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Date: 24 Feb. 2021

Country and Region: Uganda, Africa

Title of project: **COVID-19 impacts on chemicals and wastes in Uganda**

1. INTRODUCTION

Facts about the country pandemic situation

As of 13th April 2021, Uganda has registered a total of 41,263 coronavirus cases. Of these, there have been 338 deaths. Uganda, like any other country in the world, is currently grappling with a pandemic of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), a new virus that is a highly infectious. Uganda has made significant strides in handling and minimizing the cases of COVID-19. This has been made possible through constantly advocating for effective and comprehensive Standard Operating Procedures (SPOs). These include closure of schools and places of worship, limiting the number of people in public gatherings, closure of bars and disco halls, and limiting the number of passengers in public transport, among others. Importantly, the Ministry of Health and relevant officials have advocated and promoted proper hand washing with soap and water for about 20 seconds as an effective way against the virus. The National Drug Authority (NDA) has adopted World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines on sanitizers. The World Health Organization stipulates that sanitizers should have 80 percent of ethanol, as well as hydrogen peroxide, to be effective in ridding users of dangerous pathogens. Additionally, the government has been promoting sanitizers that are above 60% alcohol content.



Photo 1. A sample of good quality sanitizers on the market in Uganda. Photo by ACCC.

However, it should be noted that the virus incidences will likely increase due to the last concluded presidential, parliamentary and local elections. During the election, campaign voters and supporters of different candidates could gather in large crowds. This happened despite the fact that the country's electoral body had allowed only 70 people at meetings during campaigns to avoid the spread of the virus, barring open rallies

which often attract several hundred. At the voting day, most people lined up in hundreds of thousands and in most cases ignored the SOPs.

Uganda has not yet accessed the COVID-19 vaccine. People in the country side are relying heavily on local herbs for steaming and drinking as a cure against the virus. Uganda's Ministry of Health (MoH) is, however, planning to get COVID-19 vaccines. The Ministry is still waiting for the price of the COVID-19 vaccines to be accessible, as negotiations between the COVID-19 Global Vaccine Access Facility (COVAX facility) and manufacturers continue.

2. IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON CHEMICALS AND WASTES

A. Findings on impact of COVID-19 on chemicals-sanitizers

1. ACCC established that in public places such as entrances to banks, markets, arcades, taxis, bus parks, shops, supermarkets, restaurants and other places, people could find sanitizers with the security personnel or the management which could be forcibly applied to them without any question. One could not be allowed access into some places if insisting upon using his/her own.

2. ACCC established that some people in the communities visited reported a number of side effects as a result of using sanitizers. Some users have complained about side effects such as allergies and skin irritation, vomiting, dizziness and having difficulties in breathing.

3. In the first few months of the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown, the public couldn't differentiate the genuine sanitizers from those which were counterfeit. This exposed them to some expired, substandard and harmful sanitizers. ACCC saw some sanitizers, such as one called **Focus Hand Disinfectant**, with misleading labels such as, '*effect to Corona Virus, AIDS (HIV), HSV, Influenza viruses, Rota, Vaccinia.*'

