

## **Agrochemical use- A risk to public health**

The agricultural sector is the bedrock of Uganda's economy. Statistics track agriculture as the primary sector that serves as the main source of livelihood and provides employment to about 66% of the Ugandan population. The sector is also a significant contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – 24.5% while being critical for food and income security. Records from the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF) show that the value of agricultural exports as a percentage of the value of total exports stood at 72.9% in the FY 2016/17 indicating an increase of 36%.

Different regions in Uganda grow a variety of crops and graze livestock supported by different ecological conditions which shelter a wide range of pests such as insects, weeds, and vectors. To avoid agricultural crop loss and enhance productivity, farmers are increasingly taking on the application of agro-chemicals. Though much of Uganda's agricultural system is by default organic, The Annual Agriculture Survey (AAS, 2018) indicates that in the year 2018/9 the use of agrochemicals was as high as 17%, a trend gradually increasing.

Humans are vulnerable to the toxicity of agrochemicals as some succumb to death as a result of accumulated residues of agrochemicals in food and the environment. Approximately 300,000 people worldwide die annually and a majority of these deaths occur in developing countries. The continuous supply of dangerous agrochemicals on the markets is a risk to life and a clear indicator of human rights violations particularly the right to life and the right to a clean and healthy environment as guaranteed under the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995.

### **Glyphosate-based chemicals**

Glyphosate is a chemical compound that works as an effective herbicide or weed killer and it is one of the most commonly used herbicide chemicals in the world. The World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in 2015 however, classified glyphosate-based chemicals as highly hazardous and probably carcinogenic.

In Uganda, there are several challenges with the use of glyphosate-based chemicals stemming from the several gaps in the laws and policies regulating agrochemical use. The laws in place do not adequately regulate the use, storage, disposal, and transportation of agrochemicals taking into consideration issues of public health. The need for regulating agrochemical use, in particular glyphosate-based herbicides has been recognized in several countries worldwide and many have banned the use of the same due to the health risks involved. Glyphosate has been banned in at least 10 jurisdictions, including Germany and Austria, and at least 15 additional countries restrict its use. Glyphosate use has also been challenged in the courts of law for causing cancer to

victims; a land mark case was in San Francisco USA where the manufacturer of the Roundup weed killer was sued over claims that the herbicide caused cancer. About 15,000 lawsuits were filed against the company to which a settlement of \$11 Billion was made.

This global move restricting agrochemical use will affect Uganda's export revenue. In 2015, Uganda imposed a self-ban on the export of hot pepper to Europe for more than a month due to pesticide residues, poor storage and packaging amongst others. Similarly, in 2019, the European Union issued a warning to the government of Uganda about a pending ban on agricultural produce to the European market if Uganda does not adhere to the sanitary phytosanitary measures and standards including eliminating pesticide residues in the agricultural produce. Such rejections and bans have led to financial losses through the loss of export market for failure to meet the food safety and health standards of importing countries. Regulation of the standards requires the government to trace and monitor the entire agricultural chain/system including but not limited to regulation of marketing/trading in glyphosate-based chemicals.

We therefore call upon the government to take cognizance of its duty to protect the right to health of all Ugandans taking into account the fact that the country's economy is also greatly being affected. We call for the use of organic agriculture as a viable alternative to pesticide use. Organic agriculture sustains the health of the soil, ecosystem and has no adverse effects to the environment.