

Regional News



Prof Francis Owusu from the Next Generation Institute serves breakfast to pupils of Nakanyonyi Primary School, Kamuli District. PHOTO/OPIO SAM CALEB

UNBS directive on certified food sparks mixed reactions

Uganda National Bureau of Standards has directed schools to only procure food from certified suppliers.

BY TAUSI NAKATO

The Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) has made it mandatory for schools to procure certified food products to protect learners' health.

The directive covers commonly consumed items such as maize flour (posho), beans, rice, cooking oil, and milk, among others.

It aims to strengthen quality control in school feeding programmes and minimise health risks from substandard food.

Ms Sylvia Kirabo, the UNBS spokesperson, said both the government and private schools must prioritise food safety to protect children from the health risks of substandard food.

"Since all of us have children in different schools, we must ask ourselves: how safe is the food they eat?" she said during an interview.

She called on school owners, administrators, and parents to take responsibility for the safety of learners by sourcing food from certified suppliers, and observing proper hygiene. Ms Kirabo also urged food processors to follow the simulated guidelines.

For government schools, Ms Kirabo noted that the law now requires all food products, particularly those in the grain sector, to be procured from certified suppliers, millers, or distributors.

She said this directive is supported by the Public Procurement and Disposal of Assets (PPDA) authority to ensure compliance. Private schools have also been sensitised on the dangers of using uncertified products.

"Schools should procure items such as maize flour, cooking oil, and baking flour only from certified suppliers. These suppliers are widely available across the country," she said.

Ms Kirabo further noted that some schools engage in limited production within their premises, such as baking, milling, dairy processing as part of practical skills training.

UNBS, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Sports, has been conducting training for school administrators and education inspectors on hygiene, good manufacturing practices, and quality standards.

"UNBS has established a hub where schools can interact directly with our experts. This allows learners to gain practical skills while ensuring that any food or products they produce meet safety and quality standards," she said.

She stressed that the initiative is part of a strategic policy to integrate standards education into school programmes, helping students acquire practical skills that meet national quality requirements while promoting food safety.

Ms Kirabo said the measures are proactive and preventive. "So far, we have not received complaints from parents, but these interventions are to ensure learners remain safe from food-borne illnesses, safeguarding children's health, and ensuring that schools provide an environment conducive to learning and development," she said.

Schools respond

A section of school administrators have however raised concerns over the practicality of implementing the directive by UNBS.

The head teacher of Luzinga Secondary School in Kamuli District, Mr Paul Butono, said although schools support the policy, financial constraints and the socio-economic realities of parents make full compliance difficult.

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Worry. As a government institution, we must procure certified food. However, in rural settings, many parents cannot afford to provide money for meals, hence contributing foodstuffs in kind. Schools often convert these contributions into usable supplies, a practice that may not always align with UNBS certification requirements.

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Mr Butono added that schools often convert these food contributions into usable supplies, a practice that may not always align with UNBS certification requirements.

"We try to be inclusive so every child can access education. If we become too rigid, some parents may fail to support their children, which affects school attendance," he said.

He added that certified food products from approved suppliers are sometimes more expensive compared to those from local markets, which puts additional pressure on already limited school budgets.

"Prices from certified companies are often higher. Due to limited funds, schools are sometimes pushed to procure from ordinary suppliers, even when we know the policy," he said.

On food safety practices, Mr Butono admitted that formal training of staff on hygiene and safe food handling is still limited in many schools.

"We do not have structured training programmes for staff, but we rely on physical inspection to assess whether food is safe for consumption," he said.

Mr Butono explained that schools carry out routine checks and return substandard food supplies when detected.

Nonetheless, he acknowledged hearing reports from other schools where learners complained about food contamination, including strange smells.

"It could be due to poor preservation methods, especially for items like beans," he noted.

He attributed the absence of such cases at his school to smaller food purchases and less bulk storage, which reduces the risk of contamination.

Ms Zainabu Kizito, the resident director of Cute Kids Kindergarten and Junior School-Mansana, said the school prioritises sourcing food items such as maize and soya flour, posho, rice, sugar, snacks and drinking water from certified suppliers. That is given the delicate age of the children under their care.

"We handle children as young as six months, so we are very careful about what they consume. We ensure that all the food we give them is certified to support proper growth and development," she said.

Ruqayah Namiro, a Senior Two student at one of the secondary schools in Jinja City, said she is worried about the quality of food served at her school.

"The posho sometimes smells like Pandol and paraffin, and the beans often have weevils," she said. "It makes it hard for us to eat, and we are concerned about our health."

The Jinja City Education Officer, Mr Paul Baliraine, has assured the public that schools in the city have put in place measures to ensure that learners consume safe and quality food, in line with the directive by UNBS.

Speaking in an interview, Mr Baliraine said schools follow strict procurement procedures to guarantee that food is sourced from certified and reliable suppliers.

"Schools have procurement and disposal units which pre-qualify suppliers. These suppliers are known and trusted, and are the ones allowed to deliver food to schools," he said.

"When food arrives at the school health personnel assess its quality. It is prepared and served to learners. In addition, both teachers and learners consume the same food, which makes it easier to detect any issues early," Mr Baliraine said.

Mr Baliraine added that student feedback also plays a key role in monitoring food quality, adding that complaints from learners often prompt immediate intervention by school authorities.

"When you hear of strikes in schools, food quality is usually one of the contributing factors. Students are quick to raise concerns, and action is taken," he said.

For primary schools under the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme, Mr Baliraine said school management committees are responsible for vetting and approving food suppliers.

"Each school has a committee that pre-qualifies suppliers to ensure only those meeting the standards are contracted," he explained.

On inspections, Mr Baliraine revealed that schools are expected to be inspected at least three times a year, although visits are often more frequent.

"We are required to inspect every school at least once per term, but in most cases, we conduct even more inspections," he said.

Mr Baliraine further emphasised that support staff, especially those handling food are subjected to routine health checks by inspectors to ensure proper hygiene is maintained.

He, however, dismissed claims that learners in Jinja schools have been served contaminated food such as meals smelling of paraffin or containing harmful substances.

"We have not registered any complaints of food contaminated with substances like paraffin or pandol," he said.

Stakeholders have urged parents to take a more active role in monitoring the quality of food served in schools, emphasising that ensuring learners' safety is a shared responsibility between parents and school authorities.