



Assessing the Economic Empowerment Impacts of WASH and Water Access Interventions on Women

Qualitative Findings Memo, Rwanda

Summary of Findings

The interviews conducted throughout the communities in Rwanda consisted of 2 focus groups with male heads of household, 2 focus groups with female heads of household, and in-depth interviews with 3 community leaders, 3 project leaders, 4 female household heads of household. These individuals were selected for their ability to speak to both their household and community's experience of water use before and since the installation of the water point.

One of the key findings was the improvement in **overall quality of life**, particularly for the women in the community. Women and children **spent less time** travelling to collect water, which in turn gave them more time to **complete household chores, generate income and participate in the community**. Children were able to attend school on time, enabling **increased education**.

The new water supply also produced **cleaner water** for the community. This reduced illness and the need to treat water, leading to **improved health**. The new clean water source was also used to farm a fresh and safer harvest of fruits and vegetables, enabling **increased food security and income generation** from selling crops at the market.

Of particular benefit to women was a **reduction in both stress and safety concerns**. The water point's location, more easily accessible than previous sources, eliminated the need to ration or make multiple long and dangerous trips to collect water each day. **Women and children also did not fear harassment or violence once the new water system was installed.**

The idea of **women's empowerment gained more recognition** with the installation of the new water points and the trainings and projects that took place throughout the communities. Project leaders and groups such as **Women's Water Leadership Initiative and Global Grassroots trained and encouraged women in the community to take on leadership roles and gave women the confidence to develop their own means of income and to make their voices heard**. This led to the idea of women's empowerment being fully embraced by all members of the community.

Detailed Findings

Water Access and Behaviors

Prior to the water point installation, the typical local water source was a stream or river, or rainwater collection during the rainy season. This was time consuming and the water collected was frequently dirty or contaminated, causing illness. Community members said that the new water points created cleaner, safer water that is more easily accessible. Each water point serves between 200 and 300 households.

- “We used to collect polluted water from far down there in the river. As you draw the water there would be some people washing and preparing cassava inside the same water access point. Others would be standing right in the middle of the river as they fetch water. Yet we used to drink the same water that contained parasites because there was no other choice.”



- Female Head of Household, Nkusi – Isuku n’Umuco

Availability and reliability of an adequate supply of safe water also increased with the installation of the water point, as use of previous water sources often required rationing. A steady supply of water meant that participants could increase water-related activities, which had previously been limited.

- “We use more water than before. Initially people would only collect one gallon of water but now they can collect more than 5, and they are able to use in similar activities in full without rationing. Some use in different activities such as farming, building, and construction. People are now able to do multiple of tasks without fearing that the water will be limited.”

- Project Leader, Nyaburiba – Tuzamurane

While primary responsibility for water collection fell to women and children, the installation of the new water points enabled a new division of labor, with more men helping collect water.

- “Things have been changed, even the men are collecting water, too, for they can take their bicycles and go to collect water. The number of men collecting water has increased.”

-Community Leader, Nkusi – Isuku n’Umuco

Even with the new water points, shortages occurred occasionally, mostly during the dry season, during electricity outages, or because the source was shared between many groups. Other problems included lack of funds to pay for use of the water point. Participants stated that when this happened, they resorted to collecting water from the river.

- “A big challenge is sharing of water during sunny season. Water is first pumped to the army barracks, the soldier need much more water, and when the level of where the water is pumped from is low, then the army ration the water supply within the community.”

- Male Head of Household, Nkusi – Isuku n’Umuco

Pathway One: Health

The improved quality of water across these communities has positively affected population health and well-being. It has not only reduced the risk of disease related to contaminated water.

- “The quality of water has reduced some of the sickness the community were prone to, that were related to dirty water.”

-Project Leader, Agateko – Imbere Heza

Personal hygiene has also improved, with people able to wash clothing and bathe more frequently. Prior to the water points installation, people often had to choose between preparing food or bathing with the limited amount of water they had collected, and would sometimes resort to using the same water for both chores. This was a source of shame, but now community members take pride in the cleanliness they maintain.

