How waragi waste threatens vegetable farming in Mbale

Vegetable farmers in Mbale City say waste from waragi distilling poses an even greater threat.

BY DERICK WENANI

In the suburbs and busy streets of Mbale City, it is common to see young girls, boys and elderly women balancing basins of fresh green vegetables on their heads. Among the vegetables are tomatoes, eggplants, bitter berries, and other produce, supplied daily, regardless of the season.

But have you ever wondered where these vegetables come from and the conditions under which they are grown, harvested, and cleaned before they are sold to you?

One of the biggest suppliers of fresh vegetables in Mbale City are the farmers operating in Maluku Ward, in the Industrial Division.

Some grow them across the railway line while others cultivate near Maluku Lessons, where one's eyes are drawn to a green field that stretches as far as the eye can see. The field is covered by all sorts of green vegetables that serve daily markets and homes.

The gardens operate year-round, relying on streams that snake through the fields for irrigation. Farmers divide their plots strategically, some sections at flowering stage, others ready for harvest, and others newly planted, to ensure a steady supply to consumers.

However, behind this steady production lies a growing environmental and public health concern.

Between December and February, Mbale experienced a prolonged dry spell that left many seasonal streams depleted.

For vegetable growers, it was both one of the hardest and most profitable periods. Reduced water levels exposed underlying challenges, particularly poor waste disposal and effluent from local waragi distilling, commonly known as "*enguli*."

Garbage dumped into streams, including polythene bags, food remains and bottles, accumulates on the water surface, blocking flow and creating stagnant pools. The same contaminated water is used to irrigate crops and wash harvested vegetables.

Ms Robinnah Kimono, a vegetable farmer in Mbale, says rains often worsen the situation.

"When it rains, garbage is swept into the streams and gardens. We spend a lot of time removing polythene bags from our crops," she says. "During the dry season, domestic waste turns the water muddy and unhealthy for irrigation."



Waragi distillation in Musoto Ward in Mbale City that has become a health hazard. PHOTO/DERICK WENANI

Distillery waste polluting streams

Farmers say waste from *waragi* distilling poses an even greater threat. The molasses residue, often discharged into nearby drainage channels, flows into streams and turns the water black.

Ms Jane Khainza, a vegetable grower in Musoto Ward, says distillers frequently release waste during rainfall.

"When it rains, it's like an opportunity for them to dispose of their waste. Imagine about 10 distillers releasing molasses at once, it flows into streams and gardens," she says. "This is the same water we use to irrigate vegetables. We fear it could affect people's health."

> **Issue.** When they release the waste, it is often still hot. It runs through drainage channels into streams, killing microorganisms in the soil and aquatic life – Ms Rhoda Nyaribi, Mbale City's environmental officer.

Ms Khainza adds that some gardens have become infertile due to the waste. "When hot waste is released, it can take two to three years for crops to grow again. Where contaminated water settles, crops show stunted growth and yellowing leaves," she explained.

Mr Julius Shikanga, a herdsman in the area, says livestock are also affected.

"All the water bodies have turned black. Even when there is good pasture, animals refuse to drink because of the smell and colour," he says.

Environmental, health concerns

Beyond water pollution, residents report deteriorating air quality in Musoto Ward. Soot from distillation sites darkens iron sheets, walls and nearby banana plantations.

With more than 20 large-scale distillers and several small-scale operators in the area, the activity depends heavily on firewood, contributing to deforestation, including in sections of the nearby National Forestry Authority (NFA) reserve.

Ms Rhoda Nyaribi, Mbale City's environmental officer, acknowledges the severity of the problem.

"When they release the waste, it is often still hot. It runs through drainage channels into streams, killing microorganisms in the soil and aquatic life," she says.

"The waste also depletes oxygen in the water and turns it completely black, yet people use it for irrigation, livestock and domestic chores."

Ms Nyaribi says the city has received complaints from the industrial park where contaminated water flows, producing a foul smell.

Authorities struggle to enforce regulations

City authorities have partnered with the National Environment Management Authority (Nema) to regulate the distillation activities. Distillers were given two options: construct a waste treatment facility or cease operations.

"They acquired land intending to build a treatment plant, but the costs were too high," Ms Nyaribi says, noting that consultations with the National Water and Sewerage Corporation provided a tentative budget that distillers could not afford.

After distillers failed to establish a treatment facility, Nema deployed police to halt operations. However, enforcement proved temporary.

Mr Micheal Opio, one of the distillers, says they resumed operations out of necessity.

"This is our only source of livelihood. The government is stopping us without offering alternative income opportunities," he says.

Farmers are now urging the Mbale City Council to enforce stricter regulations, penalise illegal dumping and find sustainable solutions that balance environmental protection with livelihoods.

As Mbale's markets continue to brim with fresh vegetables, concerns linger over the safety of the water used to grow them, and the long-term impact on public health and the environment.

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