



Residents fetch water at a water system installed by TotalEnergies in Buliisa District. PHOTO/MICHAEL AGABA

How infrastructure push is reshaping health in Buliisa

From solar-powered maternity wards to boreholes that have curbed deadly diarrhoea, a massive infrastructure push by an unlikely partner is transforming survival rates in one of Uganda's most underserved districts.

BY MICHAEL AGABA

Sarah Atim still remembers the darkness that often turned childbirth into a gamble. Recently, at Avogera Health Centre III in Buliisa District, the midwife reflected on the years when she and her colleagues would gather around flickering lanterns to deliver babies, their torchlight casting long shadows on walls stained by kerosene smoke. "In the past, we relied on torches or small lanterns at night when assisting mothers in labour," Atim says, standing in a ward now illuminated by electric lights. "It was not safe for the patients or for us. Now we have reliable lighting and running water. We handle emergencies with much more confidence."

Atim is describing a significant transformation occurring in the remote district on the shores of Lake Albert. For decades, Buliisa District has exemplified the health disparities in rural Uganda, with one doctor serving every 130,000 people, health centres lacking running water, and maternity wards where new-

borns who stopped breathing were resuscitated using a midwife's fingers due to the absence of proper machines. Today, however, this narrative is being rewritten by an unexpected author: an oil company.

The infrastructure of survival

The transformation at Avogera is evident in details that most visitors might overlook: taps that run, toilets that flush, and solar panels that store daylight for nighttime emergencies. These are the everyday miracles of modern healthcare, and they have come to this area through the Tilenga oil project, operated by TotalEnergies EP Uganda in partnership with World Vision.

Across the Allertine Graben, the statistics tell a story of significant impact. Since 2010, TotalEnergies has invested in infrastructure that affects nearly every aspect of daily life. This includes the construction of 235 resettlement houses to replace homes displaced by development, the rehabilitation of classrooms at Kisomere and Kirama primary schools, and the drilling of boreholes in communities where women once had to walk 90 minutes to obtain water that could make their children sick.

At Anaka General Hospital in the neighbouring Nwoya District, 12 staff houses have been rehabilitated. Though this may seem like a modest intervention, it has had a considerable impact. A clinical officer at the hospital explains that when health workers have decent housing, they are more likely to stay.

When they remain, patients receive consistent care for fevers, vaccinations, and other



Better service.

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emergencies that rarely make headlines.

The solar dividend

Between December 2023 and January 2024, more than 4,000 solar lamps were distributed to homes, schools, and clinics in Buliisa and Nwoya. These lamps replaced kerosene, which is costly, polluting, and hazardous. Children who once studied by the dim, smoky light of kerosene now read comfortably without the coughs that used to disturb their sleep.

One mother is thrilled that her son can now study until 9pm, with his eyes protected and his grades improving. The health benefits are significant, including fewer respiratory infections and reduced eye strain. Additionally, the availability of light extends the hours available for learning.

Water as medicine

In Ngwedo, the installation of new pipes and the rehabilitation of boreholes have turned diarrhoea from a common issue into a rarity. The Kirama water project, scheduled for completion in 2026, aims to extend these improvements to Wanseko and Kigwera. Access to clean water will help reduce dehydration in children and strengthen families against cholera outbreaks.

Philippe Groueix, the general manager of TotalEnergies, emphasises that these investments are part of a larger vision. "Economic empowerment is central to our approach to responsible oil and gas devel-

BY THE NUMBERS

The Challenge (Before the Investment)

- Doctor-to-patient ratio: 1:130,000 (compared to the WHO recommendation of 1:1,000).
- Water access: Women often walked up to 90 minutes to fetch water from unsafe sources.
- Maternal care: Deliveries were performed by torchlight or kerosene lanterns; no reliable power for medical equipment.
- Infrastructure: Health centres lacked running water and proper sanitation.

The Intervention (Tilenga Oil Project & Partners)

- Clean water: Drilling of new boreholes and rehabilitation of existing ones; the Kirama water project (due 2026) will serve Wanseko and Kigwera.
- Energy access: Distribution of over 4,000 solar lamps to homes, schools, and clinics (Dec 2023 - Jan 2024).

opment," Groueix stated. "By making targeted investments in vocational training, modern housing, healthcare, and livelihoods, we are helping communities build sustainable futures. This transformation is driven by strong partnerships with the government and the people themselves."

The work that remains

Yet infrastructure alone cannot solve every problem. The same assessment recommended continued monitoring of livelihood restoration programmes through 2026, particularly for vulnerable households, and strengthened grievance mechanisms. At Butiaba Health Centre III, construction only began in March 2026 to replace a facility submerged by Lake Albert's rising waters in 2020.

Dr Nelson Naisye, the Buliisa District Health Officer, notes that the new Butiaba facility, built by the UPDF Engineering Brigade, will include maternity wards, male and female wards, and staff quarters, the full complement of infrastructure that makes healthcare possible. For residents such as Joyce Atimango, it means an end to 30-kilometre treks for antenatal services.

The long view

At Kisomere Primary School, head teacher Tommy Okello reflects on the changes that have taken place. "When it rained, lessons would stop, and we often had to send students home early," he explains. "Many teachers lived far away because we did not have proper staff housing. During the rainy season, some teachers would arrive late, and others sought transfers to better-equipped schools. It was challenging to maintain continuity."

Now, with 11 rehabilitated classrooms, six new ones, and eight staff houses, the school can operate even during storms and teachers arrive on time. Lessons now include topics such as handwashing and nutrition, in addition to mathematics.

Jeremiah Nyagah, the national director of World Vision Uganda, emphasises that these changes go beyond just improving buildings. "They stabilise institutions by retaining staff, strengthening governance, and enhancing accountability at the community level," he says.

In Buliisa, where oil extraction will begin next year, the crucial question is whether these improvements will last beyond the drilling. For now, the positive impact is evident at Avogera Health Centre, where Sarah Atim assists mothers in labour under lights that never flicker.