



AMANI



THROUGH THE EYES OF AFRICAN YOUNG WOMEN LEADERS
VOLUME 3 | 2025



African Union



**AFRICAN
YOUNG
WOMEN
LEADERS
#AFYWL
FELLOWSHIP
PROGRAMME**





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ONE MILLION
NEXT LEVEL





About the AfYWL Fellowship Programme

The African Young Women Leaders (AfYWL) Fellowship Programme is a flagship initiative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the African Union Commission (AUC). The Fellowship cultivates a new generation of young, African women leaders to drive change towards attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063.

The Fellowship rests on three pillars:

- 1. Equipping outstanding young, African women leaders** with the leadership skills and experience to advance the SDGs and contribute effectively to decision-making in public, private and multilateral institutions at home and abroad;
- 2. Creating a diverse pool of talent** to enhance UNDP's organizational efficiency and contribute to more responsive and effective policies and programmes;
- 3. Developing a network of African young women professionals** that engages in promoting innovative, sustainable and inclusive development through South-South development exchange.

Since its inception, the AfYWL Fellowship has grown into a vibrant community of young African women leaders. The first cohort (2019–2021) brought together 21 fellows from 20 African countries, deployed across 20 UNDP offices worldwide. The second cohort (2022-2023) expanded this impact, comprising 38 fellows from 22 countries working in 26 UNDP offices.

This storybook highlights the journeys, achievements, and personal reflections of the 36 fellows of the third cohort (2024–2025). Representing 24 African countries, these fellows are serving in 24 UNDP offices across Africa, Asia, Europe and the United States, each contributing uniquely to advancing development and shaping a more inclusive future for the continent and the world.



Why AMANI?

Across languages and cultures, *amani* carries many meanings — peace, wishes, hope, faith, balance, courage. To some of us in the third cohort of the African Young Women Leaders (AFYWL) Fellowship, *amani* is a quiet strength held. To others it is the audacity to dream, a steady flame of aspiration, or a sunrise promising that something better is possible. However we describe it, *amani* reminds us that peace is both an inner state and a collective pursuit, and that our hopes for the future are inseparable from the hopes we carry for our continent.

Throughout our fellowship year, we have lived many versions of *amani*. We have navigated unfamiliar environments, embraced growth in all its discomforts and found moments of calm amid constant change. We have learned to trust our inner voice — that knowing which fuels authenticity, strengthens courage and encourages us to reach toward the “endless blue sky” of our wishes and dreams. As young African women leaders, *amani* has taught us to value quiet conviction just as much as bold action.

Within our sisterhood, *amani* has also taken on a shared, continental meaning. It speaks to the aspirations of a generation of African women who have long been underestimated, rising with grace and clarity to become the visionary leaders that Africa, and the world, urgently need.

In these pages, we reflect on our journeys, the lessons we have learned and the people who have walked with us. *Amani* reminds us that the achievements captured here are not only personal milestones, but stepping stones toward a more peaceful, just and flourishing Africa. It invites us to hold space for courage and compassion, to lead with balance and intention, and to carry hope wherever our paths may take us next.

As you read our stories, we invite you to pause and experience *amani* with us — the peace we seek, the dreams we nurture and the future we are determined to build.



Foreword by Ahunna Eziakonwa

UN Assistant Secretary-General,
UNDP Assistant Administrator and Regional Bureau for Africa Director

There is a word that carries power across Africa: AMANI. It means peace. It means hope. It means trust. But most of all, it means possibility.

This book is a reflection of that spirit. Through these pages, young African women - bold, brilliant, and unapologetically themselves - share how they see the world and their place in it. Together, their voices prove that leadership is not about titles or positions. It is about showing up with purpose, lifting others as you rise, integrity, solidarity and choosing grace in how you lead, listen, and live.

The African Young Women Leaders Fellowship Programme was born from a belief that when women lead, societies thrive. This collection proves that belief right. Each story is a glimpse into how change really happens, one idea, one act of courage, one woman at a time.

To you, the young women who have shared your stories in these pages - thank you. You have done something powerful. You have allowed the world to see leadership through your eyes. Not as perfection, but as progress. Not as certainty, but as courage in motion. Your testimonies remind us that leadership begins with authenticity. And this is what our world needs most today. You have written with honesty and heart, and in doing so, you have made space for others to find their own voice.

This Fellowship has never been only about professional growth. It has been a journey of self-discovery, of building confidence and connections that cross borders and cultures. You have forged bonds that transcend nationalities and languages. In each other, you have found mirrors of strength and reminders

that progress is most powerful when it is shared. That sisterhood is the heartbeat of AMANI, the assurance that even when the path feels uncertain, we are never alone.

Your journey through this Fellowship is a testament to what happens when women are trusted to lead. You have shown that excellence is not limited by geography, language, or circumstance. It is born from conviction, the conviction that Africa's story must be written by its daughters, in their own words, in their own light.

Never forget this: you are the future, you are the present, and you stand on the shoulders of proud African queens and warriors. You are already shaping policy, transforming communities, influencing institutions. And beyond that, you are shifting mindsets about what African women can do and who they can be. That is your power. That is AMANI in action. To every reader - whether you are a policymaker, an artist, a teacher, or a dreamer, these stories are also for you. They are an invitation to see leadership differently: not as something distant or exclusive, but as something we each carry within us. Africa's story is still being written. And these young women are among its most powerful authors. Their journeys show that when we lead with purpose and stand together in solidarity, AMANI - peace, hope, and harmony - is not just a dream. It becomes the way forward.

The Africa we are building will be defined by leaders who dare to lead with heart. You are those leaders. You are the story.



Audrey Bemananjara

From: Madagascar / Duty Station: Equatorial Guinea

“Amani is a quiet strength within, fostering peace, balance and courage in every step of one’s journey.”

My journey (so far!)

Some paths are clear from the start; others are carved step by step, shaped by conviction rather than certainty. The road to the AFYWL was the latter for me; a series of moments in which purpose outweighed comfort.

My work before the Fellowship ranged from integrating digital tools in French government spaces to navigating diplomacy at Madagascar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs; each experience refined a deeply rooted sense of responsibility. Through the Fellowship, I was able to work with UNDP in the Malabo office in Equatorial Guinea. I participated in the implementation of employment and youth programmes, which became less about policy and more about ensuring that real opportunities reached those who needed them most.

The Fellowship work was not without its challenges. In deeply structured environments, there is resistance to change. It is a weighty task to prove that young voices, especially women’s, belong. Meanwhile, like some of the other Fellows have said, I dealt with the quiet but persistent whisper of imposter syndrome. Adapting to different cultural and professional landscapes demanded not just endurance, but transformation. I had to learn to navigate struggles, without losing direction.

The AFYWL is not the destination, but a continuation of career path.



Addis Ababa, September 2024, AFYWL workshop. I gave a talk about my complicated relationship with resilience : how I love her, but also resent her. Because every time she showed up, it meant I was struggling.

Impactful milestones

One of my most meaningful experiences was being able to implement the Impulso Profesional programme in Equatorial Guinea—from holding conversations with stakeholders, to working on the initiative’s digital platform, to the selection process of the beneficiaries. I saw young graduates find work through the programme and was thrilled that the Malabo Youth Centre becoming a hub of possibility.

This joint initiative of UNDP and the Ministry of Government and Employment Promotion connects young graduates with job opportunities. But the true impact went far beyond simply providing employment. In the beginning, many young people in the programme appeared paralyzed by self-doubt, expressing fears that they could never meet the expectations of a professional workplace. This hesitation was not just about qualifications, it was also the deeper fear of not being enough. I soon realized that my real task was not in offering jobs, but in offering hope—hope that those young professionals could envision a future where they were not defined by their limitations.

The most profound moments for me occurred when I saw individuals take small steps toward believing in themselves. Each time a participant pushed past their own fears and reached out for an opportunity, it was a triumph, not just of landing a job, but of self-empowerment and internal transformation. This experience reaffirmed a simple but powerful truth: sometimes, the most impactful change begins with helping others see what they are capable of, even before they can see it themselves.

Lessons learned

One of the most important lessons I learned was the value of patience and adaptability in the face of uncertainty. In the different settings I encountered, I often had to adjust my approach to meet the unique challenges and cultural contexts. The ability to be flexible without losing sight of core principles became essential: it was a humbling reminder that what seemed unfamiliar or even unusual was simply part of this new everyday reality.

I had to observe and choose to understand, embracing the diversity of perspectives without assuming one way was better than another. This approach allowed me to adapt more fluidly and build stronger, more respectful relationships. Another key insight was the importance of collective effort.



I'd keep that picture with Lala: first, because I adore Lala. But also because it captures African women envisioning a bright future. To me, this photo smells like peace, success, and shared understanding.



These are my vangovango - traditional Malagasy silver jewels. In our culture, silver is sacred. Each piece was gifted to me by a family member. Vangovango carry deep meaning: they honour the past (once worn by freed slaves) and bless the future, as a tsodrano (blessing) from the giver.

While I’ve always believed in the power of collaboration, this fellowship reinforced how much can be achieved when diverse perspectives come together. The exchange of ideas, experiences and expertise allowed me to see solutions from different angles, making our collective impact greater than what could have been achieved individually.

I also learned how crucial it is to empower others, especially those who may not yet see their potential. Helping others discover their strengths and providing them with opportunities to lead themselves was one of the most rewarding parts of the fellowship. Leadership is not about where the journey begins, but about the lives changed along the way; it is not about standing out, but making space for others to rise.

Finally, I realized that growth isn’t always linear. Challenges, setbacks and moments of self-doubt are part of the journey.

Looking ahead

As I look ahead beyond the Fellowship, my aspirations centre on creating sustainable change through my career, particularly by supporting Africa’s growth and development.

I envision a future where I can continue to bridge the gap between policy and grassroots initiatives, ensuring that the voices of young people, particularly women, are heard and valued in decision-making processes.

My ambition is to work in environments that challenge me to think critically and creatively, where I can contribute to shaping policies that are both impactful and inclusive. I hope to focus on areas such as youth empowerment, economic diversification and digital transformation, driving initiatives that not only provide immediate solutions but also create long-term opportunities for future generations. I aim to strengthen my role as a connector between individuals, institutions and ideas, fostering collaboration that leads to meaningful progress.

My long-term goal is to leave a legacy of empowerment, guiding the next generation of leaders to think bigger, act bolder and create a more inclusive future.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

I would tell her that the AFYWL is a transformative experience that will challenge and inspire her. It’s not just about personal growth but about connecting with a network of like-minded women who are equally passionate about creating change.

The AFYWL provides a platform to amplify your voice, deepen your understanding of leadership and refine your skills in navigating complex challenges. It’s an opportunity to step outside your comfort zone, gain invaluable insights and contribute to meaningful projects that shape the future. It’s a journey of empowerment, growth and connection.

Tsy MANAIKY RESY
(I BOW TO NO LOSS)

“Tsy manaiky resy” fits me because I don’t give up easily. Even when things get tough, I keep showing up. It’s not about winning : it’s about staying true to myself and not backing down.



Arij Bardaa

From: Tunisia / Duty Station: Japan

“Every achievement starts as amari (wishes), while aman (peace) is the mindset we seek in uncertainty. May all who read this find a peace they never thought possible.”

My journey (so far!)

My childhood was filled with warmth and dreams in the bustling port city of Sfax, Tunisia. As a young adult, many of those dreams were realized when I attended university at L’Institut des hautes études commerciales de Carthage in my country’s capital, Tunis. My next achievement was an enriching early career at the International Organization for Migration, first at the field office in Sfax and later at the country office in Tunis. Along the way, I was surrounded by incredible people and learned so many things, including the value of patience and perseverance.

These skills helped me navigate the fellowship recruitment process; working with a team of recruiters who believed in me, eventually my skills were matched with a position in the UNDP office in Tokyo, Japan. Now, I’m excited to be contributing to the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) summit to be held in August 2025, engaging with youth through the TICAD framework and building partnerships leading up to the summit.

Challenges faced

The biggest challenge I’ve faced under the Fellowship has been realizing that it is both a beginning and an end. The moments of excitement, when I first asked myself, “Wait, I’m really going to Japan?” too quickly faded to the moment when I thought, “Is it really almost over?” These moments still linger, and they’re full of emotion.

Learning I was going to work and live in Tokyo was momentous. My heart still races thinking about it. In that moment, I realized I was officially an adult, about to make some life-altering decisions. Telling my parents, siblings, friends and all who supported me that I would be resigning from my job, saying goodbye to my flat mate, buying a new suitcase—well, it all felt so surreal. Even in those early days, I understood the true meaning of sisterhood as part of the AfYW. I knew that I wasn’t alone and there were 35 other young women around the African continent facing the same challenges and excitement as me.

In Japan I had so much to learn. I became familiar with a new culture and people, train lines and different foods, like ramen, sashimi and raw eggs. I got used to the small earthquakes, the time difference, long flights (15,645 kilometres!) and quick, effective meetings. And at the end of each day, I could always count on at least one colleague saying: *otsukaresama desu* (good job).

What triumphs did you experience and how did you grow?

The hard work on major projects seemed daunting at first but soon paid off. A triumph was discovering resilience within myself, the ability to adapt and move forward with depth and speed; I found a strength I never knew I had. I was able to step confidently into a next phase, while building lasting connections and friendships that will stay with me. Other triumphs include staying rooted by staying in touch with loved ones back home and breaking down stereotypes and prejudices about where I come from—that, too, was a victory.



A photo taken during the Tokyo International Conference on African Development, Ministerial Meeting in August 2024, while I was moderating the high-level segment of a thematic event.



With my fellow fellows from Egypt, Sudan, and Morocco in Addis Ababa during a Leadership Training, we were asked to bring a valuable object that represents our values. I brought my hiking stick, a representation of determination, work-life Harmony, and a reminder to discover the beauty of my duty station

Impactful milestones

As I've noted, my journey in Japan has been profoundly transformative, both professionally and personally. Upon arriving, I decided to climb Mount Fuji, my first venture beyond Tokyo. The climb was grueling, but the unwavering support of those around me left a lasting impression. It was on those slopes that I first heard *ganbatte*, a Japanese expression that embodies encouragement and solidarity, serving as a powerful reminder that we are never alone in our struggles. After Mount Fuji, I decided to climb Mount Echigo-Komagatake. It was equally challenging, and like the Mount Fuji experience, revealed the deep sense of community that defines this land.

My travels also took me to Awaji Island, where I discovered rural Japan's simplicity and beauty. In Awaji, I learned about *miokuri*, a heartfelt custom of waving goodbye until the person is out of sight, reflecting the deep respect for human connection in this culture.

My Japan travels reached their zenith in Hiroshima, at the Atomic Bomb Memorial, where the weight of history enveloped me. Standing there, amid the quiet remembrance of those lost and the resilience of a nation that rose from the ashes, I was filled with gratitude for every fleeting moment, for the preciousness of life itself and for the power of humanity to heal, rebuild and stand strong in the face of unimaginable adversity.

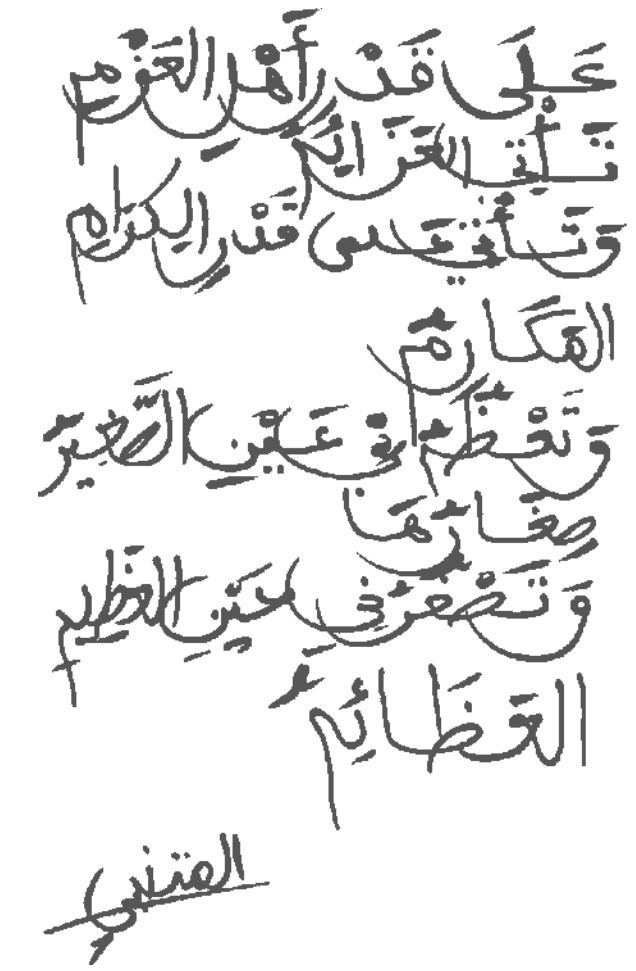
Lessons learned

In August 2024, I had the privilege of attending the TICAD Ministerial Meeting in Tokyo, my first significant exposure to TICAD as a multilateral platform. The meeting wasn't just another forum; it was a pivotal turning point, an opportunity to redefine Africa's partnership with the global community and Japan. It became clear that the foundation of this partnership would rest on mutual understanding, and in those days, I absorbed lessons that would resonate deeply, not just for the fellowship, but for life itself.

