



Livestock reared for meat.. PHOTO CREDIT: BUSANI BAFANA

Why Africa needs standardised meat quality and safety systems

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On a dusty side road market, a butcher waves off buzzing flies from a carcass hanging from a wooden pole. He hacks off a chunk of meat, throws it on a manual scale and the customer pays based on little more than colour and look.

Many customers hardly ask for a meat mark or a safety certificate. This scene is replicated thousands of times daily across Africa's informal markets, an opposite of sterile, chilled export abattoirs that serve international markets.

This divide reveals a hidden public health and economic crisis: inconsistent meat safety standards that threaten both lives and

livelihoods.

There is brisk trade in livestock across Africa but the quality and safety of most meat in informal markets is often below standard. This shows a two-tier system: one with strict, well-funded protocols for export and another, largely informal sector serving the local market with minimum oversight.

"Meat destined to international markets, as well as the facilities used to produce it, follow strict inspection protocols," says Dr Silvia Alonso Alvarez, a senior epidemiologist at the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI).

Regulatory requirements are oriented to ensure that slaughter facilities for export meat are able to produce and store meat safely. Strict protocols for

meat grading and quality control are followed. While similar regulations apply to the value chains that produce meat for national markets, a part of the meat may be commercialised through the informal sector, which often operates at the margin of regulations, Alvarez noted.

"However, most meat across Africa destined to domestic markets is sold in informal markets, which often escape, or operate at the margins of, regulatory processes," said Dr Alvarez.

The result? Meat grading is virtually nonexistent, and quality controls are limited.

More than just a bad steak

The gaps in the system extend far beyond paperwork. A lack of safe, hygienic infrastructure and critically,





refrigeration allows meat to spoil, posing severe health risks.

"Meat safety checks are also limited, and the services provided by the government to support meat inspection for local markets suffer from limited resources," says Dr Annie Cook, an epidemiologist at ILRI. "Not enough personnel to conduct meat inspection, difficulties with transportation to reach the required location. It is suspected that a large part of the meat consumed within national boundaries across African countries is uninspected."

Meat safety is a significant and multifaceted public health concern in Africa, experts argue. While meat is a crucial source of nutrition and has great cultural and economic importance, its production and consumption are linked to several serious health risks across the continent. Chief concerns are the increased incidents of zoonotic diseases - those that can move from animals to humans such as foot and mouth disease, Rift Valley Fever and anthrax - food-borne pathogens and poor infrastructure.

A continent held back

Despite having an increased cattle population, Africa is a small player in global meat trade, with a few countries exporting quality meat into selected European markets while intra-Africa trade is relatively limited. This is a result of multiple challenges confronting the meat industry in Africa; absence of cold chain facilities and unhygienic slaughter conditions, poor regulation and lack of robust meat safety laws.

Africa accounts for nearly 6 percent of global meat production, up from 4.5 percent in 2000, owing to a reduction in the cattle herds of Oceania, North America, and Europe. In 2020, Africa produced close to 20 million metric tonnes of meat, with poultry being the largest source, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

This unstandardised domestic market threatens and hinders economic growth. With the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which seeks to break down trade barriers, the inability to guarantee meat safety from one country to the

next is a big obstacle.

Eliminating the informal meat sector is not the solution given that it serves a majority of the population across Africa. Experts say the key lies in improving the sector through capacity building of butchers and traders, creating economic incentives for better hygiene and designing innovative regulatory approaches to manage and monitor the safety of food in the informal sector.

The Africa Food Safety Agency

To boost food safety in Africa, the African Union is establishing the Africa Food Safety Agency (AfFSA) to coordinate food safety policies continent-wide. This agency, expected to be operational by 2026, could be a game-changer. It will centralise risk assessment, streamline regulations, and pioneer a data-driven approach to safeguarding public health and boost trade.

The creation of AfFSA will enhance comprehensive food safety governance on the continent where food safety is highly compromised. Its launch culminates over a decade of incremental progress—from tackling aflatoxin threats to developing continental strategies.

"The food safety agency is still in its early stages and its role in promoting meat safety is still unclear. Such an agency can have a critical role in harmonising approaches to food safety," says Dr Alvarez, adding that the planned agency could guide African countries on innovative approaches to improving meat safety in the vast informal sector.

Customers in informal meat markets deserve better if not the same confidence in the meat as international customers. The success of Africa's vision for robust trade and healthier citizens will depend on whether agencies like AfFSA can help bring a measure of the export abattoir's standards to the bustling yet chaotic informal meat markets.