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Nelson Otema, a small-scale farmer from Baradong Farmer Field School (FFS) in Apac Municipality (centre), demonstrates how to prepare organic fertilizers at the height of the National Agroecology Festival 2025. PHOTO/MARTHA NIMUSIIMA

How hazardous agrochemicals are putting country's food at risk

Despite the existence of the Agricultural Chemicals (Control) Act of 2006, enforcement gaps persist. Weak monitoring mechanisms and fragmented inspection systems have allowed hazardous molecules to remain in circulation.

BY MARTHA NIMUSIIMA

The recent \$7.25 billion proposed settlement by German agrochemical giant Bayer over cancer-related claims linked to its herbicide Roundup (Glyphosate) has reignited global debate on how governments approve, monitor, and regulate agricultural chemicals.

While regulatory authorities in advanced economies had cleared Roundup for market use, thousands of lawsuits contended that users were not adequately warned of potential cancer risks. As arguments continue before the Supreme Court of the United States regarding the legal weight of federal approval, it is quite clear that regulatory clearance does not automatically equate to absolute safety.

For Uganda, where regulatory over-

sight, toxic exposure tracking, and access to justice remain comparatively limited, the implications stretch far beyond the courtroom.

Uganda's agricultural backbone rests on millions of small-scale farmers who feed the nation and sustain rural livelihoods. Yet the country imports a growing volume of agrochemicals. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 59% of the 41 agrochemicals registered for use in Uganda are classified as Highly Hazardous and are banned in the European Union due to their high toxicity levels.

Despite the existence of the Agricultural Chemicals (Control) Act of 2006, enforcement gaps persist. Weak monitoring mechanisms and fragmented inspection systems have allowed hazardous molecules to remain in circulation.

Benard Bwambale, the Programme Head-Global Consumer Centre (CONSENT) situates the matter within Uganda's continental obligations and long-term health trajectory. Drawing attention to the country's commitments under African environmental law, he stresses that regulatory complacency carries generational consequences, urging government to ban the importation of these molecules.

"Government being a signatory to the Bamako Convention, an African law on

POLICY

Poor monitoring and enforcement of agrochemical regulations, and gaps in the laws and policies, have worked in favour of increasing sales of hazardous agrochemicals.

pesticides must look at the highly hazardous molecules in the country, and they must be banned. Molecules that have been banned elsewhere must also be banned in Africa. Farmers need to be sensitised on what pesticides can cause harm to them," he warned.

Scientific literature associates several widely used agrochemicals with carcinogenicity, endocrine disruption, neurotoxicity, acute poisoning, and environmental persistence. Unlike wealthier jurisdictions, Uganda lacks comprehensive toxicovigilance systems, residue monitoring infrastructure, and integrated cancer registries capable of linking chemical exposure patterns to long-term disease outcomes. If adverse effects accumulate gradually over years, they may never be systematically traced, nor litigated.

Fertile ground

Dr. David Kabanda, Executive Director at Center for Food and Adequate Living Rights (CEFROHT), argues that structural weaknesses within Uganda's regulatory regime have inadvertently created fertile ground for hazardous chemical proliferation, and called for the enactment of a new law to ban the importation of Glyphosate Based Agrochemicals.

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vor of increasing sales of hazardous agrochemicals. We need a new law to eliminate glyphosate. Farmers must be mobilized, whether as groups or individuals, to hold Bayer accountable for product liability," he asserted.

Dr. Stephen Katende Serunjogi, Principal Technician at Makerere University College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES), observes that misuse often stems from limited technical knowledge.

"Most small-scale farmers lack knowledge on proper fertilizer and pesticide application, which puts their lives at risk," he explained, noting that improper mixing, lack of protective gear, and misinterpretation of chemical labels amplify exposure risks, particularly in informal markets where advisory services are thin.

The dangers

Baliraine Hakim the National Chairperson Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers Forum (ESAFS Uganda) and himself being a small-scale farmer emphasized that the dangers associated with Glyphosate shall persist unless otherwise this issue is handled from the root cause. Because Uganda like many other countries in Africa is part of the EU-AU Partnership, where majority of banned and highly hazardous chemical comes from Europe, so suggests that attention is moved through EU-AU Commission's parliaments to ban the importation of these chemicals to Africa.

Nutrition security cannot be reduced to yield volumes alone. Soil microbial integrity, biodiversity, and ecological balance determine micronutrient density and long-term productivity. Heavy chemical reliance risks degrading soil systems that sustain future harvests.

At the same time, limited residue testing means consumers may unknowingly ingest chemical traces beyond recommended thresholds. Export markets, meanwhile, continue tightening standards, potentially threatening Uganda's competitiveness if regulatory credibility weakens.

Uganda earns significant foreign exchange from organic exports, yet weak chemical regulation risks shipment rejections and loss of premium markets due to stricter residue standards. Strengthening agroecological crop protectors and locally produced organic inputs would protect export revenues, reduce import dependence, and support the Build Uganda Buy Uganda agenda. Upscaling these solutions can stimulate green enterprise development while promoting safe, nutrient-dense food for all.

A deliberate and sustained policy recalibration is imperative. Government must operationalize the precautionary principle in pesticide registration and importation decisions; progressively phase out substances internationally classified as Highly Hazardous; invest in independent risk assessment mechanisms; strengthen residue monitoring infrastructure; and mainstream agroecological alternatives that restore soil vitality while safeguarding public health.

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