



2014 AWARD Fellow
Freda Elikplim Asem

Position	PhD Candidate
Institution	Institute of Statistical, Social, and Economic Research (ISSER), University of Ghana
Country	Ghana
MSc	Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of Alberta, Canada, 2006
Mentor	Dr. Ivy Drafor Amenyah, Senior Lecturer, Methodist University College, Ghana
Research Area	Assessment of the technical efficiency of smallholder horticultural farmers to identify production challenges.

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Freda Elikplim Asem was born and raised in Accra, Ghana, where her parents, both educators, taught their five children early in life about the importance of education—and she heeded their advice. She earned a BSc in Agriculture at the University of Ghana, and then moved to Edmonton, where she completed an MSc in Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of Alberta.

“I have long desired to work in development, so I thought a degree in Agriculture would put me in good stead for that line of work,” she says. After completing her master’s, Asem returned to Ghana and worked as a principal research assistant at ISSER for four years before starting a PhD in Development Studies on a DAAD scholarship. She has submitted her thesis and expects to defend it in the coming months.

Asem’s current research is examining smallholder horticultural farmers’ capacity to produce, with a view to helping them to increase yields. “I’m trying to determine why farmers are unable to meet the demand for horticultural products, such as mango, pineapple, chili pepper, okra, banana, and pawpaw,” she explains. “In Ghana, 70 percent of farmers are smallholders, and the demand for such produce is very high. The question is, why, as a country, can’t we meet the demand? Is it because farmers aren’t producing efficiently? That’s one of the issues that I’m trying to resolve.”

Asem has uncovered some weaknesses in the horticultural value chain. “First, you have the input suppliers of seeds and fertilizers, and then the farmers must rely on transporters, storage suppliers, and exporters. My research suggests that the exporters tend to exploit the farmers, who are often semi-literate and uninformed about markets, and therefore very vulnerable.”

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AWARD is a career-development program that equips top women agricultural scientists across sub-Saharan Africa to accelerate agricultural gains by strengthening their research and leadership skills through tailored fellowships. AWARD is a catalyst for innovations with high potential to contribute to the prosperity and well-being of African smallholder farmers, most of whom are women.

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Although farmer-based organizations exist in Ghana, Asem says government or institutional interventions do not normally reach smallholders. "They lack information and are generally unaware of their rights," she notes. "The smallholders are very hard-working people, but often do business without any type of agreement or contract, and they lose out to commercial farmers even during a bountiful harvest when there should be plenty to go around. With highly perishable fruit such as pineapple, for example, they have to sell it at rock-bottom prices before it goes bad."

Asem hopes to establish guidelines to help farmers. "For example, a microfinance system provides inputs and subsidies, but it doesn't take into account the fact that not all farmers have the same needs—they differ according to the remoteness of their location, among other things. Interventions tend to be tailored as a 'one size fits' all solution. A farmer may only need the use of a tractor, but instead receives tons of fertilizer that are not needed. Often, it's not about giving money, but rather giving what a community really needs at a particular time."

Asem plans to eventually train smallholder horticultural farmers in crop productivity. "I also hope to help farmers change their mindsets and start seeing farming as a business rather than as a way of life." She wants to encourage and advocate for women to go into horticultural farming, especially mango farming, since this sector is currently dominated by men.

In terms of career goals, Asem plans to publish her doctoral research findings and then circulate the information in an effort to have a real, lasting impact in the lives of smallholders. "I hope to reach a point where I can contribute to formulating and implementing policies to help them," she resolves. "I want to help the small guys get the information they need to compete against the big farms."

Asem is confident that the AWARD Fellowship will benefit her in many ways. "I'm especially interested in the science-writing and proposal-writing course that AWARD offers," she says. "With the training and knowledge I'll receive from AWARD, I hope to help farmers solve their problems and entice youth back into farming, because the issue of labor is becoming imminent due to the aging population." Asem is excited about enhancing her leadership skills as well, expecting that this will help her to have influence both within and outside her institute.