

Expanded Entrepreneur in Action Profile for *Community Nutrition in Action 7e* Chapter 14



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Background

My career path into the field of international food security and nutrition is quite nontraditional. I primarily followed my passions, working in grassroots positions, while constantly discussing my interests with a large variety of people. Research and networking are important for any career but are even more important for international work. The jobs I've found were often obtained through word of mouth by someone who knew me, my passions and my quality of work. International jobs tend to either have very immediate or very far-off start dates, so patience and flexibility are two very useful qualities to have if you are going to do well.

I have a bachelor's degree in medical dietetics. For international positions, it is advisable to also have additional advanced degrees. I have been fortunate in that many organizations have been willing to overlook what I lack in lieu of the vast amount of international work experience and reputation that I have accumulated. Credentials are very important in developing countries and many who are hiring for jobs will pass you over if you don't have a master's or PhD. Pursuing an advanced degree seems to be becoming easier with a number of respected universities going online. I'm 51 and last year I finally started slowly pursuing a series of advanced degrees in this manner - so watch this space!

With my experience, skills, and reputation, I have had a relatively easy time finding the nutrition positions that I love. These experiences include grassroots volunteer work, a wide variety of paid contracts, committee and board positions, avenues for advocacy, writing, and speaking, as well as role modeling our work with my family to the point where our home has become a sustainable nutrition center (www.NeverEndingFood.org).

My career path as a registered dietitian started in 1992, when as a new graduate, I headed for my first overseas assignment with the Peace Corps. I had looked into traditional entry-level jobs for a few months after graduating in 1991, but nothing inspired me until I saw the ad for

nutrition officers in the Peace Corps. I jumped at it, and knew it was mine. It felt right—and it was.

My Peace Corps home was in the parish of St. Thomas, where I lived with a retired Jamaican couple. I felt that I lived quite comfortably: I lived in a cement home with a tin roof where I usually had electricity, cold running water, and access to a telephone, and eventually was given a small motorcycle. But, to many of my American visitors, I was living an undesirable life—no TV, VCR, stereo, or kitchen appliances, and due to an elevated level of theft and crime, we had to have burglar bars on our windows and doors. There were also more arthropods than many Americans are used to, such as scorpions and centipedes.

Initially I was disappointed in my work assignment, as I didn't get to work with a 'counterpart' that is typical in Peace Corps. As a result, I didn't think it was really building up the nutrition system to respond better to nutrition problems. It felt more like filling a job post. And although Peace Corps in Jamaica sounds glamorous, it was really quite tough working in a tourist destination where people often assumed that I was there to vacation. I made the most of it by sharing and learning as much as I could and discussing improvements that could be made, both within the Peace Corps office and at the local health department where I worked.

As I look back at my work in Jamaica, I feel that there are many more sustainable approaches I could have taken to improving the nutrition status of the people I was working with. I mostly focused on increasing the general awareness of good nutrition with the health clinic staff and with the community with only a bit of dipping into some of the larger systemic issues that were causing nutrition problems. I found a lot of creative ways to do nutrition education that I found fun and think that others did, too. To complement my nutrition talks, I created nutrition activities using empty food packages and drawings to allow people to practice putting together nutritious meals in a fun setting. During my second year, I helped out at a nurse-training school by giving sessions on various nutrition issues.

Like many Peace Corps volunteers, I took on a number of secondary projects to learn more about the community. This also kept me active when things happened on "Jamaican time" or not at all. I joined the local Kiwanis Club that conducted various community projects in the areas of environment, education, health, and infrastructure development. I also organized smaller projects, such as the painting of a world map on the wall of our community library, and I took part in various committees that the Peace Corps had to offer in the areas of volunteer advocacy and women's empowerment. All these activities offered me the chance to develop different skills and provided me with an opportunity to learn more of what I liked and what I didn't like. It was also very satisfying for me to be involved with other like-minded development people within the Jamaican community. I am still in touch with several Jamaican nutritionists and friends 25 years on, and I've been able to draw on that experience frequently over the years.

In addition to learning a lot in my first job, I also met my future husband, Kristof, a fellow Peace Corps volunteer. We returned to the U.S. for a short while and got married, but we'd both gotten the international "bug" during our time in Jamaica. Before taking you back overseas, I'll tell you about my short time in the USA. At that point I had been a registered dietitian for 3 years and had one dietitian job. It was NOT easy to find a job. I lived in a very small town that had one dietitian in the hospital and I couldn't find any others. I didn't know the community and had no idea what to do (it was a town near my husband's family cabin, long story I'll reserve for another day). I wasn't in Jamaica anymore, but this place was just as foreign to me!

