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Hygiene Club members in Mingkaman, South Sudan, clean their new school latrine, which was built with support from USAID's PROPEL project. Photo credit: Global Communities

Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Unites Communities in War-Torn South Sudan

January 12, 2018

South Sudan is the world's youngest country — and one of its most [fragile](#). In 2013, just over two years after the country became independent, a politically fueled conflict broke out in the capital, escalating to a full-scale civil war. Tens of thousands have been killed, and more than [four million have fled](#) either within the country or to neighboring countries, making this [Africa's largest refugee crisis](#).

“The South Sudan crisis is man-made, the direct consequence of a conflict prolonged by South Sudanese leaders who are unwilling to put aside political ambitions for the good of their people,” said Blake Audsley, the former deputy manager for planning on USAID's South Sudan Response Management Team. “Ongoing fighting has disrupted access to basic services, livelihoods, agricultural production, and markets, while exposing women and children to rampant gender-based violence.”

For more information, please visit Globalwaters.org.

As the single largest provider of humanitarian assistance in South Sudan, the United States has been a leader in working to put an end to the crisis — and helping its people. USAID Administrator Mark Green [visited the country in September](#), calling on President Salva Kiir to acknowledge and address the humanitarian crisis, and meeting with internally displaced persons (IDPs). Later that month, the U.S. Government announced it would be devoting more than [\\$283 million in funding](#) to South Sudan. This assistance will support the work USAID is doing to meet day-to-day survival needs of the South Sudanese people like water, sanitation, food, and shelter. Leading this response is USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA).

When disaster strikes — either man-made or natural — OFDA sends regional and technical experts to the affected country to address humanitarian needs. OFDA responds to an average of 65 disasters in more than 50 countries around the world each year. It has been working in South Sudan since the crisis broke out. With USAID support, 1.1 million people in South Sudan receive lifesaving humanitarian assistance every month.

WASH in Crisis

Increasing access to improved water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) for disaster-affected populations in South Sudan is a top priority for OFDA. Only 41 percent of South Sudanese people have access to clean water, and just 7 percent of the population has access to adequate sanitation — [the lowest rate of sanitation access in the world](#).

As a result, waterborne diseases such as cholera spread quickly. “With the vast number of internally displaced people lacking sufficient access to clean water and sanitation, WASH programs are critical in the management of cholera, as well as to reduce the impacts of increasing food insecurity and malnutrition,” said Audsley.

But conditions in South Sudan complicate the delivery of crucial WASH aid. Violent conflict, lack of quality roads, and inhospitable terrain impede the ability to transport materials and staff required to build WASH infrastructure, and to reach the most vulnerable communities. OFDA and partners have needed to think of creative solutions to overcome these obstacles.

For example, in Mayendit County, swampy terrain made it difficult to bring in the large motorized rigs needed to drill new water wells (a.k.a. boreholes). So OFDA partner Samaritan's Purse instead brought in a water drilling rig that is manually driven — which has the added benefit of not relying on scarce fuel — and trained local staff to drill boreholes with it. Communities then formed water management committees to look after the water pumps, trained local mechanics to maintain and repair them, and mobilized community members to make a monthly contribution of 10 South Sudanese pounds (about 9 cents) to cover maintenance costs.

This approach increased the cohesiveness of communities fractured by insecurity, by uniting them around the shared goal of maintaining their new WASH infrastructure. Nyaluak, a local woman who became head of one of the new water management committees, said her neighbors are looking — together — to the community's future. “This borehole is not meant only for us, but for generations to come,” she said.

WASH is uniting communities throughout the country. With facilitation from OFDA partner Medair, community mothers have formed Care Groups devoted to health and hygiene. In these groups, a local facilitator trains networks of volunteer mothers on handwashing, nutrition for pregnant and lactating women, water purification, and other health and hygiene habits. The mothers impart this knowledge to neighbors to encourage healthy behaviors throughout the community.

“Before we had the Care Groups, we had illnesses like diarrhea, and we didn’t know what to do. We relied on the traditional knowledge of our mothers and grandmothers, but we were suffering a lot,” said Eliza, a 34-year-old mother of five. Now she meets twice a month with approximately 60 other volunteer mothers in the displacement camp where she lives, and they bring the lessons learned to other community members. “People are now washing their hands, using the resources they have to support better diets, and sleeping under mosquito nets,” she said. “There’s still diarrhea and malaria, but nowadays illnesses among children are reducing.”

Building Resilience

In addition to this emergency assistance, USAID is building resilience in South Sudan for the long term. The three-year (2015–2018) Promoting Resilience through Ongoing Participatory Engagement and Learning (PROPEL) project is working with communities on their development priorities.

The project uses a collaborative approach, collecting a wide variety of perspectives and research, and applying these lessons to project implementation. This means working with village chiefs, youth leaders, women’s association representatives, and other members of communities throughout the states of Jonglei and Central Equatoria through participatory processes such as community meetings and peace dialogues. Together, communities come up with development projects to better serve their needs, which they can maintain themselves for the long-term benefit of the community.

“PROPEL works with communities in South Sudan to help them reach consensus on their development priorities and build a project together, focusing on democratic decisionmaking and creating projects that are sustainable and will promote social cohesion among the community,” said USAID/South Sudan Mission Director Jeff Bakken. The approach has helped USAID better meet communities’ needs. For example, one priority area for PROPEL was making schools safer and more secure. The project met with communities to see what this would entail. Building safe, private, school latrines was identified as a top priority. Lack of latrines had meant children would go to the bush to relieve themselves, making them more susceptible to snake bites and illnesses. Moreover, some girls were sexually assaulted when venturing out to the bush.

With community input, USAID/South Sudan constructed latrines that met the schools’ needs — gender-segregated, clean, and secure. PROPEL also helped train parent-teacher association members to oversee facilities management and safety issues, and formed school health clubs to promote hygiene and maintain the cleanliness of the new latrines.

“We did not have confidence in coming to school, we had nowhere to relieve our-

selves and for that we felt very low and saw ourselves as hopeless girls,” said Amot Ateny Reng, a 12-year-old girl at St. Paul’s Girls’ Primary School in Mingkaman, an area in central South Sudan where thousands of IDPs have fled since the war began. “Now that we have a latrine where we can help ourselves and keep our privacy, we feel confident that our self-worth has been restored and we can even do better in school.”

The hope is that PROPEL’s lessons can be applied throughout South Sudan after the project’s end. “We are cataloging techniques that work so development practitioners can better navigate the volatile environment here for the long term,” said Patrick O’Mahony, director of the PROPEL project.

Communities will also benefit from this wealth of knowledge. “There is extraordinary strength and determination in these communities,” said O’Mahony. “Our goal is to provide them with tangible benefits and the skills to cope with the inevitable shocks and stresses of life in South Sudan.”

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This article appears in Global Waters, Vol. 9, Issue 1; for past issues of the magazine, visit [Global Waters’ homepage](#).