

Health experts urge millers to adopt safer practices, regulators to enforce standards, and consumers to demand clean, safe flour.

BY CHARITY AKULLO

A public health risk is growing in Lango Sub-region where maize and millet flour, staple food for most households, are increasingly produced under unhygienic conditions at local grain milling factories.

Across towns and villages, milling machines operate continuously with little or no cleaning, exposing flour to dust and other contaminants.

Improvised packaging and weak regulatory oversight further heighten the risk, leaving consumers unknowingly vulnerable to food-borne illnesses.

#### A recipe for disaster

Experts warn that contaminated flour can cause serious health problems, including stomach infections, diarrhoea, malnutrition, and even death.

Mr Klaus Turayebingoha, a certification officer at the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS), says poor hygiene at milling facilities is contributing to a rise in food-related illnesses.

"You reach someone's milling place and realise that inside the hopper

# Poor milling hygiene puts consumers at risk in Lango

where the grains are poured, it is total dirt, and no one is minding about cleaning it. You cannot do that and then tell the public that you are producing a good quality product," Mr Turayebingoha says.

He adds that unsafe practices often result in failure to meet hygiene standards during laboratory testing.

"Even in the laboratory, you will find that parameters related to hygiene are not met because the level of cleanliness is very low. The design and layout of premises and facilities should permit good hygiene and prevent cross-contamination," he explains.

Mr Turayebingoha also warns against unsafe handling of water used during processing.

"You find someone adding water to grains, yet the drum collecting that water has gone many years without being washed. That is extremely harmful," he says.

#### Long-term health risks

Dr Morris Chris Ongom, the director of the Uganda National Chamber of Commerce and Industry for the Lango Sub-region, warns that prolonged exposure to aflatoxins, poisonous substances commonly found in contaminated

#### Poor hygiene.

You reach someone's milling place and realise that inside the hopper where the grains are poured, it is total dirt, and no one is minding about cleaning it. You cannot do that and then tell the public that you are producing a good quality product," — Mr Klaus Turayebingoha, a certification officer at the UNBS



grains, can damage the liver and weaken the immune system.

"For families already struggling with limited access to healthcare, the cost is heavy," Dr Ongom says.

"While you think you are making money, you are also eating your own death at the same time. We all need to wake up to the reality of quality and safety for our people," he said.

#### Millers speak out

Some millers acknowledge the problem but cite economic pressure and limited knowledge as major challenges.

Mr Simon Peter Itito, a miller in Lira

City says they often process dirty grains to avoid losing customers.

"The biggest challenge we face is that our machines are meant to make money. If a client brings dirty grains, we end up milling them as they are for fear of losing the client and income," Mr Itito says.

He adds that customers sometimes request minimal milling to preserve quantity, particularly for school consumption.

"We go ahead and mill the grains the way they want. Eventually, you find that the flour is not clean for human consumption," he admits.

#### UNBS steps in

In response to growing concerns, UNBS has intensified outreach efforts in the Lango Sub-region to promote safer milling practices.

Mr Richard Ebong, an official in the UNBS department of standards development, says the intervention followed reports of aflatoxin contamination in Ugandan maize exports.

"There were complaints when we exported maize to South Sudan and Kenya. Products from Lango Sub-region were rejected, and Kenya stopped importing maize from Uganda," Mr Ebong

says.

During a recent two-day training in Lira City, UNBS emphasised machine cleaning, safe packaging, pest control, and compliance with national standards.

"Some millers argued that they only mill and are not producers. But if your processing plant is a point of contamination, then you are responsible because you receive money for the service," Mr Ebong explains.

He stresses that food safety standards apply to everyone.

"UNBS compulsory standards require that food products be safe whether they are eaten by a local resident or the president. If I bring my maize to your machine, it should not be a source of contamination."

#### A call to action

Health experts say improving hygiene at milling facilities is urgent. They urge millers to adopt safer practices, regulators to enforce standards, and consumers to demand clean, safe flour.

As the region depends heavily on maize and millet for daily sustenance, ensuring food safety is not just a regulatory issue, it is a matter of public health and survival.