

Gender Responsive Agriculture Systems Policy (GRASP) Fellowship

Fellow Profile



Position

Gender Equity, Social Inclusion,
and Agri-business Coordinator

Institution

International Development
Enterprise- iDE

Country

Mozambique

Education

MSc, International Relations and
Gender Development Studies,
Atlantic International University,
USA (2020)

Mentor

MaryPat McVay, research and
knowledge manager, Opportunity
International, USA

Research Area

Promoting gender equity and
social inclusion through women
empowerment

Doreen Tekedese

2023 AWARD Policy Fellow

"As women researchers, we must seek to give more meaning to our role in society by constantly challenging the status quo and coming up with innovative and sustainable solutions that local farmers can embrace."

Doreen Tekedese never imagined she would follow a career in women's empowerment and agriculture growing up in Manica province in Western Mozambique, which borders Zimbabwe. She initially pursued her childhood dream of becoming a teacher and, after receiving a diploma in education from the University of Zimbabwe in 1998, took up a teaching post with the Ministry of Education in Zimbabwe in 1999. During this role, her career began to take a more unexpected trajectory.

While working in schools, Doreen met with other teachers who were part-time farmers, and she taught children of farming families. She quickly learned the value attached to farming; for instance, children missed school to help their parents during prime farming seasons, such as harvesting. She also saw how significantly these families were impacted when weather events, such as droughts, occurred – with mothers coming to school to request food rations.

Driven by a desire to support and empower these women, Doreen enrolled for a Certificate in counseling at the Zimbabwe Institute of Systemic Therapy in 2006. After completing the course the same year, she moved away from the classroom and applied for a job at CONNECT – The Zimbabwe Institute of Systemic Therapy. Through workshops, training, and one-to-one sessions, she engaged with men and women who were struggling with trauma.

"But I realized that, after these people overcame their mental struggles, they didn't have something to do – which posed a threat as they could relapse," Doreen explains. "I started exploring ways I could help them set up new careers, and that is when I enrolled for a degree in management and entrepreneurial development studies at the Women's University in Africa in Zimbabwe."

Completing her degree in 2013 opened a new chapter in Doreen's life, focusing on working with

numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that strive to empower rural women. For instance, in 2015, she joined Dorcas Aid International in Mozambique as a gender and livelihood programs manager, where her work included managing project grants, training partner organization staff on implementing programs and supervising implementing partners. She left the organization in 2017 to join International Development Enterprise in Mozambique, where she continues to work today.

She champions policies and strategies on gender equality, women's empowerment, and social inclusion by working with gender-based departments in government ministries. Alongside her work with NGOs, Doreen continues to develop her understanding of gender dynamics through academia – graduating in 2020 from the Atlantic International University, USA, with a master's degree in international relations and gender development studies.

Doreen reveals that a highlight of her career has been using pictures to teach illiterate women farmers how to create and understand business plans. This has enabled them to flourish and oversee successful enterprises. "Women who have never attended school can pitch their business plans using pictures. They know their markets, clients, competitors, and financial options," she enthuses. "The greatest asset I have is participatory training. I do not leave any woman behind because they cannot read or write. I believe that if women can farm, they can also develop business plans and succeed."

But her successes have not come without their challenges – particularly the numerous hurdles faced in breaking down gender stereotypes and social norms. Doreen explains that conservative communities sometimes view her work as a way of teaching women how to 'take' decision-making roles – such as around finances and reproductive health – away from men. "Men usually feel like empowering women is disempowering them [men]," she says. However, such resistance only emboldens her resolve.

Inspired by Doreen's work, a US Agency for International Development friend introduced her to the GRASP Fellowship. Doreen said that, as she completed her application, she knew the Fellowship was an avenue she wanted to pursue because it aligned with her work and values around empowering women through policy. She is confident the Fellowship will assist in honing her policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring abilities. As well as sharpening her policy development skills, Doreen also hopes to build on her leadership skills – and is counting on her mentor MaryPat McVay, an expert in research and knowledge management, to guide her through the process.

Doreen Tekedese 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).