



CASE STUDY

# Uganda: Rural water supply: major strides in sector coordination and performance



## Summary

Uneven geographical distribution, rapid population growth, industrialization, and environmental degradation, are big challenges to the sustainable development of Uganda's freshwater resources. However, the policy and institutional framework has advanced over the past two decades in Uganda including the introduction of the Water Act (1995), the Uganda Water Action Plan (1995), and the National Water Policy (1999). Political support matters in achieving success and prioritization of water and poverty was central.

## Background

Uganda is endowed with significant freshwater resources. Natural resources are the country's primary asset base, providing a source of livelihood for more than 90% of the population. However, uneven geographical distribution, coupled with pressures from rapid population growth, increased urbanization, industrialization and environmental degradation, is a big challenge to the sustainable development of the country's freshwater resources. The annual population growth rate is 3.4% (31,8 million inhabitants estimated as 2010), which poses a major challenge in increasing safe water coverage, especially in rural areas. The largest source of water for the rural population in Uganda is spring water, followed by boreholes. Shallow wells with hand pumps, gravity flow schemes and rainwater harvesting are also used.

Poverty incidence remains high, in spite of progress made, and is firmly entrenched in rural areas. In the early 1990s, the rural water sector was characterized by a relatively weak sector policy framework, limited sector coordination and insufficient institutional capacity.

More than 60% of the rural population, some 9 million rural inhabitants lacked access to safe drinking water. In terms of water service delivery, there was a relatively weak sector policy framework, limited sector coordination and insufficient institutional capacity (human, financial and technical), particularly at local government level.

## **Actions taken**

The policy and institutional framework has advanced over the past two decades in Uganda. The policy and legal reform process started with the introduction of the Water Act (1995) and the Uganda Water Action Plan (1995). Other key policies included the National Water Policy (1999) and the Local Government Act (1997, 2000). These policies integrated key principles and service delivery modalities which shaped rural service delivery for the coming years that included: decentralization of implementation; demand-driven approaches; a strengthened focus on 'software' investments in water resources management, behavior change and community management of services; and integrated water resource management.

Furthermore, reform studies for Water Supply and Sanitation were carried out from 1997 leading to the development of Strategic Sector Investment Plans (SSIPs). The SSIPs were designed to generate appropriate policies, strategies, and action areas with associated costs for the sector. Also, a reform study of the rural sub-sector was undertaken after 1999 which formed the basis for investment plans and other reform processes, such as the shift from projects to a Sector-Wide Approach (SWAp).

A combination of factors, exogenous and endogenous to the sector, has helped drive progress. These include:

- a strengthened sector policy and institutional framework;
- shifting aid modalities and improved development cooperation;
- development financing and enhanced sector resource allocation;
- and national leadership and political support, particularly up to the mid-2000s.

## **Outcomes**

Since 1990, Uganda has made notable progress in increasing access to improved drinking water sources in rural areas and has taken major strides in improving its national and local rural water service delivery systems.

Significant progress in rural water supply was achieved from 1990 to 2008. Considerable progress has been made in implementing the national water policy and attaining national water targets. In the rural water and sanitation sub-sectors, there has been a steady improvement in service coverage over the years. Rural access to improved water source increased from 39% in 1990 to 64% in 2008 which means 11.9 million rural people gained access to improved water sources. In 2010, access was recorded at 65%. Uganda is, as such, a relative leader in terms of improving access to rural water supply when compared with neighbouring countries in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Challenges going forward include:

- Adequate social sector spending will be needed to maintain sector progress in the long term, particularly in a context of rising unit costs and population growth. Progress was driven by increases in external and domestic development finance and by improved

resource allocation to the local level for rural water service delivery. Yet progress may stall as a result of the decline in sector spending and by a shift in focus away from the poverty agenda towards the maintenance of macroeconomic stability, debt servicing and export-driven growth. The social and economic case for basic WSS investments needs to be heard if progress is to be maintained.

- A decline in political backing for the sector and a broader neo-patrimonial logic has restricted further progress and affected the implementation of reforms. Development advocates will need to fully understand these deep-seated – and often intractable – historical and contextual factors to promote WSS sector change more effectively.
- Increasing access to improved water sources needs to be balanced by an adequate focus on sustainability and equity outcomes. Progress will stall, or be reversed, if insufficient attention is given to the OM of water points and to equitable access to water points, especially for the poor and marginalised.
- Incentives linked to project-based aid persist in Uganda, despite progress in this regard. For instance, donors may benefit from the visibility associated with separately managed and ‘branded’ projects. If institutional incentives are not addressed – at all levels – reforms are much less likely to be sustained over time.

## **Lessons Learned**

Political prioritization of water and poverty was central. The depth and longevity of sector reform relies on political support, which can ebb and flow. Sector-level governance reform is unlikely to be successful without broader political reform, which takes time.

Long-term engagement of donors can help build capacity and create relations of trust. A genuine process of mutual learning and knowledge transfer between donor and aid recipients is crucial, as opposed to using relative power to impose ideas and conditions.

Reforms are unlikely to be effective without addressing underlying incentives within recipients and donor agencies. Consultative reform processes or sector ceilings created incentives for active engagement and encouraged sector actors to take responsibility for effective resource allocation within the sector.

Drivers outside of the sector – international actors, political imperatives, alliances with powerful ministries – can influence sector progress. Sector leadership may not be sufficient for strong progress in the absence of wider support at national or even international level.

National ownership of the reform process and a core of technically competent and relatively powerful ‘reform champions’ within government were key factors in driving and sustaining sector progress.

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**Supporting Materials**

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Ministry of Water and Environment Uganda

**Related IWRM Tools**

Policies with Relation to Water Resources, International Water Law, Recycle and Reuse

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