

Transcript

Restaurants and Chefs that Trigger Nourishment Economies

April 25, 2017

This live online Ashoka Huddle was conducted as part of a 2017 series bringing together leading social entrepreneurs whose insights and innovations build on cyclical relationships between biological, economic and cultural forces in society; a pattern we call Nourishment Economies.

It included the following participants:

- [Marta Echavarría](#), Cumari: Rainforest to Table and Canopy Bridge, Quito, Ecuador
- [Sylvia Banda](#), Sylva Food Solutions, Lusaka, Zambia
- [Sean Sherman](#), The Sioux Chef, Minnesota, USA
- [David Strelneck](#), Nourishⁿ, Global



For more information or to watch the video, see <http://huddles.ashoka.org> or www.NourishN.com.



Nourishⁿ
Accelerating Nourishment Economies Worldwide

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This transcript was edited to clarify some language and audio for international audiences.

David Strelneck: Welcome everyone. Thank you for joining. This is the Ashoka Huddle on Restaurants and Chefs that trigger Nourishment Economies. In a moment, we'll introduce more about what that means.

My name is David Strelneck. I'm going to help facilitate today's discussion, along with three remarkable social entrepreneurs in this field. Joining us are:

Marta Echavarría, from Ecuador, who helps steer what's called the *Cumari: Rainforest to Table Initiative*, with chef's in Latin America and indigenous communities in the Amazon Rainforest. Marta, thank you for dialing in from Ecuador.

Sean Sherman, the Sioux Chef, who is the creator of the Tatanka Food Truck and a new Native American food restaurant and training center in Minnesota, in the United States.

Then, joining us in a few minutes, we hope — she's having connection problems right now — will be Sylvia Banda, in Zambia. Sylvia is the founder of Sylvia Food Solutions, which includes catering services, restaurant, food processing for the World Food Program and a food system program at a local university. One of Sylvia's remarkable accomplishments is that, in the development of her enterprises over the years, she has now trained and sources for products from over 20,000, local, smallholder farmers who farm in traditional ways. This fuels a very vibrant business operation.

Thank you all so much for joining.

As a brief production, this is part of our new series of monthly Ashoka Huddles with social entrepreneurs and other Affiliates. It is intended to help us compare, and push on the insights and the challenges and the opportunities for spreading approaches and enterprises that are built around the great many benefits that result when we connect nutritional relationships, between natural ecosystems, soil, farming, and human health and wellness system. This is the pattern we call Nourishment Economies. You can see a great deal more background, examples, and other information about this at our website www.NourishN.com.

I want to make the most of our time here, so let's jump in. Our goal in convening today is really to compare and push on insights and ideas and challenges that we face. So that this video, which is being recorded, can then be used to help each of us think about how we design and operate these kinds of enterprises around the world. Today's questions and discussion focus on how to do this. I'm hoping Sylvia will jump into the call soon.

David Strelneck: Just by way of an introduction briefly, Sean and Marta can you tell us the nature of your business? Roughly how many customers do you serve? How do you count that, is it per month? Who are these customers? Why did they choose to work with you or your enterprises rather than others? Is it taste, convenience, price, values? Give us a bit of a flavor of your operation. Sean, can you start?

Sean Sherman: Ok. Well, we have kind of a multifaceted business at the moment. We're based in the Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota region. We have a catering operation that is live in Minneapolis, within the city. We do many kinds of events, anywhere from 20 people on up to, I think we've done up to 2,000 people; probably averaging around a couple hundred people, usually. Our catering operation is extremely busy.

We also have the food truck, which, we have done really well with. We just go to many different kinds of events.

We get asked to come to many different areas. Between those two businesses, we serve a lot of customers within the Minneapolis, St. Paul area.

Another part of our business is that we travel around to different regions and do educational events. We talk about the work that we do and the research that we've done, and our vision and philosophy. And we put on a lot of popup dinners and food demonstrations. So we reach a lot more people in other kinds of exhibitions and gatherings around the nation, and around the world really. I'm in Denmark here for a couple events, and I'll be in France here in a couple weeks too. We've been doing really well about reaching a lot of people with the work that we're doing.

And, this first restaurant that we're getting ready to open — hopefully later this year if everything works out — then we expect to reach even more. So we're hoping to reach a lot of people in a short time.

David Strelneck: Awesome, thank you. Marta. What's your version of that story?

Marta Echavarría: Well, specifically for us and the work that we're doing right now in distributing Amazon products in Quito, Ecuador: We are getting to 14 restaurants, and it's about 50 customers per week. So it's still very small scale. But it's an entryway to appreciating and hopefully developing a whole range of products from the Amazon. Initially, in the case of Ecuador, with producers that are indigenous, or

rural producers in the mixed chácaras or small farms, where you get a whole range of products.

