



**2011 AWARD Fellow**  
**Asimenye Nthakomwa**

<b>Position</b>	Monitoring and evaluation officer
<b>Institution</b>	Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust USAID Mount Mulanje Mountain Bioersity Increases Livelihood Security Project (MOBI+LISE)
<b>Country</b>	Malawi
<b>BSc</b>	Bunda College of Agriculture
<b>Mentor</b>	Dr. Joyce Njoloma, Deputy dean Bunda College of Agriculture, Faculty of Environmental Sciences Department of Forestry and Horticulture

*Research area: Improving livelihoods of people living around Mulanje Mountain by introducing alternative ways of earning a living in an effort to reduce the pressure on the natural resource base, focusing on the proper management of natural resources in Malawi.*

Growing up in Lilongwe, Asimenye Nthakomwa always admired Nobel Laureate Professor Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, who is globally acclaimed for her efforts to protect and improve our natural environment. As a secondary school student, Nthakomwa was proud to be selected to attend a national science workshop organized by UNESCO, attended by 60 girls. She later pursued a BSc in natural resources management, concerned about the alarming degradation of natural resources in Malawi. "There are few specialists in natural resource management in my country," she says, "and rural livelihoods are so dependent on our natural resources, particularly water and forests. If Wangari Maathai could achieve so much, I can do it in Malawi. I want to be someone who is recognized for environmental conservation in Africa."

Nthakomwa's research concentrates on solutions for farmers' adaptation to climate change, particularly helping protect the forests, which 10 years ago covered almost half of Malawi's land surface. She and her colleagues offer alternative ways to improve the livelihoods of rural communities at the edge of forests. Irrigation, fish farming, crop diversification (scaling up of smallholder tea farming to increase soil conservation), and distribution of vegetable seeds and fruit tree seedlings, are some of the options they offer farmers to keep them out of the forests. Pineapple farmers are encouraged to process fruit into jams and juices, providing a much higher income than selling the raw fruit. Through the USAID MOBI+LISE project, the Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust intends to provide machinery for processing/value adding, and also supports beekeeping and honey production.

Nthakomwa is looking forward to seeing the farmers benefit from these alternative sources of income. "Despite Malawi being a food-exporting country," she says, "people are still struggling and some do go to bed hungry. Pressure, therefore, is huge on the environment." Nthakomwa sees the biggest challenge to be changing attitudes, since the staple food is maize, and sweet potatoes are not yet recognized as proper food in the region.

Nthakomwa wants to see more women participating in her project's activities. "Even in a women's organization chaired by a woman, the vice who makes the decisions and controls the funds is usually still a man," she adds. "That needs to change!"

As an AWARD Fellow, Nthakomwa looks forward to honing her research skills under her mentor's guidance. "I will need leadership skills to become a better monitoring and evaluation officer," she says, "as well as to grow more confident and assertive." She sees networking with other AWARD scientists and their mentors as one way to identify best practices that are working for rural communities in other parts of Africa, with the aim of eventually influencing policies at the regional and national levels to mitigate the effects of climate change.

*Nthakomwa is one of a growing number of 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](http://www.awardfellowships.org)*

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