

News and Information

The future of nutrition in Africa is bright

In the April 2004 issue (vol. 7, no. 2) of this journal, we reported about a bold new initiative for nutrition in Africa, named the African Nutrition Graduate Students Network (AGSNet)¹. Forty-nine students from 17 African countries were members at that time. Since then, the network has grown substantially and has established its structures.

In the present issue, we detail the network's achievements since our last report in *Public Health Nutrition* as well as the activities planned for the coming year. Currently, AGSNet has 133 members from 25 African countries studying in 42 universities worldwide (24 in Africa, 18 outside Africa).

AGSNet was invited to the 31st meeting of the United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) held in New York City, USA from 21 to 28 March 2004². The network was represented by six of its members (four from Cornell University, USA and one each from Southampton University, UK and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture, Kenya). A presentation by our representatives during the meeting of the SCN Capacity Building Working Group centred on the contribution of the AGSNet in supporting the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in Africa through enhancing social capacity. The presentation was well received by the audience and some of the aspects of this presentation were included in the Capacity Building Working Group's recommendations.

The network's website (<http://www.unu.edu/capacitybuilding/foodnutrition/agsnet/Index.htm>), hosted by the United Nations University (UNU), has been regularly updated and has been essential in publicising the network to the outside world. It now provides access to a rich database of African graduate students studying nutrition as well as those members who recently graduated. In the next few months, a web-based discussion forum will be established to allow members to share ideas about advances in the field of nutrition.

The network's visibility and recognition were also enhanced by the active participation of several of its members at the 19th International Congress of Nutrition (ICN) held in Durban, South Africa on 19–23 September 2005. Fifteen members made oral presentations, 31 members gave poster presentations, five chaired various sessions and one, Nkosinathi Mbuya, gave a talk during the closing ceremony entitled 'Reflections and vision of a young African nutrition scientist'³. Several AGSNet members also participated in, and made oral presentations at, the 2nd Congress on Information Technology in the Advancement of Nutrition in Africa, held on 16–18 September 2005 in Cape Town, South Africa. The South

African sojourn also provided members of the network an opportunity to meet, discuss and liaise with the organisers of the African Nutrition Leadership Program (ANLP), which several members have attended in the past. AGSNet plans to have members attend future ANLP workshops.

AGSNet held its inaugural conference at a meeting that immediately preceded the ICN. The conference was attended by 39 members from 13 African countries studying in 19 universities worldwide. Of those, only eight were studying outside the continent (one in Europe, two in Canada and five in the USA). The conference was also attended by four advisors of the network (Julia Taguireyi, Zimbabwe; Pauline Kuzwayo, South Africa; Rosanna Agble, Ghana; Robert Mwademe, Tanzania) and seven invited guests (Michael Latham, USA/UK/Tanzania; Abraham Todd, Kraft Foods, USA; Barbara Lyle, Kraft Foods, USA; Wafaie Fawzi, Harvard University, USA; Fre Pepping, Wageningen University, The Netherlands; Frans Kok, Wageningen University, The Netherlands; and Godwin N'Dossi, Tanzania). Sponsorship for this meeting came from the Food and Nutrition Programme of the UNU; The International Nutrition Foundation/Kraft Foods/Unilever; The German Development Service (GTZ); Cornell University, USA; Wageningen University, The Netherlands; University of Southampton, UK; and Université Cheick Anta Diop, Senegal. Members who attended this meeting discussed and agreed on issues of membership, governance, future activities and directions of the network. Regional representatives for North Africa, West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa and Europe were also elected. Invited guests gave important and relevant addresses to the network. In particular, Professor Wafaie Fawzi gave a keynote lecture on nutrition and infections, after which the participants split into three groups for discussions on assigned topics. These discussions were followed during a plenary session and finally important resolutions were made. Dr Abraham Todd spoke on leadership and the characteristics of an effective leader. Details about the inaugural conference are available at http://www.unu.edu/capacitybuilding/foodnutrition/agsnet/Reports/AGSNet_Conference_Report_Final.pdf.

Conference participants resolved that the next meeting of AGSNet will be held in Morocco in 2007 and will coincide with the Federation of African Nutrition Societies (FANUS) meeting. Currently the network is involved in the following activities:

- Liaising with various organisations to provide access to journals.

- Advocating a programme to deal with nutrition and infection, and nutrition capacity building.
- Creating an e-group or discussion board for members of the network to discuss issues of interest including the nutrition situation in Africa. Sharing of information regarding fellowships, job opportunities, short-term consultancies, conferences, scholarships, internships, etc.
- Sharing of issues on the cutting edge of research.
- Sharing of experiences from programmatic activities that might not be found in journals. The network should link up with other networks or organised groups that are involved in keeping and disseminating such programme information, to ensure effective propagation. Such linkages will assist in keeping the research agenda (of AGSNet members) relevant to the needs of Africa.
- Reaching out to graduate students with the aim of doubling our membership by 2007.
- Country members are to organise educational programmes/activities dealing with nutrition and infection.

To start addressing one of the most crucial difficulties facing students in Africa, i.e. access to the scientific literature, AGSNet has made arrangements with the Collaborative Crop Research Program of the McKnight Foundation, based at Cornell University, and the enLINK initiative of the Nestlé Foundation, to provide and/or inform members about access to papers published in some of the high-impact nutrition journals. Reports of great

satisfaction were obtained from those who have used these services so far.

The AGSNet is now a reality. The network will certainly continue to grow, and will soon provide African governments, national and international agencies interested in nutrition with a pool of skilled and motivated human resources to deal with nutrition problems on the continent.

Mohamed Ag Ayoya (maa36@cornell.edu)
 Joseph Mensah-Homiah (jm324@cornell.edu)
 Nkosinathi VN Mbuya (nvm3@cornell.edu)
 Jacqueline Kung'u (jm453@cornell.edu)
 Cutberto Garza (Bert.Garza@bc.edu)

References

- 1 Ag Ayoya M, Mandimika T, Mbuya M, Mbuya N, Mensah-Homiah J, Garza C. The African Nutrition Graduate Student Network: a new initiative for nutrition in Africa. *Public Health Nutrition* 2004; **7**(2): 359.
- 2 Mensah-Homiah J, Mbuya NV, Mutuku J. *African Graduate Nutrition Students Network's Contribution to Capacity Development to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals in Africa* [online]. Available at <http://www.unsystem.org/scn/publications/annualmeeting/SCN31/AGSNet.htm>. Accessed 15 March 2006.
- 3 Mbuya NMV. Reflections and visions of a young African nutritional scientist: talk given during the closing ceremony at the 18th International Congress of Nutrition. *Public Health Nutrition* 2006; **9**(1): 1–4.