

USAID Lowland WASH Launch - World Water Day 2016

Remarks by Chargé d'affaires Peter Vrooman

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(as prepared for delivery)

Good afternoon. I think it is very appropriate that we celebrate the launch of this activity today—as World Water Day is marked all around the world on March 22nd. USAID's "Lowland WASH" activity, with WASH being the acronym for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, will support the Government of Ethiopia's One WASH National Program.

Many of you may have heard of the famous chef Marcus Samuelson, or maybe you know him by the name he was born with here in Ethiopia—Kassahun Tsegie. Mr. Samuelson is now a successful restaurateur who has even cooked for President Obama. I'd like to share with you something he once observed. He said, "Clean water and access to food are some of the simplest things that we can take for granted each and every day. In places like Africa, these can be some of the hardest resources to attain if you live in a rural area."

As a development partner in Ethiopia, we know that clean water and access to food is not something that can be taken for granted in rural areas here—even though Ethiopia has made great strides over the past decade to improve water access and sanitation and hygiene practices. Ethiopia can rightly be proud that in 2015 it achieved its Millennium Development Goal target of 57 percent access to safe drinking water. This improvement halved the number of people without access to safe water since 1990. Ethiopia has also achieved the largest decrease in the proportion of the population practicing open defecation globally—a reduction over five times greater than the regional average over the same period. The United States is proud to have partnered with the Ethiopian government and other donors to help drive these improvements.

Yet even with these improvements, 43 percent of the population or approximately 40 million people still lack access to improved drinking water sources. At the same time, approximately 65 million Ethiopians do not have access to improved sanitation facilities, and more than 28 million people continue to practice open defecation.

With that in mind, the United States is committing 23.7 million dollars, or more than **half a billion birr** at current exchange rates, over the next four years to help address these issues in lowland areas of Ethiopia. USAID's Lowland WASH will provide sustainable access to safe

drinking water for 225,000 people in the Afar, SNNPR and Somali regions—areas chronically affected by drought and currently suffering under the effects of El Niño.

Lowland WASH will also equip 500 water points with sensors to measure their real time operational status. This will help local authorities to improve services by reducing the number of days of water system down time. At the same time, the activity will work to spur demand for improved sanitation and will work with Ethiopia’s wonderful health extension workers to certify 300 additional kebeles as “open defecation free” by the end of the activity, thus improving sanitation for 750,000 people. And as water is not solely used for human consumption, this USAID activity will work with communities on sustainable, small-scale irrigation with the aim of helping households to increase their incomes by growing produce both for consumption and for sale.

Lowland WASH will build on the tremendous success of USAID’s previous water and sanitation activity known as WATER, which delivered improved water and sanitation products and services to 347,000 people in Afar, Oromia and Somali regions from 2011 to 2015. Water was heralded by the Somali regional president last month as a critical intervention for the region and its people, as water is a prerequisite for improvement in health, education and agricultural growth. I was happy to hear that he holds USAID’s WASH work firmly in his heart.

As I noted earlier, Lowland WASH will support the Government of Ethiopia’s One WASH National Program. One WASH is truly an innovative, sector-wide approach to addressing the WASH needs of rural, urban and pastoralist communities, schools, and health posts in an integrated manner across sector ministries and institutions. Lowland WASH will complement One WASH by concentrating its work in areas not currently being covered through government programming. And, as water and sanitation are essential for both health and nutrition, it will also help deliver on two of President Obama’s major development initiatives in Ethiopia, Feed the Future and Global Health.

While we’re marking World Water Day, I would be remiss to not mention the current drought. As you know, the United States and other partners are currently working very closely with the Government of Ethiopia on water trucking, well rehabilitation and other emergency water, food and health responses. The United States has been the leading donor overall to the response—providing more than \$500 million in humanitarian assistance in the last 18 months. But this activity, while it definitely will contribute to overall drought relief, is part of our long-term development commitment to Ethiopia. Lowland WASH was created with the longer-term picture in mind—to build resilience—so that when the next drought comes, Ethiopia will be in an even stronger position to get through it.

Thank you!