- “I didn’t even wash my children’s innerwear, and when I cooked porridge, it takes all liters of water, so if you chose to do the washing you would end up not cooking porridge because you didn’t have enough water. In the case of washing the children, sincerely speaking, they are times when I used to clean sweet potatoes and later use that water to bathe the children. Honestly, I used to do that.”

- Female Head of Household, Nkusi – Isuku n’Umuco

Project leaders explained that training and education about health and water safety contributed to the improved health of the community through increases in healthy behaviors.

- “There is great change, especially at the family level. People know how to maintain proper hygiene; the water is plentiful and they no longer ration the usage. More cleaning is happening, people are bathing more and eating healthy. There are frequent mobilization programs in the community informing people to avoid dirtiness in their families.”
– *Project Leader, Nkusi – Isuku n’ Umuco*

Pathway One Sub-Section: Stress

Community members noted that stress has been reduced since the installation of the water point, most remarkably for female members of the community. An important factor related to the proximity of the new water point is that women are able to get more sleep, no longer needing to wake before dawn to begin the long water collection journey. Women noted that this has significantly decreased their stress.

- “Before, you would set an alarm at 3:30 am, and by the time you wake up, you would still feel like you have not gotten good sleep. But as of today, you wake up at 5:30 happy and refreshed and you attend the farm before even thinking of collecting water.”
– *Female Head of Household, Nkusi – Isuku n’ Umuco*

Family dynamics have also improved. Marital relationships are less stressful because people are now able to collect water from a closer source, enabling women to prepare food for the family and complete chores, which keeps the household running smoothly. Participants attributed these factors directly to the installation of the new water points.

- “Now the stress level of family members has been minimized, because before, many women and children were punished by the man of the house because they went to collect water far away and returned late. Children also experienced stress because they didn’t see their parents on time and would worry, asking themselves where their parents were. Really now the stress has taken its end, no one is stressed from lack of nearby water.”
– *Community Leader, Agateko – Imbere Heza*

Pathway Two: Food Security and Nutrition

The positive changes in quality and availability of water in the community has enabled increased production of fruits and vegetables in both home gardens and on larger farms, and livestock are healthier because they are able to drink an adequate supply of safe water.

- “People are eating healthy because they can plant vegetables and this has reduced the cases of malnutrition through balanced diets.”
– *Project Leader, Agateko – Imbere Heza*

Prior to the installation of the water points, time spent travelling to collect water prevented sufficient engagement in agricultural activities and food preparation. No longer needing to spend hours each day collecting water means that women can now spend more time on these activities, which benefits the entire family’s nutrition.

- “Women would go to cultivate and stop approximately at 10 am to find time to go to fetch water. I would wake up earlier and cultivate and stop at 10am. A woman collecting water would be back from fetching water almost at 12, but during the time she could have been cultivating. Then she would start to do domestic work and it would be 2pm, having not eaten lunch yet.”

-- Female Head of Household, Nkusi – Isuku n’ Umuco

Pathway Three: Education

Children assigned the task of collecting water were often late to school, or even missed school entirely, due to the time it took to travel to the water source. Since the installation of the water points, both male and female children have the time to collect water and arrive to school on time. They also have more time to study at home and are therefore less stressed about their studies.

- “Children would go to school late and they were not able to study effectively. It was clear that the children’s’ education was suffering because of the water collection. But now, they arrive to school early and they have more time to do their individual studies.”

– Male Head of Household, Nkusi – Isuku n’ Umuco

For pubescent girls in particular, improved water access enabled school attendance during menstruation. The ability to engage in proper hygiene during this time increased girls’ confidence and reduced insecurities about school.

- “Girls in particular need water during their menstruation period. They can clean themselves and this makes them comfortable not to miss school, unlike before when they would fear to attend school when they are on their periods.”

