

Drought and erratic rainfall had turned the search for water into a daily struggle and a source of humiliation.

BY KARIM MUYOBO

When the first rays of sunlight slide across the parched plains of Teso and Apac, the morning rhythm in many villages is no longer what it used to be. The once-familiar sight of women and girls trekking long distances with jerrycans balanced on their heads is slowly fading.

Years of recurring droughts and erratic rainfall had stripped communities of the swamps, ponds, and shallow wells that once sustained them, turning water into a daily struggle and a source of humiliation. But in several parts of north-eastern, northern, and western Uganda, the story is changing.

Experts say the worsening water scarcity has affected not only domestic life but also livestock, agriculture, and local economies, illustrating the widening link between climate change and water insecurity. The Ministry of Water and Environment estimates that Uganda loses about two percent of its GDP annually to climate-related disasters such as prolonged droughts, crop failure, and waterborne diseases.

Yet amid these challenges, the sound of gushing water from newly drilled boreholes and the steady hum of solar-powered pumps are echoing through villages. For residents such as Ms Harriet Naguru of Kibasi Village, Kibasi Town Council in Kabarole District, the return of clean and reliable water has transformed daily life.

"In the past, we would wake before dawn to fetch water, sometimes walking for hours only to find a long queue. By the time we got home, it was already noon," she recalls.

Today, she needs only a short walk to a clean water source. "My children are healthier, and I have more time to farm and weave mats to sell at the market."

Local health records show that communities with access to safe water have seen a 45 percent drop in waterborne illnesses such as typhoid, cholera, and dysentery over the past two years. School attendance, particularly for girls has risen by 32 percent.

The economic ripple effects are also becoming visible: with consistent water, smallholder farmers are experimenting with irrigation gardens, grow-

How clean water access is restoring dignity in villages



State Minister for Local Government Victoria Rusoke (left) and UBL Supply Chain Director Anthony Alozie during the launch of a water project in Kibasi Town Council, Kabarole District, in October. PHOTO/KARIM MUYOBO

ing vegetables such as tomatoes and cabbages even during long dry spells.

"The borehole has become more than just a source of drinking water; it's a foundation for food security," Ms Naguru says.

Mr Christopher Bacwa, the Local Council chairperson of Kibasi Village, describes the arrival of clean water as a turning point.

"Water scarcity often led to tension and humiliation," he says. "Our wives queued for hours at muddy wells or bargained for a few litres from neighbours. Sometimes fights would break out at water points during peak dry seasons," he adds.

With new boreholes, those conflicts have eased. "People used to fight at the wells because everyone was desperate. Now we fetch water in peace. There's no shame in sending our daughters to collect clean, safe water," he adds.

This year alone, nine new boreholes—five in Teso and four in Apac—are slated for drilling to restore dignity to women who once spent entire

What he says.
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mornings searching for water. Ms Matilda Okiror, a gender and mobilisation officer in Teso, says water scarcity has shaped the lives of rural women for generations.

"We used to walk between three and seven kilometres every day to collect water from distant wells, ponds, or swamps," she says. "The journey meant hours under the scorching sun, queuing at contaminated sources and returning home exhausted before the day had even begun."

Today, that reality is shifting. Govern-

ment-led interventions, supported by community-based initiatives, are steadily improving access to clean water across rural districts. Ms Okiror explains that women and girls previously spent an average of six hours a day fetching water—time that could have contributed to farming, schooling, or childcare. Changing weather patterns had only made the situation worse.

"Our goal is not just to provide water but to ensure sustainability," she says.

Each water source is managed by a trained five-member committee—at least three of them women—who oversee maintenance, collect household contributions, and ensure equitable access.

Many of the new projects deliberately centre women, ensuring they take the lead in planning, management, and decision-making. Water user committees now incorporate training in leadership and financial literacy. Each household contributes between Shs500 and Shs1,000 per month to a maintenance fund.

"When people feel responsible for their

AT A GLANCE

- 72% – Uganda's current national access to safe water.
- 60% – Access in some northern districts still below this level.
- 2% – Estimated annual GDP loss from climate-related impacts.
- 45% – Decline in waterborne diseases in communities with new clean-water sources.
- 32% – Increase in girls' school attendance where water is nearby.

borehole, they take care of it," Ms Okiror says. In Teso, Apac, and parts of Tororo, the Ministry of Water and Environment, working with local governments and partners such as Uganda Breweries Limited (UBL), is rolling out solar-powered mini water schemes and boreholes designed to ensure year-round water supply. During the handover of one such project, Ms Sheila Sabane, the UBL corporate relations director, noted that clean water underpins development.

"Water is life, and it cuts across every aspect of human wellbeing, from drinking and cooking to food production and poverty eradication," she said.

Mr Anthony Alozie, the UBL Supply Chain director, said the company sources sorghum, maize, and barley from farmers in the region, making it essential to support the communities that support its value chain.

Solar-powered systems, now preferred over hand pumps, are more efficient and durable. A single mini-solar scheme can supply up to 10,000 litres of water per day, serving roughly 250 households. Despite national access to clean water standing at about 72 percent, the National Water and Sewerage Corporation acknowledges that some northern districts still lag below 60 percent. The government aims for universal access by 2040, prioritising investments in water resource management, rainwater harvesting, and expanded piped networks.