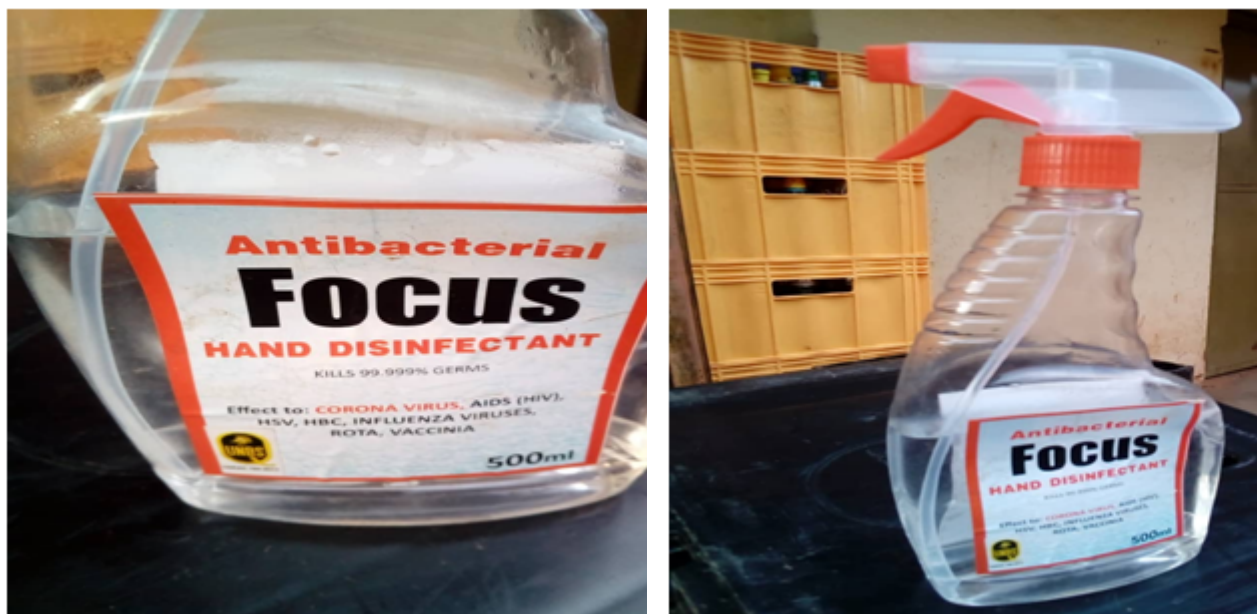


Photo 2. A sample of fake sanitizers from Focus Company claiming that it can help in treating HIV/AIDs. Photo by ACCC.

4. ACCC further established that some companies making sanitizers in Uganda took advantage of the high demand for hand sanitizers during the coronavirus pandemic and used toxic ingredients such as methanol. Some of these sanitizers have since been banned by the National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) for failure to meet the standards. According to UNBS standards, sanitizers containing less than 60% alcohol may be less effective in preventing the spread of Covid-19.

5. Coronavirus pandemic exponentially increased the need for access to hand-sanitizers and disinfectant products for both healthcare professionals and the public at large. When produced and used correctly, these products are safe and effective. However, wrong formulations and improper use of these products could result in life-threatening effects.

6. During the field visits, ACCC established that some companies found it cheaper to buy sanitizers in bulk (like in 20-litre cans) and just refill the (unlabelled) bottles or the cans at their entrances and in offices. This makes it difficult to distinguish between wrong or right sanitizer.

7. The public had a mixed response in regard to the use of sanitizers. Some would willingly sanitize, although in most cases, people would have to be forced to wash their hands, sanitize or wear masks—like it made little sense to them to do so on their own. This risked the spread of the virus to the rest of the public.

8. ACCC found that some members of the public were making their own sanitizers without following the guidelines of Ministry of Health and NDA, which could likely harm the users.

9. ACCC established that there are a number of poor quality sanitizers and masks on the market. Some of the manufacturers had not met the MoH and NDA guidelines and thus produced a number of substandard products that were circulated to the public. Consequently, after receiving continuous complaints from the public regarding the quality and safety of sanitizers and facemasks on the market, UNBS banned certain companies and others were blacklisted. UNBS went ahead and named companies that had failed laboratory tests and were likely to sell substandard sanitizers.

10. ACCC found out that children were freely playing with hand sanitizer bottles without any precaution. Hand sanitizers were tempting to children because some were packaged in colourful bottles with good smells. This put the children at a risk of chemical poisoning.

B. Findings on the impact of COVID-19 on plastic wastes

1. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the complexities of plastic waste management. The pandemic resulted in massive use of personal protective equipment (PPE), much of which contains a substantial proportion of plastic as the most reliable and affordable defense against infection and transmission of the virus. The increased demand for single-use PPE by doctors and other health care workers and use of masks for the public has increased the generation of plastic waste. This waste hitherto has been littered in different public places, including key water bodies such as lakes.



*Photo 3. An example of massive plastic waste dumping in Kabaka's lake in Lubaga, Kampala.
Photo by ACCC.*

2. Plastic waste management practices in Uganda are largely ineffective. Lack of proper collection and management of plastic wastes was evident during the lockdown period. Thus, there was uncontrolled use and an insensitive way of disposing of plastic waste to the environment. Plastic wastes were disposed of into gardens, wetlands, water systems, walkways, roadsides, abandoned and open lands and people's compounds that were not fenced. These practices will exacerbate plastic pollution in the country.