- Female Head of Household, Nkusi – Isuku n’ Umuco

Pathway Four: Time Savings

Prior to the installation of the water points, the biggest challenge people faced was the significant distance to the river. Reported time spent travelling to collect water was as high as two hours each way, with two or three trips made per day, beginning pre-dawn. Treating water took time as well: up to three hours to boil and cool it to allow safe drinking. Since the installation of the new water points, participants spend less time travelling to collect water, often only a few minutes per trip. Both men and women have been able to use saved time on other important chores and activities, including food preparation, and income generation.

- “For instance, when a husband is cutting grasses and attending to the farm, the wife collects water, prepares food on time, and when the husband comes back he finds food ready. Women can then go back to fetch water at 4pm after having a rest, and during the rest time they are able to do some different household activities. If the children are around they are able to help out with some of the activities. The time that I would have spent in a queue waiting to get water, I now use it resourcefully to find food for my children.”

– Male Head of Household, Nkusi – Isuku n’ Umuco

Women’s time saved in particular has allowed them the ability to generate personal income.

- “The installation of the water point has resolved the water issue plus other problems within the society. Factors such as hygiene, women’s participation in community activities, and engaging in income-generating activities: all these are made possible by availability of water and time.”

-Project Leader, Nkusi – Isuku n’ Umuco

Women’s community participation has been directly enabled by the water point installations, which allows more time, and has been supplemented by trainings provided by Global Grassroots in topics such as confidence, income generation, and financial management. Previously, even when women wanted to



participate in community activities, they were prevented from taking the initiative because their time was dominated by water collection responsibilities.

- “Before, there were many small projects that were initially planned but didn’t get to be implemented. Now the community is able to engage actively on the projects; for instance, there are women in this community who are engaged in different activities, including the group which makes window baskets and decoration materials. Initially, these women did not have enough time to even follow up on the group activities, but now they have time to do that. They sell many of them and they still have time to take care of children and continue their domestic chores. There are others who have farming projects, before, they didn’t have time to care for their livestock, but now they have time and they follow through on their activities no matter what.”

-Community Leader Agateko – Imbere Heza

Pathway Five: Income

Both male and female community members reported the ability to generate income because of the time saved by using the new water points. Income generating activities varied from agricultural and livestock based, earning money as health workers, clothing makers, market sellers, and casual laborers.

- “Yes, people spend more time working, they are engaging in different activities than before and making an income. Some are using water to farm or keep livestock, while others have time to open businesses and engage in casual employment. I don’t think there is anyone who has lost any income with all these opportunities.”

-Community Leader Nkusi – Isuku n’ Umuco

There were also financial savings for those who paid others for water prior to the water point installation: though community members pay for use of the water point, this cost was greatly decreased compared to the purchasing options that were available previously.

- “Since we no longer pay a lot of money for someone to collect water, our expenditure has gone down. Our income has increased since we are now spending more time in income generating activities.”

-Female Head of Household, Nyaburiba – Tuzamurane

Increased income at the household level benefits the entire community, as evidenced through reports from community leaders.

- “Looking at the community, I would say that the income level has improved. This can be seen from the status within the community, from clothing, household income is changing, new better and improved houses are being built, and we have more bicycles in the village. This shows some people within the community are making transformations.”

-Community Leader, Nyaburiba -Tuzamurane

Some women reported that earning income increased their standing and decision-making responsibilities in the home.

- “Being engaged in income making processes, where I work in the farm and assist in selling of the fruits has earned me the right to be given a chance when it comes to decision making within the family.”

-Female Head of Household Nkusi – Isuku n’Umuco

Pathway Six: Safety and Security

Prior to the new water point, women would often face safety issues while travelling long distances to fetch the household's water. These risks included harassment, theft, abuse, and treacherous terrain. The installation of the new water points has created a feeling of safety among women of the community. They no longer fear the long dangerous walks to the water source.

- "This water point brought safety: safety from the sleepless nights, to the morning walks and falls when climbing the hill, and harassment at the river, like we experienced before."

-Female Head of Household, Nkusi – Isuku n'Umuco

Many participants mentioned that while collecting water at the river, people would start fights to be able to collect water first, as water quality was better the earlier it was collected and so that they could begin the journey back to the village sooner. This was no longer an issue, because at the water point community members politely wait their turn, because water is in abundant supply and of good quality.