From this transformative experience, three key lessons stood out, shaping my approach to work, relationships and growth.



The sky and olive groves of Tunisia, a place perched at the crossroads of North Africa and the southern Mediterranean. I grew up here, learning and dreaming in its public schools and universities, where hopes blossomed. This land lives within me and tells the story of who I am. Before leaving for my duty station, I had a farewell under this very olive tree, beneath this vast, familiar sky, surrounded by my family, a moment of love and belonging I carry with me always.



Every school year, my dad would have us write lines of Al-Mutanabbi's poetry on our notebooks, a heartfelt tradition to inspire us to strive for excellence. Which translates to:

One's actions are shaped by the depth of their determination,
And the nobility of one's character is reflected in their deeds.
What may appear significant to those with little perspective is often trivial,
While what seems trivial to those with wisdom may hold great importance.

Throughout my life I have seen him live by these words and he pushed us to do the same. I am grateful for everything that he keeps teaching me.



Bignon Priscille Bijou Dossou

FROM: Benin / DUTY STATION: New York

"To me, amani represents a blend of hope and positive aspirations. Through amani, I see a bright future ahead with God's grace guiding the way."

My journey (so far!)

My journey to the AFYWL has been shaped by my education, leadership experiences and commitment to food systems, sustainability and nature-based solutions.

I was born in Dangbo, Benin, in the heart of the stunning Ouémé Valley and raised in Cotonou in a modest yet dignified home. My parents, my first role models, made immense sacrifices to provide my brother and me with access to quality education. My mother, a talented seamstress, gave up her career to focus on our studies, while my father took full financial responsibility for the family. Their resilience instilled in me a relentless pursuit of excellence, allowing me to consistently rank among the top students.

Earning a state scholarship, I pursued a bachelor's degree in nutrition and dietetics, graduating second in my class. An internship at the National Council of Food and Nutrition opened my eyes to the impact of food policies on public

health. My leadership journey took shape after attending a youth leadership conference, leading me to become Secretary General of an NGO focused on education and sustainability. In 2018, I launched a milling business, but a DAAD scholarship led me to a master's degree in bioengineering. Later, I co-founded a company in agroecology and waste valorization.

Blending fellowship programmes in leadership and entrepreneurship, I am constantly seeking new opportunities, and, in 2023, I became a Mandela Washington Fellow at Purdue University in the United States. Returning to Benin, I applied for the AFYWL in September. In March 2024, my "late birthday gift" arrived—an email confirming my selection.

Though I had other prestigious offers in South Africa and Germany, I chose UNDP, eager for my first experience in an international organization. Twenty days later, I landed in New York, ready for this new adventure.



Picture with my supervisor, Fatou, and my colleagues, Sylvie, Celine, and Rukayya, during a busy time at the UN General Assembly 79 in New York.

While constantly exploring new fields and curiosity has shaped my path so far, I now recognize the importance of clarity, direction and the value of having a mentor. Going forward, I am learning to focus on growth. The AFYWL has been transformative, helping me embrace opportunities with confidence and acceptance.

Impactful milestones

Stepping into front-office operations with UNDP Africa has been a transformative experience, challenging me to step outside my comfort zone (I used to combine administrative work and field missions in my previous occupation in a private company). My role at UNDP involved supporting the Director's meetings, coordinating high-level missions and managing daily administrative tasks. Given the dynamic nature of the Front Office, I learned that the smooth execution of activities across all units in the bureau requires proactively engaging with colleagues—both virtually and in person.

A key milestone has been organizing high-level meetings and actively participating in senior management team discussions. I also had the privilege of serving as the Regional Bureau for Africa focal point for events during the General Assembly, a role requiring strategic coordination and attention to detail. Through colleague feedback, I realized the tangible impact of my contributions. As someone who values servant leadership, knowing that my work supports others was truly fulfilling.

I was also able to collaborate remotely with the Regional Hub in Senegal, applying my food expertise to support the Food Value Chain Project Team. I am proud that my contributions to the cassava project and Empowering Women-led Small and Medium Enterprises (EWASME) Initiative helped small businesses in the rice value chain across Guinea, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

Balancing multiple responsibilities has been both challenging and rewarding, but the positive feedback outweighs the difficulties. Every experience strengthens my commitment to excellence, adaptability and impactful leadership.

Lessons learned

My Fellowship in New York has been a transformative experience, shaping me both personally and professionally. Working with a diverse, global team has broadened my understanding of multilateralism and international development, while living in one of the world's most dynamic cities has taught me independence, adaptability and resilience. This journey has been a continuous learning experience, offering invaluable insights into leadership, collaboration and self-growth.

One of the most important lessons I've learned is that knowing what you don't want is just as crucial as knowing what you do want. This clarity helps in making better decisions and staying aligned with long-term goals. I also developed a structured leadership approach, following the PLPE Action Plan: Planning, Learning, Preparation and Execution, which helped me prioritize and execute tasks effectively.



A family photo taken with the UNDP RBA HQ staff and the Administrator, Achim, during the RBA annual retreat. It was my first time meeting the Administrator in person.



Priscille and Emefa with the Deputy Secretary-General, Her Excellency Amina Mohammed. This photo was taken after the intergenerational dialogue organised by UNDP and UNFPA on the margins of Africa Day. It was my first time meeting her.

The AFYWL reinforced the importance of continuous learning, as I benefited from mentorship, skills-building opportunities and a dedicated learning budget. I have learned that to be an impactful leader, one must master their field, excel in their expertise and maintain a healthy balance between work and personal life.

Moreover, I've come to appreciate the power of strategic networking and collaboration, embracing optimism, humility and resilience as guiding principles. Most importantly, I have realized that as women, we can create fulfilling lives in which career success and personal happiness, including relationships, coexist harmoniously.

Looking ahead

The AFYWL has reinforced my belief that the private sector is the key to Africa's economic transformation. By combining entrepreneurship, leadership and innovation, I aim to create a future where agribusiness thrives, local economies are strengthened and African youth are empowered.

My short-term goal is to bridge the information gap in Francophone Africa, ensuring that young people have real-time access to opportunities and mentorship through my dedicated platform that I am actively refining. I will continue leveraging my expertise in food systems to contribute to projects enhancing food security, such as my work with the EWASME initiative.

In the medium term, I plan to expand my consulting expertise in bioengineering, post-harvest systems and agricultural value chains to drive food sustainability across Africa. I believe bioengineering is a game-changer, capable of reducing food losses and optimizing agribusiness operations and I aim to support agricultural entrepreneurs, SMEs and policymakers in implementing sustainable solutions. My long-term vision is to become a serial investor in agribusiness, fostering economic growth, job creation and entrepreneurship for African youth.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

Dear Sister,

I wholeheartedly recommend AFYWL. It will offer you global exposure, leadership development, networking opportunities and the chance to work on impactful projects. Importantly, the recruitment process is fair and transparent; I had no prior connections within UNDP, applied independently and successfully navigated the selection process.

Through the AFYWL, I have enhanced my skills, improved my level of English, completed various courses and earned certifications. The experience has been transformative, allowing me to discover new aspects of myself through diverse discussions, work experiences and interactions. My duty station has been a supportive family, providing invaluable support for which I am deeply grateful. If you are ready to challenge yourself, step out of your comfort zone and embrace growth on all levels, this Fellowship is for you!

Good luck!!!

I carve my path at my own pace



Daisy Olielo

FROM: Kenya / DUTY STATION: Ethiopia

“To me, amani means faith, an inner knowing that fuels dreams, authenticity and living in truth with God’s grace.”

My journey (so far!)

My journey to the Fellowship is a tapestry of moments that shaped my resilience, worldview and purpose. My professional life began with a bachelor’s degree in public health from the University of Sunderland. I graduated with first-class honours and received the Ede and Ravenscroft Prize for academic excellence. Fresh out of university, I felt hopeful and unstoppable.

I landed an internship at the World Health Organization (WHO) headquarters, assigned to the United Nations Interagency Task Force on Non-Communicable Diseases. Working alongside two remarkable young women professionals and inspired by their achievements, I decided to pursue a master’s degree in public health. However, the COVID-19 pandemic struck during my studies. I completed my degree in isolation, graduating with a sense of anti-climax but immense pride in overcoming such a challenging year.

Post-graduation, I received countless rejections from job applications. Undeterred, I took on another unpaid internship at the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for Road Safety. This decision became a pivotal turning point.

It was here that I found a professional home under the mentorship of the Road Safety teams, who became my collective source of guidance and strength.

For the first time, I was surrounded by colleagues, mentors and peers alike who genuinely believed in my potential. Through our collaborative efforts, I witnessed the profound impact of our projects in communities, a direct testament to the team’s dedication and expertise.

When I decided to apply for the AfYWL programme, I requested a reference letter from the team, which they provided with wholehearted support, championing my application with incredible encouragement. With the strong foundation they helped me build, coupled with my hard-earned qualifications and experiences, I was accepted and posted to UNDP’s HIV and Health Group Africa, within the Regional Service Centre for Africa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This journey has been anything but coincidental, it’s a testament to faith, perseverance and the transformative power of mentorship.



Impactful milestones

One of my transformative moments was representing the #WeBelongAfrica programme at the 2024 YouthConnekt Africa Summit in Rwanda; an opportunity made possible by a He4She leader. As someone who typically worked behind the scenes, stepping onto that regional stage to engage with partners pushed me far beyond my comfort zone. Witnessing young Africans drive meaningful change at such scale reignited my belief in what's possible.

This growth was amplified by the extraordinary sisterhood within our Fellowship. From day one in Addis Ababa, my colleagues (now sisters) became both anchors and catalysts. Their expertise across critical development areas—from gender advocacy and social protection, to communications, partnerships and the African Continental Free Trade Area—fundamentally reshaped my perspectives. Their solidarity during personal challenges, all while maintaining work commitments, showed me the power of collective resilience. Even in practical matters, whether finding the best hair salon in town or decoding the learning budget, their guidance underscored how community turns obstacles into opportunities.

The summit crystallized this lesson; whether coordinating events or advocating for youth priorities, I saw firsthand that transformative work thrives where trust and shared purpose exist. These bonds didn't just support my Fellowship journey, they redefined my vision of leadership and collaboration.

Lessons learned

The AFYWL has taught me the profound truth of the African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." The power of collective action and shared purpose is undeniable. This principle, echoed in UNDP's Leave No One Behind strategy, has become my guiding light.

I've learned that leadership is not about individual glory but about lifting others as you climb. The Fellowship has shown me the importance of Ubuntu, the belief that "I am because we are." In a world increasingly divided, this lesson is more relevant than ever. Together, we can achieve far more than we ever could alone.

The AFYWL also fortified my resilience. From navigating personal challenges to embracing professional growth, I've learned to face adversity with grace and determination. These lessons will stay with me, shaping my journey long after the Fellowship ends.

Looking ahead

Beyond the Fellowship, I am committed to continuing my public health journey, ensuring that the most vulnerable—especially young African women—are not left behind. I aspire to re-empower marginalized voices, creating opportunities that elevate and inspire. The AFYWL programme has reignited my



This photo captures me with my fellow fellow Lisa, deep in conversation about what leadership means to us during the leadership training in Addis. It was a rare moment where all 36 of us met for the very first time. Lisa became my assigned buddy during the leadership training, and her wise words, "there is no true coincidence," still resonate. She believed there was a reason we were assigned buddies, and to this day, we still fondly refer to each other as "buddy."

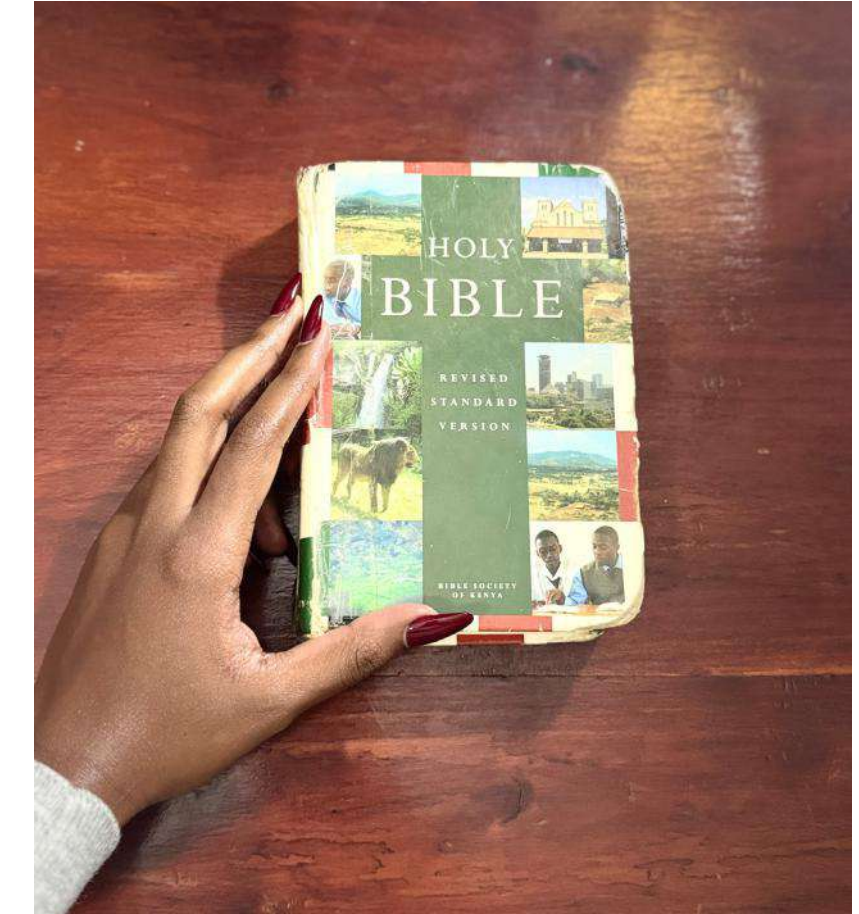


If I had to delete all my albums but keep just one photo, I'd choose this one. It was our first event together as the Addis-based fellows and the very first photo we took all together. A special shout-out to our expert communications colleague for capturing this moment for us!

belief in leadership as an act of defiance and hope (as UNDP's Ms. Ahunna Eziakonwa so eloquently put it). I intend to lead with courage, authenticity and amani (faith), contributing to a brighter, more equitable tomorrow for Africa.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

I'd say to her, "If at first you don't succeed, try again." I applied twice before being selected as one of 36 Fellows from a pool of 12,000 applicants. The AFYWL is more than a programme, it is a life-changing journey. Over 12 months, you'll experience joys, challenges and triumphs that will stretch you in unimaginable ways. The sisterhood, the personal and professional growth and the unique opportunities will leave you transformed. It is a chance to live authentically, embrace your purpose and become a true force for change. To the next cohort: take the leap. This journey will equip you to architect the Africa we want.



If I had to choose one valuable object, it would be my Bible. It's traveled everywhere with me. My faith, rooted in its pages, keeps me steady even in the most uncertain times.

*Dream boldly, act courageously,
and trust the divine purpose
that lights your way. ♥*

This mantra reminds me to pursue every ambition with daring action, knowing my faith anchors and guides me through any uncertainty.



Deo Gracias Pitimbaye Naitati

From: Chad / Duty station: Gabon

“To me, amari embodies the aspirations of young African women who have long been undervalued, rising to become the visionary leaders that Africa—and the world of tomorrow—so greatly need.”

My journey (so far!)

My formative years were deeply influenced by extensive family road trips across Africa; we traveled to Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda and Togo! These journeys instilled in me a profound appreciation for the continent’s rich diversity of landscapes, cultures and peoples. I deepened this connection through personal and professional experiences gained through living in six different African countries: Chad, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Rwanda, and now Gabon. This exposure has sparked and sustained my passion for cross-cultural exploration and discovery.

Throughout my upbringing, I observed how many local businesses in our communities struggled to survive and grow. Their challenges ranged from limited access to finance, market barriers and difficulties in product development, to regulatory constraints and inadequate infrastructure. I was eager to understand the root causes of these issues and, more importantly, to contribute to practical, sustainable solutions. Thus, I pursued a master’s degree in business administration, driven by that strong ambition to support the development of small- and medium-sized enterprises across Africa.



