Local Water Conflicts in Uganda: Options for Peacebuilding Policy and Practice

By Resty Naiga, PhD

This policy brief draws on the results of field-based research on water-related conflicts in Western Uganda to analyze the governance and institutional building aspects of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The brief provides policy and practical options on how to address governance aspects of peacebuilding in relation to local water conflicts.

BACKGROUND

Water-related structural violence and insecurity are manifested in the form of waterborne diseases and illnesses sometimes resulting in deaths; food insecurity; low productivity and livelihood losses leading to increased rural poverty; gender inequalities and loss of educational opportunities. Water insecurity accounts for over 33% of the school dropouts and poor school performance in rural areas of Uganda. Women lose 4-6 productive hours on water collection and may suffer domestic violence by suspicious spouses. Uganda spends approximately US$10 million annually treating waterborne diseases (MoWE, 2017). Therefore, the potential for water security to mitigate conflict and greatly improve the quality of life in communities cannot be overemphasized.

Over 78% of the rural population in Uganda receives water from communally used and managed water sources such as boreholes, shallow wells, protected springs, and gravity flow tap stands. These sources are limited in terms of numbers and quantity of water, prompting competition, rivalry and contention among users and policy actors. The water sources are also subjected to unregulated multiple uses leading to contamination which exacerbates conflicts between different users such as crop farmers and pastoralists. The water governance situation is therefore characterized by competition, overuse, and free riding. Failure to interrogate water conflicts contributes to water resource degradation and is also a risk factor for escalating conflicts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Integrate peacebuilding into all water development processes right from the pre-construction, through implementation phase to the post-construction phase including operation and maintenance.
- Build robust local self-governance institutions and conflict resolution mechanisms to coordinate and resolve conflicts that might arise among different actors.
- Use participatory methods and prioritize gender mainstreaming, including women’s participation in WUCs as stipulated in water management policy and processes.
- Review land compensation practices since the current practice places too much burden on the owners of the land on which the water infrastructure is situated.
- Commission more research on the dynamics of local water conflicts and provide options for effectively incorporating peacebuilding into water development and management processes.
NEXUS BETWEEN PEACEBUILDING AND WATER GOVERNANCE

The governance of water-related conflicts comprises a system of institutions, including rules, laws, regulations, policies, social norms, and organizations involved in governing resource use and protection. Therefore effective water governance is imperative due to its potential to: i) consider peacebuilding as an integral part of water development and management, ii) prevent and mitigate conflicts; iii) develop conflict resolution mechanisms, iv) devise rules to promote and sustain peace and cooperation among users, and v) promote transparency and accountability, hence building robust self-governance institutions.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The results indicate that 98% of the water users experience conflicts at least once a week. Despite the high rate of water-related conflicts, 91% of the water users reported a lack of adequate conflict resolution mechanisms in their communities. Factors found to significantly influence water-related conflicts positively (reduce conflicts) or negatively (increase conflicts) are broadly categorized as governance-related factors.

FACTORS LIKELY TO INCREASE CONFLICTS

The research identified the following drivers of water-related conflicts: absence of Water User Committees (WUC), long waiting times at water sources, lack of accountability of water user fees, and inadequate levels of women’s participation in water-related decision-making in spite of provisions stating that women should occupy prominent positions in, and constitute up to 50 per cent of WUC members. Also, the lack of effective conflict resolution mechanisms, absence of community participation in decision-making regarding location of water sources, constitution of management committees, and the choice of water infrastructure alienate community members and contribute to conflict. Moreover, the lack of local capacity to repair water equipment contributes to water scarcity and increased competition over limited water sources.

FACTORS LIKELY TO REDUCE CONFLICTS

Water management performance recorded the highest positive effect on local water conflicts. The capacity of the WUC to devise water user rules and fulfill its mandate in terms of monitoring compliance to mitigate conflicts among users reduces conflicts five times. Land compensation also has a positive effect and reduces local water conflicts between users and district local government authorities four times. While a comparable shorter distance (below one km) reduces conflicts three times and a longer distance increases conflict.

OPTIONS FOR PEACEBUILDING POLICY AND PRACTICE

Drawing from the research results the following policy options are presented to policy makers and practitioners:

- Integrate peacebuilding into all water development processes right from the pre-construction, through implementation phase to the post-construction phase including operation and maintenance.
- Build robust local self-governance institutions and conflict resolution mechanisms to coordinate and resolve conflicts that might arise among different actors.
- Use participatory methods and prioritize gender mainstreaming, including women’s participation in WUCs as stipulated in water management policy and processes.
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BIBLIOGRAPHY


