Improving Water Supply Sustainability in Northern Uganda (IWAS) - Project Brief
In Uganda, it is difficult to maintain rural water sources that are managed by local communities. Poor functionality is blamed on the limited capacity of community water source committees (WSCs) and weak institutional support mechanisms for operation and maintenance at the district level. Lack of spare parts results in expensive repairs that water users can’t afford. While there has been an increase in the number of rural water sources that are functional at the time of spot check, there is still limited information on the reliability of these water sources.

Operation and maintenance practices of the rural water sources remain poor and many gravity flow schemes and point water sources are not fully functional. Post-construction monitoring and technical support gaps exist at the district and sub-county with the district water offices focusing more on development and less on maintenance.

A reliable water source should provide water for a minimum of 350 days in a year with less than 14 days of breakdown. Very few water sources are able to meet this standard and a broken down water source can take up to three months or more before repair. On average, a water source functions well within the first three years, after which it starts breaking down. The majority of the current rural water sources are over 5 years old and not regularly maintained and hence at risk of regular breakdowns. While big strides have been achieved in the management of urban water supply sources, many of which are maintained by urban water boards in liaison with private operators, similar progress is yet to be registered for the rural water supply sources.
SNV Netherlands Development Organisation has been supporting rural water operation and maintenance in Uganda for the last 10 years. From supporting the formation of Hand Pump Mechanics Associations in the five districts (Arua, Bundibugyo, Kasese, Kyenjojo and Lira), an initiative that was later rolled out across the country; to designing an innovative mobile based information system to collect, process and provide real time information to stakeholders on water point functionality in rural communities, SNV has actively pursued lasting solutions to address the challenge of functionality. Although significant improvements have taken place with an increase in the national functionality rate, operation and maintenance of rural water sources is still a challenge. To improve functionality sustainably, there is need to review the operation and maintenance system holistically rather than focusing on the apparent challenges like unwillingness of water users to own and manage the water facilities.

Based on SNV’s experience, to improve functionality and sustainability of rural water sources the following measures need to be undertaken to address structural gaps:

- There is need to ensure that the rural water systems receive preventive maintenance from qualified professionals rather than the current erratic ‘wait till it breaks down’ approach. This can be achieved by building the capacity of the Hand Pump Mechanics Associations to operate as private entrepreneurs, so that they are more professional and business oriented and can proactively operate and maintain rural water sources. The Hand Pump Mechanics Associations will also need to be linked to the Umbrella of Water and Sanitation for easy access to genuine and affordable spare parts.

- Address security concerns of operation and maintenance funds by promoting the use of quasi financial institutions such as village saving and loan association schemes at the community level. This will address the wariness and perceived insecurities by water users about water user committees mismanaging their operation and maintenance funds and also provide clear transparency and accountability mechanisms for the water user committees.

- Ensuring strong post-construction support at the district, sub-county and private sector level to operationalise, strengthen and monitor the operation and maintenance system structures.

“We the district leaders should not wait for SNV in order for us to monitor functionality of water sources. Monitoring is our core function and we should include it in our workplans,”

Hon. Angelo Okello
Alebtong District Vice Chairperson
The IWAS model

The Improving Water Supply Sustainability in Northern Uganda is a three-year project that SNV has been implementing since 2015 with funding from the Coordination Office for Development Cooperation of the Austrian Embassy in Uganda.

The project objective was to enhance the functionality and sustainability of rural water supplies in 600 communities in the districts of Apac, Lira, Alebtong and Dokolo in Northern Uganda. Since the project did not include a hardware component, the project focused on the following activities:

- Capacity building of 300 existing and 300 new water source committees in the selected sub-counties to oversee the operation and maintenance of their water sources including repair of the non-functional water sources. Borrowing from its experiences under the Yahura Yehoza (YY) (Bolicap), or “save and borrow” approach, SNV trained water user groups (WUGs) on how to mobilise resources for operation and maintenance of water sources. Adopted from a pilot in Kamwenge District, SNV and its partners have scaled up the approach, supporting WUGs to provide credit to members. The goal was to strengthen the collection and utilisation of funds for repairs, empower WUGs to ensure proper operation and maintenance of water facilities and promote a culture of saving and investment among WUGs.

- Establishing and training water source committees to manage water sources that have been rehabilitated by the district local governments or where other organisations are drilling boreholes or rehabilitating existing water sources.

- Supporting four existing handpump mechanic associations (HPMAs) to develop and implement business plans in order to improve their capacity to carry out preventative maintenance and repairs. The project has linked three Hand Pump Mechanics Associations to the sub-county water supply and sanitation boards (SWSSBs) and the water and sanitation committees for regular routine maintenance works, as well as to the Umbrella of Water and Sanitation for easy access to genuine and fairly priced spare parts. The project also trained 91 Hand Pump Mechanics were trained on business management skills.

- Support DLGs to oversee and guide WSCs and HPMAs, as well as provide post-construction support. Mentoring and coaching support was provided to 32 technical staff at the district and sub-county level, 78 village health teams and to 125 political leaders in the four districts to be able to effectively carry out their roles towards improving functionality.

