

COMMUNIQUE FROM THE WEBINAR ON WATER RESOURCES HELD ON 29th APRIL, 2020 IN KAMPALA, UGANDA

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Uganda is one of the countries battling with Novel Corona Virus (COVID 19) pandemic since early this year. The government through its institutions has been mobilizing and sensitizing the public to contain the spread of the Virus among the people. The COVID 19 Task Force which is an Inter-ministerial committee was established to oversee the coordination of the preparedness activities against the spread of the COVID 19. The President of Uganda has regularly addressed the public issuing updates on matters regarding COVID 19 and has also engaged other East African counterparts to have the matter streamlined. However, in many COVID 19 interventions at national and local level water is one of the subjects considered marginal and is not critically discussed in terms of accessibility, stability, use and management.

Water is one of the vital resources at the frontline of fight against COVID-19 worldwide. Because the virus has no cure or vaccine, the government of Uganda guided the public to protect themselves through regular washing of hands for at least for 20 seconds after every 20 minutes, maintaining proper hygiene and social distancing. Much as the population is complying with the measure of regular hand washing, water resources continue to be demanded and consumed by different sectors such as agriculture, health, industry, energy, transport, tourism, minerals and forests among others, the rate of consumption is becoming high due increasing water demand by households and other public places like markets, health facilities, and super markets each single day for washing hands. Amidst the COVID 19 pandemic, it is thus assumed that there is reliable and sufficient water accessible by all Ugandans everywhere at all times.

With the current population pressure, many stand a risk of becoming water insecure as more water is required at a household now than ever before over 75% of Ugandans are at risk of catastrophic expenditure¹ due to the increasing water demands especially the rural poor living in water stressed areas such as Karamoja and Teso. It should be noted that Uganda's water sector currently requires at least nine times the present level of funding annually for the next 12 years² to realize the national development targets. Realizing the economic importance and governance of water resources, it is critical that those resources are systematically planned for. It is critical that Uganda needs to strengthen its water resource management systems for effective and efficient access to water during the COVID-19 crisis.

Basing on the above, on 29th April, 2020, the Civil Society and other Non-State Actors convened an online meeting to debate and present a case around COVID-19 to influence various stakeholders including Civil Society, Private sector, academia, farmers, media, government and development partners to prioritize water resources management systems as the first line of defense against health emergencies and equally required for production in other economic sectors such as agriculture.

The observations and recommendations below were jointly developed by the group of Non State Actors (NSAs) in collaboration with representatives from the Ministry of Water and Environment. The meeting sought to create a platform for stakeholders to analyze key water related issues to inform increased investments towards water resource management during and after COVID 19 crisis to support the not only the health sector as water is primary in sanitation and hygiene but also as a development production resource.

¹ The Human Development Report, UNDP 2019

² Budget Monitoring and Accountability Unit Briefing Paper 30/19, Ministry of Finance, 2019

Mindful of the critical role played by civil society organizations in the development process and the community in general, Food Rights Alliance (FRA) and Community Integrated Development Initiative (CIDI) in partnership with Trocaire and Danish People's Aid organized a webinar on Water resources under the theme, **"The Impact of COVID-19 on Water Resources: How Much Water is required and How Much is Available?"**

2.0 OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the objectives of the webinar/ online meeting and the overall presentations and discussions, participants highlighted and made the following observations and recommendations:

