

## COMMENTARY

### ADDRESSING MALNUTRITION THROUGH PROFESSIONAL AND INTER AGENCY NETWORKING: THE UGANDA ACTION FOR NUTRITION SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of professional societies and networks in building capacity for improved nutrition through cohesion with relevant national institutions and development partners on issues of food and nutrition policy development, implementation, and monitoring. It draws heavily on practical experience and capacity of professional members of the Uganda Action for Nutrition (UGAN), a corporate agency and society that advocates for adequate nutrition for all in Uganda. UGAN evolved from a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) effort, to a Ugandan owned and managed initiative that provides a forum to advocate for adequate nutrition for all through all channels of policy and leadership. In effect, UGAN activities are geared towards improved productivity and realisation of high quality nutrition advocacy messages and actions to influence positive development outcomes. The outputs provide options for improving the food and nutrition security and livelihoods of vulnerable groups in Africa and other parts of the world through its membership and participation in the activities of the International Union of Nutrition Sciences (IUNS), and partnerships with other development actors. With a membership of diverse professional levels and disciplines, UGAN provides a diversity of well tailored nutrition strategies through multidisciplinary channels that directly and positively affect vulnerable populations, and lead to demand-led development initiatives. This initiative can assist the achievement of a technical–social empowerment balance in alleviating malnutrition. Lessons learned from the transparent and participatory leadership, are pulled out to provide recommendations for achieving positive and sustainable development outcomes through food and nutrition security interventions.

**Key words:** Uganda, Malnutrition, Networking, Technical solutions, Advocacy

## INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, partnerships between advocacy societies with both public and private sectors, and support from philanthropic development corporations and agencies have contributed to the progress in the nutrition and health sectors. While progress in the reduction of malnutrition and food insecurity is being witnessed in other continents, this is not so in Africa, despite billions of pounds and dollars of development assistance. The number of Africans living in malnourished and poor health has continued to increase (1). Conversely, for many years national development has regarded nutrition for the most part as an afterthought in economic development priorities to the extent of being seriously underemphasized in national programmes and development aid supported by both donors and developing countries. This assessment is widely shared within and beyond the nutrition community (2). Recent studies by the International Food Policy Research Institute (3), paint a gloomy picture that Sub-Saharan Africa is the only developing region in the world where nutrition insecurity has worsened. What this calls for, is more concerted and innovative efforts to quickly build and strengthen resource capacity, both human and infrastructure in the field of nutrition.

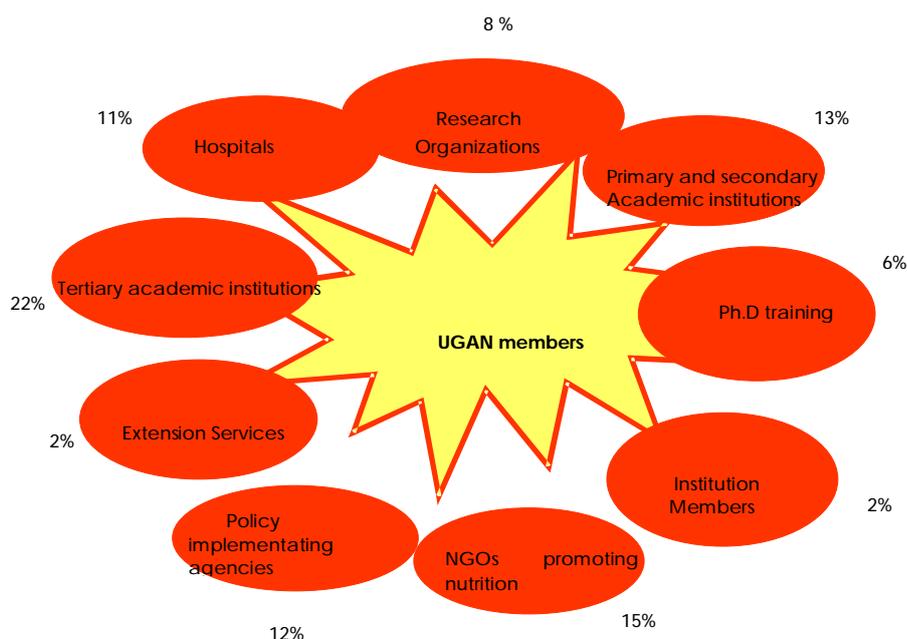
There is widespread consensus on a broad framework, for action to counter the neglect of nutrition, and the need to support partnerships to enhance collective action among key stakeholders. Findings (2,4,5) have demonstrated that nutrition perspectives can strengthen key development mechanisms such as poverty reduction strategies, health sector reform, agricultural sector reform, democratic governance, human rights and trade liberalization.