- Establishing and building capacity of the SWSSBs to oversee all the water sources in the sub-county. SWSSBs have been encouraged to employ a technician to solely support operation and maintenance on a day to day basis.
Project results

Improvement in operation and maintenance of water sources: Water and sanitation committees have been formed in 622 water sources and sensitised on their role in operation and maintenance. There is improved collection and remittance of O&M fees to sub-county water supply and sanitation boards (SWSSBs), with remittances currently standing at 55%. Preventive maintenance contracts were signed between the HPMAs and 12 sub-counties in Lira, Alebtong and Dokolo district. As a result, 435 water sources underwent preventive maintenance giving 130,000 people sustainable access to clean water.

WSCs were also encouraged to open bank accounts for their operation and management funds. To date, 58 WSCs in Apac have opened accounts with Centenary Bank.

“The business mentoring exercise was timely and an eye opener. We will continue to use the materials and the business plans as a practical marketing and promotional strategy to interest all potential customers to give us business,”

Moses Okello,
Chairperson Lira HPMA
Capacity assessment and training

One of the key deliverables of the project was to build strong and knowledgeable sub-county extension staff teams that actively support the WSCs to maintain water sources. 50 extension staff, made up of community development officers, health inspectors and parish chiefs from Lira, Dokolo and Apac districts, were trained. They learned how to identify capacity gaps, mobilise communities with a focus on rural water supply and sanitation and development of joint plans for field activities in each sub-county.

The project also supported the Ministry of Water and Environment to roll-out the HPMA framework to all the districts in Technical Support Unit 2. This has helped strengthen the linkages between HPMAs and water and sanitation committees to ensure the sustainable management of water sources. 12 sub-county water boards in Lira, Alebtong and Dokolo were also formed and trained to provide management oversight to all the rural water sources within the sub-county.

“...We had a challenge of operation and maintenance of water facilities. Because of SNV, we have been able to bridge the gap and there is now improved O&M of water sources. As a district, we shall budget and recognise active HandPump Mechanics and Water Source Committees that have well-maintained water sources during the coming financial year,”

Hon. Anthony Ojuka, Vice Chairperson Lira District

Stories of change

Agweng P7 Water Source Committee mainstreams sanitation and hygiene in their work

Agweng P.7 has a pupil enrolment of 2019 pupils. The school has a functional borehole which serves both the school population and the neighbouring communities. The water source is one of 50 that are being supported by the Improving Water supply Sustainability (IWAS) project. The water source had a management committee, however the committee was not fully constituted and members did not fully understand their roles and responsibilities since they had not been trained. In addition, the water source was not registered with the Sub-county Water Supply and Sanitation Board (SWSSB) and there was no clear mechanism for collecting operation and maintenance (O&M) funds.

When IWAS project model was introduced to the community, the local leaders and school management embraced it. Through the support of SNV in collaboration with Local capacity Builders (LCBs), District and Subcounty leadership, the Water Source Committee (WSC) was revamped, trained and linked to the SWSSB. The training covered broad areas including...
roles and responsibilities of WSC in collecting and managing O&M funds, registration and remittance of O&M funds to the SWSSB, preventive maintenance, sanitation and hygiene, among others. During one of the Annual General Meetings (AGM), the school management Committee (SMC) and the parents agreed to a 1,000 UGX levy on each pupil per term towards maintenance of the water source. Part of this money is allocated to the WSC for preventive maintenance based on the budget presented by the WSC.

To date, the borehole has a functional WSC of 9 members (i.e. 6 women and 3 men), registered with the SWSSB and the WSC is remitting 80% O&M funds to SWSSB. Breakdown of the borehole has reduced as result of preventive maintenance by the Hand Pump mechanics (HPM). From the 20% that remains after remitting 80% to SWSSB, the WSC has purchased seven (7) basins which is used by pupils at break time to maintain personal hygiene before resuming class. Each basin is allocated to one class. This strategy has improved hygiene around the water source as the school children no longer wash their legs at the borehole.

New Chair transforms Twon-yao water source in ogur sub county, lira district.

“Water is life and we have to treat the source that gives us that life well,” are Sam Okello’s first words. Sam is the new Chairperson of Yao –Twon water source. He was elected during the water users meeting organized by the Parish WASH Coordinator of Akangi parish. Sam had always demonstrated his passion for maintaining the water source since he had been in that community and had experienced first-hand the effects of having no water for four months when their water source broke down. Sam took it upon himself to sensitise his fellow community members about the importance of collecting the monthly 1,000 shillings towards operation and maintenance of their water source. Because of his efforts, the water users elect him as their chairperson. Through the support of Parish WASH Committee Chairperson, the WSCs were trained and oriented on their roles and responsibilities.

To date the WSC is functional and the committee always gives accountability to the users on their O&M funds. In the last four months since Sam became the Chairperson, the water source has registered with the SWSSB and has never missed remitting 80% O&M to the board and have successfully raised 50,000 UGX every month.
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