

# 'Contaminated vegetables pose health hazard'

Story: Naa Lamiley Lamptey

**THE use of polluted water by some residents in vegetable cultivation in the Accra metropolis poses a great health hazard to consumers of vegetables. This is because the water is often contaminated with faecal matter.**

The Food, Water and Drug Officer at the Metro Public Health Department of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA), Mr Anthony Adotey who made this known in an interview, stated that health experts were worried by the practice and that the assembly was considering destroying the farms of those who use waste water to irrigate them.

He explained that diseases such as typhoid, cholera, worm infestation, dysentery and diarrhoea could be contracted from vegetables cultivated with waste water if they are not washed well before eating.

Dr Pay Drechsel, the Team Leader of Agriculture, Water and Cities at the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), however, argued that the livelihood of farmers engaged in urban agriculture would be jeopardised if their activities were banned, adding that urban vegetable growers were contributing immensely to the "green" nutritional needs of people in such areas.

According to him many such farm-

ers yearn to use safe water for irrigation but it is "scarce, expensive and unreliable".

He said "a big step forward is the current efforts by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture to search for clean groundwater for irrigation".

Research which was carried out by IWMI this year revealed that more than 200,000 urban dwellers ate fast foods that had had been prepared with lettuce, spring onion or cabbage every day.

Dr Drechsel said as a result of this contribution to diet of urban dwellers, "interventions should be put in place to reduce the health risk while enhancing the advantages of urban agriculture, but not automatically to condemn it".

He explained that banning the use of waste water failed in the past since it threatened the availability of leafy, vitamin and nutrient rich vegetables. "It also threatened the livelihood of poor vegetable farmers and traders, many of whom were women".

He stated that "as long as authorities cannot provide alternative irrigation water sources, other options for risk management are required".

The risks involved in the use of waste water, according to him, could be reduced at the farm level through safer irrigation techniques, the use of improved shallow wells and low technology water filters. He said studies

at KNUST and IWMI are exploring these options.

He further stated that the institute in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) plans to establish Farmer Field Schools to train urban farmers in risk management and best farm practices, next year.

Mr Philip Amoah, a Microbiologist and Environmental Scientist, also with IWMI, explained that the contamination of vegetables as a result of waste water irrigation could be minimised if consumers washed the vegetables with a combination of water and vinegar.

He said research carried out by the institute early this year in three areas of the country, namely, Accra, Kumasi and Tamale indicated that most people did not wash their vegetables sufficiently to remove the bacteria that cause disease.

Mr Amoah has explained that using running water to wash vegetables is good but that it only reduces the risk by about 30 per cent, while using water in a bowl reduces the bacterial load by only 20 per cent and washing vegetables with salt water reduces contamination by 30 per cent.

According to him the best tested method so far is a mixture of water and vinegar, using two parts of water and one part of vinegar.