

News and Information

The African Nutrition Graduate Students Network: a new initiative for nutrition in Africa

Economic shocks and stresses, climatic fluctuations and epidemics continue to have broad adverse impacts on Africa's resources, especially human and institutional development and organisational capacity. These conditions have worsened the substantial levels of hunger and malnutrition experienced throughout the continent. For example, sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world where both the absolute number and the prevalence of many nutritional deficiencies are on the increase. This situation in Africa persists despite international efforts and repeated declarations and resolutions (for example, the World Declaration on Nutrition in 1992, the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and many others in between) focused on improving the continent's nutrition situation, and despite steadily improving tools and ever stronger rationales for dealing effectively with these problems.

Since nutritional problems are similar in most African countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, there is a need to share ideas and to implement joint programmes among those working earnestly to improve the population's nutritional status. However, there is a paucity of inter-country collaborations among governments, research institutions and non-governmental organisations. The lack of individual, institutional and organisational capacity has been – and continues to be – a barrier in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of effective nutrition programmes for the continent. Africa's worsening nutrition situation, the availability of solutions and every improved tool all underscore the urgency for increasing the number of young nutrition professionals dedicated to overcoming these barriers and improving networks that bring and keep them together.

By developing a positive approach to confront the challenges facing the continent and as future practitioners in the field, nutrition students from Africa have a major role to play in improving the situation. With this in mind, a group of African graduate students currently studying nutrition at Cornell University envisioned a bold new initiative: the African Nutrition Graduate Students Network (AGSNet).

The purpose of this network is to provide a forum for effective collaboration among African graduate

students studying nutrition world-wide, and also among professionals interested in the promotion and enhancement of nutrition on the continent. The network envisions that enabling improved networking today will strengthen future networking as well. Current AGSNet activities include:

- *Creating a database of graduate students studying nutrition or interested in the field.* There are 47 students from 16 different countries who are currently AGSNet members. In addition to creating a world-wide database of nutritionists from the continent, members envision that interested professionals and organisations throughout the world will have ready access the database, that the database will foster and reinforce collaborations, and that it will serve as a resource for the prompt identification of African professionals by agencies committed to assist Africa address its nutrition-related challenges.
- *Establishment of a web-based discussion forum for sharing current thinking in the field of nutrition.* The United Nations University is hosting this website. The site can be accessed through <http://www.unu.edu/capacitybuilding/foodnutrition/ags-net/Index.htm>.
- *An Inaugural Conference planned to coincide with the 2005 Congress of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences in Durban.* In addition to a scientific session focusing on an important theme for the region, this conference will include a session designed to formally establish the network's organisational structures, adopt working protocols and outline an agenda for the network's future activities.

Though rapidly growing, AGSNet is still in its infancy. Members welcome helpful comments and suggestions on issues related to its objectives, structure, the recruitment of new members and in setting the agenda for the network's future activities.

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