OnePlanet FELLOWSHIP

Building a robust pipeline of scientists leading climate change research in Africa

Candidate Profile

Austin Tenthani Phiri

2019 One Planet Laureate Candidate

Position

Chief Agricultural Research Scientist

Institution

Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development (Malawi)

Country

Malawi

Education

PhD, Soil and Water Management, Tanzania

Mentor

Dr. Joyce Prisca Njoloma, Associate Scientist, World Agroforestry (ICRAF)

Research Area

Promoting adoption of climate smart technologies

He describes himself as a very resolute person. "When I am determined to do something, I do it and give it my best," he says.

Austin Tenthani Phiri was born nearly 40 years ago in Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi. His second name, Tenthani, means 'to burn,' in memory of his great grandfather. Phiri studied at the University of Malawi, Bunda College of Agriculture to pursue agriculture (forestry option).

He was lucky to be placed for employment immediately after graduating, as a Crops Officer under the Department of Crop Development (DCP) of the Ministry of Agriculture Irrigation and Water Development (MoAIWD) in Kasungu District, Central Malawi. He later on moved to the Department of Agricultural Research services (DARS), to serve as an Agricultural Research Scientist.

In 2006, he was informed about a three-year scholarship opportunity advertised by the African Network for Agriculture, Agroforestry and Natural Resources Education (ANAFE) and McKnight Foundation for a Master of Science program at the University of Malawi.

His application was successful. His project focused on how to improve maize yields through the combined application of the Tundulu rock phosphate and legume residues in Malawi.

He didn't stop at the master's level and a year after completing his master's studies, he applied for a PhD scholarship opportunity by The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) at the Sokoine University of Agriculture in Tanzania.

His project was on soil and water management: improving nitrogen use efficiency by maize through the pigeon pea groundnut intercrop maize rotation cropping system.

As he earned the degrees, he also earned promotions at his workplace. From an Agricultural Research Scientist, Phiri was promoted to serve as a Principal Agricultural Research Scientist, and later to serve as a Chief Agricultural Research Scientist (CARS) in soil fertility, plant nutrition, and agroforestry. He is currently based at Bvumbwe Agricultural Research Station in southern Malawi.

Phiri's research focuses on improving soil health for increased and sustainable crop production. He is promoting the use of legumes to improve soil fertility and increase maize productivity which is a staple food in Malawi.

Phiri has been promoting the use of legumes to improve soil fertility and increase maize productivity which is a staple food in Malawi. His most interesting research activity was the study he undertook in Chitedze in the central region of Malawi on improving nitrogen use efficiency by maize through the pigeon pea and groundnut intercropping and maize rotation system. He was able to see tangible results in terms of improving soil fertility and increasing yields. The abstract of his work was published in the 7th World Sustainability Forum.

"I am happy that I have contributed significantly. I proved that the cropping system can improve yields, and in turn improve food security and incomes of farmers," he said.

Phiri came across the One Planet Fellowship announcement via social media. He was attracted by the opportunity because it would support him in his efforts of mitigating the impact of climate change on agricultural productivity. He is currently working in nine districts in Southern, Northern and Central Malawi to catalyze processes to improve crop productivity under the Agriculture Sector-Wide Approach (ASWAp).

Specifically, in Central and Northern Malawi, he is supporting farmers in the seasonal wetlands to increase productivity to ensure food security during the dry season in a region where there is only one rainy season.

Phiri is currently mentoring an intern in his office on the cropping system using sorghum. He is hoping to pass the knowledge he gained from his study on the use of legumes in improving nitrogen efficiency in soils for maize production.

His biggest challenge is that since he is trained as a field researcher, he has to engage lab technicians on tasks requiring lab analytical skills. The challenge is in motivating them to generate quality data from the lab.

Austin Tenthani Phiri is one of the growing number of candidates selected to participate in the One Planet Fellowship. The One Planet Fellowship is a career development initiative that is building a robust pipeline of highly connected, inter-generational scientists equipped to use a gender lens to help Africa's smallholder farmers cope with climate change. The One Planet Fellowship is funded by the Bill &Melinda Gates Foundation, the BNP Paribas Foundation, the European Union and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) and Agropolis Fondation are jointly implementing the Fellowship.