



Is it possible for Uganda to become open defecation-free?

AGAGO

By Gerald Tenywa

The cloud of dust that had been stalking our car from Lira to Patongo town council in Agago district finally settled. I had landed in a place which has become the latest frontier in the fight against open defecation.

As Uganda keeps working at stepping into a better future, Agago is becoming a model, showing how the country could fight for an open defecation-free community.

This has come after five years of interventions by civil society under WASH Alliance, which teamed team up with the Agago district government and central government to challenge the malpractice.

"I used to spend a lot of time taking my children to the health centre for treatment," Alice Acan, a resident of Patongo, says adding that she has gone against her old ways and is now living in a better environment. "We have a toilet and also wash our hands."

In her view, persistent open defecation is not only unsightly, but also causes contamination of water and food. It also increases the disease burden in Agago and other parts of the country.

This is eating into the incomes of the communities because they have to spend part of their income on the treatment of water-borne diseases, such as diarrhoea. They also lose time when they are bedridden or have to attend to the sick at home or in health facilities.

This was confirmed by a study undertaken World Bank in 2012. It states that Uganda loses up to sh389b due to poor sanitation every year. "This sum is the equivalent of US\$5.5 per person in Uganda per year or 1.1 per cent of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP)," states the report.

STATISTICS ON SANITATION

According to *The Annual Health Sector Performance Report 2021/2022*, half (50%) of the households in Uganda use unimproved toilet facilities, while 44% use improved toilet facilities. An improved toilet means one that is basic and not shared by many people and has a washable floor, according

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A water and sanitation meeting at Patongo

to Dr Herbert Nabaasa, the commissioner in charge of public health at the health ministry. The unimproved toilet refers to one that is not washable and is shared by many people.

The population practising open defecation is 25% with 16% living in rural areas and 9% in urban areas, according to Dr Nabaasa. This means that one out of four people in Uganda practises open defecation.

AGAGO'S TOILET PROBLEM

Acan says latrines collapse as a result of floods, which wash them away. "It is difficult to construct a toilet that will last long," Acan says. For cultural reasons built around certain myths, there is limited construction of toilets in northeastern Uganda, including Agago.

This is set to change after Agago teamed up with Uganda WASH Alliance (WAI Uganda), a consortium of civil society organisations working with the regional and local government entities since 2017 to end open defecation and improve access to safe water and sanitation around the Aswa River catchment. The team believes that prevention is better than cure. As the population secures better sanitation, the disease burden is expected to decline.

This is part of the 2030

BENEFITS OF THE GIRL-CHILD

The girls are also kept in school after the introduction of new technology for constructing toilets with running water.

"The girls have access to water. During the dry season, they fetch water and pour it into a drum. The girls experiencing menstruation can use it," Andrew Agum, an official of Caritas Hewasa, says.

"There is improved enrolment." Previously, the girls would not come to school because of menstruation periods. "The girls today feel motivated to stay in school," he says.

The toilets are also used to transform human waste into manure, according to Agum.

"The faecal matter is used as manure in the garden after it is dry," he says.

sustainable development agenda being implemented globally by countries including Uganda. "As Agago district, we have got a lot of support from the WASH Alliance. By the time they came, sanitation was estimated at 47.8%. We are currently at 56%, which means there has been an increase," Alfred Ocaya, the assistant water officer for Agago district, says.

He adds: "What they have helped us with is the change of behaviour of the communities. The communities are constructing pit latrines."

He says the team has introduced improved drainable toilets in parts of Agago including Patongo town council, which suffers from collapsing toilets due to flooding.

"We have toilets that are constructed in the dry season and when the rainy season starts, they end up collapsing. We have overcome this through the construction of drainable toilets," Ocaya says.

The approach of the WAI Alliance pays attention to the inclusion and sustainability of the water sources. WASH Alliance (WAI Uganda) applies innovative approaches and partnerships in civil society, the private sector as well as the Government to overcome the challenge open defecation poses.

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

The saying that charity begins at home brings to light the role of the communities in ending open defecation. As the

partners under WAI Uganda spread awareness about better sanitation and hygiene, they are also empowering communities to access sanitation facilities.

This is being done through innovative approaches that have helped bring communities closer to the private sector and seek accountability from local government. One of the innovations is the introduction of the soft sanitation loan, which is helping the local beneficiaries to avoid the interest rates charged by commercial banks in the towns and cities.

"We have come together to pool resources from which we borrow at friendly interest rates to build toilets or improve on what we have put in place," Tom Akena, a resident of Patongo, says.

Akena is part of the Village Scheme Loan Association (VSLA), which was spearheaded by Caritas Uganda. "The reason we resorted to VSLA was that the bureaucracy was too much. We decided to deal with it locally," Akena says.

Previously, most households were struggling to get money. The communities were left cursing because of the bureaucracy and commercial banks were scared of lending to the communities to improve sanitation. This is because they considered it a risky venture.

"The members of the village

SACCOS realised that they had savings, which they could use to build toilets. The interest rate for a loan for toilets was put at 8%, which is lower than the school fees loan," Andrew Agum, an official of Caritas Hewasa (Health Water and Sanitation), says pointing out that the interest in loans for school fees is 10%.

In a group of 30 members who started the scheme, 17 built pit latrines and others are improving what they had already put in place. All these are females. Others have extended piped water to their homes, according to Agum.

The scheme, which started in 2020-2021 has become a stepping stone for the communities. "We have started with them as entrepreneurs. They were generating income by selling liquid soap and reusable sanitary pads, farming and also have chairs for hire," Agum, says adding that they have started with four village savings and loans associations and others are coming up.

Deogracious Obwor, the senior assistant secretary of Lira Kato sub-county, Agago district, says open defecation has been a challenge. "We have had a challenge with open defecation, but we have put in place a strategy to reduce it. We are working with the district and partners in WASH," he says.

HUGE IMPROVEMENT

Charles Akaka, the health assistant for Lira Kato sub-county, says the WASH partner has contributed to the increase in sanitation from 46% to 50.2%. "This is a big improvement."

He says African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF), that is part of the WASH Alliance, triggered 15 villages in Lira-Kato sub-county. "There were two villages which had only five latrines, but they have now moved to only two households without toilets. This is a big improvement."

"What is outstanding is handwashing, which stands at only 12% and we are creating awareness in the villages to improve handwashing and also create open defecation-free villages. We have also realised a drop in water-borne diseases, such as diarrhoea and worms," Akaka says.