Taken during the African Young Women Leaders Fellowship training in Addis Ababa, this moment captures me in a room of brilliant, driven African women, learning, collaborating, and challenging ourselves to lead with clarity, courage, and impact.

As I advanced in my academic journey, I came to realize that these challenges are deeply interconnected and require multi-faceted, systemic approaches. I understood that creating meaningful change was not something to be achieved in isolation. This insight inspired me to pursue a career within a development organization—specifically the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)—with whom I share the vision of reducing inequality, ending poverty and fostering sustainable growth.

I first applied to the AFYWL during its inaugural cohort, but my application was unsuccessful. Refusing to give up, and with renewed determination and growth, I applied again for the third cohort and was selected. I was assigned to the UNDP Country Office in Libreville, Gabon, where I served as a Finance Officer. In this role, I was responsible for preparing monthly financial reports, processing invoices and acting as the finance and operations focal point for sister agencies. In addition to my core financial duties, I supported procurement processes.

Impactful milestones

A defining milestone in my journey wasn't a title or achievement—it was a shift in how I saw myself and what I believed I could contribute. After years of navigating academic success and gaining experience across sectors, I reached a point where I began asking deeper questions: How do I make real, lasting impact? Where does my voice matter?

That turning point came when I joined the AFYWL. It wasn't just about being placed in a very demanding role, it was about learning to navigate complexity, embrace responsibility and lead with purpose. The experience challenged me far beyond technical work: it asked me to be resourceful, to think beyond my comfort zone and to speak up in spaces where silence often feels safer.

But most importantly, the Fellowship reminded me that growth often comes in quiet, uncomfortable moments—writing a report that influences decisions, asking the hard questions no one else will, learning to listen before leading and showing up with integrity even when no one is watching. The AFYWL didn't just shape my career—it reshaped my mindset. I walked away not only more skilled, but more certain of the kind of impact I want to make: one rooted in service, strategy and a deep belief in Africa's potential.

Lessons learned

My most valuable takeaway from the AFYWL was the realization that while technical skills are important, resilience is equally essential. I learned to adapt to a fast-paced, high-pressure environment and to face challenges head-on. The experience not only strengthened my professional confidence and sense of purpose, but also revealed something more personal: that I am capable of far more than I once believed. I discovered an inner confidence and drive that continue to fuel my aspirations.

Looking ahead

I aspire to continue working in the development field, ideally with UNDP, other United Nations agencies or other development organizations. My primary motivation is to ensure my work contributes to meaningful change beyond economic gains. I'm passionate about supporting sustainable development, driving tangible positive impact and contributing to a better world. My focus is particularly on sub-Saharan Africa, a region of immense potential yet facing significant challenges.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

This AFYWL is an intense and demanding experience, requiring a high level of dedication and commitment. Be prepared to be pushed far beyond your comfort zone, but hold on tight—the rewards are unparalleled.



Of all my photos, I'd keep the one of my mother, not for its beauty, but for its meaning. In her face, I see strength, sacrifice, and love. That image grounds me. It reminds me who I am, where I come from, and the woman who shaped my path.



The Bible. There are specific verses that kept me going during hard times like Philippians 4:13, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me', and they became personal affirmations of my own potential. So when I look at my Bible, I see a history of triumphs, lessons, and reminders of how far I've come.

"She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs without fear of the future"
Proverbs 31:25

Proverbs 31, verse 25 reminds me to lead with grace and courage, grounded in who I am, and unafraid of what lies ahead.



Dina Omer Hamid Ismail

FROM: Sudan / DUTY STATION: Thailand

"In my language, amari means "wishes," but to me, it holds a deeper meaning—it's the strength to believe in yourself, the unwavering faith that empowers you to lift your head high toward the endless blue sky and declare, I will achieve all those wishes and dreams."

My journey (so far!)

I don't believe it was mere coincidence that I came across the AFYWL. For a long time, I thought it was. But now, I truly believe this Fellowship found me. It was the culmination of a journey that began long before I even knew such an opportunity existed—a journey fueled by resilience, belief and the unwavering support of my family, who always told me I was meant to lead.

In 2023, as a Sudanese girl facing the horrors of war, survival was supposed to be my only priority. Safety—both physical and mental—was what everyone expected me to focus on. The thought of seeking opportunities for personal growth seemed almost unimaginable. But African women defy norms and rise beyond expectations. I stumbled upon the fellowship announcement on Facebook. Something inside me whispered, "What do you have to lose?" So, I applied.

The process wasn't easy, especially given my circumstances. Electricity and internet access were daily struggles. I vividly remember walking long distances to the nearest water station just to charge my laptop, negotiating with the staff to let me use their power every day. Eventually, it became unsafe to stay in one place and my family was forced to move from one city to another. To others, we were seeking safety. But to me, each step was a move closer to my dreams. I completed my application on the road, driven by an unshakable determination—the spirit of an African woman who refuses to be defined by her circumstances.

Through it all, I wasn't alone. My parents stood beside me, believing in my potential. And, of course, it was the grace of God that carried me through. This fellowship isn't just an opportunity; it's proof of resilience, hope and the power of unwavering belief.



In that moment, I wasn't just smiling, I was feeling. I felt deeply connected, genuinely happy, and, most importantly, like I finally belonged. That photo captures the exact moment I realized I was in the right place, surrounded by a sisterhood that embraced me for who I am. It's more than a picture—it's a reminder of love, belonging, and purpose.

In 2024, I began my fellowship at the UNDP Regional Hub of Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok, Thailand, working within the health team. My work focused on strengthening health systems, improving the health workforce and advancing health equity—ensuring that underserved and marginalized communities have access to the quality care they deserve. From reviewing policy frameworks to supporting the integration of inclusive digital health tools, I had the privilege of contributing to efforts that challenge systemic barriers and promote fairness in health outcomes. Every day reminded me of why I fought so hard to be here: to use my voice, my skills and my story to build systems that leave no one behind.

Impactful milestones

"I'm not alone." It might sound cliché, but it's a truth I've come to embrace after conquering one of my oldest fears—loneliness. This fellowship catapulted me out of everything familiar: I went from the warmth of my family, the comfort of friends and the embrace of my beloved Sudan to a new continent, a

new country and a language I barely spoke. For the first time, I faced loneliness head-on. At first, I resisted, complaining and struggling against it. But then a realization hit me—was it loneliness I feared, or was it being alone with myself? Slowly, I took small steps, learning to sit with my thoughts, listen to my own voice and trust my instincts.

Day by day, I began to discover parts of myself I'd overlooked—the flaws, the insecurities, but also the resilience and strength that had always been there. And through this journey of self-discovery, I found something even more powerful: sisterhood. I crossed paths with women who understood my fears before I could even voice them, who accepted me wholeheartedly, and, without realizing it, helped me grow and heal. I'm not alone—not within myself, and certainly not in this beautiful circle of strength and solidarity.

Lessons learned

This fellowship has been more than just an opportunity; it has been a confirmation of what I've always known but often doubted. For years, I questioned whether leadership and making an impact on health and human rights were truly my path.



This photo shows me wearing my traditional Sudanese Toub during leadership training in Addis Ababa. It was a powerful moment where I met my sisters fellow young African leaders all united by purpose, learning, and the shared dream of building a better future for our communities.



I chose my golden rings because gold represents me. I shine bright, carry strength, and hold timeless value. They also symbolize the rich heritage and wealth of my country, a reminder that even through hardship, our worth and brilliance never fade.

Was I really meant to speak up when voices fell silent? To advocate for those overlooked by policymakers? Every moment I spent in this fellowship answered those questions with a resounding yes. It reaffirmed that this is where I belong—working at the intersection of health and human rights, amplifying marginalized voices and driving meaningful change.

More than just validation, the fellowship sharpened my leadership and advocacy skills. I learned not just to speak but to strategize, collaborate and navigate complex systems with resilience and empathy. I found my voice—not hesitant, but strong and assured. Today, I stand as a confident leader, no longer questioning if I'm on the right path but embracing it wholeheartedly. This experience didn't just shape my professional journey; it transformed how I see myself and my ability to make a difference.

Looking ahead

As I look beyond this fellowship, one thought keeps echoing in my mind—my country needs me, my continent needs me. The lessons, skills and connections I've gained through this experience are not just personal achievements, they are tools I believe will be useful to my community. I want to channel everything I've learned into driving progress and prosperity, particularly by strengthening my country's health system.

My ambition is to lead and support initiatives that expand access to quality healthcare, ensuring that no one is left behind, especially the most vulnerable and underserved communities.

This fellowship has shown me the power of leadership rooted in empathy and action. I am determined to be part of solutions that not only address current challenges but also build resilient, inclusive systems for the future. I see myself collaborating with changemakers, advocating for policies that prioritize health equity and implementing projects that turn vision into reality. Ultimately, my hope is to contribute to a healthier, more just society—one where access to healthcare is a right, not a privilege. This journey has equipped me to make that hope a reality, and I'm ready to take the next step.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

I would say, "Do you want to embark on a journey that will challenge you, shape you and reveal strengths you never knew you had?"

This Fellowship isn't just an opportunity; it's a transformative experience that will push you beyond your comfort zone and awaken a better, bolder version of yourself. It's where you'll conquer fears, break barriers and expand your horizons. If you're ready to step closer to your goals, to grow both personally and professionally, and to find a community of inspiring women who uplift and empower each other—then this fellowship isn't just what you want, it's what you need.

The sky is the limit

A motto that fuels my journey. It reminds me to dream boldly, push boundaries, and never settle. No matter the challenges, I carry this belief as a compass guiding me toward purpose and possibility.



Diouma Kamara

From: Côte d'Ivoire / Duty station: Zimbabwe

"Amani means 'wishes' in Arabic. To me, it represents the audacity to hope, daring to dream and the promise of a brighter future."

My journey (so far!)

From a young age, I witnessed how trade could transform lives. I saw how a small business, given the right opportunities, could elevate entire communities. This realization ignited my passion for economics and policy, fueling my desire to explore how market access can drive sustainable development. It is this unwavering belief in the power of trade and opportunity that led me to pursue a career centred on economic empowerment.

For that, I needed a degree in economics and statistics, a choice that sharpened my analytical skills. But the real growth happened when I applied these skills in the field conducting research, preparing policy briefs and implementing projects that focused

on breaking down market barriers for small businesses. Each experience revealed the profound impact that these actions can have on real lives fueled my determination to create solutions that open doors for underserved communities.

One of the most transformative moments in my journey came when I saw the results of my work firsthand. Supporting women- and youth-led small enterprises to access markets wasn't just about business, it was about empowerment. Seeing these businesses flourish, knowing that my work helped open a path to success, solidified my belief that market access is the key to unlocking economic growth and equality.

Impactful milestones

One of the most meaningful milestones was when I met a group of women entrepreneurs who had struggled for years to access markets due to financial and logistical barriers. Their determination was inspiring, but they lacked the resources and knowledge to scale their businesses. I worked closely with them to help navigate these challenges, connecting them with networks and providing guidance on improving their market strategies. The turning point came when one of the women, who had previously faced constant setbacks, was able to secure her first major order. The pride and joy on her face as she shared the news with her community was unforgettable. More than just making a sale, this businesswoman gained a newfound confidence and belief in her ability to succeed.

This moment deeply impacted me. It reminded me that real empowerment isn't only providing tools or resources, it's about enabling others to believe in themselves and their potential. The ripple effect from that success spread through the community, reinforcing my belief in the power of access to markets as a catalyst for lasting change.



Lessons learned

This fellowship has been a journey of unlearning and relearning. I came in with technical expertise, but I quickly realized that real impact goes beyond numbers: it's about people, context and community-driven solutions.

One key lesson was the power of listening. Initially, I believed that data alone could tell the full story. However, engaging with communities and stakeholders taught me that stories and lived experiences are just as valuable as statistics in understanding needs and shaping policies.

I also learned the importance of adaptability. Development work is not linear; challenges arise and solutions must be dynamic. Whether it was adjusting project strategies or navigating cultural nuances, I became more agile when problem-solving.

Most importantly, I discovered that impact is not measured by grand gestures but by small, consistent efforts that empower individuals. The biggest change happens when people are given the tools to create their own solutions. This insight has reshaped how I approach my work, ensuring that inclusion and sustainability remain at the heart of every initiative.



This photo captures a powerful moment of learning, where local women lead the value addition process, turning fresh produce into export-ready goods. It reflects the heart of AfCFTA: empowering communities, boosting trade and driving inclusive growth from the ground.

Looking ahead

As I look beyond this fellowship, I see a future where economic empowerment and inclusive policies drive sustainable change. My ambition is to continue bridging the gap between research and real-world impact, ensuring that data-driven policies reflect the voices of those they serve.

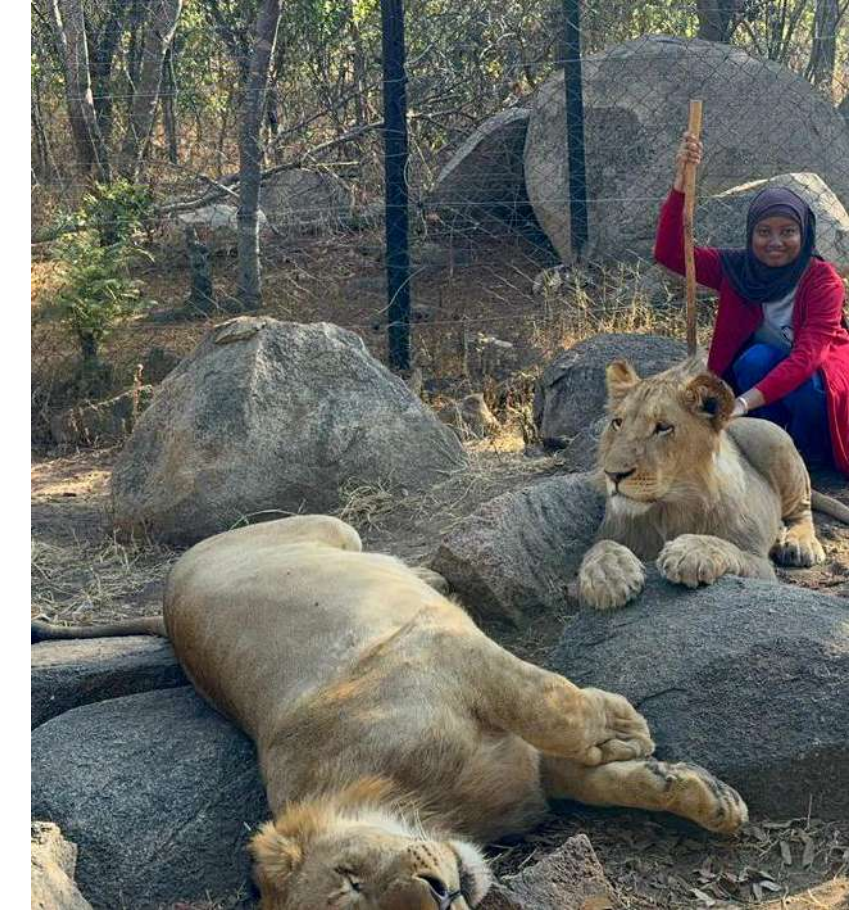
I aspire to work at the intersection of economic policy and development, shaping programmes that empower women, youth and marginalized communities. Through policy briefs, project implementation and advocacy, I want to contribute to creating systems that enable small businesses and entrepreneurs to thrive.

I plan to deepen my expertise by engaging in further research and policy analysis, particularly in areas related to financial inclusion, international trade and small business development.

More than anything, I hope to be a changemaker, one who not only analyzes economic trends but actively works to build resilient, equitable communities. I am still at the beginning of a lifelong commitment to impact.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

This Fellowship is a game-changer for anyone eager to create real impact. It offers a unique blend of hands-on experience and deep learning. It will challenge you to think critically and creatively about sustainable development. You'll gain invaluable skills in leadership, policy analysis and community-driven solutions. It's not just about professional growth, but also about personal transformation. The fellowship encourages you to push your boundaries, collaborate with diverse thinkers and engage in meaningful work that truly makes a difference. If you're ready to learn, grow and contribute to lasting change, this is the perfect programme for you.



"Live a life of purpose, leave this world with no regret."

To me, this quote is a call to live with purpose and intention, to make every moment count. I want to build a legacy rooted in impact, integrity, and compassion. It's not just about success, but about significance. Leaving behind a world better than I found it, with no room for regret.



