

believe it!" In her opinion the basic problem still exists today, but fortunately she also sees that much has changed over the past five years: "In the Dutch government's plans for WASH 2030, in the United Nations, you can hear people everywhere talk about a system approach. There is greater focus on water management, governance and financing."

However now, Fonseca adds, the discourse must shift from talking to action. Money should be invested and "until now this has not happened". If she had one water wish for 2030 it would be a water budget: one for each country. It may not sound very exciting, but she believes it is necessary if we are to achieve the sixth Sustainable Development Goal.

"And by that I mean an overview: what is received in taxes, aid and water payments. What should be done and how can we deal with the budget deficit? All countries committed themselves to the Sustainable Development Goals, but only a few have a plan to actually realise them."

In the latest IRC water campaign you therefore see a woman at a water pump on the left of the poster and a man holding a propeller on the right. And underneath the text: "If this is a permanent water system, then this is an airline company." Fonseca: "We want to focus the attention on the system behind the water."

However, Fonseca, like Mels, notices that it is sometimes difficult to get donors to focus on long-term action; the investments are not necessarily innovative, but they are desperately needed for a water system to continue to function. She even has her own term for it: *flatlining*. "When a country realises a sixty to seventy percent water supply, you often see activities flatlining. Investments still increase substantially, but water coverage remains the same."

Fonseca knows that the investments usually focus on innovation. Not on maintenance, not on strengthening the institutions or on monitoring. "Donors say that is something governments have to take care of. However, this doesn't mean we shouldn't keep a close eye on it."

Thailand, 2016 – the metropolis Bangkok is severely affected when the monsoon rears its angry head. The drainage system has to process so much waste water from households all year round that it constantly becomes blocked with rubbish and sediment. Everything overflows to

knee level, including the contents of the sewers. Anyone who wants to move around simply has to wade through water.

Sustainable Development Goal 6.3

Improve water quality and combat the discharge of untreated waste water

"Anywhere water is used, waste water is produced", Merle de Kreuk explains, who is professor in waste water treatment at TU Delft. "And waste water contains pathogens you should eliminate before the water enters the cycle again."

According to the World Health Organisation, half of the population of developing countries may suffer from diseases linked to a lack of clean water. As a result of the Sustainable Development Goals there is now a focus on the role of waste water; "the flip side of water".

This is good, De Kreuk adds, because she believes the flip side is equally important. Certainly in countries where water is scarce and is recycled in a much more direct way.

As a researcher De Kreuk is involved in various collaborations in Asia. Like in India, where cities are growing at an unprecedented rate; but where there are no sewage or treatment systems to process the waste water from all these people. "This is a current issue that is out of control." The waste water in these metropolises does not only cause disease, it also pollutes the rivers into which it is discharged.

If you could treat the water, you could create a new source of water for all the millions of city dwellers, provided it is done properly.

This is where De Kreuk's expertise comes in. "I am a technologist", she explains. "I examine purification systems; which system is suitable here and how are we going to achieve it? In India we are currently looking at ways to organise treatment locally and on a small scale, so without the large sewer systems that we know, but in a district or apartment complex."

Her partners at the Vrije Universiteit and research institute TERI in Delhi are studying the social aspect of water. What do people think of water and safety? Are they prepared to directly recycle treated waste water. "In the Netherlands we think that this is disgusting. But it's not, you know; in Namibia they've been doing it for years."

De Kreuk would prefer to see water treatment designed in such a way that it can generate an income, by separating waste

flows and selling water, energy surpluses or fertilisers. "When a profit can be made parties will also be inclined to maintain the system."

"If it only were true: a well that solves all your problems"

Burkina Faso, 2017 – after a four-hour drive, a canoe trip and a journey across dirt tracks on the back of a 50cc bike with gears, we finally reach our destination: a water pump, installed by the International Organisation for Migration in the south of Burkina Faso. It is a region from which many young people set off to seek their fortune in Europe. Do the youngsters gathered around the well know why IOM placed it there? No, not really. "The idea is that it removes your fundamental reason for migrating; as a result you don't want to leave anymore." They grin: "If only that were true, a well that solves all your problems."

