

## Expanding water and sanitation services across Zambia's rural communities

Access to sanitation services and clean drinking water are basic human needs. And yet, communities in Sesheke, Zambia, are paying the ultimate price just to draw water from their primary water source, the Zambezi River—and they are not the only community living in these dire conditions. The USAID Expanding Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (USAID Expanding WASH) project, implemented by RTII, is working to change this by improving access to basic sanitation and drinking water services in rural and peri-urban communities of 12 districts across Zambia.

“[The distance] from the village to the river is about 2 km. There was a sad instance which occurred in 2005; my sister went to fetch water at the river after school, but she never returned. At the river she was attacked by a crocodile, and she did not survive. We lost her on that day” said ██████████ ██████████, a resident of Likunda village, recounting the story of the death of his sister. And he is not alone in his experience, ██████████ from Nalima Village adds “My brother-in-law was killed by a crocodile in 2020 [when he went to fetch water from the river] and unfortunately, he died on the spot.”

The people of Sesheke living along the Zambezi River may have an abundance of water—but it is unfit for human consumption. Locals use the river to dispose of everything from dead dogs to baby diapers.



Despite this contamination, the people of Sesheke District continue to draw water from it. And as a result, incidences of “diarrhea diseases continue” ██████████ explained. Access to basic water services, which is defined as “an improved source protected from contamination, with year-round access, and within 30 minutes round trip collection time,” is a difficult goal to achieve. In the Northern Province, only 9% of the population of Lunte district have access to basic water services. Mungwi is not much better, with only 13%.

Photo: ██████████ collecting water from the Zambezi River

Sanitation services are also largely inaccessible throughout Zambia's rural villages. In the words of Sesheke community members, “open defecation is a common practice in the villages because they do not all have toilets. For those that have something like a toilet, the holes are shallow, only a meter deep. [These facilities tend not to provide] privacy and when it rains the toilets fill and the fecal matter rises and washes into the river.” Sesheke district has only 9% access to basic sanitation facilities, or facilities that separate waste from human contact and are not shared by multiple households. Many other USAID Expanding WASH target districts are similarly lacking—in Mpika, Kalabo, and Nalolo less than 1% of households have access to basic sanitation services. Community-led sanitation efforts have been attempted but proved unsuccessful long term.

In light of this reality, the communities have two asks: 1) boreholes with handpumps for the villages and 2) assistance towards sanitation improvement. USAID Expanding WASH will evaluate these community requests and work with water supply companies, local authorities, and other stakeholders to professionalize the WASH sector and increase community access to local services. Borehole locations will be determined in institutional settings through completion of water quality testing and other feasibility assessments in the project's next steps. After consulting with community representatives, project staff determined that focusing on training youths to construct latrines would be the most efficient and effective way forward—that way these youths could also act as changemakers in the societal behavior change process. The project will work to increase awareness and behavioral changes on improved sanitation practices in the communities, training the youths and other masons to construct affordable but durable toilets.

Despite a well-defined institutional framework for WASH governance, service delivery and maintenance in Zambia remains insufficient, especially in rural areas. The Zambian government has recently expanded the mandate of commercial utilities to extend to rural WASH services, creating a window of opportunity to provide inclusive and sustainable WASH services to all citizens—a window that USAID Expanding WASH will build on over the next five years.

Implemented by RTII, USAID Expanding WASH aims to professionalize the WASH sector, expanding services in Muchinga, Northern, Southern, and Western Provinces, with a specific focus on peri-urban and rural areas. To protect these communities from the perils of river water collection—including crocodile attacks, poor water quality, and traveling long distances—this work will increase access to safe water by 15% and reduce the proportion of inoperable water sources by 25%. To achieve this, the project will improve the capacity and delivery performance of at least 125 rural water service providers or community-based water committees and increase private sector participation in WASH service delivery.

Behavior change is crucial to ensure sustainability. In line with the needs voiced by community representatives, USAID Expanding WASH will implement a behavior change strategy; this strategy will address the need to stop open defecation, encourage hygiene, and work closely with women, youth, and persons with disabilities to achieve this change in the community.

Access to WASH services and sources that provide sanitation and clean water are basic human needs that [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and their communities have gone without for far too long; The USAID Expanding WASH project implemented by RTII plans to change that.