

Investing in Local Technology for Sharing Nutrition Information in Uganda: Small Investment Creating a Big Impact

‘Today, if you have an Internet connection, you have at your fingertips an amount of information previously available only to those with access to the world’s greatest libraries.’

– Peter Singer

The Uganda Action for Nutrition (UGAN) Society is a professional body of nutritionists that was established in October 1999 to increase the visibility of nutrition, coordinate actions, and build the capacity of nutritionists. In order to create visibility for the UGAN Society, the UGAN Secretariat commissioned an interactive website to share current nutrition information, research, success stories, upcoming events, and job postings for professionals in health and nutrition. The website was first launched in 2012 and used as a medium to share information in regards to nutrition events in Uganda and to coordinate the UGAN society activities. Unfortunately, in 2013 the website was shut down due to lack of resources for proper maintenance.

‘We did not want to let this venture just die-off without a fighting chance,’ said Peter Kato, the UGAN General Secretary and a Nutrition Lecturer at Kyambogo University, Uganda. With this mindset, he approached

the Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA) (funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development), which had supported the UGAN Society in the creation of its Strategic Development Plan (SDP). In 2014–2015, FANTA was able to provide financial and technical support towards the redesign, development, and maintenance of the website.

‘The UGAN Society has great potential in creating a profile for nutrition, nationally and in sub-Saharan Africa, using a well-designed and managed website,’ said Dr Hanifa Bachou, Project Manager for FANTA/Uganda. The financial support covered hiring of a technical firm for the site redesign, monthly maintenance fees, and an annual subscription for a stronger and better website hosting platform to enhance functionality. Technical support involved recommendations on the general layout and content of the website as well as recommendations on using the website as the main driver for UGAN society activities. The support that was provided enabled the site to be up and running again—the site now serves as a reliable source of information and one-stop-shop for members and non-members to access health and nutrition-related information.



The UGAN website serves an important role—to bring together nutrition students and professionals to build capacity in nutrition in Uganda.

The website is an important vehicle to inform key audiences about the nutrition agenda in Uganda. For example, the site provides:

- Information about high-level policy dialogues, news, and events related to food and nutrition in the country for UGAN society members
- Information on the planned and ongoing activities under the Uganda Nutrition Action Plan (UNAP) objectives and strategies
- Information for the general public to raise awareness about the nutrition agenda in Uganda and what they can do to move it forward

An example of health and nutrition-related materials that are shared on the site include nutrition strategies, policies, and guidelines, as well as current events and job postings. In March 2015, for example, top pages viewed featured African Food and Nutrition Security Day (188,418 visits), a nutrition dialogue in Kiryandongo District (73,877 visits), and study opportunities (20,256 visits). Key improvements to the website have driven the increase in visits, which should continue as website development is enhanced. Currently, the website has an average of 367,000 visits per month and is a large driver in the growing membership for the UGAN Society.

The site is managed by the UGAN Society General Secretary and a volunteer that posts updates on a regular basis. Nabunya Phoebe, a former UGAN Website Administrator, noted that, 'Users provided feedback on how the website could be made more effective, what content could be added, and a better façade; to me this was an indicator that the website was being effectively used. We took all these into consideration to inform our plan of making the website even better.' In addition, a web developer ensures the reliability of the website. The UGAN Society is tracking general trends on website usage (such as visitor demographics, volume, and engagement) in order to continue to adapt the site to user needs.

What's Next?

Plans are underway to collaborate with faculty from Makerere University's Department of Food Science to engage university students in online discussions around inter-university collaborations, opportunities for further studies, research-related work, and opportunities for career growth. There are also plans to manage UGAN Society memberships online, with all membership information well organized in a 'members' section. In addition, the digital library is being modified and further developed for easier usage and access to documents, resources, and general information.

While there is a plan to recruit a full time website maintenance manager from the current voluntary role, this would require more financial support from within and outside the UGAN Society. One option being explored is to host advertisers as a means to generate income for site maintenance, in addition to the standard annual membership contributions, which make up a large part of the operational costs. Membership to the society is encouraged for university students in food science and nutrition-related studies seeking employment for access to job postings.

In the future, there will be a need for more sustainable mechanisms to maintain the website, including technical support from relevant government institutions (such as the Ministry of Information, Communication and Technology) and academic institutions to strengthen the website's initiatives. Such collaborations fall under key areas highlighted in the UGAN Strategic Development Plan.

In Summary

The UGAN website is a success story of how small investments can have an impact. The site not only serves as a communication channel for the UGAN Society but has also strengthened awareness and knowledge of Uganda's health and nutrition agenda. The website has served an important role—to bring together nutrition students and professionals to build capacity in nutrition in Uganda.



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