

OBITUARY: DR. BJÖRN GUNNAR LJUNGQVIST



Björn Ljungqvist passed on suddenly at his home in Sweden on Tuesday, 21st July 2020. This came four months after a hastened departure from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania to Skåne, Sweden having managed to secure a seat on a flight just a day before flights were suspended due to COVID-19 restrictions. It would soon be summer, and he hoped members of his family would join him in time for midsummer celebrations. This was not to be, as travel restrictions prevailed. When I wished Björn happy mid-summer eve on 19th June 2020, he responded in his typical jovial and humorous style writing:

“Yes, I will invite all the trolls and fairies and have a party you’ve never seen - happy midsummer to you too sister.”

Björn Ljungqvist, a national of Sweden, was born on 12th December 1946 and held a PhD in Food Science and Nutrition from Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden. Following a brief work period in Sweden, he started work in Tanzania with the Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre (TFNC) in July 1977. This was the beginning of adventure, co-creation of knowledge, international development work, and building a beautiful family. After 4 years

of heading the nutrition laboratory at TFNC as its Chief Biochemist, Björn went back to Sweden in 1981 and worked for two years at the Institute of Nutrition, University of Uppsala, while continuing to support nutrition development and capacity building of nutrition institutes in Africa during the era of “nutrition planning”. Björn then had a long and outstanding career with UNICEF that spanned many countries in Africa and Asia. First he returned to Tanzania in 1983 as UNICEF’s Programme Officer for one of the Joint Nutrition Support Programmes (JNSP) – The Iringa Nutrition Programme - and subsequently as Programme Officer based in Dar es Salaam where he served up to 1990. He then served as Senior Programme Officer for UNICEF in Uganda, UNICEF Country Representative in Cambodia, Deputy Regional Director for South East Asia based in Bangkok, and finally Country Representative in Tanzania and later in Ethiopia before leaving UNICEF for what was supposed to be retirement. However, he immediately accepted a leadership role for the joint UN agency nutrition collaborating mechanism, REACH, where he contributed to defining and rolling out the global SUN movement. He left REACH in 2012 and after that, took on short-term assignments focused on nutrition policy, programming and evaluation in countries across different regions.

Björn was a champion of women’s and children’s rights. He was always innovative, thinking “outside the box”, seeking solutions that worked best within community resources and promoting cross learning amongst communities. He promoted and applied a human rights approach to programmes, and he defended the choice of interventions even when some of these were being challenged. He believed strongly in the duty of care, and in his own words,

“I never accepted ‘solutions defining the problems’ but in supporting people to better understand their situation and to be able to claim their rights and the rights of those for whom they are responsible” (“Not too fast, please”, [World Nutrition](#) Volume 6, Number 1, pp 96-99, January 2015).

He had such a photographic memory that even as a student at Chalmers University, one of his lecturers wondered how the student who did not take notes in class passed with flying colours! He was a fast learner, including in languages, local etiquette and dancing.

Björn leaves behind his wife Pille, his four children--Oskar, Ida, Gabriella and Annie--and six grandchildren. He will be missed by many friends and colleagues across the globe and cutting across all walks of life.

On a very personal note: In March 2016, Björn wrote the obituary for his life-long friend, and my late husband, Urban Jonsson. It never occurred to me that one day I would be writing an obituary for Björn. We have travelled a long journey together both professionally and as families, celebrating many memorable events and also crying on each other’s shoulders when tragedy struck either our families.

May His Soul Rest in Eternal Peace.

Olivia Yambi – Dar-es-Salaam, TANZANIA.