



2015 AWARD Fellow
Bridget Bwalya

Position	Lecturer and Researcher
Institution	University of Zambia
Country	Zambia
PhD	Environment and Development, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Norway, 2012
Mentor	Dr. Judith Chikonka Ngalande Lungu, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Mulungushu University
Research Area	The practice of sustainable agriculture among smallholder farming households in Zambia.

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Bridget Bwalya grew up in Zambia’s Copperbelt Province in a family of six. Her parents worked in the copper mines and had a farm where they grew maize and sweet potato for subsistence. “I wondered why they farmed because they were not making any profit,” says Bwalya. Further, their rural relatives would often bring them food to augment what they grew on the farm. This made Bwalya question their persistence in pursuing farming with little return. “I refused to accept the standard explanation that we farm because we grow food to eat,” she explains.

This knack for questioning the norm formed a good basis for the researcher, who has carried this trait into her university studies, starting with a BSc in Natural Resource Management (NRM) at the University of Zambia in 1997. “I went to university and kept asking questions,” notes Bwalya.

Bwalya obtained her MSc in NRM and Sustainable Agriculture at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences in 2007, which offered her the opportunity to gain exposure in Norway. She also spent a semester of study in Uganda as she felt agriculture there is similar to Zambia’s. Bwalya’s BSc was in natural sciences but she had to learn social sciences to augment her research methods.

“As most of our communities were dealing with natural resources, it made sense to follow this course of study,” she says. In her interactions with farmers, Bwalya asks them about their use of natural resources and the challenges they face in accessing them. “Farmers have diversified livelihood strategies and depend on fisheries, forestry, and wildlife resources,” she continues. “Accessing these resources is important in meeting their livelihood strategies.”

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Bwalya emphasizes the importance of observing and listening to farmers, and believes farmers should always be involved in identifying solutions to their problems. "Farmers know what is best for them," she asserts. "We shouldn't just go in and present solutions." Bwalya's PhD research was on conservation agriculture (CA) systems in Zambia. When visiting project sites, she noticed few farmers were adopting the technology. Farmers told her that with CA, they were advised to weed four to six times a season as opposed to the one or two times they were accustomed to. "They were told to prepare land during the dry season, when most farming households have very little food," says Bwalya, highlighting the fact that farmers prefer to wait for the rains. A newly introduced heavy hoe (*chaka*) was a challenge for many female farmers. These responses prompted her to conduct further research in three provinces. "My aim was to identify challenges and determine the best way to deal with them," she explains. "The idea was to promote CA but farmers were required to fit into what was already designed."

Bwalya's recommendation to CA promoters was to allow farmers select the technologies they were comfortable with and adapt them to suit their situations. "It should be acceptable for farmers to adopt an aspect of CA that they can manage rather than needing to embrace the entire package," she notes. "For instance, they could opt to practice crop rotations without the chaka hoe, instead opting to use draught animal power."

Bwalya has acquired an eight-hectare farm in Zambia's Copperbelt, where she plans to develop the capacity of 120 farmers for locally relevant research. "I want to work in Zambia since I feel I can make a bigger impact in my country," she adds. "I want to be able to do something that makes a difference,"

Bwalya enjoys teaching and is supervising students working on CA and NRM. "I have been privileged to have a good education and want to give back by training students to become experts in their fields," she says. Inspired by her mentor, Bwalya would like to make research accessible to the general population by making seemingly complex concepts easy to understand. She is also working with student organizations in environmental management, fisheries, and wildlife management, especially with regard to human-wildlife conflict.

Bwalya is excited about the AWARD Fellowship. "I have a lot of research results and I am learning how to disseminate my findings," she says. "I want to produce results that I can give to policy makers." Bwalya believes the AWARD training opportunities will contribute to her career growth. She is also looking forward to sharing her work with different experts through attending international conferences. "As an African researcher, I appreciate the chance to participate in such conferences, which present opportunities for networking and collaborative research."