

CSOs statement for the Uganda Water and Environment Week 2023

Theme: Water and environment for climate-resilient development Impact for Nutrition?

2023



Introduction

With only seven years left to meet the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals, recognition and application of pragmatic solutions to the challenges posed by the climate change, water, and food nexus take precedence now more than ever.

Despite being the most fundamental of human needs, water and food remain scarce resources. Relatedly, today's water, food, and climate crises are interrelated and interchangeable, presenting a nexus with a high impact on socioeconomic development. Thus, SDG2 on zero hunger, SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation for all, and SDG 13 on climate action present key actions to ensure sustainable access to safe and adequate food and water, given their critical relevance to human health and life.

It's on this basis that we, the Non-State Nutrition Actors join the rest of Uganda during the week of 12th-17th March 2023 to celebrate the Uganda Water and Environment Week (UWEK 2023) under the theme ***"Water and environment for climate-resilient development"***.

We commend the government of Uganda for all the initiatives established at all levels through the various government programs, plans, strategies, and frameworks to ensure access to safe and adequate water and food for all. We also commend the government for its efforts in promoting sustainable environmental management and curbing climate change as well as its impacts on the livelihood of Ugandans.

Further, we commend the Ugandan government for its commitments undertaken at regional and international levels including the SDGs, Malabo commitments, Land Degradation Neutrality, and United Nations Framework Convention on climate change commitments to improve safe water access, promote sustainable environmental resource management and combat climate change for food and nutrition security.

However, despite the efforts made, Ugandans continue to suffer from high rates of food insecurity and hunger. In 2022, over 41% of the population in Karamoja faced high food insecurity levels with 428,000 people in crisis. UBOS 2020 also reports food to take the highest share of household expenditure at 43%. Further, Uganda also continues to shoulder high and multiple burdens of malnutrition. Today, 23% of all children below 5 years in the country shall never leave to their full potential because of stunting. In addition, over 300,000 children (3%) are wasted; almost one million children (8%) are underweight; and 300,000 children are obese (3%). Further, nutritional adequacy remains a challenge for children aged 6-23 months in Uganda as only 30.3% consume diverse diets and only 15% consume the minimum acceptable diet (UNAP 2020-2025). More so, over 53% of all women of reproductive age are anemic as well as 32% of all children under 5 years. This malnutrition situation negatively affects the quality of human capital, and education outcomes, and increases the cost of health including maternal, infant, and child deaths.

Henceforth, we would like to draw the attention of the government to the following water, environment, and climate change challenges that exacerbate the levels of food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition in Uganda. We believe these issues are pertinent to the theme as well as national development. We, therefore, call upon everybody and every institution to rise to the occasion of addressing these issues, which are eminent if sustainable action is not undertaken.

1. Inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services in communities

The high levels of malnutrition in Uganda are exacerbated by inadequate access to safe water and poor household-level sanitation and hygiene practices in communities in the country. Currently, only 24% and 47.9% can access basic sanitation services in Uganda (MOWE report 2022). In addition, 23% of the population in rural areas and 9.4% in urban areas practice open defecation.

Further, the report also showed declines in access to quality handwashing practices in both rural and urban areas. In rural areas, handwashing with soap declined by 8.9% from 44.7% in FY 2020/21 to 35.8% in FY 2021/22 in rural areas while in urban areas, a decline from 54.7% in FY 2020/21 to 53.4% in FY 2021/22 was observed.

Impact: Inadequate access to WASH services is classified as an underlying cause of malnutrition according to the UNICEF framework. Poor sanitation and hygiene impede food safety and increase the risk of diarrheal diseases and worm infections, which in turn contributes to malnutrition. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 50% of malnutrition is associated with repeated diarrheal or intestinal worm infections because of unsafe water, inadequate sanitation, or insufficient hygiene.

2. Inadequate water for agricultural production

More than 95% of the agricultural production in Uganda is rain-fed. This production system is highly affected by seasonality and climate variability. On the other hand, only 22,797 Ha in Uganda is under irrigation (MAAIF 2022 report). The current cumulative water for production storage capacity in Uganda amounts to 52.48 Million cubic meters, which is much lower than the targeted capacity of 76.82 Million cubic meters in the NDP III. In addition, most of this water is inaccessible to small-holder farmers, who make up the majority of food producers in Uganda. Further, there is low investment in water for livestock production and aquaculture despite these being high-demand sectors with high investment returns.

Impact: Limited access to water for agricultural production reduces productivity and may explain why Ugandan investments in agriculture are high yet production remains low, unable to meet the food needs of the population as well as market demands. Inevitably, low food availability and access increase the burden of food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition in the country.

3. Poor water safety.

Besides being inaccessible, water in Uganda is of poor quality and sometimes not suitable for human consumption. According to the Ministry of water report 2022, over 33.7% of rural water resources and 22.8% of urban water resources provide poor quality water that does not meet the National standards for potable water quality. In addition, compliance with National standards for wastewater discharge stands at 33.4 %, way below the target of 68%.

