



Bridging the *Water Gap*

MARIA MUTAGAMBA describes how her country is meeting the Millennium Development Goals in bringing water and sanitation to its towns and cities

Uganda may be predominantly rural, but it has a fast rate of urbanization. Among the consequences of this urban influx is growing demand for water and sanitation services. The gap is continuously widening between this demand and supplies in urban areas – where water, sanitation and hygiene are vital components of sustainable development and the alleviation of poverty.

Poverty eradication

The water sector is one of the Government's priority areas – essential, as it is, for poverty eradication and the welfare of society. The Government pledged to increase access to safe and clean water and sanitation facilities by mobilizing resources for: constructing and rehabilitating facilities for domestic water supply through piped water schemes, boreholes, protected springs, and rainwater tanks; constructing dams and valley tanks; and promoting hygienic practices. Driving forces in the water sector include the need:

- to promote co-ordinated, integrated

and sustainable water resources management to ensure conservation of water resources and provision of water for all social and economic activities;

- to promote the development of sustainable safe water supply and sanitation facilities within easy reach of 80 per cent of the urban population – rising to 100 per cent by 2010 – based on management responsibility and ownership by the users; and

- to promote the development of water supply for agricultural production to modernize agriculture and to mitigate the effects of climatic variations on rain-fed land.

The trend in urban safe water coverage shows a progressive increase over the years. Improved access to water sources within reasonable range of people's homes has increased from below 10 per cent in 1986 to 65 per cent today. Household sanitation service coverage is now estimated at 53 per cent. These initiatives are in line with achieving the targets of the Millennium Development Goals.

The Ugandan Government has been reforming the water and sanitation sector

over the past years. This is intimately linked to the Government's poverty alleviation plans, and is financed largely by debt relief funds. The Government has led others and built a high level of trust and consensus with its sector development partners and with civil society organizations, through initiating progressive and innovative reforms.

This reform process aims at providing efficient and effective service delivery to urban areas. It has involved comprehensively assessing the water and sanitation sector – including studying the rural and urban sub-sectors – and preparing action and investment plans. Key strategies in implementing the urban initiatives that Government has identified include: decentralized delivery of services; increased public-private partnerships; and a sector-wide approach to planning. The Government of Uganda recognizes that a deficiency in resources for implementing the delivery of basic services is a critical constraint to development.

Great investments

Great investments have been made, most notably within the last decade. They have improved coverage or service levels as extensively as expected in achieving the present level of 65 per cent of the urban population with access to safe water supply or sanitation services.

Reform in the urban water supply and sanitation sub-sector began in the 1990s and introduced commercialized operations based on increased private sector participation. It is believed that▶

public-private partnerships are key to efficiency, with the public sector retaining ownership of the assets and private operators delivering the service. The reforms were developed through an unprecedented participatory process, with strong links to the public service reform process and to the Government's primary objective of poverty alleviation.

This process has been high quality, sustained and influential, bringing civil society organizations, external support agencies and Government together, and leading to real partnerships and mutual understanding among sector stakeholders. It has also fostered the development of networks of policy advocates, such as the Uganda Water and Sanitation Network, and legitimized civil society's role in monitoring the use of water sector funds. The reform process has also raised the profile of the water and sanitation sector, and increased confidence among its backers – resulting in a tripling of funding over the last four years.

Efforts have also been made to strengthen the operational and financial standing of the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC) – which serves 19 towns across the country – so as to reduce its commercial risks. Performance contracts between the NWSC and Government have improved operational standards and led to reduced staffing, increased connection rates – and

a profit of over US\$2 million in 2001. The reforms also contained some pro-poor elements, such as reducing the fee for connection to urban water supplies, and allocating new water supply connections to poor households. All these actions have contributed to ensuring improved provision of services, especially to the urban poor.

International commitment

The challenges for the urban sub-sector are many and call for all stakeholders to join hands, if Uganda is to achieve its national and international commitments. The major ones include the following:

1. Equity and equality issues in Ugandan Water Sector Reform. While implementing the urban reforms, concerns regarding perceived exploitation by the private sector and commercially-oriented companies taking over previously public-owned utilities must be addressed. Above all, the reforms for efficient and effective service delivery must be established and sustained.
2. The necessity continuously to address the needs of the poor. A well-performing utility can deliver water services efficiently to its customers, but it must also be seen adequately to supply and meet the needs of the poor, and those living in informal, urban and peri-urban areas for whom water is the single most

important priority. The real challenge, therefore, is to tailor the reforms to achieve exactly what is intended in the definition of strategies for the poor.

3. Cost recovery. The need to ensure the survival of Government investments clearly requires sufficient generation of internal cash flow to meet expected expenditures. The issue of cost recovery should not be confused with the ability of the poor to meet the real cost of water services. A balance must be struck between the two so as to be able to adopt appropriate tariff structures and strategies that will ensure the long-term sustainability of urban water sector investments.

4. Urban sanitation and hygiene. Selling water is relatively easy, even to the poor – but selling sanitation is much harder, despite the clear public health benefits. Much work therefore has to be done on sensitization and awareness campaigns to all citizens of the country. Resources are also needed, since this has been a neglected area in the past.

Many and varied challenges therefore definitely remain – but we are continuing to move forward towards realizing the Government's vision to ensure water for all cities ■

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