

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' PRESS STATEMENT

Unmasking Uganda's Silent Food Safety Crisis: The Invisible Killers on Our Plates

World Food Safety Day – Saturday, 7th June 2025, | City Square, Kampala

As Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) committed to advancing sustainable agricultural trade, food safety and sovereignty, climate and gender justice, biodiversity restoration, human and environmental rights, and equitable development, we express profound concern regarding the deteriorating state of food safety in Uganda.

On this World Food Safety Day, observed under the theme “**Food Safety: Science in Action,**” we come together to emphasize a vital message: ***Food safety is not a luxury. It is a Right. It is a necessity.*** Unfortunately, this right is currently under significant threat.

Food safety lies at the core of public health, food security, and national resilience. Commemorated annually on June 7th, World Food Safety Day serves as a crucial reminder to strengthen safe food practices, raise awareness about the dangers of unsafe food, and advocate for the implementation of comprehensive and effective food safety measures.

Foodborne diseases constitute a major global public health concern. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) estimates that approximately one in ten individuals worldwide experience illness annually as a result of consuming contaminated food. This burden translates to an estimated 420,000 deaths each year and a loss of 33 million Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs), highlighting the substantial impact on global health and well-being. Moreover, unsafe food is responsible for over 200 diseases, with approximately 1.6 million people falling ill daily.

The economic repercussions are equally significant, with foodborne illnesses imposing an estimated annual cost of US\$110 billion on low and middle-income countries, underscoring the magnitude of this challenge. In Uganda, the burden of foodborne illnesses remains alarmingly high. According to the Ministry of Health (MoH, 2021), approximately 1.3 million cases of foodborne diseases were reported in 2021, accounting for 14% of the total disease burden treated nationwide. This statistic underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and effective food safety interventions across the country's food supply chain.

Despite the well-known health risks posed by unsafe food, it is alarming that up to 75% of staple grains in Uganda, as well as other foods such as milk, eggs, and meat, are contaminated with aflatoxins at levels exceeding safe limits. These toxic contaminants are also increasingly present in a wide range of essential foods, including fruits and vegetables, thereby exposing every Ugandan to serious health risks.

Aflatoxins are particularly dangerous. Acute exposure can cause liver failure, digestive complications, and even death; chronic exposure is strongly linked to liver cancer. Uganda

spends approximately US\$910,000 annually on health services for aflatoxin-induced conditions, and could lose up to US\$577 million each year due to aflatoxin-related liver cancer. Beyond liver disease, aflatoxin exposure suppresses the immune system and impedes growth in young children, increasing their vulnerability to stunting and severe infections. Animal health is also compromised, with contaminated feeds leading to increased livestock mortality, reduced productivity, and higher veterinary costs.

The food safety situation in Uganda is further aggravated by the widespread use of Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs). These chemicals are scientifically recognized for their mutagenic properties (can alter genetic material); carcinogenic (meaning they can cause cancer), reproductive toxicity, endocrine disruption, and toxicity to vital pollinators such as bees, as well as aquatic life. Alarming, nearly half (47.8%) of the active pesticide ingredients and over two-thirds (68.6%) of the pesticide brands registered and used in Uganda meet the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) criteria for classification as HHPs (FoSCU, 2024; PAN, 2021).

Food safety is not merely a matter of health; it is a fundamental pillar that supports food security, economic stability, and social justice across the nation. For instance, Uganda's vulnerability to non-compliance with pesticide regulations has had significant economic consequences. In 2020, the country lost more than \$60 million in fresh produce exports due to excessive pesticide residue levels detected in shipments (UBOS, 2021). These losses extend beyond economics, damaging Uganda's reputation in international agricultural markets and threatening future trade opportunities.

Compounding these challenges is the prevalence of counterfeit agrochemicals, which constitute approximately 40% of the pesticides available on Uganda's market. The circulation of these fake products not only results in substantial financial losses but also exacerbates environmental degradation and public health risks. On a continental scale, Africa suffers nearly \$4 billion in annual losses attributable to pesticide mismanagement.

While we acknowledge and commend the efforts of the government, civil society organizations, and the private sector in advancing scientific research and innovation to improve food safety, the magnitude and urgency of Uganda's food safety crisis demand immediate and decisive action. This is especially critical where scientific interventions are influenced more by profit motives than by the public good.

What Is at Stake If We Do Not Act Now?

Public Health Consequences: The consequences of inaction are dire and multifaceted. Public health is already suffering. An estimated 5.6 million Ugandan children under five are at increased risk of stunting, immune suppression, and long-term developmental delays due to chronic exposure to aflatoxins and foodborne pathogens. Uganda registers over 3,700 cases of aflatoxin-induced liver cancer annually, yet the Uganda Cancer Institute can only accommodate around 4,000 new patients per year, severely limiting access to treatment. The burden of non-communicable diseases driven by unsafe food continues to stretch an already overwhelmed health system, with foodborne illness cases accounting for 14% of all outpatient visits.

