

How safe is food on the market?

Safety. In mid-1979, hundreds of people were left dead after consuming adulterated alcohol. In 1997 and 1999, the EU slapped bans on Ugandan fish products amid allegations that some fishermen were using poison to increase their catches. Such incidents have left many wondering how safe food items on our market stalls are.

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The price has not plummeted, at least not yet, but beef is no longer one of Kampala's biggest sources of animal protein. Would be consumers have shunned it amid reports that unscrupulous butchers have been using chemicals such as formalin, known to be used in the preservation of dead bodies, to keep it looking fresh.

Neither formalin nor its traces were found in either the butcheries or beef products when Kampala City Council Authority operatives launched an operation, but six men were on Thursday sentenced to eight months in jail for spraying insect repellents on the beef they were selling.

Those developments in Kampala came against a backdrop of decades of a not so decent record of food safety.

In mid-1979, hundreds of people were left dead and others blinded after consuming adulterated alcohol. Similar deaths, albeit in small numbers, occurred in Kulambiro and Gulu in August and November 2009 and in Kabale in April 2010.

In 1997 and 1999, the European Union (EU) slapped bans on Ugandan fish products amid safety concerns arising out of the outbreak of cholera and allegations that some fishermen were using poison to increase their catches.

In between those and other incidents there have sporadic deaths, sometimes of entire families, arising out of the consumption of poisonous food items. All those incidents have left many Ugandans wondering how safe the food items on our market stalls are.

Laws The Food and Drug Act of 1964 is the main law governing food safety. This is backed up by other laws such as the



Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) Act (1983), the Adulteration of Produce Act, the Public Health Act and the Dairy Industry Act.

The laws have not been amended to match recent developments in agriculture and technology such as the commencement of the production of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and statutory organisations such as UNBS seem to be more pre-occupied with ensuring quality and safety of products meant for the export market.

During an interview aired on NTV Tonight on Wednesday, the president of Uganda Veterinarians Association, Dr Sylvia Baluka, suggested that existing laws are adequate to ensure that food on the market is safe for human consumption.

"Our laws require that before it (the animal) leaves the farm it is in good health and it shouldn't have been on treatment. It shouldn't be

carrying any residues of drugs in its tissues when it leaves for the slaughter house," she said.

Animals are easy to examine and inspect. They can be handled by vets in the villages, but what about the chopped pieces of fish, pork and beef that end up on the charcoal stoves, and in the sooty frying pans full of dark cooking oil, which we find in road side eateries that sprout up every evening on street corners and paved walkways on the suburbs of Kampala city and on streets of major towns around the country?

What about those that end up on charcoal stoves in trading centres along major highways?

Dr Baluka suggests that those two are captured under existing laws, but tales of such people being caught selling dog meat are not strange or new. So how effective are the laws?

The two bans that the EU slapped on fish products from Uganda, the bans that Rwanda and Kenya slapped on milk products from Uganda on grounds that it was adulterated and the occasional discovery of expired products on the stalls of our markets point at ineffectiveness.

It was in part due to the realisation that there were gaps in the existing legal framework that Cabinet, at the prompting of the Ministry of Health, approved in 2000 both the National Health Policy and Health Sector Strategic Plan 2000 after it emerged that food safety related epidemics were on the rise.

The two sought to, among other things, enforce food hygiene and safety laws.

In a presentation titled "Building a Food Safety System in Uganda", which he made at the second global forum of food safety regulators organised by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) in Thailand in October 2004, the then Director General of Health Services at the Ministry of Health, Prof Francis Omaswa, revealed why the two documents sought to strengthen the laws.

"Much of the burden of illness results from basic sanitation failures that occur in food production, processing, storage, transportation, retailing, and handling in the home. Achieving basic food hygiene is made difficult by the lack of necessary sanitation infrastructure in many areas of the country and in food processing industries," he told the conference.

From the foregoing it would suffice to say that food products on the market are not safe. They have not been in quite a long while.

Prof George Nasinyama, an expert on food who is also the deputy vice chancellor in charge of research, innovation and extension at Kampala International University, says it comes down to inadequacies in existing mechanisms for monitoring the food chain.

"We have the guidelines and regulations. The challenge is in enforcing these guidelines. We need to strengthen the surveillance mechanism to ensure that food which is out there is safe," he says.

The challenge though, is whether the country has the resources in enforcing food safety.

BUILDING A FOOD SAFETY SYSTEM

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Concerns. U has previous faced bans on food products such as milk fish from the EU, Kenya and Rwanda over safety concerns.

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