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Natalie Hahn MC/MPA 1974

When **Natalie Hahn** MC/MPA 1974 joined the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in 1990, she was met with a startling reality: Millions of dollars were being funneled into agriculture, but almost none reached women because they didn't "legally qualify" for aid. Rather than accepting the status quo, Hahn went on to prove the system wrong. It was one of many instances in her 38-year career with the United Nations where she successfully pushed global agencies to recognize women as the backbone of agricultural policy.

Working with the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture IITA, Natalie had an especially visible impact in southwestern Nigeria, where she tested food crops with the women who actually grew and cooked them. Soybeans proved transformative. As women learned to plant, process, and prepare the new crop, livelihoods and nutrition improved so dramatically that the Yoruba community honored her with a chieftaincy, bestowing on her the title Balogun Iyalaje, or "the person who empowers."

Her career grew out of a life that began on a farm in Polk County, Nebraska. "I'm a Polk 4-H girl," says Natalie. Her mother, a 1926 graduate of Nebraska Wesleyan University, instilled a global perspective: a world map hung above the breakfast table, and public service was a family tradition.

After graduating from the University of Nebraska, Natalie spent six months in New Zealand and a month in India. “That opened up a whole world,” she says. “I took the Foreign Service exam, but my goal was a United Nations position.”



Natalie Hahn with women farmers in Ibadan, Nigeria, in the 1980s. A major impact of her work was the introduction of improved crops, including soybeans.

She landed a position at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome, and quickly realized she wanted to gain new skills. The Hodson Scholarship brought her to Harvard Kennedy School. “I was the first woman to receive that scholarship. It was a major influence.” HKS helped sharpen her understanding of negotiation and philanthropy, and strengthened her ability to engage effectively with governments and agencies.

In addition to attending HKS, Natalie earned her Ed.D at Harvard Graduate School of Education, where her dissertation focused on women and agrarian reform. Her research documented indigenous codes in African countries where women did inherit land — evidence that women should indeed qualify for credit and programs.

At IFAD, she helped organize an international consortium of 68 first ladies to advocate for women's inclusion, where she met Jim Grant, the executive director of UNICEF. Soon after, Natalie became UNICEF's representative in Malawi. Here, she saw a chance to expand education during the nation's transition to democracy. She urged presidential candidates to abolish school fees and uniforms, and when the winning candidate followed through, enrollment jumped from 1 million to 3 million children. Funds were raised to deliver notebooks and pencils for students throughout Malawi, many of whom were going to school for the first time.

After postings in Africa and at UN headquarters, Natalie wished to recognize her heritage and give back to her beloved Nebraska. "I have to tell you, I'm the happiest to be home". she says. She founded the [Malaika Foundation](#) to enhance global education initiatives in Nebraska's schools and universities, and continues her longtime support of African artists, donating art to several schools and universities in Nebraska, including 200 pieces to Peru State College.

She also researches medicinal plants and maintains a connection with Harvard Kennedy School as a mentor with the School's [Alumni Career Connections initiative](#) — an experience that, she says, "was an honor and joy." She was especially happy to introduce several students to former colleagues, including a former UN legal counsel as well as an Ethiopian soil scientist from Lincoln.

Natalie remains committed to the idea that public service can reshape institutions and improve lives. Her favorite quote is from the Koran: "If you have saved just one life, you have saved the world."



The Yoruba community in Nigeria honored Natalie with a chieftaincy — Balogun Iyalaje, or "the person who empowers."

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