

Frances Davidson (1942–2019)

Noted international expert in nutrition dies



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Margie Ferris Morris
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Frances Davidson, an international expert in nutrition, passed away on Sunday 12 May 2019 in Washington, DC, USA, after a sudden and severe brain aneurysm.

Hunger Notes conducted an interview with Frances

in 2012 after she retired from working with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for 24 years, dedicating her efforts to improving the nutritional wellbeing of people in developing nations. She served as acting Director of USAID Office of Nutrition and Director of nutrition programming at USAID during that time. [Here is the interview recounted.](#)

After completing a doctorate at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Davidson came to Washington, DC, with her husband, who took a post at the British Embassy. She was hired in 1987 to work in the US Agency for International Development's Office of Nutrition, and soon afterwards rose to directing the office. She oversaw the merger of the Office of Nutrition into the larger Office of Health and Nutrition (later the Office of Health, Infectious Diseases and Nutrition; HIDN) within USAID, where she continued to focus on issues of malnutrition in low-income countries.

During her tenure at USAID, she grew the Agency's nutrition program by establishing relationships with related sectors such as reproductive health, education, infectious diseases, agriculture and gender.

Given the modest resources of the nutrition program, Davidson worked with colleagues to catalog the reasons for malnutrition in a particular country and then identified the aspects that were appropriate for USAID investments. To this end, she built

upon previous work and continued the funding of research and analysis, both scientific and programmatic, in developing countries through agreements with universities, governments, non-governmental organizations, foundations and private-enterprise organizations.

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One of her major accomplishments was to continue supporting vitamin A research and propelling forward vitamin A policies and intervention campaigns to address this debilitating deficiency. Part of that initiative was to support Dr Alfred Sommers' groundbreaking research on vitamin A's relation to young childhood morbidity and mortality.

Congressional support for efforts to increase child survival and prevent childhood malnutrition allowed Davidson's office to expand the original idea of blindness prevention through vitamin A distribution to one that included treatment, rehabilitation and skill development to enable individuals with varying types of sight impairment to lead productive and meaningful lives. USAID worked closely with the Perkins Institute on blindness prevention as well as the Seva Foundation, HKI, the International Eye Foundation (IEF) and others to achieve this. In order to maximize impact, USAID sought out innovative ideas to reach those in need and beyond the range of most programs. In order to help accomplish this, the Office of Nutrition worked on developing private and public partnerships, such as with Hoffmann-La Roche/*Sight and Life* Foundation and BASF to supply vitamin A capsules and conduct research. For instance, Hoffmann-La Roche supported *Sight and Life* to promote young investigators' work.

Additionally, Davidson and her office developed and fostered private-sector partnerships to promote food fortification with micronutrients and other important nutrients in a number of countries. The Division of Nutrition joined with the Bill & Melin-

da Gates Foundation and others to help start GAIN, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, with the focus on expanding the application of food technologies to improve the nutritional quality of foods in as many low-income countries as possible.

The translation of science and technology into programs that were appropriate to low-income countries and that improved lives was central to her work.

Recognizing the fact that if a population was deficient in one critical nutrient, such as vitamin A, there was a good chance they were deficient in others, Davidson expanded the program and policy portfolio to include a range of vital nutrients, in particular iron deficiency anemia. In order to help countries document the extent of the deficiency, USAID supported the development of the HemoCue, a simplified field tool that could be used by minimally trained field workers to assess iron deficiency. Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) began using it in select country assessments.

In addition to documenting the extent of anemia in populations, Davidson and her office worked hard to get important nutrition indicators – such as dietary diversity to better understand nutritional deficiencies and their health outcomes – included in DHS, health surveys conducted in many different developing countries over many years, which have been crucial in demonstrating progress, or the lack of it, in key measures of health.

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The efforts of Davidson and her colleagues at USAID have advanced overall knowledge of micronutrient deficiencies and their role in health and wellbeing and policies and programmatic practices to treat nutritional problems in order to promote the development of individuals and their communities.

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After retiring from USAID, Frances became a master gardener, loved to knit, and enjoyed swimming and being with family. Her work and accomplishments in the field of nutrition will be remembered for decades.

This obituary originally appeared on the website of the World Hunger Education Service (WHES) at: <https://www.worldhunger.org/frances-davidson-noted-international-expert-in-nutrition-dies/>. Reprinted in abridged form with permission.