From a Graduate Student to a Community Agent: From Science to Communication – The Story of Catherine Mloza-Banda

Studying for a Master of Science degree under the RUFORUM Scholarship has greatly shaped my career and opened a world that I could not comprehend. Being able to generate scientific information is one thing; communicating it in a way that is understandable and relatable to a wide range of audiences is another.

My Master’s degree has helped me to be able to do both and more. I learned to engage policy makers and influential decision makers on the critical issues that are taking place at grassroots level that have an implication on policy. It highlighted the important role that farmer networks play in dissemination and adoption of new technologies and the role of informal communication channels.

I was awarded the RUFORUM Scholarship at a time that I was seeking to establish my career as an agricultural communications specialist. I had recently graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Crop Science from the then University of Malawi, Bunda College of Agriculture. The most logical step for me was to pursue a career in the agricultural sciences either in a research station or academia. Interestingly, that was not what I wanted to do. Over the time I had studied for my degree, I had grown a passion for development communication and I wanted to innovatively fuse my newly found interest with my science degree; an aspiration that seemed very far-fetched at the time.

I opted to conduct research to understand the social and institutional aspects related to the adoption of Conservation agriculture under the RUFORUM scholarship. This required me to enrol and be admitted into the Department of Extension and Rural Development at Bunda.
I thoroughly enjoyed my coursework and research. It was interesting how I found rural sociology theories very fascinating. I was always looking for opportunities to expand my horizon in my field of study. During my studies, I managed to conduct policy analysis, write conceptual papers and conduct research activities that widened my scope of the agricultural and rural development sector.

One worth mentioning is a study I conducted on the role of rural social networks in the adoption of agricultural technologies. Using participatory rural communication tools, I was able to work with farmers to understand the diffusion of agricultural technologies from a relational perspective. I found that adoption can readily occur where networks and participatory research and extension methods are used. This is because any given agricultural technology is not just a production technology; but also a social construct.

Thus, one of the keys to success in widespread adoption among smallholder farmers is through their intensive leveraging of farmers’ social networks. These social networks are essentially informal communication channels, which farmers employ to receive and share information on new technologies or practices. These networks are more complex than conventional extension approaches, because they form spontaneously or organically among and within communities to bridge information gaps and reduce uncertainties about a given technology or local appropriateness of an innovation. During my research, it was found that most farmers rely on these social networks for validation and more information on a given innovation. Thus, the use of influential farmers and/or local innovators and early adopters is key in ensuring widespread adoption of agricultural technologies.
Immediately upon the completion of my studies, I was offered an opportunity to work with Farm Radio Trust as an Agricultural Value Chain Officer. Farm Radio Trust is a non-governmental organisation that aims to provide innovative agricultural extension and advisory services through radio and other ICTs. My role is to contribute to design and develop agricultural content for use in radio and ICT programming. I am also responsible for mobilizing and engaging with agricultural sector players and knowledge partners under specific agricultural value chains to support farm radio programming at all levels.

Within this mandate, I lead the analysis, development and design of sound, evidence based and scientifically proven agricultural value chain content for radio and ICT based agricultural extension and advisory services in line with government policies, science and farmer practices through participatory research. This also involves mainstreaming of emerging issues such as gender, climate change and others in radio and ICT based agricultural extension and advisory services.

I was able to spearhead knowledge management and documentation of success stories of innovative agricultural extension models through our organisations work. I have managed to publish articles on ICT-based agricultural extension in quite a couple of magazines including the ICT Update, a bimonthly printed bulletin, a web magazine, and an accompanying email newsletter that explores innovative uses of information technology in agriculture and rural development in African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. It is published in English and French by the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation ACP-EU (CTA) in Wageningen, the Netherlands, with each issue focusing on a specific theme. The print magazine is widely distributed amongst policy makers in Brussels and across Europe, and to embassies and sector stakeholders in developing countries. CTA is an institution of the ACP Group of States and the European Union, in the framework of the Cotonou Agreement and is financed by the EU. I was also recently featured in the e-Learning Africa 2015 on the work that our organisation is doing in ICT4Ag.
Recently, I was selected by the European Union to participate in the Future Leaders Program during the European Development Days in Brussels under the theme ‘Feeding the Planet Together’. Feeding the Planet Together basically focused on global food security, hunger, sustainable agriculture, nutrition, right to food, fisheries, land management, property rights, retail, and policy coherence for development. During the conference, I participated in a panel discussion with high level experts such as the Deputy Executive Director for World Food Programme (WFP), Ms Barbara Noseworthy. Interestingly, she once served as Advisor to the former Nigerian Minister of Agriculture, Mr Adesina Akinwummi. The Minister of Agriculture for Cote d’Ivoire and the Director of CIRAD were also on the panel.

I also participated in a debate titled "A more connected, contested and complex world: A conversation with Federica Mogherini and Sam Kutesa". Federica Mogherini is the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs, and Vice President for the European Commission and Sam Kutesa is the President of the 69th United Nations General Assembly.

I am currently a 2015 AWARD Fellow and contemplating pursuing a doctorate degree in rural sociology or agricultural extension.

Being a young African woman, the odds and opportunities for higher education gradually decrease as the levels of degrees increase. I consider it an achievement that I was able to study for a Master of Science degree at a very young age, actually before the age of 25 and would like to thank RUFORUM for this opportunity. I can be contacted at catharinemloza@gmail.com