



AWARD Fellow 2009
Mary Anyango Oyunga

Position:	Research scientist
Institution:	Kenya Agricultural Research Institute
Country:	Kenya
MSc:	Nutrition-Public Health and Epidemiology
Mentored by:	Dr. Jan Low Leader, Sweet Potato for Profit and Health SASHA Program Manager, International Potato Center

"My appointment as a technical officer at the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) was followed by seven years of hard work that gave me neither visibility nor credibility."

In 1995, due to my post-graduate diploma training in the Netherlands, I courageously took the opportunity to work with more qualified scientists where I learned various skills, including proposal writing, conference presentation skills and how to be involved in publishing. However, this did not help me to be sufficiently assertive or to stand out on my own as a credible scientist. I kept reminding myself of René Descartes' statement, "It is much better to prepare and not have the opportunity, than to have the opportunity and not be prepared." When I became an AWARD Fellow in 2009, I was prepared for the opportunity to be assertive, visible, and credible.

As an AWARD Fellow:

- I received two promotions and am currently a research scientist at KARI
- In 2009 I had the privilege of making oral presentations at the 15th Triennial Symposium of the International Society for Tropical Root Crops in Lima, Peru, and at the first All-Africa Horticultural Congress in Nairobi, Kenya
- I was nominated by my employer to be a member of the National Codex Committee, and the National Codex Contact Point for Kenya—a position for which I successfully negotiated
- In 2008 I won an award for the second-best scientific presentation in food crop research during the 11th KARI Biennial Conference
- I published in a refereed journal (AJFAND online) and submitted two papers for publication
- I now have access to electronic science libraries and the G&D e-newsletter
- I became a member of the prestigious, U.K.-based Nutrition Society for both human and animal nutritionists

At the AWARD mentoring orientation workshop, I learned how to use a clearly defined roadmap to guide my own development. My main goal was to strengthen my networks, and I achieved this. I became part of the module developers of the Sweetpotato Action for Security and Health in Africa (SASHA) program, which my mentor manages at the International Potato Center in Nairobi. I received further mentoring from the team and increased my networks locally and internationally.

Thanks to my growing network, I attended a course in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania on emerging challenges for food and nutrition security: HIV/AIDS and ARVs in sub-Saharan Africa, which was organized by Wageningen International and Sokoine University. I am also building new collaborative relationships with professors at Emory and Ohio State universities in the United States, where I received overwhelming support in developing my PhD proposal and advice on laboratory skills. I also received support through one of my network scientists to attend the 15th World Congress of Food Science and Technology in Cape Town, South Africa. Through my networking and knowledge sharing, I learned to be a good listener, and I now know that sometimes opportunity knocks very softly.

Over the years, I have worked on a crop (sweet potato) and food systems (street foods), but I found it difficult to explain my research findings to a broader audience. At the AWARD science-writing workshop, I learned how to communicate to the general public without including scientific jargon. The course also motivated me to negotiate for better opportunities for women to advance in their careers. I intend to visit various learning institutions, including girls' secondary schools, during my role modeling exercise to encourage them to take science subjects and to help them with their career paths. I will make an effort to help the students with publication and scientific writing, because many students leave college with little or no knowledge of proper scientific writing.

I applied for an AWARD research attachment in April 2010 and my proposal was one of 20 selected. I will be going to Emory University in Atlanta, United States for three months to study the effect of high beta-carotene sweet potato and dark leafy green vegetables on the vitamin status of Kenyan women and children.

Through AWARD I have learned that I should never let someone's opinion of me become my reality. My mentoring relationship helped me change some of my negative attitudes, and helped me to use my leadership qualities in the proper way. My mentor made me realize that mentoring is about sharing openly, being honest, and helping each other achieve our highest potential.

My participation in the AWARD Fellowship program has had personal benefits as well. My children are excited about my performance and my new negotiation skills within our family, and are themselves aiming higher. To paraphrase another famous saying, "Whatever the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve." I have learned that obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goals.
