

THE PARADOX OF RURAL WATER USER
DEMAND AND SATISFACTION: 
Findings from selected districts in
northern and mid western Uganda

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Introduction

Users' satisfaction and payment for rural water services provides a striking story behind the factors that affect demand for water. The story emerges from the study conducted by Triple-S Uganda in 2012/13 on Assessment of performance of the service delivery model for point water supply facilities in 16 Sub counties in 8 districts¹ in Technical Support Units 2 & 6 (Northern and Mid western Uganda). The point water facilities include; shallow wells and deep boreholes fitted with hand pumps, and protected springs.

In the study, users' satisfaction was used to get perspectives of the water users on the different parameters of the service: quality, quantity, reliability and convenience/distance. In addition, the assessment measured the actual levels of service received by users, levels of performance of service managers, and levels of performance of service authorities and institutional support mechanisms.

This paper analyzes the level of service that water users receive with emphasis on quantity of water accessed, reliability of the supply facilities, user satisfaction, willingness and ability to pay for water.

Water Quantity

The National standards in Uganda set 20 litres per person per day (lppd) as the minimum quantity of safe water that rural households should access. The average quantity of water collected per person from safe water sources ranges from 10.2 lppd to 19.2 lppd, with districts in TSU 6 (Mid western Uganda) showing much lower consumption. The proportion of water user groups accessing the minimum quantity (20 lppd) is just 1/3 of the overall sample (124 user groups). At the same time, users are satisfied with the amount of water they are able to collect, as shown by Figure 1 which compares the proportion of users satisfied with the water quantity with the proportion of users that access at least 20 lppd.

¹ Kabarole, Kamwenge, Kyenjojo, Kasese, Lira, Alebtong, Kitgum, and Nwoya

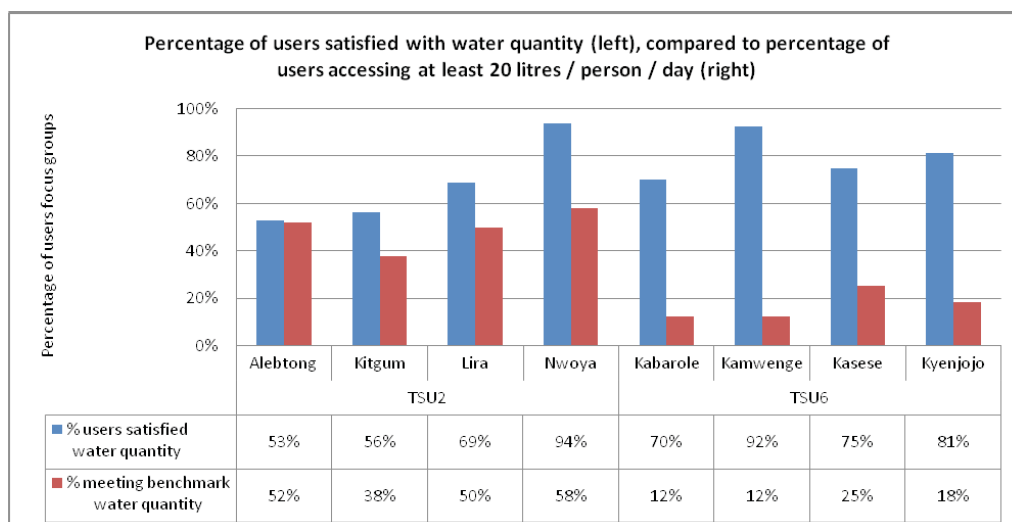


Figure 1 Percentage of users satisfied with water quantity

The proportion of users satisfied with the water quantity is much higher than the proportion that actually fetch 20 lppd. This is the case for almost all districts, and is more pronounced in TSU 6 districts, where many surface water sources are found. Access to safe water in the TSU6 districts ranges from 72% to 87% (MWE 2013). This clearly indicates that consumption of safe water is low not because the supply is low, but because people have a very low demand for water from an improved water supply facility. Users prefer to do some domestic activities such as laundry directly at the surface water sources and only carry home water from improved sources for drinking, cooking and other selected household chores.

