

Safeguard

Health

Stakeholders

Scope

Experts criticise laboratory services Bill

By Moses Mulondo

Experts from various government entities have faulted the Uganda National Health Laboratory Services Bill, arguing that it has a narrow scope, and, therefore, unable to adequately address the challenges Uganda faces.

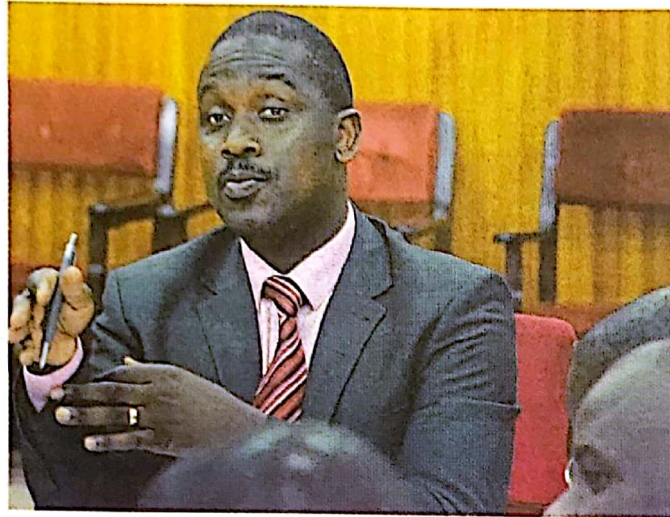
The experts, who made their objections to various provisions of the Bill being scrutinised by the parliamentary health committee, came from Makerere University, the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, National Drug Authority and the Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI).

They castigated the health ministry for what they called drafting the Bill without consulting the stakeholders who transact laboratory activities.

Currently, there is no law providing for a central co-ordination and management mechanism, with a mandate to manage and organise laboratory services in Uganda; which increases the risks of operating illegal and unsafe laboratory services in the country. The Bill seeks to address that gap.

The director of UVRI, Prof. Pontiano Kaleebu, was the first to poke holes in the Bill. He expressed concern that whereas UVRI had given their views to the health ministry while drafting the Bill, they were not factored into the Bill.

Kaleebu opposed the provision in the Bill, which puts the co-ordination and setting the standards in the National Health Laboratory Services.



Bukenya steering the health committee meeting yesterday.
Photo by Miriam Namutebi

"One entity cannot be allocated all those roles. It is necessary to have two entities, with one in charge of co-ordination and another, in charge of implementation, all serving under one umbrella organisation," Kaleebu suggested.

He also noted that the Bill is blind to the existence of many other laboratories of various categories and puts focus on the Central Public Health Laboratory.

"The roles and link with other health laboratories as mentioned in the policy document is not stated in the Bill. It is not clear what roles other key players

in the national laboratory service, surveillance and reference provision perform," Kaleebu argued.

The principal of Makerere University College of Veterinary Medicine, Animal Resources and Biosecurity, Prof. John David Kabasa, said the framers of the Bill should have involved all stakeholders, to come up with a Bill for establishing a robust national laboratory system. He argued that the scope of the Bill is too narrow to cater for the participation of all stakeholders.

"Activities done in laboratories affect the lives of Ugandans. You know that

"Medical doctors cannot collect samples from animals. You need veterinary doctors to do that. The Bill should have been an outcome of the input of all stakeholders." Ademun

the cancer cases are on the rise. We need a Bill establishing an efficient system, allowing every key stakeholder to play their role," Kabasa argued.

He further said if priority is given to promotion of laboratory activities in the country, it would spur scientific innovations, safeguard the lives of Ugandans and create more employment opportunities.

The secretary of the National Drug Authority, Donna Kusemererwa, told the committee chaired by Dr. Michael Bukenya, that the Bill, in its current state, contradicts the National Food

and Drug Authority Bill, which is also currently under consideration.

"Health laboratories is not defined in the interpretation section and this leaves the scope of application of the Bill wide, with a likelihood that such undefined scope may be construed to encompass the mandate of the National Food and Drug Authority," Kusemererwa argued.

Dr. Anna Rose Ademun and the permanent secretary, Pius Wakabi, who represented the agriculture ministry, expressed disappointment that they were not involved in drafting the Bill, yet they are key stakeholders.

"The Bill is confined to human laboratories and has left out agricultural laboratories, yet they also affect the health of the citizens. We have a diversity of laboratories for both crops and animals, which the Bill has ignored. Medical doctors cannot collect samples from animals. You need veterinary doctors to do that. The Bill should have been an outcome of the input of all stakeholders," Ademun argued.

The Minister of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, Vincent Bamulangaki Ssempiijja, said: "We are sorry that as government entities, we do not have harmonised positions. It is abnormal for government entities to come before Parliament without harmonised views."

The minister blamed the Ministry of Health for having brought the Bill to Parliament without having sought input from other stakeholders, including his ministry.