I first worked for a short time in a small assisted-living home for the elderly, doing all sorts of support services: cooking, cleaning and aiding with dressing and bathing. I continued to search for work as a dietitian and finally found one, an hour away. For the next two years, I served as director of dietary services in a 200-bed rehab and senior citizens' home, overseeing foodservice and nutritional care of each resident, adding to the diversity of my skills and interests. I found I was good at being part of a health team, that I really enjoyed managing programs and people, and that I had a real strength for organizing and communicating. I did become very disillusioned by the corporate takeover of health care-for-profit and put it on my advocacy list to work on improving care for the elderly. There are always lessons to learn in every position.

As much as I liked my work and life in Wisconsin, there was an aspect of life that wasn't being fulfilled for us. After a long search through international organizations, we applied for the Peace Corps again, this time as a married couple. We both believe in the Peace Corps' philosophy and its mission, and we felt that another tour of service with them would allow us to investigate what other international organizations are doing. It didn't take long to get a second placement because of our skills and knowledge of the system. In 1997, we were invited to join the Peace Corps program in Malawi, Africa.

We were both placed with a local health center to address issues of nutrition and HIV education, prevention, and care. After our two years of service with Peace Corps Malawi, my husband and I extended for a third year and have remained in Malawi, working in the areas of nutrition, health, and sustainable agriculture, ever since. In 2002, our daughter, Khalidwe, was born, and we currently live a modest lifestyle in a village that lies at the edge of the Agricultural Research Station. Our living conditions are similar to those that we had in Jamaica: a cement house with a tin roof and bars on windows and doors with intermittent access to water and electricity. We are surrounded by people with even less—mud huts with no electricity, no running water, and little or no income to speak of.

Community Nutrition and Entrepreneurship

It is here in Malawi that we have been developing stronger opinions about what is “god” development and what is not. To be a part of a village has opened our eyes to what is really important in many Malawians' lives. Very few things in a village rely on money. Having a healthy and wealthy life relies on working together, taking care of each other, and sharing resources fairly.

Many current problems with food and nutrition security in Malawi have had a relatively short history. Maize is now the predominant staple food in Malawi (meaning that, whenever possible, it is eaten 2–3 times a day). But it only began to be this way since the introduction of maize in around 1800. It took some years of coercion to make a maize-based agriculture and diet the norm for Malawians, but between pressures put on the population by colonial rule, followed by a long period of dictatorship, maize finally won out.

This crop has become so dominant that many Malawians will now say that they have not eaten unless they have eaten maize. In contrast, before the introduction of maize, Malawians relied upon sorghums, millets, roots, tubers, legumes, nuts, animals, and fruits to fill their nutrient needs. There are still a few Malawians that have retained the knowledge of their ancestors and are able to feed themselves from their environment, while at the same time taking care of the environment for future generations. But, more common, unfortunately, is the destruction of the environment to make room for more maize fields, pushing out biodiverse, traditional foods, and making their availability, access, and consumption much more difficult.

My husband and I have been working to revitalize this information about traditional foods, and raise awareness concerning all local resources, by teaching people how to work with the environment and restore a natural balance that provides for everyone's needs. In our own lives, we set an example by living what we believe. We learned about a sustainable living design system called "permaculture" that pulled together all the bits and pieces of sustainability that we'd been learning about into an efficient system. Through permaculture we are helping the environment around us to repair itself by living as part of the cycle, such as utilizing renewable resources wisely and returning them to the soil through composting, mulching, and restoring plant and animal ecosystems. We collect local seeds, establish them around our home, propagate the seeds to share with others, and teach creative ways to process, prepare, and utilize local resources for nutrition, energy, economic benefits and other household needs.

After three years of volunteering, Peace Corps hired me as a staff member to manage their HIV and Food Security Programme, which introduced me to the next level of development: middle management. I got to know a lot of other managers in that time and did a great deal of traveling around the country, getting to know the various issues affecting food security and HIV even better. In the meantime, our house was beginning to attract a large number of visitors who were interested in learning about the sustainable and "low-input" methods that we were implementing. During this time, I also attended food and nutrition security policy and programming meetings organized by Malawi's Ministry of Agriculture, where I continually raised the issues of agriculture and dietary diversity and the availability of local resources at every possible opportunity.

Because of my advocacy and experience in using local resources for food and nutrition security, in 2005 WFP asked me to put all our experiences together, in collaboration with their non-governmental organization partners, into a manual for food security and nutrition. Prior to my work with them, their program was focused primarily on the distribution of "inputs," such as foreign seeds, synthetic fertilizers, and tools, but they soon realized that when the inputs were used up, the gardens stopped, and the tools disappeared. WFP's desire to examine more sustainable solutions resulted in hiring me to create the manual "Low Input Food and Nutrition Security: Growing and Eating More Using Less". They hired me again in 2012 to revise the manual with lessons learned and users overwhelming wanted the manual to be more permaculture specific. The revision was released in 2016 after a lengthy approval process through the Ministry of Agriculture. Having the manual endorsed by the agricultural technology clearing committee was a huge achievement for Permaculture and was worth the effort. The manual and posters can be downloaded for free on our website at: www.NeverEndingFood.org.