Our interest is to use that as a way to support what we are really aiming for, which is a movement. A movement of rainforest to table, as you introduced me. And it also means, reiterating, something that many chefs have been doing for quite a while: we're just linking up and networking through our work, as environmentalists, to make it a much bigger, social movement. Ensuring not only wonderful food, but food that is supporting conservation, that is supporting cultural values, and also biodiversity and livelihoods.

David Strelneck:

Thank you. Just so everybody knows, the background on this Nourishment Economy series of Huddles that we're launching here, and all the other work that I do, is in trying to stimulate and support enterprises and social initiatives that are built on the immense range of benefits — social, cultural, financial, physical, and other benefits — that result when you connect nutrition in natural ecosystems with human beings; and when you connect it in a cycle that reinforces itself. This is what we call a Nourishment Economy. Marta just articulated that really well.

Let me give a little flavor. I want to people to know about Sylvia Band's work, in Zambia, if she can't join today. It's a similar story, but she's a ways down the road in the sense that ... let me start with the end of the story. Sylvia has now trained sources food products from over 20,000 smallholder farmers in her region. That's because her catering, restaurant and food processing business has grown so large [and the many values produced by this kind of local regenerative farming are so clear]. Sylvia's focus is on traditional cuisine and nutrition, as the driver of market demand for healthy, regeneratively grown food. We'll talk a little more about that.

As we try to distinguish the difference between a wonderful, tasty, sustainable foods restaurant, and a regenerative-growth or nourishment-cycle restaurant, there's a slight distinction there we're trying to understand better. Because we see certain restaurants that are sustainable in all their practices, and doing great things, but we see others that actually seem to be stimulating the broader community around them in additional ways.

I want to turn back to the two of you Sean and Marta and ask, how do you source your ingredients and your food products? Is there an intentional linkage to what I just said, or is it a coincidental benefit? How do you go about it? Again, Sean, you've told me some interesting things before about paying attention to the traditional, not only cultivated but also harvested wild foods.

Sean Sherman:

Yes, the way that we've structured our business is that we prioritize our purchases from indigenous vendors, first in our region because that's what our business is all about. It's called indigenous culinary. We try to create some economic opportunities for indigenous peoples in our region by purchasing as

much as we can, because with the businesses that we're doing, we're popularizing this really great, healthy indigenous food. We're able to purchase a lot.

In particular in the Minneapolis region, we try to buy a lot of our fish from the Red Lake Indian Reservation, which is North of us. We purchase some hand-harvested wild rice from a few different [Native American] reservations around us, and also maple sugar. We work directly with a couple of native run farms around Minneapolis who are trying to grow out a lot of cool heirloom varieties that are particular to our area.

We have such great history, our native agriculture and our region too. We want to showcase some of these heirloom seeds that are still out there.

I'm also on the Board with one of the farms, Dream of Wild Health, which is in our area. I'm also on the Board with Seed Savers Exchange, just to be close to as much as that heirloom seed stock as possible. I can see in the future, as we grow bigger as a restaurant and are able to stretch out larger, we're just going to create more economic opportunities for people to be able to purchase. So we really try to support that business.

Our big vision, really, with the restaurant is bigger than just opening a restaurant. What we want to do is open up this restaurant and educational center and then be able to train and teach people about the indigenous food systems. Then we want to open up satellite restaurants directly in indigenous communities so they have an opportunity to have those foods available to their communities. We want to help them to build their own infrastructure by growing community gardens, or redesigning their permaculture landscapes so there's food around them, and just kind of creating micro systems for them.

Then we hope to be able to take that system of a large city restaurant, training center and satellites and move that around, not only in the United States, but hopefully in Canada and Mexico.

David Strelneck: Nice. So I think you just described focusing really heavily on heirloom, traditional, wild, original foods and ingredients.

Sean Sherman: Well, the biggest part of it, with the foods that we're buying, they are the traditional foods of the region. There's so many regions and variety throughout North America. We would be excited to be able to help open up many across the nation, because there would be so much diversity through indigenous food businesses, and people would be able to see that first hand and it'd be a tangible business piece. It'd also help bring economic prosperity back into a lot of these indigenous communities.

Not everywhere across North America had agriculture, but everybody was utilizing the wild foods directly in their area and being a part of the ecosystem.

Knowing how to sustainably harvest the foods and keep them growing every year. All these foods are traditional to the people that are living in those regions. So a lot of it is tying back to some of those cultures. You know, tribes have varying degrees of how much food system they have left traditionally. Some of them have quite a bit of it left, and some of them have last a lot over the span of history.

