



In the run-up to the World Water day, *New Vision* is publishing daily features highlighting key issues in the sector and what the public can do to save the environment and water resources. Today **Moses Nampala** looks at the water challenges in Busia district

**O**n a hot afternoon, a middle-aged woman, in the company of a seven-year-old boy, strolls purposefully to the lake shores.

The empty utensils that each of them carries explains why they have braved the scorching heat to the lake. Once at the edge of the lake, the woman squats, filling her jerrycan with water before doing the same for the little boy's container. When asked why they draw water directly from the lake, her response is fascinating.

"True, it is risky but what can we do with no alternative water sources available in our community?" retorts Agnes Auma, a resident of Majanji sub-county in Busia district.

However, just as the female figure and the little one turns to go, a dozen other natives; men, women and children emerge from almost simultaneously and stream to the lake in possession of all sorts of containers.

It is undoubtedly clear that this community on the edge of Lake Victoria, in Busia lives in depravity of a clean and safe water point.

Yet an interface with the district authorities reveals that the problem is not only confined to Majanji alone, but also the sub counties of Buhehe, Masaba, Buteba and Lunyo.

Busia chief Administrative officer Walter Iriama admits that the district is water stressed. Majanji Lake Shore village chairperson Jackson Wabwire says the village with 3,000 inhabitants, has for years now, nursed the problem of access to clean safe water.

"Previously, our main clean and safe water points were spring wells. However, for the last one decade, nature has not been kind to us; most of the spring wells have dried up," Wabwire says.

While the district boasts of 78% safe water coverage by way of boreholes, the boreholes too, dry up during long droughts besides their waters being too salty.

"A case in point has been in sub-counties of Buteba, Buhehe, Masaba and Lunyo, among others, where a sizeable proportion of boreholes have been reported to dry up during the dry season," Iriama disclosed.

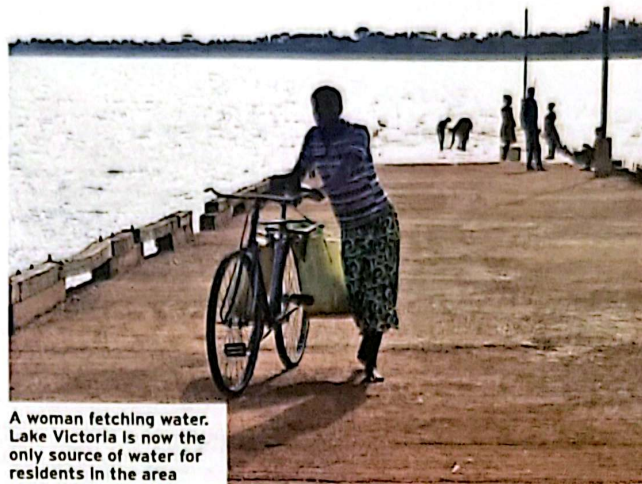
Busia district health officer Dr Robert Otuta says drawing water direct from the lake comes with serious health challenges.

"The community has very often been haunted by serious epidemic out breaks of water-related ailments, notably cholera and dysentery, among others," he observes.

Among other health challenges that the

*For the last one decade, nature has not been kind to us; most of the spring wells have dried up, says Majanji Lake Shore village chairperson Jackson Wabwire*

# Water scarcity drives Busia into the lake



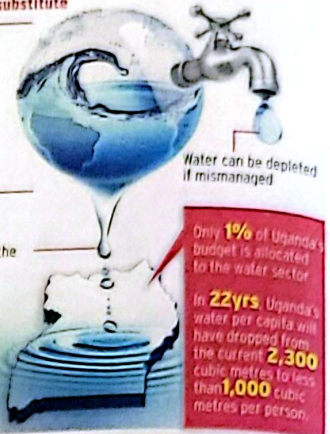
**A woman fetching water. Lake Victoria is now the only source of water for residents in the area**

## Fact file

Water has no substitute

97% of global water resources is sea water

Only 3% of the world's water is fresh water. Of this, 87% is inaccessible



## LONG-TERM SOLUTION

**T**he best solution in the long term is restoration of the depleted wetland areas. "The depleted area ought to be recovered from the encroachers and protected from continued depletion," he observes.

"The community ought to be inspired to plant more trees in order to conserve mother nature," he observed.

Iriama disclosed that a \$10m (about sh36b) World Bank-funded project was in the offing to extend piped water from Majanji landing site to Busia municipality. The project, to be implemented by the Directorate of Water Development, will cover the sub-counties of Majanji, Lunyo, Masaba, Buhehe and Buteba.

district health department has encountered, has been the bilharzia epidemic. Bilharzia, also referred to schistosomiasis, is caused by contact with fresh water contaminated with parasites released by fresh water snails.

According to Atuta, 98% of the victims of this ailment, that causes abdominal pain, diarrhoea, bloody stool or blood in urine, have been children.

High levels of vulnerability among children, has been blamed on a compulsory primitive culture upheld by this predominantly fishing community to compel their children to learn swimming in the lake at a tender age, contracting the ailment in the process.

"We are steadily managing it. We have managed to control it to 25% from 90% in the last five months," Dr Atuta explains.

According to Auma, water obtained from boreholes is not only distasteful to drink, but can hardly be used for other domestic purposes such as laundry.

"The borehole water is contaminated with oily substances. Its sticky and reacts negatively with soap," she observes.



**Experts say the water from the lake is not safe**



Busia district Environment officer Johnson Eryenyio blames the water stress in the district to wetland degradation.

"In the last decade, the district has suffered massive encroachment on the wetlands that currently could be estimated at more than 60%," Eryenyio said.

"Because wetlands used to serve as potential underground reservoirs for springs and boreholes, depletion of the ecosystem has considerably wrecked the ability of wetlands to feed the ground reservoirs with water during the dry season, which explains why the spring wells and boreholes dry up," he explains.

Eryenyio also blamed the salty underground water to huge mineral deposits in the area.

"A survey report arising from a forensic study by a team of experts from the water ministry reveals that a sizeable proportion of the district that lay on the edge of Lake Victoria, sits on huge deposits of both calcium and sodium. This explains why water from some of the boreholes in the district have salty water," explained Eryenyio.

## Way forward

Considering the factors of huge mineral deposits beneath the ground and extensive depletion of wetlands, Eryenyio says the immediate solution is by providing the community with piped water.