



2010 AWARD Fellow Damaris Achieng Odeny

Position:	Senior researcher, biotechnology
Institution:	Agricultural Research Council (ARC), South Africa
Country:	Kenya
PhD:	Plant Genetics, University of Bonn, Germany, 2006
Mentored by:	Dr. D. Jasper G. Rees, Head Biotechnology Platform, ARC

Research area: *Molecular breeding for resistance to biotic and abiotic stresses, and improving the nutritional status of relevant African crops.*

Biotechnology is a promising way to increase the production of indigenous vegetables among small-scale farmers in Africa, says Damaris Achieng Odeny. Her work at the ARC focuses on using biotechnology to develop advanced breeding tools for highly nutritious African crops. She has worked on pigeon pea (*Cajanus cajan* (L.) Millsp.) and potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) in the past, and intends to broaden her scope to work on amaranth (*Amaranthus* spp.), and the African spider plant (*Cleome gynandra*)—a vegetable to some, and an ornamental plant or a weed to others.

Growing up in rural Kenya influenced Odeny's choice of a career in agricultural science. "Most farmers in Kenya can't make ends meet," she says. "I got into this line of work thinking that I could do more to help them."

An accomplished researcher, Odeny won the joint Japan/World Bank Graduate Scholarship Award in 2000 and graduated the following year from Nottingham University with an MSc in Plant Genetic Manipulation. In 2002, she received the German Academic Exchange Service Scholarship Award, and later enrolled at the University of Bonn in Plant Genetics. After graduation, she worked as a post-doctoral research fellow at the renowned Max Planck Institute for Plant Breeding Research in Cologne, Germany for three years.

"My work centers largely on breeding, but also covers the development of genomic tools to enhance the breeding process of vegetables, especially underutilized ones, to increase yield and improve nutritive value," Odeny says. Most of these vegetables are grown by women, and are adapted to the African region. Enhancement of the yield and nutritional quality of these vegetables will go a long way toward improving the household incomes and health of women and children.

Odeny recently embarked on a project funded by the Swedish International Development Agency, which will see her working with South African farmers for six months. "We'll do interviews and speak to community groups to try to understand the seed market, if any, of indigenous vegetables in Limpopo, South Africa."

Odeny says the AWARD Fellowship will help her enhance her scientific publication and proposal writing skills. She plans to interact with other successful scientists at the national and international level, and hopes to increase her professional network. "The mentoring will also improve my self-confidence and leadership skills, as well as my visibility as a scientist in Africa," she says. Her long-term goal is to lead a global food security institution.

Odeny says she appreciates it when people recognize her determination and believe in her, but that's not the most important thing. "If I can eventually put a smile on that woman farmer's face by helping her to produce more nutritious food for the family and the market, that's what makes me happy." And as an AWARD Fellow, she believes she is surrounded with the right people to help her achieve her dreams.

Achieng Odeny 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, please visit www.awardfellowships.org
