



Children fetching water in Kawongo island on Lake Kyoga. The area is grappling with sanitation challenges

Kawongo residents at risk of catching diseases

By Umar Nsubuga

The residents of Kawongo Island on Lake Kyoga are living dangerously. Kawongo, which is one of the landing sites in Galiraya sub-county on Lake Kyoga in Kayunga district, is grappling with poor health and sanitation facilities. The landing site virtually has no toilets worth a name or safe drinking water sources, yet the area boasts of a population in thousands.

Last financial year, top on the district's agenda for this predominantly fishing community was to steer the area onto the path of development. Among the ways to achieve this was to improve the sanitation. But a year later, Kawongo is no different.

Unbearable sight

Mounds of human waste with flies hovering over line the lakeshores as children play and fetch water for domestic use.

Boats dock in and offload fish as hundreds of traders bargain for the goods. Dogs and people compete for space on the messy shores of this lake.

It is a picture that leaves one dumbfounded.

According to Muhammad Matovu, the area LC1 chairperson, residents say the rocky terrain and waterlogged lowlands make the construction of pit-latrines difficult.



Matovu

"A few people who build latrines lock them up to deter intruders. As such, most of the residents resort to using polythene bags commonly referred to as flying toilets. Here, the waste is put in a polythene bag and cast either into the lake, bushes or onto rooftops," he says. Others ease themselves in the bushes or in the lake.

Isaac Ntale, a fisherman, says Kawongo has one latrine which is located at Kawongo Health Centre III and serves about 1,000 residents. It is a gut-wrenching revelation.

Unsurprisingly, most of the diseases treated at the health facility are related to poor hygiene. According to records at the health centre, two to three people are admitted with typhoid and malaria every day.

Ntale says that where as other districts are passing by-laws requiring each household to have a toilet, the policy cannot work in Kawongo as construction is difficult because of the rocky terrain soils.

Robinah Abenakyal, a councillor, says she has written to the district authorities to support them construct pit latrines, but to no avail.

"We request the National Medical Stores to increase the supply of medicines for water-borne diseases," urges Stephen Nyanzi, the in-charge at Kawongo Health Centre III, who doubles as the head of health services in the area.

"The lake where people dispose their waste is the same lake where they fetch water for domestic use," Nyanzi adds.

He says that due to shortage of drugs at the health centre, only a handful of people get treatment. To ease the situation, he says, they have established village health teams to reach out to the communities for sensitisation.

Kawongo Health Centre III serves the all the five islands in the sub-county, but health workers are concerned that consignments of medicines from the medical stores are in most cases not sent on time.

Sarah Namugerwa, a resident says leaders recently asked us to contribute money to construct a toilet, but we have not responded. They do not have funds and we also cannot afford to construct toilets on our own."

Eddy Masaba, another resident, says: "We are doing badly in public health. Kawongo Health Centre has no ambulance. The Government should come to our rescue."

Health workers say residents

are battling preventable diseases such as diarrhea, malaria, typhoid, dysentery, bilharzia and sexually transmitted infections like gonorrhea. Health workers attend to at least 10 diarrhoea patients every week and three gonorrhea patients. The health centre attends to over 10 cases of malaria during rainy season every week.

"If the situation is beyond control, patients are referred to Kayunga Hospital, yet it is about 100km away," says one health worker.

Sanctuary for criminals

According to Isam Senono, the local council defence secretary many people who settled in Kawongo are criminals.

"Many of them fled their homes after committing crime, while some defaulted on debt repayment."

Kawongo is one of the major suppliers of fish in Kayunga district. "In addition, most of the land here was unoccupied so people rushed in to take advantage of it," says Senono.

Mzee Simon Masaba, who has lived on the island all his life, says that other people were attracted to the area by fishing. Fishing is the dominant economic activity, followed by carpentry and food business. Residents also practise subsistence farming.

Some residents describe the current state of sanitation on the landing site as an improvement compared to what it was two years ago.