*Photo 4. A photo depicting massive plastic wastes in wetland in Kikaya, in Kampala suburb.
Photo by ACCC.*

3. During the first stages of the Covid-19 lockdown, some of the recycling factories had to shut down. Vehicles collecting garbage were few. Some of the owners and drivers of trash and recycling companies left to the villages. Additionally, children had come back from schools, parents were not working, and there were restrictions on movement (only the medics and security personnel were permitted free movement). Because of this, some households increased the burning of plastic wastes such as bottles, polythene bags and straws, among others, in the open, during the day and at night. Worst of all, some parents sent children to do the burning without any warning about their dangers. If burnt, plastic wastes like polythene bags release highly toxic gases like phosgene, carbon monoxide, chlorine, sulphur dioxide nitrogen oxide, in addition to deadly dioxins. These chemicals have far reaching ramifications on the health of people and the environment at large.

3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS RELEVANT TO THE FINDINGS IN THE REPORT

A. Recommendations on the impact of COVID-19 on chemicals-sanitizers

1. Regular vigilance is required in the public and by the responsible authorities such as the Uganda National Bureau of Standards, National Drug Authority, and Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development over counterfeit hand sanitizers that have flooded the market. Ensure all sanitizers and other related chemicals in the market are well labeled and authorized for the purpose.
2. To reduce improper use and prevent unnecessary chemical exposures, users should always read and follow directions on the label. Wearing of eye and skin protection material is also critical in minimizing exposures to sanitizers. The public should also report suspicious sanitizers to the responsible authorities for action.
3. The chemical products that are used in different households should always be kept out of the reach of the children. Children are much more vulnerable to such chemical exposures.
4. The communities and the public should be reminded to wash hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Hand washing should equally be emphasized as a cheaper alternative to using sanitizer.
5. The public should be sensitized that swallowing alcohol-based hand sanitizers can cause poisoning. Sanitizers shouldn't be used by and kept out of reach of young children.
6. There is a need to conduct independent studies on different chemical formulations for hand sanitizers produced and used in Uganda. This is important in ensuring that they are safe for public use.
7. There is a need to advocate and promote hand sanitizers that contain at least 60% alcohol. Hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol are more effective in preventing the spread of corona virus.
8. The public should be warned not to use empty containers of sanitizer for other uses such as fetching water or storing water for drinking, among others.

B. Recommendations on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on plastic wastes

1. The government should enact and enforce strict policies and legislation on plastic waste. Uganda does not have any serious environmental laws on disposal of plastics and the existing laws are never enforced. Many companies and investors were allowed to produce a variety of plastic-related PPEs and containers in Uganda without any law governing them.
2. There is an urgent need to raise the awareness of the entire public on issues of plastic wastes and how it should be managed. There is a need to sensitize the public about the environmental and health damage caused by plastics. This will help in reducing the irresponsible and thoughtless behaviour such as the

indiscriminate use of plastics, reckless disposal of waste, and other lavish, wasteful and unaffordable lifestyles, the effect of which is damaging our health and environment.

3. The government should promote, install and prioritize efficient waste management systems across the country. Manufacturers and the business community need to be encouraged to do more of sound recycling and disposal of the used plastics in order to absorb big volumes of plastic waste disposed of in the environment.
4. The government and businesses should identify and promote non-fossil fuel plastic substitutes. The list of non-toxic, biodegradable or easily recyclable materials that could replace plastic includes many well-known materials, such as glass, ceramics, natural fibres, paper, cardboard, rice husk, natural rubber and animal proteins.
5. There is a need to interest the media to cover stories on issues of wastes in general and specifically plastic waste. The media is well positioned to reach to the wider audience. This will deepen knowledge and skills with respect to waste management.
6. There is a need to promote community outreach on issues of plastic waste management. Management of plastic waste often starts at the household, individual and community levels, and effective strategies to educate and motivate citizens can significantly change their behavior.
7. There is a need to provide incentives such as tax waivers, tax holidays, free land, and subsidized electricity fares, among others, to companies that have plans for sound management of the wastes.
8. There is a compelling need for an effective law enforcement mechanism. Serious penalties should be imposed to non-complying individuals or businesses. There is a need to promote benchmarking missions for the policy makers and advocates of sound waste management to countries that have had remarkable successes in managing wastes for replication purposes.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

4. ACTIVITY CONDUCTED

The project sought to raise and deepen awareness and document chemical and waste consequences as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was limited to Kampala and Wakiso districts and to raising awareness and documenting the impact of COVID-19 on plastic wastes and chemicals-sanitizers. The project was implemented from October 2020 to January 2021. The target group for this project included the media, households, community leaders, women associations/groups, companies dealing in chemical and waste products, government agencies and line ministries, MPs, academic and research institutions, and public interest NGOs. To achieve the project objective, ACCC undertook a series of activities that include the following:



Photo 5. A plot of land amidst the community filled with all sorts of plastic wastes in Uganda, Wakiso. Photo by ACCC.