- "Before, there were fights at the water source, someone would be drawing water and someone else would and started hitting and striking them, preventing safety and security while obtaining water on time as expected. That was harassment. But now they come and collect water and get back home without any harassment, no one spitting on each other, and no one having any problems."

-Community Leader, Agateko – Imbere Heza

Pathway Seven: Leadership and Skills

In general, women are accepted and even encouraged as leaders and decision-makers within the community. They have influences over changes that take place within the village. Women are involved in community projects, politics, and religious activities.

- "Women are in leadership, they are the ones driving the change through the water project. They hold various leadership in church groups. They attend and speak out on their rights and concerns in community meetings."

-Male Head of Household Nyaburiba -Tuzamurane

Some women have participated in the Women's Water Leadership Initiative through Global Grassroots to improve their position as community leaders and self-starters in their own income ventures. This has given them confidence to teach and guide young girls and women in their community to better their lifestyles.

- "Me for instance, my personal confidence has changed. When they engaged me on this project, I thought to myself that this will not be possible, I also thought that I could not lead others. How could I have led such a community project? However, through trainings, I learned more and this built my confidence. In the community, I am well respected, I always earn the right to speak in community gatherings, they call me a leader, a project representative. They have confidence in me and this has built me as a leader."

-Project Leader Agateko – Imbere Heza

Project leaders state that while new income generation is not limited to those who participated in the water project, but that project leaders seem to benefit in a larger capacity thanks to the training they received.

- "We were trained on how to fight fear and have confidence as women, and on creativity, where they trained us on having creative self-drive. This could be producing quality products, marketing the product, and competing to get a market space. They gave us examples of how [famous Rwandan businessman] Sina Gerard uses innovations in his business. We have also been trained on other social

skills such as family planning, hygiene, building self-confidence, and solving conflicts both within the household and within the community.”

-Project Leader, Agateko – Imbere Heza

Water project leaders have also worked with community members on special training programs designed to educate on business development and financial management. Some project leaders report now training other community members in income generation. Community-sourced finance projects, which existed on a smaller scale prior to this project but have since been expanded, contribute to income generation particularly by women.

- “Yes, they are trained and some have been engaged in training other community members on how to start and expand their business. Some have used the skills learned to manage their finances and even start business. We are also working as a group in training and promoting income generating activities. The project management team spend more time working, for instance, when the members are done with their domestic activities, they engage in their personal income generating activities. We usually have weekly meetings and activities, which are also income generating.”

- Project Leader Nkusi – Isuku n’ Umuco

Pathway Eight: Shifting Roles and Norms

Participants tended to feel that the community has begun to change in its views of women. The ease in access to water has helped women focus less on spending their days collecting water and instead direct their energy towards more productive activities in the public and private sphere, which was previously not possible. Women find great relief and satisfaction in this new acceptance.

- “Oh my God! I do not even know who came up with the idea of a nearby water access point or where they came from, but what they have given to this community is great, and what they have given to us women is more than great. When I look back at all we have gone through, the pain and the stress we have experienced, I see that they have given us life. We feel safer, we engage in other activities, we are listened to, we feel appreciated and we feel safe. Before, do you think I would have had time to sit here and have this conversation, or I would be heading the hill right now to collect water?”

-Female Head of Household Nkusi – Isuku n’Umuco

The ability to collect water at the new water points has also had positive effects on gender relations within the community. Women are now treated with respect both in the home and in public, particularly with regards to water collection activities.

- “The fact that men queue alongside women at Tuzamurane, tells a lot about respect they have for women. This is unlike before, where men would fight the women off in order to get water first.”

-Male Head of Household, Nyaburiba -Tuzamurane

Participants reported that women’s generation of income demonstrates to everyone that women are active contributors to the household and the community and should be treated as such, leading to a newfound sense of respect. This has created a new status quo for women, which is viewed positively by both women and men.