We want to do our best to not only create something that brings the health and spirituality back through their own foods, but also creates that point to showcase it and create a business out of it.

David Strelneck: That's exciting. That's what we call the nourishment enterprise. By nourishment, we mean that full cycle — you're increasing the vitality of both the earth and the people.

It sounds like you're operating on your sourcing at the intersections both of sustainability and of traditional foods. You've got to pay attention to both. If not you could certainly, I imagine, go out and exploit traditional foods until they're gone.

Sean Sherman: Yeah, and that's not the purpose that we're shooting for at all.

David Strelneck: Sean, flip back for one second to the first question I asked you, then Marta I'm going to ask you the same. Why are your customers coming? That's what you're trying to achieve. Are they're coming to the table because they have that cultural awareness? They're excited about supporting your mission? Does it just taste really good? You're able to come with a price point that's low enough that it's better than the McDonald's next door? What's bringing them to you? That half of the demand and supply equation.

Sean Sherman: It's a little bit of all of the above because we're hitting so many different points. People are interested in native agriculture, people are interested in wild foods, people are interested in Native culture in general. We have a lot of Native people who are just really interested in wanting to know more and learn more about the culinary side of their culture. There's a lot of non-native people just really interested in learning more about their own territory and area. If you're from the US or Canada, if you have European descent, you can still appreciate all this history of the landscape because the indigenous food systems are such a much better representation of the food of your area.

We are just hitting many people with many different interests because we're talking about an entire food system, not just one piece. It's not that we're just doing wild corn or heirlooms. We're doing all pieces, it's food preservation, salt productions, sugar production, it's cooking techniques. We're trying to mix all of it in to make it unique for every region that we go in to.

David Strelneck: So, both in terms of your vision but also in terms of the [marketing] success, you've got to be thinking holistically. You think about all those pieces. Thank you.

Let me mention, before turning to Marta that, Sylvia in Zambia reports that she can see us and hear us but for some reason we can't see and hear her. Sylvia is with us in spirit.

I want to mention also, a couple of others are listening right now and will be a big part of the dialogue following this Ashoka Huddle and other things we're doing: Bill Carter, who is one of the founding board members of Ashoka, is listening; a phenomenal social entrepreneur from Zimbabwe named John Wilson, who does this work throughout parts of Africa with communities on sustainable food systems, is watching today. Also, Arthur Getz in Spain is paying attention; Arthur is a real thought leader of urban food systems and nutritional relationships and multilateral policies in this arena. Thanks to the three of you for paying attention and the for things that you're doing [in this arena.]

Marta, what's your version of the intentionality of how you source products?

Marta Echavarría: It's also right now a very mixed bag. Really more than anything, I do think it's a sense of taste, of trying new things. It's the curiosity that a restaurant, especially the high-end restaurants, where there is a more of a gastronomical focus. People are interested in seeing those products in viewing and tasting new things.

At the same time, I do think there is a growing concern about valuing our cultures. Knowing what Ecuadorian culture is about, that Ecuador is an Amazonian country.

And also, looking at the rest of the members of our *Cumari* movement, which we set up with Forest Trends and Amas in Peru and Wildlife Conservation Society and many others that came into this — because I really want to highlight that this is not just us or one entity, but it's really aiming to be an ecosystem — as Sean explained, we want to bring chef's, we want to bring conservationists, we want to bring in communities, indigenous rights, all those issues, because we want that Nourishment Economy.

There are many people who all of a sudden say, "...well if I can make my choice in a restaurant, maybe I want to go to the one that is going to give me all those other values."

In our case, we are aiming to the high-end because we think that we want to shorten the value chains to make sure that there is a higher value for the products, for these indigenous communities. And that takes us to your initial question, which is, are we sourcing from indigenous communities?

So an example of what we're doing is, for example, we're highlighting a fish that is produced by the Cofan Ethnic group, which is between Columbia and Ecuador, but mostly lives in Ecuador. There are only about 3,000 Cofan, as a population, and they manage a really large area that because of a huge struggle, are managing almost 300,000 hectares. The paicha production — piacha is one of the largest fish in the world, it's like a sturgeon, it is an incredible, tasty fish — they are producing paicha in ponds and we are ensuring that the production gets to the high-end restaurants in Quito.

That's just one anecdote, but like that there's going to be many along the way. What we want to make sure is that has the safeguards to ensure that it's a sustainable production. We're not aiming for the same, traditional productivity and profitability issue, but rather highlighting how there's more than just the economic value of these products.

