

**REPORT ON THE 3RD FANUS CONFERENCE IN ARUSHA
24th – 28th May 2015**

By

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**From left: Prof. Judith Kimiywe (Kenyatta University), Prof. Ruth Oniang'o,
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I sincerely thank Prof. Ruth Oniang'o for giving me an opportunity to attend the 3rd Federation of African Nutrition Societies (FANUS) conference held at the Arusha International Conference Center, Tanzania, from 25th May to 29th May 2015. FANUS was established as a conglomerate of nutrition societies of African nations with the vision to promote food security and national development in Africa. FANUS conferences are held four-yearly and this particular one was organized and hosted by the Food and Nutrition Association of Tanzania (FONATA). The conference was attended by nutrition scientists, practitioners and students from over 25 countries in Africa. The focus of this year's conference was to take stock of whether Africa had achieved the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to set goals for the next round of nutrition development in Africa.

The major theme was Nutrition in Africa at Crossroads. The sub-themes included the following: changing patterns and causalities of nutrition in Africa; nutrition governance and accountability; breastfeeding and complementary feeding; maternal nutrition as a neglected factor; obesity and

non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and nutrition training and education. Research findings based on the above sub-themes were presented either orally or by use of posters. Most people arrived in Arusha on Sunday 24th May and spent the entire afternoon registering. Thereafter, there was a cultural event in the evening to entertain the guests.

Monday 25th May, 2015

The first few hours on first day of the conference were abuzz with activities with some participants still registering, others catching up with old friends and others making new friends. I made new friends too and was excited to meet almost all my university lecturers at the event. All participants gathered in Simba Hall and the FANUS president, Prof. Joyce Kinabo set the ball rolling by welcoming all to the conference and gave a brief overview of what the conference was all about. The first session began with a plenary lecture delivered by Prof. Lawrence Haddad (IFPRI) on Changing Patterns of Malnutrition in Africa from the 2014 Global Nutrition Report (GNR). According to the report, 45% of all child deaths globally are caused by poor nutrition and for there to be intergenerational equity and sustainable development, good nutrition is core. What stood out in this report was the fact that most countries in Africa were showing good progress towards achieving the World Health Assembly (WHA) global nutrition targets. However, this progress was slow as a result of various challenges. These challenges need to be addressed to fully realize the goals. This lecture set the pace for all other discussions during the conference. After this session, all successive sessions ran concurrently in three halls (Simba, Tausi and Mbayuwayu) and everybody was allowed to attend a session of their choice and interest. I attended the second session in Simba Hall where the topic of discussion was Changing Patterns of Malnutrition in Africa with country experiences (Ethiopia, Senegal and Tanzania). Although findings showed improving trends over the years, the rates of malnutrition (stunting, underweight and wasting) were still high. This actually mirrored what is in the GNR.

In the afternoon all participants congregated in Simba Hall for the official opening ceremony with speeches being delivered by representatives from FONATA, Africa Nutrition Society (ANS), FANUS and International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS). One presentation that really impressed me was by Prof. Joyce Kinabo on Nutrition in Africa at Crossroads. In this presentation it was clearly brought out that Africa was still experiencing a myriad of challenges that put nutrition interventions at a point of make-or-break. However, even with the current situation, we were called upon to be on the forefront in pushing the nutrition agenda forward.

Tuesday 26th May, 2015

I attended a session organized by Nestle' Nutrition Institute whose thematic area was, Developing a Continuum of Care: the importance of nutrition in the first 1000 days. The session was chaired by Prof. Ruth Oniang'o with three speakers (Prof. A.M Prentice, Prof. F.N. Were and Dr. H.N. Nabwera) presenting their research findings. Prof. Prentice presented on importance of nutrition through the life cycle where he emphasized on the first 1000 days (pregnancy period to infancy) as a period that offers a window of opportunity in ensuring good nutritional status throughout adulthood. Proper nutrition during this period can break or alleviate the cycle of generational malnutrition in any population. In her presentation, Dr. Nabwera highlighted the experiences of rural African women as regards breastfeeding; including the motivations for and challenges to

breastfeeding. Prof. Were presented research findings on Complementary Feeding: Guidelines and Philosophy. Emphasis was on core indicators for assessing infant and young child feeding like exclusive breast feeding, minimum dietary diversity, minimum acceptable diet among others. For instance, it was interesting to note that there were increased rates of exclusive breastfeeding but interestingly the rates of stunting remained high in many African countries. What then is not being done right? I liked this session particularly because of the interest it attracted as seen by many questions and contributions from the audience. This was a really informative and interesting session.