Edith-Casely Ndidi Fordjoe

From: Ghana / Duty station: Nigeria

*“To me, amani means hope:
the hope we carry in our hearts
for the future we can create for Africans.”*

My journey (so far!)

I still haven't found the origin of this quote, but for now, I'll claim it: "If you can be 'anything,' why not be many good things." This has become a guiding principle for me—one that emerged from years of struggling with self-doubt and pressure to fit into a single mold.

Growing up as a "smart kid," I was nudged toward specific paths. While I liked being seen in a positive light, it also sparked a quiet rebellion inside; I wanted to be more than the one thing everyone sees. Thus, despite being advised to associate only with the "well-behaved" and studious, I embraced both books and social life and gained wider experience by making many great friends from all walks of life.

My childhood wasn't the easiest. I was raised in a single-parent household, but I had an empowered mother. She showered us with love and instilled in me the value of education and resilience. At times, I struggled with direction. My interests were vast, which often felt overwhelming. But one constant remained: every passion I pursued was rooted in a desire to help others. This drive stems from my mother, whose unwavering resilience shaped my outlook on life. She grew up in Accra in a large family, living in poverty and facing hardships, but she never allowed circumstances to dictate her ability to uplift those around her. She instilled in me the belief that challenges are not roadblocks but opportunities, that one must try, persist and make a difference.



This photo captures my first major moderation and speaking engagement in a long time. It was an incredible experience facilitating intergenerational conversations, led by Ms. Elsie Attafuah, as she hosted Patoranking, UNDP Regional Goodwill Ambassador, to inspire and empower youth.

I haven't had the most predictable early career path, ranging from working in marketing consulting to non-profits, but I always focused on moving forward. Looking back, I'm proud of the risks I've taken, the hard things I've done, despite my doubts, and the paths I've forged. And then, I found myself as an African Young Women Leaders Fellow working on youth empowerment, community-level innovation, intra-Africa trade and women's empowerment in the UNDP Nigeria Country Office. Wild!

Impactful milestones

I experienced many high moments that affirmed my journey, but none quite like the day the team and I met Ms. Josephine, a young dressmaker during one of our many project visits. She told us about how UNDP's intervention had changed her life. She was lucky to have secured a contract to produce 37,000 medical scrubs just when UNDP had provided solar energy to run a garment production hub at a Common Facility Centre.

Josephine subcontracted over 250 people to meet this demand, creating jobs and a cash infusion in her community. I will not forget hearing a man she recruited from northern Nigeria telling us that for the first time in his life he felt like a complete man. Having earned over a million naira (about \$600), he was able to buy his first piece of land, that for him symbolized dignity and security.

In that moment, I thought: This is what I live for; this is what we should all live for. We must create spaces where people don't just survive but thrive. Seeing tangible change, feeling its weight in people's lives, I knew I had finally landed in the right place.

Lessons learned

The AFYWL has been a masterclass in adaptability, resilience and embracing growth. From day one at UNDP Nigeria, I immersed myself in diverse portfolios—trade, partnerships, innovation, energy and youth programmes—stepping in wherever needed. With no set path, I learned to be agile, versatile and open to challenges beyond my comfort zone. Success wasn't about expertise in one area but about adaptability and a willingness to learn.



If I had to keep just one photo, it would be a family picture of my mother and sisters at Cape Coast Castle in Ghana. It's a powerful reminder of resilience, history, and the bond we share - standing together in a place that tells the story of strength and survival.

One of my biggest takeaways is the power of relationships. I was fortunate to have mentors, sponsors and friends who supported my growth, offering guidance and encouragement in moments of doubt. Their belief in me kept me pushing forward.

This experience also reinforced the importance of resilience. Frustration and uncertainty were inevitable, but bouncing back, pivoting when needed and embracing change defined my growth. As I move forward, I carry not just professional growth but a deeper understanding of leadership, adaptability and perseverance.

Looking ahead

Looking into the future, I hope to continue working at the intersection of policy, sustainable development and women and youth empowerment, ensuring people are equipped with the mindsets, networks and opportunities to thrive.

But, more than anything, I want to be the kind of leader who pays it forward—who creates space for others to rise, just as those before me have done. I will stay open to learning, embrace new challenges and remain a sponge, soaking in lessons that shape me into the leader I aspire to be. This fellowship was a launchpad, and I am ready to take flight.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

The AFYWL will change your life—literally. It is the perfect opportunity for any young African woman who wants to grow, lead and make an impact. You will be challenged, stretched and empowered in ways you never imagined. From engaging in high-level policy work to gaining hands-on experience in development programming, every moment is a chance to learn and evolve.



I thought really hard about this one and it has got to be my phone. It holds everything—connections to family and friends, access to my bank accounts, my journal, my Bible, and even my Snapchat. It's my lifeline.

Beyond professional growth, you will gain a powerful network of mentors, sponsors and brilliant peers who will inspire and support you. If you are looking for more, want to be more, see more and do more—this is for you!

If you do not ask, the answer will ALWAYS be NO!!!

This is my personal reminder not to let fear or self-doubt hold me back. I've learned that being bold enough to ask—no matter the odds—can open unexpected doors. You miss every shot you don't take! "If you do not ask, the answer will always be no." It's a reminder that self-doubt is often our biggest barrier. Being bold and curious enough to try - despite the odds - opens doors we never imagined. You miss every shot you don't take!



Emefa Duah

From: Ghana / Duty station: United States of America

*"Start with a wish (amani),
have a vision and
develop a plan."*

My journey (so far!)

I completed both my undergraduate and graduate studies at the University of Ghana, Legon, where I majored in statistics while also studying computer science. My passion for working with numbers made statistics the perfect choice. However, after graduation, reality hit, knowing that the skills taught in school and the demands of the job market were vastly different.

Facing unemployment, I engaged in volunteer work to stay active and while looking for an opportunity to add value to myself to be job-ready. In 2023, my life took a turn when I applied and got accepted into a fully funded data analytics training programme with Blossom Academy in Ghana. This gave me hands-on experience that prepared me for the job market. As part of the training, I secured a six-month internship with Beacon Power Services. At the end of the internship, I was offered a full-time role as a Data Analyst.

I was beyond excited when I received a congratulatory e-mail confirming my posting to the United Nations headquarters in New York to work with the People Analytics team in the Office of Human Resources at UNDP. I jumped and screamed with joy while my husband watched, sharing the moment. I had been on an exchange programme during my undergraduate studies with Barnard College, Columbia University, in New York in 2015 and had hoped to one day go back, so this opportunity was a dream come true.

I accepted the offer because of the countless opportunities it presented and took the risk of relocating to the United States to begin the one-year Fellowship.

What challenges have you encountered?

The biggest challenges I faced with the Fellowship were the struggle to find accommodation and, more importantly, the emotional toll of being separated from my husband and daughter for the first time. While I was fully aware during the application process that the Fellowship required me to be away from my family, the reality of the distance hit much harder once I left. I knew if I had been posted to another African country, it would have been much easier to visit. Being in the United States alone without them was incredibly tough, but I remind myself that this was a sacrifice for the future; for my family, my career growth and my financial independence.

Fortunately, I had some contacts in New York, allowing a relatively smooth transition and meaning I had a place to stay upon arrival and someone to pick me up from the airport. However, after a few months searching for my own place, I realized just how immensely challenging it is to find reasonable housing in New York. I wondered if the other fellows in different locations were having trouble settling in.



AFYWL Leadership Training at Addis Ababa Ethiopia, where I had the privilege of sharing my knowledge on how to use social media to advance one's career as a youth



During the fellowship, I experienced a unique and meaningful sense of sisterhood. This bond, built on shared experiences, open conversations about challenges and successes, and genuine support, is something I will cherish for life.

Impactful milestones

The most rewarding aspect of the AFYWL was the incredible people I met along the way. Their support made my stay in New York stress-free and memorable; I call them "destiny helpers."

The privilege of working within the United Nations system was an incredible opportunity and contributed tremendously to my career growth. My placement was perfect, allowing me to collaborate with professionals from various backgrounds which significantly improved my communication and technical skills and pushed me to adapt to different perspectives and work styles.

I was also given the amazing opportunity to live in the United States again and have several travel experiences within the country as well as work trips to Ethiopia and Rwanda.

Impactful milestones

In September 2024, I experienced a defining moment in my journey; I attended the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) 2024 for the first time. I had the opportunity to witness world leaders from across the globe gather in one place. Volunteering at a side event organized by the MasterCard foundation, I gained a seat to impactful discussions shaping global policies.

One event on financial inclusion at the United Nations Secretariat became an unforgettable milestone. I found myself surrounded by some of the most influential figures of our time—Bill Gates, Ajay Banga, Queen Máxima of the Netherlands and many others. Sitting in that room, listening to these global leaders speak, I had a moment of deep realization: I was exactly where I was meant to be. This Fellowship has opened doors I never imagined possible and granted me access to spaces I would never have entered otherwise.

But perhaps the most unexpected gift of the Fellowship has been the sisterhood; this is a network of 35 other incredible women who have become my pillars of strength. Thank you to UNDP for believing in young leaders like us and creating this transformative opportunity.

Lessons learned

The world is evolving every second, thus we always need to be on the lookout for opportunities to continually add value to ourselves. Don't be too comfortable. Don't be afraid to fail. It's an asset to be better.

Throughout this fellowship, I am constantly stepping out of my comfort zone, learning on the job and taking on new challenges that accelerate my growth. The pace at which I have gained new skills in such a short time is truly remarkable and has made this journey both exciting and fulfilling. I am always ready to ask questions to understand any task and not afraid to ask for help if I have no idea how to proceed on a given task.

There is always something new to learn each day and that is how I know I am at the right place. As this fellowship is about to end, I ask myself what's the next opportunity? My goal is to keep on adding value to myself.

Looking ahead

This fellowship has given me the confidence, the international exposure and skills to take on leadership roles with a more strategic and people-centred approach. Moving forward, I see myself stepping into roles where I can drive impact,



Life is full of uncertainties and during dark times the only thing you can fully rely on for encouragement and advice is the Bible. It provides timeless wisdom, strengthens faith, and offers a moral compass in navigating life's challenges.

foster collaboration and mentor others in their own growth. My success must also contribute to the success of others; that is the real impact.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

Stay alert! The next cohort application will be opening soon—don't miss out! Opportunities come once, and if you snooze, you lose. Give it your best shot! Seek advice and guidance throughout the recruitment process, from application to selection, and even beyond. This fellowship is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that can open doors to even greater possibilities. Take the leap!

"For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak and not lie. Though it tarry, wait for it, because it will surely come; it will not tarry."

Habakkuk 2:3



Fanto Vida Foday

From: Sierra Leone / Duty station: Kenya

“Amani means harmony within and around us—where peace fuels progress and collaboration sparks transformative change. It’s unity in action.”

My journey (so far!)

My journey to the AFYWL was one of purpose, resilience and continuous learning. Coming from Sierra Leone, I always wanted to be part of Africa’s transformation. I was passionate about creating opportunities that empower people, particularly in Africa. When I joined the Fellowship, I saw more than one opportunity—I saw a doorway to impact, to learning and to being part of something bigger than myself.

Being deployed to the UNDP Kenya Country Office as a Partnerships Officer was both exciting and challenging. Navigating the complexities of resource mobilization, stakeholder engagement and donor relations required adaptability and I had to climb a steep learning curve. One of my biggest challenges was balancing expectations, both personal and institutional, while ensuring that I delivered meaningful contributions in a fast-paced environment.

But with challenges came triumphs. I played a key role in updating the Partnerships and Communication Action Plan, refined donor engagement approaches and supported the evaluation of 35 startups out of 688 applicants for the Timbuktoo Greentech Accelerator Programme. Seeing my work translated into action was incredibly fulfilling.

Beyond the technical skills, this experience shaped my confidence and ability to lead conversations at high levels. It reinforced my belief that young women can be powerful change agents when given the right platform.



This photo was taken during the launch of the UNDP Green Tech Hub under the Timbuktoo Greentech Accelerator Programme — one of the biggest projects I've worked on. I was proud to represent UNDP and contribute to a vision that supports African climate innovators and sustainable solutions.

Impactful milestones

One of my most memorable moments was leading the preparation of donor profiles for 15 countries to assess their priorities and align them with UNDP Kenya's Country Programme Document 2022-2026. Initially, it felt like a daunting task—synthesizing complex data, aligning donor priorities and ensuring profiles were both strategic and actionable. But as I delved deeper, I realized these were more than just documents; they were telling a story—about UNDP Kenya in a way that spoke to shared values and long-term impact and were important communication tools.

The real impact for me wasn't just completing the profiles but the moment I presented them to colleagues and saw the content being integrated into engagement strategies. Knowing that my work would shape real partnerships was deeply rewarding.

That experience reinforced a valuable lesson for me: meaningful impact isn't always about big, visible successes. Sometimes, it's the unseen moments—the research, the strategy, the thoughtful positioning—that create real change.



If I could only keep one photo, it would be this — me, teaching kids in underserved communities how to build games using Scratch through the Civic X project. It captures my heart for innovation, inclusion, and empowering the next generation with tools to dream bigger.

Lessons learned

The AFYWL has been a masterclass in diplomacy, collaboration and self-leadership. One of my key lessons has been the power of strategic patience—understanding that meaningful change in development takes time and persistence. I've learned to appreciate the nuances of partnerships, the importance of trust-building and the art of aligning diverse interests toward a shared vision.

Another critical lesson has been the importance of adaptability. No two days in the Fellowship were the same, whether drafting concept notes or navigating internal processes. Learning to pivot, remain solution-oriented and embrace uncertainty has strengthened my problem-solving skills.

Most importantly, I learned that leadership isn't about titles but about taking initiative, adding value and being intentional in every engagement. This experience has solidified my confidence in contributing meaningfully to Africa's development journey.

Looking ahead

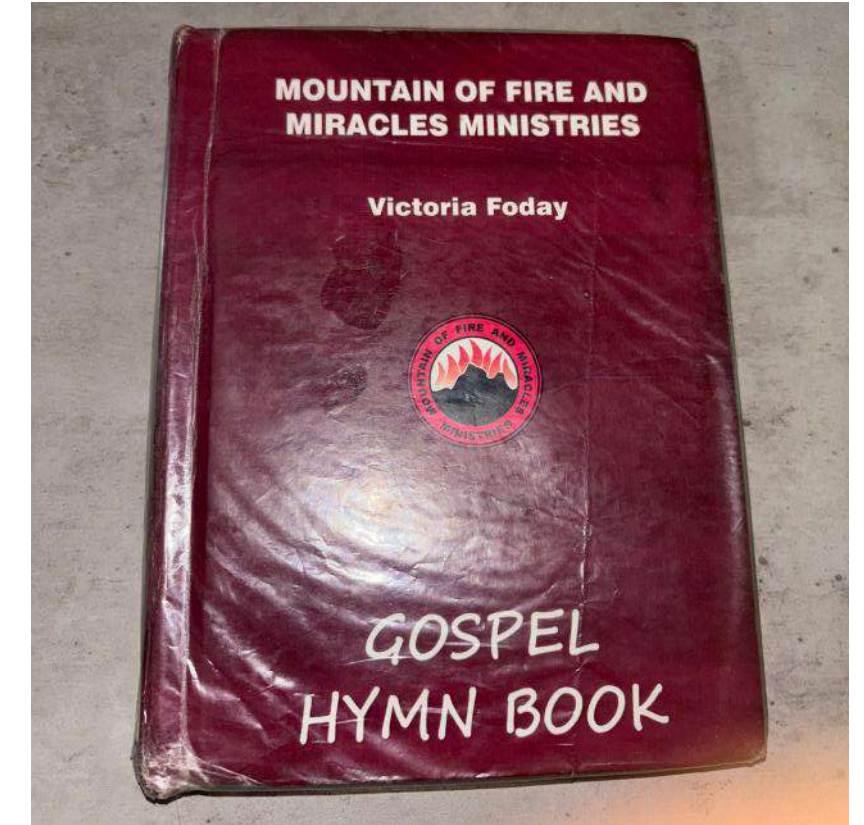
Beyond the Fellowship, I am committed to deepening my impact in Africa's agricultural sector by bridging the gap between farmers and AgriTech solutions. I see a future in which innovative, climate-smart solutions can transform agricultural productivity and resilience across the continent.

My immediate goal is to refine an agriculture-related business idea and pilot it back home in Sierra Leone, leveraging the networks and skills I gained. In the medium term, I aspire to scale the model across Africa, creating an ecosystem where technology-driven solutions are accessible to farmers who need them most.

