





# In[ter]view: Wawira Njiru

Verse Mag's Regular Graduate Interview

In this edition of Verse, Wawira Njiru recalls her move to Australia to study nutrition before returning home to Kenya, founding her own not-for-profit organisation: Food for Education. After graduating from UniSA, Njiru has dedicated her work to helping improve the lives and school performance of vulnerable children in her hometown of Ruiru.



Interview conducted by Jesse Neill | Photos supplied by Wawira Njiru

[Check out the organisation at Food4Education.org](http://Food4Education.org) or

**How would you describe your role with Food for Education?**

I am the executive director of Food for Education. I am in charge of overseeing our programs and ensuring that our team is working towards our goal of ensuring that children in Kenyan public schools do not have to learn while hungry. I am also in charge of partnerships, raising awareness about our work and creating strategy for growth.

**What made you want to found this organisation?**

I had grown up seeing how lack of education could limit opportunities in life through the children I grew up around. My siblings and I were among the few who went to university and I knew that this was because we had a good education foundation when we were younger. I wanted to give this same opportunity to other children in my community and in Kenya. For many children however, food was the major thing keeping them away from school. I started Food for Education to ensure that lack of food did not stop children from going to school or

concentrating in class. A lot of kids were running away from school during lunch to go look for food outside and some would even faint, we wanted to ensure that this stopped happening.

**You moved to Australia in 2010 to study your degree in Nutrition and Food Science, I can imagine that could be a little daunting. Can you explain a bit about the move and what you were feeling at the time?**

I was 19 when I moved to Australia and only knew one person in the entire country. It was incredibly daunting, lonely and terrifying. The good thing about youth is that you're more impulsive and so I didn't really think through the consequences of being so far away from home so young at the beginning. I was able to make friends quickly though and through that Australia began feeling more like home. I was working to pay my school fees, studying full-time and learning a lot about how to balance everything and stay sane. I also started Food for Education while I was still in university (in 2012) so juggling everything was difficult.





In 2011, I failed two subjects and had to do a supplementary exam and that was a big wake up call for me that I needed to learn how to balance everything better. Looking back, I appreciate the experience because it taught me how to be a more balanced person.

**Had you always intended to found the charity when you began your degree or is it something you thought about later on?**

I always knew I wanted to do something back home but I wasn't sure what it was. I started by volunteering for *World Vision Australia* and *Oaktree* in my first year of university, then decided to start something myself because none of them were working in my community. I was also learning a lot about the impact of undernutrition in my nutrition classes and decided to focus on this as my main intervention in schools.

**What was your first fundraising opportunity?**

In December 2011, we held our first fundraiser to start our program and raised \$1680. It was a Kenyan dinner where I made dinner for

80 people with the help of my friend Sam. It wasn't excellent food but my friends were so supportive—they ate it all. With that money we built a make-shift kitchen back in Kenya and started making lunch for 25 students in January 2012.

**What do you find most rewarding about your work?**

I love the children's reaction as they eat the lunch we provide and also love it when they begin to improve in the test scores because they are able to learn better.

**What has been your biggest challenge since founding Food for Education?**

Our biggest challenge has been not being able to expand as fast as we want as the need is so big in other schools in Kenya and around the continent. We are working to form partnerships that will help us expand faster and reach more students across the country, and ultimately the continent.

**What results has Food for Education seen on student outcomes?**

We have seen improved nutrition, school attendance and performance. Attendance has increased from an average of two and a half days a week to an average of four days a week, while have improved by 24 per cent.

**What future plans do you have for the organisation?**

We are looking to form partnerships with local and national government to expand our program nationally.

**I can imagine your work can be very demanding, and studying a masters in Public Health must become stressful and draining. As student's mental and physical wellbeing is becoming more and more of a focus on campus, what sorts of things do you like to do to relax and what motivates you to keep going?**

I quit my masters in Public Health to work full-time on Food for Education but mental and physical wellbeing is definitely a big focus for me. I will often take time out to recharge, practice meditation almost each morning and try to stay physically active as much as I can. I think the trick, especially with mental health is knowing your triggers and learning how to take care of yourself when feeling stressed or overwhelmed.

**Ultimately, what legacy would you like to leave for future generations, what is your vision for Food for Education?**

Food for Education is working hard to push towards a universal school feeding program where all children in Kenyan public schools will have access to nutritious meals in school. Currently, 23 million children go to school hungry in Africa and our ultimate legacy will be putting an end to this, or at least creating a framework for action in all 54 African countries.

**Finally, what message do you have for students with aspirations such as yours?**

Start and learn along the way. Just start. ◊



