

Gender Responsive Agriculture Systems Policy (GRASP) Fellowship

Fellow Profile

**Position**

Regional Advocacy Manager,
East and Central Africa

Institution

CARE International

Country

Kenya

Education

MA, Public Policy, University of
Warwick (UK), 2018

Mentor

Dr. Esther Kanduma, Lecturer,
University of Nairobi

Area of Interest

How to influence the
implementation of agriculture
and food security policy
commitments by decision-
makers

Laureen Wesonga

2022 AWARD Policy Fellow

"Policies should be designed and implemented with people in mind. It is not just about science and data, but also about people and how they are affected by policy."

Growing up in a rural setting in western Kenya, Laureen Wesonga was able to appreciate first-hand the pivotal role that women play in agriculture. At a young age, she was impressed by the effort the women in her village put into the farms and markets, waking up at dawn and retiring late. Noting this commitment, she was inspired to one day change their fortunes so that their contributions to society would be recognized, supported, and justly remunerated.

After finishing school, Laureen joined the University of Nairobi to pursue an undergraduate degree in Political Science and Economics. During her studies, one topic that particularly stood out was food security as a strategic political issue and how critical it is for a country to be able to feed and sustain itself. "When we were discussing that topic in class, the memories of the women farmers in my rural area suddenly became vivid," Laureen recalls. "I knew then that I wanted to pursue something that would connect policy with the lives of ordinary farmers."

Following her graduation in 2009, Laureen worked with several organizations, eventually working with the Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA), an umbrella body for the Kenyan business community. There, as a Public-Private Dialogue Officer, she was actively involved in discussing agricultural policy issues with different players (including government officials) and sat on various forums where these policies were drafted. In 2016, she was awarded a Chevening scholarship to study an MA in Public Policy at the University of Warwick in the UK.

It was at the Kenya Red Cross as a Policy and Advocacy Manager that Laureen could once again interact first-hand with farmers. Here, with her colleagues, she worked on communicating and disseminating science, agriculture, and climate change information to farmers in the simplest way possible. "We would sift through mountains of scientific information and data, then interpret that information into simple language that farmers could understand," she

explains. “Then, they could use this to organize themselves – for example, knowing when to plant and anticipate rains. This was particularly important because climate change was hitting the farmers hard, and we needed to help build their ability to cope with climate shocks.”

With a drive to ensure policies benefitted farmers, Laureen moved to a Pan-African research organization, the Partnership for African Social Governance Research (PASGR). One project she was involved with supported a national non-governmental organization (NGO) in working with the government on how agriculture policy could benefit youth. Keen to become even more involved in connecting policy with practice, in January 2021, Laureen took up a position at CARE International as Regional Advocacy Manager for East and Central Africa. Alongside her colleagues, she pushes for sustainable agriculture practices (especially for women farmers) and advocates for more agriculture and food security-friendly policies. “Policy is not just about science, economics, laws, and data. Most importantly, it is about people and how they benefit or are affected,” Laureen asserts. She adds that while many great policies exist, the focus should now be on translating these into action and ensuring they benefit those they were drafted for.

Laureen first heard about GRASP from LinkedIn, and then a CARE colleague shared the announcement, encouraging her to apply. With her policy advocacy background, Laureen intends to explore the problem of the “implementation gap”; how to influence and obtain political goodwill from decision-makers to ensure that promised financial and technical resources are provided.

“The Fellowship gives me an ideal platform to start influencing that kind of mindset,” she enthuses. “I want to be part of the conversation that says, ‘let’s do things differently’. We owe it to our smallholder farmers.” She says that part of doing things differently is strengthening dialogue by making it inclusive; voices that have been excluded or marginalized should be featured prominently. She is also keen to push for indigenous knowledge on agriculture and climate change to be included in agriculture and food security policy and decision-making.

Laureen is excited to receive guidance from her GRASP Mentor, Dr. Esther Kanduma, a previous AWARD Fellow. Laureen notes that, through the launch of GRASP, she has already been exposed to discussions about new approaches to agriculture and food security. She is looking forward to continued involvement in the AWARD community and with associated partners.

Laureen Wesonga is among a growing number of women selected for the Gender Responsive Agriculture Systems Policy (GRASP) Fellowship. GRASP Fellowship is a career development program growing a pool of confident, capable, African women to lead the design and implementation of gender-responsive policies in Africa. The Fellowship is an initiative of African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD), funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).