

# KULI KULI

Bringing a superplant to a new market

By Lisa Curtis

*When I don't finish my plate, I think of starving kids in Africa. But it's not because my mother told me to. It's because I have a vivid memory of the young girls who I befriended in Niger, West Africa, who took my food wrappers out of the trash and licked the slight residue that remained.*

**T**o many, I'm not a true Peace Corps Volunteer. I was only in Niger for seven months before a terrorist attack forced our program to evacuate. When I tearfully bade farewell to my friends and adopted family in my village, I promised myself that I would find a way to be useful to these incredible people who had welcomed me into their lives and community with open arms.

Witnessing hunger prompted me first to think more deeply about the problem. As the economist Amartya Sen often points out, we have more than enough food to feed the world (we could feed 10 billion people!) and yet nearly a billion go to sleep hungry every night. When I studied why this happens, I noticed that one main solution

was advocated: for rich countries to send heavily subsidized crops abroad to poor nations. Yet this effort has proved to be inefficient and even hurtful if imported food lowers crop prices such that local farmers can't sell their harvests. I noticed as well that a better solution than "giving"—even if one's intentions are pure—is to enable others to give. In agriculture, that means investing in farmers.

Ironically, the majority of the world's hungriest people grow food for a living. Investing in agriculture is, hands down, the most effective way to reduce poverty, and yet investment in agriculture has been declining for the past two decades.

Eager to be part of this solution, I founded Kuli Kuli, a company producing nutritional bars from an incredible plant I used to eat in Niger—*Moringa oleifera*. *Moringa oleifera* is slender tree



The author (left) in Niger.

that is often said to be one of the most nutrient-dense plants in the world. It has high levels of protein, iron, calcium, vitamins, and antioxidants. It's as perfect for vegetarians as it is for rural farmers who can't afford meat, because it contains essential amino acids that the body normally can't acquire from plant-based diets. Moringa leaves also contain



Preparing a meal with moringa leaf.



The moringa tree.

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vitamins A and C, more calcium than most other greens, and so much iron that doctors prescribe it for anemic patients.

Best of all, it grows in sandy soil with very little water, meaning that it naturally grows in places like Niger that suffer from high rates of malnutrition. It's an especially promising food source in the tropics because the tree is in full leaf at the end of the dry season when other foods are typically scarce.

Kuli Kuli aims to increase global investment in the agriculture of poor communities by engaging consumers living in the "land of plenty" with farmers in West Africa who cultivate moringa. Just like the idea behind Fair Trade, a certification showing that the farmers and workers are justly compensated, Kuli Kuli invests in farmers by providing new market opportunities and fair wages. Because we are carefully managing our supply chain so that that only a portion of each harvest is exported, not only do farmers derive additional income, but they can also improve the health of their local community, ensuring that a superfood like moringa benefits those who need them the most. At the same time, Kuli Kuli is

building a way for U.S. consumers to share in the health benefits of moringa.

Growing and utilizing moringa for development isn't a new idea. Moringa production has already been taken up by the international development community, via organizations like Trees for Life International, USAID, Church World Service, Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization, and, of course, the Peace Corps.

It is my hope that we can help support and build off the work of these incredible organizations. We've recently begun supporting nonprofits that work with moringa by donating 15% of our online moringa bar sales through month-long, co-branded campaigns. I have wild dreams that someday we could be the Girl Scout cookie equivalent of the Peace Corps, providing funding for Peace Corps Volunteers all over the world to work with moringa in their villages.

In just the past year, we've made incredible progress. In June 2013 we launched a crowdfunding campaign that raised \$53,000 from 800 people, many of them Peace Corps Volunteers. We then launched our Kuli Kuli Moringa Superfood Bars with the Whole Foods supermarket

chain last year and are now in nearly 100 stores across California and the Pacific Northwest. We've recently begun raising investment to support our growth in the U.S. and to scale our supply chain in West Africa. Our largest investor thus far is a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer.

They say the Peace Corps stays with you. My life will never be the same. It is my hope that Kuli Kuli can play a small role in creating a world where images of malnourished children licking trash exist only in history books. **WV**

*Lisa Curtis began working on Kuli Kuli while in the Peace Corps in Niger, West Africa. As a Volunteer in her village's health center, she gained a first-hand understanding of the common nutritional challenges faced in West African villages and how moringa can play a role in helping to address a few of those challenges. Prior to Kuli Kuli, Lisa served as communications director at Mosaic where she managed a team of six to grow the company from zero to over \$5M invested in solar through Mosaic's online marketplace. Previously, Lisa wrote political briefings for President Obama in the White House, served as a United Nations Environment Programme youth advisor and worked at an impact investment firm in India. She writes for a variety of outlets including Forbes, The Huffington Post and Grist. For more information, visit [www.kulikulibar.com](http://www.kulikulibar.com) and follow @KuliKuliBar and @LisaCurtis on Twitter.*