

A Day in the Life of Lucy Martinez Sullivan

Lucy Martinez Sullivan helped found the non-governmental organization 1,000 Days and serves as its Executive Director. Established in 2010, 1,000 Days works to improve nutrition for extremely vulnerable groups in some of the poorest parts of the world, but the NGO is also aware that malnutrition constitutes a serious public health crisis in nearly every country on earth – even the United States of America. Lucy discusses her role in helping to ensure that the work of 1,000 Days supports the delivery of the nutrition-related Sustainable Development Goals.

Sight and Life (SAL): *Lucy, let's start with the term 'the first 1,000 days', from which your organization takes its name. For any of our readers who may not be familiar with the concept, could you start by explaining what it's all about?*

Lucy Martinez Sullivan (LMS): The first “1,000 days” refers to the 1,000 days from a woman’s pregnancy to her child’s second birthday. This 1,000-day window is a unique opportunity in a child’s life, when their nutrition and early life experiences lay the foundation for the decades that are to come. We think of this in terms of three key areas.

The first is brain development. Babies are literally built from nutrition. Nutrition is the fuel that drives the incredible brain development that occurs from even the very early stages of a woman’s pregnancy. Many people may take for granted the role that nutrition plays in shaping cognitive development during this phase of life, but it is absolutely essential, and its adequacy or inadequacy will dictate whether an individual will thrive or suffer irreversible damage – damage that will lead to problems at school and in the workplace later in life.

The second is health. Many of the diseases we have to deal with can be traced back to the quality of nutrition a person receives during their first 1,000 days, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and obesity.

Finally, the first 1,000 days matter for equality of opportunity. Good nutrition during this period will allow individuals – and, by extension, their families, their societies and their countries – to reach their full potential as they grow. The World Bank and other institutions have done great work recently quantifying the economic impact of good or bad nutrition during the first 1,000 days. Its influence on economic productivity is enormous. The same goes for healthcare spending.

So the job of my organization is to make the case for investing in good nutrition in the first 1,000 days of every child on the planet.

“Babies are literally built from nutrition”

SAL: *How did you come to co-found 1,000 Days, Lucy, and what were the challenges involved in setting it up?*

LMS: As I’m sure many of your readers are aware, Hillary Rodham Clinton – who was US Secretary of State at the time – was very moved by the findings about stunting published in 2008 in the seminal Lancet series on maternal and child undernutrition. The conclusions of this publication were underscored by a number of subsequent studies, and Hillary Clinton decided to partner with the Irish Government, which has a strong commitment to eradicate hunger worldwide, to shine an international spotlight on the importance of good nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life.

We were set up as part of that initiative, which was a call to action, and the initial plan was for the project to operate for just 1,000 days – hence the name. Our efforts generated a great deal of interest, especially around how best to bring proven nutritional solutions to scale, and our work was lent additional impetus by the launch of the six global nutrition targets in 2012 – the first time that such targets had ever been formulated. We



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Melinda Gates, co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, speaks at the 1,000 Days event 'Investing in Nutrition: A Golden Opportunity' on Capitol Hill, watched by Lucy Sullivan.

saw this as a great opportunity to rally partners in the nutrition community to action, which in turn encouraged us to broaden the scope of our activities beyond our initial focus on maternal and child malnutrition in low- and middle-income countries.

We became increasingly aware that malnutrition has no borders, and that the problem of inadequate nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life affects almost every country in the world – even our native USA. And so our perspective became more holistic, and our portfolio of activities expanded to include “our own back yard” here in America. We set out to identify partners to help us in our work, and we now in fact collaborate with over 80 different organizations. In our search, we especially wanted to identify a US organization that focused strongly on maternal and child nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life. We ascertained that there are many great organizations in the nutrition space in the USA, but none working specifically on nutrition in the first 1,000 days. And so we decided to become that organization ourselves, using our energies not just to draw attention to this issue but also to try to positively influence policies at national level.

“Malnutrition has no borders”

SAL: *What is the essence of your role as Executive Director of 1,000 Days?*

LMS: My task is to build a movement. This begins within the organization itself, and involves forming and leading a team of dedicated, passionate people who are all committed to creating a world in which every child, irrespective of where he or she is born, receives adequate and appropriate nutrition during the first 1,000 days its life. We are a “small but mighty” team of ten people based in Washington, DC. We lead and support coalitions in the nutrition space, help craft advocacy messages and tools,

and try to ensure that the topic of the first 1,000 days receives proper attention.

