



Elizabeth Magombo  
**2015 AWARD Fellow**

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Position	Project Manager
Institution	African Institute of Corporate Citizenship
Country	Malawi
BSc	Agricultural Economics, University of Malawi, 2010
Mentor	Dr. Mariam Kadzamira, Collaborator, Development Strategy and Governance Division, International Food Policy Research Institute
Research Area	Agricultural value chain development.

Elizabeth Magombo recognized the career opportunities in Malawi’s agrarian economy, and wasted no time in pursuing agricultural science as a line of study. As the last born in a family of five girls, she attended secondary school in southern Malawi, and then moved to Lilongwe to complete a bachelor’s degree in Agricultural Economics at the University of Malawi. Her father passed away when she was only nine years old, and she credits her hard-working mother with encouraging her and her sisters—all university graduates—to aim high and reach for what may seem unattainable.

“I decided to pursue agriculture since it’s the greatest contributor to Malawi’s economy and it’s the country’s largest employer,” she says. “I’ve always been interested in numbers and analysis, so I know that I’m in the right place. I was also influenced by one of my sisters, who took the same degree.”

Now a project manager with the African Institute of Corporate Citizenship, which serves as the Secretariat of the Cotton Development Trust, Magombo’s work is focused on Malawi’s cotton trade. “Cotton is an essential smallholder cash crop in my country, second in importance only to tobacco,” she says. “It’s a smallholder crop, and the government is promoting it as an export commodity.”

The Cotton Development Trust is a public-private partnership of key players in the cotton value chain, including farmers, ginners, seed crushers, spinners, input suppliers, and government departments and ministries. “My work involves coordinating the activities of the Trust, including organizing the board of trustees and stakeholder meetings,” she says.

She is also responsible for initiating, managing, and supervising project activities and writing proposals and reports. “I am currently lobbying for the introduction of a biometric cotton farmer registration system, which will help to address the challenges of limited access to inputs that Malawi’s smallholder cotton farmers deal with.”

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**AWARD is a career-development program that equips top women agricultural scientists across sub-Saharan Africa to accelerate agricultural gains by strengthening their research and leadership skills through tailored fellowships. AWARD is a catalyst for innovations with high potential to contribute to the prosperity and well-being of African smallholder farmers, most of whom are women.**

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Magombo has recently broadened her research focus to include rice, looking at how to increase farmers' production and earnings. "Rice farmers face the challenge of not having access to markets," she notes. "I'm working with them to help develop co-ops rather than using middlemen as they currently do, which eats into their profits." She is also encouraging farmers to improve their production logistics—paying closer attention to proper bagging and transporting to processors.

Magombo hopes to contribute to Malawi's agricultural sector by encouraging farmers to practice agriculture as an income-generating activity, which will ultimately improve their livelihoods. "I also aspire to conduct agricultural research and to develop programs and policies that are relevant and that have an impact," she resolves.

Magombo is working with more than 8,000 cotton farmers—both men and women—linking them to input suppliers. "Our work is market driven—farmers need to be shown the benefits of proper planning," she comments. "We are also focusing on rice irrigation schemes, and ensuring that farmers have access to recommended inputs such as certified seed. We provide training and demonstration plots on recommended production practices such as the 'systems of rice intensification'—showing them how to plant, maximize their plots, and increase their yields." She and her team also work with partners in the value chain to ensure that efforts are not being duplicated.

A main challenge faced by farmers is low productivity, since many have no access to the appropriate technologies. "In response, we have created a revolving fund that farmers manage and use to buy supplies," Magombo says. "They have to pay the loans back at end of the season."

Magombo believes the AWARD Fellowship will equip her with leadership and management skills that will help to further her goals. "What I learn as an AWARD Fellow will build on my academic background to help me reach my goals," she asserts. "I'm sure I will benefit from an enhanced view of smallholder farmers—particularly in terms of a gender view—and I already feel that I've been connected to expanded networks thanks to AWARD." She is confident that her institution will also benefit as she continues to achieve her career goals. She expects the AWARD training to increase her confidence, help her learn to better manage her time, and enhance her people-management skills.

Soon to complete an MSc in Agricultural and Applied Economics at the University of Malawi, Magombo has experienced disappointment at being underrated by peers due to her young age—saying people sometimes assume a knowledge gap. But she cherishes the satisfaction she feels when her activities have a positive impact in the lives of smallholder farmers. "Even seeing one person's life move from one state to another is very rewarding," she says.