

Nutrition leadership in Africa: making the change

Only a small number of truly exceptional international leaders have emanated from Africa. One of these is the South African Nobel Prize winner, Nelson Mandela. In reality, Africa is poorly led and most African countries still carry the burden of neo-patrimonial leaders who cling to their own knowledge, ideas, judgments and leadership positions, while rarely accepting advice from followers.¹ Africa is known to have well-intended reforms, but without the necessary galvanising action. While improved leadership in Africa might not be the only answer to addressing nutritional problems, it would definitely be a first step in the right direction.²

In 1992, the African Nutrition Leadership Programme (ANLP) was initiated by Prof Johann Jerling and Kombi Mbhenyane. The 10th ANLP was held in South Africa on the banks of the Vaal River in 2012. The organising team for this event included experts in the fields of nutrition, organisation, development, communication and advocacy. Since 1992, 245 delegates have worked within the programme. Today, there are ANLP alumni in 30 African countries (Figure 1). This programme aims to develop leadership capabilities in individuals in the field of nutrition. It has proved that Africa is capable of both starting and maintaining a leadership programme of a very high standard.

Preferably, ANLP delegates should be under the age of 40 years, hold an advanced nutrition degree and either work or study in Africa. Applicants undergo a rigorous selection process that is conducted by the ANLP committee. Although aimed at candidates within the nutrition field, nutrition science content is not a focus of the ANLP.

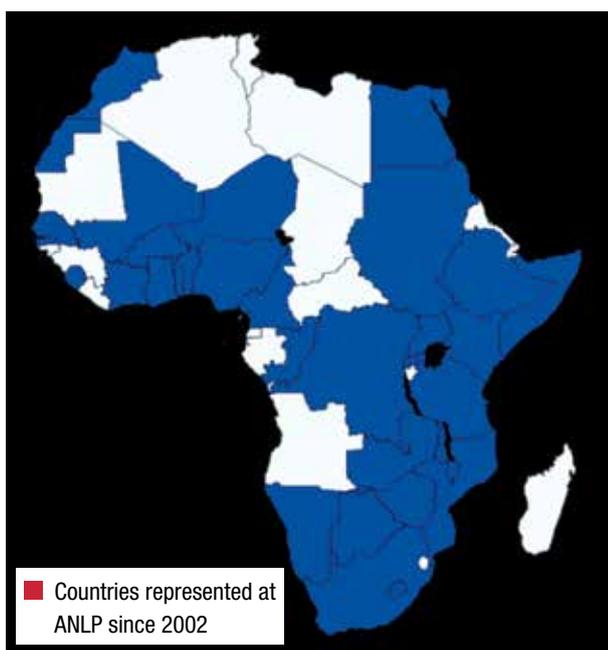


Figure 1: African Nutrition Leadership Programme alumni, 2002-2012

Rather, it empowers nutrition leaders with various skills, including communication, leadership, advocacy and teambuilding. ANLP advocates that people often don't succeed in their endeavours because they either don't believe that they can do it, or they simply don't know how.³ The skills gained at ANLP are invaluable and form building blocks for successful nutrition leaders in Africa. Participants are encouraged to lead from where they are, regardless of whether or not they are a postgraduate student or employed by the Ministry of Health.

It was a privilege for us to attend the 10th ANLP, together with 21 delegates representing 12 African countries. It was rare to be in a setting in which one's leadership strengths and weaknesses could be identified, while receiving feedback from experts on how to improve them. The combination of the diversity of cultures from 12 countries that had different nutritional problems and leadership styles had an unimaginable impact on the way in which nutrition in Africa was viewed. It also laid the foundations for an extensive nutrition network across the continent.

Every year, the group of delegates compiles a declaration that contains values toward which they strive. The declaration of the ANLP-2012 participants is as follows:

"We, the 2012 ANLP participants, pledge to lead from where we stand. We are committed to accountable, ethical, responsible and visionary leadership towards transforming nutrition on our continent. We embrace partnerships, cultural diversity, empowerment and advocacy for positive change. The change starts with us and the time to act is now!"

The impact of ongoing poor leadership on current nutrition problems is clear. The solution lies with each nutritionist and person who works in the field of nutrition in Africa. He or she must take up the responsibility to be the best leader that he or she can possibly be, regardless of the position that he or she holds. The change starts with us and the time to act is now.

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