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Seeds of Gold

SMARTER FARMING FOR BUMPER HARVESTS

Champion. As the first actors in the food value chain, farmers play a decisive role in determining whether food entering markets is safe and nutritious. **P.16-17**

The role of farmers in promoting food safety



How food safety can be integrated into everyday farming practices

As the first actors in the food value chain, farmers play a decisive role in determining whether food entering markets is safe and nutritious.

BY DAPHINE NAKABIRI

As food safety concerns continue to pose significant health risks to Uganda's population, particularly among pregnant women, lactating mothers, and young children, an estimated 1.3 million Ugandans are diagnosed with foodborne diseases each year, with children under five accounting for 40 percent of these cases. This persistent exposure to unsafe food has contributed to a heavy national malnutrition burden, with about 2.4 million children under five stunted and thousands more affected by wasting and micronutrient deficiencies.

However, as the first actors in the food value chain, farmers play a decisive role in determining whether food entering markets is safe and nutritious.

Practices ranging from soil preparation, the use of agrochemicals, harvesting and post-harvest handling can either protect or compromise public health.

Speaking during a national multi-stakeholder dialogue on food safety convened by the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the CASCADE project, experts stressed that addressing malnutrition and foodborne diseases requires strengthening food safety practices not only among vendors and processors but also at farm level.

Mr Henry Kimera, the Executive Director of the Global Consumer Centre Uganda, explained that while many food safety risks originate during production, this is often due to limited awareness among farmers, which leads them to engage in unsafe practices that directly compromise the quality and safety of food that reaches households.

"There is need for deliberate efforts to build farmer awareness and capacity, to ensure that food safety is intentionally integrated into everyday farming practices," he said.

As such, this can be achieved in the following ways.

Producing a quality culture

Understanding the right time to plant and harvest is key for farmers to be able to consistently produce high-quality, safe, and nutritious food. This not only benefits consumers, but also enhances the farmer's reputation and income.

This involves carefully observing crop maturity, including colour, texture, and firmness, to determine the optimal harvest time. In many cases, farmers are tempted to harvest early for quick sales.

However, doing so often reduces the nutritional value of the produce and increases the risk of losses, as crops may spoil more quickly in storage or fail to meet market standards.

It is thus important to wait and harvest crops only when they are fully ripe, as this en-

sures maximum nutritional value, longer shelf life, and higher market quality. For instance, tomatoes harvested too early may be hard and lack flavour, while mangoes picked before maturity may not develop the natural sweetness that attracts buyers.

Ensure safe use of pesticides and herbicides

While using chemicals can be risky, handling pesticides and herbicides responsibly protects both farmers and the consumers of their produce. This involves selecting only approved and safe products, following their recommended dosages, and applying them correctly.

According to Francis Asiimwe, an agro-chemicals expert, he explained that when farmers use the wrong pesticides or apply them excessively, this can leave harmful residues in fruits, vegetables and grains, degrade the soil, and cause health problems for consumers.

Asiimwe noted that many farmers use cheap or unlabelled chemicals thinking it will save them money, but these products can poison the food, harm the soil, and even make people sick. It is always safer to use approved pesticides the right way.

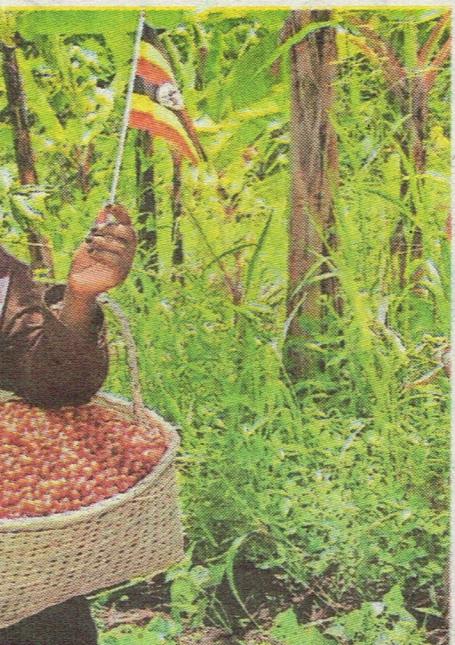
Protect crop and soil nutrients

Nutrients play a crucial role in ensuring that crops grow strong, healthy, and rich in vitamins and minerals that consumers need. When soil lacks essential nutrients or becomes contami-



nated with harmful substances like heavy metals like lead, crops may fail to develop properly, and the food they produce can be unsafe for consumption. In essence, this contamination does not disappear during cooking as it enters the body of consumers, posing serious risks to children and pregnant women.

Farmers should therefore use clean water for irrigation, avoid planting near polluted sites, and apply safe fertilizers or compost to restore and maintain soil health. Additionally, routine inspection of fields is also important, particularly when chemicals are used, so that any abnormalities are detected early. Once contam-



Sandra Nakayenze, a coffee farmer in Sironko District, sorts coffee beans after harvesting.
PHOTOS/ DAPHINE NAKABIRI

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