



## ARE WE PREPARED FOR THE UNEXPECTED? - FOOD SAFETY IN UGANDA

Until recent years, food safety and quality have not been prioritized in policy agendas in Uganda and Africa at large, in favor of strategies for increased production and productivity to combat food insecurity. As a result, while food has become largely available and accessible on markets, it remains unsafe for consumption. Food safety risks in Uganda have not only posed significant threats to the health of the population, but also the competitiveness of agricultural commodities, which are the foundations of inclusive growth and sustainable development in the country.

Today, Uganda registers 1.3 million cases of foodborne illnesses annually, which account for 14% of all cases treated (MoH). In addition, the country suffers a loss of USD 77 million on treatment of 3700 cases of aflatoxin-induced cancer cases (FAO). This is because up to 65% of Ugandan maize contains aflatoxin levels above the Ugandan maximum limit of 10 ppb for total aflatoxins (PACA), which has led to its repeated rejection on regional markets like Kenya and South Sudan. As a result, aflatoxins cause USD 7.48 Million decline in export value, which accounts for a 45% reduction in total agricultural exports and a 0.26% reduction in economic growth. Uganda's fruits and vegetables also register high contamination rates from the use of contaminated water and direct application of chemicals after harvest. Currently, over 82% of vegetables and fruits in markets contain carbamates (Rikolto, 2021).

The government of Uganda has made effort to address some of these food safety challenges through establishment of food safety standards, food safety laboratories, development of action plans to ensure food safety such as the National Action Plan on Aflatoxin control and Management, regulations on the marketing of infant and young child foods and most recently, cabinet resolutions on the establishment of the Food, Animal and Plant Health Authority that will be charged with ensuring food safety in the country.

However, beyond the expected, Uganda has made little progress in preparing for and combating the unexpected food safety incidences in the population. As a result, Uganda has also over the years registered numerous unexpected food safety incidences. These vary from mass cases of food poisoning to food fraud cases reported across the country. Such incidences include; the 100 pupils from Golden Learning Center, Mityana and 150 students from Nakanyonyi S.S who suffered from food poisoning due to contaminated food consumption, 278 people in Amudat and Napak that contracted food illnesses from consuming unsafe food aid products, as well as the cyanide poisoning outbreak in Kasese from cassava consumption.

Largely, food safety outbreaks are not effectively managed in Uganda due to numerous challenges ranging from the absence of a food safety law and policy, weak food safety surveillance systems and food recall mechanisms, limited resource allocations towards food safety and quality, low enforcement of food safety, hygiene and labelling, Low consumer awareness and civic consciousness and limited capacity of public health and agrifood system actors to address food safety incidences when they occur.

Hence, as we celebrate this year's World Food Safety Day under the theme, *"Prepare for the Unexpected"* We call upon;

## Government

1. **Fast-track the establishment of the Food, Animal and Plant Health Authority.** This authority is expected to have exclusive overall responsibility for ensuring a healthy food environment and that food consumed by the citizens is safe and nutritious.
2. **Fast-track the enactment of the Food safety Bill:** While efforts have been made to develop the food safety Bill, it has since then remained a draft and has not been enacted. We therefore recommend for the government to fast track the enactment of the Bill into Law to provide a legal framework for addressing expected and unexpected food safety incidences.
3. **Establish a robust food safety surveillance mechanism:** There is need for Uganda to strengthen its surveillance frameworks for food safety both on local and export markets. Some of these frameworks include national food safety emergency response plans, food recall mechanisms, legal provisions against food fraud as well as protocols to address food-related outbreaks
4. **Strengthen hygiene and sanitary inspection systems** to ensure adherence to the existing regulatory measures for food and food products in institutions including schools, street food vending establishments, traditional food markets, primary food production centers and food processors, and household hygiene and sanitation.
5. **Strengthen enforcement of standards** through increasing financing for technological, numerical, and technical capacity of enforcement agents. Prioritize **communication, education, and awareness creation** on food safety practice and compliance as it is for other epidemics and pandemics

## Private Sector

1. **Ensure compliance to existing food safety standards,** food labeling standards, and hygiene protocols to prevent unexpected food safety incidences
2. **Develop and routinely review food safety management plans** as well as food product tracking and recall mechanisms to avoid mass impacts in case of any food safety incidences.
3. Mass sensitization of consumers on existing food safety management protocols to ensure that they understand the implications of the unexpected food safety incidents from your products as well as how to report or respond to these food safety incidents.

## Consumers

1. **Make conscious food choices.** Focus on quality and safety beyond the price. “*While eating, have pleasure in the mouth but safety and quality in the mind*”
2. **Communities be alert** to spot, reprimand, and condemn any actor engaging in adulteration, defrauding, and contaminating food and/or means of production, handling, and preparation

## **Civil society**

1. **Engage in advocacy to hold state and non-state actors accountable** for their actions in the promotion, protection, and fulfilment of food safety.
2. **Design and implement programs that promote food safety** across the entire food system.