to loans and debt relief by the international financial institutions undermine the realization of human rights by, among other things, compelling reductions in public spending on basic social services.

While public debt levels in many Sub-Saharan African countries have been increasing over the last decade, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the region's debt crisis, raising renewed concerns about the ability of countries in the region to adequately spend on basic social services, such as health and education. According to UNICEF, in the context of a contracting global economy and fall in government revenues, 'the growing burden of debt interest threatens to crowd out social spending further.'

This paper discusses the impact of sovereign debt and related policy conditionalities on the realization of human rights, with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa. The paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, section 2 provides a brief overview of Sub-Saharan Africa's debt crisis, highlighting the threat of vulture fund litigation and the implications of opaque Chinese lending. Section 3 briefly discusses the impact of debt servicing on the realization of human rights, particularly economic, social, and cultural rights, and how conditions linked to loans and debt relief undermine human rights as well as country ownership of national development strategies. Section 5 concludes.

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