A lot of our work involves partnering with the US Government and Administration to ensure that they understand the importance of good nutrition and that they keep funding critical, life-saving programs. We try to achieve a great deal with our small and dedicated team, but our real strength comes from our partners, of whom we have many around the world, especially in the NGO community. We support them in their advocacy efforts, and help them make the case for investments in the first 1,000 days – with policy documents, infographics and other materials that communicate the key arguments in accessible and compelling terms. As the head of the organization, I get out to talk with many audiences about this, and I really enjoy that aspect of my job.

SAL: *Do you have a typical working day? Could you tell us something about your working life, and what you most enjoy about it? Are there things that you would like to change about it?*

LMS: I have two little ones at home, a daughter who is almost four and another who is two and a half, and so my day starts early and is very focused on young child nutrition! I answer emails or participate in conference calls with our partners overseas while still at home, and then go to the office, where I work with my colleagues to fuel the growing sense of urgency around the issue of the first 1,000 days. I’ll have meetings with representatives of the US Government, or one of the NGOs with which we partner, and I’ll often speak at events. I spoke to a group of students last week and a group of clinicians the week before that – the scope is always very varied. It’s really important to understand the first 1,000 days as a universal issue, and to articulate the key arguments in terms which are of relevance to everyone, wherever they may be in the world. We need to make a case that can be understood by a policy-maker in Indiana here in the US just as easily as by a policy-maker in India.

A lot of our partners are based on the west coast of the USA, which is three hours behind Washington, DC, and so speaking with them as well can make for a very long working day. But we’re all very passionate about the issue of the first 1,000 days, and that’s the fuel that keeps us going.

Of course I have to juggle my speaking and traveling commitments with the job of running the organization on a day-to-day basis.

I’m not a scientist by training, but I’m really interested in the science of nutrition, as I realized very forcibly when working on our recent First 1,000 Days: Nourishing America’s Future report. Nutrition is fundamental to health and growth, and it seems that every day we learn something new about the relationship between nutrition and development – the influence of

a mother's diet on the health of her baby, for instance, or the importance of breast milk, which is much more than a source of nutrition itself. It's also a vaccine, with remarkable immunological properties. I'm also very interested in the operation of food systems, whether local or global, and the way they influence people's nutritional status.

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SAL: *Is there anything you would change if you could?*

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LMS: I'd like to see more resources dedicated to the first 1,000 days. A mere 1% of development budgets is spent on the kind of high-impact nutrition interventions we support, and which we know can be so effective. Only 2% of individual country budgets are allocated to this cause. And this despite the fact that 45% of child deaths are attributable to malnutrition. All those deaths are preventable. I'm all the more aware of this because I have young children myself, and the barriers between my professional life and my personal life as a mother are very porous. When I

see my daughters enjoying something like a carousel – and they absolutely love carousels at the moment! – I can't help but think of all the children in the world who are denied such experiences because they are living in poverty, or in dangerous parts of the world, and because they are malnourished.

SAL: *Do you have a particular hero who has inspired you in your career?*

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LMS: I don't think I have an individual hero as such, but the people who have inspired me to take on this role are the millions of mothers around the world who struggle to feed themselves and their children adequately. When I took up my present role, I was shocked at the disparity between investments in the prevention of HIV/AIDS, or malaria, and the investments made in the prevention of malnutrition. At the outset, this was very much an intellectual passion fueled by my sense of justice, but as soon as I had my first child, it became a very personal passion. I just imagine what it must be like to be a mother who doesn't have access to adequate food and healthcare for her children.

Another source of inspiration are the various people for whom I have worked in my previous roles, who were always prepared to give me a chance to take on new responsibilities, even



'The First 1,000 Days: Nourishing America's Future' – a first-of-its kind report on the nutritional health of America's mothers, infants and toddlers – is launched on Capitol Hill. **From left to right:** Hugh C Welsh, President and General Counsel of DSM North America; Barbara Bush, Co-Founder of Global Health Corps; Kimberly Seals Allers, Director of the First Food Friendly Community Initiative; and Lucy Sullivan.



