Social Science and Humanities Journal
Everant Journal
ISSN: 2456-2653
https://sshjournal.com/
Impact Factor: 2024: 6.576
2023: 5.731
Volume 09 Issue 09 September 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18535/sshj.v9i09.2039

Prevalence of Chemical Residues in Containerized Food Imports at Dar es Salaam Port, Tanzania

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Received 15-08-2025
Revised 08-09-2025
Accepted 15-09-2025
Published 19-09-2025

Abstract

This study quantified the prevalence and concentration of key chemical residues in containerized food imports at Dar es Salaam Port, Tanzania. A cross-sectional design sampled fifty containers between March and May 2025. Pesticide residues (organophosphates, organochlorines, pyrethroids, neonicotinoids) were analyzed via QuEChERS extraction and GC-MS, and heavy metals (lead, cadmium) via acid digestion and AAS. Results showed that 44 % of containers contained pyrethroids (mean 0.72 mg/kg), 36 % contained lead (0.30 mg/kg), and 28 % contained organophosphates (0.40 mg/kg), each exceeding FAO/WHO MRLs. Organochlorines (20 %), neonicotinoids (16 %), and cadmium (24 %) were also detected. Over half of consignments harbored two or more residue classes, underscoring layered exposure risks. These findings mirror contamination patterns in other global ports and reveal critical gaps in pre-export testing, port laboratory capacity, and risk-based inspection regimes. The study recommends adopting multi-residue, high-throughput screening technologies, expanding rapid-analysis capacity, and implementing data-driven inspection prioritization to safeguard consumer health and strengthen Tanzania's food-safety infrastructure.

Keywords: Containerized Food, Pesticide Residues, Heavy Metals, Dar Es Salaam Port, Public Health

1. Introduction:

Globalization has led to an unprecedented increase in the volume of food products transported across continents in both refrigerated and dry-goods containers. While this expansion underpins food security and economic growth by facilitating access to diverse commodities, it also introduces complex food-safety challenges. Imported items may carry chemical contaminants such as pesticide residues and heavy metals that exceed permissible limits, posing serious risks to consumers (Diop et al., 2019). As international food chains lengthen, the efficacy of upstream controls becomes ever more critical for ensuring the safety and integrity of imports.

In East Africa, Dar es Salaam Port functions as the principal gateway for containerized food imports into Tanzania and neighboring landlocked countries. Handling over two million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) annually, the port is a linchpin of regional trade and a major contributor to national GDP (Tanzania Ports Authority, 2023). Its strategic connection to road, rail, and maritime transport networks directly influences the movement and storage of food products, with lapses at any juncture capable of compromising safety before goods reach consumers.

Among the most insidious chemical hazards in imported foods are pesticide residues and heavy metals. Organophosphates and pyrethroids remain extensively used for pre- and post-harvest pest control, despite evidence of their potential neurotoxicity and endocrine-disrupting effects (Nguyen & Le, 2020; European Food Safety Authority, 2021). Organochlorines, though banned in many jurisdictions, persist in the environment due to their chemical stability, while lead and cadmium uptake by crops driven by contaminated water sources or atmospheric deposition raises additional concerns about developmental toxicity and renal dysfunction (World Health Organization, 2022).

To safeguard public health, international bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and WHO have established Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs) for both pesticide residues and heavy metals in food commodities (FAO, 2021; WHO, 2022). However, the real-world effectiveness of these guidelines hinges on the capacity of port facilities to perform rigorous testing. Studies in West African ports indicate that up to 42 percent of container consignments exceed at least one pesticide MRL, a failure attributed to fragmented pre-export testing regimes and under-resourced laboratories (Diop et al., 2019). Similar gaps have been documented in Southeast Asia, where only 60 percent of containers undergo full multi-residue screening due to reagent shortages and staffing constraints (Nguyen & Le, 2020).

In Tanzania, empirical data on the burden of chemical residues in containerized food imports are sparse. Although the Tanzania Food, Drugs and Cosmetics Act codifies rigorous safety standards, enforcement is frequently hampered by delays in sample processing and a lack of rapid-analysis equipment at port laboratories (Patel & Singh, 2021). This bottleneck allows potentially hazardous consignments to enter domestic markets before confirmatory test results are available, undermining the protective intent of MRL regulations and exposing consumers to both acute and chronic health risks.

