



2013 AWARD Fellow
Mercy Maiwa Mwambi

Position	Master's Student
Institution	Egerton University
Country	Kenya
BSc	Agricultural Education and Extension Egerton University, 2010
Mentor	Dr. Joyce Jefwa, International Center for Tropical Agriculture, Kenya

Research area: Participation in contract farming and its implications on incomes of smallholder avocado farmers in Kandara district, Kenya.

Mercy Maiwa Mwambi was raised in Kenya's coastal area by parents who are primary-school teachers. She worked hard in class with the goal of becoming a scientist, although she wasn't sure what discipline to pursue. When she decided on agriculture, her parents were reluctant, thinking that her future would be limited to farming.

Mwambi attended Egerton University, sponsored by the Mughamba Scholarship Foundation, and after graduation had a three-month Kenya-based research attachment with Agricultural Business Development, a Denmark-funded organization. "I had a good supervisor who taught me how to work with farmers," she says. "He acted as role model, helping me learn about marketing value chains and small and medium-sized enterprise development."

As a master's student in Agricultural and Applied Economics at Egerton, in collaboration with the University of Pretoria, Mwambi is trying to determine the benefits of contract farming for smallholder avocado farmers in Kenya's Kandara district—and what factors are hampering their active participation in contemporary supply chains. Avocados contribute more than 50 percent of the value of Kenya's fruit exports.

"Contract farmers enter into an agreement with agribusiness firms/purchasers, who provide a degree of production support through the supply of inputs, the provision of technical advice, and a ready market," Mwambi explains. "The farmer provides a specific commodity in quantities and at quality standards determined by the purchaser." Her goal is to enhance their participation in markets, and to make policy recommendations that will help them to compete in the new economy and marketing systems.

Mwambi has found that contract farming has a significant effect on avocado farmers' incomes, but not on total household incomes. "There is no spillover effect—their income isn't great enough to allow them to expand," she says. "Contract farmers fetch a better price for their produce, but they can't increase their incomes significantly because they can't sell a huge amount of product. The export market is competitive in terms of quality."

Mwambi is working with a sponsor to revive a community development project that is aimed at linking women farmers to markets, improving their income and hence food security. "I want to conduct a pilot study to determine what caused this initiative to falter," she says.

Mwambi also is engaged in a project in Mwanda district in Kenya that is introducing a grafted avocado variety, which is rated as a high-value fruit, since this has the potential to increase farmers' income once they are linked to buyers. "Farmers supplied local variety seeds, which were raised and grafted with Hass and Fuerte varieties in the nursery, and then redistributed to farmers at no cost," she explains. The project's aim is to distribute 500,000 seedlings by June 2013 to enhance livelihoods through improved nutrition and increased incomes of vulnerable groups, including women and children.

Mwambi expects to soon finish her master's degree, and then hopes to find a research position in a challenging environment, and eventually proceed to a PhD. "It is very satisfying to share research results with the farmers," she says. "It's also important to share them with NGOs, and the buyers themselves. They may have to make changes to the way they are conducting contract farming."

Mwambi is excited to be an AWARD Fellow and looks forward to working with her mentor. She considers the opportunity to network and create partnerships with other scientists as a great advantage.

"The AWARD Fellowship will provide me with the chance to meet women scientists and specialists in different fields, and share knowledge on agricultural research and development," she says. "The training provided by AWARD will give me the leadership skills that I require, especially on gender issues since I'll be working more with women. Also, I need to develop more self-confidence, and AWARD will help in this capacity. I am particularly looking forward to learning more about science writing and proposal writing in the AWARD Science Skills Course," concludes Mwambi, who plans to publish a paper, which is under review, extracted from her thesis entitled "*Does Contract Farming Improve Smallholder Farmers' Income? The Case of Avocado Farming in Kenya.*" Mwambi presented the paper at the 138th European Association of Agricultural Economists seminar on Pro Poor Value Chains in September, 2013 in Ghent, Belgium.

Mwambi is one of a growing number of African women agricultural scientists who have won an AWARD Fellowship. 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.

AWARD is generously supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the United States Agency for International Development, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, and Agropolis Fondation. For more information, visit www.awardfellowships.org