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Children at Rwamwanja refugee camp in Kamwenge district, Western Uganda enjoy water from an ATM machine. Photo by Felix Basiime

OXFAM IS DELIVERING WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE (WASH) SERVICES TO REFUGEES IN SOUTH WESTERN UGANDA.

BY DORAH NTUNGA AND VINCENT OGIRA

Water ATMs, delivering inclusive water access in refugees Settlements.

Access to water is one of the significant challenges that refugee settlements in Uganda grapple with. Even when water sources are available, they are far and often not convenient for groups such as people living with disabilities, the elderly and women who shoulder the most significant burden of care work.

Agencies like Oxfam and UNHCR have recognised this challenge. They are piloting innovations in various refugee settlements to make access to water reliable and inclusive. One of their recent pilots is the innovative automated water system. Water ATM, as commonly known, is a prepaid water dispenser that provides refugees and their host communities reliable and clean water twenty-four hours a day at an affordable fee. The Water ATMs are connected to existing water supply network managed by Oxfam in Kyaka and National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC) in Rwamwanja.

In two refugee settlements of Rwamwanja and Kyaka II in South Western Uganda, Oxfam, with funding from its humanitarian innovation fund, has installed 30 water ATMs benefiting an estimated population of 10,000 refugees and their host communities.

According to Mr. Ambayo Okudi, the Public Health Engineering Officer at Oxfam, the physical ATM structures are fifteen, with ten in Kyaka II and five in Rwamwanja. Each ATM has two tap stands, giving thirty in total.

Water is accessed through a paid token that is issued to each household. The token is used to dispense only a certain quantity of water per day. To ensure that all refugees including the most vulnerable can access water, the bills are paid by UNHCR only for refugees.

The automated systems have since shortened the distance to access water as they are within reach of the refugee vicinity. Access to safe water has been significantly improved, especially for the people living with disability, the elderly, and women. They can fetch water whenever they want it without worrying about queuing up or walking long distances.

The system allows for flexibility, better planning and minimises wastage. People can fetch water at their convenience and just enough water for their families. Chances of spillage are minimal as water only runs when a token is inserted. The token credits can only be spent on the water so the money cannot be stolen or misspent.

The sustainability of these water systems is very crucial to Oxfam. In Rwamwanja, Ambayo explains that discussion on change of ownership to National Water and Sewerage Corporation is at the advanced stage. This is in line with Oxfam support to the sustainable transition of water supplies to government utilities.



Mr Edwin Nabimanya, the Public Health Engineering Officer of Oxfam at Sweswe water treatment plant explaining the processes of water supply at Kyaka II refugee camp in Kyegegwa district.



Thirty kids from school take water from one of the motorized water points



We had a challenge of water storage capacity but in April we shall have a water tank of 108,000 litres which will connect unserved villages to 90%

Managing water stress

Despite the various interventions by Oxfam and other actors, water supply remains a challenge with low water coverage across the two refugee settlements. Mr. Leo Migabi the camp commandant for Rwamwanja says that Rwamwanja is a water-stressed area, but with partner support, they hope the stress will come down.

Mr. Jackson Birungi, the NWSC branch manager Nkoma-Katalyeba Town council, which is within the settlement, says the company covers 51km of the pipeline but mainly along the road.

“We had a challenge of water storage capacity but in April we shall have a water tank of 108,000 litres which will connect unserved villages to 90 percent,” says Birungi, adding: “The Covid-19 pandemic affected our rate of extending water to our target of 1000 individual household connections currently we have 408 customers.”

Delivering water through other water systems

Besides the water ATMS, Oxfam has been supported with funding from the European Union (EU), Belgian Government (DGD) and UNHCR to set up other water supply systems towards addressing the water gaps. The water systems include both the motorised and non-motorised schemes (handpumps and protected springs)

Motorised water Systems

There are three motorised water systems in Kyaka II designed with eco-friendly hybrid technology. These systems are powered by solar electric power or generator as a backup power with in case of outages. These systems include Sweswe, Buliti and Bujuburi. Oxfam does the management of the water system on behalf of UNHCR.