This paper addresses the critical knowledge gap by focusing specifically on the prevalence of chemical residues in containerized food products imported through Dar es Salaam Port. Employing validated analytical methods including QuEChERS extraction paired with gas chromatography–mass spectrometry for pesticides and acid-digestion atomic absorption spectroscopy for heavy metals alongside a representative sampling design, the study quantifies residue frequencies and mean concentrations relative to established MRLs. The findings are intended to inform targeted interventions, such as enhanced port-laboratory capacity and risk-based inspection scheduling, and to contribute to the broader discourse on chemical safety in global food trade.

2. Literature Review:

2.1 Global Context of Chemical Contamination in Trade

Chemical residues in imported foods have emerged as a pervasive global health concern, driven by the intensification of international food supply chains. Large-scale analyses across major seaports have consistently revealed that a substantial fraction of consignments fail to comply with established safety limits. For instance, Diop et al. (2019) reported that 42 percent of 120 containerized food shipments arriving at Dakar contained at least one pesticide residue above the Codex Alimentarius Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs), with particularly high detection rates for organophosphates and pyrethroids. Such findings underscore systemic weaknesses in pre-export testing regimes and highlight the uneven capacity of origin-country laboratories to enforce residue standards.

Similarly, Patel and Singh (2021) conducted a multi-country survey of South Asian ports and found that fewer than half of all incoming consignments underwent comprehensive screening for both pesticides and heavy metals. They attributed these compliance gaps to chronic resource constraints namely, insufficient funding for laboratory reagents, outdated analytical equipment, and a shortage of trained personnel at inspection agencies. The result is a global patchwork of oversight where chemical hazards routinely bypass national entry controls, putting consumers at risk and eroding public confidence in food-safety systems (Patel & Singh, 2021).

2.2 Pesticide Usage and Regulation

Organophosphates and pyrethroids dominate the global pesticide market due to their broad-spectrum efficacy and, in some cases, perceived lower toxicity profiles relative to organochlorines (Nguyen & Le, 2020). Organophosphates, including chlorpyrifos and malathion, function by inhibiting acetylcholinesterase activity, while pyrethroids such as cypermethrin disrupt neuronal sodium channels. Despite their widespread adoption, mounting evidence links chronic, low-level exposure to neurological impairments, endocrine disruption, and developmental deficits effects that manifest even when residue levels fall below regulatory thresholds (EFSA, 2021).

International frameworks, notably the Codex Alimentarius Commission, prescribe MRLs for specific pesticide–commodity pairs to protect consumer health (FAO, 2021). However, enforcement of these limits depends critically on the availability of gas chromatography–mass spectrometry (GC-MS) instrumentation and skilled analysts at point-of-entry laboratories. Nguyen and Le (2020) found that ports equipped with portable GC-MS units achieved compliance rates of up to 80 percent, whereas those reliant on distant central labs recorded only 45 percent compliance, due to sample degradation and transit delays. This disparity highlights the importance of on-site analytical capacity for real-time decision making and rapid intervention.

2.3 Heavy Metals in Food Imports

Heavy metals such as lead and cadmium pose significant public-health challenges because of their persistence in the environment and ability to bioaccumulate in plant and animal tissues (WHO, 2022). Lead, often originating from legacy industrial emissions or contaminated irrigation water, can impair cognitive development in children and contribute to cardiovascular and renal disease in adults. Cadmium, commonly associated with phosphate fertilizer use and metallurgical activities, accumulates in the kidneys and is classified as a human carcinogen.

Surveys of imported commodities further illustrate these risks. Smith et al. (2020) examined spice consignments entering European markets and found that 30 percent exceeded the maximum allowable lead concentration, with samples from high-emission regions showing the greatest contamination. Such data underscore the necessity for routine heavy-metal screening alongside pesticide assays at ports of entry, as reliance on pesticide-only protocols leaves a critical gap in hazard detection. Monitoring both classes of contaminants is therefore essential to comprehensive food-safety assurance.

2.4 Port Laboratory Capacity and Risk-Based Inspection

The effectiveness of chemical screening at seaports is inextricably linked to laboratory infrastructure and staffing. Nguyen and Le (2020) demonstrated that ports deploying portable, rapid-analysis technologies such as field-deployable GC-MS and X-ray fluorescence spectrometers could process samples within hours, achieving compliance rates as high as 80 percent. In contrast, facilities with centralized laboratories often experienced backlogs that delayed testing by up to several weeks, undermining the utility of results and allowing contaminated shipments to proceed unchecked.

To optimize resource allocation, risk-based inspection schedules have been proposed. These involve leveraging historical residue datasets and real-time cold-chain monitoring to identify consignments at greatest risk of contamination. By prioritizing samples based on origin country, commodity type, and transport conditions, inspection agencies can focus limited analytical capacity where it is most needed (Nguyen & Le, 2020). This targeted approach not only improves detection efficiency but also reduces operational costs associated with blanket testing regimes.

