



Women and children at a water point in Uganda. Credit: AMCOW/James Kiyimba

African Ministers' Council on Water embraces groundwater as a key to health and socio-economic development in Africa through a new UK-funded Networking Project

'Groundwater is critical in combating coronavirus in Africa. Most people, especially in rural areas, depend on it for everything, including the crucial handwashing and cleaning required', says Paul Orengho, Program Director of [AMCOW](#), the African Ministers' Council on Water, the apex body on water in Africa under the African Union. AMCOW since its inception in 2002 has emphasized the [need for proper handwashing](#), even before the present pandemic. Taking this conclusion to the next level and in post COVID-19 recovery times, we need to be even more cognizant of the role of this resource and the need to ensure that it remains available and accessible for all in adequate amounts and quality to ensure water supply and sanitation for all. Why making these considerations? Groundwater is omnipresent, below our feet, to be tapped where needed. It is also resistant towards drought and can provide resilience like no other water resources during extended droughts? So, why this concern?

Groundwater can be undermined to the point where it does not provide its nature-based service of water security and resilience. Critical risks come from contamination, which arises when various practices are not controlled with a groundwater-lens in mind. Examples include:

- The issue of [poor livestock management](#), leading to entry of bacteria and unwanted nutrients into the subsurface and ultimately into the water supply, as often seen close to boreholes and watering points where livestock concentrate.
- Similar impacts arise from [unprotected pit latrines](#) and [uncontrolled dumping of waste](#) as well as poor wastewater management.
- Intense pumping, as seen for [intensive agriculture, mining and larger cities](#) due to proliferation of boreholes, can entail a drop in the groundwater level, and result in [difficult access for poorer communities](#) relying on shallow wells.
- Salinity can also build up in coastal areas, [where pumping wells pull the boundary between fresh and seawater inland](#).

The resource may also fail indirectly, if the [infrastructure to access it, like wells and boreholes, are not kept up](#) with good technology and maintenance.

Hence, while groundwater is the resource to go to during climate change and pandemics and it [holds great promise for sub-Saharan Africa in its future development](#), there is a need to address a chain of factors to ensure continuous safe and uninterrupted flow of groundwater and its benefits for health and economic development in Africa, an overarching one of which is to have the necessary knowledge, capacity and finances to ensure this chain.

This is why AMCOW, in collaboration with partners like the International Water Management

Institute ([IWMI](#)) and the British Geological Survey ([BGS](#)), along with a large number of national and regional African and international organizations have committed to work together to [enhance the groundwater chain](#) and secure not only a better containment of the coronavirus, but also secure long-term sustainability of the resource and the benefits it provides for people across Africa. Through a grant from the UK Research and Innovation ([UKRI](#)), and its Global Challenges Research Fund's [Global Engagement Network](#) , to a Groundwater Resilience in Arica Network ([GRAN](#)), led by IWMI, these partners are going together in a [thrust to enhance focuses, policy, practice and capacity on groundwater across the continent](#) using the new platform of the APAGroP (AMCOW Pan-Africa Groundwater Program), a new flagship program of AMCOW that focuses on groundwater policy and practice in Africa, through leveraging on science and partnerships, while promoting sustainable management and utilization of groundwater resources for improved livelihoods and socio-economic development on the continent

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Equipping groundwater managers and policy-makers with the tools and skills needed to manage groundwater sustainably (AMCOW),