

Interview with Columbia's Jessica Fanzo, Professor, Global Nutritionist and Sustainable Development Specialist

by [Meredith Smith](#) | October 31, 2014

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Jessica Fanzo, Ph.D., is the Director of the Center on Globalization and Sustainable Development at the Earth Institute and a Professor of nutrition and sustainable development at Columbia University's Medical Center and School of International and Public Affairs. She has formerly worked with UN Reach, [Bioversity International](#), World Bank and on various large-scale applied research projects for various UN agencies.

How do you view conflict in your work on nutrition and global food security?

Conflict is one of those huge issues. If you look at the countries with the highest burden of under-nutrition, most of them are either conflict or post-conflict countries: Nigeria, Afghanistan, Burundi, Yemen, Madagascar, for example. When you look at under-nutrition, particularly stunting, which is the chronic form of under-nutrition, it is like a photograph of that place's history. Take Timor Leste, for instance, where there are levels of 60 percent of children who are stunted. Much of this is because of the conflict they've undergone over the last 100 years, i.e., being occupied by Indonesia and having poor infrastructure, poverty, poor health and environmental issues.

Conflict is one of the major drivers of poor nutrition outcomes – not just of famine and undernourished states but also of obesity and diabetes, the flip side of poor food access. Nutrition is very multi-faceted. A lot of sectors and disciplines are involved in improving nutrition outcomes but conflict is one of those drivers

where you really see impacts on nutrition.

The [Global Hunger Index](#) from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) ranks countries as “winners” and “losers” based on their nutrition outcomes. Congo, or the DRC, always has the worst outcomes, with the highest number of under-nourished. But, it's a conflict country. You look at the ranks from IFPRI's index and the worst, “loser” countries are all ones suffering from conflict or have just come out of some kind of civil war.

We have to think of conflict in different ways. It's not always what we think of as just “war.” It could be lots of different conflict. I work a lot in Northern Kenya, and it's conflict on a different level. It involves a lack of resiliency of populations but it's also in competition over scarce natural resources. The pastoralists have a lot of conflict with neighboring tribes or clans based over water and land resources. It's not always displaced peoples; there are people with limited natural resources that then pose conflict with neighboring tribes or clans.

Your work fighting malnutrition has taken you around the globe, to now over 60 countries, and draws from many different fields and applications: policy analysis, economics, immunology, and causal analysis, to name a few. Describe your outlook on the importance of taking an interdisciplinary fieldwork approach.



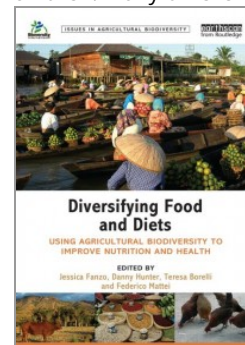
In international nutrition, you have to work amongst disciplines. For example, in the under-nutrition world, one of the most different areas of work is how to improve complementary feeding, i.e., when mothers switch from breast-feeding to complementary feeding. This is where you usually see rapid decline in growth and children become stunted during this time. Reasons for this could be poor foods being used for complementary foods, increased environmental exposures, poor sanitation and hygiene. This is the Holy Grail right now: how do you improve complementary feeding? Because once these children are done breast-feeding and if their growth drops off without being addressed, then they just don't recover.

If you think about that intervention, it requires engagement from the health system, food markets and agriculture. You can talk about improving foods but you need agriculture to step in and have those foods and you need those foods to be at the market. With this comes need for improved water, sanitation and hygiene, education, women's empowerment and knowledge for the mothers on how to care for their children. Many different sectors are involved and this is just one intervention among many.

In the fieldwork I do, I've always engaged with a lot of different experts, and that is what makes the work so interesting. I've worked with ergonomists, economists, and health practitioners. Shauna Downs, my colleague and a postdoc at the Earth Institute who I work with closely, has very different training than mine; she has more of a policy perspective and I come from a nutritional science perspective.

As a scientist, I was trained to be curious. I consider myself to be a generalist of nutrition. I really like getting other sectors involved. I think it's more of my being open and curious and framing issues from different perspectives. Plus, it's just so much more fun to be involved with different sectors.

