



EP.1 - with Judith Francis - AgSpirations Podcast by AWARD (V.1)

[00:00:00] **Dorine Odongo:** Hello, and welcome to AgSpirations by AWARD, a podcast that explores how we can accelerate inclusive, agricultural driven development in Africa.

[00:00:25] **Dorine Odongo:** In this episode, we'll be talking to Judith Anne Francis. One of the leading global experts on agricultural innovation systems. Judith is an independent advisor on innovation in agri-food and nutrition systems. A graduate of the three campuses of the University of the West Indies in Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago.

[00:00:46] She has over 25 years international experience building capacity of state and non-state actors and forging multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral inter-regional and global correlations to advance science innovation in developing countries. Judith has worked across Africa. The Caribbean, Europe, Latin and North America and the Pacific.

[00:01:11] She has been instrumental in widening the pipeline for professionals, male and female, including young academicians researchers, farmers, agropreneurs, and underrepresented populations to realize their full potential as critical players and agents of change for strengthening agricultural innovation systems.

[00:01:43] Judith, I'm incredibly honored to have you on the inaugural episode of AgSpirations by AWARD. Thank you so much for joining us

[00:01:52] **Judith Francis:** Thank you so much Dorine for inviting me, I am thrilled. And especially when I'm being interviewed by one of the young women who I have mentored over the years. It's really exciting.

[00:02:06] To see how advanced our young professionals in Africa have been and where they are now. So I'm really happy to share with you. Thanks again for inviting me and for featuring my week in this podcast.

[00:02:22] **Dorine Odongo:** Thank you, Judith. We stand on the shoulders of giants, like you. And so just to start us off for this inaugural episode of AgSpirations by AWARD where we are really focusing on how we can accelerate inclusive agricultural-driven development and how innovation systems are crucial drivers of transforming livelihoods, what would you say is the most pressing need in agricultural innovation systems across developing countries?



[00:02:48] **Judith Francis:** My first and immediate response would be capacity building capacity building, capacity building. We still have a lot of work to do to increase understanding of the complexity of innovation processes to enable actors to better define strategic entry points for policies and investment. Also to develop the human resource capacity, the physical infrastructure, including labs, equipment, technology, telecommunications, and modernized enterprising.

[00:03:26] Since we are talking about innovation systems and the complexity and the need for capacity building, we need to position learning and innovation as a continuous process. Organizations, institutions, societies, markets, technologies evolve. They don't stay static and it is therefore imperative that our policy makers academicians.

[00:03:55] And I'd like to give them scientists, researchers, finance. Yes, producers assessors and other actors have a shared understanding of the system and commit to capitalizing on sustaining innovation and agrifood systems. I remember when we first started talking about innovation systems and we brought in the team from Unitech in Maastricht to raise the awareness and enhance knowledge and innovation systems.

[00:04:25] And we talked to the senior policymakers, the seniors, the deans, the directors of science in the research institutions, of course, Africa, Caribbean, and the Pacific. And along with their EU partners. And when they began to understand and appreciate, we took about a week of intense backward and forward. Uh, it, it was one of the first capacity building sessions. I had in innovation systems. Those senior level officials said to me, Judith, this is relevant to our regions.

[00:05:00] We need to build capacity and they motivated and supported the launch of our program on training, researchers, lecturers, et cetera, in Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific to understand innovation systems.

[00:05:19] So for me, capacity building is still important. We need to capitalize on sustained innovation in agri-foods systems. Research is only one element and so to technology, we all need a mindset change. Sometimes I hear people say policymakers, sometimes they blame the researchers, they say the universities are not doing the work.

[00:05:47] they should. They say the farmers are not listening, they're not learning, but in truth and in fact, this is the system we need. We need a mindset change and it's not only the policy makers, it's not only the universities, it's all of us. And we need to respect and value the role of various actors. Yeah.



[00:06:08] **Dorine Odongo:** So Judith, you have led multiple cross continental initiatives that catalyze the potential of science technology and innovation to drive development.

[00:06:16] And I'm just wondering, how do you engage the stakeholders of the agricultural innovation system to support inclusive, agricultural research and development? And what could this ideally look like? I mean, you mentioned the situation where we've had different sets of actors pointing fingers and saying it is these actors who are not doing this, but how do we create a shared vision among stakeholders rather than a competing narrative about what and how we will implement what is required?