Impact: If it is not safe, it is not water. Unsafe water use increases the prevalence of water-borne illnesses, decreases the safety of agricultural produce, and escalates food safety risks, which results in health complications and malnutrition

4. Limited staffing for water service delivery

Access to water for production and domestic is greatly limited by the low staffing levels and lack of competent human resources to build and maintain sustainable water supply systems. The Maaif report 2022 shows that the national ratio of irrigation engineers stands at 1:3 in the 146 districts. Further, while District Water and Sanitation Coordination Committees (DWSCCs) are functional, most sub-county and parish Coordination Committees are not functional and/or lack capacity to increase access and utilization of WASH services down in the communities

Impact: Inadequate human resource limits service delivery, i.e. WASH and water for production. It also results in inefficiencies in service delivery, especially where maintenance of irrigation schemes and water supply systems is not done appropriately, leading to system breakdowns, which limit water access

5. Unsustainable farming systems

Agriculture in Uganda is characterized by the use of unsustainable farming systems ranging from subsistence, rain-fed agricultural systems, mono cropping, and increasing rates of fertilizer and pesticide use. This is partly attributed to Uganda's policy frameworks such as the Uganda Vision 2040, National Development plans, and the National Agriculture policy, which promote mechanical and plantation agriculture, including the increased commercialization of food crops.

Impact: While these farming systems were adopted in Uganda's policy frameworks to increase agricultural production and productivity, they pose numerous environmental risks such as decreased on-farm ecosystem biodiversity, poor soil health, low rates of nutrient recycling, and increased encroachment on wetlands and forests, which in turn result in environmental degradation. As a result, over 40% of Ugandan soils are depleted and 10% of these are severely depleted, unsuitable for quality agriculture (Jumba et al., 2020).

6. Increasing climate change risks and variabilities

With an estimated annual change in green-house gases of 1.15 Million Tonnes of Carbon dioxide equivalent, Uganda faces various climate change risks and vulnerabilities. Today, farmers experience prolonged dry seasons, uneven rainfall distribution, droughts, increasing disease and pest incidences, decreasing water sources, lack of pasture, bushfires, hailstorms, and changes in crop flowering and fruiting times.

Impact: Increased frequency and severity of droughts leads to water stress and severe water shortages while uneven rainfall distributions lead to floods, increased incidence of pests and diseases, and decline in crop yields, which increases food shortages and exacerbates food insecurity and hunger.

7. Social inequalities and access to resources

Access to land, safe water, sanitation, and hygiene resources is influenced by social, economic, and cultural norms and resultant inequalities. Many lower-level health facilities in Uganda lack inclusive toilet facilities, particularly for pregnant women. Women and girls remain the major water collectors, users, and promoters of households and community sanitation activities. On average, women and girls spend up to six hours every day fetching water, which exposes them to threats of violence and health hazards (GoU water and sanitation gender strategy 2018-2022).

Further, gender inequalities continue to limit women's access of women to land and other production assets and opportunities for work. Like women, the youths and other marginalized groups such as urban poor, smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fish folks, forest communities, and people living with disabilities equally face significant socially constructed limitations regarding access to water and land resources.

Impact: Limited access of women and other marginalized communities to land and water resources limits their capacity to procure and utilize safe and nutritious diets, leading to deep-rooted food and nutrition insecurity.

Recommendations:

- ❖ The government through MoWE should increase coverage of inclusive basic sanitation facilities in all communities
- ❖ MoWE and OPM should utilize the various mindset change vehicles to develop and disseminate nutrition messages in WASH through mass education.
- ❖ MoWE should establish initiatives to improve water safety especially in rural areas
- ❖ The government through MAAIF to prioritize public investment in irrigation focusing on household and community small-scale water harvesting technologies to help in adapting to the effects of climate change on agricultural production.
- ❖ Government through MAAIF to consider phased recruitment of more irrigation Engineers to technically support the implementation of water for production interventions. Initiatives should also be established to revamp sub-county and parish-WASH Coordination Committees for improved service delivery.
- ❖ The government should re-evaluate the impact of industrially motivated agricultural production systems on the environment and climate change and strategize appropriately.
- ❖ The government should promote transformative social norm programming to instill positive social norms among rural communities as this will reduce socio-cultural and gender disparities
- ❖ Implementation of policies and laws that protect rights of women particularly rural women towards access, control, and ownership of productive resources such as land and other land-based resources

Conclusion

The rallying call behind the theme is very timely in ensuring sustainable development in the face of the economic recovery from the global pandemic of COVID19. However, with only seven years left to meet the 2030 SDGs, stakeholders should utilize all opportunities to design multidimensional approaches to that address compounding community challenges while contributing to various sustainable development goals.

Addressing the above challenges will contribute to over five SDGs including SDG2 on zero hunger, SDG 3 on good health, SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation for all, SDG 13 on climate action as well as SDG 1 on zero poverty.



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