

Application of Cost-sharing with Water Users for Operation and Maintenance of Water Systems in the South Western Refugee Settlements, Uganda

Background:

In line with UNHCR Uganda Public Health Strategy (2013-2017), with further emphasis in the ReHOPE objective for Water Services Integration with the Uganda national/government systems, the South West refugee operation is promoting the national guideline in the District Water and Sanitation Conditional Grant (DWSCG) for community management of WASH facilities through a cost-sharing arrangement. In the DWSCG guidelines, it is stipulated that Operation and Maintenance (O&M) of community water facilities is the responsibility of the users. This level of community involvement has the great advantage of promoting ownership of water facilities, resultantly ensuring sustainability of the water supply interventions, through minimization of dependence on external funding for the routine operations and maintenance of the water systems.

Since 2013/2014, WASH partners across the South West have conducted sensitizations and campaigns within their respective refugee settlements to introduce and promote the system of water user fee contributions at each water point through the Water Source Management committees, also called Water User Committees (WUCs), which is comprised of:– Chairperson, Vice chairperson, Treasurer, Secretary, Care taker (with plumbing skills) and Refugee Welfare Council I (RWCI). The water user fees are applicable to all improved safe water sources including boreholes, shallow wells, protected springs, motorised boreholes and piped water supply systems.

Current Status:

The current extent of application of the water user fees varies from one settlement to another, with Rwamwanja and Kyaka II taking the lead as more than 90% of the beneficiary community from all water points are complying to monthly water user fee contributions. In Nakivale, out of 157 water points, 78 have functional WUCs and only 37 are collecting monthly water user fee contributions (particularly in Juru zone); with an equivalent of only about 30% of total beneficiary households contributing thus far. There is a challenge of high turnover of WUCs in Nakivale requiring frequent gap filling and this has stalled the roll-out of the water user fee application across the settlement.

The Water User fees are collected and managed by the WUCs and funds kept by the treasurer. And during the monthly village meetings, the treasurer/chairman of the committee presents a financial report detailing total collections and expenditures, for accountability to the water users. However, this is an area that needs to be strengthened as it has been observed that only about 30% of the WUCs are providing proper accountability to the water users. In Rwamwanja, the partner has introduced a system to strengthen accountability for the expenditures, whereby a minimum of three signatories (2 members of the WUC and the RWC I village chairperson) are required to counter sign the borehole repair forms as part of the accountability, and the forms are filed with the WASH Partner. That notwithstanding, some reports have been received of miss-allocation of collected funds by some WUC members, in some instances re-directing funds to personal livelihood interventions and in other instances change of address of members to un-disclosed locations.

The monthly contributions per household vary from 500 – 1,000 ugx per HH per month. The amount is decided jointly by the beneficiary community in a village meeting, including nationals where water points are shared between refugees and host community.

The main source of income for the households who are contributing the water user fees is from sale of Agricultural produce, payment received from doing odd jobs in the host community, and

Livelihood groups such as bee keeping, small scale business. However some of the households reportedly use part of their monthly Cash-for-Food ration from World Food Programme to pay their water user fee contributions. There is however a challenge of households who make their contributions in instalments making accountability tracking complex.

It is worth noting that an exemption is made for special categories of extremely vulnerable households who are identified by the community – including those with physical disability, chronic illnesses and the elderly. Other categories of Persons with Specific needs (PSNs) and non-vulnerable households who are unable to pay are required to contribute in-kind, by participating physically in water source maintenance activities. In Nakivale, the list of Vulnerable Individuals is read by the Refugee Welfare Council I (RWC I) to the community members at village meeting for their information & endorsement, and the exemption then agreed upon. Some members of the list who are not extremely vulnerable are assigned to give in-kind contributions of their labour for routine maintenance of hygiene status of the water point area.

The special consideration for new arrivals currently varies from one location to another. In Kyaka II, new arrivals are expected to start making contributions as soon as they are granted refugee status. Whereas in Rwamwanja, which has been receiving DRC new arrivals with prima facie status, they are given a grace period of only one(1) month.

Currently, funds collected are being kept by the treasurer/chairman of the WUC and used for variable interventions as and when required including; Labour fees for repairs done by Community based pump mechanics and paying motivational Incentives for water source caretakers. The labour fees paid to the community based hand pump mechanics vary depending on the complexity of the repairs conducted. For instance in Kyaka II for external repairs- 5,000 Ugx per repair, and for internal repairs – 15,000 Ugx per repair for shallow wells and 25,000 Ugx per repair for boreholes. However in Rwamwanja, the labour fee paid to the hand pump mechanics per borehole repair has been standardised to 50,000 Ugx.

Within the host community, nationals are also contributing water user fees ranging from 1000-2000 ugx per household per month for unmetered water points. However for the metered water points, payment ranges from 50-100 Ugx per 20 litre Jerrycan of water. Additionally, there is a mandatory community contribution paid prior to installation of the water point ranging from 200,000 – 350,000 Ugx per water point, depending on the technology being applied (Borehole, Shallow well, Protected Spring). Each Water Management Committee is required to open up a bank Account per water point, and where a water system is managed by a Private Operator, he is paid 80% of his monthly collections after deduction of O&M costs, then 5 % goes to facilitating the WUC, and then 15% is saved on the WUC account for any major repair that may be required in future.

Way forward

With the current efforts of the Uganda operation towards socio economic empowerment under the umbrella of Uganda's progressive refugee Policy, it is anticipated that the refugees' income status will continue to improve. This will further create a conducive environment for the strengthening of the cost sharing arrangement, with an aim to engage the communities in purchase of minor spare parts for repair of their water points.

There is however need to harmonise the application of the system across the settlements to strengthen it further in the aspects of increasing compliance of water users, clear guidelines on exemptions for special categories, proper accountability to the community, and gradual reduction in direct partner engagement in the operation and maintenance of water points. The WUCs will also be

encouraged to utilize local banks and/or SACCOs for safe custody of their monthly collections. The SACCOs could then be utilized, through a revolving fund and under the framework of an MOU, to stock up various Spare parts at the field level for easy access/ready availability for purchase by the WUCs using their monthly savings.

Within the framework of ReHOPE, the operation will also facilitate and advocate for Refugee Community-based Hand Pump Mechanics to Join District Hand Pump Mechanic Association, for sharing of experiences and harmonization of approaches in O&M of handpumps.