David Strelneck: Awesome. And the customers are valuable enough?

Marta Echavarría: Everybody just can't believe it. If you know, if there's incredible biodiversity in the North America, think about the biodiversity of the Amazon.

Sean Sherman: Yeah, it's amazing.

Marta Echavarría: We're a mega-diverse area, and our food systems are not using all that. So the potential is enormous! Of course, always to ensure that there are safeguards so we do it in a sustainable way.

David Strelneck: Let me draw out a point, a lesson, from our work. I've been working with Ashoka for about 10 to 12 years, with social entrepreneurs like you around the world, on the underlying drivers of successful system changing innovation. System-changing new ways of doing things. In the last five or six years, we really focused on what became this Nourishment Economy pattern that we observed, happening, taking off, here and there...in Ireland and the US and Ecuador and other places.

But something that the two of you just mentioned that I want to draw out is how the cultural connection finds it's way into the business. This is a pattern. This is important. But I think that it is often downplayed in more quantitative analyses of environmental or farming or food [or wellness] systems. Yet, we're seeing it over and over again as a very powerful driver of very successful, what are becoming very large scale enterprises. I mean, Sylvia's got 20,000 farmers supplying her, that's not small. That's not just a little project somewhere, right?

What's interesting to me is that sometimes it's the food that's the entry point, which then begins to tap into the environmental sensibility, or the cultural connection of the consumer. Or sometimes the entrepreneurs, like yourselves, start with the cultural piece and let that lead consumer back into the environmental, or the health pieces.

Something I think Sylvia would mention is actually how she was concerned about food security in her country, in the face of various environmental and other threats; witnessing the decrease in traditional food production in both urban and rural parts of the country. She started with a traditional foods restaurant, very small scale. She needed farmers to produce traditional ingredients. The traditional food grabbed everyone's attention, to the point that she now caters 2,000-person events, similar to what Sean said ... Around the traditional cultural connection and the taste that they remember from their childhood, or from when they were on the countryside, or in their current life.

Let me ask another question to Sean and Marta, which is — and this comes out of Sylvia's work and out of our own work — whether the nutritional aspect of the food is an intentional piece of your operation.

Whether the evidence we have — that traditionally-raised or organically-raised foods in certain ways are not only often better for the land, but turn out to be, in subtle ways in terms of your own microbiome and micronutrient absorption and other things in your body, healthier for you. For Sylvia, that's a real driver of her business now. She has become an advisor to the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, she is ambassador throughout Africa on related topics, she really puts nutrition at the forefront of what we're doing now, even though that's not actually how she began her enterprise. Is this on your radar? How much on your radar is it, Marta?

Marta Echavarría: For us it's a huge issue. Just to let you know, most indigenous, Amazonian communities are losing nutrition. Even the colony, the areas, the new cities that are cropping up, they're in the middle of the most bio diverse ecosystems, and yet nutrition is failing? It's mostly because of economic choices that are being made, with food being imported from out of the Amazon, and convenience of using the modern-looking food, like rice, like ramen noodles, or Coca-Cola, which is modern. And it's devaluing the traditional.

David Strelneck: Let me interrupt for one second just to say, that was Sylvia's story 10 years ago.

Marta Echavarría: Exactly, exactly. At the same time, there are discussions with, for example, some literature at some point saying how the basis of the Amazonian food is the yucca, the manioc, as a product that doesn't have so much nutritional value. But if you look at it, it was always complemented with other things. It was hunting with a certain protein that was complemented, it was with nuts, it was with vegetables. Different kinds of complementarities.

That whole nutritional question is something that we haven't worked on much just because we're a recent effort but we're very concerned about that. We do think that getting these enterprises going, making sure that we have this close relationship with the producers, with the chefs beginning to innovate and position these products, is going to take us back to really understanding how the community is doing. How are they using the resources that are being sold

abroad or out of their community? How do they make sure that they're safeguarded so we are really valuing these systems?

Another anecdote, for example, something very common throughout the amazon, is a product called tucupi in Colombia or Brazil. Aji negro, black chili, if you want to call it, in Peru, and also neapia in Ecuador. It is incredible, basically a vegemite that was made from yucca, throughout the Amazon. Basically the communities, as they go hunting, need to make the soup. They add this flavoring to their soup. It also added to the yucca bread, the cassava. It becomes this wonderful, tasty umami, that has all the chefs amazed.

