

Healthcare challenges of island, mountain dwellers

Hurdles continue to stack up against Uganda's island and mountainous communities in the arena of access to healthcare services.

BY SHABIBAH NAKIRIGYA

Access to healthcare for Uganda's island and mountainous communities remains a major challenge, with residents struggling to receive timely and adequate medical services.

The November 2025 Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) report identifies key issues that continue to hinder service delivery, exposing the communities to preventable illness and death.

The survey was conducted in 14 districts with 106 islands that included Namayingo, Buvuma, Kalangala, Kaabong, Kapchorwa, Bulambuli, Mbale, Sironko, Bukwo, Kween, Ntoroko, Bundibugyo, Kasese and Kisoro.

Bottlenecks

The report lists limited communication among the top bottlenecks, with many islands lacking reliable phone network coverage.

"In emergency situations, patients and caregivers are forced to move long distances in search of a signal to call for help. This delay often proves costly, especially for pregnant women and critically ill patients who require urgent attention," the report reads.

The situation is further complicated by the dependence on boats, the single mode of transport on the islands. The water transport is not only expensive but also unreliable, particularly during bad weather or at night.



People dwelling in mountainous and island areas face several hurdles when trying to access medical help. PHOTO/FILE

Insufficient access to ambulances has also weakened the referral system, in that even when patients manage to reach lower-level health facilities, transferring them to better-equipped centres becomes difficult.

"Equally alarming is the health worker crisis in these hard-to-reach areas. Many health facilities operate with minimal staff, while others are run by a single health worker handling all responsibilities. This leads to burnout, reduced efficiency, and compromised quality of care," reports states.

Ms Suzan Atukunda, the research lead at EOC, said the absence of Health Centre IIIs in some sub-counties denies communities access to critical services such as maternity care, laboratory testing, and emergency treatment.

"Residents are often forced to travel long distances across water to access

Poor transport.

Unreliable transport facilities leave many patients stranded. In some cases, expectant mothers are forced to deliver at home or along the way due to transport challenges, with patients likely to spend Shs400,000 in transport to access treatment."

November 2025 Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) report

these services, further increasing risks. A case in point is Tmu Health Centre II in Kaabong District, where one nurse, Anna Grace Lochoro, manages the entire facility alone," she said.

Ms Lachoro does everything includ-

ing cleaning the facility, organising it, and attending to patients. Sometimes she is called at night to handle deliveries without any support.

"Ms Lochoro attends to over 20 patients daily and conducts up to 10 deliveries per month, often under extreme pressure," she said.

Ms Atukunda said while Tmu Health Centre II is designated to handle minor illnesses such as malaria, it frequently receives complicated cases due to lack of nearby alternatives.

Mr Yusuf Muziransa, the EOC spokesperson, said the commission urges urgent government intervention, including improved communication infrastructure, increased investment in water transport and ambulance services.

"There is also need to recruit more health workers, and the establishment of Health Centre IIIs in underserved

sub-counties," he said.

Without immediate action, the report warns, thousands of island residents will remain cut off from life-saving health services.

What leaders say

Mr Robert Miggadde Ndugwa, the Buvuma Island County Member of Parliament, echoed the concerns over limited access to healthcare across the district's 52 islands.

He warned that current government planning models do not reflect the realities of hard-to-reach communities.

"The government's programme of having a health centre in each sub-county has hit a dead-end since majority of island are depending on health centre IIs," he said.

Mr Miggadde said the residents, who are estimated at more than 300,000 people, are often forced to travel long distances across water to access basic services.

Health ministry responds

While Dr John Baptist Waniye Nambobe, the commissioner for health services and emergency medical services at Ministry of Health defended the current policy framework, he acknowledged existing gaps.

"Every constituency should have a Health Centre IV, and a population of 500,000 people should have a general hospital. That has been the catch, but this report challenges us to think outside the box, especially for hard-to-reach areas like islands and mountainous regions," he said.

Dr Nambobe said the ministry shifted its focus to strengthening Health Centre IIIs to provide up to 90 percent of essential services, supported by improved infrastructure, equipment, medicines and staffing.

"These gaps are already captured in our three-year sector plan," he noted.

Dr Nambobe added that government plans to upgrade selected Health Centre IVs into community hospitals and improve emergency response by deploying both boat and land ambulances in island districts.

"Where we provide a boat ambulance, we must also ensure a land ambulance. That gap has been noted," Dr Nambobe said.