In Uganda a three year pilot study (6) in the South West region demonstrated that integration of nutrition and gender approaches in agricultural interventions significantly reduces malnutrition and related health disorders by 50%. Integrating nutrition in multi-sectoral programmes and policies can accelerate improvements in non-nutrition development objectives. Given the existing opportunities, UGAN transpires to exploit the skills and competences of various individual professionals, and agencies to bring about significant change in the sector of food security and nutrition. The cost, as outlined in the following sections is modest and the benefits from participatory and skilfully executed programmes are substantial. The examples cited are not exhaustive; they only serve to illustrate the relevance of professional associations and networks in the improvement of nutrition and development outcomes.

## THE GENESIS OF THE UGANDA ACTION FOR NUTRITION SOCIETY

The Uganda Action for Nutrition society (UGAN) is an association which was initiated in 1999. With the support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-REDSO greater horn of Africa initiative, UGAN, together with the Kenya Coalition for Action on Nutrition (KCAN) and Tanzania Action for Nutrition (TANCO) were registered in 2004 in the respective countries.

The **Vision** of UGAN is to have ‘A Uganda in which every individual enjoys good nutrition at all times’ and its **Mission** is to advance and lobby for better nutrition for sustainable national development through capacity building, technical support, networking, information dissemination and operations research. A total of 90 individuals registered as ordinary members at the time of registration, and by 2010, it had registered over 150 individual professionals and agencies interested in nutrition. The society members are employed in a diversity of sectors within and outside Uganda, and this is testimony to their broad-based training and career advancement as shown in figure 1.



**Figure 1: Variation in UGAN membership as reflected by their employment in various professional agencies and governmental institutions**

## THE ROLE OF UGAN

UGAN was established in response to the growing realization that nutrition related problems in Uganda and beyond, could not be effectively addressed using economic growth models only, that have dominated Africa development agenda. It was envisaged then, that effective advocacy was needed to mobilize resources, political commitment and support for nutrition at the regional, national, district and community levels, and to scale up existing and successful nutrition programmes. There was also need to have effective communication of the latest knowledge about the importance of good nutrition and the proven impact of specific nutrition programmes, to the organizations and professionals in positions that can influence investment in nutrition. UGAN works with these professionals, their institutions, and their partners to design and implement strategic activities and monitor relevant policies aimed at promoting

the knowledge and actions needed to achieve food and nutrition security at all levels. Strategic networking has been central in the society linkages and activities, thereby spurring and enhancing its contribution to national development as discussed below.

### **Major activities of the society**

With support from its partners, UGAN has effectively participated in various activities aimed at improving food and nutrition security in Uganda. Some of the major activities that UGAN has been involved in include:

### ***Organising advocacy forums***

The forums organised by UGAN include but not limited to the following:

