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Lessons from COVID-19; Intellectual Property will support MSME sustenance in Uganda

By Mercy K. Kainobwiso

The advent of COVID-19 destabilized countries and economies world over inclusive of Uganda. The pandemic has since had adverse effects on the country's social and economic systems. The disruptions from the pandemic have however had some creative turn-around responses from innovative entrepreneurial start-ups to tackle this challenge that has impacted on critical sectors of national business sustenance. Every business starts with an idea. Each of the thousands of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) that operate across Uganda started with an idea that took shape in someone's mind and made its way to the market.

Uganda will on 26th April, 2021 join the rest of the world to celebrate the World Intellectual Property Day to highlight the role that Intellectual Property (IP) rights play in encouraging innovation and creativity especially among the multitude of MSMEs that have had to face the relentless wrath of the pandemic on their survival. This year's theme, *IP & SMEs: Taking your ideas to the market* focuses on their vital contribution to Uganda's economic configuration.

IP Rights & MSME growth

MSMEs play a vital role in the development of the economy. They collectively constitute about 90% of private sector production and employ over 2.5 million people. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has had far reaching economic consequences on their survival, offering opportunities to some, while leaving others vulnerable and faced with closure. Those that have emerged stronger have linked their progress to innovation and creativity.

Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB) which is the national Intellectual Property office has registered a rise in the number of IP related registrations. By end of March 2021, over 1,244 local trademark applications had been submitted for registration since January 2020, while patent applications stood at 10. Innovation is credited for tackling crises for which solutions are sometimes challenging and come with attachments towards their usage and related IP rights if they are to be used across many countries. IP as a tool has helped provide opportunities for open innovation systems, and should therefore be given higher priority when leading into a more sustainable post-COVID-19 world.

As MSMEs invent products and services to handle the results of the COVID-19 impact on communities, considerations regarding the ownership, access to and usage of IP rights, such as patents, copyright, design and trademarks, but also of data and trade secrets are important for effective innovation processes and for governing collaborative, open and national innovation systems.

Ugandan MSMEs are engaged in innovative and creative activities that directly benefit academia, public and private sectors of the economy. These activities include, but are not

limited to, development of new technologies; research and development; performing arts; informal sector inventions; and other creative endeavors. As a result, significant IP assets have been generated, including patented inventions; copyrightable materials; valuable trade secrets; trademarks; and new plant varieties.

IP policy for innovation

To stimulate and nurture innovation and creativity for socio-economic development, Government of Uganda acknowledged IP as an essential prerequisite for sustainable development. In May 2019 Cabinet approved and passed the National Intellectual Property Policy (NIPP) with the intention of generating effective and beneficial linkages between national and international IP systems as well as set a policy direction in regional and international relations in respect of IP. The policy will also facilitate the integration of Intellectual Property into national priority sectors and programs towards the realization of national development goals under vision 2040.

Creative minds the world over - architects, artists, artisans, designers, engineers, entrepreneurs, researchers, scientists and many others continue to create. From the arts to artificial intelligence, fashion to farming, renewable energy to retail, television to tourism, and virtual reality to e-commerce solutions.

Already, many innovative Ugandan enterprises have taken advantage of the NIIP roll-out to turn the COVID-19 crisis into opportunities not only to keep themselves afloat, but to benefit from the immense openings. E-commerce start-ups like *online butchery* have seen their business-to-consumer meat orders skyrocket overnight from 10 orders a day, to 150 a day in a matter of weeks. There are many more striking examples of innovative responses of MSMEs that have responded by re-working their ideas to gain market leads even amidst the pandemic.

AS URSB we will continue to support collaborations with MSMEs as we play our part in facilitating their formalization to ably transact in the growing competitive market.

The writer is the Registrar General of the Uganda Registration Services Bureau