

Universities grapple with poor sanitation

By Jacky Achon

As an undergraduate, master's and doctoral student at Makerere University, there was always one thing that disturbed Harriet Kebrungi, that was the state of sanitation on the campus of one of Africa's most prestigious learning institutions.

There were inadequate and dirty toilets. Students had to move out of the university to find toilets at a cost.

The situation was worse for pregnant students and those in their menstruation periods due to lack of water and the unhygienic state of toilets which put them at risk of getting infections.

Highly affected too were students with disabilities. It was a sorry situation that pushed Kebrungi, a doctor of philosophy (PHD) student into action.

"My question was what happens when students are doing exams or attending lectures and have to use a clean toilet, would the students get their expected result? How about the health implication for the students who postponed the deed," Kebrungi worried.

Addressing the challenge

On Friday January 19, Kebrungi received her doctorate in gender studies following completion of her research about gender responsiveness in providing and managing of water and sanitation in East African universities.

Just like at Makerere University, Kebrungi found an even bigger problem at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

What is shocking is that these universities were established in the 1970s. Despite the growing number of students and facilities, there seems to be no effort to expand or overhaul the water and sanitation systems to meet the demand.

In the 1970s, Makerere University had just over 2,000 students, while the University of Dar es Salaam had only 14 students in the faculty of law. Today the number has multiplied.

This is the challenge of most public Universities in East African. Even at Kyambogo University, where she is an administrator and lecturer, water and sanitation problems persist because the system is too old and has not been overhauled to accommodate influx of students.

The problem has affected both resident and non-resident students in halls of residences and lecture theatres.

The toilets most likely are locked at 4:00pm-5:00pm and no staff is present to manage the facility. However, there are evening students and so one wonders where they are supposed to ease themselves from.

Kebrungi says the problem is beyond numbers. More structures are being put up and connected to the old water and sanitation systems and in the end it is overloaded leading to a break down.

From her study funded by Makerere University and the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (SIDA) that started towards the end of 2012, it found that students use bushes as a coping strategy which has an environmental and public health implication.

Water and sanitation is vital
On July 28, 2010, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly recognised access to water and sanitation as a human right.

It called upon states and international organisations to provide financial resources to provide safe, accessible and affordable drinking water for all.

This is in addition to capacity-building and technology transfer to developing countries.

According to Kebrungi's study, most students and administrators in public universities across East Africa do not even know that access to good sanitation is their right.

She says: "All the universities I investigated have never seen a water policy." This is the same for health ministry that should take interest in having such policies working.

Kebrungi says even though the sector ministry has a water and sanitation policy in place, it has never disseminated it.

Why there is no solution

Lack of strategic engagement by the water ministry and universities as key partners in advancing the water policy has created a huge gap.

According to Kebrungi: "The ministry does not look for institutional partnerships but instead individuals to work as consultants. They involve someone they already know to develop policies so that they don't address institutional needs so universities are left out," she says.

Also disturbing is no direct co-ordination between National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC), the water ministry and universities in addressing the water and sanitation needs.

"When there is a water burst, NWSC will leave the whole burden to the universities because their work stops at the connection centre and the universities are strained. They will only chip in when the situation is out of control," Kebrungi explains.



Kebrungi says one should prioritise key assignments

TIP FOR SUCCESS

Kebrungi says it is important to define your goals and remain focused. Do not dwell on challenges

water.

Associate professor and dean of school of women and gender studies, Makerere University, Sarah Ssali, agrees water and sanitation is a problem public institutions are grappling with.

"With the expansion of the university, toilet facilities are not enough. Currently public toilets are only available at Mitchell Hall, gender department and main building," she says.

Kenan Okurut a water and sanitation engineer says public institutions are dogged by water and sanitation problems because many are operating beyond capacity.

The number of people using the facility maybe overwhelming and

most times the trouble stems from these facilities being occupied without inspection and approval by the city department of public health.

Okurut says the situation is bad because there is no external and internal monitoring strategies that has resulted in the water and sanitation challenges in most public institutions are facing.