[00:06:49] **Judith Francis:** So, so, so Dorine, uh, I think the most important thing is to understand the problem. We need to remember who we are working for and what we want to achieve. Put at the forefront. We have households, especially young children, less than five years and women, rural communities and countries suffering, economically uncertainty, high poverty, unemployment, malnutrition. We write multiple reports, but we need to have a shared goal of what do we want to achieve? What, what change do we want?

[00:07:29] We operate in a competitive world, competition is a fact of life and in organizations, communities, and countries, and between them at local national, continental and global level. It is not only the private sector that needs to understand and navigate the innovation space, the cultural context, the finance governance and governance mechanisms.

[00:07:59] And overcome the barriers to innovation. It is a shared agenda. This is the first narrative, navigating the innovation space is a shared agenda. And we must start with understanding the context. This is what I call the first narrative we need to address and ensure that everyone understands the local, national, global contexts, the institutional framework, the power dynamics. It cannot be left to the politicians, policy and decision makers and private sector to shape the innovation agendas. Researchers need to be engaged in understanding the context. And this was one of the things that we, we, we did when we launched the science and innovation program.

[00:09:01] We trained researchers to analyze the innovation system, to, to appreciate who the various actors are involved because they cannot afford to operate in a vacuum. We want research, innovation for impact must be the driving force. As key stakeholders, they need to be willing to work with the other actors and agreeing on the goal, what is to be achieved and how we are going to go about it.



[00:09:36] What, what resources, for example, do we have. What policies exist, which need to be changed, which needs to be updated, which, which, which can be eliminated. But the important thing is that this is the knowledge base for co-creation of new knowledge, uptake and innovation. And this is what we did in our Pacific project.

[00:10:06] The first thing we started with was an analysis. And in short we said it was analysis, act, and advocate to change, be focused.

[00:10:18] **Dorine Odongo:** I really like what you said about, you know, we, we live in a competitive world, we live in a dynamic world and the driving force must be that we are conducting research and innovation for impact.

[00:10:31] And I really like what you mentioned about the project in the Pacific that sought to analyze, to act and to advocate. And so what do you think are some of the opportunities or constraints to getting concepts such as this one's mainstreamed and to scale, particularly in different geographies and contexts, you know, so for example, what are some of the regional or cultural specific examples about these would then intersect with other sectors and skills, such projects like the Pacific project.

[00:11:02] **Judith Francis:** Very thought provoking. I see lessons in this COVID-19 pandemic, which has confirmed that we are all in this together and what I, I saw as the pandemic unfold for example, the farmers went back to their land, the people who went to urban settings went back to their homesteads, their villages, et cetera, to plant food.

[00:11:29] You had the ministries of agriculture would get with the ministries of health ministries of trade, the private sector, every body was impacted. So culturally and specifically, and regionally, we recognized that inclusivity must be the cornerstone for resetting the science technology and innovation agenda to achieve more tangible outcomes, all stakeholders are now even more aware of the interconnected nature of the lookout to the national, continental, global agri-food systems.

[00:12:11] Science alone can't change, but the collaboration needs to go forward. Another interesting thing is that, uh, and what I have been following is the dialogues leading up to the 2021 year in FSS food systems summit and these have reinforced that stakeholders need to agree on game changes for food systems transformation.

[00:12:38] So this is one approach, and this is an approach that we used in Africa when we brought together the women in science, when we brought together the young professionals,



when we brought together the nanotechnology experts with the dry lands experts, with the sort of scientists.

[00:13:00] So what you're seeing is that no one science research priority, no one sector is going to help us with the challenging, uh, uh, issues to achieve the change we want. In fact, in Africa, this is the Africa we want, and it was an approach that we use in the Pacific. So what we found is that when the farmers associations would now lead in the dialogue, you would hear something from the ministry saying, but why are they leading? But what happened in the end is that the farmers were able to engage with the policy makers and the ministry with other international organizations where the development banks mobilize their own communities and come up with strategies for innovation in what they call the traditional, local food value chains.

[00:14:02] So for me, regionality might exist, geography might exist, but when you look at what the pandemic has shown us, is that all of these things don't matter. Every one is at an equal level and all this shows is that we need each other to overcome the barriers to innovation and to also instigating and implementing the change in policies, programs that we need.

[00:14:40] So that's the issue on geography, but, um, in terms of, uh, specific examples, I would like to encourage researchers in developing countries to pay more attention to things closer to home. If your research is not focused on solving some of the problems and learning from some of the traditional practices within your own backyard and your own home country then you find that a case like what we have now, where the global pandemic, and before that we had the economic crisis. Our local systems cannot adapt quickly, so we need to focus on the localization of knowledge and the capacity building within the local and national systems and playing in the bigger international field.

[00:15:43] Uh, and I will focus the example on African indigenous green, leafy vegetables, African indigenous foods, Pacific local foods, and even in the Caribbean. So we did not build up enough local knowledge on the nutrition and health benefits of our local foods. We were able now to adopt what people call the westernized style of eating and what happened when the pandemic hit, as we saw in Fiji and in other parts of the world, the people went back to basics. They went back to their indigenous foods, they went back to their traditional practices of barter trading with each other, et cetera. And it was the research to support that we funded a project and we actually produced a paper since the pandemic and how the local communities adapted to the situation.



[00:16:45] Of course there are challenges so I think that one key area that I see provides an opportunity for research intervention and it's being flagged in the international debates. And I challenge researchers in our developing countries to learn from each other and to invest in research in the local context and building up your expertise on your international presence, appreciating the local context.

[00:17:20] And I would like to say that's how I started, that's how I learned, that's how I was able to work with farmers and a small scale food processors in the Caribbean before I got on the wider international stage and scientists in Africa who I admire and some of the leading scientists. And when you look at their work, their publications, etc.

[00:17:51] It's that they thought to apply their knowledge in organic chemistry to understand the health benefits of indigenous crops, their rich biodiversity etc so, I think that that is the future, and if we can improve our work as researchers and scientists, our commitment to development and engaging with our policy makers and the private sector financiers and the other actors.

[00:18:23] Then we will not have the tension that we are having that the next time there is a pandemic, people don't believe in the science, you know, they are critical, they can because we didn't work with them in the first place. So how can they believe us? So there's a lot of work to be done in that area. So as I said, we are all equal now. The pandemic has taught us we are all equal. If we didn't know we were all equal before, we are all equal, let's bring our knowledge together.

[00:18:57] **Dorine Odongo:** Wow I have really enjoyed listening to you because this really part of what I'm very passionate about. I'm really passionate about research uptake and technology transfer.

[00:19:06] And I could hear you talk about and emphasize on the need for us to localize our knowledge, on the need for us to be very conscious and aware of who we are innovating for and innovating with, and where are they located, and that these scientists and the researchers need to talk to each other.

[00:19:27] So I'm very excited to hear you talking about this. And I want to take you back to the study, the research that you say you conducted on consumption patterns of indigenous foods, is this paper available so that we could direct our listeners to look for it.



[00:19:41] **Judith Francis:** Everything I did with partners in Africa, wherever we documented. Women in science, some of the Pacific foods, I can send you the link if they want, they can just Google, you know Pacific and they will find all the reports, all the case studies.

[00:20:03] On my LinkedIn I featured some of them like the research paper that came out recently about the Pacific and the COVID-19 impacts that was published in an international journal. And this was, you know, uh, I wanted to tell you the essence of the work we did is that we ask the Pacific researchers we're working with, University of Cambridge, et cetera, work with the local community groups on the ground, the people who know, or the heads of households, et cetera, get them to interrogate the questions before we go out in the field, then work with them in the field. So this, what you had was a bond being forged between the academic community and the, if you want to call it the NGOs, the social enterprises, the farmer's organizations, so they also value the importance of research, but they also influence the research.

[00:21:12] And then you bring it back to policy. We must keep the policy makers engaged, I cannot emphasize we need to keep them engaged. So what you found out then, and then we, we worked with ICT innovators who did crowd sourcing of market prices. Could you imagine? And when I realized, we build the capacity, they can do. Trust to me, we have invested in capacity building and now the ICT innovators are themselves advisers, you know, supporting government programs, supporting other farmer's enterprises.