At the core is the sixth Sustainable Development Goal about access to water. It is no longer a purely technical subject, but more than ever a political issue; especially now that governments are pointing to water as a cause of migration. From the WASH strategy 2016-'30 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Water insecurity in countries of origin is one of the fundamental causes of conflict and migration. [...] These fundamental causes must be eliminated."

When you talk to people who do not have access to water, you're talking about the 'last mile': the last 884 million people with no clean drinking water. The people that are most difficult to reach: the vulnerable, those that live in remote areas, outcasts, those that want to leave, the poorest of all.

Mels, Fonseca and De Kreuk all see challenges in this task. In order to achieve the Sixth Goal, political will as well as the will to invest are required, sometimes also selflessly, Fonseca emphasises. After all, if we want to provide the poorest people with access to water, someone will have to pay for it.

It does not suffice to merely save a well, as the boys in Burkina Faso already know: a well is no panacea. According to one of them, water is "A matter of survival." ●

Drinking water and sanitation



Around the village pump

The villagers are responsible for maintaining their water pump in the Ugandan countryside. For a long time the government and aid organisations viewed this management model as the key to better water supplies. But is this still the case? On assignment.

Author and photographer: Eva Huson

In Kanara's village street a handwritten note is attached to a bamboo stick. The note bears the title 'Water meeting' and calls on all villagers to convene for a serious discussion at three o'clock that afternoon. The topic of the meeting is the only water pump that exists in this rural area in West Uganda. "And of course I had to go and fetch everyone myself", Jonathan Bengyi Kabuka, the note's signatory, winks. He stands a short distance away, in a garden with mango trees, and surveys the full meeting benches in front of him. It is four o'clock and the meeting can begin.

Kabuka is the new chairman of Kanara's water committee, a small group of residents that has been elected by the rest of the village to manage and maintain the local water pump on a voluntary basis. This is an important task, because the national water mains do not reach these remote villages in the province. Anyone who is thirsty or wants to wash him/herself in Kanara has to rely on this communal water point.

In order to ensure that the pump remains operational, Kabuka's team sees to it that the surrounding water point is kept clean and that villagers use the lever properly. The volunteers also make sure the local mechanic regularly services the device and performs any repairs quickly and correctly. In order to fund all this, the water team also has a financial task. Every month the committee collects a water tax, fifty eurocents per household, which the treasurer keeps in a piggy bank.

"Well, yes, that's the idea", says Kabuka. Following the death of his predecessor, the water committee stagnated and for months the water tax went uncollected. The payment arrears are substantial, and that is exactly what Kabuka, recently elected as the new chairman, wants to address today during his first meeting. "Everyone has

to pay in the end”, the Ugandan says in a fiery tone.

The fact that it is not the government, but villagers like Kabuka who manage and fund a water point, has been the norm in the Ugandan countryside since the nineties. The idea was developed at the offices of the United Nations during the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade in the 1980s.

It is where a series of conferences and communiqués led to the same conclusion: centralised water management in rural areas in low-income countries is doomed to fail. People were convinced that these governments failed or barely managed to keep their water infrastructure operational due to their crippling bureaucracy and usually empty treasury.

Which is a shame, because many wells and water pumps were consequently neglected, fell into disrepair and became unusable in the long term. According to UN water experts, setting up water committees in remote rural areas offered a solution to the authorities. Because when each water point has a volunteer committee that ensures maintenance and funding, the authorities do not have to recruit mechanics or allocate money to pay for repairs. Indeed, once a well or water pump had been constructed, you no longer have to worry about it.

The idea was supported by the authorities in Africa and also gained acceptance with development organisations. They regard the management model as an attractive way of guaranteeing maintenance of the wells and pumps they constructed after their departure. In Uganda, where the state was struggling at the time to maintain its water infrastructure, the method was also an immediate hit and the government set up the first water committees in the early nineties, together with aid organisations.