- **Conducted a rapid assessment study to document the impact of COVID 19 on chemicals and plastic wastes.** The study employed a number of methods. These included focus group discussions (FDGs), strategic meetings, photography and observations, literature reviews and field visits. The FDGs were conducted with the members in different communities. Strategic meetings were conducted with technical and policy makers. Field visits were conducted in Nansana, Ganda (Wakiso) and Kavule, Makerere Kikoni and Kawala (Kampala). The literature reviewed was from secondary sources (online, library, reports of the media houses and policy documents). The copy of the report is attached.
- **Convened FDGs, awareness meetings and strategic meetings with key stakeholders to gather data, share experiences and disseminate results.** A total 3 FDGs and 2 strategic meetings were conducted in the course of the project implementation. The FDGs were conducted with different households, community leaders, women groups, dealers in plastic wastes, and opinion leaders. These FDGs were carried out in Ganda parish, Nansana in Wakiso district and Kasubi and Mulago villages in Kampala City. Strategic meetings were conducted with media, companies dealing in chemical and waste products, government agencies and line ministries, MPs, academic and research institutions, and public interest NGOs. A webinar was also organized to get the views from the public regarding their experience on the subject matter. During the webinar, the ACCC team shared some of the findings from the study and other engagements. The key concerns, experiences, questions and comments informed our discussion on the radio talk show and further enriched our advocacy campaigns. Comments and resolutions made during the meetings were captured and consolidated in the section of the recommendations in the study

and narrative reports.



*Photo 6. One of the strategic Meetings Conducted at Holy Farm Hotel in Nansana, Kampala.
Photo by ACCC.*

- **Conducted one radio talk show at Impact FM on 16th October 2020 from 7:00-8:00 pm.** As part of the awareness campaign on the impact of COVID-19 on plastic wastes and chemicals, ACCC organized and conducted a talk show on Impact FM Radio. The talk show program was shared in advance on ACCC's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/accuganda/>) for the public to participate. During the talk show, callers from different districts of Uganda expressed fears and concerns on the likely negative impacts of COVID-19 on plastic wastes and chemicals-sanitizers. One of the callers testified that he had experienced some skin and eye irritations after applying a certain brand of sanitizer. The public was asking government for effective disposal systems and protection from dangerous sanitizers. They also requested for incentives from the government that would interest people in the recycling business. The link to the talk show is here:
https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10221135387367199&id=1619947360



Photo 7. ACCC Team during the talk show on Impact FM in Kampala. Photo by ACCC.

- **Developed EIC materials, including a brochure for raising awareness on plastic wastes and chemicals as a result of COVID-19.** To provide meaningful engagements with different stakeholders at national and community levels for purposes of deepening the awareness campaign on plastic wastes and chemicals, ACCC developed and printed a brochure. The copies were circulated to stakeholders during the awareness raising campaigns. ACCC further plans to circulate it on its social media and also upload it on its website. A copy of the brochure is attached to this report.

5. RESOURCES ON CHEMICALS AND WASTE

The following are useful resources for researching these issues.

1. <https://ugandaradionetwork.net/story/nda-adopts-who-guidelines-for-sanitizers-after-adverse-effects-reports> (accessed on 10th December 2020)
2. <https://www.health.go.ug/cause/standard-operating-procedures-sops-for-conducting-church-services-in-the-covid-19-era/>
3. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/covid-19-casts-shadow-on-uganda-s-election-campaigns/2042257>
4. <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/jeph/2020/6807630/>
5. <file:///C:/Users/dt/AppData/Local/Temp/sustainability-11-05523.pdf>
6. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10962247.2014.984818>
7. <https://www.unenvironment.org/interactive/beat-plastic-pollution/>
8. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/07/c_139649564.htm Uganda awaits price of COVID-19 vaccine as cases surge

Note: More references can be found in the study report that was conducted.