At the same time, I want to continue working at the intersection of partnerships, innovation and sustainable development—whether within international organizations, policy spaces or impact-driven enterprises. This Fellowship has expanded my vision of what's possible, and I am excited to channel that into tangible action.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

The AFYWL programme is more than just a professional opportunity—it's a transformational journey. If you're passionate about driving change in Africa, eager to gain hands-on experience in development and ready to challenge yourself, then this is for you. You'll grow, build meaningful networks and gain invaluable skills in diplomacy, leadership and problem-solving. Most importantly, you'll leave with a clearer sense of purpose and the confidence to shape Africa's future. If you get the chance, take it—you won't regret it!



My late Grandma's hymn book is very valuable to me because it holds the songs she sang every morning — songs that anchored her faith and now comfort mine. The worn pages and handwritten notes remind me of her strength, warmth, and unwavering trust in God.

"Faith does not make things easy, it makes them possible".
Luke 1:37

This quote reflects my quiet strength —my ability to keep showing up, even when my circumstances are uncertain. It mirrors my belief that with faith, what feels impossible becomes a path forward. I lead with hope.



Grace Divine Ongtouek Baketa

From: **Cameroon** / Duty station: **Turkey**

“To me, amari signifies to ‘be calm, relax, let go and enjoy the ride.’”

My journey (so far!)

I vividly remember reading all in one night about the extraordinary women from the second cohort of the African Young Women Leaders Fellowship Programme. I felt inspired but also questioned why anyone would choose me. I thought to myself, “I don’t have their experience. I didn’t study at prestigious schools or abroad like some of the other women.” Yet here I am among incredible young women, writing the storybook of the third cohort.

Growing up in Cameroon, a country with high poverty rates and limited employment opportunities, I never imagined I could reach this point. I managed to pay my own school fees through various online jobs. Fortunately, Cameroon’s bilingual system gave me an

advantage: I was able to do a significant amount of translation work for various companies, assisting them in training their artificial intelligence systems. This is how I continually financed my education up to the master’s level.

When I applied for this Fellowship, despite my bachelor’s degree in business management and master’s in international relations, I was very much at entry-level, as I lacked extensive work experience. However, I refused to let that limit me. Despite facing numerous rejections while applying for various opportunities, I did not give up, and here I am the Communications and Reporting officer for UNDP in Turkey!

Impactful milestones

I lost my dad to COVID-19 in 2021. This tragedy gave me the urgent need to be a pillar of strength for my four younger siblings. I wanted to ensure they didn't feel discouraged nor would I allow our loss to be a reason to lead unfulfilled lives. Most importantly, I wanted to hold onto the values my father fought so hard to instill in us. I remember him coming home with stories and pictures from his work, showing us how his NGO installed electricity and water pumps to ease the life of people living in the northern part of our country. On her side, my mum is the strongest woman I know. She is a passionate teacher who did everything to live her dream of owning her own school. She always says it is her school that provides the best education; it might be a bold statement, but looking at all the work she puts in and all her sleepless nights, I believe it could be possible. I gained fearlessness and perseverance from both of my parents.

I feel like my efforts with my siblings was worth it. Just recently, my younger sister told me, "Grace, when I look at you and your journey, I know nothing is impossible for me." It filled me with pride. My goal is to continue being a source of inspiration for my sister and siblings as they pursue their own dreams.



This photo was taken during my first mission in Montenegro, at the Generation Nexus Youth Leadership Conference, in front of a visual I designed for the event. I was part of the organizing team, and the best part was meeting young people driving change in their countries and regions.



First mission with the Generation Nexus RBEC Youth group. Was I stressed? Absolutely.

Work milestones through the AFYWL include preparing what I called the Istanbul Regional Hub Monthly Pulse newsletter, a first for me. I attended the Youth Summit in New York City and organized a side event for the Ukraine Country Office. I also organized a Generation Nexus workshop in Montenegro, where I had the privilege of standing beside the Youth Minister of Montenegro (the picture hangs on my mum's fridge). This is just to name a few of the exciting moments I experienced through the Fellowship.

Lessons learned

With the support I received from my peers, I learned the power of vulnerability. I discovered that sharing personal struggles can foster deeper connections, build authentic relationships and strengthen trust within a group.

I found that working with individuals from around the world spotlighted the strength found in different perspectives. Collective efforts can lead to impactful outcomes, reinforcing the value of teamwork.

I likewise found that stepping out of my comfort zone and participating in challenging activities, such as public speaking, notably at the Generation Nexus Youth Empowerment Summit in Montenegro, built my confidence and even revealed hidden passions.

Setbacks, like rejections and failures, also served as valuable lessons in perseverance, and I came to understand that resilience is about moving forward with renewed strength and learning from all experiences.

Looking ahead

The Fellowship was a unique opportunity and experience that significantly lifted my career aspirations. I will now aim for greater heights than I imagined before and I feel excited and confident about my next steps.

While I may not have a concrete plan, I am actively applying for new opportunities. I expect more rejections—I've been through that before—yet I am filled with a renewed sense of confidence. I believe wholeheartedly that fulfilling opportunities are ahead, and I know the key to success is persistence.

If you're reading this, feel free to check my LinkedIn profile!



I would keep this photo with my mum in Istanbul, under the Galata Tower. We share the same smile, the same nose and the same joy. Living that moment together was one of my biggest goals, and I'm proud I made her proud. Here's to more memories like this.



I chose this photo of a lamp I designed during a team building activity. It reminds me how fortunate I was to work with such a great team at Istanbul Regional Hub. I had voted for the boat activity and still think it would have been better, since handwork doesn't seem to be my strength, but the lamp now sits proudly beside my bed.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

Don't be scared! Don't let the idea that it's too high for you get into your head and never think you're not good enough. The Fellowship is designed for people like you—passionate and determined individuals looking to grow. It's a unique opportunity to learn, connect and challenge yourself. Go for it!

"Nobody claps for you twice"
for doing the same thing—
Not even yourself

This reminds me not to settle or get too comfortable, and to never lose myself in my achievements but keep striving for growth and renewal.

Grace Mwende Kalii

From: Kenya / Duty station: United States of America

“In Kiswahili, my mother tongue, amari means peace. Amari reminds me that this Fellowship brought me so much peace by bringing my dream to life and affirming that my dreams are valid.”

My journey (so far!)

I first learned about the AFYWL programme in the fall of 2021. I was in my final semester of my master’s degree at Osaka Jogakuin University searching for opportunities within the United Nations system, particularly in development, when I came across the second cohort’s call for applications. I applied—but didn’t get in. However, in January 2022, I secured a paid internship with the Office of Human Resources at UNDP in New York. Since the world was still navigating the pandemic, I worked remotely from Japan, managing a 14-hour time difference. For six months, my days were a crazy balancing act—coursework, a part-time job and my internship at night.

Between 2022 and 2023, I was borderline obsessed with getting into the AFYWL programme. I set up Google alerts and my phone’s screen saver was my vision board, with the AFYWL logo at the centre. Every day, I saw that image—a constant reminder of my goal. For a year, I practiced essay questions, honed my interview skills and prepared diligently. Then, one night at 2 a.m., I woke up suddenly, checked my phone and there it was: the call for the third cohort!

I whispered a prayer, went back to sleep and started my application the next day. This was the moment I had been waiting for. And this time, I got in and was posted to New York City. I had hoped for Ethiopia or Equatorial Guinea, but God had different plans for me.



Youth Connekt 2024 in Kigali Rwanda, where I had the privilege to moderate two discussions on the future of Africa's youth. My future!

Stepping into my role as a Global Coordinator at the UNDP Bureau for Policy and Programme Support (BPPS) this past year has been both exciting and daunting. It was unlike anything I had done before. When I first read my Terms of Reference, well, I had to Google it, only to find little information. It took me six months to fully gain confidence and familiarize myself with the complex work of all the policy teams I supported.

Thankfully, my supervisor, Juliana Gargiulo, guided me. Working in the Headquarter Directorate's front office was fast-paced, intense and high-stakes; this is where crucial decisions are made. Initially, imposter syndrome crept in, but I reminded myself that I was chosen for a reason. Being there as a young African woman taught me that I needed to prove myself and be the best I could be otherwise I risk being overlooked. So, I showed up every day, ready to excel, learn and lead. My confidence soared.

Impactful milestones

On my first day, I saw a colleague in the Singapore Global Policy Centre moderating the BPPS town hall. As I like public speaking, I knew I wanted to do the next one, and in June 2024, I did. My journalistic training came in handy and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I served as moderator a second time during YouthConnekt 2024 in a session covering Agenda 2063.

Beyond moderation, I played a key role in ensuring smooth operations during the busiest month of the office: September's

UNGA79. A single mistake could inconvenience anyone, from our Assistant Secretary-General to an array of member states. That experience reinforced the value of teamwork.

Lessons learned

The first lesson I learned is that I have something significant to contribute to the world. Being selected from over 12,000 applicants was a testament to my potential and told me that I have unique qualities.

However, the second lesson quickly followed: I am not all that special, in the sense that my journey did not exist in a vacuum. The Fellowship could easily have been given to someone else, equally capable and qualified and eager, and that realization humbled me. Thus I now understand the importance of continuous self-improvement and the necessity of giving one's all: I gave 150 percent every day at work!

Having been posted to the UNDP headquarters, I had the opportunity to collaborate with individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures. I witnessed the dedication and diligence of everyone at the bureau working together to create a well-oiled machine. This was both inspiring and a learning experience. It reinforced my understanding of the power of teamwork and the importance of contributing to a collective mission.

The AFYWL has given me more than just professional growth—it has given me a lifelong sisterhood, a reminder that we rise higher when we lift each other up.

Looking ahead

I have many ambitions for my future! In the long term, I aspire to run a kindergarten back home in Kenya that follows the Japanese model of operation because SDG 4 has to be achieved, one way or another, and requires all hands on deck. Fun fact: While in graduate school, I worked as a part-time kindergarten teacher and it was incredibly fulfilling, (and tiring!) but I absolutely loved it.

In the next few years, however, I want to immerse myself in governance, specifically at the country level. The year at BPPS ignited a fire within me to work in democratic institutions and processes. As I learned about policies at the headquarters level while simultaneously witnessing the resilience of youth in Kenya standing up for democracy, I realized the crucial role every individual plays in a democracy.

Governance is central to shaping equitable societies, and I am inspired to advocate for democratic values, ensuring every voice is heard in decision-making processes.

With Africa as the home of the youth, I am particularly motivated by Agenda 2063, which envisions a prosperous and united continent driven by its young people. My ambition is to be one of those young leaders changing Africa. After all, this Fellowship is for African women leaders—I need to live up to that name! The knowledge and insights gained during my Fellowship have truly equipped me to be a catalyst for positive change in my country and beyond.



I don't have many childhood photos, which makes this one all the more precious—it's the only one of my mum and I together. Sometimes, life feels surreal; I can't believe I'm living my wildest dreams. For that, I thank God and her. I won't explain further.



My mother's sweater—probably older than me—travels with me everywhere. She may no longer be here physically, but in every journey I take across the globe, she is with me.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

I would tell her to go for it; the AFYWL is a once in a lifetime opportunity for growth, networking and impact. I'd also advise her to be realistic about what comes next. In today's shifting political landscape, with multilateralism evolving, this Fellowship might best be seen as a steppingstone, not a final destination. Make the most of every opportunity, build meaningful connections and develop skills that will serve you beyond the United Nations system. Be ready to adapt, explore different paths and embrace whatever comes next with confidence and an open mind! I would also say that if you'd like to gain 32 other sisters, who no matter where life takes you, you will never walk alone, give it a try.

*"I don't like to gamble, but if there's one thing I am willing to bet on, it's myself!" - Beyoncé
Muende!*

This was my yearbook quote in undergrad, and it still rings true—I've always bet on myself. After all, I am all I have. Many thanks to Madam Beyoncé for that inspirational quote.



Inutu Katoti

From: Zambia / Duty station: Angola

“To me, amani means peace, embracing growth, change and new environments while finding tranquility in life’s evolving journey.”

My journey (so far!)

“Growth begins at the end of your comfort zone.”
– Neale Donald Walsch

I sought an opportunity that would allow me to express myself fully, expand my potential and help me grow both professionally and personally. With a master’s degree in electrical engineering and renewable energy systems from the University of Leeds, England, after transitioning from physics, I was eager to contribute to the global energy transition. When I came across the AFYWL programme and met the criteria, I knew I had to apply. After a rigorous process, I was selected.

In December 2023, I was informed that I had made the roster, but my duty station remained unknown. I assumed I would be placed far away from home, perhaps in Kenya, at the closest. To my surprise, I was assigned to Angola. I embraced the journey and made my way to its capital city, Luanda.

Living and working in a Portuguese environment was unfamiliar. My first task? Learning how to say “Eu não falo Português” (I don’t speak Portuguese)! While language was a challenge, it taught me that communication is more than words—intention, effort and connection speak volumes. Over time, Portuguese words began to come naturally. Food had a comforting familiarity: Zambia’s ‘nshima’ (maize dough served as a staple food) became Angola’s ‘funge’ (cassava dough served as a staple food) and I discovered a new favourite—roasted plantain and groundnuts, a twist on Zambia’s roasted cassava.



UNDP Angola's Solar for Health initiative installed a solar PV system in Luanda at a medical depository to ensure reliable refrigeration for critical medicines and vaccines. A team from our Country Office visited the site to assess the progress. I was examining the solar panel specifications to determine the system capacity.

The UNDP Angola Country Office was incredibly welcoming and supportive, reaffirming the vital role of a strong support system. I was privileged to have found such a strong support system in a new location, underscoring the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." This environment provided a sense of belonging and affirmation, reinforcing the understanding that leadership thrives within a supportive community.

Impactful milestones

While working to enhance TRAC2 activities, I contributed to an initiative that procured solar ovens to improve the socioeconomic status of women in two provinces outside Luanda. Despite my background in developing and optimizing energy systems, I recognized that Africa's primary challenge remains basic energy access. This realization led me to prioritize electrification and development. As beneficiaries experience tangible improvements, more refined initiatives can be implemented for greater impact.

Lessons learned

One of my greatest personal milestones has been adaptability—learning to adjust seamlessly to different situations. I have come to see adaptability as a practical form of consistency, refining existing resources to create value while evolving to meet new demands. This mindset has enabled me to exceed my expectations and maximize opportunities.

Learning to adapt to a new country taught me that I can thrive anywhere, and that outcomes will be shaped by my attitude, response and decisions. I also learned to create a healthier work-life balance. In Angola, I observed the local cultural emphasis on rest after hard work, a lesson I embraced.



The Monumento da Paz (Monument of Peace) in Luena, Mozambique, stands over 30 m tall, with two arms lifting a white dove. It commemorates the April 2002 signing of the Luena Memorandum, ending Angola's civil war. Visiting this powerful monument, mere hours from my home in Zambia, was something I could not forget.



This photo with Ms. Ahunna Eziakonwa, UNDP's Regional Director for Africa, during her visit to Angola bookends my journey as a Fellow: from the moment her impactful initiative launched my fellowship in Angola to meeting her in person at my duty station - representing both personal achievement and the powerful support behind it.

Prioritizing downtime allowed me to fully engage in moments beyond work, leading me to take extra hobbies, such as dance classes, which deepened my appreciation for Angola's rich and diverse culture.

I learned to embrace the continuous evolution we undergo daily. Each experience contributes to a transformation into the individuals we are to become. Embracing this mindset, I recognize that each day offers an opportunity to learn, grow and inch closer to the person I aspire to be.

Looking ahead

This experience deepened my commitment to fostering inclusive and supportive environments for new team members. By extending the same warmth and support I received, I aim to cultivate a culture where individuals feel valued and empowered, something that is very much needed for team effectiveness.

I am committed to breaking through proverbial glass ceilings, challenging entrenched norms and paving the way for others. I am eager to embrace roles that not only challenge me but also serve as beacons of possibility for others, reinforcing my belief that I am meant for such impactful positions.

Participating in the AFYWL was instrumental in shaping me into a leader Africa envisions—a leader who embodies the continent's aspirations and drives meaningful change. The Fellowship not only honed my skills but also deepened my understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities within the African context. I am reminded of the words of Koffi Annan: "You are never too young to lead, and you should never doubt your capacity to triumph where others have not."

My commitment to continuous learning and leadership development is unwavering. I recognize that each role I undertake offers a unique platform to effect positive change and contribute meaningfully to communities. By engaging with diverse perspectives and embracing lifelong learning, I aim to amplify my impact, ensuring that my leadership journey is both transformative and inclusive.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

If you're looking to elevate your career, push your limits while growing personally and make a global impact in sustainable development, the AFYWL programme is for you! It offers hands-on experience in international development, exposure to high-level policy discussions and opportunities to work on transformative projects.

You'll grow through cross-cultural learning, mentorship and collaboration with experts. Plus, it strengthens leadership, problem-solving and networking skills while providing valuable insights into United Nations systems and global policy implementation. This Fellowship will empower you to drive meaningful change in your career and community. Don't miss this life-changing opportunity!

Turning passion into power for a sustainable planet



Irene Merveille Ngamy

From: Cameroon / Duty station: Togo

"For me, amani embodies both hope and peace, representing a desire for a tranquil, harmonious and positive future."

My journey (so far!)

My journey to the AFYWL was a blend of intentional growth and serendipitous discovery. It began in my undergraduate years when I was reading geography at the University of Buea, Cameroon, sparked by an internship with a local development organization that worked in the field of local community development and sustainability. As a project intern, witnessing firsthand the tangible impact of development work in land use mapping for local communities ignited a passion in me. I was captivated by the dedication of social development professionals and their commitment and dedication to local community upliftment. This experience solidified my desire to contribute meaningfully to this field.

Driven by this newfound purpose, I actively sought opportunities to expand my knowledge and experience. I pursued a master's degree in project management and took various internships to continue my growth. Each experience provided valuable insights and skills, reinforcing my commitment to development work. When I came across the AFYWL, it stood out like a beacon, perfectly aligning with my aspirations. The prospect of working with UNDP and contributing to the SDGs and Agenda 2063 was incredibly exciting. The rigorous application process was a test of my determination, and the acceptance letter sending me to Togo to work as a programme analyst, felt like a validation of my efforts. When I told one of my sisters about the AFYWL she was overjoyed and reminded me of a conversation we had years ago, when I had expressed my dream of working for the UNDP one day.

The Fellowship itself presented a unique set of challenges. Adapting to the UNDP system, a complex world of its own, required a steep learning curve. Understanding the organizational structure, mastering bureaucratic procedures and effectively communicating within the environment demanded patience and perseverance. Togo's climate and culture were vastly different from my own, demanding significant personal adjustments. The intense heat and unfamiliar customs initially felt daunting, but I embraced these challenges as opportunities for growth. All in one year, I learned to navigate bureaucratic processes, embrace cultural differences and adapt to new environments.

Impactful milestones

This may sound trite on its surface, but among my triumphs was organizing and animating office coffee sessions. This initiative fostered camaraderie and collaboration and reinforced the importance of nurturing a team. This helped me understand the importance of team bonding and improved my event organization and facilitation skills.

I equally carried out focused group discussions and key informant interviews on the field, which significantly improved my public speaking skills, gave me confidence and helped me become a more effective communicator.



Lessons learned

My on-the-job experiences, coupled with the need to be adaptable and resilient, were transformative. I discovered inner strengths and grew immensely. The experience was a powerful affirmation of my faith and a reminder that perseverance and dedication can lead to the fulfillment of dreams. It gave me renewed hope for the future, knowing that God is always ahead of me, guiding my path.

The Fellowship was a masterclass in diplomacy, teaching me the value of restraint and thoughtful communication. I learned how to navigate complex situations with grace and tact, ensuring that my actions and words were always considerate and impactful. Moreover, the AFYWL provided me with a renewed sense of purpose. I now understand the importance of my role in contributing to my community and beyond. I am more determined than ever to use the skills and knowledge I gained to make a positive impact. Ultimately, I have emerged from this experience with a deeper understanding of myself and a commitment to driving meaningful change.

Looking ahead

Looking ahead, my hopes and ambitions beyond the AFYWL are deeply rooted in the desire to create lasting, positive change in my community and beyond. The skills and knowledge gained through this Fellowship will be instrumental in implementing sustainable solutions that address local challenges.



In this photo, we're dancing during a coffee break. It shows that joy and connection thrive even in busy workdays. Moments like these strengthen team spirit, build trust, and remind us that meaningful work includes laughter and shared humanity.

To achieve this, I aim to establish a non-governmental organization in the fields of education and social development dedicated to tackling social challenges, with a focus on women's interests. I am passionate about fostering resilience and adaptation within my community, ensuring that we are well-equipped to face future challenges.

Moreover, I am committed to empowering other young women to become leaders. By sharing the insights and experiences I gained, I aim to inspire and mentor the next generation of female leaders, helping them to realize their potential and drive meaningful change. I believe that by working together and supporting one another, we can create a brighter and more equitable future for Africa.

In addition, I aspire to contribute to broader regional and continental initiatives that align with the SDGs and Agenda 2063. By collaborating with like-minded individuals and organizations, I hope to amplify our collective impact and contribute to the sustainable development and prosperity of Africa as a whole.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

Dearest, you'd be perfect for AFYWL. This programme is an incredible opportunity to develop your leadership skills and contribute to Africa's development. You'll gain hands-on experience with UNDP, working on projects aligned with the SDGs and Agenda 2063. The AFYWL emphasizes resilience and adaptation, equipping you to tackle challenges and thrive in dynamic environments. Plus, you'll join a powerful network of young African women leaders. It's a chance to boost your career, make a real impact and connect with like-minded individuals. Check it out!



"With Christ as the foundation, be the change that you wish to see in the world."

This motto affirms that true impact begins with a divine calling. I strive to ground my actions in Christian values and faith, which empower me to move beyond observation and act in service of those most in need. It is a daily commitment to reflect God's love through ethical, tireless work that upholds dignity and inclusive change for all.



Ivana Maria Godinho Manuel

From: Angola / Duty station: Cabo Verde

“To me, amari means a sense of calm, hope and a reminder to always strive for peace and balance.”

My journey (so far!)

I preface by acknowledging the irony of writing about my “personal” journey by speaking almost exclusively about other people. The reality is that I am where I am because of the people I have been lucky to cross paths with. From dedicated, compassionate elementary school teachers in New York City to friends I made during secondary school in Lisbon, Portugal, who taught me the meaning of patience and loyalty, I have been shaped by those around me.

In equal measure, what led me to the AfYWL was randomly meeting, unbeknownst to me at the time, my chosen sister, who sat by my side during late-night library sessions in Lancaster, England as we navigated endless pages of case law and legal theory. Her support was nothing short of essential in getting me through my bachelor’s degree and she has since become my go-to dance partner, one of my emergency contacts and a trusted application proofreader.

I earned my master’s degree in international law and development in Nottingham, England—a city that was new to me, during a time that was uncertain for everyone. My support system made the experience not only manageable but meaningful, helping me create cherished memories even amid a global pandemic. A key part of that support has been my boyfriend, who to this day is locked in a fierce (but friendly) competition with my brother and mom for the title of my biggest cheerleader.



One of my most precious memories of this journey has been the Leadership Training in Addis Ababa, primarily due to the incredible, inspirational group of young women who I can now call my sisters.

As you can see from all my travels, my personal journey to this Fellowship has been shaped by finding home in unfamiliar, temporary places and by the people who helped carve out my forward paths in life. My last stop before the AFYWL was Luxembourg, where I worked at the European Commission as a trainee and later as a legal assistant. There I had the privilege of working with a team that truly embodied leadership, blending intelligence with compassion and a constant eagerness to learn and support one another.

This Fellowship has since offered me a chance to venture into a new area. Coming from a legal background, stepping into the world of communications, partnerships and resource mobilization was initially intimidating. Yet, it has proven to be a rewarding experience, one that has not only broadened my skill set but also sharpened my ability to communicate effectively, persuasively and concisely—skills that will undoubtedly make me a better legal professional.

Impactful milestones

Soon after arriving in Cabo Verde to work as a Public Information and Reports Officer for the Joint Office of UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF, I accompanied the Resident Representative to the 50th anniversary commemoration of the liberation of the Tarrafal Concentration Camp.

Built by Portuguese dictator António de Oliveira Salazar, the “Camp of Slow Death” housed Portuguese political prisoners as well as Angolans, Cabo Verdeans and Bissau-Guineans who rebelled against colonial rule. Standing among high-level diplomats, within close proximity of Heads of States, was nothing short of daunting.

It was profoundly moving to stand on the grounds of the concentration camp, surrounded by people from across the world. Even more powerful was hearing the testimony of a survivor and discovering the name and photos of a relative of mine, Agostinho André Mendes de Carvalho (“Uanhenga Xitu”), among the listed prisoners of the camp. What resonated most deeply was the glaring reminder of the importance of accountability, protecting human rights and cultivating a world where fairness and empathy prevail.

Amid the chaos and turmoil of the world, it can sometimes feel easier to lean toward a defeatist attitude; yet this event will remain with me as a strong reminder of the power of resilience and hope.

Lessons learned

At the heart of my Fellowship journey, “learning” has undoubtedly been the central theme, extending far beyond gaining a deeper understanding of development issues or deciphering the countless acronyms that often accompany them. It has been a process of self-discovery, growth and adaptation. One of the key lessons I learned is that while taking pride in my work is invaluable, perfectionism can sometimes hinder progress.

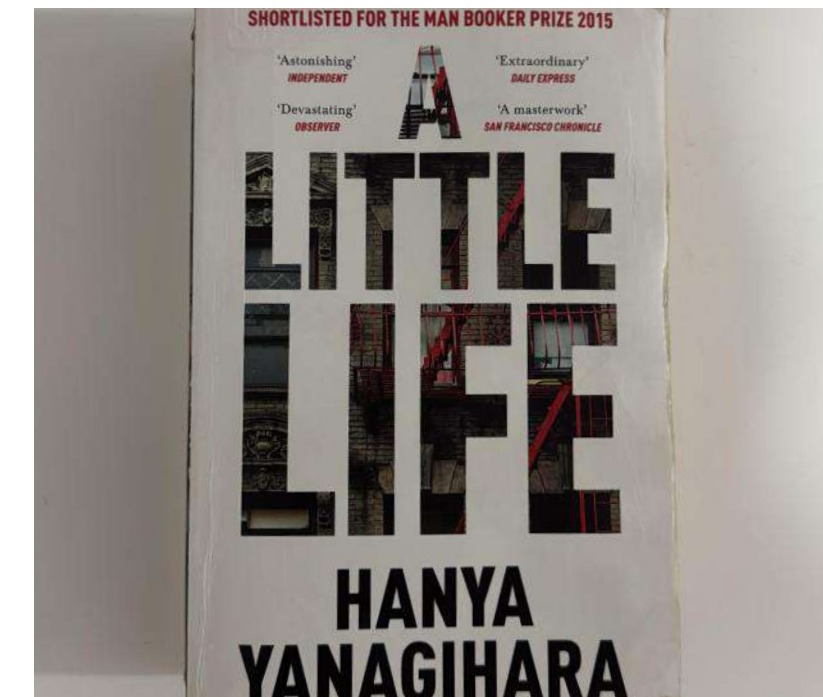
Throughout this experience, I also learned the significance of knowing when to adapt and when to hold firm in my beliefs and convictions. At times flexibility is necessary for growth, but there are also moments where staying true to one’s principles is the most important thing. Equally, this Fellowship has reinforced the importance of having confidence in my potential and trusting in my ability to navigate unfamiliar terrain, whether it’s stepping into a new field or engaging with new concepts.

In the end, the AFYWL has been a meaningful opportunity for growth in many ways: not only in terms of professional development but also in the kind of person I want to become—someone who continuously learns and grows, both in their career and in life.

Looking ahead

Looking ahead, my ambition is to harness my legal expertise, newly acquired communication skills and enhanced understanding of multilateralism to embrace roles that challenge me and allow me to make a tangible contribution to sustainable development and the promotion of human rights.

I aspire to deepen my ability to connect with diverse individuals and integrate ideas from various fields—such as economic diversification, equitable education and the empowerment of women—to cultivate collaboration that drives meaningful and lasting progress.



I was the child who asked for books for Christmas instead of dolls. Later, I pursued a degree that demands extensive reading and started a charitable organization to provide quality education to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. A book perfectly symbolizes my curiosity, dedication to learning, and passion for sharing knowledge.



Amid all the temporary homes, adventures, and headaches, my mom and brother have been my two constants through it all.

In a world filled with uncertainty, I believe that fostering unity through diverse perspectives is key to shaping a future where positive change is not just possible, but inevitable. Along the way, I hope to make people smile, be it through my awkward jokes or by offering a snack, while demonstrating that embracing your authentic self is inherently empowering.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

Seize the opportunity and apply. Forget about the odds, have faith in yourself and remember that the improbable is still possible. The AFYWL will give you the chance to be in a work environment that is not easily accessible. It will be challenging but equally as rewarding. You will find yourself in unexpected places, surrounded by those who are older, with longer CVs and a larger presence.

It may be daunting but know that you too can and are shaping the future. Know that you do not need to be the loudest nor most extroverted to push boundaries, evolve and lead.

Dream big, Work hard, Be kind



Khawla Benyahya

From: Morocco / Duty station: Senegal

"Amani is Morocco's golden sunrise and Africa's whispering breeze—a hymn of resilience, justice and an unwavering devotion to a world where all souls may thrive."

My journey (so far!)

Rabat, Morocco, where I was born, is a city in which every ancient medina alley whispers history and every zellige mosaic tells a tale. Growing up surrounded by this ancestral spirit shaped me early on and sparked a lifelong desire to build bridges between our ancestral legacies—African, Amazigh, Arab, Muslim—and the future ahead. My path has been anything but linear, shaped by curiosity, resilience and a quiet determination to create meaningful change.

I first stepped into international development through a job at the French Development Agency, first supporting climate and governance initiatives locally, then contributing to governance and peace-building programmes across the French overseas territories and the Horn of Africa. Each experience widened my lens and deepened my commitment to inclusive, community-led development and to the African continent. Through my journey, I've come to understand the power of unity and the shared belief

that, together, we can shape a more resilient Africa. The next big milestone in my international development journey was the AFYWL. I was selected to work for UNDP in Dakar, Senegal, in March 2024, and the weeks following were a whirlwind. I packed up my life and prepared for the unknown. I arrived in Senegal with both pride and humility, aware that I was representing Morocco in a space where North African voices are still rare. I remember stepping into the UNDP Sub-Regional Hub for West and Central Africa and receiving a warm welcome from colleagues, soft light spilling through the windows. It was a quiet, defining moment. I felt I had found my place as an AFYWL Fellow and it was clear that I wasn't just there to grow professionally; I was there to listen, to learn and to unlearn.

Impactful milestones

Stepping into this Fellowship was a powerful experience. I'm grateful for being one of 36 out of 12,000 applicants. The strength and wisdom of the other incredible Fellows inspired me daily. Together, we faced the realities of the system, supported each other and grew stronger in our shared mission for change. My sisters, the first triumph goes to you.

While arriving in Dakar brought a wave of excitement, the transition wasn't without its challenges. Settling into a new city, adapting to a different work culture and quickly finding my footing in a dynamic and fast-paced sub-regional hub demanded both resilience and flexibility. There was little time for hesitation—within days, I was contributing to programmes that addressed complex governance issues in fragile settings.

The pressure to perform, absorb institutional knowledge and deliver meaningful input early on was intense, especially after being bestowed the responsibility to lay the foundation for the Local Governance and Delivery of Public Services pillar of the hub's work. I had to learn quickly how to navigate internal systems, manage competing priorities and collaborate across



Presenting my work under the Local Governance and Public Service Delivery Pillar at the RSCA Community of Practice in Kigali and how strengthening institutions across West and Central Africa translates into tangible impact for communities, where local voices shape the systems that serve them.

countries with vastly different political and social landscapes. It was at times overwhelming, but also deeply formative. I was very lucky to be guided by our exceptional Team Leader, challenging me to adopt a more mature, grounded approach. She pushed me to refine my instincts, trust my voice and stay focused on the purpose that brought me there in the first place.

Lessons learned

Venturing into conflict and post-conflict contexts and fragile communities across Africa deepened my desire to work for positive change. I was not dealing with abstract policy discussions or distant statistics; now it was my lived reality that demanded not just empathy but commitment. I learned that development is not about imposing solutions, but about co-creating them—honouring the knowledge, agency and aspirations of the communities with which we work. Carrying this ethos, and with the support of my supervisor, I successfully laid a viable foundation for the local governance pillar within the sub-regional hub, earned top-management buy-in and secured seed funding for the portfolio. I also organized in Dakar a high-level sub-regional dialogue on local governance and resilience in the Sahel, a region that deeply resonates with me.

Professional triumphs aside, and midway through the Fellowship, an unexpected responsibility emerged and changed everything. A gentle, stray dog who lived at the doorstep of my building and who was loved by all the residents was hit by a car while giving birth. Only three of her seven puppies survived and I suddenly found myself their sole caregiver. Without hesitation, I took them in. For months, I juggled round-the-clock care—feeding them every few hours and keeping them warm—with leading key tasks at the office and in-person meetings. Needless to say, my social life became almost nonexistent. It tested my limits, but it also expanded them. I learned what it means to lead with tenderness, to stretch beyond exhaustion and to hold space for both professional duty and quiet acts of care.