We're really working with some products like that to be the entry point to all this discussion about nutrition, about fermented products, about the millennium knowledge, the knowledge that these communities have had for millennia, that we're losing. Now there's the whole big hype about fermented products. It's just one way of looking at it, I do think the nutritional value is really important. I think people who come to the restaurants do want, and are concerned about, that. I do think that it needs to be something in the forefront of our work and in our decisions to ensure that we're not belittling in any way the nutritional heritage of these systems.

David Strelneck:

Thank you. Let me mention that in our work with entrepreneurs in a lot of countries — and I mentioned Bill Carter who's listening in who led the Ashoka program in all these countries that was looking specifically for entrepreneurs in these topics in the last five or six years — there's a whole set of them, you!, the real and innovating thinkers and doers on these topics, who actually come out of the health and wellness sector, who've come back towards the nutritional food products. Which they have then identified as being produced effectively through natural farming and natural food preparation systems, not exclusively but clearly.

They came at it because in their health clinics, or in their own health and wellness work, which was system-changing in their countries, they identified certain types of foods and dietary supplements as increasing the nutritional baseline of the person. So that the traditional medical interventions then work more effectively. ...very important work where the traditional, medical approaches appear to be more successful when built upon a nutritional platform, in the patient, in the sick person. Which is rooted in, I'm going to call it, natural foods.

Natural foods, for reasons which the formal science sometimes is working on. We know that from the scientists we work with at Nourish to the Nth Degree, which is my organization. There's interesting questions that aren't proven in the clear, analytic science, but they're also not disproven. They're suggested at. This is a very active area of the scientific work, around micronutrient content, the effect not just on your body but on the biome in your own stomach, and how you therefore absorb the macronutrients and other ingredients. And, how all of

these things correlate with the natural harvesting or farming practices the food was produced by to begin with.

This all can be pieced together. Part of what I'm trying to say, Marta, is that, reflecting on it what you said, sometimes the food system can become the driver for improving nutrition in the community. [But] sometimes the health and wellness story can become the driver for the food system. From my view, from the wonderful privilege of working with a couple hundred initiatives like yours, I don't care which one's driving the system. Sometimes it's the cultural thread. Whichever thread pries it open, people quickly begin to see the whole story, and it builds on itself. That's why we call it a Nourishment Economy, a nourishment cycle, a regenerative cycle.

Sean, what do you think? How do you address that? Does it matter? I know health and wellness and the communities you work with is a profoundly important issue.

Sean Sherman:

For me, I grew up on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, which is the third largest [Native American] reservation in the US and, statistically it's been the poorest area in the United States ever since, probably, the 1940's if not since its inception...you can look up statistics on Pine Ridge and they're not going to be pretty. It could be upwards to 60% Type 2 diabetes. It could be mass obesity, heart disease, a lot of issues.

So we look at the work we're doing right now with understanding indigenous food systems. When you see the point at which people, indigenous communities, lost their traditional foods and stopped harvesting and doing things in the traditional ways, then you see that immediate and rapid decline in health across the board.

Even to answer a bit of this question that's open on the [viewers' computer dialogue] from Joseph Collins, asking, "...for nutrition, many of the indigenous food has less nutritional research to mainstream foods, is that problematic?" So really, we look at how the diets worked, the commonalities of how people were eating. We look at the entire food systems and we're able to break it down. We have to understand, if there was agriculture what kind of seeds were they growing? What kind of agriculture were they growing? How were they doing everything? The wild foods of their region, how are they sustainably living off of these things? Plants, the animals, the preservation, all of it. So we can really go backwards and reintroduce traditional food systems, pretty much anywhere. Our focus is North America because it's a gigantic continent, but all of this information is pretty much usable anywhere that colonialism happened and there's indigenous communities.

So getting people back on their traditional diets, one of the biggest commonalities, at least through the Americas, was that people were living off of extremely low glycemic diets. High in vegetable and a huge diversity of

vegetation. Low salts for the most part. Lots of great fats. Lots of seeds, lots of nuts. You can find that in most communities, traditionally, across the board. Being able to get people to want to eat a more traditional diet can only be beneficial because it's easier to tell people and get them to realize, especially in indigenous communities, why they should be eating traditional, because it's a part of their culture, it's who you are, it's cultural identity.

It's easier than to tell people to eat healthy. Everybody knows they should eat healthy foods. They should eat a carrot over Snicker's bar. We want to not only popularize it, but really make it exciting. Which, is why we think having food businesses is such a great way to do it. It's something that is tangible and we can showcase that these healthy, traditional foods, can be delicious and beautiful and affordable. It's for the community and it's something that people can be proud of in their own community.

