



Striving to Improve the Quality of Life for Disadvantaged Africans

Traveling halfway across the world was an exciting prospect for Evelyn Boyd Simmons. It was 1985 and, fresh out of college, she was on her way to Africa for the first time. Simmons loved the idea of being in the land of her genetic roots, but she was also fueled by professional ambitions.

After having recently graduated from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, Simmons was being sent to Dakar, Senegal, as a volunteer project manager with Africare, a Washington, D.C.-based non-governmental organization (NGO) whose mission is to improve the quality of life for disadvantaged Africans.

During her time in Senegal, Simmons witnessed the impact that Africare was

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- Evelyn Boyd Simmons, chief of external relations and partnerships at Africare

having on the local community. Namely, helping to bring potable water sources closer to villages so that locals wouldn't have to travel daily to gather clean water.

“Women were walking miles each day, twice a day, balancing heavy earthenware vessels on their heads to get to the nearest hand-dug well,” Simmons remembers. “They had to wait for the water table to rise again, so they would return in the evening to draw more water.”

Her volunteer experience through Africare had a powerful impact on her life.

Simmons went on to hold multiple high-profile positions, including director of international trade policy at Motorola and director of international relations at Pfizer.

Still, Africare's important work remained top of mind throughout her career.

While at Motorola, she worked with the company's foundation to make a charitable donation to Africare. Simmons even visited one of Africare's local projects while she was on a business trip



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◆ Using the Hb Meter app to test for anemia at Muhimbili Hospital in Tanzania.

in South Africa. Then in March 2016, with decades of professional experience under her belt, Simmons returned to Africare, but this time as its chief of external relations and partnerships.

“I now have a much broader range of touchpoints for relating to the work Africare does,” she says.

One example Simmons gives is Africare's work in Malawi that focuses on not just preventing starvation, but also ensuring that children are eating nutritious foods that support the development of their bodies.

“I know from being a mother and from my civic work in education with D.C. Public Schools how important nutrition is to brain development during those early years and how it impacts a child's readiness for education,” she says. “I don't think this work would have resonated with me the same way when I was a volunteer in Senegal in my 20s.”

Now that she has rejoined Africare, Simmons is able to celebrate the NGO's successes alongside its employees instead of congratulating them from the outside.

One accomplishment that Simmons and her colleagues are thrilled about is the organization's recent receipt of the USAID Global Development Lab's Innovation to Action Award. Africare's Mwanzo Bora Nutrition Program in Tanzania was one of three award winners for its work with Hb Meter, an innovative smartphone app that tests for anemia in less than 30 seconds.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AFRICARE



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◆ Mwanzo Bora ('good start' in Swahili) Nutrition Program participants. This project is funded by USAID and led by Africare.

“For the development community, this is like winning an Oscar,” Simmons says of the award. “This is an extremely important vote of confidence by one of the most important and expert development agencies on the planet.”

With Hb Meter, a person places his or her index finger on the smartphone and the app uses the device's built-in flash to measure a person's hemoglobin

◆ A couple participants of the Mwanzo Bora Nutrition Program, which is in 37 districts in mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar. It supports the efforts of the Tanzanian government to improve the nutritional status of its citizens by focusing on good nutritive behaviors and education.

levels within 15 seconds. The successful use of this non-invasive method means that blood does not need to be drawn, increasing the likelihood that people will volunteer to be tested.

“Africare's use of technology is enabling us to disrupt the cycle of poor nutrition passed from mother to child,” Simmons says. “This app means quicker, better care for a fraction of the time and money.”

Hb Meter is a prime example of how Africare is working with innovative technology to support positive local change. And it's really just the beginning.

“We are striving to remain on the cutting edge to achieve better results more efficiently,” Simmons says. “The people who depend on us to help them build and then steady the ladder out of illness and poverty deserve that. The cost in human lives is too high not to innovate.”

**Story by Tara Shubbuck
Africare
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