



2011 AWARD Fellow  
**Mtisunge Mngoli**

<b>Position</b>	Research assistant
<b>Institution</b>	Bunda College of Agriculture
<b>Country</b>	Malawi
<b>BSc</b>	Environmental Science, Bunda College of Agriculture University of Malawi, 2010
<b>Mentor</b>	Dr. David Mkwambisi, Environment and development expert Department of Natural Resources Management Bunda College of Agriculture, University of Malawi

*Research area: Assessing causes of malnutrition, environmental degradation, and food insecurity to uplift the lives of rural women and children.*

For an ingénue environmental scientist, Mtisunge Mngoli has very well-defined career aspirations. “I want to promote food security and help rural female-headed households adapt to climate change through the promotion of underused crops in Malawi,” says Mngoli confidently.

Mngoli currently works as a research assistant on a project that is developing eco-nutrition guidelines for communities, to help them adapt to climate change and improve child nutrition, food security, and environmental quality.

Malawi’s dependency on natural resources and rain-fed agriculture make the country particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Mngoli is convinced that “orphan crops”—indigenous vegetables that have become less popular with consumers—are an overlooked, drought-resistant source of nutrition in Malawi, where 22 percent of the population live in extreme poverty (less than US\$0.31 per person per day) and cannot meet the daily minimum recommended food requirements, according to UNICEF reports. “Agriculture policy makers focus on hybrid crops when looking to the future, but these crops don’t do well during dry periods. People then turn to okra and *bonongwe*, [as amaranth is known locally]. But these vegetables are highly nutritious, more resistant to drought, and they have medicinal properties, so should not be considered as only a last resort.”

Nutrition and health deeply interest Mngoli. She originally planned to study medicine in Malawi, where there is only one doctor for every 50,000 people. “I came to realize that most health problems in my country are related to food security,” she says. “The solution is not necessarily to increase the number of doctors, but to increase the number of researchers who can address the problems on the ground. If children are not suffering from malnutrition, they won’t need a doctor.”

Mngoli finds working with women farmers to be the most enjoyable aspect of her job. “Although I’m young, they often share problems with me that they won’t talk to a man about.” Mngoli has natural leadership skills, but she says this is not always accepted culturally. “In Malawi, people can underestimate your capacity as a

woman, and men often get more opportunities for field work. However, even on a mixed team the women don't share their views openly because traditionally, men speak first. I want to see women become more involved in decision making."

Mngoli says AWARD is already having an impact on her career following the Mentoring Orientation Workshop that she attended in Nairobi, Kenya—her first trip outside Malawi. "After the training, I've become more confident and more focused. I realize now that I have potential and that I have a role to play in addressing food security in Africa." And Mngoli is realizing that potential already: she is the youngest female researcher to have a paper accepted for presentation at a national symposium on climate change and the environment held in Malawi.

*Mngoli is one of a growing number of African women agricultural 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. AWARD is generously supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the United States Agency for International Development. For more information, visit [www.awardfellowships.org](http://www.awardfellowships.org)*

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