- a) The Uganda Nutrition Congress of February 2009.  
The Nutrition Congress was the biggest and most successful advocacy and research dissemination forum, UGAN has ever organized. The congress theme was “*challenges, successes and opportunities to address nutrition*”. It was the first international nutrition congress to be held in Uganda. The objective of the congress was to raise public awareness on current nutrition issues, so that plausible solutions to challenges impeding implementation of nutrition programmes could be explored. It brought together over 350 participants from Africa, Asia, Europe and America who included: programmers, entrepreneurs, policy makers, industrialists, farmers, academia and researchers who made concrete recommendations, which have been forwarded to key government representatives in Uganda.
- b) UGAN was central in the planning and organization of the continental side event on Food and Nutrition security in Kampala, during the 15th Africa Union (AU) Summit held in Kampala in 2010. The event was supported by the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and it attracted dignitaries from African Governments and the United Nations. This meeting resolved to institute the Africa Food and Nutrition Day (AFND). Upon deliberations, it was recommended that this day would be commemorated on 30th of October every year in all African countries.
- c) UGAN was involved in the organization of the Uganda National Academy of Sciences (UNAS) conference on Nutritionalisation of Agriculture held in Kampala, August 2010. This meeting explored various challenges and options for integrating nutrition approaches in Agriculture development programmes being emphasised in Africa and other parts of the world.
- d) UGAN also hosted the National Nutrition/HIVAIDS Conference in 2006 in Kampala, Uganda.

### ***Technical support to the Government of Uganda***

As a key stakeholder in nutrition, UGAN has participated in programmes, policy formulation and implementation activities of the Uganda Government ministries of Health, Education, Gender and Agriculture. Some of the activities UGAN has participated in include:

- a) Reviewing of the Code of Marketing and Promotion of breast milk substitutes
- b) Developing of guidelines and training manuals on the Integrated Management of Acute Malnutrition (IMAM) in Uganda
- c) Developing Nutrition and HIV/AIDS training curriculum for the Ministry of Health
- d) Validating of the Uganda Nutrition Situation Report of 2010
- e) Developing of school nutrition guidelines for Uganda
- f) Pre-testing of a WHO manual for the development of country specific Food-based Dietary Guidelines (FBDGs)
- g) Updating of the Uganda Nutrition Profiles using data reported in the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) of 2006
- h) Consultation on UDHS nutrition indicators for the 2010/2011 survey;
- i) Developing of nutrition advocacy briefs for Uganda
- j) Consultation on the USAID- supported programme on Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative (GHFSI).

***Supporting growth of human and infrastructural capacity for service provision***

Programmes that enhance capacity of individuals and institutions in the field of nutrition have been supported by UGAN. The programmes supported include:

- a) Training of The AIDS Support Organization (TASO) counsellors in nutrition and HIV/AIDS
- b) Training of Five Masters Applied Human Nutrition Students at Makerere University
- c) Participated in development of nutrition guidelines and care for People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV).