[00:21:51] The researchers are mobilizing more funds to do more in-depth research. So the question is, who are we working for? I remember when in my lab days, my colleagues would pass through the lab and say Judith is making this thing in science. And then when I went out now with all the knowledge that I had advocated about the mango fruit and how to store it and how to process it's added value to extend the shelf life so it can stay on the shelf, you know, my colleagues were laughing and saying, oh Judith has made this thing a science. And then when I said, okay, I am ready to take this knowledge out to the small-scale processors, and again they laughed. And when we did the first advertisement saying that our industrial research institute is having a workshop for small and medium enterprises.

[00:22:50] Listen to me Dorine, the response was so fantastic that we had to run the workshop four times because we were expecting 20 people in the first instance. And then the farmers were coming to ask me, well, how come you knew so much about the mango? You understand? I was just smiling to myself. Yes. I had to spend hours in the lab working



with the technicians and such, so I am encouraging. And I saw the value in that approach to research for development, research for impact, innovation, and understanding the consumers, understanding their needs into putting the science, and translating the science to other people, hey Judith is trying to make them scientists

[00:23:49] Yes. Yes we need, because they also need to understand the science that we are doing. And the more scientists we have the better the world will be. I am passionate about science. I am passionate about innovation, I am passionate about the need for us to understand the innovation system. I am passionate about making sure that in that understanding and analysis, it leads to change.

[00:24:11] **Dorine Odongo:** You're very right. It's not just science, it's not just research, but science that changes, research that transforms. And indeed we shouldn't be talking about poverty and malnutrition in the next 10 years. And like you mentioned, the COVID 19 pandemic has brought a sharp focus on the fragility of our food systems.

[00:24:33] Um, the fragility of agricultural research, what are some of the concrete recommendations that you would put forward, you know, to drive a sustainable future.

[00:24:44] **Judith Francis:** First, policies, that would be my first concrete recommendation. I'm thinking and the synergy between agriculture, nutrition, education and science and innovation.

[00:25:00] I mean, when we were looking, we have numerous policies, but nobody knows what is in those policies. So I think we need to revisit, redevelop our policies. So come back to the co-creation of knowledge. So the synergy between, and the complementarity, and not to rush, to design new policies, that one I would put more highly and I wouldn't put a hundred chapters on everything else.

[00:25:30] So, so that would be my first concrete, recommendation. My other concrete recommendation is in the technology. So we go all excited about digitization, digitalization, artificial intelligence, which is also going to impact on jobs we produce, et cetera. But in our quest to digitize and privatize, we also need to remap the fundamental things that need to improve post-harvest handling, storage, processing. And we must address the issues of intellectual property rights, not only in terms of accessing, but also commercializing knowledge. And we had made great strides back in 2005 to 2010 prior to that, and countries are opening up and understanding the issues with somehow I get the impression that even though IPR offices have been established in universities and in national government offices,



that people are not making full use of this and they don't see the link. So that's on technology.

[00:26:51] On financing, what has come up as being of critical importance is blended finance. And this is how do you leverage public funds with private sector funds to achieve the change that you want? Even if it's in your universities in terms of investments in research, in terms of enterprise development, I think this is just, these are just my views from what I have seen.

[00:27:23] So, you know, government funds are unlimited and therefore they have to be smart about how they optimize or leverage their funding with the private sector and some of these international funding mechanisms that are being created because at the end of the day, what do the governments want? To see at this would have been negotiated in consultation with the key sectors, the interest groups and that sort of thing.

[00:27:57] And I saw some interesting things in the Pacific where the development banks actually targeted rural communities such that, you know, that funding windows were made available to women's groups and that sort of thing. They knew they were taking risks, but they didn't just take the risks like that, what they did is they built capacity. They sent their officers out to understand what is really happening on the ground and to see the opportunities that if you empower, enrich these people, you can make more money. They will make more money and you will make more money. And I think that this is a missed opportunity for government. I have two more critical recommendations because one of the success stories, I believe it's a bigger deal with the universities and they have created a mega platform where the vice chancellors have a say.

[00:29:02] Right. And they talk, they consult, they grow together, they learn together, but that university engagement also say there's a responsibility of national universities to work closer to the ground. So university engage better leadership and then I know that there's this tension between universities and policy makers.