Lucy Sullivan delivers over 200,000 petition signatures for paid family leave to Rosa DeLauro, US Representative for Connecticut’s 3rd congressional district. Members of the 1,000 Days and National Partnership for Women and Families teams took to Capitol Hill to deliver the signatures to US policymakers. **Far left:** Lucy Sullivan. **Far right:** Rosa DeLauro, the US Representative for Connecticut’s 3rd congressional district.

if I wasn’t the classic ‘fit’ for this or that job. The trust placed in me has given me a lot of confidence. I’m very grateful for it, and I’d like to be the same kind of boss myself, and inspire others to achieve their full potential.

SAL: *Unusually for someone in your position, you have a background in management consultancy, as well as in marketing and brand management. How has this experience helped you in your work for 1,000 Days?*

LMS: I think my experience as a management consultant has taught me to think very analytically, which really helps me when I’m trying to build the case for why governments and private-sector donors should invest in the first 1,000 days of life: “This is the current state of affairs, this is the cost of a high-impact intervention, and these are the positive social and economic consequences of making that intervention.” Being able to spell out these arguments in detail puts us at a great advantage. As regards the marketing experience, it’s also been extremely helpful. I used to sell color cosmetics for L’Oréal. A new type of lipstick may not be considered an essential item by everyone, and so you have to make a very persuasive case for investing in it. Why this product and not that? It’s a line of argument I can still apply in my work today. We may be dealing with a much more

serious subject-matter, but within the framework of 1,000 days advocacy we have to construct arguments that appeal to the heart as well as the mind. We have to communicate a sense of joy and possibility, however bleak the situation might sometimes seem.

SAL: *A related question, Lucy. Your academic qualifications are in Business Administration and Political Science rather than Nutrition, Biochemistry or Public Health. In what ways does your academic training influence your current work?*

LMS: Obviously we’re not in the business of making a profit here at 1,000 Days, but I still try to apply best business practice to the way we operate. We have to be rigorous about what we do and always ask ourselves how any given activity is going to impact the bottom line – even though in our case the ‘bottom line’ is not a financial one.

SAL: *1,000 Days was established with the support of the US Government, the Government of Ireland, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and several non-profit organizations. What, in your view, is the secret of successful collaboration between government and NGOs in the nutrition space?*

LMS: The most important thing is to obtain clarity as to what everyone is trying to achieve. In the case of 1,000 Days, we worked hard to get a lot of different groups of people to coalesce around a single idea and instill that idea with urgency. The creation of the initial 1,000 Days Partnership was driven by the US State Department, in collaboration with InterAction, an association of non-governmental organizations that included GAIN (the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition). Crucially, there was excellent communication between the various actors from the start. It’s very pleasing to see that nowadays governments like those of Nepal and the Philippines are taking up the concept of the first 1,000 days and creating their own campaigns around the topic.

When I was brought in, my role was to develop a clear sense of direction for the organization. We’ve grown since then, but our clear focus remains making sure that the world doesn’t forget about the importance of nutrition and the needs of mothers and babies during the first 1,000 days of life. I didn’t come in with preformed ideas: I really listened to everyone, conscious of the fact that I’m not a nutritionist by training. Together, we have forged a really strong common sense of purpose. I’ve learned an enormous amount, and I have many mentors in my job!

SAL: *In what ways is the work of 1,000 Days supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals?*

LMS: We did a lot of behind-the-scenes work to help ensure that nutrition was given appropriate prominence in the SDGs – something that had not been the case with the Millennium Development Goals, unfortunately. I think I speak for many of our partners when I say that I really value the clarity of the SDGs: we have an absolutely clear notion of what we need to achieve by 2030, which is to end malnutrition in all its forms. That’s a historic milestone, and we’re all working together to attain it and end the terrible scourge of malnutrition, which has plagued humanity for as long as we know.

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SAL: *What advice would you give to readers wanting to actively support the first 1,000 Days initiative?*

LMS: Helping with our work of education and advocacy is the most valuable thing your readers could do. If you work in the health sector, for instance, you shouldn’t imagine that all of your colleagues will know or understand the concept of the first 1,000 days. So “telling the good news” about it is very important. Also very important is to try to find out how much your own government is investing in nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life, wherever you may live and work. If you’re aware of the current level of investment, you can argue much more persuasively for more, and for the adoption of programs that we know to be effective in tackling the problem of malnutrition in the first 1,000 days. We’re an advocacy organization, and so we want to create advocates the world over.

SAL: *Thank you, Lucy, and the best of luck with your future endeavors.*

LMS: Thank you.

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Lucy Martinez Sullivan was interviewed by Jonathan Steffen.