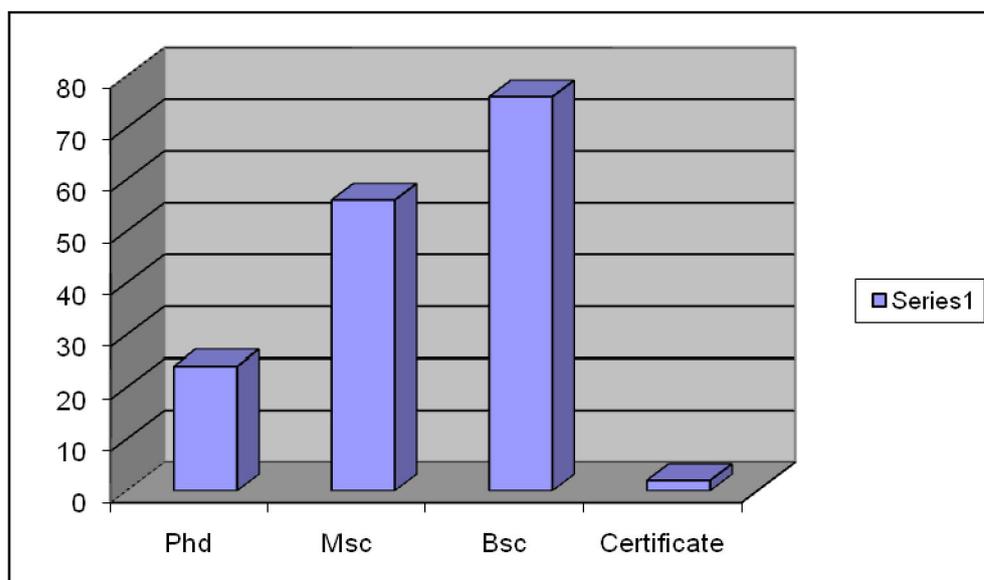
**Challenges faced by the society**

Although the UGAN policy of voluntary membership and trust provides opportunities to address food and nutrition insecurity issues, it also comes with considerable challenges, such as: keeping ordinary members effectively committed to the society throughout the year; and establishing effective funding mechanisms and ensuring that nutrition is recognized as an important aspect for the development agenda. As a response to these challenges, strategic themes have been developed over time to woo members in supporting the society including; encouraging members and key allies to take up strategic positions in key sectors and agencies, take advantage of political and bureaucratic transitions that create opportunities and chemistry for alliance, and creating and strengthening the UGAN secretariat as an effective focal point for national nutrition issues. In turn, UGAN's involvement strategically stimulates simple but visible accomplishments. Although this is not exhaustive, it gives a sense of the major areas in which the society revitalises the spirit much needed to achieve cohesion to accomplish nutrition objectives in Uganda and other parts of the world.

## TAPPING FROM AVAILABLE RESOURCES

While UGAN membership consists of agencies with varying mandates geared towards addressing nutrition, its individual professional members have varying range of academic and professional qualifications. By 2010, the society had registered 24 members with Doctorate degree, 54 with Master's degree, and 76 Bachelor's degree (Figure two). The variation in level of qualifications is indicative that members hold different capacities and make varied contributions to nutrition and overall development.

It has been observed over a period of time, that tapping from this network of specialisation among UGAN members may be viewed as having leaders, facilitators and needy members. Leaders are the institutions (for instance universities) that have greatest expertise and most up-to-date facilities in a certain area of nutrition instruction or research. Facilitators are institutions such as the development agencies and individuals with specialized, but incomplete capacities within that area. Needy members are those who acknowledge their weakness in a given area and seek to collaborate within the network in order to broaden their services and capacities for nutrition. By pooling their efforts and available resources, and in-fusing cross-border and external experience, through networking, UGAN members have had greater abilities to achieve their strategic goals in terms of advocating for adequate nutrition for all in Uganda, Africa, and beyond.



**Figure 2: The classification of UGAN members based on level of qualification**

As a result of the exceptionally high commitment of UGAN institutional members to the eradication of malnutrition, a total of 15 projects have been implemented through collaborations between UGAN and development partners from within and outside

Uganda (Table 1). UGAN's skilful networking of the best available national and international talent is focused and orientated to problem-solving by integrating high quality findings and technology into the development processes. This approach has continued to attract institutional members and partners to implement the society's objectives.

The collaboration between UGAN and partners is both directly and indirectly benefiting the nutritionally vulnerable groups. It is contributing to the reduction of the burden of malnutrition. Each project implemented brought with it mutual benefits to participating partners. The collaboration has strengthened nutrition advocacy capacities of members in both UGAN and partner institutions. Additionally, they have brought the opportunity to acquire resources in terms of technical-social empowerment. Thus, each successful project has left a significant 'footprint'. On the other hand, innovations such as internal meetings for mutual review of progress and other quality enhancing efforts are on-going in the society. This serves to create a strong sense of ownership amongst all participants – from UGAN members, to partners, to donors and other collaborators. At the end of the projects, the quality focus remains essential; allowing UGAN and its participating partners to build up their resources as each new project leaves a clear 'footprint' in terms of resources, policy documents, guidelines, publications, thesis, report, data and analysis relevant to nutrition.

## **NUTRITION SOCIETIES IN AFRICA AND THEIR SURVIVING MEANS**

Nutrition-based societies in Africa including UGAN, came spontaneously but relatively late in the late 1990s on a strong premise set up at the International Conference on Nutrition (ICN), that was jointly organised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and held in Rome in 1992. Despite the existence of nutrition societies in most developed countries, the World Food Summits (WFS) of 1996 and 2002, and the advent of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, added more impulse to the adoption of nutrition societies across Africa, while maintaining linkages with foreign partners (7).

