

Food or foe - the real cost of counterfeit consumables

By [Vashti Nagel](#)

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The rise of counterfeit consumables has increased exponentially over the past few years across the African continent. A cause for major concern as many of these cases end in a fatality...



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Everyone needs to eat, but trusting the source of your food has become more of a challenge than before.

Recent studies have shown that over 50% of all goods, including food, drugs and construction materials, imported into Tanzania are counterfeit. Ghana is not far behind, where palm oil is laced with Sudan IV, a food dye which is a known carcinogen. In Nigeria, counterfeit milk powder contains no animal protein; and in Kenya, vegetable oil is made of recycled oil unfit for human consumption. Throughout Africa, plastic rice has become the replacement, carefully wrapped in the packaging of well-known brands.

Most of the consumable goods counterfeited are staples which consumers believe contain required nutrients. Unfortunately, these foods are laced with disease-causing ingredients and, in most instances, not at all containing the ingredients and nutrients required in the food.

While it may seem like this is only a problem for upper Africa regions, South Africa is no stranger to counterfeit food. In September 2019, Dr Jane Battersby-Lennard of UCT's African Centre for Cities [reported](#) that the trading of counterfeit foodstuffs is on the rise, both in formal and informal businesses in South Africa.

The effects of consuming these foods, especially on growing children, means they do not consume the required nutrients and may suffer malnutrition and possible lifelong impacts on their physical and intellectual development. Not only is malnutrition an issue, but consumption of possible deadly ingredients, resulting in death is a major concern. [Recently in Nigeria](#), two children died after consuming biscuits at a friend's birthday celebration at school and a few others were hospitalised.

One of the reasons for the rise in counterfeit food is the fact that locally, manufacturers are faced with competition from cheaper imports, resulting in them using inferior or unregulated products to decrease their production costs. Added to this are weak regulatory systems which make it easy for counterfeiters to find loopholes and additionally, the origin of food products is difficult to trace because of the complex food systems and long supply chains.

To protect yourself from falling victim to this crime, it is always best to inspect the packaging and labels; and where the food can be seen through the packaging, to inspect whether the food meets the normal visual criteria.

To curb the epidemic, African countries, apart from creating awareness about this issue, need to implement stringent regulatory standards for food content as well as for labeling. Focus must be placed on the tracking and prevention of imported as well as locally produced counterfeit food.

In an ever-growing field such as anti-counterfeiting, it is best to stay one step ahead; counterfeiters are becoming creative and are starting to counterfeit anything and everything that will ensure a benefit for them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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