Reliability

Reliability was estimated by calculating proportion of water facilities that deliver water for at least 351 out of the 365 days in the year (95% of the time). In other words facilities that have been broken down for a maximum of two weeks in the year. Only 40% of the 124 water facilities in the sample were classified as being reliable. This implies that users are assured of having water delivered through-out the year at only 40% of the facilities. Yet when asked about their satisfaction with reliability of the water supply facilities, majority of the users (70%) were satisfied. It was surprising to find that low level of reliability had no effect on satisfaction of the users. This is quite strange for a service that people are expected to pay for.

Level of Service received

Analysis of the level of service received further complicates the puzzle. Only 7% of facilities fully comply with all the rural water service benchmarks; this therefore means that only a minority of facilities deliver a basic level of service (*good quality water supply of at least 20lppd within a distance of 1 km from the source & is reliable 95% of the time*). Yet the majority of the user groups (88%) were satisfied with their water service.

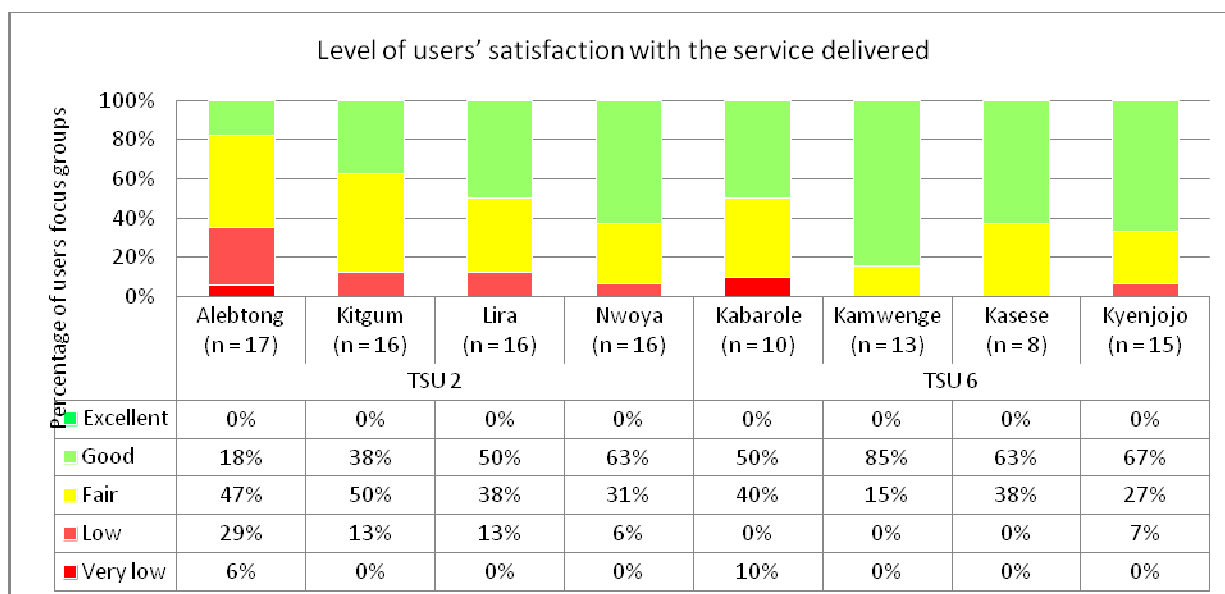


Figure 2 Percentage of users satisfied with different parameters of the service delivered

The puzzle on satisfaction with low reliability and low level of service can be attributed to either very low expectations of users of the service or lack of awareness on the standards that their rural water service is expected to meet. Therefore the users are not able to effectively engage service providers to demand for a better service.

Users' willingness and ability to pay

When asked about affordability of the service, a majority of users reported that they were satisfied with it. However, looking at the actual payment for water, majority of the users do not pay for the water they collect. Hence affordability is not seen as an important issue to them.

