

Towards a solid cooperation between local actors for sustainable management of public water services in South Kivu, DRC.



Photo Credit: Mercy Corps, 2023.

In Kavumu and Katana in Kabare territory, South Kivu province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), in response to humanitarian crises, various humanitarian and development actors and organizations have implemented programs to support local development in order to build resilient communities. In the water sector, various types of infrastructure were built, such as boreholes, springs, reservoirs, water distribution networks, and public standpipes.

Once completed, this infrastructure was usually handed over to newly formed or existing community structures called **drinking water management committees (COGEP)**. *"I remember that the first standpipes were built in Katana in 1976 by Catholic priests after the cholera disease killed several people.*

After this episode, in 1986 as I was working with the priests, they gave me some training in the management and maintenance of the built water networks"; explains the president of the COGEP of Kadjudju, Jules Polepole, in office since 2015.

Over time, Jules has seen many COGEPs gain experience, which has enabled their facilitators to provide management, distribution, and maintenance services for drinking water networks. However, he mentions the difficulties for these structures to operate: *"despite the experience gained, COGEPs often struggle to provide quality water, ensure water availability and maintain the water network over time, due to the difficulties in raising sufficient revenue to cover the long-term life cycle costs of operating and maintaining the network"*.

To improve the way water services are delivered to communities, [the United States Agency for International Development \(USAID\)'s Sustainable Water and Sanitation Activity \(SWASSA\)](#) is using innovative approaches to accelerate change in this sector in North and South Kivu. One such approach is to bring together several COGEPs to form an Association of Drinking Water Users (ASUREP), [an approach that was started in Kinshasa, DRC, in 2009 by humanitarian actors and has been rolled out with some success throughout the country.](#) ASUREPs will be given legal personality to contract with the chiefdom as a provider of rural water services. With this new status, the relationship between ASUREPs, project owners and the community will be based on accountability in the management of water works.

The approach that accompanies USAID SWASSA not only meets the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals but also of the DRC, [which since 2015 has promulgated the water law](#) that dictates the efficient management scheme and enhances this vital commodity, which is an economic resource and a social good. Now that there is a water law governing the sector, Jules believes it is important to respect it in order to prosper in the water sector. *"Thanks to the training we receive from USAID, we understand that we can go further in managing the water sector. Now we have understood that we need to have a legal personality, internal rules, and regulations to finally sign contracts for the operation of the water networks with the Kabare chiefdom as the authority and owner,"* added Jules .

Perceived in the community as a "great opportunity for a prosperous water sector", this law obliges project owners who are decentralized territorial entities (ETDs) in rural areas to ensure the sustainable and permanent management of water networks. It specifies that all water works belong to the ETDs, but that they are not authorized to manage them. Hence, the need to sign contracts with legally recognized service providers.

USAID SWASSA has started the process of transforming COGEPs into Asureps since September 2022, in North Kivu (Sake and Bweremana) and South Kivu (Kavumu and Katana). 13 COGEPs are actively participating in this transformation process, to form five ASUREPs, thanks to the training and popularization of the water law provided by the consortium, as well as regular exchange meetings held in the community.