Economic Setback: Economically, the country is losing ground. Productivity losses from foodborne diseases in low and middle-income countries were estimated at US\$95.2 billion per year in 2019. In the 2023/24 financial year, aflatoxin contamination in staples such as maize, sorghum, and groundnuts not only increased health expenditures but also slowed national economic growth by 0.147% and reduced employment by 0.107%. Export rejections due to unsafe food have reduced Uganda's tax collections by UGX 32.8 billion (approximately USD 9.2 million), undermining public revenue needed for essential services. If we fail to act now, Uganda risks being locked out of regional and international markets, deepening rural poverty, eroding investor confidence, and sabotaging our national development goals.

Widening Inequality: The food safety crisis is also a justice issue. The poorest Ugandans, smallholder farmers, informal food vendors, women, and children suffer the most. These groups often lack access to information, safe inputs, and the infrastructure needed to meet food safety standards. When contamination strikes, it is their bodies that bear the illness, their incomes that are lost to medical bills, and their productivity that is crippled by chronic health conditions.

Environmental Damage: Environmental damage compounds these injustices. The increased use and improper disposal of hazardous pesticides and food-related waste are killing our ecosystems. Chemical runoffs contaminate water bodies, harm pollinators, and lead to pesticide resistance, reducing long-term crop productivity. The lack of proper waste management in slaughterhouses, markets, and food industries leads to organic and chemical pollution, degrading soils, and making agricultural land less viable.

Uganda's Legal and Policy Commitments

Uganda is a party to several international conventions, including the Rotterdam, Stockholm, Basel, and Montreal Conventions, whose broad purpose is to prevent humans and the environment from exposure to hazardous chemicals and waste. The Constitution of Uganda enshrines the right to social justice, economic development, access to clean and safe water, and a clean and healthy environment. However, the implementation of these commitments remains inadequate, and the outdated Food and Drugs Act of 1964 does not reflect current scientific knowledge or address emerging food safety challenges.

Our Call to Action

As we commemorate this Year World Food Safety Day, we, here, call upon the;

A) Government to;

1. Invest in national research institutes and universities to develop better detection technologies, preservation techniques, and nutritional improvements. This includes dedicated funding to NARO to scale up the production and distribution of Aflasafe, making it widely accessible and affordable for all farmers.
2. Retool and empower district inspectors and agricultural officers with the resources, training, and authority they need to enforce food safety standards, monitor local markets, and guide value chain actors.

3. Most critically, ban the importation, sale, and distribution of highly hazardous pesticides that pose a threat to human health and the environment.
 4. Streamline the food safety enforcement mandate. Cabinet resolution to establish the Food, Animal and Plant Health Authority should be fast-tracked. To avoid duplications of mandates as often seen a clear mandate and overall responsibility for ensuring food safety should be vested in the authority in collaboration with agencies for support.
 5. Review the Food Act of 1964. Considering the changes in technology and rising food challenges, we recommend the immediate review of the Food Act to reflect changes in technology and the food environment.
 6. Strengthen enforcement of standards: By increasing funding for quality assurance agencies through adequate staffing to undertake market surveillance, testing, and certification activities. There is also a need to enhance the capacity of border agencies to detect and prevent the entry of substandard and counterfeit products into the country.
- B) **Consumers:** Your safety begins with you. Make informed food choices by prioritizing quality and safety over price. Start with small, practical steps at home: boil water, wash produce thoroughly, store food safely, and eat only well-cooked meals. And while avoiding highly processed foods, always check expiry dates and certification labels when you must consume them.
- C) **Farmers:** Grow it safe. Stop the use of hazardous chemicals, and comply with the proper use of the recommended chemicals. Opt for organic fertilizers, and adopt traditional food safety methods like fully drying of staples like maize, cassava, and G-nuts to avoid virus contaminations like Aflatoxins. Non-compliance impacts on one's own health, the health of farms, including soils and water, as well as incomes. Farmers carry the base and beam of food safety.
- D) **Civil society:** Take the lead in designing and implementing year-round food safety programs, while also resisting the distribution of hazardous chemicals and non-compliant food materials to communities. Moreover, CSOs should amplify advocacy efforts to hold both state and non-state actors accountable for upholding food safety standards, not just in June, but every day of the year.

Conclusion

Food safety is not a niche concern; it is a national emergency. Yet it is a solvable problem if we treat it with the seriousness it deserves. Let this World Food Safety Day be a turning point. Let Uganda become a nation where no child goes to bed having eaten food that will harm them, where farmers are not afraid of losing markets due to contamination, and where science is not just in laboratories, but alive in our farms, markets, and kitchens.

Food Safety is Everyone's Business!

Safe food is healthcare!

If it is not safe, it is not food!

This statement is endorsed by the undersigned Civil Society Organizations.

FRA

SEATIN

CONSENT

FOSCU

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PELUM-Uganda

PELUM Association