Now, twenty years later, water committees are incorporated in the Ugandan water policy and setting up a committee is one of the conditions that applies if a village is to acquire a water point. According to government statistics, the country has thousands of committees. It's time to take stock: does this kind of volunteer management work? Is communal water management actually the key to sustainable water supplies?

Water committee member John Tumwesigye at work



Village residents in Nyabani refuse to pay the water tax

“Children from the village school hang around the pump all day long”, a large lady shouts from the meeting bench. “Why should I pay the same monthly amount as the village school? That’s not fair, is it?” An older man wearing a hat seconds her: “If they break the pump when they’re hanging around, we’ll then have to pay for the repairs, won’t we? I don’t agree.”

In Kanara the water meeting has now been in session for half an hour and chairman Kabuka has fallen silent. He faces greater opposition than he had bargained for: most fellow villagers refuse to pay the water tax.

Their resistance is not surprising. The evidence is crystal clear: failing water committees are the rule rather than the exception. In the *Community Development Journal* published by Oxford University researchers calculated that thirty to sixty percent of these committees in rural Africa fail or barely function.

This appears to be no different in Uganda. According to the state, more than eighty percent of water committees function as they should, but official figures contradict this claim. A sample taken by IRC, a knowledge institution in the field of drinking water, revealed that just a third of the water points in the Kabarole district have a water committee, of which less than eight percent is in fact active and collects money.

The main reason for the failure of committees? “Unwilling payers”, according to Martin Watsisi, who works for the Ugandan branch of IRC, which manages Watershed (see box). Together with Ugandan organisations, the programme strives to influence government policy on water facilities and catchment areas. “Users in rural Uganda”, Watsisi explains, “currently have little income, and there is the prevailing idea that water should be free.” People view it as a gift from Mother Nature, the authorities or aid organisations, which

does not have a positive impact on their willingness to pay.

The fact that not all water users interact closely, let alone collaborate in everyday life is also problematic. According to Sheila Ruyondo, from the Ugandan organisation and Watershed member, JESE, this is a breeding ground for distrust. “You see that water users are often very afraid that the treasurer will disappear along with the savings.”

“Water users are often very afraid that the treasurer will disappear with the savings”

Therefore the villagers keep a tight grip on their purses, or prefer to put their money into a collective savings and credit system such as Yahura Yehoza, in which a small group jointly saves for emergencies such as a funeral or irrepairable farming equipment. “You see”, Ruyondo explains, “that water is not by any means a priority for everyone in the Ugandan countryside.”

Motivation is another problem. “Committee members carry out their tasks as volunteers”, Watsisi continues. “So if the rest of the village opposes them, they ask themselves: ‘Why bother?’” When



A water committee in Western Uganda

users refuse to pay the water tax, the situation will quickly deteriorate. Committees will then not meet anymore, departing members will not be succeeded and the group will be dormant over time, with all the misery this entails.

Because when the well does not function anymore due to a lack of maintenance, it drains the committee’s piggy bank and the well cannot be used anymore. “Therefore people will often revert to using open water sources such as the closest river or swamp.” Watsisi concludes. “Or they may visit a water pump a few kilometres away, where the problems of payment will frequently emerge again. In the end a water pump is a public water point, to which everyone has free access.”

And committees also struggle with the poor financial capacity of their members. Before the water committees were introduced, the authorities may not have been able to manage the water infrastructure in a successful way, but they left the job to paid experts. How realistic is it to expect that small groups of unpaid amateur managers, such as Kabuka and his team, can handle these management and maintenance tasks?

“It’s not always straightforward”, Ruyondo from JESE acknowledges. The committee members elected by the village, that is to say, the residents that are trusted most, are often elderly and cannot always read and write, let alone keep the books or convince defaulters.

