



Children accessing clean water in Lugazi. Government data indicates that 32% of Ugandans cannot access clean water

Access to clean water now at 68%

By Moses Walubiri

As Uganda joins the rest of the world to mark the World Water Day, today's event offers an opportunity to reflect on a host of issues pertaining to a resource whose importance in some parts of the world cannot be over emphasised.

The World Water Day is an annual United Nations (UN) observance day that highlights the importance of fresh water. The day is used to advocate for the sustainable management of freshwater resources.

World Water Day is celebrated around the world with a variety of events.

These can be educational, theatrical, musical or lobbying in nature. The first World Water Day, designated by the UN was commemorated in 1993.

This year's theme, *Leaving no one behind*, adapts the central premise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – which is to the effect that in sustainable development progresses, everyone must benefit.

And with Uganda experiencing the incipient signs of global warming as evidenced by unpredictable weather patterns and prolonged droughts, this year's theme makes sense if the country is to forestall the specter of an increase in water-stressed areas.

Despite government's increased funding tailored to improve access to safe drinking water, the picture is still

Challenges in the water sector

As the country marks the World Water Day, the water sector is facing many challenges – more especially the environmental degradation being occasioned by population pressure.

Data at NWSA indicates that poor quality of raw water is having a financial bearing on the cost of treating water for human and industrial consumption. The worsening quality of raw water, according to Apedel is largely due to the decimation of wetlands and papyrus, which act as natural filters of water that drains into lakes.

Decimation of wetlands means that water drains into lakes in a storm form, which is normally dirty. NWSA is currently spending sh900m a month to treat water – an

increment of sh400m from three years ago. Besides, the entity is having to place its pipes deeper into lakes because water at the shores is either silted or dirty.

The deputy chairperson of Parliament's natural resources committee, Lawrence Bilyika (Ora County), says Ugandans should use the country's water resources carefully and protect the current catchment areas to avoid the curse of water stress. He says there is need for the Government to increase access to safe water for people.

"Our women and children should not spend half their time a day fetching water from dirty streams yet tap water can be brought nearer to them through improved connectivity," Bilyika opines.

not very rosy, but better if compared to other countries on the lower rungs of the development index of the United Nations Development Programme.

Water-stressed areas

Eng. Aaron Kabirizi, the director of water development at water ministry, says the cattle corridor is the most water-stressed area in the country. This area runs through Karamoja, parts of Teso, Nakasongola, northern Luwero, Ngoma and Isingiro districts.

Some pockets of water-stressed areas, according to Kabirizi, exist in Rukungiri, Bundibugyo and Mayuge districts.

"We have plans to channel water from places where it flows in abundance to these water-stressed areas," Kabirizi says. In Isingiro, this plan will entail getting water from River Kagera, while in Karamoja, dams will be built to store water during the rainy season.

Safe water coverage in Uganda, according to government data, is

around 68% in rural areas and 69% in urban areas as of June, 2018. This means that 32% of people in rural areas cannot access safe water. Given the fact that over 80% of Uganda's estimated 40 million people live in rural areas, failure to access safe clean water affects over 30 million Ugandans. Kabirizi reveals that the Government hopes to have all Ugandans accessing clean water by 2030.

Meanwhile, the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSA) spokesperson, Sam Apedel, says access to clean and safe drinking water in municipalities and cities is at 84%.

"Our aim is to reach 100% target by 2021 through the service coverage acceleration project which is currently ongoing," Apedel says. The ambitious project, according to Apedel, will cost taxpayers sh213b.

This is only a fraction of the total national coverage because NWSA only operates in some towns, municipalities and cities.

New Plan

NWSA's plan, according to Apedel, is to take clean water to 12,000 villages on the periphery of urban centres and municipalities. The idea is to make sure that villages of 20 to 30 people have access to tap water.

Uganda, just like many other countries around the globe, has a number of water-stressed areas. This means that water available for industrial, domestic and agricultural use is insufficient in such areas.

Such areas, according to NWSA data, include Mbarara, Isingiro

and Arua districts. Because of environmental degradation as evidenced by destruction of water catchment areas, rivers and brooks that used to flow all year around are fast turning into seasonal ones.

One such river, Apedel says, is River Rwizi near Mbarara. Formerly a burbling river that would occasionally bust its banks during rainy seasons, River Rwizi is a shelf of its former past. Its water levels drop so low during prolonged droughts that have of late become a staple of Uganda's weather pattern.

Apedel says plans are in the offing to have NWSA pump water from River Kagera to supply Mbarara and parts of Isingiro with clean water. Similarly, Apedel avers that River Manafwa in the Mt. Elgon area is of interest given the degradation it is suffering at the hands of human activities like sand mining and cultivation close to its shores. These activities are aggravating silting of a water body that was hitherto pristine.

The increase in Uganda's population and the attendant need to create room for peasantry agriculture has exerted pressure on Uganda's pristine forests. This, according to Apedel has seen destruction of water catchment areas.

Another area that is water stressed is Kampala. Currently, NWSA is producing 240 million litres of water a day, yet the demand is between 280 and 300 million litres at the peak of the dry season.

Through the Katosi project in Buikwe district, NWSA hopes to add another 240 million litres of water a day on its current capacity.