



50 YEARS OF FOOD SAFETY EXCELLENCE: UGANDA HOSTS LANDMARK CCAFRICA SESSION AS CONSUMER ADVOCATES HIGHLIGHT INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES

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The Codex Alimentarius Commission recently celebrated a significant milestone as its regional African committee marked half a century of promoting food safety standards across the continent. At the 25th session of the FAO/WHO Coordinating Committee for Africa (CCAFRICA) in Kampala, Uganda, consumer advocates presented groundbreaking approaches to integrate public voices into food safety initiatives, emphasizing the critical need for effective communication strategies to protect public health.

CCAFRICA's 25th Session: A Golden Jubilee Celebration

The 25th session of CCAFRICA, held from January 27-31, 2025, in Kampala, Uganda, served as both a working meeting and a celebration of the committee's 50th anniversary. The session addressed implementation challenges related to the Codex Strategic Plan 2020-2025, with particular focus on addressing current and emerging food safety issues affecting the region.

The timing of this landmark session is particularly significant given the alarming food safety statistics faced by African nations. According to the World Health Organization, foodborne diseases cause approximately 137,000 deaths and 91 million acute illnesses in Africa annually, representing one-third of the global burden of foodborne disease. In Uganda specifically, over 60% of reported foodborne illnesses stem from the consumption of fresh and perishable foods such as fish, milk, fruits, meat, and vegetables.

Consumer Advocates Champion Inclusive Approaches

Among the most dynamic contributors to the session were representatives from the Food Safety Coalition of Uganda (FoSCU). The organization's steering committee chairperson, Mr. Henry Kimera, and country coordinator, Mr. Bernard Bwambale, presented innovative strategies for integrating consumer voices into standards development and protection initiatives.

“Effective food safety systems must begin and end with the consumer,” explained Mr. Kimera during his presentation. “Without systematic methods to capture and address consumer experiences, even the most sophisticated regulatory frameworks will fall short of their objectives.”

The FoSCU team outlined four key consumer engagement approaches that have shown promising results in Uganda:

Consumer-Centered Strategies for Food Safety

FoSCU’s presentation highlighted several groundbreaking approaches to ensure consumer perspectives remain at the heart of food safety initiatives. Their systematic “Consumer Complaints Harvesting” method identifies recurring issues through careful collection and analysis of consumer grievances, creating an early warning system for potential widespread problems.

The coalition has also pioneered extensive media engagement strategies, including media league sessions, radio shows, and television programs that amplify consumer concerns and increase public awareness about food safety issues. This approach has proven particularly effective in reaching rural populations who might otherwise have limited access to food safety information.

At the grassroots level, FoSCU organizes consumer parliaments, dialogues, and awareness programs that empower local communities to advocate for their food safety rights. These forums create direct channels for consumer feedback that inform both policy development and implementation strategies.

Perhaps most innovative is FoSCU’s multi-stakeholder dialogue approach, which brings together regulators, service providers, and consumers to discuss critical food safety issues. These facilitated conversations have helped bridge communication gaps between different stakeholders in the food safety ecosystem.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite these promising strategies, the FoSCU representatives emphasized significant challenges that remain in effectively communicating and implementing food standards. Analysis of food products in Ugandan markets has revealed concerning levels of chemical hazards, including heavy metals such as arsenic, cadmium, and mercury, along with residues of Highly Hazardous Pesticides, insecticides, disinfectants, and veterinary drugs.

“The standards exist, but awareness doesn’t,” noted Mr. Bwambale during a panel discussion. *“We need to translate technical documents into actionable guidance that resonates with everyone from small-scale farmers to market vendors to consumers.”*

The coalition reaffirmed its commitment to advancing food safety in Uganda through localized research, awareness creation, capacity building, and advocacy.

Conclusion

As CCAFRICA celebrates its golden jubilee, the 25th session in Kampala represented both a reflection on past achievements and a renewed commitment to addressing persistent and emerging food safety challenges. The innovative consumer engagement strategies presented by FoSCU offer promising approaches that could be adapted throughout the region.

The continued evolution of food safety systems in Africa will require sustained collaboration between international organizations, national governments, and civil society organizations like FoSCU. With foodborne illnesses continuing to pose significant public health challenges across the continent, the work of translating Codex standards into practical, widely-implemented food safety measures remains as urgent and vital as when the committee was established fifty years ago.

