Empowering refugees to rebuild with durable, self-reliant water and sanitation

For the 1.5 million refugees rebuilding their lives in Uganda, safe water, sanitation facilities and good hygiene practices are too rarely available. The Water Trust, with over 13 years experience delivering water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) solutions in Uganda, has the programs and experience to help this population achieve WASH access and independence. The Water Trust’s “self-help groups for sustainable water” model has enabled community-led and financed water point maintenance for more than 900 communities and 250,000 people in rural Uganda.

The program builds community-level financial institutions that empower communities to maintain their own water sources, as well as invest in livelihoods, home improvements, school fees, and medicines. This program has been successfully implemented across 50 communities in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, helping refugees to gain independence and self-reliance. The Water Trust is seeking funding to bring WASH capital improvements and self-help groups for sustainable water to more than 1,000 refugee communities in the next three years, building the self-reliance of 300,000 refugees to provide their children clean water and invest in a brighter future.

SUMMARY
THE PROBLEM

Transitioning from emergency to sustainable WASH

Uganda’s role as a refugee asylum in East Africa has saved many people from devastation and death in their homelands. Since 2016, Uganda’s refugee population has grown considerably and is currently estimated at approximately 1.5 million by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Nearly 90% of these people are from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In the initial years of this surge, efforts were focused on emergency refugee services. These services were provided in a coordinated approach by UNHCR, the Ugandan government, and NGO partners. Partners are now working to shift the paradigm to self-reliance through sustainable development for these refugee populations. Key stakeholders acknowledge the need to improve WASH services to refugees, particularly the sustainability of service.

The Government’s Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), coordinated by Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and UNHCR, includes water delivery and infrastructure among its top priorities for refugees. Piped water and sewage systems are called for in Uganda’s 2020 Refugee Response Plan, facilitated by user fees paid through a utility based model.

Uganda’s Settlement Transformative Agenda (STA) provides important context to this plan, outlining a “non-encampment policy providing land for settlement near host communities.” While UNHCR characterizes Uganda’s refugees as residing largely in 13 “settlements” across the country, in fact, due to this “non-encampment policy,” many refugees are settled in remote rural areas stretching for miles around the camp reception areas.

While government-run piped water systems are a laudable vision for concentrated refugee populations, this approach is not a reasonable fit for the large populations of remotely settled refugees. While this population still needs durable, sustainable solutions, borehole water points are likely the best technology solution for the near future. Similarly, community-funded and organized operation and maintenance of water points is a more viable near term scheme for these populations than a fee-based Government utility model. Once the Government led utility model is perfected in densely populated refugee settlements, applying it to dispersed populations is worth considering. Until then, Uganda’s remotely settled refugee population is in urgent need of a different WASH approach.

Yet the traditional approach of relying on volunteer management committees to collect user fees and contract repairs has failed. One study of comparable boreholes in rural Uganda found just 55% of wells were functional and just 30% had functional community management. Collective saving for future maintenance and repairs is a challenge in a context where two-thirds of households lack cash savings. The lack of a trusted institution to manage water user contributions also reduces willingness to pay.

To address this financial and institutional need, The Water Trust adapted the well-established Village Savings and Loan model to incorporate water point fee collection, reserve fund management, and water and sanitation promotion. This solution is not only a viable model for Ugandan communities, but also meets the needs of a humanitarian sector looking for community-led solutions that build a local capacity for self-reliance.

CASE STUDY

Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement

UNHCR reports that as of August 2021 the Kiryandongo refugee settlement hosts 72,418 people, of which 59% are children. Virtually all arrived over the last seven years from South Sudan. As UNHCR does not expect conditions to enable meaningful repatriation of South Sudanese refugees in the near future, the need among this population has shifted from emergency services to durable, self-reliant solutions. Of this population, approximately 30,000 depend on borehole wells for water access.

Refugees relocating to the settlement have increased the rural population in this area by nearly 20%. Today refugees, internally displaced people, and the host population frequently lack access to improved WASH and are straining the limited resources that exist, leading to conflict. Where water points do exist, neither local water authorities nor affiliated umbrella organizations have stepped into the role of building and maintaining refugee water points.