[00:29:23] I understand. But again, if you need to remain relevant, then of course your university must be a central part of the development agenda. So they should be evolving just as your societies evolve. And they should be coming up with new ideas. It hurts me when I first started off, we had some professors in food technology who were talking about cassava and yam transformation. There was another professor, one I really admired who was into solar panels, et cetera, he was talking about the technology back in the eighties, you know,



and these guys were visionary, but somehow the other, the, the way how we work with policymakers, not understanding the politics. And again, it comes back to that, to get that shared.

[00:30:24] You know, I suppose I was lucky people laughed at me and I persevered. But some people you can't laugh at them and some of them, when you laugh at them, they retreat into themselves. Right. But our universities not only have to engage and you see some of them trying, coming up with innovative agendas for change, but we need more of that, university engagement and leadership.

[00:30:53] They should be the go to, and Dr. Maurice Bullough did an analysis some years ago. And the paper is published in the book we did on innovation for small holder farmers, et cetera, that deals with smallholder farmers, about skepticism that farmers have of going, so the universities are not the go to for knowledge for farmers.

[00:31:17] And that is a shame they should be. I'm not saying kick out anybody. But, but we can't have, okay and Dorine this is my last point. I want to see focus on youth and women, but not at the expense of marginalizing the senior men in our society, because it was the senior directors of research, deans of faculties, of agriculture, et cetera, who listened and worked with me in terms of all of this could not have been done or achieved if there weren't motivated collaborators, et cetera. But when the tension came between the youth and the senior officials, we were able to manage it. And so a lot of the youth and the women that we worked with are now in serious senior positions, initiating change, forging change, leading programs.

[00:32:26] So I encourage all of us who are working on transformation and I am saying not in normal tourism, more women, more this, more that, I mean serious collaboration, serious consultation, serious engagement, targeted capacity development. Right. And providing the opportunities for youth and women to shine and how to be agents of change in their organizations, in their communities, et cetera.

[00:33:04] I want to caution and I always caution you and also my female colleagues that when you arrive, you look back, and you support several others. I thank all the agencies I worked with, including my own organizations, et cetera, for allowing us to focus on and engage with you. And we had a thing, listen, listen, listen, engage, arrive at a shared vision and agenda for change, and then support facility to process. So that's my last concrete



recommendation. Thank you very much, Dorine, for giving me this opportunity to support you in your work and to share my views on topics that are very close to my heart.

[00:34:05] **Dorine Odongo:** Wow lots of insightful lessons from you, Judith, and what a great points to end it at, I am hearing you say that we must engage youth and women, but not at the expense of marginalizing the senior men. And I think this is what inclusiveness is about. It's understanding who is bringing what to the table and then gauging them intentionally.

[00:34:33] I'm hearing you saying not to propagate tokenism, but to be very clear about what each stakeholder and each actor is bringing to the table, you have said that we must sustain multi-stakeholder inclusive engagement. It has gained momentum, but we need to sustain it. Also hearing you say that the universities must keep evolving just as the environment is evolving. We must continue engaging, and most importantly, you cannot be an agent of change if you do not understand your context. That is my biggest takeaway.

[00:35:13] **Judith Francis:** Very good.

[00:35:14] **Dorine Odongo:** It has been an absolute honor talking to you, Judith. Thank you so much for shining a spotlight on the status of agricultural innovation systems and how the road to inclusive agriculture development in Africa looks like. I'm glad to see that the future there's hope the future looks good, we just need to sustain the momentum that we've been building over the years.

[00:35:35] **Judith Francis:** And be focused, keep your eye on the goal.

[00:35:40] **Dorine Odongo:** Indeed

[00:35:42] Alright, so friends that brings us to the end of this episode of AgSpirations by AWARD. I have been talking to Judith Anne Francis and, an independent advisor on innovation and agri-food and nutrition systems from Trinidad and Tobago.

[00:35:58] Thank you for joining us. We would like to hear from you, your views on the topic and how you think you can advance inclusive, agricultural research and development. We also welcome your feedback and suggestions on guests you would like us to host. Do feel free to get in touch with us by sending us an email to awardqueries@cgiar.org. Remember, you can subscribe to the podcast at a podcast platform of your choice and listening to the episodes on our website. Until next month, I am Dorine Odongo, stay updated with the



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[00:36:42] I'd like to say a big thank you to my colleagues at African Women in Agricultural Research and Development for your support and my colleagues at PodcastCo who are helping us with the production of the podcast. And once again to our guest for today, Judith Anne Francis. Thank you.