Finally, what also does not help is the fact that the Ugandan government is almost absent. Committees hardly receive any support when they encounter problems, and are not accountable to anyone for the work they carry out. As stipulated by national guidelines, when a committee is founded community rules are drawn up on paper, including the fines issued to defaulters. However, these rules do not have a legal basis in practice and the village police and lead

ers do not make a genuine effort to enforce them. “Ultimately”, Watsisi explains, “a local politician prefers to sign a land agreement for which he receives a fee than to lose votes by clamping down on voters with regard to an unpopular water tax.”

Officially, the volunteer management falls under the supervision of subdistricts, the lowest administrative level of the Ugandan government. Officials should motivate, support and inspect the committees, but in fact the subdistrict shines is mainly absent. “It’s simple”, according to Stella Kahumde, head of the West Ugandan subdistrict of Karambi. “There is just no money.”

Anyone that scrutinises the national budget can see that the Ugandan government gives priority to roads and power cables. The head of a subdistrict has to manage with a few thousands of euros, which the local council can budget itself. “However, aldermen are not interested in investing money in something abstract like supervising water management”, Kahumde says. Therefore the hands of the civil servants in the water department are tied. At present there is a lack of money for transport as well as for the ‘daily allowance’, the Ugandan custom of paying officials extra when they are on the road.

Officials are therefore shackled to their desks and this is reason for concern, Ruyondo warns: “A water committee cannot succeed on its own. You have to continue to monitor and inspect members.” Watsisi agrees: “It concerns a group of volunteers, to whom you have to devote time and energy.” When this kind of support is not provided, as is currently the case, he believes sustainable water supplies are doomed to fail.

Kabuka is still sitting in silence on his chair in the mango garden in Kanara and fellow committee member John Tumwesigye, also a farmer and water pump technician, takes over: “We recently tried out a pre-paid method. You paid per filled jerry can instead of the monthly water tax.” People sitting on the wooden meeting benches murmur in agreement.

“However”, Tumwesigye continues, looking severely at his fellow villagers, “when the pump operator we hired went home, someone broke the lock off the pump and stole water.” A woman wearing a shirt from a major aid organisation shakes her head and jumps

up: “I just don’t think we should have to pay. It should be up to the authorities or the *mzungus*.” There is a loud applause from the benches.

The aid organisations in Uganda are well aware that it is difficult for the community of users to solve the issues related to managing the water pump on their own. This is why some try and intervene through an information campaign that should convince the villagers of the usefulness of the water tax. The villagers of Kanara also benefited from a campaign to raise ‘awareness’ on a couple of occasions.

According to committee member Tumwesigye, the sessions were not particularly memorable: “They show up every few months, but if you want to bring about a real change, the trainers must visit much more often.” Tumwesigye is also not a fan of the alternative payment methods, such as the pre-paid model, which the aid organisations propose to the water committees: “There is no point if we have no authority; the village just doesn’t take us seriously.”

This is a reason for aid organisations, including the members trained by Watershed, to defend people like Kabuka and Tumwesigye and seek a solution through the administrative route, or by advocating an institutional safety net for water committees. For example, the Ugandan JESE is setting up associations for water users, an umbrella organisation that water committees can join on a voluntary basis.

The idea is that the associations take over some of the work from committees by helping them collect money and plan repairs and carry out the periodic service. “This is how we want to guarantee that the water supply is really sustainable”, Ruyondo states. JESE has currently set up three associations, but at the moment the bottleneck is the lack of funding. “We pay everything ourselves right now”, Ruyondo reveals. “However, we hope the associations will be sufficiently effective to train the water committees, so that they collect enough funds to be able to pay the staff members of the association.”

The Ugandan branch of IRC is now lobbying for a more ‘authoritative’ version, in the form of local authority water states within the subdistricts. “Our aim is to set up official water departments at the lowest administrative level”, says Watsisi.

The water committees can turn to them for support and training, but must also be accountable. Moreover, it is the intention that the

Watershed

Watershed is a programme by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a consortium comprising IRC, Simavi, Wetlands International and Akvo. The project, which runs for five years (2016-’20), is part of the strategic partnerships and focuses on the management and use of water supplies and catchment areas in six countries (Bangladesh, India, Mali, Ghana, Uganda and Kenya).

