

Report UN Water Conference Amref side event

Wednesday March 22nd, 2023,

“Empowering Communities through Access to Clean Water and Sanitation: Solutions for Health, Gender Equality, and Climate Resilience at the UN HQ in NYC.

Amref Canada’s Executive Director **Ky’okusinga Kirunga** moderated the session, which included the following panelist:

- Knowledge Management Specialist – Water, Sanitation & Hygiene at UNICEF, **Anu Paudyal Gautam**,
- Representative of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, **Joke Baak**,
- WASH Champion, **Anastazia Rutatina** from Tanzania and
- Community Champion **Nice Nailantei** from Kenya.

The session highlighted various issues related to the WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) sector, including amplifying African voices in policy discussions, women's empowerment, mainstreaming access to WASH at all levels and in all sectors, adapting to climate change through WASH, and community-led solutions for better health.

The event commenced at 9:30 am with Ky'okusinga Kirunga welcoming the attendees and outlining the session's objectives. The session began with an impactful video featuring Agnes Gabriel, our South Sudanese WASH champion, highlighting the critical role of community health workers in remote areas, immediately engaging the participants.

Anastazia Rutatina shared a poignant account of her journey to becoming a WASH Champion and the dire consequences of the lack of access to water. She vividly described the daily struggles she faced as a young girl, having to fetch water from her grandmother's village, and realizing that many other girls experienced similar challenges, all the while recognizing that elders and people with disabilities face even greater difficulties in accessing water. This inspired her to become an advocate for change in Tanzania's WASH sector. Believing that access to WASH facilities is a basic need and not a privilege, and that it is essential for a healthy life. Anastazia is committed to seeing that every household in Tanzania has proper WASH facilities. However, traditionally, the decision-making process for investing in WASH facilities has been dominated by men, despite women being the ones who are most affected by inadequate access to clean water, proper sanitation, and hygiene. This power dynamic needs to shift to ensure that women have more agency in influencing investments towards WASH facilities. By empowering women and involving them in decision-making, the WASH sector in Tanzania can achieve better outcomes for everyone, and ensure that the basic need for access to WASH facilities is met.

Anu Paudyal Gautam also stressed how access to water and sanitation affects and benefits girls and women. A shift in mentality is needed as sanitation is often a topic of shame. Most investments are made at the household level. If we want change, we need to start there. But we need transformative change to address the structural issues of gender and social inclusion and address cultural barriers and the stigma on menstruation. Policy changes and political will and leadership are a necessity as well and commitments at school and local level. WASH is central to many SDG's and requires a holistic approach including systems strengthening and both at community as on political level more coordination is needed.

Joke Baak emphasized the Dutch government's focus on sustainable and climate-resilient access WASH as a means to achieve sustainable development, healthy and dignified lives, education, gender equality, and socio-economic development and highlighted that governments need to show political leadership for WASH. Therefore, the King and Minister of Foreign Affairs hosted a session with Head of States to strengthen political will and leadership At the UN Water Conference. Civil society plays an important role in advocating for WASH to become a national and political priority and building trust with the government. Civil society also knows what is happening on the ground and should give voices to those left behind. To support civil society, governments should provide resources, an enabling environment, recognize their importance, set priorities through conversation, and be accountable and transparent.

Nice Nailantei shared her story of how climate change is affecting the position of girls and how WASH can be a community-led solution for better health. She told how climate change is affecting the Maasai community in Kajiado County, Kenya, particularly women and girls. Due to prolonged drought, water sources have dried up, leading to loss of livestock, food scarcity, and poor health conditions. Often families see no way out and marry off their girls. Additionally, women and girls have to walk long distances in search of water, exposing them to various risks, including rape and unintended pregnancies. She drew attention to how the future does not look promising for her community if the devastating effects of climate change are not addressed and mentioned several action points to mitigate these effects including climate change adaptation and mitigation through provision of water, construction of safe spaces for girls in schools, investment in education, and promotion of gender equality.

The event concluded with a discussion on adapting to climate change through WASH, where **Nice Nailantei** and **Joke Baak** discussed adaptation strategies and solutions for addressing water-related challenges and opportunities presented by climate change. Nice addressed the role of climate actors in supporting her work and Joke Baak mentioned how the Dutch government is mainstreaming climate action into all its programs, including WASH, through infrastructure and systems strengthening, national climate-resilient sanitation action plans, and leveraging climate financing. She moreover highlighted that WASH champions should be aware of the strong linkages of WASH its contribution to socio-economic development and to make sure that they are part of the discussions and negotiations.

After an hour of discussion, **Ky'okusinga Kirunga** summarized the key takeaways from the session and thanked the speakers and attendees. Overall, the event provided valuable insights into the importance of access to clean water and sanitation for empowering communities, promoting gender equality, and building climate resilience. The speakers' personal stories and experiences highlighted the need for collective action and cross-sectoral collaboration to achieve universal access to WASH.

Key recommendations for action

- Households are the starting points for access to WASH and behaviour change. Governments and other stakeholders should prioritize investments in WASH services at the household level, ensuring that communities have access to clean water and sanitation facilities. This can be achieved by adopting participatory approaches that involve communities in the planning and implementation of WASH projects.
- Women should be empowered to take on leadership roles in WASH programs and policies, recognizing their crucial role in promoting gender equality and improving health outcomes. Governments and other stakeholders should invest in training and capacity building programs for women to build their knowledge and skills in WASH management.

- Civil society organizations play a critical role in reaching the most marginalized communities and ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making processes. Governments should support civil society actors by providing resources, creating an enabling environment, and recognizing their importance in advocating for inclusive WASH systems.
- Governments and other stakeholders should prioritize investments in locally led climate adaptive solutions to address the impact of climate change on WASH services.
- WASH is not a stand-alone issue: WASH programs should be integrated into broader development strategies to ensure that they are sustainable and have a lasting impact on communities. This requires collaboration between sectors, such as health, education, and agriculture, to address the root causes of WASH challenges and promote inclusive development.

Nanneke Nix, Martin Muchangi, Michel Luna Sanjuan and Dona Anyona were present for logistical support.

More information can be found here: [Amref | 2023 UN Water Conference](#)

Amref Flying Doctors and Amref Health Africa have made commitments to the Water Action Agenda to empower communities through access to clean water and sanitation. They can be found in the following links:

Commitment 1: [Empower and give agency to girls and women to access safe water, sanitation, hygiene including menstrual hygiene and health](#)

Commitment 2: [Community-Focused Multisectoral Collaboration for Scaling up WASH services](#)

Commitment 3: [Support and empower communities to hold governments accountable for provision of sustainable and inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene services](#)