- “Things have changed: women work not only in their homes, but now since the burden of collecting water have saved them time they are able to work outside their homes. They engage in some of the activities that used to be for men only. These activities are no longer seen as taboo for women to do. It would not be surprising to find women at a construction site, carrying and fetching building



materials, or mixing and measuring construction materials. The community is no longer held up by the thought that women are incapable.”

-Community Leader, Nyaburiba -Tuzamurane

At the community level, women are regularly—and even expected to be—a part of making decisions. Some stated that through time savings, women now had more availability to participate in household financial decisions and community decisions. This increased community decision-making was further enabled by trainings, which included self-confidence and leadership components.

- “Yes, some women leaders in the community are engaged in community decision-making process. My opinion and others are usually considered before a decision is made. We have trained women within the community the importance of championing their rights and having self-confidence. Indeed, in community meetings, the women always seek the opportunity for their opinions to be heard.”

-Project Leader Nyaburiba – Tuzamurane

- “Yes, in most cases the decisions are influenced more by women. We are no longer marginalized unlike before, women are becoming are confident, they are eager to participate in community meetings and they look forward to having their voice heard during public gatherings.”

-Female Head of Household Nkusi – Isuku n’Umucu

Women’s increased ability to move in the community without restriction is a result of decreased water collection responsibilities and the logistical freedom that enabled. Because women have more free time no longer allocated to water collection, they can use their time to move around the community.

- “Something that has changed because of the water point is that before, a woman couldn’t go to visit other families knowing that there was no water at home. Now since water is nearby, she can visit the neighbors without seeking for permission. The women now have got freedom to go and visit neighbors, the same case applies to girls.”

-Male Head of Household Nyaburiba – Tuzamurane

Women’s Empowerment

Decision-Making

Reports of responsibility for decision-making at the family level varied, with some reporting that women and men make all decisions jointly, and others reporting that while a woman could provide input or advice, the final decision was the man’s responsibility. It was not common for a husband to make decisions unilaterally, without consulting his wife at all.

- “My husband cannot make a decision alone, we usually sit down to discuss before he decides, and most of the time the decision also factor my opinions.”

-Female Head of Household, Nyaburiba -Tuzamurane

Control Over Income

Participants asserted that each family dealt with financial decisions differently, but for the most part, women had a say in any income she earned for the household. Sometimes women would have complete control over her earnings, and in other cases they jointly manage this money with their spouse. Some even mentioned that women are the primary income earners for the family, and ultimately are the primary financial decision-makers in the home.

- “I have told you that women all live different life situations, but within this community we have more women heading families who practice small-scale businesses. They earn money and they earn it on

time. This is not different from someone else who waits for monthly salary. Those women doing this work are the primary income earners for households, and they make more than their husbands.”

-Community Leader Agateko – Imbere Heza

Community Participation

Often, it is an overall expectation that women engage in community activities. Some suggested that women are more active in some community organizations than men. Women saw community participation as an important responsibility that was crucial to self-improvement.

- “In order to develop ourselves, we need to belong in some associations or cooperatives. Women’s groups are numerous, and they are engaging in various religious, economic, or training activities.”

-Female Head of Household Nkusi – Isuku n’Umuco

Freedom of Movement

In general, participants voiced that adult women had the ability to move freely without asking permission, though it is most common to inform her spouse or other family members of her destination before departing. This was primarily for household planning purposes or in case of an emergency. Women are not required to travel with accompaniment in most instances, though men more commonly suggested that women needed a chaperone than women did. Occasionally, if a woman left the house without telling her spouse, the husband could become upset, causing a domestic conflict.

- “I have a daughter who is a student, and when she comes for the holidays, and anytime she is leaving the compound, she informs me where she is going. I also don’t leave without telling anyone. If my husband is not in, I will inform the people who are within the household, in most cases my children. If you are a visitor within my household, you must at all time inform of where you are going. My husband always informs me of his whereabouts. This is just to be open in case anything happens or if there is an emergency that needs your attention. “

-Female Head of Household Nkusi – Isuku n’Umuco