Piped water system revives learning in West Nile schools

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After years of civil conflict and prolonged underdevelopment, Northern Uganda and parts of West Nile continue to face severe challenges in accessing clean and safe water. Many communities still rely on unsafe sources, resulting in widespread health complications and hindering progress in education, agriculture, and economic growth.

Despite the region's natural water sources; rivers, streams, and seasonal wells,the absence of proper infrastructure and limited maintenance has left schools, health facilities, and households in crisis.

In response, the Government of Uganda, in partnership with UK Export Finance, contracted Nexus Green Limited to construct water systems aimed at supplying clean, safe drinking water to communities, including schools and churches across the country.

The intervention is already transforming lives. In several areas of Maracha, Yumbe and Arua districts, where learners had previously abandoned classes due to poor sanitation and unreliable water access, piped water has begun to reverse the trend. School hygiene, academic performance, and enrollment have markedly improved.

At the center of this renewed hope are Oci Primary School in Vura, Arua City, and Yivu Secondary School in Yivu SS Village, Alikua Sub-county in Maracha District. Both are beneficiaries of the €600,000 water supply and irrigation system project funded for Arua City,Maracha and Yumbe Districts.

The installation of piped water is steadily revitalizing education in these communities, proving once again that clean water does more than quench thirst; it restores dignity, health, and the desire to learn.

Previously, the schools depended on a single borehole shared with surrounding communities. This often left pupils spending long hours queuing for water time that should have been spent in class or preparing meals. The congestion also compromised sanitation, with inadequate water for cleaning classrooms and latrines.

According to Robert Draleni, the headteacher of Oci Primary School, which has an enrollment of 1,040 learners, the impact of the new piped water system has been immediate and profound.

"We had a big challenge accessing clean water. Our borehole was shared with the community, and learners spent a lot of time queuing," he said. "Earlier this year, clean piped water was extended to our school. Learners' punctuality has improved, and lessons begin early because they spend less than five minutes drawing water from the tap."

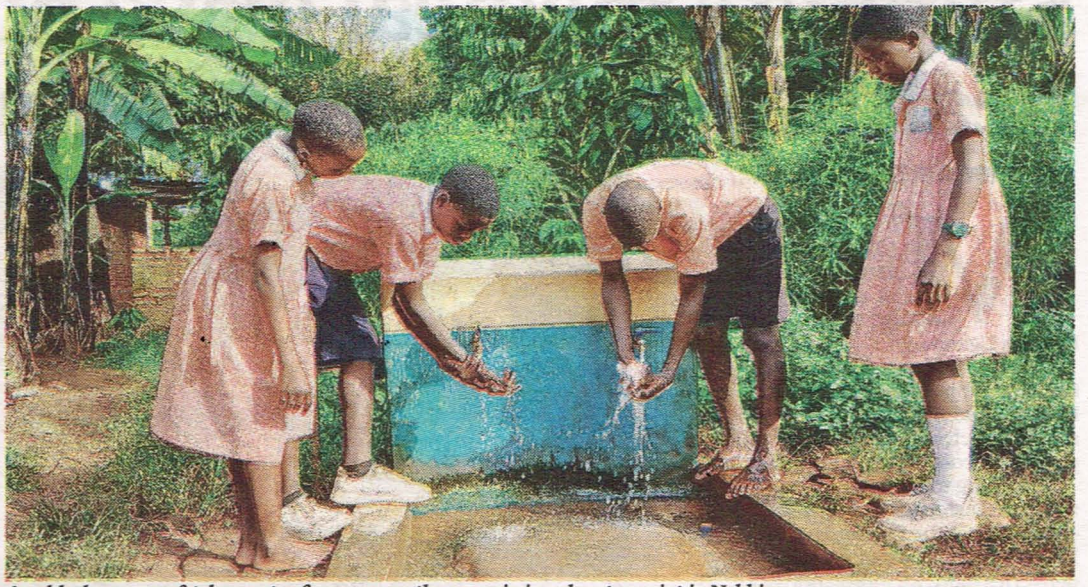
Draleni said cases of diarrhea and other water-borne diseases have drastically reduced, alongside absenteeism. Initially, more than ten learners would miss class every day.

"We have a school feeding program where learners take porridge, and others have lunch depending on arrangements with parents. Meals are now prepared on time, and learners feed on time," he explained.

Draleni also reported that some learners who had dropped out have now returned, thanks to the improved sanitation and convenience brought by the new water system.

"Sanitation at school has greatly improved. Learners can mop their classes, and the toilets are always clean because they are washed every day," he said.

The situation was no different at Yivu Secondary School, where learners and teachers also shared a borehole with the surrounding community. The crisis worsened when the borehole eventually broke down, leaving the school without any reliable source of clean water.



An elderly woman fetches water from a recently-commissioned water point in Nebbi

Modest Bandale, the director of Studies at Yivu SS, said that the breakdown forced the school to resort to unsafe alternatives.

"After the borehole broke down, we had no option but to draw water from nearby streams. This immediately increased cases of diarrhea, bilharzia, and other water-borne diseases among learners," he said.

"Before the extension of piped water into the compound, it was very difficult to control learners' discipline because they could leave school at any time under the pretext of fetching water, and some of them would not return," Modest added.

He said personal hygiene among learners had deteriorated because students lacked water to wash their uniforms and maintain cleanliness.

"Food is now cooked in time and served to learners, which is a big academic benefit. Time that would have been wasted fetching water is now saved. Managing time, especially for preparing meals, has greatly improved."

He added that learners' sanitation cleaning toilets and bathrooms has improved significantly, reducing hygiene-related diseases, which were previously very common.

Winnie Neva, the head girl of Yivu Secondary School, said the water source has saved learners from conflicts and altercations with community members because water is now available at school 24 hours a day.

"We need a lot of water at the girls' wing. We wash clothes every day, we bathe, and the water is especially important during menstruation," she said.

Morris Adrapi, the head prefect of Yivu Secondary School, said the water point is an essential resource for the learners.

"Water has really improved our well-being at school. Before piped water, boys walked long distances to bathe in the swamp and returned very late. Some would come to class without bathing, wearing dirty uniforms and producing an odor that made learning difficult."

"The drinking water from the borehole contained iron fillings, which could cause ulcers or even cancer. The school nurse was always busy treating water-related illnesses."

"Water-borne diseases such as schistosomiasis, diarrhea, and typhoid were very common.Time management was very poor. Sometimes we ate late at night because water was not available," he noted.

He said that before piped water was extended to the school, sanitation was poor because the flushing toilets had no water, and learners had no time to fetch water for cleaning.