A comparison was made between what users pay every month for their water and what they pay for their mobile phones (if they have one), as a proxy indicator for ability to pay. Among the households interviewed, 52% own a mobile phone while only 27% pay a water fee. Households that pay a water fee were asked how much they spend monthly on airtime and charging of their phones. The difference between what people spend on water and on their mobile phones is striking. They spend between UGX 400 and UGX 1,350 on average on water, and between UGX 15,000 and UGX 45,000 on mobile phones. Figure 3 clearly shows that the current water fees are within the financial ability of at least half of the households (the ones owning mobile phones), and even probably the majority of them.

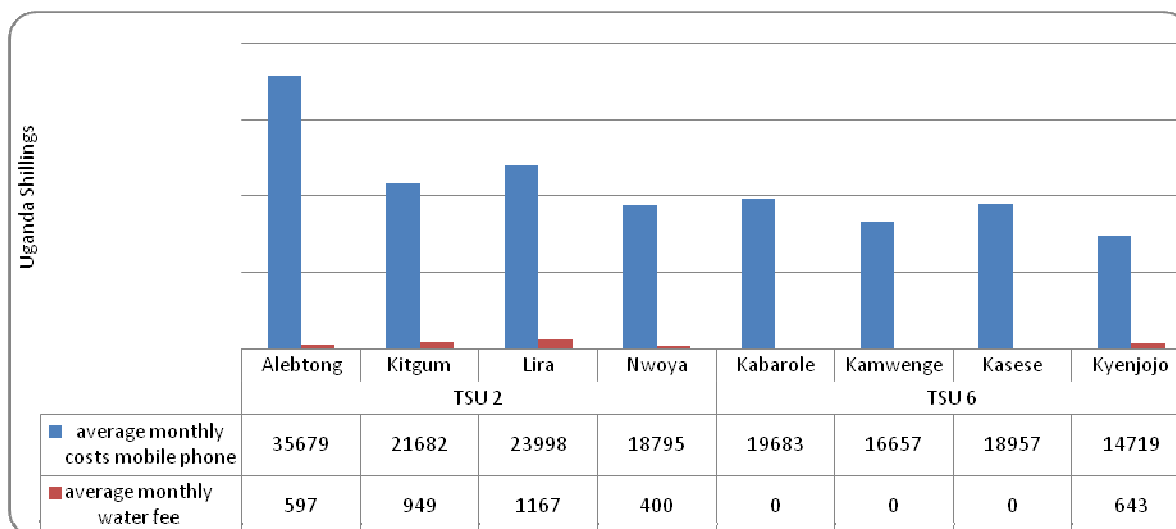


Figure 3 Comparison of average monthly spending on mobile phones and average monthly fee

Mobile phones are certainly seen by users as having a monetary and social added-value; a phone call can for example allow someone to earn money when used for business, and it is a means to keep contact with relatives and possibly mobilise their support when need arises. However, comparing expenditures on water and with expenditures on phones demonstrates that users' ability to pay for water is not the issue. The observed trend rather suggests that access to reliable water may not be such a high priority for users, that the demand for water from an improved sources is not so high, or that users believe that it is not their responsibility to ensure that water points are in working order at all times.

Action Points

- Service Authorities make information available to users on the attributes of water service that they are entitled and their obligations to enable them hold service providers accountable as they are also held accountable on their obligations.
- Monitoring of rural water services should go beyond tracking functionality of water supply facilities to capture data on level of service delivered. Absence of this data hinders planning for service level improvement.
- District water office should be proactive in communicating about costs of maintaining rural water facilities, resources available for operation and maintenance, expected user contributions and the funding shortfalls, to engage the local government political and technical leadership in revisiting public financing options and user tariffs.

Conclusion

The findings on users' satisfaction with reliability and service level delivered show unexpected results on expectations of users from the service they receive. Satisfaction of users with the very

low level of service clearly shows that demands they not aware of the standards that their rural water service is expected to meet and majority of them donot pay. This makes it difficult for the users to demand for a better service. However, payment for water also does not guarantee a better service especially where point water supply technologies (boreholes / shallow wells fitted with hand pumps, and protected springs) are used. The water users pay a standard fee irrespective of the quantity of water and payment does not solve the issues of crowding at water points and walking distance from the households.