2.5 Gaps in Tanzanian Port Controls

Tanzania's regulatory framework for containerized food imports broadly aligns with

Codex standards under the Tanzania Food, Drugs and Cosmetics Act. However, recent audits reveal critical implementation gaps. Patel and Singh (2021) found that Dar es Salaam Port laboratories frequently experienced reagent shortages, equipment downtime, and staffing deficits that delayed residue analyses by up to four weeks. During this interval, sampled consignments often cleared customs and entered domestic markets before confirmatory results became available.

The lack of rapid-analysis capabilities and risk-based prioritization mechanisms further exacerbates these enforcement challenges. Without on-site GC-MS or real-time monitoring of cold-chain integrity, port authorities rely on manual inspections and off-site testing processes ill-suited to the high throughput of over two million TEUs handled annually (Tanzania Ports Authority, 2023). As no peer-reviewed study has yet quantified the prevalence of chemical residues in containerized imports at Dar es Salaam Port, this evidence gap hinders targeted policy reform and the allocation of resources necessary to strengthen national food-safety defenses.

3. Methodology:

3.1 Study Design and Sampling

This investigation adopted a cross-sectional descriptive design to capture a "snapshot" of chemical residues in containerized food imports arriving at Dar es Salaam Port over a three-month period (March–May 2025). Drawing upon the port's detailed manifest records, a sampling frame of all containerized food shipments was established. From this frame, fifty containers were selected by simple random sampling, ensuring that every eligible consignment had an equal probability of inclusion. This sample size was calculated to estimate residue-prevalence rates with a 95 percent confidence interval and a maximum allowable error of ±12 percent, based on standard epidemiological methods (Daniel, 1999).

3.2 Sample Collection and Preparation

Immediately after off-loading and prior to any depot transfer, each selected container was opened and sampled under aseptic field conditions to prevent external contamination. From the main commodity in each container whether frozen poultry, dried fruit, or bulk spices a 10 kg composite sample was collected and homogenized in stainless-steel blenders. After thorough mixing, a 10 g subsample was reserved for pesticide residue analysis, and a separate 5 g subsample was used for heavy-metal assays. All sampling equipment and glassware were rinsed with high-purity solvents between containers to maintain analytical integrity. Homogenized samples were stored in pre-cleaned polyethylene bags at 4 °C and transported to the laboratory within 24 hours.

3.3 Analytical Procedures

Pesticide residues were quantified using the QuEChERS (Quick, Easy, Cheap, Effective, Rugged, Safe) extraction protocol followed by gas chromatography–mass spectrometry (GC-MS) on an Agilent 7890B/5977A system. Calibration curves were prepared with certified standards at five concentration levels (0.01–1.00 mg/kg), yielding correlation coefficients (R^2) of at least 0.995 for each analyte. Heavy-metal concentrations (lead and cadmium) were determined via overnight acid digestion (HNO_3–$HClO_4$) and analysis by atomic absorption spectroscopy (AAS) using both flame and graphite-furnace modes on a PerkinElmer AAnalyst 800. Method detection limits ranged from 0.01 to 0.05 mg/kg for all analytes. Quality control measures including procedural blanks, matrix spikes, and duplicate sample analyses demonstrated recoveries between 70 percent and 120 percent, in accordance with international guidelines (FAO, 2021).

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were entered and managed in SPSS version 25. For each analyte, residue presence was recorded dichotomously (detected vs. not detected), and prevalence rates were calculated as the proportion of positive samples out of the total number tested. Where residues exceeded the established Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs) set by FAO/WHO, mean concentrations and standard deviations were computed to describe the magnitude of exceedance. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, SDs) provided an overview of contamination patterns, and all results were benchmarked against the relevant FAO/WHO MRLs (FAO, 2021; WHO, 2022) to assess compliance.

4. Results and Findings:

This section presents the quantitative outcomes of the residue analyses conducted on 50 containerized food samples imported through Dar es Salaam Port. First the study reports the prevalence of six target contaminants four pesticide classes and two heavy metals and then detail the average concentrations for those analytes exceeding international Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs). All results are benchmarked against FAO/WHO standards to assess compliance and public-health implications.

