



FROM TOMATO STALLS TO POLICY HALLS: UGANDA'S COLLABORATIVE FIGHT FOR PESTICIDE SAFETY

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In March 2025, a groundbreaking workshop organized by CABI brought together farmers, vendors, government officials, and researchers in Kampala to confront a pressing issue: the misuse of pesticides in Uganda's food system. The five-day event, held from March 24th – 28th, revealed alarming patterns of pesticide misuse that pose significant risks to public health. Through collaborative efforts, participants developed behavior change communication strategies targeting every link in the food chain, from farm to table.

Unveiling Uganda's Food Safety Crisis

The workshop began with sobering findings from market investigations in Kalerwe and Nakawa. Research highlighted widespread pesticide misuse by farmers, traders, and vendors due to limited training, economic pressures, and inadequate regulatory enforcement. A tomato vendor admitted during the session that she sprays her produce without considering the health risks to herself or her customers, an admission that underscored the critical gaps in awareness and practice.

The existing "Wash 5 Times" initiative at Kalerwe Market further revealed consumer misconceptions about chemical residues and proper washing techniques. These findings painted a troubling picture of Uganda's food system, where unsafe practices are deeply entrenched at multiple levels.

Understanding the Scope of the Problem

Participants identified several systemic challenges contributing to pesticide misuse:

- ⌚ Farmers often apply chemicals improperly due to fear of crop loss and lack of integrated pest management (IPM) training.
- ⌚ Vendors use additional chemicals to preserve produce during transport without protective equipment or knowledge of safety protocols.
- ⌚ Regulatory enforcement at markets and farms remains weak, while economic pressures prioritize appearance over safety.
- ⌚ Cultural and linguistic barriers hinder effective communication about pesticide risks.

Behavior Change Communication: A Strategic Approach

The workshop's central focus was on designing targeted social and behavior change communication (SBCC) strategies to address these issues. Facilitators emphasized understanding the motivations and barriers faced by different groups of farmers, traders, consumers, and policymakers to create tailored messages that resonate with their realities.

One participant noted that “*some people don’t hear the message because it’s not framed in a way they can relate to.*” This insight drove the development of culturally relevant approaches that go beyond traditional information dissemination.

Practical Solutions for Farmers

In a farmer-focused group, participants identified common harmful practices such as overuse of pesticides or failure to observe waiting periods before harvest. The group crafted messages emphasizing practical alternatives like IPM techniques, economic benefits of safer practices, and protecting family health. These messages were designed to align with farmers’ daily challenges and priorities.

Innovative Communication Tools

The workshop explored creative ways to deliver safety messages effectively:

- ⦿ Community drama and theater productions reflecting real-life scenarios.
- ⦿ Religious institutions share messages through church choirs or sermons.
- ⦿ Local-language audio clips broadcast in markets or on community radio stations.
- ⦿ Visual demonstrations at agricultural supply stores showcasing proper pesticide use.
- ⦿ Market posters with simple graphics for easy comprehension by diverse audiences.

This multi-channel approach ensured consistent messaging across various platforms while addressing cultural and linguistic diversity in Uganda’s population.

Stakeholder Commitments

The workshop concluded with bold pledges from key stakeholders:

- ⦿ The Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) committed to stricter enforcement of market regulations related to pesticide use.
- ⦿ Academic researchers agreed to share unpublished data on pesticide risks to inform campaign development.

- ⦿ Market authorities pledged to pilot communication initiatives in their jurisdictions.
- ⦿ CABI announced plans to test behavior change campaigns in 2025 as part of a larger rollout strategy.

Next Steps for Implementation

A clear roadmap was established for moving forward:

1. Finalizing SBCC materials based on workshop insights.
2. Securing funding for nationwide implementation of campaigns.
3. Pilot testing communication strategies in selected markets across Uganda.
4. Monitoring and evaluating pilot outcomes for scalability.

Conclusion

The CABI workshop marked a significant milestone in Uganda’s journey toward safer food systems by fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders and applying behavioral science principles to address pesticide misuse. The initiative offers a model for tackling other complex public health challenges requiring systemic change and community engagement.

As one participant reflected, *“It was more than just a workshop, it was a reminder that with the right message, on the right platform, real change is possible.”* The coming months will determine whether these efforts translate into measurable improvements in pesticide practices and safer food for Ugandan consumers.

By combining regulation, education, and strategic communication tailored to local contexts, Uganda is taking critical steps toward protecting public health while ensuring sustainable agricultural practices one message at a time.