The structures end up not serving their purpose. Public institutions are also allocating inadequate funds hence poor maintenance of facilities.

Apedel says if the water infrastructure at universities such as Makerere is dilapidated and not being refurbished or expanded, the real estate department of the institution needs to be questioned.

"This is a university that has an engineering department, they should be using both lecturers and students to conduct research. The studies can then be used to build better infrastructure," he says

According to Makerere University public relation officer Ritah Namisango and the estates and works department, the solution is in phased improvements of their facilities because funding needs cannot be met at once.

"Water and sanitation matters shouldn't be handled by one institution, but by several institutions, that are directly linked to it. To resolve the problem, there is need for a streamlined agenda on water and sanitation," Kebrungi says.

She is already leading a team of scientists from Kyambogo University to engage the water ministry.

"We want to develop a gender-responsive water and sanitation policy for learning institutions," Kebrungi says.

"Our public universities have seater toilets and most students complain it does not address their hygienic needs.

Resolve the problem

Okurut says public institutions need to have a proper and adequate budget to cater for sanitation.

That aside there is also need for reinforcement of the department of public health to inspect and ensure institutions have the required water and sanitation facilities in place.

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Sarah Ssali, Associate Professor and Dean of school of women and gender studies Makerere University

I knew Kebrungi long before she joined university. She is hardworking and determined. Challenges only get her fired-up. Her work is of great importance and tackles an issue that we at Makerere and other public Universities in East Africa are struggling with. This study is timely in pushing for a solution in institutions of learning.

Timothy Lusiba, former student and finance and administration manager Centurion Security, Jinja

From the time I was Kebrungi's student she wanted to get a doctorate. She has achieved that goal despite the challenges she faced. She is insightful on development aspect and passionate about gender matters. Kebrungi does not let the status quo or stereotypes dictate what should be done.

Prof. Livingstone Luboobi, supervisor, former vice-chancellor and retired professor of mathematics Makerere University

We do not care about the gender of students or staff. Kebrungi demonstrated in her study that different genders need different facilities sanitation wise. We will encourage Kebrungi to present her findings to different institutions. So far her work has been published in five international journals including the *International Journal of Women and Gender Studies*.

He says the department should not only be from the city council, but institutions should have their own.

Okurut says the health ministry, water ministry, Kampala City Council Authority and National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) should conduct impromptu inspections to ensure compliance.

Finding a solution

Kebrungi says universities need to be innovators.

"We are the experts. We should not expect other people to do for us things yet we are at the forefront of carrying out research," she says.

Kebrungi says the tendency of relying on the Government to provide solutions to every challenge must stop.

She explained that the Government is spending a lot of money on procuring consultancy or importing goods and services, yet institutions can take the lead in addressing these challenges.

So there is need to start a project and put monitoring frameworks to get to know when the water and sanitation facility was constructed, the lifespan, maintenance plan and replacement depending on population.

Universities can use the expertise to generate revenue from things like water recycling, fertilisers, biogas and services they provide

Harriet Kebrungi's Journey

Born to the late Aston and Veronica Kambonesa of Kachinga, Kyabubuma village in Kamwenge district, Harriet Kebrungi is the first female PHD holder in the district.

The last born in a family of nine, Kebrungi attended Rwenjaza Primary School and Kyabenda Senior Secondary School.

She later joined the Institute of Teacher Education Kyabongo (ITEK) now part of Kyabongo

University for a diploma in educational planning management. She then joined Makerere University for a Bachelor in Social Sciences and did a masters and PHD in gender studies.

Kebrungi worked for Mbarara University of Science and Technology as an administrator and National Agricultural Advisory Services as consultant

Currently she is the director for gender mainstreaming at

Kyabongo University and a lecturer at the department of teacher education and development studies in the faculty of education.

Managing her work life

For Kebrungi there is no permanent schedule of doing things. "I prioritise key assignments and work on them according to the urgency," she says.