

Oil is a water-thirsty sector

The saying "every drop of water counts" is about to become a reality in the Albertine region. Water that has been an abundant resource there could soon turn into a priceless commodity as the country enters the oil production stage. Gerald Tenywa explores the water question in the oil region

For Amos Karamagi, a resident of Bulisa, bottled mineral water is a luxury, so he and his family rely on the water from the nearby Lake Albert. "How can I waste money buying water in plastic bottles when God has given us free water in Lake Albert?" he asks. Unknown to Karamagi, however, his water supply may be cut short in a few years as oil companies use large volumes of the same for their activities. Experts say large volumes of water will be needed for these activities. According to Dr. Callist Tindimugaya, a commissioner



Residents of Adjumani crossing River Zoka, which pours its water into River Nile. Photo by Gerald Tenywa

in the Ministry of Water and Environment, a lot of water will be needed to maintain pressure underground to be able to extract the oil.

More is needed at the central processing unit to clean the mined oil to remove impurities. Also water will be needed at the refinery and its processes and for blowing out the 1,443km pipeline. Hoima's Kabaale, where the refinery and the airport will be constructed, will also house petro-chemical industries, which will also need water. In addition, hydro-electric power plants have been set up on rivers such as Wambabya in the Albertine region. It will also require water to generate electricity. Tindimugaya says there are 18 towns planned in the Albertine also requiring a lot of water. Besides, as the oil activities gather pace, Hoima and Masindi, the major towns in Bunyoro, are also expected to expand into cities. This means they will demand more water for domestic use. Already, Tindimugaya says, the human population in the Albertine region has started increasing as the prospects from the oil sector keep growing.

measures," Tindimugaya says. For instance, if the use of Lake Albert reduces the level of the water by one metre, the impact will be felt particularly on navigation, fisheries and energy. "The countries in the region will be notified because the water resources are shared with neighbouring countries," he said, adding that Uganda would also expect neighbouring DR Congo to do the same.

Shared waters
According to Tindimugaya, Uganda has 43 billion cubic metres of water, of which 29 billion cubic metres come from outside it as part of the trans-boundary resources, where there is need for co-operation. "We have the water, but there are also challenges that are related to the sites," Tindimugaya says, adding that there is need for planning to address all the concerns.

This will mean engaging neighbours through the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) to let them know about Uganda's oil activities and the demand for water. "The water is shared with other countries and Uganda should co-operate with them," he says.

In the Nile Basin, the water in the River Nile and its catchment is shared by 11 countries — Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt. But, the adequacy of water is not the only issue worrying Karamagi and other stakeholders. "I have heard about the pollution of water by oil companies elsewhere and fear that this might be repeated here on our land," Karamagi says.

According to reports, one drop of oil could contaminate up to 25 litres of water (equals one big jerrycan and a small jerrycan of water).

Fate of fish

At a recent workshop on African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) project, organised by the civil society in Kampala, Phillip Kutegeka, the Bulisa fisheries officer, said studies on fish catches and water quality were done on Lake Albert.

He said as water is removed for oil activities, there will be effects on fish, so care must be taken to leave enough to support fish and maintain the environment.

Government concerned

The Government has asked the users of water — oil companies and the water ministry — to establish the water demand.

"We have told the companies to tell us the amount of water they will have to use," Tindimugaya says. He adds that studies have been done to come up with estimates and the expected impact.

About 100,000 cubic metres of water will be required per day for refining the oil. Also, 165,000 cubic metres more will be needed for domestic use, especially in the urban centres. "We also expect demand

amounting to 200,000 cubic metres for irrigation schemes for food production or agriculture in the Albertine rift," he says. In all, at least 500,000 cubic metres of water will be needed daily.

According to Tindimugaya, some of the companies are considering recycling water, while others are eyeing underground sources. But, the underground water is not limitless, so plans must be made ahead before the oil comes out of the ground.

"As the Government, we will put this together and assess the overall impact and what will be the mitigation



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