



2010 AWARD Fellow
Ruth Amata

Position:	Senior research officer
Institution:	Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) National Agricultural Research Laboratories, Nairobi
Country:	Kenya
PhD:	Agriculture, University of Sydney, 2006
Mentored by:	Dr. Josephine Songa, Consultant Agricultural Management Systems Kaizen Agricultural Services

Research area: Evaluating technologies to manage maize diseases in Kenya.

As a senior research officer at KARI who manages several critical projects, Ruth Amata wears many different lab coats.

Amata is KARI's project coordinator for BioEarn (Project 2), a Swedish government-funded project in East Africa with a network of collaborators and partners in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. This project examines the distribution of viral diseases that contribute greatly to yield loss in cassava and sweet potato crops, disease transmission studies (vectors), and disease epidemiology.

"We visited sweet potato and cassava farmers and collected and characterized Kenyan germplasm for resistance to viral diseases," says Amata. "We also characterized sweet potato germplasm for high dry matter content, which is desirable to consumers."

Amata is also a collaborator on a USAID-funded project team developing and evaluating integrated pest-management technologies to control diseases affecting passion fruit. She also coordinates a project that addresses biosafety issues of new varieties before introduction in Kenya.

"Pest resistance and drought tolerance would lead to increased crop productivity and contribute to food security and sufficiency," explains Amata. "However, concerns have been raised about the safety of some products. We are studying potential interactions between transgenic and non-transgenic plants and their impact on the environment."

Amata is in charge of the mycology laboratory, which handles all diseases attributed to fungi, at the National Agricultural Research Laboratories' Plant Pathology Department. Farmers can bring in diseased plant samples and get advice from Amata on appropriate control measures.

"I love to see plants thrive," Amata says. "My main goal is to help women farmers to improve production of their food crops through better disease management. If I can help to reduce the yield loss, I feel that I have done something; that I have contributed positively to somebody else's life."

Amata recalls working with women farmers who were caring for their orphaned grandchildren—children whose parents had died of HIV/AIDS. “These women banded together to purchase a piece of land so they could grow sweet potatoes to feed the children when they came home from school for lunch,” explains Amata. “When I do my work, I think of them—and of other women who are struggling to help their families and communities. These women are the solution to hunger and poverty; they can, in time, drive economic development across the continent.”

Through AWARD, Amata says she looks forward to building her professional networks. “This fellowship will help me link up with and learn from other women scientists who are making an impact. AWARD’s Women’s Leadership and Management course is particularly important to me, as it will enable me to manage my projects efficiently and guide upcoming junior scientists.”

Amata wants to encourage female students to consider a career in agricultural science. “When I talk to young women, I tell them they can make it, but I also tell them that sacrifices may be necessary. In my case, I studied for my doctorate in Australia—and for four years I was more than 12,000 kilometers away from my husband and two children. I’ve learned the importance of perseverance, and that nothing is impossible just because you are a woman.”

Amata 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
