

# ITANA 2002 (Information Technology in the Advancement of Nutrition in Africa): Report from the First Conference on IT and Nutrition in Africa

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## Introduction

The first ever Pan-African Conference on Information Technology in the Advancement of Nutrition in Africa (ITANA) was held in Nairobi, Kenya, on 21–24 July 2002.

The idea of holding this conference was developed by a core group of 26 African scholars representing 23 countries. They all participated in the second training programme on Information Technology and Nutrition (Global NutriTion) for a cohort of African based professionals in nutrition, sponsored by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) in 2000 and organized under the auspices of Uppsala University and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Uppsala, Sweden. The group formed the ITANA organization as a platform for their actions and the conference was the first major activity of the group. The planning of the conference took 2 years.



The vision of the organizers, that this conference should be a meeting place for those with an interest, or experience, in the use of modern IT in

relation to nutrition, has become a reality. It created an important platform to make optimal use of modern technology in the fight against the high incidences of malnutrition in Africa and the low status accorded to nutrition in many African countries.

The conference took place at Hotel Inter-Continental in Nairobi. About 300 participants were registered, including 60 speakers and/or workshop chairpersons, as well as more than 90 participants sponsored from various organizations. In total, 38 countries were represented: 26 African countries (Angola, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Ivory Coast, DR Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Malawi, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe), 7 European countries (France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the UK) as well as Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Iran and the USA.

## Objectives of the conference

- To update nutrition professionals on recent development on IT and e-learning in nutrition.
- To identify and define the potential of IT in nutrition in Africa.
- To impart hands-on basic and advanced skills.
- To launch a regional ITANA society.

The programme included 32 plenary lectures in the mornings and 22 workshops in the afternoons. Sixteen workshops essentially comprised demonstrations of various IT programs and web-based information, and were duplicated in the afternoons. Five workshops comprised 45 short communications. In addition, a poster session was arranged comprising 60 poster presentations. In an

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exhibition area in the same location as the poster booths various companies and organizations displayed IT and nutrition-related material throughout the conference period.

### **Conference programme**

The conference was officially opened by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Kenya, Hon. Daniel T. arap Moi. In his speech the President noted that the theme of the ITANA conference was relevant and important to Africa's well-being and development, partly because of the many health and nutrition problems. The current developments in IT in Africa have not kept pace with the information trends world-wide. The scenario is worse in the rural areas where connectivity is still poor. The main obstacle to the slow pace is the poor infrastructure. It is important therefore that countries in Africa address these structures in order for Africa to benefit from the information age. He urged the Ministries of Health in Africa to re-examine the role that nutrition plays in society and place it high on the governmental agenda.

A goodwill message to the conference delegates sent by Mrs N. Annan, wife of the UN Secretary General, was read to the participants. In her message, Mrs Annan urged African governments to make IT accessible to women.

A keynote address was held by the Minister of Public Health and short remarks and goodwill messages were given by the President of the International Union of Nutrition Sciences (IUNS), the President of the International Union of Food Science and Technology (IUFoST) and representatives for donor agencies, including the German Technical Co-operation Agency (GTZ), the Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CTA) and the MicroNutrient Initiative (MI).

#### **Day 1**

Day 1 of the conference highlighted the importance of these new IT-based technologies. It was pointed out that the areas most relevant to developing countries are the growth of IT in Africa, the development of websites for a nutrition audience, and steps for website production, from planning to maintenance. A description of the development of a successful interactive CD-ROM in medical series that is currently used around the world illustrated ways of avoiding common problems. The concept of knowledge-based networks as enabling tools for improved knowledge management in the level of nutrition was also highlighted.

#### **Day 2**

Day 2 focused on different procedures for assessing dietary intake, knowledge about participatory assessment and experiences of various interventions related to IT and nutrition in Africa, the role of women and young people as stakeholders in IT and IT in nutritional assessment.

#### **Day 3**

Day 3 focused on the role of IT in nutrition programming, including the challenges of nutrition communication, the use of IT for strengthening campaigns, and the promotional and organizational capacities of different organizations relevant to nutrition. It included "Profiles" as a process for nutrition policy analysis and advocacy that uses a spreadsheet model to estimate the functional consequences of malnutrition in terms that policy makers understand. The use of IT in training and nutrition education was included, with an emphasis on how developments in the field of modern IT offer opportunities for academic trainers world-wide. Examples were how IT can be used in distance education in nutrition; how the Global Nutrition programme ([www.globnut.net](http://www.globnut.net)) combines an updating of current nutrition concepts with computer skills training and provides a basis for strong networks among academic trainers through the use of IT; and how IT plays a role in the entire research process, including research design, sample selection, data collection, analysis, reporting, dissemination, web-based challenges and opportunities.

### **ITANA Symposium**

At a separate symposium during the conference, ITANA was formally inaugurated as an organization with a mandate to continue to work with IT and nutrition in Africa. During this meeting, the delegates duly elected the new ITANA Council, comprising Demetre Labadarios (President, South Africa), Fatima Ouattara (Vice-President, Mali), Delana Adelekan (Secretary, Nigeria), Prisca Tuitoek (Treasurer, Kenya), Judith Waudu (Member, Kenya), Chrissie Chawanje (Member, Malawi), Mofor C. Teugwa (Member, Cameroon) and Ridha Mokni (Member, Tunisia). The ITANA group has already drafted a strategy for its work in the longer term, illustrating the commitment and type of activities in which the group will engage. This involved a draft constitution for an electronic society within its mandate.

### Conference facilities

The facilities for IT communication were mostly adequate and often good. The plenary lecture hall and the workshop rooms were well equipped with a total of 65 computers, 8–12 in each workshop room. Internet connection made it possible to demonstrate web-based programmes and material in all but two workshop rooms. Workshops were well attended and successful, and constituted an important feature of the conference. Additional workshops, both new ones (Nutrition Surveys and Dietary Assessment Software) and repeats, were incorporated in the scientific programme on the basis of popular demand. Simultaneous translation (into English and French) was available during the plenary sessions as well as during the workshop sessions.

Abstracts of all keynote lectures, short communications and posters were published in advance as a supplement in the South African Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Vol. 15 (2), 2002. The abstracts will also be posted on the journal's website in due course ([www.samedical.org](http://www.samedical.org)). In accordance with the IT objectives of the conference, the proceedings, including keynote lectures, oral presentations, lists of delegates and conference photographs, will be posted in due course on the ITANA website ([www.itana2002.org](http://www.itana2002.org)).

### Conclusion

IT offers a unique chance for Africa and its universities to keep up with developments and to build networks with colleagues all over the world. The conference showed that it is possible to arrange a conference making use of modern IT in the developing world. Thus, the limiting factor is neither

hardware nor software, but rather “peopleware”, such as knowledge about facilities and possibilities. In this perspective, the ITANA 2002 Conference represented a great step forward in accelerating awareness of the potential of both IT and the resources available world-wide, including in low-income countries.

Further details can be found at the ITANA website ([www.itana2002.org](http://www.itana2002.org)).

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