Interacting with other disciplines is great because of the diversity of the groups. Distinctive personalities tend to go towards different disciplines, like ecologists are the coolest group because they're so laid back. They all bring different expertise when they go to the field. When you're working in systems-type approaches you really need those diverse



What would you say have been some of your biggest influences in inspiring your research interests and approach to the study of sustainable development?

The [Millennium Village Project](#) as far as a project is concerned. Being involved as I was in the very beginning stages was very influential for me. It was this large scale multi-sectoral approach to sustainable development that was pushing all the buttons at the same time. All these different experts from different sectors were working all at the same time and thinking how does development change. [Jeff Sachs'](#) lead on this was very inspiration.

The field of sustainable development has evolved, and there are a few nutrition leaders I really admire: [Patrick Webb](#) at Tufts University and [Lawrence Haddad](#) at IFPRI. Both are very inspirational people and not nutritionists by training; Patrick is a geographer and Lawrence is an economist. They each have taken their disciplines and applied them in a very unique way to nutrition. Also, [Werner Schultink](#), the head of nutrition at UNICEF, is inspiring; he's very solutions driven.

There are some real interesting mid-level, mid-career leaders in nutrition right now who have truly inspired me over the last five years. They've brought nutrition to the forefront of sustainable development. [Maria Ruel](#) at IFPRI is one; she is often one of the only women sitting at the table of global nutrition system. She is fantastic at clarifying the role of agriculture for nutrition. Ten years ago, nutrition was sort of the forgotten child of food security and health care and now nutrition is having its moment. Not only internationally but also in the U.S.. It's not the scientists that did that; it was the journalists – Michael Pollan and Mark Bittman and a few others who are advocates of a better food system.

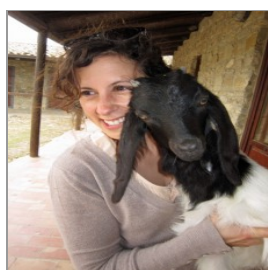
What is your most cherished project?

The work I did in Timor Leste when I wrote a nutrition strategy for the ministry of agriculture. Did they adopt it? Not really. This made it an even more fascinating experience! Timor Leste is this tiny, post-conflict country with one million people and some of the highest burdens of under-nutrition in the world. The potential to make an impact is huge; you could really scale up some nutrition interventions. I continue to do work there with [Glenn Denning](#), and it's been a very interesting, evolving project. Many [Masters of Development Practice \(MDP\)](#) students have been going there and making their mark.

Probably my greatest projects at Columbia have been the ones where the students have been involved. It is a mentoring of sorts where students go work in these countries and get turned on by nutrition. Some of these students are now going into different places bringing a focus on nutrition, such as the World Food Program and Concern. That's my greatest success story: knowing I have these youngsters who are twenty years younger than me, going into my field. That's so cool!

We have some interesting work coming up on [healthy and sustainable diets](#). Shauna, Dr. Denning and I are working on this area, looking at what is the potential for improving diets while ensuring that there is a reduction of environmental degradation with the changing diets. We have a couple of projects in the pipeline I hope, all in post conflict or sub-regional conflict countries: Nepal, Myanmar, Kenya, and Timor Leste.

I worked with Lawrence Haddad on a new [Global Nutrition Report](#), which will be released later this year. This will be a regular annual report coming out every December and this inaugural year focuses on nutrition and the sustainable development goals. We really tried to synthesize everything going on in global nutrition with perspective on both the developed and developing world. December 8 there is a launch of this project in New York – details on the launch can be found here: <http://globalnutritionreport.org/>



If you were only given 140 characters to pen a unique statement about your scholarly interests, teaching philosophy, sustainable diets or (fill in the blank), what would you write?

Oh, sounds like a tweet! Ok, I guess, as is the focus of my blog: [You Are What You Eat](#). And, in spirit of MDPs: *goats rock!*

Follow Jess: [@jessfanzo](#). And, check out her goat blogging: <http://goatrodeo.wordpress.com/> (yes, seriously!)

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