

Making Sanitation for all a reality in Africa

Reflections on AfricaSan 4 written by Rehema Aanyu, Liaison and Networking Officer, Uganda Water and Sanitation NGO Network (UWASNET)

A week before the 4th AfricaSan Conference in Dakar, Senegal, I was attending a regional learning and sharing forum for 35 UWASNET member organizations in the Busoga region. One of the items on the agenda was training members in the “Sanitation as a Business” model which is aimed at changing people’s perception of fecal matter from waste and inspire investment in it for profit. We visited a hospital that was using fecal matter to produce biogas for cooking. And yet with such innovation, the idea of “cooking with poo” was, and still remains, detestable to many.



During the country dialogue on action plans and progress on the eThekweni commitments at AfricaSan, the Ugandan Head of Delegation and State Minister of Health, Hon. Sarah Opendi, acknowledged the progress made by Egypt in generating biogas from fecal matter and committed to initiating the same approach to Uganda to attract investments in biogas from poo. She acknowledged that changing people’s perceptions on poo would be an uphill task but one she was willing to take on. “Changing the perception that shit is gold and can generate fuel for profit will eradicate poor sanitation instantly, because everyone will be storing it properly,” she said.

During her opening remarks, Catarina de Albuquerque, Vice Chair of Sanitation and Water for All (SWA), highlighted that realising the human right to water and sanitation is more than coming up with declarations at international conferences like AfricaSan, but far more about following up on action plans and commitments made at country level for real implementation.

SWA has been very instrumental in enabling the process of country level implementation of commitments. They have done so by providing a platform where dialogue translating into action at the country level is realised through collaboration - not only nationally, but also regionally and internationally. To support this process, SWA has instituted civil society Focal Points. These representatives are namely the umbrella organisations of CSOs in the different countries, who are responsible for following up on their respective country commitments; all to ensure that what was committed to on paper, translates into real action.

To realise this, there is a need for factual information to assess progress. SWA provides information on actual country progress and this becomes a strong evidence-based tool for advocacy, to call for the political prioritisation and provision of effective WASH services.

UWASNET acts as an institution that contributes to meeting the Government of Uganda’s goal of poverty alleviation - mainly through access to safe, clean water and improved standards of sanitation and hygiene. We have benefited greatly from our partnership with SWA. Through our participation, we have strengthened our capacities to engage with not only other CSO networks in the region and internationally, but also by participating in high-level dialogue meetings at a country level. This has allowed us to follow up on Uganda’s commitments, participate in developing strategies to operationalize the undertakings and to ensure accountability and good governance. UWASNET has also ensured that CSOs play an active role in the process of implementation by aligning organisational goals to the undertakings made.

This is why Catarina de Albuquerque, Vice Chair- Sanitation and Water for All (SWA)’s call stood out for me at AfricaSan conference. Her message resonated with UWASNET’s wish for the conference which was highlighted in a pre-conference survey that asked participants to share the one message they wish to promote at the 4th AfricaSan conference in Dakar, Senegal.

“There is a lot of talk about provision of safe, clean water and facilitating improved standards of sanitation and hygiene, but there is minimal action towards this goal. Our key message as UWASNET is a call for recognition of sanitation as a priority, a call for provision, access and action towards achieving water, sanitation and hygiene for all,” I wrote in the survey.

The 4th AfricaSan Conference ended with the Ngor Declaration, a new set of commitments replacing the eThekweni commitments made previously in South Africa. The status report of sanitation in Africa showed that even though there were improvements in terms of access to clean, safe water and improved standards of sanitation and hygiene, a lot needed to be done to fully realize sanitation and water for all in Africa. This is also recognized in the Ngor Declaration which states that,

“...while an estimated 133 million people living in Africa gained improved sanitation since 1990, the level of progress has not kept pace with demographic change; many countries do not have adequate high-level leadership, financial and human resources to implement existing policies, fail to tackle equity, do not build, manage or maintain sanitation systems and services, or create the large-scale hygiene behavior change.”

The Ngor Commitments are inspired by the need to change perceptions on sanitation. This will certainly impact greatly on the scaling up of sanitation technologies and approaches at country level. *Ngor* is a *Wolof* word that means dignity. And in reference, adequate sanitation is an issue of dignity. I know for sure that in Uganda, change of perceptions of sanitation will certainly impact greatly on the progress of the country in regard to sanitation and hygiene. Poo is certainly gold and investment in the poo business is certainly possible when there is change of perception.

As countries and organizations shared their experiences in WASH service provision, there were lessons learnt that can be adopted to implement the Ngor Declaration at country level because certainly, in some areas, a lot needs to be done.

It is my prayer that by 2030, access to clean, safe water and improved standards of sanitation and hygiene will be a reality for all in Africa. This is only possible when there is action on the ground. And it takes collective effort to achieve this with every partner committedly playing their role and also ensuring that others are actually playing their roles as well.



Uganda Water and Sanitation NGO Network (UWASNET) is the national umbrella organisation for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the Water and Environment sector. UWASNET is crucial in helping government realise its targets of alleviating poverty and achieving MDGs through universal access to safe, sustainable water and improved sanitation. UWASNET plays this vital role in partnership with other key sector players such as the Government of Uganda, Development Partners and the private sector. Find out more about UWASNET on their website: <http://www.uwasnet.org/Elgg/>