My triumph lies not only in the strategies I helped shape but in how I've grown—into a leader who is both resilient and deeply human. Those puppies, now safe in their forever homes, taught me that impact doesn't always wear a blazer and heels.



I couldn't choose a single object because I couldn't settle on just one. I chose a photo of me wearing a traditional caftan: something deeply symbolic. It embodies femininity, heritage and celebration, reminding me of the strength and grace carried by generations of women before me.

Sometimes, it comes with muddy paws, sleepless nights and a heart that learns to love a little bigger.

Looking ahead

As my time in the AFYWL programme draws to a close, I find myself standing at that quiet, tumultuous edge between what was and what's next. It's a space filled with reflection, but also with quiet power. I've learned that leadership is not about always having the answers—rather it is having the courage to keep asking better questions and to trust your inner compass when the path ahead is unclear.

Moving forward, my hope is to carry this clarity with me: that meaningful change happens slowly in the in-between moments and in the daily choosing of justice, care and persistence. I want to keep working in vulnerable contexts, helping to build systems that embrace people with dignity. But more than that, I want to lead with integrity, wherever I go.

What the AFYWL gave me, beyond tools and networks, was belief—in myself, and in the quiet revolution that happens when people dare to hope collectively. That belief is what I take with me now. Even as I step into the unknown, I trust the foundation I've built because it was shaped in truth, challenge, sisterhood and service.



I would keep the photo of me holding the newborn puppies I rescued and raised. I fed them every two hours for weeks, watched them grow and eventually let them go to their forever homes. That photo reminds me that love is service: that nurturing life, even briefly, makes your heart expand forever.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

I'd tell her: Enter with an open heart and leave with a fuller one. The AFYWL is not just a line on your CV—it's a mirror, a forge and a sanctuary. It will challenge how you see yourself and what you believe is possible. You'll meet women who reflect your strength back to you when you forget. It's not easy, but it's real, and in the mess, the beauty and the growth, you'll find something priceless: a deeper trust in your own voice. If you are ready to grow beyond your own limits, the AFYWL is where it begins.

“الجدور قبل الأجنحة .
Roots before wings.”

A reminder that true strength begins with belonging. Before she soared, she listened, learned and grew from the soil that made her. Because a grounded woman's resolve lifts entire worlds when she rises.



Lala Mariam Dabo

From: **Gambia** / Duty station: **Kenya**

“Amani, to me, means hope—a guiding light in uncertainty, a promise of resilience and the courage to keep moving forward.”

My journey (so far!)

My young adult journey has been challenging, starting with undertaking my university studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, I felt incredibly fortunate to receive a scholarship to study soil and water engineering in Taiwan. When I boarded the plane to Taiwan, I never imagined that my farewell hug with my father would be our last. Two years after I left home to pursue my future, I lost the most important man in my life. The grief was overwhelming, made even heavier by the miles that separated us. I longed for his warm embrace, for one more conversation, but instead, I had to learn how to grieve alone—how to carry his love with me across oceans.

Despite the heartache, I pushed forward. After six years, far from home, in 2022, I received my master’s degree. Through it all, my family and faith were my anchor. Even from afar, their unwavering love and encouragement reminded me that I was never truly alone. My mother’s words, the laughter of my friends and siblings over late-night calls—these became my pillars of strength, lifting me when I felt lost.

Stepping out of academia into the professional world came with a new set of challenges. I faced an unexpected paradox: I was a fresh graduate with a master’s degree from a prestigious university yet struggling to secure employment. In a job market where a bachelor’s degree was the standard, I was seen as overqualified yet inexperienced. The weight of uncertainty was daunting.



On September 30th, 2024, in Nairobi, Kenya, I had the incredible opportunity to lead a session during a study tour on Risk-Informed Development Planning and Budgeting. Facilitating discussions, exchanging ideas, and seeing innovative solutions take shape fueled my passion for driving meaningful change in development and policy.

Yet, every setback became a lesson in resilience. I learned to embrace the unknown, to seek opportunities beyond the conventional and to trust in my own adaptability. That persistence led me to remarkable results—first working with the African Development Bank and then securing this transformative Fellowship with UNDP in Nairobi, Kenya. My journey has been shaped by loss, perseverance and the unwavering support of my family. It taught me that even in the face of uncertainty, growth is possible and making an impact is within reach. Most of all, it reinforced that *amani*—hope—will always light the way forward.

Impactful milestones

Certain moments in life shift something deep within us and redefine who we are. For me, one of those moments came when I received my first major opportunity with the African Development Bank after months of rejection and self-doubt. I remember staring at my laptop screen, my heart pounding, as I read the email: Congratulations! We are pleased to inform you that you have been assigned to the Power Systems Development

Department at the African Development Bank (AfDB). It felt surreal. After countless applications, after questioning my self-worth and wondering if I was enough, here was proof that my efforts had not been in vain.

But it wasn't just about securing a position—it was about what it represented. It was about resilience, about picking myself up every time a door closed. It was about remembering my father's words: "Keep pushing, even when things get tough." That moment reminded me that every struggle, every uncertainty, had been shaping me for something greater. It was a lesson in perseverance, in faith and in trusting the process. And most importantly, it was a reminder that sometimes, the impact of a milestone isn't in the achievement itself, but in the journey that led to it.

Lessons learned

The AfYWL has been more than just a professional experience—it has been another amazing journey of growth and transformation. One of the greatest lessons I've learned is the power of adaptability. The world is ever-changing and waiting for certainty is not an option. I've realized that embracing uncertainty, rather than fearing it, opens doors to unexpected opportunities.

I've also learned that success doesn't come to those who wait—it comes to those who seek. Being proactive, asking questions and stepping outside my comfort zone have been game-changers. No one hands you opportunities; you create them. And in that process, confidence becomes a necessity—not just in what I know, but in my ability to learn, unlearn, relearn and grow. Another key lesson has been the value of resources. I've come to understand that investing in myself is not a luxury but a necessity. Maximizing tools like the learning budget during the Fellowship has allowed me to continuously sharpen my skills and expand my knowledge. Most importantly, the AfYWL reaffirmed that growth is an ongoing journey. There will always be more to learn, more to explore and more ways to make an impact.

Looking ahead

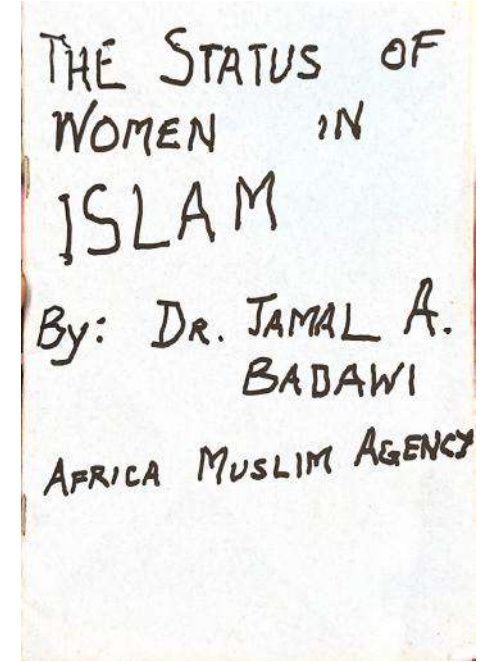
As I stand at the edge of this chapter, I find myself standing at the crossroads of excitement and uncertainty. Looking ahead, I want to carry forward not just the skills I have gained, but also the unwavering determination to create meaningful change. My passion lies in working with communities that are often overlooked, addressing multidimensional vulnerabilities through food system resilience in ways that are not just theoretical but truly transformative. Whether through policy, advocacy or action, I hope to contribute to innovative solutions that leave a lasting impact.

The future is uncertain, and that is both daunting and thrilling. But if this journey has taught me anything, it is that uncertainty is not a barrier—it is a gateway to possibility. I step forward with confidence, knowing that the lessons I have learned, the people I have met and the challenges I have overcome will continue to shape me. The road ahead is mine to create and I am ready!



If I had to keep just one photo, it would be the one of me nestled in my dad's arms—my little world wrapped in his warmth. That picture isn't just an image; it's a feeling. It holds his laughter, his love, and the reassurance that I was always safe. Time may move forward, but in that memory, I am forever his little girl.

When my great uncle handed me *The Status of Women in Islam* by Dr. Jamal A. Badawi, he said, "Knowledge is your compass—let it guide you." With a handwritten cover he carefully crafted, this keepsake reminds me of my worth, faith, and the wisdom that continues to shape my journey.



If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

Girl, buckle up! —it's going to be one heck of a ride! This isn't just about polishing your resume; it's about discovering parts of yourself you didn't even know existed. You'll be pushed out of your comfort zone (a lot), question everything you thought you knew, and somehow come out more confident, skilled and ready to take on the world. Plus, you'll gain an incredible sisterhood that will hype you up on your best days and remind you to keep going on the tough ones. If you're ready for growth, challenges and a life-changing adventure—this is it!

"The garden of the world has no limits, except in your mind." —Rumi

This quote is a constant reminder that the only true boundaries we face are the ones we create. Life, like a garden, is vast and full of possibilities—waiting to be explored, nurtured, and embraced. Whenever doubt creeps in, I turn to these words and remember that growth is endless, and dreams have no walls, only the ones we dare to break.



Laura Ndayizeye Izere

From: **Burundi** / Duty station: **Namibia**

"Amani to me means peace, resilience and a commitment to creating harmony and opportunities for growth within myself and others."

My journey (so far!)

I remember the precise date I received the email to participate in this cohort of the African Young Women Leaders Fellowship: 17 December 2023. I was at the beach in Bujumbura, Burundi, taking a break from job applications, and a wave (no pun intended) of excitement hit me. Then came the waiting to find out which UNDP country office I would be placed in. When the email finally arrived, I was assigned to Namibia, a country I hadn't even considered. While I was excited, I was also anxious, as I didn't know much about Namibia, so I spent the next few weeks researching everything I could to prepare myself. Now, having lived and worked here, I can say I truly loved my time in this beautiful country.

I've always wanted to be working in spaces that create opportunities, tackle inequalities and empower communities, and the fellowship was the perfect opportunity for that. Moving to a completely new country was both exciting and overwhelming. I had to adapt quickly to a new environment, work culture and way of life. At times, imposter syndrome crept in, making me question whether I was truly ready for the tasks ahead. Balancing multiple projects and learning the system was a steep learning curve, but I was determined to make the most of it.

Despite the challenges, the experience has been incredibly rewarding. I successfully contributed to implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in Namibia. I gained confidence as a leader, navigating complex development challenges and engaging with stakeholders.

Looking back, my journey has been about taking leaps of faith into the unknown. From my education to my career, each unexpected step has helped me grow in ways I never imagined. I'm grateful to my parents, whose hard work made my journey this far possible. This experience has given me the skills and confidence to drive meaningful change and I'm excited for what's next!

Impactful milestones

One of the most impactful milestones during my time in the Fellowship was seeing the impact of my work on people's lives. Through my work at UNDP, I helped facilitate the participation of Namibian micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises in AfCFTA through stakeholder engagements and capacity-building initiatives to improve their market readiness. Watching business owners attend local and international forums, interact with potential partners and seeing the pride on their faces was incredibly fulfilling. Many of them had never had such an opportunity and I realized how significant this was for their growth and success. It was more than just a professional achievement; it was a personal realization of the power of just being offered an opportunity.



At the AU MSME Forum in Windhoek, Namibia, supporting UNDP's efforts to advance inclusive MSME development across the region.

Personally, this experience shifted my perspective. It reminded me that even small actions can have a ripple effect, and that's when I understood the power of partnership and collaboration. My role was just one piece of a larger puzzle, but seeing those small businesses thrive because of something I helped organize was incredible. It reaffirmed my passion for empowering others.

Lessons learned

The fellowship has been an eye-opening experience. I learned that leadership is not about knowing all the answers but must include the willingness to learn, adapt and support others. During my fellowship, I often found myself questioning my decisions and wondering if I was meeting expectations. However, I learned the process of asking for guidance and how reflecting and incorporating feedback is essential for work as well as for personal growth.

My experience likewise taught me the importance of resilience. I faced challenges like navigating a new living, socializing and working environment all at once and balancing multiple work tasks, but these experiences ultimately strengthened my ability to adapt and manage stress. I learned that progress doesn't always happen quickly: patience, persistence and collaboration are key.

Supporting UNDP's work to unlock better results from the AfCFTA for instance, taught me the value of always planning ahead and steady relationship-building with partners. I learned to approach each task not just as a job, but as an opportunity to make a difference. Lastly, the Fellowship reinforced the significance of inclusivity in development, it became clear that true impact comes when everyone has a seat at the table.

Looking ahead

Looking ahead, I am excited to leverage the skills and experiences I gained at UNDP Namibia to continue working in development, focusing on initiatives that drive economic growth and support economic empowerment of marginalized communities. The exposure to the AfCFTA project deepened my interest in regional economic integration and trade policy.



If I were to save just one photo in my album, it would be this picture of my parents and I at my graduation. It captures not only a milestone in my life, but also the perseverance it took to get there, and the love and support my parents gave me throughout the journey.

I aim to work in roles that bridge the gap between policy development, business growth and inclusive development. The Fellowship inspired me to dream big and step out of my comfort zone. I look forward to a future where I can make a lasting impact on development in Africa.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

I would tell her that the AFYWL is an invaluable experience for anyone passionate about creating meaningful change in Africa. It would provide her with the opportunity to collaborate with inspiring mentors, organizations and young women leaders from across the continent. The Fellowship is not only about professional growth, but also personal transformation, helping build confidence and refine leadership skills. If she's looking for an opportunity to make a tangible impact while growing in a supportive, dynamic environment, the AFYWL is an opportunity she shouldn't miss.



My physical photo album filled with old family pictures - this album is dear to my heart as it holds memories of loved ones, and childhood memories that I can never replace.

The Journey of a thousand miles begins with one step

This quote reflects how I approach life. With courage and hope to start, one step at a time, even when the road ahead is uncertain.



Lisa Rumbidzai Simango

From: Zimbabwe / Duty station: South Africa

“To me, amani means hope and aspiration and is the foundation of growth, resilience and positive transformations toward the future.”

My journey (so far!)

My journey to the AFYWL was boosted through mentorship and fueled by a deep commitment to youth empowerment, gender equality and socio-economic justice. It began with my involvement in the Tag a Life International Programme, a Zimbabwean women’s and girls’ rights organization, where I was mentored by a passionate advocate for young women’s economic justice. That mentorship deepened my understanding of the barriers women face in accessing economic opportunities.

The first time I applied for the AFYWL, in 2021, I was rejected and that was an emotional setback, a blow to my confidence, but I chose not to let it define me. I focused on personal growth, professional development and volunteering in socio-economic justice projects for young people, building resilience along the way.

So, by the second time I applied to the AFYWL, in December 2023, I was ready. I believe being chosen was a reflection of my persistence and growth.

At my new duty station, UNDP Country Office in South Africa (Pretoria), I had to navigate cultural differences, new communication styles and varying expectations. As a Youth Empowerment Coordinator and Project Coordinator in the Inclusive, Just and Sustainable Economic Growth Unit, I was tasked with managing multiple stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, countries and ethnic groups. Over time, I gained valuable insights into the importance of trust, empathy, adaptability and effective communication in achieving shared goals. These experiences played a significant role in shaping me into the leader I am today.



The photo captures a vibrant moment during South Africa's Youth Day and 30 Years of Democracy celebration. Surrounded by young people, we engaged in public knowledge sharing about the role of UN agencies. I proudly represented the UNDP, fostering awareness and enthusiasm for global development initiatives.

Impactful milestones

With the guidance of my supervisor at UNDP and insights from a project management course, I successfully managed the ongoing Advancing Just Energy Transition Programme in South Africa's four provinces: Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West and Northern Cape, which connects youth to employment opportunities in the energy sector. This work experience enhanced my leadership, collaboration and stakeholder management skills. My proudest achievement was coordinating the programme across two provinces in South Africa, reaching 200 learners and 50 lecturers. The overwhelmingly positive feedback from stakeholders during site visits was both rewarding and validating, reinforcing my passion and commitment to continuous growth and skills refinement.

During one site visit to Mpumalanga for the project, I met a young man whose story deeply resonated with me. He felt stuck, unfulfilled and disconnected from his qualifications as an electrician, struggling to find work in his field. He had resorted to tutoring, but it didn't satisfy him. His experience reminded me of my own time working as a merchandiser while

waiting for the results of my master's degree in international relations. Like him, I learned to power through and be patient during that uncertain period. I discovered that every challenge and opportunity, no matter how small, contributes to personal growth and character. It reinforced the importance of young people continuing to push forward, even when the path is unclear, as every step helps uncover new aspects of ourselves. For me, important aspects have been character development and a positive attitude towards work.