As a result of limited funding opportunities and constrained resources, foreign partners who provide most of the support, dictate the terms and *operandi* of most African societies. External actors retain significant influence on developments in the field of nutrition in Africa as they continue to provide assistance that is reflective of their economic and political interests. This has continued to the present day, though, it has important drawbacks including national problems not prioritized, and un-sustainably high costs in terms of human capital and financing. These challenges are being overcome in UGAN, by prioritizing nationally owned nutrition solutions and issues in its collaborative projects, finding roles for each partner and member, and exploiting complementary strength of various donors, NGOs, academics and other partners. It also directly sponsors (using internally generated funds) some of its activities such as

the maintenance of the society website and organising bi-annual national stakeholders meetings.

On the other hand, since 2004, African nutrition societies are federated under one continental body, the Federation of African Nutrition Societies (FANUS). Under FANUS the society members meet bi-annually to deliberate on emerging issues in nutrition on the African continent. On the global scene, all nutrition societies worldwide are affiliated to the International Union of Nutrition Societies (IUNS).

However, majority of countries in Africa have failed to organise into nutrition communities (8). According to the current statistics from the IUNS, out of the 54 African countries, 21 have registered nutrition societies, of which only 6 are active – based on the annual subscription fee remitted to IUNS, and 15 are inactive as seen in Table two. Inadequate financial and political support, incoherent internal organization among national members, mistrust, and negative attitude from Governments, have greatly encouraged dormancy of some nutrition societies in Africa. In Tanzania, despite funding from the USAID/Linkages project (7), the nutrition society there has not been operate due to limited human capital and esteem to unify the nutrition community. In Kenya, despite registering a high level political commitment for nutrition, and advance in career development in nutrition on the African continent, conflict of interest and persistent disagreements among nutrition actors centred around divergent institutional perspectives and interests, rather than the policy debates, are impeding efforts to consolidate the gains made by Kenya Coalition for Action in Nutrition (9). On the other hand, countries without a registered nutrition society are at a loss given that their right to associate is gravely deprived.

Reports (9) have demonstrated that lack of commitment of politicians to nutrition and competing government priorities considerably affect mid level actors and professionals to organise into common agenda. Also, countries under repressive leadership and authorities do not entertain associations, in the guise of political reasons revolving around suspicion to overthrow governments. A case in point is the country of Rwanda where the nutrition community is failing to organise into an association because the government banned associations and unions on a premise that they perpetuate tribalism, genocide, and political dissent. The nutrition society of Zambia was also de-registered because nutrition professionals failed to organise into a common agenda to advocate for nutrition, thus its activities were not appreciated by the government (10).

It has been observed that through tapping of networking opportunities, nutrition societies in countries where political or economic conditions are unfavourable can be kept operating at the highest possible standard (9). It is possible to federate and forge common agendas as observed in several countries. Once this is achieved, it becomes more possible to manage challenges faced by struggling nutrition societies in Africa and other parts of the world. With support from development partners, these nutrition societies can be ready for action once the situation returns to normalcy and quickly be

able to play their role in food and nutrition security recovery activities and programmes on the continent.

## LESSONS LEARNT AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite the challenges faced by nutrition societies in Africa, UGAN has been resilient and continues to ensure enhanced networking among its resourceful members. At the grassroots level, food insecure households and nutritionally vulnerable individuals are benefiting directly and quickly from work supported by UGAN and its development partners in Uganda and Africa at large.

While initiatives spearheaded by various agencies have the potential to address the pervasive malnutrition of Africa, this potential has not been successfully incorporated into majority of the development strategies. With strong leadership, especially from the nutrition sciences community, and supportive guiding policies, this dismal picture can be altered with modest costs and made to bring substantial benefits to the livelihoods of the nutritionally vulnerable, as various research outputs are incorporated into development projects, programmes and policies. This can be achieved through skilful networking of the best available talent (nationally and internationally) in a focused, problem orientated mode to integrate high quality technology into the development process.

