

INTERVIEW WITH MADINA DIANCOUMBA



The Open Doors Fellowship Program



For women researchers in
Africa



Tell us about yourself. How would you describe your career so far?

I am Madina Diancoumba, a Postdoctoral scientist based in Mali, at the Regional Research Hub of the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-arid Tropics (ICRISAT).

So far, my career has progressed well. I defended my PhD in 2020 at the “Université des Sciences Techniques et Technologiques de Bamako”, where I got the chance to participate in a sandwich program in ICRISAT Mali and ICRISAT India.

After my PhD, I was involved in different projects including the Africa Research in Sustainable Intensification for Next Generation (Africa-RISING-AR) project where I was to provide support to the crop improvement team of ICRISAT in data management, analysis, and writing scientific publications. Currently, I am a post-doctoral scientist working on the designing of target population of environments to guide the development of improved varieties that are high yielding and meet farmer and market needs.

What research area are you working on?

I use crop modeling tools to assist plant breeders in decision making when it comes for example to the selection of multilocation trials for evaluating promising lines being developed.

Why did you choose this area? What inspired you to go into your field?

I did not really choose my area; it came accidentally. I wanted to do environmental science which was not available in Mali. I ended up going to Senegal on a DAAD scholarship to do my MSc, and it all started from there.

What are some of your achievements so far?

My PhD was a big achievement for me because I had to face many challenges to be able to complete it. Among those challenges are family issues (long sickness and finally death of my dad), political issues (my supervisor become Minister of Higher Education of Mali during my last year of PhD and therefore did not have time to read and correct me and did not want to let me defend. I had to wait until he was discharged from his duties) and health issues (I had to wait 8 months to defend my thesis because of lockdown of the university due to COVID-19).

I participated successfully in many international conferences where I made oral presentations. I also contributed to different paper and book chapter writing. Currently there are one paper and two book chapters under review.

We also successfully organized a summer school in or "Summer School (CMRA-2022)" et the Centre d'Etude Régional pour l'Amélioration de l'Adaptation à la Sécheresse (CERAAS) of the Senegalese Institute of Agricultural Research (ISRA) from 11 to 17 September 2022, in Thiès, Senegal. This short-term training on crop and cropping system modeling, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, brought together around 12 scientists and more than 30 international students, from all over the globe.

What would you like to achieve during this fellowship and afterwards?

I wish the project proposals we developed, thanks to the ODF program, get funded. That will be a big achievement for me because it will offer us the opportunity to buy more equipment for my institute. It will also allow me to be able to secure not only my position but also that of other technicians and students. I also hope the scientific paper we are writing, thanks to the ODFP, gets published. Moreover, I want to complete the clear standard operational procedure being developed, that will assist plant breeders of my institute to run drought experiments in managed stress environments that we are establishing. I want to maintain for longer period the partnership built between ILVO, IPBO, and ICRISAT. In addition, I also want this partnership to support student exchanges between the three institutions.

How did the Fellowship help improve your skills and how has it helped you achieve your goals?

The fellowship contributed to my career in many ways. It gave me the opportunity to meet many new people, partner with them, and thus grow my network. It offered me several soft skills training, necessary to strengthen my leadership skills but also hard skills training to enhance me professionally.

It allowed me to improve my project proposal writing skills, as the list of training courses that were offered to us, thanks to the program, included the “Horizon Europe Proposals Writing”. That training course provided us with many tips on how to write a competitive project proposal mainly for EU calls but also for others. From the beginning of the program to date, I have already been part of three project proposal development opportunities: one was not successful, one was preselected—we are yet to receive the final decision, and the last one is being developed.

How would you describe your experience in Belgium?

I had an amazing experience in Belgium. I had the chance to have an extraordinary supervisor—Dr Sarah Garré from the Flanders Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (ILVO). Though Sarah and I are from different backgrounds, she has kindly agreed to host me for my two and a half months’ stay in Belgium. She linked me with ease with all her colleagues from ILVO and elsewhere who could be of help to me. Socially, Sarah was just particular: she invited me for lunch several times, during which I used to update her on my progress. She included me in her crop modeling bi-weekly meetings, where I used to exchange and learn from others’ experiences. She even invited us (myself and other ODFP fellows) to the beach at the end of our stage when she was on holiday! Thanks to Sarah I met Irene and Peter, who are remote sensing scientists at ILVO. They trained me how to pre-process and post-process images collected using an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV).

Everyone at work, in the fellowship program (Laura and team), my roommates, and Belgians in general were exceptionally nice. This is very important as it contributes to make one’s stay more pleasant.

How do you intend to promote the activities of the fellowship?

I will promote this fellowship’s activities through social media - Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn. I will also share the program’s activities with my colleagues at work.

How does the Fellowship address the challenges faced by women in science and research?

In building our professional and personal capacities. The fellowship has given us the opportunity to learn self-leadership which taught us to think of ourselves, how to improve our personality, how to be self-confident, have self-esteem, and be more assertive. We were trained how to negotiate with success in any situation including our position at work, or salary. We were also trained to present with power in such a way to convey our key message and be able to capture people's attention.

How would the Open Doors fellowship promote equity in gender, diversity and inclusion in the research space in Africa?

The program can promote equity in gender diversity and inclusion in the research space in Africa by providing equal training and funding opportunities for empowering African women scientists.

What is your favorite book? What do you do in your spare time or to relax?

Fooling around with friends, shopping, listening to music.

How would you describe yourself in 5 words?

Pragmatic, humble, caring, extrovert, and ambitious.

Who is your role model?

Michelle Obama