4.1 Prevalence of Chemical Residues

Table 4.1 Prevalence of Chemical Residues in Containerized Food Imports (n = 50)

Contaminant	Positive Samples	Prevalence (%)
Organophosphates	14	28
Organochlorines	10	20
Pyrethroids	22	44
Neonicotinoids	8	16
Lead	18	36
Cadmium	12	24

Source: Field Data (2025)

Table 4.1 shows that nearly half of all sampled containers (44 %) tested positive for pyrethroid residues, making this the most commonly detected pesticide class in the study. Lead was the next most prevalent contaminant, found in 36 % of samples, followed by organophosphates (28 %) and cadmium (24 %). Organochlorines and neonicotinoids were detected less frequently, in 20 % and 16 % of shipments respectively. This distribution likely reflects both the widespread use of pyrethroids for post-harvest pest control and persistent environmental sources of heavy-metal contamination in origin countries.

The steep drop-off from pyrethroids to neonicotinoids underscores the heterogeneous nature of chemical risks in imported foods. A prevalence of over one-third for lead and cadmium suggests that heavy-metal uptake remains a systemic issue possibly due to contaminated irrigation water or soil while the continued detection of organochlorines, despite longstanding bans, points to the remarkable environmental persistence of these compounds. Together, these findings reveal that a significant portion of food imports carries one or more chemical hazards, highlighting the need for comprehensive, multi-residue screening protocols at Dar es Salaam Port.

4.2 Concentrations Exceeding MRLs

Table 2. Mean Concentrations of Residues Exceeding MRLs

Contaminant	Mean Conc. (mg/kg)	SD	MRL (mg/kg)
Pyrethroids	0.72	0.15	0.50
Lead	0.30	0.05	0.20
Organophosphates	0.40	0.08	0.30

Source: Field Data (2025)

Table 2 highlights the degree to which select analytes exceeded their respective Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs). Pyrethroids showed the highest mean concentration 0.72 mg/kg surpassing the 0.50 mg/kg threshold by 44 percent. The standard deviation of 0.15 mg/kg indicates moderate variability among positive samples, suggesting that while some consignments carried pyrethroid levels just above the limit, others contained substantially higher residues. Organophosphates averaged 0.40 mg/kg 33 percent above the MRL of 0.30 mg/kg with a standard deviation of 0.08 mg/kg, reflecting relatively consistent but still troubling overages. Meanwhile, lead exhibited a mean concentration of 0.30 mg/kg, 50 percent above its 0.20 mg/kg limit, and demonstrated the tightest clustering (SD = 0.05 mg/kg), implying widespread environmental or handling sources of contamination.

The elevated mean level of pyrethroids underscores a systematic reliance on these compounds for post-harvest protection, possibly without adequate pre-export residue reduction measures. Given the neurotoxic potential of pyrethroids especially among vulnerable populations such as children the high average exceedance presents an acute public-health concern. The variability in pyrethroid concentrations also suggests inconsistent application rates or differential degradation during storage and transport, pointing to gaps in both agricultural best practices and cold-chain management.

Lead's consistent overshoot of its MRL signals pervasive heavy-metal uptake along the supply chain, likely stemming from contaminated soils or water sources in origin regions, or from exposure to leaded infrastructure during transit. The relatively low standard deviation indicates that this is not an isolated issue but a systemic one, warranting bilateral remediation strategies. The organophosphate exceedances, while slightly less pronounced, still represent a significant cholinesterase-inhibition risk. Together, these mean-level breaches across different contaminant classes reveal that many imported foods pose layered chemical hazards, reinforcing the need for multi-residue screening, stricter enforcement of MRLs, and upstream interventions to reduce agricultural inputs of these toxicants.

4.3 Composite Exposure Patterns

The co-occurrence analysis revealed that only 8 percent of containers were free from all six target analytes, while 36 percent harbored residues of two different contaminant classes and a further 20 percent contained three or more. These overlap patterns underscore that most imported food consignments carry layered chemical hazards rather than isolated residues. Such multi-class detections likely arise from a combination of agricultural practices where several pesticide chemistries may be used in concert and environmental contamination pathways for heavy metals, resulting in composite exposure profiles that single-analyte screening would miss.

From a toxicological standpoint, concurrent exposure to multiple residues can produce additive or even synergistic effects, amplifying health risks beyond those predicted by individual compound assessments. For example, Smith et al. (2020) demonstrated that combined ingestion of pyrethroids and lead intensifies neurodevelopmental deficits in juvenile animal models more than either toxicant alone. Likewise, EFSA (2021) has highlighted that organophosphate–pyrethroid mixtures can potentiate cholinesterase inhibition, increasing the likelihood of acute neurological symptoms. These compounding interactions are particularly critical for vulnerable groups such as young children and pregnant women who may experience disproportionately severe outcomes from compounded chemical insults.

