The “westernization” of diets in developing countries, including higher consumption of processed foods with more fat and sugar, is increasing the incidence of obesity in their populations. At the same time, many people are malnourished because their diets are less diverse, with fewer fresh fruit, vegetable and protein options.

An Iowa State University graduate student in community and regional planning and sustainable agriculture will spend three months studying the impact of this “nutrition transition” and changing food-distribution systems in Ghana, West Africa, this summer.

Shelley Oltmans, Sherburn, Minn., received a $2,000 Butler Travel Award for International Studies in Sustainable Agriculture from ISU to conduct research on “food deserts” and food security in the context of a developing country like Ghana.

“In the United States, a food desert is an area where residents have little or no access to affordable, healthy foods,” Oltmans said. “I’ll be looking at Ghana’s capital, Accra, and mapping where people in that city get their food from. Food security is not only about getting enough calories but about access to good, healthy, affordable food.

“If the trends continue, developing countries will suffer the same problems we have with heart disease, diabetes and other health concerns,” she said. “My goal is to help people find local solutions to healthier diets.”

After completing her dual master’s degrees, Oltmans hopes to work with nongovernmental organizations doing “participatory international development,” she said. “I’d like to work with small land owners and help organize programs and funding, but let them decide what they need and how to accomplish that.”

**International background**

Oltmans is no stranger to international travel and development issues. She studied German in high school and was an exchange student in Germany for a year between high school and college. She studied abroad in Holland for a semester during her senior year at the University of Minnesota, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in German studies and global studies with a minor in Dutch studies in 2006.

Oltmans went to Italy in 2008 and did marketing and translation work for a security software company. She also raised money for the international Save the Children organization.

Back in the U.S., Oltmans joined AmeriCorps and served an 11-month term as a Minnesota Conservation Corps crew leader. Through this program she worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources on projects including wildland firefighting and invasive species removal.

These diverse experiences shaped Oltmans’ interests in environmental planning, food security and international development.

She enrolled in Iowa State’s new Master of Community and Regional Planning/Master of Science in sustainable agriculture dual-degree program to learn about planning strategies on the local, national and international levels, “and because I believe agricultural development—not necessarily modernization—is one of the most important things to improve the conditions of people in developing countries,” she said.

“Every experience has built on the previous to lead me into international development,” Oltmans said. “I want to be able to live my life traveling, learning about different cultures and people, to understand what they want and assist them in getting there.”