Mr. Edwin Nabimanya, the Oxfam Public Health Engineering Officer, says Oxfam and its partners pump over 500,000 liters daily from Sweswe Surface Water (dam) in Kyaka II, treat it before it is pumped to three water reservoir tanks of 100,000 liters each and distributed to refugees and the host community.

With funding from European Union, Oxfam has embarked on Sweswe dam catchment protection/restoration to secure it from encroachment and dumping. This will ensure the reliability of clean water.



Oxfam provides washable latrine slabs to refugees

Non-Motorised Schemes

Edwin says, apart from this piped water system, there are other alternative water sources set up and managed by Oxfam that ensure the refugees get enough water. In Kyaka, there are Sixty-Six (66) hand pumps, and eight (8) protected water springs.

However, Nabimanya says one of the challenges is that water is not enough for both the refugees and the host community.

Hygiene and sanitation

Oxfam delivers Sanitation and Hygiene services to protect the public health of refugees and the local communities. The interventions include providing technical and material support to communities to construct household level pit latrines, latrine innovation in difficult environments through construction of Urine Diversion and dehydrating toilets (UDDTs) and construction of faecal sludge treatment facilities (FSM).

Oxfam supports institutional WASH and community engagement, risk communication around epidemic preparedness and response. This includes placing awareness materials in public places such as water points, schools among others, to ensure a wide reach and sustainability.

For Hygiene and Promotion, Oxfam works with over 500 Village Health Teams (VHTs) within Kyaka and Rwamwanja Settlement. Management of VHTs is jointly carried out by WASH and Health partners as per the VHT framework.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic changed how Oxfam and partners work within the settlement. "The pandemic changed our approach. We procured a public address system and recorded the messages. This was done to avoid mass gatherings," says Ambayo.

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Solid waste

Solid waste management remains a challenge across the settlements. In Rwamwanja there is no treatment facility for faecal waste in the district. There are five markets within the settlement that create waste which Nkoma-Katalyeba Town Council at times picks with trucks to the dumping site, which is close to a wetland.

According to Mr. Michael Ainembabazi, the Oxfam Public Health Promotion Officer at Kyaka II, there are solid waste volunteer groups among the refugees that Oxfam supports with gears who have done a lot to improve hygiene and sanitation.

“We provide these groups with gears. They collect garbage and charge a minimum of Shs1,000 per week per household. Depending on the amount of waste, this money is used to hire public trucks to collect the garbage,” says Ainembabazi.

Oxfam started these groups together with the Office of the Prime Minister. Mr. Odeta Matabishi is a chairperson of a group of volunteers that voluntarily collect garbage in the camp.

“We are 12 in the group and we voluntarily collect garbage up to the dumping site. Oxfam and UNHCR support us with gears such as gloves, gumboots and overalls,” says Matabishi.

About Oxfam Humanitarian response

Since the beginning of 2014, Oxfam, working with local partners have been providing an integrated response to the humanitarian crisis responding to the needs of South Sudanese refugees in West Nile and later DRC refugees in South Western Uganda. Oxfam has been providing Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services and Emergency Food Security and Vulnerable Livelihoods (EFSVL) as a basic need.

Oxfam’s interventions integrate gender and protection across all its programming. We also largely use the evidence generated from this work for advocacy at local national and regional levels. All these interventions are linked to Oxfam’s development to build the resilience of these communities. More about Oxfam in Uganda. <https://uganda.oxfam.org>

About Kyaka II

Kyaka II refugee settlement was established in 2005 to receive the remaining population of Kyaka I following the mass repatriation of Rwandan refugees the same year. After this movement, Kyaka I was closed. Around mid-December 2017, renewed violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo led to a new refugee influx into Uganda, with an estimated 17,000 new refugee arrivals in Kyaka II.

About Rwamwanja

Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement is a refugee camp in Kamwenge District in southwestern Uganda and is home to over 70,000 refugees mainly Congolese. The Rwamwanja camp is managed by the UNHCR and the Ugandan Office of the Prime Minister’s Department of Refugees (OPM). Services to refugees are implemented by a host of “implementing partners” – the NGOs that include Oxfam, the Lutheran World Federation, the Windle Charitable Trust, Africa Humanitarian Action and African Initiative for Relief Development.



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17,000

New refugee arrivals in Kyaka II.



Over 70,000

Refugees mainly Congolese in Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement