



2014 AWARD Fellow
Lessah Mandoloma

Position	Associate Lecturer, Natural Resource Management
Institution	Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR)
Country	Malawi
BSc	Natural Resources Management University of Malawi, 2012
Mentor	Dr. Tasokwa Vida Musa Kakota, Head, Basic Sciences Department, LUANAR
Research Area	Natural-resources management, eco-tourism, gender, and climate change.

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Lessah Mandoloma has a vision to help her community through eco-tourism—uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel. “Communities could benefit if they are empowered to embrace this idea,” she says. “Most of Malawi’s poverty-reduction approaches fail to recognize the role of communities in contributing to the tourism industry. We have to find better ways of improving livelihoods by using the resources we have—forests, wildlife, and water—for eco-tourism.”

Mandoloma believes that it is possible to conserve the environment while earning a livelihood from it. Although she recognizes a lack of skills and knowledge among some rural community members, she is convinced that the potential to learn is there. “Many rural people, especially women, have challenges in accessing and using natural resources for the betterment of their own livelihoods due to regulations,” she says. “So they no longer consider themselves a part of the solution to reduce land degradation. We are always advocating that food security is through farming, not realizing that there is a direct link between food production and environmental conservation.”

Mandoloma is collaborating with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian—Nkhoma Synod, one of the largest faith groups in Malawi, to initiate an eco-tourism program that aims to improve community livelihoods, information, and environmental management through a commercially viable faith-based eco-tourism center. “It is a great opportunity to contribute to the country’s growth and strategic development objectives,” she notes.

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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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In addition, Mandoloma is working with rural women to promote environmental conservation through waste-paper recycling for briquette making. This initiative is raising the incomes of the women while providing a safe cooking fuel alternative.

Mandoloma very much enjoys teaching, and “leaving a footprint in someone’s life.” She started working as a research assistant on a project called extension/participatory methods to reach rural women, which involved using different agricultural extension methods to teach rural women. “I was trying to determine what extension methods the women prefer and why, and whether they learn better in mixed or all-women groups,” she says. “The issue of empowerment is very complex—we often need to break barriers of culture and background. One thing I’ve learned in all of this, is that it is important for men to be fully involved in the issue of women’s empowerment.”

Having recently won a scholarship for postgraduate studies through Capacity Building for Managing Climate Change in Malawi (CABMACC), Mandoloma intends to begin her master’s in 2014, focusing on a combination of science and tourism. Next on her agenda is to proceed to a PhD.

Mandoloma says she has been inspired to make a difference by three women in her life—her aunt, her mother, and her AWARD Mentor. “My aunt and my mother encouraged me to wake up and work hard to become more influential in society,” she reveals. “And my mentor is also very diligent and is a great role model.”

Mandoloma expects the AWARD Fellowship to help her achieve her goal of improving the lives of women. “AWARD will give me a better platform, and will improve my leadership skills. I also appreciate the access I’ll have to resources and the broad network of fellow scientists. I know I’ll be able to use what I learn here even in my work as a lecturer at the university.”