

Professor Thokozani Majozi

President, Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

invites you to

the 13th ASSAf Presidential Roundtable Discussion on

A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO CURB FOOD-RELATED POISONING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Date: 11 February 2025

Time: 10:00 – 12:00

Platform: ZOOM Webinar

Registration: Please Click [here](#) to Register (You will receive a joining link immediately after registration)

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Background

According to media reports, approximately twenty-two (22) children have died from food poisoning-related illnesses since the beginning of 2024 to date. About 3 000 cases of suspected food poisoning were reported to the Notifiable Medical Conditions System¹. Reports by the Ministers of Health and Police have confirmed that the cause of these deaths was poisoning by hazardous organophosphate chemicals. President Cyril Ramaphosa identified toxic terbufos and aldicarb, the street pesticides referred to as 'Galephirimi,' commonly sold and used illegally in townships and informal settlements to control rats, as the toxic agents linked to the surge in poisonings². Consumption of snacks purchased from spaza shops has been widely reported as the primary exposure route.

Terbufos, aldicarb and other organophosphates are commonly associated with suicides³ and contribute to notable child and adolescent accidental mortality. The SA government announced stringent interventions following the deaths of the children due to food poisoning in order to curb the crisis and these include:

- Removing hazardous pesticides:** closing down spaza shops and street vendors implicated in the distribution of contaminated snacks; inspecting all registered manufactures and distributors of terbufos to prevent illegal selling,
- Strengthening food safety regulations:** mandating the registration of all spaza shops within a 21-day period; reviewing guidelines for the supply and management of foodstuffs to public schools; intensifying efforts to trace, test, and regulate food and chemical products; assisting township and rural businesses to comply with safety regulations and also improve their infrastructure,
- Educating the public:** launching public education campaigns on food safety,
- Improving waste management** by municipalities to address the rat infestation problem, etc.

Notably, the poisoning incidents have been limited to certain pockets of society, mainly townships and rural areas, and have been exclusive to public schools. In South Africa and other developing nations, accidental pesticide poisoning disproportionately impacts poorer communities⁴. Therefore, to address the food poisoning crisis meaningfully with sustainable outcomes requires a multi-faceted, systematic approach that encompasses public and environmental health, food safety, social, economic and regulatory dimensions. It is on this basis that the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) is hosting the 13th ASSAf Presidential Roundtable titled "**A Systems Approach to Curb Food-related Poisoning in South Africa**" to

- Increase awareness on the issue of food-poisoning related incidents, especially in townships and rural areas; and
- Provide recommendations on how best various government service delivery portfolios, organisations and the society at large can systematically approach this challenge. The panellists will include Prof Hanna-Andrea Rother (University of Cape Town), Prof Lise Korsten (University of Pretoria), Prof Caliphs Zvinowanda (University of Johannesburg) and representatives from Government and civil society. Participants from the private and public sector, civil society and the general public are encouraged to attend.

The ASSAf Presidential Roundtables (PRT) on Science, Scholarship and Society are evidence-based dialogues that bring together high-level experts and stakeholders to address critical issues affecting society at large and are of interest to a broad audience.

1. Minister of Health Reply to Parliament: <https://pmg.org.za/committee-question/26818/>
2. President Cyril Ramaphosa: Address on food-borne illnesses: <https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-address-food-borne-illnesses-15-nov-2024>
3. Razwiedani, L.L. and Rautenbach, P.G.D., 2017. Epidemiology of organophosphate poisoning in the Tshwane District of South Africa. Environmental health insights, 11, p.1178630217694149
4. Stuart, A.M., Jacob, J., Awoniyi, A.M. et al. Alternative domestic rodent pest management approaches to address the hazardous use of metal phosphides in low- and middle-income countries. J Pest Sci (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10340-024-01825-7>