



How do the public and policy makers communicate their perceptions of environmental risk to academics?

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This paper investigates the ways that the public and policy makers talk about environmental risk to academics. The case study is heavy-metal contamination of food in Zambia, Southern Africa. In several localities in Zambia, urban agriculture is practised using heavy-metal contamination wastewater for irrigation. This leads to contaminated food crops that are subsequently consumed. One case study site where this occurs is Chunga, situated in the northwest of the Zambian capital: Lusaka.

For members of the public, six focus groups were carried out at the Chunga, Zambia study site, involving a total of 48 participants. The participants were those involved in urban agriculture through cultivation, selling and consumption of food crops. Urban agriculturalist focus group participants were recruited through key field informants. Focus group discussion starter questions involved pollution awareness, health impacts of pollution in the area and who is responsible for communicating environmental contamination risks to the general population. For policy stakeholders, 39 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals from various organisations including government ministries, non-governmental organisations, community based organisations and international institutions. Semi-structured interviews investigated the perceived major health issues in Zambia, food safety, environmental contamination and specifically heavy-metal contamination. Policy stakeholders were identified through policy mapping and organisations mentioned in focus group discussions and other interviews.

The results at the Chunga study site show that members of the public perceive: (i) heavy metal pollution is not an issue in Lusaka and for their irrigation practices, (ii) dirty food can cause illness, (iii) heavy metals in foods can cause illness but they are not present at the Chunga site. Amongst urban agriculturalists the quantity of food available is the greatest issue, with some saying that they do not have the luxury of thinking about the quality of food. Only two policy makers in the semi-structured interviews perceived there to be a possible health problems due to heavy metal contaminated food in Zambia. However, this was from personal experience and not a corporate view. Policy makers did not think that food safety was an issue in Zambia, with several interviewees stating that food security was more of a priority, reflecting the urban agriculture cultivators' views that quantity is the more important issue than quality of food. Risks due to environmental contamination are not high in the public and policy makers' priorities, even when asked directly about the issue. Both urban agriculturalists and policy stakeholders believe that academics have a key role to play in communicating the possible and actual risks to the affected populations and institutional stakeholders.