The day ended on a high note with a dinner sponsored by Nestle'. This event was well attended and we enjoyed ourselves. The speakers (Prof. Kinabo and John Bee-Nestle') highlighted on the need for scientists to work together in tackling the nutrition problems facing Africa.

Wednesday 27th May, 2015

I attended a session on Nutrition as a Human Right and Nutrition Governance in Simba Hall with a presentation from Prof. Tola Atinmo (University of Abuja).Emphasis was put on the fact that good nutrition is the right of all regardless of gender, race, age e.t.c. Governments and policy makers were called upon to ensure that everybody accessed good nutrition through putting talk and commitment to action that produces tangible results. Later in the day the Arusha Regional Commissioner joined the participants and welcomed us to Arusha.

Another interesting session was on food composition situation in Africa organized by FAO and AFROFOODS which ran from 1700-1800hrs.The focus was on the need for a comprehensive food composition table as a reference tool for most indigenous African foods. It was interesting to note that data on African food composition is mostly unavailable and where available it is outdated and of low quality. This comes with challenges since most scientists (including students doing their projects) use the American food composition table when analyzing data on African foods. This begs the question of accuracy since food products from different locations may not be similar in composition as a result of the effect of locality, geography, soils, fertilizers used e.t.c. The audience was interested in this discussion and there were calls for FAO and African governments to help set up well equipped laboratories around Africa to enable on-going analysis of food products thus ensuring availability of up-to-date data on food composition.

In summary, the area of nutrition in Africa still faces numerous challenges. Despite the numerous gains made in improving the nutrition situation, there are other emerging or re-emerging issues that pose a challenge which if not addressed may erode the gains made so far in relation the MDGs. Such setbacks and challenges that put the nutrition situation in Africa at crossroads include:

- i. Political instability and civil unrests; they displace people leading to loss of property and livelihoods hence food and nutrition insecurity. The question then is, as nutritionists do we have the capacity to ensure proper nutrition for all in such cases?
- ii. Nutrition and GDP; it was found that most African countries have projected increases in their GDPs. However, this has resulted in an emerging trend of obesity and NCDs. How

- do we therefore then reverse this trend while ensuring that we allow the GDPs to continue growing?
- iii. Dietary patterns and globalization; if ever there was a time when nutritionists seemed to be at the crossroads concerning emerging dietary trends, then it is now. The effects of globalization on African dietary patterns need to be urgently addressed while putting in mind that globalization has deepened its roots in Africa.
 - iv. Emerging diseases; with new diseases that require nutrition care coming up, nutritionists face numerous challenges when it comes to the capacity to address such diseases e.g. Ebola virus disease.
 - v. Nutrition training and capacity building; with all the changing trends in Africa, what skill set do nutritionists need to enable them adapt and respond to the African scenario?
 - vi. Poor co-ordination among sectors; nutrition problems require a multi-sectoral approach. It is interesting to note that big percentages of government budgets go to nutrition-relevant sectors like agriculture, health, education and social protection. However, there is a weak link among this sectors and more is needed to embed nutrition more broadly in this sectors.
 - vii. Poor/lack of political will and poor governance; many governments commit to ensure nutrition goals are realized. However, most of the time it ends at commitment stage (talk and more talk), not implementation stage where working results of the talk need to be seen.
 - viii. Insufficient data; this pulls back any progress in the area of nutrition. Quality data provides a starting point for any action since only what gets measured gets managed. For instance the poor/lack of sufficient data on the situation of obesity and NCDs in Africa especially among under fives has resulted in poor management of the situation. In addition, presence of data enables assessment of the direction of progress i.e. positive or negative.

From the above it is imperative, therefore, to address these issues in order to fully achieve the WHA global nutrition targets which recognize that accelerated global action is needed to address the pervasive and corrosive problem of the double-burden of malnutrition.

In conclusion, attending the conference was a great opportunity and the experience was an eye opener to me. I learnt so much on the numerous issues Africa still faces in the fight against malnutrition and what my role as a nutritionist is in championing the nutrition cause .In addition, I had a great opportunity to meet and network with scientists and other practitioners in the nutrition field. Here I was in the company of doctors and professors which really got me interested and I silently promised myself to be like them some day. Besides that I enjoyed my stay in the beautiful city of Arusha and I count myself blessed to have attended such a high level event.