



2011 AWARD Fellow
Atsede Solomon Retta

Position	Associate researcher
Institution	Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research (EIAR)
Country	Ethiopia
MSc	Horticulture, G.B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, India
Mentor	Dr. Chilot Yirga Tizale, Senior researcher Socio-Economics and Research Extension Department, EIAR

Research area: Development and promotion of holistic potato technologies using participatory approaches to improve the livelihoods of smallholder farmers.

Impressed by her determined mother, who struggled to provide her children with an education, Atsede Solomon Retta quickly became a very competitive student. After obtaining a diploma in agriculture, she decided to pursue a BSc in plant sciences at Alemaya University of Agriculture. "Actually, the government decided what I should study, but very soon, plant sciences really interested me," she admits. "When I got to college, I did not even know some of the crops and I had had nothing to do with livestock ever before." Upon graduation, she joined a commercial tea packing and marketing enterprise in Addis Ababa.

During her first years with the Ministry of Agriculture and later at the EIAR, Retta noticed the lack of access to information about improved crop technologies and livestock husbandry and management. She is deeply concerned about the rural poverty and hunger, as well as the lack of education of many rural children, and is determined to do what she can to change the situation as a researcher. "I want to see food, clothes, shelter, and education for everyone in Ethiopia," she says.

While training farmers on potato production and postharvest management, Retta works closely with breeders and field staff of the International Potato Center (CIP) to evaluate improved varieties. Potato is a good food security crop in Ethiopia, she says, and can be grown on small parcels of land providing high yields within a short vegetation period. In most of the Ethiopian highlands, a food shortage is experienced from August to October, at which time potatoes mature and can replace cereals to ensure food security at the household level.

Retta likes linking research and extension in her work, especially since there is no formal potato seed system in Ethiopia and good seed is hard to come by. She is proud of her impact on many farmers' livelihoods. "They can now access quality seed potatoes, and some farmers have diversified into other businesses as a result of their success with seed potato production," says Retta. She wants to see farmers diversify further to generate more income and to establish themselves as small entrepreneurs rather than struggling at the brink of mere subsistence.

To achieve her goals, Retta later pursued a master's degree in horticulture, and now works with rural communities and women's groups using the farmer's field school and farmer's research group approaches. This involves developing improved potato technologies, training farmers and extension agents on the use of those improved technologies, marketing, and grading of appealing varieties of disease-free seed potatoes. Some 15 to 20 farmers' groups have achieved recognized status as seed potato producers in the central highlands of Ethiopia and now supply the seed for all Ethiopian potato farmers, as a result of her team's collaboration with CIP.

Retta wants to diversify her research, aiming at becoming a more visible scientist in horticulture, particularly with such cash crops as garlic, a crop of high commercial and medicinal value. She expects that the AWARD Fellowship will help with this plan by increasing her professional network and making her more visible and technically stronger as a scientist. She also wants to hone her leadership skills to encourage and influence others to do their best, and looks forward to becoming a better communicator in a diverse world. Citing examples where women have been left out of important leadership positions when policy decisions were framed in her country, Retta wants to see more women recognized for their contributions as hard-working researchers.

"I enjoy working with people and seeing their livelihoods improve," she says, emphasizing that she does not want to be successful just on her own, but wants to see others grow alongside her and be proud of their joint achievements.

Retta 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
