

# Meet an MI Student

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**M.S. in Natural Resources, 2015**  
**Michigan State University**  
**Senegal, 2012–14**

Prior to coming to Senegal as an agroforestry Volunteer, I started a Master's International degree in natural resources at the Community, Agriculture, Recreation, and Resource Department at Michigan State University (MSU). MSU has a long history of engagement in international agricultural development and African studies, so the school was an ideal fit since I knew that I wanted to serve in French-speaking West Africa. When I received my assignment in Senegal, I was very pleased by the cohesion of my studies, MSU's long history in Senegal, and my interest in agroforestry.



I had two full semesters of classes before coming serve in Senegal and they prepared me excellently for work here. I took classes that I thought might be useful from multiple departments, and concentrated mostly on international agricultural development and natural resource management. A year of classes in these subjects gave me an edge during training. Having classes on crop and soil sciences, grant writing, and agricultural and resource development models already under my belt helped me learn training material more quickly and thoroughly.

Currently, my main Peace Corps project involves working on fruit-tree production in rural villages in the delta region of the county. I also work with gardening, live fencing, and malaria prevention. I work primarily with mango, citrus, and cashew best practices and value chain development. I am researching value chain development of

cashew nuts and fruit, and investigating how producers can move up the value chain and earn higher incomes.



There are certainly challenges to working toward a degree while serving. When my professors and Peace Corps staff advised me about pursuing research topics, they made it clear that my Volunteer assignments came first and my research project came second. I agree that this is the best strategy. Sometimes, it is difficult to balance volunteering and research, especially when both take place in a rural setting. I don't have electricity or Internet, so to do any computer work I must leave my site and my Peace Corps projects. It is a challenge to find equilibrium between being on-site doing my Peace Corps assignments and working on the computer or in a quiet place outside of my village. As my language gets better and my ties with village members become stronger, my community and host family now understand that I am a student and that sometimes I need to leave to do schoolwork.

Looking toward the future and planning to work in development, my Master's International program has been essential. Before I joined Peace Corps, I couldn't imagine the opportunities serving could afford to aspiring development professionals. I am currently planning to extend my service for a third year with an organization called International Relief and Development in Dakar. They work with cashew value chains and have a long history of collaboration with the Peace Corps. This is an excellent opportunity to contribute to research on a larger scale across Senegal, The Gambia and potentially West Africa related to cashew best practices and value chains. It is also a great first step in a hopefully long career in international development.