Every community is slightly different. As we look across North America we just see an immense amount of variety. It's unfortunate that it's so homogenous right now. If you drive across the country you're going to find the same hamburgers and the same Coco-Cola and the same beer. It's the same story in Canada, even slowly in Mexico little by little. We want to really get the people to understand the beautiful, regional, historical flavor compounds and variety that sits everywhere. If we can help open up indigenous restaurants across the country, across the nation and continent, you'd see that immense amount of diversity and health would carry along with it. Just because of the nature of that diet.

So by creating this non-profit that we're working on to try to open up small, food businesses directly into the indigenous communities, we want to directly impact them in giving them that chance to have those foods and giving them an understanding of why they're important. And really make a difference in the health, and help to turn around a lot of those pieces, and directly combat Type 2 diabetes and obesity and heart disease and even tooth decay. And, mental health in general from all that spiking with the high sugar diets that everybody's always on and the high starch and high processed foods.

So showing people how to work with these very simple foods that have always been there in their communities. Because it shouldn't be hard to know how to work with dried corns and dried beans and dried squash and whatever other tubers might be out there, and the wild foods that are around you. We see an immense amount of benefit. The work really is to steer towards a healthier lifestyle all around communities.

David Strelneck: An observation, an excitement in our work, is that we see that when this does ...

[PAUSE] I hear Sylvia Banda's voice. Sylvia, hello?

Sylvia Banda: Hi David, how are you?

David Strelneck: We're so happy to hear you.

Sylvia Banda: I'm so happy too.

David Strelneck: Welcome. Sylvia, let me finish the observation I was going to offer and then turn the microphone to you for a couple of minutes, okay?

Sylvia Banda: Very good, thank you.

David Strelneck: That makes me happy.

I wanted to point out that, we see some communities where the combination of things that Sean and Marta were just discussing, the cultural reinforcements, the slight connections to the food and the taste, the economic opportunities, they all begin to fit together. The community flips into being proactive, rather than a reactive. A proactive nourishment community.

Let me say this, I'm from a town of 400 people in the mountains in California, a small community right? I know everybody and I can push and poke. I speak this now from my personal home as well.

Where, people flip from being told that they should be doing things a certain way by a government or by an advertisement or by somebody else, to realizing, "...wait a minute, this is cool! There is an opportunity here to be healthy, for my babies to be healthy, for me to have food that tastes good. For me to actually not have to spend so much money at the store on food that comes from somewhere else. For me to actually have more wildlife in my neighborhood. For me to experiment with fun recipes and pull out my grandma's recipe box." In some parts of the world, "...for me to begin to stabilize water systems because this kind of farming helps the earth conserve more water, which means my land is more resilient when a drought or a flood comes. For me to make money doing this."

Suddenly, the energy is local. What we've seen is that it usually takes that combination of factors in a community. Just one or two of those, what I call Nutrient Value Chains, isn't [necessarily] enough. When enough of the organizations like yours begin to converge, suddenly you get this buzz, this beehive of activity. Suddenly you better get out of the way because the community's going to take off with it. That's my vision, that's my hope.

This is part of a series of these Huddles we're having. One of our listeners today is an Ashoka Fellow named John Wilson. I hope that he'll join us in one of these future conversations about exactly this. Which is about, how communities do or don't adopt that energy and that beehive mentality and that sense of ownership and proactivity. John has just a wealth of experience around parts of Africa on this topic.

...Now Sylvia, welcome! It's so nice to hear your voice. I don't know if you heard us talking about you a few times. If you did, I'd like you to please correct anything I said that is not accurate. Also, can you go back and tell us a little bit of your own story of how do you go about designing a combination of a restaurant and a farming system and a catering business like yours. What's most important as you set about this task? Sylvia Banda: Can you hear me?

Sylvia Banda: The internet is unstable and most of the times I could not hear, but some of the things I'm able to hear. If you're able to hear me, maybe let me just pick up from what you have just said.

David Strelneck: Yes please.

Sylvia Banda: So, the way we run our restaurants, as you gave a background, we started in a small way. Working with the farmers. The reason why we have been working with these farmers, we wanted them to provide the products which are up to our standards. That is the reason why we train them first. Once we have trained them, we become their market, we buy the local produce from those we trained.

We [also] invented the solar dryers ourselves. This is the solar dryer which has been commercialized, and the distributors come to buy these solar dryers. We have three types of solar dryers: the smaller one, medium sized, and the bigger one which are bought by the distributors, who give them to the communities so that they are able to dry a lot of vegetables at one point.

When these farmers bring the products to our place, we have popularized the use of this indigenous foods, which for a long time people had neglected, or maybe they're underutilized. But we have done so well, I am proud now that each time I walk into the bigger hotels, I could see that they got a room to serve the indigenous foods, because of the many programs we have done to popularize it. With these same farmers.

