

Saving Lives and Supporting Returns: Improving Water and Sanitation Conditions in Northern Uganda

Marian Spivey-Estrada

For more than a decade, OFDA has supported projects that increase access to safe water and improve sanitation and hygiene conditions in northern Uganda. In FY 2006, OFDA provided nearly \$5.8 million to eight implementing partners for essential water and sanitation projects serving internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees in five districts in the north. Despite ongoing challenges, namely insecurity, OFDA programming has achieved great progress in the past year, increasing daily water supply in camps, reducing lines at water points, and expanding hygiene education.

From 1986 to 2006, LRA attacks and Government of Uganda (GOU) counterinsurgency measures forced more than two million residents to flee their homes to live in IDP camps. Even as the GOU and the LRA proceed toward a comprehensive peace agreement, water and sanitation conditions remain among the foremost challenges facing humanitarian agencies in northern Uganda.

A deadly enemy

From 2002 to 2005, increased conflict led many residents of northern Uganda to seek refuge in already crowded camps. As the IDP population increased from 600,000 to 1.4 million, camp conditions quickly deteriorated. From January to July 2005, more than 25,000 people—or approximately 129 per day—died in northern Uganda as a result of conflict.¹ However, very few of these residents died as a result of murder, looting, or burning of homes once perpetuated by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Instead, most residents perished in IDP camps, where poor sanitation conditions and inadequate or contaminated water rendered them easy targets for diseases such as malaria and diarrhea. Insecurity and population movements in northern Uganda hindered the consistent provision of humanitarian assistance, despite concerted efforts by relief agencies to meet evolving needs.

The consequences of poor water and sanitation conditions are life-threatening. In camps where residents have access to quantities as low as 5 liters of water per person per day, mortality rates for children under five are five times that of areas where 20 liters of water are available per person per day. Severe water shortages are also associated with skin diseases, eye infections, and an increased incidence of diarrheal diseases and fatal dehydration. Furthermore, vital nutrition programs cannot function without sufficient water for food preparation and basic hygiene.

Assisting the displaced

Instability has long hindered the success of key water and sanitation projects in northern Uganda. However, improvements in security in FY 2006 enabled OFDA partners to expand activities in longstanding IDP camps and newer camps located near the original homes and farms of IDPs. In total, in FY 2006, OFDA funded eight NGOs to carry out improvements in water and sanitation in Gulu, Kitgum, Lira, Pader, and Apac districts.



Rita Otto collects clean water from the tap of an OFDA-supported water program in Ligi Ligi settlement, northern Uganda (Al Dwyer, USAID).

¹ According to a July 2005 interagency IDP health and mortality survey conducted by the Ugandan Ministry of Health, with support from U.N. agencies, NGOs, and donors.

OFDA implementing partner the International Rescue Committee (IRC) responded to a particular challenge in Potika IDP camp, Kitgum District, where low water coverage existed due to an inability to drill sufficient boreholes within the camp's security perimeters. At the same time, the population was unable to access water points outside security zones during periods of insecurity or beyond curfew hours. In response, IRC developed a system utilizing a high-yield well outside the camp to feed into a water system within the security zone. As a result of OFDA's support, the 14,400 camp inhabitants now have access to more than 15 liters of potable water per person per day, the minimum humanitarian standard. Moreover, the entire distribution system is within the security zone of the camp allowing IDPs to safely access water at all times. Community participation in the project was crucial in securing land for the well, designing the distribution system, and providing system maintenance and management.

Camp residents believe the new system has been worth the effort. According to Aya Josephine, secretary of the camp finance central committee, "We now have water close to our homes. We are living like town people who turn on a tap to get water, we are modern you know. We shall do all we can to ensure we have this water running." Aluku Betty, a camp resident, explained, "Even past 7 p.m. when we are not allowed outside the camp, I will be able to collect water for my family. I will have enough water for my family now."



Children in Pader Camp use hand washing sites installed with OFDA funds (Jack Myer, USAID).

Supporting returns

As peace negotiations continue and security improves, a growing number of northern Ugandans are leaving the camps and returning to their areas of origin. OFDA partners, including Cooperazione e Sviluppo (CESVI), are increasingly working to support these returns. In Ligi Ligi settlement in eastern Pader District, little infrastructure remained to provide for the needs of returnees. Many traveled excessive distances to collect water of questionable quality from streams and ponds, losing valuable time better spent on rebuilding homes and farming. To respond to these needs, OFDA provided funds for CESVI to complete a motorized borehole that now provides sufficient quantities of clean water to more than 2,000 returning families to rebuild lives through agriculture.

The borehole has dramatically changed the lives of returnees, including Beatty Otto and her eight children, who arrived in Ligi Ligi after spending several years in nearby Patonga Camp. Mrs. Otto thanked USAID for the new water taps, noting that her children are now able to draw enough clean water for the family at any time of the day. She no longer worries about the safety of her children who previously ventured far from home to collect water.

Making a difference

For more than a decade, OFDA has worked diligently to ensure that the victims of conflict in northern Uganda have access to basic water and sanitation services. Despite challenges posed by insecurity, OFDA partners have made great strides in improving water and sanitation for hundreds of thousands of IDPs. As GOU and LRA peace talks progress and security improves, OFDA assistance remains as critical as ever. Displaced populations will require water and sanitation assistance to return to abandoned homes and farms. OFDA has already begun to support initial returns and remains poised to meet the evolving needs of northern Ugandans.