



International Water and Sanitation Centre
Supporting Water Sanitation
and Hygiene services for life

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World Water Day 2016 : Water and Jobs Celebrating hand pump mechanics and water source caretakers

Today, Uganda joins the rest of the world to celebrate world water day focusing on water and jobs. Keeping water services running requires jobs both paid and unpaid, for men and for women. These jobs transform millions of lives across the country. IRC - International Water and Sanitation Centre celebrates two categories of people who work daily to ensure that people in their communities have water every day for domestic use - the Hand Pump Mechanics and the source caretakers. The experiences of Susan Alobo, the only female HPM in Lira district and Simon Owaraga a source caretaker in Onamudian village, provide a glimpse into the typical activities that define the job of operating and maintaining rural water sources on a daily basis.

Susan Alobo, the girl who repairs boreholes



**Susan Alobo, a Hand Pump Mechanic
in Lira district**

In 2011, the Ministry of Water and Environment in Uganda adopted Hand Pump Mechanics Associations (HPMA) to ensure that hand pump mechanics (HPMs) support communities with operation and maintenance (O&M) of water facilities. HPMA's improve functionality; sustain the HPMA's jobs and enables them to venture into WASH-related business beyond source repairs. HPMA's are key to the O&M of water supply facilities. They work with stakeholders at local government and community level, to ensure that when sources break down, they are repaired in a timely manner.

For HPMA's, O&M is a livelihood. The formation of HPMA's was primarily to increase functionality of water sources, but also an opportunity to improve the HPMA's trade and ensure that they are motivated to keep providing O&M services. Susan Alobo is the only female member of the Lira District Hand Pump Mechanics Association (HPMA) which brings together 32 Hand Pump Mechanics. She is the hand pump mechanic (HPM) attached to Adekwok Sub county, and the treasurer of the association.

Susan joined the District Water Office as an engineering intern in 2009, and there she got an opportunity to work with the HPMA's. She often joined them to learn how repairs were done and she found the work immensely interesting. Later when she completed her studies, and got a job with an NGO, she found it irresistible to join the HPMA as a member. Susan currently serves as the association treasurer - a position she got because of the trust that many people have in women. In her work with NGOs she also does source repairs and says she has repaired a good number of boreholes.

Susan's motivation to join the HPMA was the need to bring a gender angle to the mechanic's job and address women's key concerns. In her view, women are the ones most concerned with water issues at household level. They fetch water and they do the chores which require water. Women

are particularly affected when sources break down owing to poor Operation & Maintenance (O&M). In most cases women are the ones who pay the O&M fees. Men don't pay user fees because they feel that women are the household water users. "Women suffer when there is a shortage of water. They walk the distances and carry the load. So we need to maintain functionality of sources at community level to save women."

Susan says that most water facility designs do not favour women. For example, it is strenuous for most women to pump a borehole. Some boreholes have too many pipes and one needs a lot of energy to pump any amount of water. It is also a hard job for women to walk long distances carrying water to their homes.

She therefore suggests that it is time to change to sources that favour women's needs arguing, "We should move away from boreholes to piped water supply. It may be expensive but it will save the women a lot of time. One production well drilled and piped would serve an entire parish. This will reduce the queues." Currently there are long queues at boreholes because of the time it takes to fill a single container. Hence women have to sit for hours waiting for their turn. Piped water on the other hand would reduce the waiting time significantly. It would also enable women to save time and engage in other economic productive activities.

Apart from repairing boreholes, Susan says that the HPMA's also carry out sanitation promotion. They take time off to educate water users about the need to maintain sanitation at the source and at home. Again, Susan sees this as an opportunity for her to give special input as a woman. "You find that a lady comes to fetch water with a dirty jerry can. I find it easy to talk to fellow women about sanitation."

On whether she thinks more ladies will join the trade of water source maintenance and repair Susan says, "I try to encourage other ladies to join me but they are still hesitant."

Her male colleagues in the HPMA also are surprised that a girl can do their work. They encourage and help her all the time although some still feel that for a woman this is hard work. "They always help me thinking that I won't manage the strenuous jobs. They do the heavy work and leave the lighter jobs for me. But slowly they are realizing that even a girl can handle all those tasks," she says with a smile.

For Susan, joining the Hand Pump Mechanics Association has given her the opportunity to deal directly with O&M issues and to identify what needs to be done in order to improve women's experiences with water services.

A day in the life of a water source caretaker



Simon Owaraga, caretaker Kakusi borehole

In rural Uganda, different actors make sure that water sources are always functioning and that people enjoy a reliable water supply as close to home as possible. Water source caretakers play a crucial role in the management of water points. What are the typical tasks and activities of a source caretaker?

Owaraga Simon Peter is the caretaker of Kakusi borehole, Onamudian Village, Pallisa district in Eastern Uganda. Simon has been caretaker of this borehole since it was constructed in March 2013. He was nominated by fellow residents to be part of the Water User Committee (WUC), mostly because his house was close to the source. After the bad experience of going without safe water for years, everyone in the village was willing to contribute in one way or another to the maintenance of the borehole. Simon had no hesitation in taking up the caretaker responsibility.

Simon rises early and goes straight to the borehole which is a few meters away from his home. Sometimes he finds fellow residents already waiting. Under his supervision, they quickly sweep around the source, clean the splash apron and the drainage. Then he opens the source which is locked with a padlock every evening at 7.00 pm. There is a chlorine dispenser at the source. He makes sure it is also filled.

After the morning supervision he fetches water for his household and goes to the garden at about 10.00 am. In his absence, other community members continue fetching water while at the same time ensuring good use of the borehole. Since his home is near the borehole, Simon can see from a distance anything that goes on at the source. Whenever he observes a problem he quickly runs to the borehole to resolve the matter. Sometimes people are fighting. Sometimes children are mishandling the borehole. Other times people are bickering over positions in the queue. Women and young girls constitute the biggest number of people who fetch water from the borehole. Simon may send a child back home if they are the cause of trouble; or talk to the bickering parties to control themselves. Once in a while he settles a fight.

Since he started playing the caretaker role, community members have been cooperative and indeed they pay their user fees to the WUC treasurer. As a result, this borehole has remained functional without any major breakdowns, for over two years. He says the district technical staff have also been supportive, regularly coming to follow up on the functionality of the borehole and offer advice.

So far, Simon has faced two key challenges - the bad language that some community members use when they are called upon to do some cleaning work at the borehole; and the difficulty in mobilizing them to do some cleaning work around the source.

Although his job is voluntary, Simon says he enjoys it because he appreciates the fact that water is life. He also says that his job has earned him respect among the community members and allowed him to exercise his leadership skills. "I would be willing to serve over and over again," he says, with a broad smile.