By the way, we have over 20,000 farmers who are on our database. Each time we want any type of product, all we have to do is just one email and those products reach our doorsteps.

Now coming to the manner in which we have popularized our product, one of them was that we were holding competitions, cook of the year competitions. We invite the farmers who come from all the provinces to come to the capital city of Zambia, which is Lusaka, for a good three days. And we invite the government to come and officiate the program. It was from there that the First Lady, whom we invited to be the guest of honor, declared the program to be an annual event.

Then — with all the materials we garnered from all these people within the provinces of Zambia, and even crossing to Mozambique where we have trained

in five districts, and also crossing into Tanzania where we have trained in two provinces — we decided to get the material and we published the Zambian cookbook. It's a very, very good book because it tells all the indigenous recipes. Most of the universities acquired our book and they're using it as a reference book.

So it is from this that we decided to bring nutrition in the restaurants. Whereby right now I tell the government, if they have visitors and they want to showcase the food, they come to us in order for us to provide the traditional foods.

Plus the many more things which David has already talked about. I don't know if I still have a little bit of time, I can continue. Have you heard me?

David Strelneck: Yes Sylvia, we can hear you well and it's fascinating and important.

Let me mention just for our viewers briefly, you just saw Dana Thompson join the screen for a moment. Dana is a partner of Sean Sherman and is currently logged in as a presenter. That's who that woman was who appeared for one moment. She's part of the team!

Sylvia please, continue.

Sylvia Banda: Ok fine. The reason why, David, we trained these farmers is that we want to maintain the nutrition through the entire chain. The purpose is that the indigenous vegetables and foods reach the clients. It should not just be, probably just eating without getting anything. We want to maintain and they could retain the nutrients.

And also, we have seen that from the many farmers that we have trained, there are a lot of testimonies when you visit them. We have a very good system where we follow these farmers to find out how they're doing. This is where we listen to a lot of testimony before we went through their community to train them and to start buying from them, [and learned] their children are not going to school. Because of our training them and also empowering them economically, their children they are going back to school.

Also, apart from that, these same products, we have done quite a lot of innovations on them. We just don't just sell them as dry vegetables. We have a factory where we process them. Once we have processed these vegetables, we make soup, the traditional soup. We call it pumpkin soup. We have also made another soup, which is the moringa soup. Also amaranta soup.

We have also, in the same factory, we came up with a kind of village chicken — which we call village chicken in Zambia, when anyone says village chicken they know what you are talking about, it is simply free range chickens — and also goat meat. Why we went into this area is that we looked at the farmers. Once they have supplied the vegetables to us, in Zambia where we have one season,

so it means that the farmers will be dormant until the next season comes. We have to look at what else we can do to occupy the farmers. Especially since I am an innovator, so all the time I always look for new things. (Even when you look at my book, you'll find that most of the recipes which are in that book, the Zambia cookbook, I have just actually created them. We take them to the lab. Once they have been analyzed and qualified, then I put them in the recipe.) So with the goat meat, when we started coming, we looked at the situation and said, how can we help these farmers? When we started buying the chickens from them and the goats, the NGOs came in, and they started promoting these farmers to grow more chicken and also to grow more goats. Which, meant that they were supplying them to us.

So in short, what I am trying to say is that to promote the indigenous recipes, I've discovered that is one of the better things one could do to help the community as well as the nation.

I can give an example of Zambia. The situation was quite bad where malnutrition was the order of the day. When we started training these farmers, we did not want to start the training from the urban areas because we knew that we were not going to achieve what we're looking for. But starting from the rural areas has really helped us quite a lot. The 20,000 farmers that we have trained, if anyone walked into their communities, they have come to understand, they know the importance of nutrition. As compared to the ones who are in urban areas, those are the culprits. In most cases, they kill themselves because they do not understand what they eat. The rural dwellers, they understand it very, very well. Even their children. When we look at their children, some of them, you can see how the children have improved, by eating the same food that they used to eat.

Because in our teaching, in our programming, we have included the nutrition aspect. So that these farmers that we are training, they should understand that it is not a charity, but it is a business. Because of that, this food which they sell to us, they also retain some, which they use now to feed their children and themselves. David, with what I've just explained, I feel that in a way we have contributed tremendously to national development.

David Strelneck:

Sylvia thank you so much. There's such a wealth of learning and insight and opportunity in what you just said. Which I've had the chance to see on the ground with you a little bit in Zambia and it's remarkable. We only have five minutes left on this call, so with your permission, let me run us through a couple of wrap up points. I don't want to talk much, I really want to hear each of you talk more. Let me pose a question and then say a couple of things while you think about your answer. Then, maybe Sean and Marta and Sylvia, if you can offer just a last, one or two minutes of comments and we need to sign off.