Operationally, these findings argue strongly for integrating multi-residue, high-throughput screening technologies into port laboratory workflows. Portable GC-MS platforms and advanced sample-preparation kits can simultaneously capture a broad spectrum of pesticide classes, while coupling with inductively coupled plasma–mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) enables parallel heavy-metal quantification (Nguyen & Le, 2020). By shifting from sequential, single-analyte assays to comprehensive panels, inspection agencies can more efficiently identify high-risk consignments and prioritize them for immediate intervention thereby safeguarding public health against the complex reality of combined contaminant exposures.

5. Discussion:

The extraordinarily high prevalence of pyrethroid residues (44 %) in our container samples mirrors findings from other major African ports (Diop et al., 2019) and underscores the enduring reliance on these insecticides in global post-harvest practice. The mean concentration of 0.72 mg/kg 44 % above the Codex MRL of 0.50 mg/kg raises acute neurotoxicity concerns, particularly given evidence that chronic, low-level pyrethroid exposure impairs cognitive function and disrupts neurodevelopment in children (EFSA, 2021; Lee, Park, & Kim, 2019). These data suggest that both exporting-country agronomic practices and container-storage conditions may contribute to residue persistence, highlighting a need for coordinated pre-export residue-reduction measures and reinforced cold-chain integrity.

Lead contamination in 36 % of containers at a mean level of 0.30 mg/kg parallels European spice-import data (Smith et al., 2020) and reflects systemic environmental sources of heavy-metal uptake in agricultural commodities. Lead's tight concentration distribution (SD = 0.05 mg/kg) points to widespread soil or water contamination at origin farms, consistent with the documented neurodevelopmental and renal risks of dietary lead exposure (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022; Järup, 2003). These findings call for bilateral engagement on soil-remediation and irrigation-water management, as well as pre-export testing protocols to intercept lead-bearing shipments before they enter domestic markets.

The detection of organophosphates in 28 % of samples at a mean of 0.40 mg/kg echoes Southeast Asian surveillance work (Nguyen & Le, 2020) and spotlights acute cholinesterase-inhibition hazards for consumers. Organophosphate-induced acetylcholinesterase suppression can precipitate neurological symptoms even at sub-MRL levels (EFSA, 2021), disproportionately affecting agricultural-worker families and other vulnerable groups. Our results underscore the necessity of multi-residue screening that encompasses both organophosphates and pyrethroids, rather than narrow, single-class assays that risk overlooking high-impact toxicants.

The persistence of organochlorines (20 % prevalence) and neonicotinoids (16 %) despite decades-old bans and tighter regulations highlights environmental reservoirs and gaps in monitoring frameworks (Nguyen & Le, 2020; UNEP, 2019). Organochlorine residues, notorious for bioaccumulation and long-range transport, expose consumers to potential carcinogens, while neonicotinoids have been implicated in endocrine disruption and pollinator declines (Simon-Delso et al., 2015). These data make a compelling case for expanding port-based surveillance to include legacy and emerging pesticide classes, reflecting the evolving landscape of agrochemical use.

Underpinning these contamination patterns are critical gaps in port-laboratory capacity. As Patel and Singh (2021) observed, reagent shortages, outdated GC-MS instruments, and insufficiently trained analysts compromise the timely identification of hazardous consignments. Similar challenges have been documented in West African and Nigerian port facilities (Okocha et al., 2017), where delays of weeks in sample processing allow contaminated goods to clear customs. Addressing these vulnerabilities will require investment in rapid-analysis platforms, ongoing staff training, and risk-based inspection schedules informed by historical residue data measures that together can shift Dar es Salaam Port from reactive to proactive chemical-safety management.

6. Conclusion:

This study reveals that containerized food imports at Dar es Salaam Port are frequently contaminated with multiple chemical residues most notably pyrethroids (44 % prevalence, mean 0.72 mg/kg), lead (36 %, 0.30 mg/kg), and organophosphates (28 %, 0.40 mg/kg) often at levels exceeding international MRLs, and that 56 % of consignments carry two or more residue classes. These layered exposure profiles highlight critical gaps in pre-export controls, port-laboratory capacity, and risk-based inspection protocols, while also underscoring the need for comprehensive, multi-residue screening technologies, bilateral agricultural remediation efforts, and strengthened vendor education on chemical-safety best practices. By prioritizing investments in rapid-analysis equipment, staff training, and data-driven inspection scheduling, Dar es Salaam Port can move from reactive to proactive management of chemical hazards, thereby safeguarding consumer health and reinforcing Tanzania's role as a reliable node in global food trade.

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