



2019 AWARD Fellow
Rebecca Sarku

Position	Teaching and research assistant
Institution	University of Ghana
Country	Ghana
MPhil	Geography and Resource Development, University of Ghana, 2014
Mentor	Dr. Nikoi Ebenezer Goodman Ashie, Lecturer, University of Ghana
Research Area	Food security, climate change adaptation, climate information services, and adaptive decision making in farming.



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Rebecca Sarku sees agriculture as one of the dominant activities in Ghana. Keenly interested in agricultural land use and sustainable development, she always leaned toward rural development, and is now focusing particularly on issues like food security and climate information services. “I see a vast difference and a sharp contrast between urban and rural areas,” she says. “There are fewer opportunities in rural areas, but I am trying to come up with ideas that can be used to help improve people’s lives.”

Sarku grew up in Ashaiman, an urban community near Accra. After her secondary schooling at Mawuli School, Ho, she proceeded to Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) for a bachelor’s degree in Geography and Rural Development, then completed her master’s at the University of Ghana. She is currently in a doctoral program focusing on public administration and policy at the University for Development Studies/Wageningen University in the Netherlands, which she expects to complete in 2020.

Even though her doctoral program requires her to be in the Netherlands from time to time, Sarku spends most of her time in Ghana with farmers. “In my study of rural development, I have concluded that farmers have their specific ways of going about things,” she notes. “You need to combine the local knowledge of the people with the resources at hand—I always try to meet them halfway. One thing I like about rural development is that there are so many resources and they can own it.”

Sarku's goal is to become a renowned researcher and own a lab where innovative technologies are designed.



Sarku is one of a growing number of women agricultural scientists who have won an AWARD Fellowship. AWARD works toward inclusive, agriculture-driven prosperity for the African continent by strengthening the production and dissemination of more gender-responsive agricultural research and innovation. We invest in scientists, research institutions, and agribusinesses to deliver sustainable, gender-responsive agricultural research and innovation.

The AWARD Fellowship is a career-development program that invests in top women agricultural scientists to ensure that confident, capable, and influential women are available to lead critical advances and innovations in the agricultural sector.

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But Sarku is careful not to impose, using a “self-help” approach with the farmers she works with. “I endeavor to use my knowledge as an educated person to help them, to challenge them.” She appreciates having gained an understanding of how to link rural development theories to practice. “For example to address inadequate fertilizer use, we employ geographic information system tools to map areas where intervention is required.”

Sarku says farmers face a variety of challenges. “They have to deal with crop and livestock diseases, pest infestation, weather changes, price changes, unfavorable policies,” she says. “And they need to make wise decisions—this is where adaptive decision making comes in. This means making flexible or robust decisions in response to uncertain conditions.”

Sarku enjoys learning from the farmers and the extension officers with whom she interacts. She is trying to teach farmers to take time to track the weather before they apply fertilizer, for example. “Some decisions have to be flexible—wait. Others have to be robust—the decision has to be effective irrespective of the condition at hand.”

She has recently co-created a weather information application, which enables farmers to contribute data via mobile phone. “For instance, someone might post that it’s likely to rain tonight,” she explains. “We compare with a formal system to find out if it’s actually true, then confirm whether it will rain. This is one of the adaptive technologies I mentioned.”

Although the weather app is not yet fully available online, it has been piloted with 22 farmers of various ages, male and female—troubleshooting along the way.

She first applied for an AWARD Fellowship after reading about it in 2013, then subscribed to the AWARD newsletter to keep informed about happenings. Sarku appreciates being exposed to the idea of a purpose roadmap, a concept she learned at the mentoring orientation workshop. “I didn’t have a concrete idea about my goals and plans, but now I have put it on paper, shown it to colleagues and my mentor,” she stresses. “And 10 years along, I’ll see what I have achieved!”

Her goal is to become a renowned researcher who owns a lab where innovative technologies are designed. “Policies have to be adaptive to farmers’ conditions and evidence-based. If they are top down it creates a lot of havoc for food production.”

Sarku hopes to mentor other students in her institution to help them follow a career path. “Similarly in the community I work in, I plan to continue working with rural women, having one-on-one chats with them. I’m convinced that the knowledge I’ve learned is transferable.”