Investment in expanding water infrastructure and sustainable community-based management systems plus (CBMS+) is critical to helping this refugee population live healthy lives in dignified conditions and become self-reliant.
Since 2017, The Water Trust has trained more than 900 self-help groups in the Kiryandongo and Masindi districts. These groups operate as community-based savings banks that both finance water point repair and provide much needed access to personal savings and consumer credit in underbanked rural communities. A study of 192 self-help groups demonstrated their value with 95% water point functionality (55% is typical across Uganda) with an average $52 spent per annum and $173 in reserve for repairs after 3 years. These investments provide durable WASH solutions without the ongoing financial and management support of NGOs or the government. Furthermore, the lending function of these savings groups helped countless families with loans for crops, school fees, unexpected medical fees and home improvements including latrine construction.

With the support of Deerfield Foundation and the endorsement of the Office of the Prime Minister, The Water Trust trained 50 communities in Kiryandongo refugee settlement to operate self-help groups. The group training process also included messaging on COVID-19 risk-reducing behaviors (e.g., mask wearing, distancing, handwashing) and training on how to build and appropriately use hygiene and sanitation facilities (e.g., latrines and handwashing facilities).

The self-help groups not only finance well maintenance and repairs, but also provide access to personal savings and credit to these largely unbanked households, a significant asset in a context where four out of five refugees have no access to credit.

Monica Mugisha, commandant of Kiryandongo refugee settlement noted the value of the program, “The Water Trust model is very good because it will empower the refugees to be more resilient. … The Office of Prime Minister is looking forward to eradicating dependency syndrome as most of the refugees are not paying for the water user fees.”

Self-help groups for sustainable water can address a critical challenge for hundreds of thousands of refugees dependent on poorly-maintained, at-risk borehole wells for access to water. In the process, they can build a robust community-level institution that provides a platform for self-reliance, inter-tribe cooperation and solidarity, and development.

Building on the success of the program in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, The Water Trust aims to help more than 1,000 refugee communities to form self-help groups for sustainable water in the next three years, while also expanding access to water to address critical gaps in infrastructure.

THE SOLUTION
Self-help groups for sustainable water
Rebuilding together through self-help groups

Akwero Florence is a Chairperson of *Mali-ya-Mungu* self-help group in Cluster G, Ranch 37, in Kiryandongo refugee settlement. She is a widow taking care of her six children and another five children of her late sisters who died along with her late husband and other family members during conflict in South Sudan. She came to Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement in 2014 for the safety of her children.

“Life was very difficult raising 11 children by myself as a widow with little income from selling part of the food ration from the World Food Programme and backyard gardening in the settlement,” says Florence.

In April, Florence and her neighbors received training from The Water Trust on how to run a self-help group. After the training, Florence was elected to be the chairperson. Of the 37 members, 34 are women like Florence.

Today Florence’s water access is maintained by user fees Florence and her neighbors pay in their weekly group meetings. The amount is small compared to their individual savings, yet it ensures that when their borehole well needs new parts or servicing, there’s money on hand to keep water flowing.

Meanwhile, after saving for a few months to build up the group’s capital, Florence took out a loan from the group to open a small business.

“I can now afford to buy basic necessities for my children from the profits I make from my business,” said Florence.

“The savings group is helping the group members to meet their financial needs, so far 36 members have received loans from the savings scheme.”

For Florence and her neighbors, a self-help group is a chance to build up their assets and invest in a brighter future. It’s also an opportunity to bring together a community, fractured by war and conflict in South Sudan.

David Biphal Gatduel is the Chairperson of the Refugee’s Welfare Council for Cluster N, Ranch 37, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement.

“I used to receive a lot of cases of fights ranging from conflicts at water points to fights between tribes especially the Dinka and Nuer, which has been there since the war broke out in South Sudan,” said David.

“I appreciate that after the introduction of savings groups and the water committees, the cases of fights and conflicts have dropped due to the interaction and unity that the group has brought in the community.”

---

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

Grace Alupo  
Country Director  
galupo@watertrust.org

Inga Rubadiri-Nyangabyaki  
Chief Operating Officer  
ingangabyaki@watertrust.org

Chris Pratts  
Executive Director  
cpratts@watertrust.org