Its objective is to support social organisations in their role as active champions of water users. This approach enables the consortium to influence government policy and to guarantee quality and sustainable water supplies over time. The programme has entered its second year in Uganda and 24 organisations are receiving training, ranging from data visualisation to lobbying techniques.

They concern lobbying tips provided by

Steven Birungi, director of the Ugandan organisation and Watershed member Hewasa.

- **“Tailor your communication.** When you speak with the head of a village, use different language and arguments than those you would use when you are talking with an honoured district politician. You can confront the latter about his election promises or budget, while you should try and convince the head of a village by clearly explaining the consequences of certain customs and traditions in the village. In short, put yourself in the shoes of the person in front of you.”

- **“Be patient. In Uganda,** lobbying is more or less viewed as influencing behaviour. Many policymakers currently base their choices on the wishes of local politicians and predominantly focus on water infrastructure. That is obviously very easy

to ‘sell’. However, we try and persuade officials to make policy choices based on facts. This is a long and complex process. Is a five-year programme enough to turn things around? I wouldn’t dare speculate.”

- **“Work together.** The programme is still running, but I am already proud of how we collaborate as a consortium, especially at the implementation level. As Ugandan organisations we all have our specific strengths. At Hewasa our strong point is drinking water, JESE excels at integral water management and IRC is extremely skilled in documentation and lobbying work. Since we now form a consortium we maintain contact more closely than before and really work together as water clubs. It’s fantastic, because you can easily exchange knowledge and reinforce each other’s projects.”

water committees will become part of the water department, which means that the committee members will also be paid. Watsisi: “We want to eliminate volunteer work and ensure that the water managers will become professional. This is the only way to improve the committees over time.”

Michael Byamukama, who works as a water official in the Kamwegne district, completely agrees. Together with a group of organisations, including IRC and Water For People, he has launched a water department in five subdistricts. “We are still waiting for the green light from the head of each subdistrict and then we can get started.”

Well, yes, there is just one major problem: the Ugandan government is not convinced by the plan, which means there is a lack of funding. The fact that this particular cabinet has allocated the highest amount ever to the water portfolio, will not be directly felt by the water committees in the opinion of Watsisi: “As long as we have no proof that the water departments work, the government prefers to invest money in building water infrastructure rather than managing it.”

To anyone who has read the political programme of the government party NRM, this comes as no surprise. President Museveni’s party writes that its goal is to transfer water management and maintenance again from volunteers back to the authorities.

“However”, official Byamukama says with a grimace, “the fact that they have written this down does not mean it will actually happen. Where do they get the money and experts from now? Water management in the countryside always costs too much money and time.” The official also dismisses the suggestion to bring the private sector or national water company to the Ugandan province: “That is too expensive and too complicated.”

It is clear that rural water management by volunteers has its limitations. However, starting an alternative, such as setting up a water department, is quite an undertaking. But will the lobbying end? “Absolutely not”, Watsisi grins. The financial year began in June, so Watsisi has a year to manoeuvre ‘his’ water departments into the next budget.

He is therefore outlining institutional guidelines and examining with a number of organisations whether they could fund the water departments themselves. “If the government sees the ‘train’ is starting to move”, he says, “it might jump on board after all.”

“Alright people, we’ll postpone the payment once again”

“Hey, when is this going to be finished?”, a man wearing a baseball cap calls out impatiently. Kabuka and Tumwesigye glance at each other anxiously. The meeting has already lasted an hour and the villagers are becoming impatient. The pair have run through the payment rules one more time, but it does not look like the residents will want to pay the water tax. Tumwesigye hesitantly looks at his chairman, who gives him a timid nod. “Alright people”, Tumwesigye exclaims. “We know it’s difficult and that you have not brought in the harvest yet. We, the water committee, want to help you: we’ll postpone the payment once again.” ●

In the future, the Ugandan government also wants to place national pipelines in rural areas, such as this common pipeline

