



2010 AWARD Fellow
Betty Chalamila

Position:	Agriculture research officer
Institution:	Mikocheni Agricultural Research Institute
Country:	Tanzania
MSc:	Community Economic Development, New Hampshire University, 2007
Mentored by:	Dr. Joseph Ndunguru Principal Agricultural officer Mikocheni Agricultural Research Institute, Tanzania

Research area: Commercialization of cassava production to improve rural livelihoods in Tanzania's Coast Region, and a case study of Soga and Kidimu village in Kibaha district.

Betty Chalamila never tires of asking “why?” This social economic and farming system researcher has been posing tough questions for more than 15 years. “A new agricultural technology may be good, but are farmers going to use it? Does it fit their needs? Do they have the resources to use it?” queries Chalamila.

Chalamila is currently posing a lot of questions about cassava production. She is a collaborator on a project looking at the commercialization of cassava production in Tanzania’s Coast Region. She is also participating in a pioneering project with three institutions studying the value chain of cassava from production to market. “This is the first time that the whole value chain has been studied in the villages of Soga and Kidimu in Kibaha district,” explains Chalamila. She is also serving as co-principal investigator examining the introduction of indigenous fruit-processing technology to rural communities in central Tanzania to improve rural livelihoods and biodiversity conservation.

Chalamila says farmers in the coastal regions want to diversify their crops, especially after disease decimated local coconut trees, which used to provide the top cash crop. “Farmers are now planting mangoes, pineapples, and cashews, but they don’t know if there is a market for them, and they face the challenge of pests and diseases,” says Chalamila, who is conducting research on the crops’ potential.

“I would like to learn more about why farmers react differently to new technologies—why some adopt them and some don’t,” says Chalamila, who is in the process of registering for a PhD at the Open University of Tanzania. Trust is a key factor in working successfully with farmers. “It takes time for people to get to know you. In the past, men participated in all of the meetings, while women stayed home waiting to learn from their husbands. You have to encourage them to come and share their views,” explains Chalamila, who conducts much of her work among traditional Muslim communities in the coastal area.

“However, things have been changing since we started implementing programs specifically for women, such as a project promoting organic vegetable production to empower women in Mkuranga district, where I participated as a co-principal investigator.”

Chalamila admits she needed encouragement herself to consider a career in agriculture. “After graduating from high school, I wanted to work in an air-conditioned bank,” she says, with a laugh. “A neighbor, who was an agriculturalist, convinced me to pursue the field. Today, I still love it. If I can do anything to contribute to improving a farmer’s life, then I’ve not just made an income, I’ve made an impact.”

In 1996, Chalamila won a scholarship to a graduate program in food-quality management at the University of Ballarat in Australia. Like many ambitious African women scientists trying to balance career and family, Chalamila faced a tough decision about whether to accept the opportunity: her son was only 18 months old at the time. “My husband and my family convinced me that I had to go, and my sister looked after my baby,” says Chalamila. “He didn’t recognize me when I came back a year later. That was very difficult at first, but gradually he warmed up.” Today, her 16-year-old son is in Grade 10.

A global traveler, Chalamila looks forward to meeting more African scientists through AWARD. “I want to exchange ideas and experiences with scientists and development partners from different countries, which is not very common in our working environment,” she says. “Often I see calls for proposals for regional projects that I would like to apply for, but I don’t know any collaborators outside my country. AWARD is already opening up a whole new network for me.”

Chalamila is one of 180 African woman scientists who have won an AWARD Fellowship. AWARD is a professional development program that strengthens the research and leadership skills of African women in agricultural science, empowering them to contribute more effectively to poverty alleviation and food security in sub-Saharan Africa. For more information, visit www.awardfellowships.org