- a) Stakeholders recognize government for increasing the budgetary allocation for the water sector for the FY 2020/2021 by 59% from the previous FY 2019/2020 allocation.
- b) Stakeholders also recognize government for Inter-ministerial coordination that led to formation of a Task Force to oversee the coordination of the preparedness activities against the spread of the COVID 19.
- c) Noted with concern that Water being the front line weapon in defense against COVID- 19, there is no doubt that the pandemic shall pose significant impact on its sustainable management as water is increasingly required for washing hands.
- d) Water is not only essential for health but also for all other sectors such as agriculture, health, industry, energy, transport, tourism, minerals and forests. Many Ugandans are at high risk of becoming water insecure due to the increasing competing demands.
- e) Noted that every Ugandan per household requires 1, 440 litres of water a month for hand washing only which will not be sufficient for the current population estimated at 43 million.
- f) In the current Financial Year, the Ministry of Water and Environment and National Water and Sewerage Corporation did not receive a supplementary budget to meet their operational costs and ensure effective access to water by all.
- g) Noted that the National Development Plan III under the Agro industrialization Program recognizes the need for water quality to facilitate production and processing. Thus water should not be considered as a free good but rather an essential good for the realization of the national agenda by managing its quality.
- h) There is a possibility that the burden during COVID 19 and after the pandemic will be huge and the population will not have access to water. The water bills have more than doubled which will affect the operations of National Water and Sewerage Corporation in enhancing effective access to water by the public.
- i) Noted that there is a challenge of repairing water facilities due to lack of contingency fund in some districts to undertake COVID 19 interventions.
- j) The availability and accessibility of water at household level has a number of gender dynamics as women suffer the burden of looking for water for domestic use.

- k) The quality of water consumed especially in water stressed areas comes from ponds and dams which are prone to direct contamination from humans and livestock.
- l) COVID-19 is a prime opportunity to fast-track financing for integrated water resource management in the country and establishing systems and facilities that provide water to vulnerable communities in both rural and urban areas in times of a crisis.
- m) Water management systems involve maintenance of the water infrastructure, storage, distribution and abstraction of water and if these are not considered access to water will remain a big challenge to not only Ugandans in water stressed areas but also those who are the most vulnerable to pandemics like COVID 19.
- n) Noted that Water has always played a central role in human societies. It is a mandatory health and socio-economic good that requires stewardship to avoid economic implications on Uganda's economy.

Stakeholders present resolve that Government;

- 1) Increases investments towards water resource management as water is becoming the first line of defense against health emergencies like COVID 19 as it is equally required for production in other economic sectors like Agriculture.
- 2) Advances the technological approaches in terms of infrastructure to enhance water quality consumed by the public and strengthen community management structures to improve the hygiene and management of the different infrastructure in place.
- 3) Promotes Public Private Partnerships at national and local level for increased investments in water infrastructure. This will address issues of operation and maintenance of the water infrastructure and enhance access to water by the different community water users.
- 4) Plans from an integrated or multi sectoral dimension and ensure water is a primary concern during and after COVID 19 pandemic in order to enhance coordinated development and sustainable management of water resources. The government should improve coordination and implementation of its policies across MDAs.
- 5) Prioritizes and recognizes the importance of water through systematic and meaningful investment in water sector rather than over relying on external sources for funding to avoid future water crises and this requires early preparations with long term investments for resilience.
- 6) Fosters ideological conversations on the linkage between water-food-health and energy with attention. A Task Force should be established as part of the response plan to foster planning and strategic direction in such pandemics like COVID 19. This needs to be prioritized in the development interventions and during resource allocation.
- 7) Improves water management plans for efficient access to water by the public. The plans should also involve mechanisms for proper waste management to mitigate water pollution in the country.

- 8) Strengthens the existing institutional framework to advocate, promote, develop, regulate, supervise, maintain and generate data that will guide planning and investments for sustainable management of water resources and infrastructure.
- 9) Builds capacity at all level for designing, construction, operate and maintenance of water facilities for improved efficiency and access to water. This will require regular engagements with stakeholders and conducting trainings to enhance their skills and packaging well-articulated messages for community sensitization and awareness.
- 10) Effectively manages the water resources through setting water withdrawal limits for industry and agriculture and scaling up rain water harvesting to reduce the growing deficit in water supply relative to demand.
- 11) Subsidizes costs of water supply to at least 50% for the entire corona virus season for National Water address challenges related to operational costs being incurred.
- 12) The Urban Poor are disproportionately affected by the restrictions of movement and virtually no income and therefore their water needs remain unmet. Government provides additional supplementary budget to KCCA to enable them pay for water for the additional points that they are providing.
- 13) Government accelerates the provision of Pro Poor units to help bring down the cost of water which is driven higher by vendors .

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