

## Uganda National Health Users'/Consumers' Organisation (UHNCO)

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### Calling for change: Health rights advocacy and the Uganda National Health Users'/Consumers' Organisation

The Uganda National Health Users'/Consumers' Organisation (UHNCO) is a national non-governmental organisation. Working simultaneously with the community, health providers, and Ministry of Health, the UHNCO seeks to use health rights advocacy to attain “the realization of a health sector that involves meaningful consumer participation in promoting sustainable access to affordable and quality health services for all” .

Since the Alma Ata Declaration of 1978, participation in health has “captured the attention of health planners, policymakers and activists, and become well entrenched in mainstream health discourse” . As part of a wider shift towards people-centred development , participation in health is currently viewed as both a method by which the provision of health services can be improved in resource poor settings, and by which the development “object” can become “subject”, empowered to engage in their own wellbeing .

Uganda's health system was decentralised in 1993 and one of the central instruments is the Primary Health Care Strategy , under which ‘the Government of Uganda is fully committed to the improvement of health by the people themselves’ . The UHNCO has used this health policy shift as an entry point for their health rights advocacy work which, unlike most other NGOs who deal directly with service delivery, aims to sensitise communities and health workers to health rights and responsibilities.

After humble beginnings in 1999, UHNCO has a functioning board and secretariat and is active in five districts through three core activities: research; community sensitisation at the grassroots; and advocacy at the national policy-making level. Research findings have been incorporated in National policies and documents e.g. Health Sector Strategic Plan. In partnership with communities, the secretariat holds open meetings in which they introduce health rights and offer UHNCO membership. Members then elect a task force which liaises between the community and secretariat, identifying problems, potential solutions and advocacy work. Occupying this position between the spaces of community and government requires constant negotiation around concerns such as self-medication and equitable access, and can lead to frustration at the grassroots level .

Their work, despite such challenges and a narrow funding base , has improved patient numbers, practitioner-patient relations, and feedback mechanisms in the areas targeted . According to one in-charge at Rugazi Dispensary in Bushenyi District, ‘sensitising patients should be emphasised, that way they will know that it is their right to make complaints and suggestions’ . In particular, facilitating dialogue between patients and practitioners in Luwero district has led to reductions in abuse of patients, and an increased willingness to utilise the district health centre . In conjunction with facilitating positive changes at the community level, UHNCO has helped to foster a health rights dialogue in national policy, and are currently developing, along with other NGOs, a Patients' Rights Charter for presentation to parliamentary committees .

The case of UHNCO demonstrates the complexities of negotiating the spaces of community, patient, practitioner and government in Uganda's health system, but also the potential for a shift in health discourse to incorporate a health rights based approach. Far from being an abstract concept, health rights has the power to re-engage people in their own wellbeing and to improve the ability of a health system to provide services.

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Submitted by Briony Smith, Researcher, University of Manchester, Robinah Kaitiritimba, UNHCO National Coordinator

UNHCO Secretariat attending a community meeting in Kalagala sub-county, Luwero District 17th June 2005



UNHCO members reading information leaflets at an information sharing meeting, Kalagala sub-county, Luwero District 17th June 2005