*Policy linkages and networks:* A common problem throughout sub-Saharan Africa and Uganda in particular is the poor linkages and among civil society groups, extension services, policy makers, private sector and the vulnerable grassroots. UGAN has, however, proven to have the capacity to create multi-agency and multi-disciplinary teams that work systematically and with strong local leadership to develop solutions to pressing national and regional food and nutrition problems.

UGAN provides a model through which a coordinated, cost effective, and efficient technology transfer process can evolve, using the best of national and international expertise in a focused and problem solving effort. The best of local knowledge and expertise, both at grassroots level and researcher/policy maker level, can be used to develop a practical and sustainable example of how to link successful interventions in nutrition, extension, and national policy to improve the food and nutrition security and living standards for rural people. The lesson is that science for development requires effective networking amongst several key parties. This is entirely possible but needs facilitation and encouragement.

*Research for development:* UGAN's involvement in research for development projects has opened new frontiers in nutrition using a participatory and community based nutrition programmes and models to inform policy and development. Career and professional development of nutrition has also been enhanced through collaborative scholarships offered by the Nestle Nutrition to graduate research' of five Master of Science in Applied Human Nutrition students at Makerere University. These efforts and many others have had significant impacts in creating positive change and attitudes

towards improving nutrition as central to sustainable development. The lesson is that well verified science, introduced with strong and consistent leadership from the research community, can make a real contribution to development and the reduction of malnutrition.

*Explicit consideration of scale:* The birth of UGAN and other existing agency partners and professionals has generated the need to build and strengthen stronger and long term collaborations to ensure the diffusion and uptake of evidence based nutrition programmes and interventions. From the society's experience, it is entirely possible, with thoughtful integration of policy, research and other sectors, to make a rapid impact on eradication of malnutrition. However, nutritionists need to reach beyond the boundaries of their own disciplines and be able to engage directly with the vulnerable poor. In essence, there is a strong need and desire to strengthen community nutrition training, programme design, implementation, and monitoring. With the progress that has been witnessed, more can be achieved in this direction. The lesson is that nutrition professionals need to be innovative and active in developing partnerships and networks at all levels of society, which can carry the best of their outputs quickly and efficiently into the hands of nutritionally vulnerable persons and communities.

Despite a widespread perception of Africa as “the hopeless continent” [as in a recent leader article in The Economist] (11), the unique efforts by Ugandans to create change in Uganda and Africa at large through UGAN has proved that African people are innovative and able to quickly adapt to new circumstances. As a result to increased access to information, nutrition has been appreciated by it being incorporated into the global and national development agenda. As a result, new initiatives emphasizing nutrition indicators in health, gender, agriculture, governance, research and extension services are steadily registering economic progress.

At continental level, policies incorporating nutrition have been passed by the AU/NEPAD (12, 13). In Uganda, Ghana and Malawi, multi-sectoral approaches towards improving food and nutrition security have been adopted with active involvement of the health, gender, education, and agriculture sectors. Farmers have diversified into new nutritious crops, and new varieties have been readily accepted and tested (14). In all these processes, nutritionists have played a somewhat under-appreciated role in promotion and realisation of these changes (15). UGAN builds on this record through pooling the best indigenous and international expertise in nutrition in Uganda and beyond, with the aim of identifying problems related to inadequate nutrition and seeking solutions using concerted multi-sectoral approaches.

In sum, membership to UGAN is open to all who can offer solutions to the pressing problems of malnutrition in Uganda and other parts of the world. The society has maintained its relevance even as new pressing nutritional issues emerge. Indeed it has remained relevant and is now moving towards increased advocacy for the human right to adequate food for all as a means of demanding public actions and commitment of obligations against hunger and malnutrition. With this approach, universal human rights' principles of participation, accountability, transparency, non-discrimination,

democratic governance, rule of law, empowerment, and access to information through freedom of media among others, will be central in the societies operations. In effect, this will expand further the opportunities for interdisciplinary approaches for improved nutrition for all.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND DISCLAIMER**

This write-up is based on the activities and outputs realised by UGAN since its existence. Lessons are drawn from observations of the authors. However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the institutions mentioned.