You know, Sylvia just illustrated so many aspects of what we've been discussing. The relationship between nutrition and products and taste and cultural

connection and economic opportunity and health. And how, in my opinion, it all comes together in a massive opportunity! Right? As she said, this is not a charity project, this is a huge opportunity, it's just not mainstream — yet.

Let me mention to everybody else who's watching that Sylvia and Sean and Marta and I and a number of others will be together in person a couple months from now, at a two day gathering in New Mexico. I'm very excited to have the chance to develop these ideas and along with schools, and also the question — this is where the public who's listening, anybody else, please send us your input on this — there's a real question here for me in my work: how do we introduce this opportunity with new communities? Not “to” new communities, because they're the ones who are going to drive it. We're working very hard on the right way, or right ways, successful ways, of helping spark this insight in local change makers so that it takes off all over the place.

Anybody can view the transcript, or the followup to this call, at huddles.ashoka.org, online. Or at www.NourishN.com. You can also sign up there with your name and email if you'd like to be kept in the loop about everything we're trying to do here.

My final comment round the table, and we really just have one minute each, is anything you want to say. Also, if you can make some point about what you've had to do that's different than if you were just setting up a “normal” sustainable foods restaurant. Is there anything you've done that you would really point to, if there's somebody in a community somewhere watching this discussion, and you would say, “Look, here's a couple things you need to think about that distinguish what we're doing from other restaurants,” what would that be? Sean, any thoughts there?

Sean Sherman: Sure. I think with the work that we've done, we've been very disciplined about how we approach the foods. We try to cook extremely regional, micro-regional, at that. And we've cut out all European influences like dairy and wheat flour and processed sugar. We're not even using beef, pork or chicken. So we're really trying to utilize only the foods on flavors that are in the regions that we're cooking at. I think utilizing that discipline and making foods with only traditional ingredients has really helped us come quite a long ways with the foods that we're able to prepare. It really helps keep it authentic. It helps keep it just more traditional in flavor and base. And we're re-learning a lot of these very simple and beautiful methods, and able to share a lot of this with other people. I think having that kind of discipline really goes a long ways.

David Strelneck: Thanks so much for joining us especially out of the fact that you're in the middle of another event with chefs in Denmark right now.

Sean Sherman: Thank you.

David Strelneck: Marta?

Marta Echavarría: I think the important thing from our end is to, like Sean says, use the power and the current fashion of gastronomy and food and incredible chefs that are really awakening many minds, many initiatives. And that they can be a driver for social change. Not only at a scale of the examples that we're looking at but even at a minor, regional, global scale, all of a sudden it's just waking up people. You begin with a chef, with wonderful food, wonderful innovation. But behind that chef, has to be a whole set of ecosystems of organizations and people and producers and communities and issues that, I think it is unlimited. We really have a huge potential. I invite everybody, as a consumer, to also try to support those initiatives. We can really make it a much more regenerative economy.

David Strelneck: Thank you, that's the point.

Sylvia, thank you again for sticking with us today. Do you have any additional thoughts before we sign off?

Sylvia Banda: Yes, David, just in one minute. I feel proud that we have helped quite a lot, the community especially. Because these are people who started, you know, with nothing. But after training them we have not ended up there. We are now encouraging them. We have even opened a second university, which is for culinary arts training, where these students are women or men who never thought they could set foot into a university. But we have the university now. As long as someone has got the idea and the zeal wanting to improve with knowledge, we are now training them. Our place is always full, David. Because these are women who thought they had nothing in society, but we have put them in the middle of society by giving them that education.

David Strelneck: Thank you. Awesome.

Everybody thank you, it's so helpful and provocative, and we're going to keep doing this.

Let me mention that the next Ashoka Huddle on Nourishment Economies, the second in our series in May of this year, is on enterprises that we call "bio-diversifies." With social entrepreneurs like Marta and Sean and Sylvia that we work with on enterprises and initiatives that either intentionally, or just as a result, multiply biodiversity in the areas and regions in which they work. So please join for that. You can see the whole list of huddles and other activities we're trying to implement at www.NourishN.com.

I want to thank everybody one more time for joining us today, be well.

Sean Sherman: Thank you.

Marta Echavarría: Thank you!

Sylvia Banda: Thank you.

Marta Echavarría: Bye-bye.

Sean Sherman: Bye.

Marta Echavarría: Nice to meet you all.

Sylvia Banda: See you soon.

-- End of Transcript --