The first version of manual, combined with the contracts I was working on previously, led me to my next job with the German International Development organization (GIZ), helping the Ministry of Education to develop their School Health and Nutrition Programme. This introduced me to a whole new world of working directly with national-level systems, policies, procedures, and activities. Our goal was not to implement systems, but to build capacity to help the Ministry and communities develop and run their own systems. This is a slower and more tedious process, but the end results are much higher impact and longer lasting. My hope is that more organizations take this approach to development so that developing nations are truly strengthened to improve their own food and nutrition security programs. It is possible when we really work together with people closely.

After working with GIZ I knew I wanted to delve deeper into full time agriculture work and that's what I've done and where I've stayed. I turned my focus to supporting the Ministry of

Agriculture to improve nutrition policies and programs by joining the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for three years, which placed me in a perfect position to focus on food. In that position my work ranged from international to regional to national to community policy and program work, which suited me very well. I love being able to keep grounded in communities and sharing what I learn with others.

My current job builds right on what I was doing with FAO but takes me back more to what I was doing with GIZ: systems and capacity. I started working on implementation of a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) program called Feed the Future. I am employed by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to support 1/3rd of Malawi to decentralize agricultural programs to community level and control. We started implementing our work in 2016 with 10 districts (there are 28 districts in Malawi) though as I write we are expanding. I'm the nutritionist on the team, helping agriculturalists to understand their critical role in nutrition and to work towards improving the way that agriculture feeds us sustainably.

I have many favorite aspects of my work, likely the most favorite is that it varies a lot from day to day. I love the frustration and looking for solutions as a team. I love seeing the communities and the support systems realizing how important their role is and realizing that they have the power and resources to succeed. I love looking back at the path we've taken and learning from it, amazed at how far progress has progressed.

There really isn't a typical day for me. When I'm 'in the field' (i.e. out of the office) I could be backstopping a group to do something that we've done with them before, or I could be teaching people how to strengthen a skill or knowledge that we've together found is weak. The teaching can be formal in a classroom, or in the field, or in a kitchen or around a computer – again very varied. When I'm near the office, it's a lot of meetings, discussions and planning by phone, in person, on WhatsApp or email. I have to do a lot of documentation – reporting and financial administration. There is a basic cycle to it though: planning, implementing, monitoring, analyzing, strategizing, planning, implementing, etc.

I think this is where you will find me for many years to come: Celebrating and sharing food diversity and trying to get everyone from large national and global systems to individuals like you, to see the value in it. (We need you and everyone else to spend their money and effort on food diversity so that it can continue!).

Sage Advice

If you are inspired even in the least to join the international food and nutrition security world, I'm ecstatic! The people running nutrition programs now are-all-too often agricultural economists who just think about filling people with calories per hectare or maximizing profits without really taking into consideration what people or the environment need. Or one may find health personnel who tend to rely too heavily on artificial sources of nutrients or solely on treatment of nutrition-related problems through the use of pills, fortification, and supplements, without linkages to addressing the roots of the problem. So the problems continue often festering and becoming worse.

The latest challenge is for people to think that agriculture needs new seeds for people to achieve nutrition – but this is absolutely not true, and even worse, taking a lot of resources and attention away from real solutions. You'll come across individual foods either engineered or naturally occurring to be touted as so important that everyone should have it. This is the opposite of the truth – the truth is that we need as much biodiversity as we can muster to

restore the earth and restore the differences in our diets. We can still share our foods and cultures and celebrate each other's diversity, but we shouldn't all be the same.

Luckily for each of the challenges I've raised, solutions are growing.

There are a few organizations focusing on biodiversity and more are catching on. This threatens agribusiness and food systems so there is some backlash, but there doesn't need to be. We still need agribusiness, but we need it to provide foods and other agricultural products in ways that are healthy for us and our earth.

There are many more universities and schools including sustainable food systems in their curricula and meals. There are more economists that are understanding that filling bellies is not the only measurement that matters.

There are lot more nutrition professionals working worldwide and more positions in international organizations. A person with food and nutrition security knowledge can really help to guide the system toward what is healthy for people, helpful for the environment, often simultaneously. We all need to start thinking more about sustainability of our Earth. Don't be afraid at ANY time in your life to re-look at what you are doing, to follow your passions and interests, and get yourself on the career path that fulfills you the most. I'm so glad that I did!

Website: www.NeverEndingFood.org