



An extra drop of water changes refugee lives

The forced migration of a large number of South Sudanese has seen over one million refugees seek safety in West Nile, Uganda. The fighting in South Sudan that broke out in December 2013 between government forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and the former vice-president, Dr Riek Machar, left many needy and vulnerable. For the next one month, *New Vision* will be publishing articles to highlight the plight of refugees under the campaign *Be Your Brother's Keeper*, to encourage Ugandans to support refugees in all ways possible. Bidibidi Refugee Settlement in Yumbe district, which has become the second largest settlement in the world and houses over 270,000 refugees, faces a big water challenge, writes Lawrence Mulondo

"People who have access to clean water take it for granted. Such people should experience our pain," said 39-year-old Selina Akuli, a South Sudanese refugee in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement.

"The situation is worse when, as women, we experience our monthly menstrual periods. Keeping minimum hygiene is a dream," she said.

Akuli is among the refugees who fled into Uganda following an outbreak of fresh fighting in December 2013.

She sought refuge in Uganda with her nine children after the death of her husband during the war.

For the time she has spent in the settlement, Akuli said they were being forced to prepare one meal a day as a result of water shortage. "We used to trek about 3km from Zone two, Block Four where we live to Block Eight in search of water," she said.

According to the UNHCR-WASH report, 1,742 emergency water sources have been established in Bidibidi by different humanitarian agencies, bringing water coverage in the area to 46%. These are Fields (ACF), Oxfam International, Uganda Red Cross Society, Water Missions, Samaritan's Purse, Here is life, Plan International among others.

However, the report indicates that the coverage is still low as the agencies bringing water are facing challenges such as limited resources.

Akuli said the long distance they cover in search of water had affected children's performance in school.

"They have to fetch water before going to school. This has affected their performance because they hardly cover much at school," she said.

Akuli also said at first they would fight with host communities for water from the already stressed water sources.

"Water has no substitute. We had to fight for it in order to survive and the host communities became hostile because of this. We could not give up



Rudacogoza (left), Yasin, Matthews, Seventh-day Adventist Church in Canada Pastor Mark Johnson, Aguilar, Manasi and other officials during the launch of solar-powered water wells in Bidibidi recently. Both host communities and refugees have benefitted. Photo by Lawrence Mulondo

the fight because we had no choice," she said.

Joan James Lina is a 16-year-old Senior Three student at Valley View Secondary School in Bidibidi. Lina said she would wake up at 5:00am to fetch water before going to school.

"I would fetch water 4km away. Although my school was near home, I still got to school late," she said.

Lina said the school had a big number of students. Whenever she went late, she would have to stand outside looking in through a window since there would be no free seat for her in the classroom.

She, however, said the situation changed after a water point was constructed near her home.

The headteacher of Valley View Secondary School, Stella Ezaru, said the students' performance was being affected by many challenges.

She said many students would give fetching water from long distances as an excuse for late-coming.

"We have hundreds of students at the school with few classrooms. So, whoever comes first, gets a seat in class. Many students are forced to go back home without studying because they have nowhere to sit," she said.

Ezaru hopes that with improved access to clean water, students' performance will get better.

Address challenge

The situations in the settlement eased

"We are still looking for partners to motorise the remaining wells and also donate other items,"

ADRA director of programmes

when some organisations started to address issues of violence and installed some water points.

Akuli said clashes with host communities in Bidibidi stopped after Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) provided five solar-powered water wells.

The wells were constructed by ADRA Uganda under the Refugee Emergency Aid for Life Uganda, Wash and Protection project.

The project was funded by ADRA Canada at C\$1.3m (about sh3.7b). Launching the solar-powered wells in Zone Two, Block Four in Bidibidi, ADRA Uganda director of programmes and human resources, Solomon Kateregga, said three solar-

powered wells were constructed in Imvepi Refugee Settlement, Arua district and two wells in Bidibidi to benefit both the host communities and refugees.

"There are two motorised solar-powered wells. One was installed in Imvepi settlement and the other in Bidibidi. Eight hand-pump wells were also installed, with four in Imvepi and the other four in Bidibidi," Kateregga said.

Water harvesting systems were also installed; 12 in six schools in Bidibidi and six in schools in Imvepi, two in health centres and one at a Police post. Under the same project, 200 latrines were constructed in the two camps with 100 in Bidibidi and the other 100 in Imvepi.

Call for help

Kateregga said if it were an option, no one would wish for war because of what comes with it. He, however, urged Ugandans and other partners to give a helping hand so that the refugees have enough water and other essential items.

"We are still looking for partners to motorise the remaining wells donate other items to help our brothers and sisters. The situation is not of their own making. They really need a helping hand to cope," he said.

Benon Kwizera, an assistant settlement commandant from the Office of the Prime Minister in Bidibidi, said mothers have to walk long distances in search of water. He called for more donors to help improve water accessibility in the settlements.

"As government, we continue to provide a friendly working environment for all partners to see that every refugee lives a good life wherever they settle," Kwizera said.

The ADRA-Canada's executive director, Stephen Matthews, emphasised that accessing water is a

right for every human. He was glad that the wells ADRA-Canada has dug up would benefit even the host communities.

Matthews said in the past, whenever refugees arrived at the settlement, they could not access clean water. He said ADRA-Canada would continue providing sustainable clean water to the people in the camps.

While addressing the gathering, the ADRA Uganda country manager, Charles Aguilar, thanked the Government for helping the refugees and allowing the agencies to come in.

The Archbishop of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Uganda, Dr Daniel Matte, lauded the host communities where the refugee settlements were established.

Host communities speak out

The Bidibidi area LC3 chairperson, Rashid Kawewa Gadso, said water had always affected service delivery in the settlements, citing health and education services as the most affected.

The Yumbe resident district commissioner, Wadia Manasi, said since the wells in the settlements provide water for home consumption, dams should be constructed for agricultural purposes.

Manasi asked the refugees and host communities to protect the wells so that there is adequate water supply for a long time.

"The wells can last for over 20 years if well maintained," Manasi said.

The Yumbe district LC5 chairperson, Taban Yasin, said before the new wells were dug, the water sources were overwhelmed by the number of people using them.

Yasin said the district had plans of requesting host communities for land to plant forests to improve the environment.

The technical director of Draco Uganda, the company that installed the solar-powered wells Angelo Corda, said each system was able to pump 14,000 litres of water an hour. He said each water source can pump 120,000 litres into its reservoirs daily.

Corda said although the wells are powered by solar energy, they could as well use electricity from the national grid when the need arises. He said the system can be monitored from anywhere in the world using a mobile phone application.

Many village water volunteers were trained in the maintenance of the solar panels, especially during dry seasons to get rid of dust that may affect their performance.

Corda said each well uses eight solar panels of 100 watts each and can supply water to a radius of 2km.

The UNHCR field officer, Monique Rudacogoza, said it had been a challenge to provide water to both the refugee and host communities.

She said trees should be planted to restore the greenery that had been destroyed by human activities such as the settlements.

UNHCR was one of the many humanitarian agencies that advocated and ensured that there was accessibility to clean and safe water in the settlements.

WHAT REFUGEES THINK ABOUT WATER SUPPLY IN THE SETTLEMENT

Charles Yanga, 32, South Sudan refugee: I arrived in Uganda in April 2017 from Lanya county in South Sudan with five children. My sister also has six children, so water was a big challenge given the size of our family.

Loyce Tabu, South Sudan refugee: The situation has improved in the settlement. We no longer move long distances in search of water. We now have water sources close to our localities.