**Table 1: Title of project, collaborator and donors to UGAN's activities**

<b>Title of Project</b>	<b>Collaborator(s)</b>	<b>Donor(s)</b>
1. Inventory of nutrition projects/programmes in the country	AMREF	REDSO/USAID
2. Study on best practices in community-based nutrition programmes,	AMREF	REDSO/USAID
3. Developed and trained in Uganda nutrition profiles,	AMREF	REDSO/USAID
4. Training of TASO counsellors in Nutrition and HIV/AIDS,	TASO	TASO
5. Participated in development of nutrition guidelines and care for PLWHA	MoH, MwanaMugimu Nutrition Unit	USAID, Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance and REDSO
6. Participated in development of recipe booklet for PLWHA	MoH, MwanaMugimu Nutrition Unit	USAID, Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance and REDSO
7. Training of Five Masters Applied Human Nutrition Students at Makerere University	Makerere University & Nestle Foundation	Nestle Foundation
8. Hosting National Nutrition/HIVAIDS Conference	Nestle Nutrition Institute Africa	Nestle

9. Hosting of UGAN secretariat	Department of Food Science and Technology Makerere University	Makerere University/UGAN
10. Participated in Development of Ugandan Nutrition Bulletin	UNICEF, MoH, WFP, World Vision	UNICEF
11. Development of UGAN website	FANTA II Project	UGAN
12. UGAN Stakeholders Workshops	Makerere University	UGAN
13. Uganda Nutrition Congress 2009	UGAN and Makerere University	Makerere University, NuLife, GAIN, Harvest Plus, UNICEF, WFP, FANTA, GAIN, IFPRI and A2Z, USAID
14. Nutritionalization of Agriculture symposium 2010	GAIN, UNICEF, WFP, FANTA, GAIN, IFPRI, UNAS	USAID
15. Launching of Africa Food and Nutrition Day 2010	NEPAD/AU/MoH/MAAIF, UN systems	USAID/FANTA II Project

**Table 2: Country, name of nutrition society and its current performance status according to IUNS**

Country	Name of Society	Status
1. Ghana	Ghana Nutrition Association	Active
2. Kenya	Kenya Coalition for Action in Nutrition (KCAN)	Active
3. Morocco	Moroccan Society of Nutrition	Active
4. Nigeria	Nutrition Society of Nigeria (NSN)	Active
5. South Africa	South Africa Nutrition Society	Active
6. Uganda	Uganda Action for Nutritionists (UGAN)	Active
7. Benin	Nutrition Society of Benin	In-active
8. Burkina Faso	Société de Nutrition du Burkina Faso	In-active
9. Cameroon	Cameroon Association of Nutritional Sciences	In-active
10. Cote d' Ivoire	National Nutrition Programme	In-active
11. Democratic Republic of Congo	Congo National Human Nutrition Planning Centre	In-active
12. The Gambia	Gambia Food and Nutrition Association	In-active
13. Guinea	Reseau Guinéen des Nutritioniste	In-active
14. Madagascar	National Union Nutrition	In-active

	Scientists- Madagascar	
15. Senegal	Association De Nutrition Et Alimentation Du Senegal (ANAS)	In-active
16. Sierra Leone	The Nutrition Society of Sierra Leone	In-active
17. Sudan	Nutritional Division of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare	In-active
18. Tanzania	Food and Nutrition Association of Tanzania (FONATA)	In-active
19. Tunisia	Tunisia Nutrition society	In-active
20. Zambia	Zambia Nutrition society	In-active
21. Zimbabwe	Food and Nutrition Association of Zimbabwe (FANAZ)	In-active

Source: (8)

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