This encounter reminded me of why initiatives like the AFYWL are essential—they provide hope, support and opportunities for young people to realize their potential, ultimately helping shape a brighter future for all those involved.

Lessons learned

Learning to adapt to a new country and work environment, navigating cultural differences and building relationships with colleagues and stakeholders from diverse backgrounds was both challenging and rewarding. It taught me to be adaptable, the importance of trust, effective communication and being open to learning from others.

Another significant lesson was the importance of rest and consistency. I learned that leadership isn't just about pushing through obstacles—it's also knowing when to pause, breathe and reflect. It is important to take time for self-care and try to avoid burnout.

A personal journey I also walked during this time was navigating grief. After losing my aunt, I traveled back to my rural home in Chipinge, Zimbabwe. Upon returning to my duty station, I had to learn how to balance my responsibilities while carrying the weight of loss, finding strength in the process. It was difficult, but I discovered the power of moving forward, even if you don't feel your best. The support of my colleagues, the space to reflect and a commitment to my work helped me continue making an impact, showing me the strength that can come from vulnerability and perseverance.

Looking ahead

As I look ahead beyond the AFYWL, my aspirations are centred around continuing to drive meaningful change and empowerment, particularly for women and youth. I aim to deepen my expertise in project management, with a focus on sustainable development and economic justice. My goal is to play a pivotal role in advancing projects that not only create job opportunities but also promote gender equality and social equity.

I hope to build on the leadership skills I've developed during this Fellowship. I am passionate about mentoring young leaders and fostering a culture of collaboration, inclusivity and innovation. I aim to inspire others, especially young women, to realize their full potential and to be economically independent.

In the long term, I envision contributing to policy development, advocating for the integration of youth- and gender-responsive approaches in national and international development frameworks. I hope to continue working with international organizations, using my experience to influence positive change at both local and continental levels.

Ultimately, I aspire to become a transformative leader who empowers others, fosters inclusive growth and contributes to creating a more just and sustainable world.



This photo captures one of the happiest moments of my life—returning home during my fellowship journey to celebrate my young sister's graduation for her first degree. The pure joy, pride, and laughter in this picture make it irreplaceable, a reminder of love, achievement, and shared success.



My 2024 and 2025 journals serve as an inseparable sacred chronicle of my fellowship journey, capturing my prayers, thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Through moments of joy, challenge, and deep reflection, I poured my heart onto these pages, creating a profound record of my faith and personal growth.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

The AFYWL is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that you will never regret! From the very start, you will be immersed in real-world projects focused on sustainable development. It's not just theory—it's action. You will work alongside passionate professionals from diverse backgrounds, gaining invaluable mentorship and building lasting relationships.

The AFYWL will help you develop leadership skills and you'll learn resilience and adaptability through challenges. It will open your eyes to the power of collaboration and how working together can create meaningful change. This journey will transform you—professionally, personally and spiritually—and you'll emerge stronger and more empowered than ever before. Hop on board! The journey awaits, and it's one you won't want to miss.

*Faith
rise fuels
and perseverance—
conquer!*

This stands as a reminder that success comes to those who refuse to quit. Rooted in faith and resilience, this motto inspires me to keep pushing forward, knowing that every effort brings me closer to victory.



Liza Njambi Kiwara

FROM: Kenya / DUTY STATION: Zambia

“The essence of amari is beautifully captured in the Kenyan National Anthem, which reflects my wish for all Africans: ‘Natumae na undugu, amari na uhuru, Raha tupate na ustawi,’ which translates to: ‘May we dwell in unity, peace and liberty; Plenty be found within our borders.’”

My journey (so far!)

I grew up in a family of educators who instilled in me the unwavering belief that no dream was out of reach. Yet beyond the safety of that belief, my upbringing in rural Kenya, in the highlands of Murang’a County, exposed me to the stark realities of development challenges—particularly how the lack of access to reliable energy hindered local community development.

My desire to pursue engineering took root at a young age, driven by a strong interest in development work. I was inspired by impactful stories like that of my uncle, a civil engineer whose projects brought water and energy access to underserved communities, transforming their lives. This, coupled with the support of my parents, both strong advocates for education, planted the seed for what would become a lifelong mission.

My career at the intersection of energy, technology and climate has been shaped by diverse experiences. I studied electrical and electronic engineering and later earned a master’s degree from Imperial College London where my research focused on the application of artificial intelligence in the energy sector. My experience with global companies, such as Microsoft, Televic and Ernst & Young, enabled me to develop expertise in AI, digital transformation, data analytics and technology risk, deepening my interest in leveraging technology for sustainable development.

My experience at UNDP Zambia was deeply rewarding and transformative. I was part of a supportive community where leadership fostered a strong sense of inclusion, ensuring that everyone felt seen, heard and valued. My time in Zambia coincided with a severe drought that significantly impacted the energy sector due to the country’s reliance on hydropower.

As a core team member and focal point for UNDP Zambia's energy and climate portfolio, I had the opportunity to contribute to a range of impactful projects that supported national efforts to advance sustainable development.

A vivid memory was conducting energy needs assessments for the Solar for Health project, where I witnessed firsthand how the lack of access to reliable energy affected the health sector—mothers giving birth by torchlight, compromised vaccine storage and delayed life-saving procedures. The project will soon connect over 400 health facilities to solar power, ensuring quality healthcare delivery. These experiences deepened my commitment to global electrification efforts and sustainable development.

Impactful milestones

I still recall the moment I received the AFYWL acceptance email; initial excitement quickly gave way to the uncertainty about what lay ahead. But as I reflect on my journey, I'm proud of the milestones I've achieved, such as leading impactful energy and climate projects, organizing and moderating high-level events, training project developers on carbon markets, contributing to thought leadership through panels and blogs, supporting resource mobilization efforts and making presentations of UNDP's work to diverse key stakeholders.

Among these, the most memorable experiences were the field missions, during which I had the privilege of contributing to and witnessing firsthand UNDP's impactful work in driving sustainable development. These experiences are imprinted in my heart and will continue to guide my work.

Lessons learned

Over the past year, I've learned valuable lessons that have shaped both my personal and professional growth. For instance, aim for progress over perfection. Second, focus on your own journey—true growth happens when you work on being a better version of yourself, not someone else. Third, it's important to work well with others.



My experience at UNDP Zambia was deeply rewarding and transformative. I had the privilege of being part of a supportive community where leadership fostered a strong sense of belonging and inclusion.

People's working styles will differ from yours, and that's okay. Adapt where needed but also set boundaries when necessary. The following things I learned to say to myself. "Get the work done with excellence! Be confident! Feel the fear, but do it anyway. Believe in yourself and don't let anyone dim your light. Be kind to yourself. The world is tough enough; don't add to it by being your own worst critic. Be kind to others. Encourage, uplift and empower. The workplace and the world needs more kindness."

Looking ahead

As I look beyond this Fellowship, my mission is clear: to contribute to achieving universal energy access, drive sustainable development and empower women.

Having aligned my goals with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union Agenda 2063, I am dedicated to advancing Africa's sustainable development. Energy is a key enabler for sustainable economic development.

About 600 million people in Africa still lack access to electricity and nearly one billion live without access to clean cooking fuels and technologies. These statistics represent communities and local economies that could be transformed through energy access. I am committed to working towards ensuring universal access to sustainable, affordable and reliable energy to fuel sustainable development

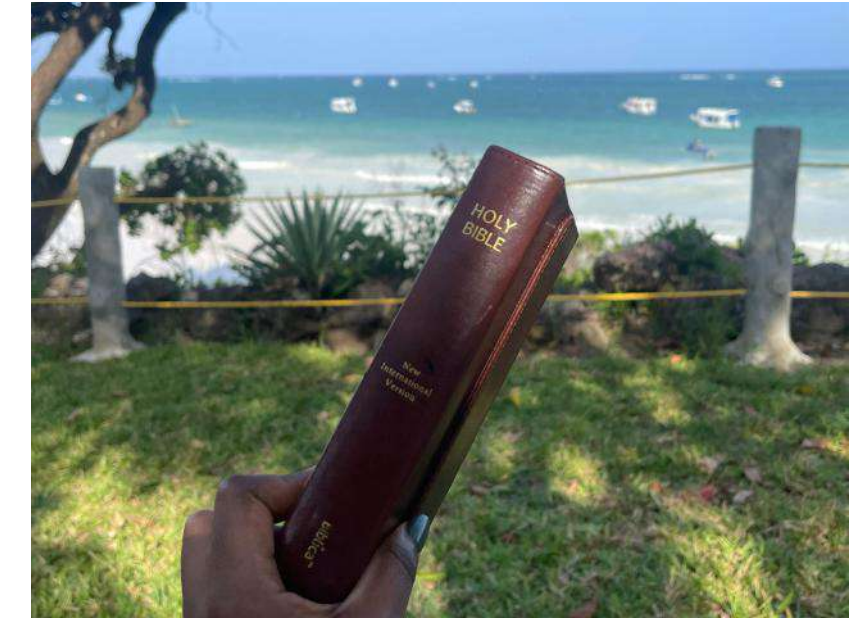
Empowering women is also core to my mission. As a woman in STEM, I understand the unique challenges that women face in the sector. I currently serve as a mentor for the Accelerated Women's Empowerment in Energy programme, an initiative by the UNESCO Chair for Climate Change and Resilience at Strathmore University, addressing gender disparities in Kenya's energy sector. I am committed to continuing this work, advocating for and creating more opportunities for women in energy, climate and engineering, ensuring that they are not just participants but leaders in shaping Africa's sustainable future.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

I would tell her to apply! You miss 100% of the opportunities you don't pursue.



Graduating with a First-Class Honors in Electrical and Electronic Engineering, a testament to God's faithfulness. The greatest joy - having my biggest supporters, my parents, there to celebrate this milestone with me.



My Bible. The living Word of God, the truth of Jesus Christ. This is the unwavering foundation on which I stand.

The AFYWL is a one-of-a-kind opportunity for African women to contribute and make meaningful impact on the development of our continent. Opportunities like these, for women like us, are rare and invaluable. From the start, adaptability and resilience will be your greatest strengths. The unknown may seem daunting, but it is often where the most rewarding experiences lie.

Don't be afraid; take up the challenge. It might just be your biggest blessing yet, but how will you know if fear gets in the way?

UKIONA VYAELEA.
JUA
VIMBUNDWA !!

The Swahili proverb, "Ukiona vyaelea, jua vimeundwa," meaning "If you see a ship sailing afloat, know that great craftsmanship is behind it," speaks to a deeper truth. Success is often the culmination of many unseen chapters - hard work, failures and immense growth - beautifully concealed, with only the final result visible to the world.



Mai Tarek Shalabi

From: Egypt / Duty station: Ethiopia

“Amani, in Arabic, means wishes. Wishes keep me alive. Without them, I wouldn’t strive for something greater. They drive me forward, shaping my path.”

My journey (so far!)

A defining moment in my journey was the sweeping changes that took place in Egypt in 2011. I was still young, but the experience left a lasting mark on how I view community, change and the incredible power of individuals to spark transformation. Witnessing both the pain and the resilience of people around me opened my eyes to a deep truth: real change is never easy—but it is always possible.

That period awakened something in me. It wasn’t just a call to understand the world through theory—I felt a strong urge to be part of shaping it. So I pursued Political Science. During my university years, I threw myself into student activities, always searching for ways to make a difference beyond the walls of the classroom.

One of the most life-changing moments came when I joined an international student organization focused on sustainable development projects with local communities. Through this work, and other hands-on experiences, I had my “aha” moment. This was it. This was the path I wanted to follow, not just as a career, but as a purpose.

After graduating, I poured my energy into joining the development field. I started working with international organizations and United Nations agencies in Egypt. Each role broadened my perspective and deepened my commitment, especially toward empowering women and girls. A pivotal point was traveling to Iceland. That experience showed me what was truly possible and sparked a new dream in me: to extend my impact beyond national borders, to support vulnerable communities no matter where they are.



Me at my very first event contribution in Addis Ababa.

That dream led me to the AfYWL. Leaving my country to work in a completely new context—with different cultures and different hopes—was both humbling and empowering. Working at the UNDP Regional Service Centre for Africa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, has been nothing short of transformative. It reaffirmed my belief in the power of development and strengthened my sense of purpose.

Impactful milestones

There are moments in life that test us—pushing us into unfamiliar spaces, stretching our limits and helping us grow in ways we never imagined. For me, one of those moments was being part of the Beijing+30 consultation. I found myself surrounded by remarkable women—trailblazers who had been there 30 years prior when the Beijing Declaration was first shaped. And now, three decades later, as past and present met, I stood beside them, not just as a listener, but as someone who had a voice in the review process; it was powerful.

That feeling deepened when I was tasked with overseeing the 16 Days of Activism Against Violence Against Women event for the UNDP Regional Service Centre for Africa. I had the chance to design a moment that united two generations of changemakers and to give the closing remarks. I felt the weight and beauty of legacy and the promise of what lies ahead, and once again past and present met.

Another profound realization came quietly but clearly: I could thrive under pressure. Truly thrive. Even when everything around me felt unfamiliar, even being far outside my comfort zone, I found a strength I hadn't fully seen before. I am learning to welcome the chaos, to find peace in the unpredictable. I pushed myself to try new things and to open up to people from all walks of life. But the most beautiful discovery? The unexpected sisterhood. With women who were once strangers, I found something deeper than friendship. I discovered a chosen family; women who held space for me, who celebrated my wins and who sat with me through the hard moments as if their own.

Lessons learned

This year of the AfYWL has been a rollercoaster—especially on a personal level. Losing my father was a profound moment, one that I'm still processing. Grief has a way of reshaping everything and navigating that loss while living and working far from home was not easy.

But through it all, I discovered a resilience within myself that I didn't know existed. I learned that growth isn't always comfortable. Sometimes, it means unlearning old habits and confronting your own assumptions. I became more adaptable and more open to the unknown. I learned to trust myself in complex, unfamiliar situations and to find confidence even in uncertainty.



A recent milestone: my participation in what I consider the last major event I contributed to—the regional Gender Community of Practice meeting in Istanbul. Both moments reflect my journey with the gender team at RSCA working on advancing gender equality through collaboration and knowledge sharing.



A photo of me in Iceland. This memory reminds me that when I trust my instincts, feelings, and what I truly want, things always turn out beautifully—no matter how others see the situation. It symbolizes courage and self-trust.

Professionally, the fellowship was eye-opening. It exposed me to a wide range of perspectives and deepened my understanding of the challenges and opportunities in global development. Real change takes time, consistency and strategic, thoughtful action. A true leader once told us that understanding what you don't need is often more important than knowing what you do—especially when your vision isn't yet clear. And right now, I know exactly what I don't need.

Above all, this experience taught me that the most transformative growth happens when you allow yourself to be challenged—emotionally, intellectually and professionally.

I leave this journey not just with sharpened technical skills, but with a stronger sense of purpose and a deeper belief in the incredible human capacity to drive change, even in the face of adversity.

Looking ahead

As I look beyond the AfYWL, I see a future shaped by the lessons, challenges and growth I've experienced during this journey. My hope is to continue making a meaningful impact in gender equality and women and girls' empowerment, with a goal of working and focusing on transforming policies into tangible change on the ground. I want to be able to drive innovative solutions that empower women in vulnerable communities, ensuring they have access to opportunities that transform their lives.



This small cactus is dear to me because it symbolizes resilience and quiet strength. Thriving in challenging environments, it represents endurance, patience, and the ability to bloom beautifully despite adversity—qualities that mean a lot to me.

More personally, I aspire to keep growing while staying true to my values. No matter where I go next, I want to carry forward the spirit of resilience, leadership and adaptability.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

If you're considering the AfYWL, I would tell you: go for it. It's more than just an opportunity. You will be challenged, inspired and stretched beyond your comfort zone in ways you never imagined. You will gain not just skills but a powerful network of like-minded, passionate individuals who will become lifelong allies.

هناك احتمال آخر لتتويج مسعانا بخير
العزيمة، مدعنا قويا أننا لن نموت قبل
أن نساؤل أن نحيا.

"There is still another possibility for our endeavors to be crowned with something other than defeat, as long as we have decided that we will not die before we try to truly live." Quote by the renowned Egyptian writer Radwa Ashour, which I consider a motto.



Manyika Suzanne Banda

From: **Malawi** / Duty station: **Germany**

“Amani means “peace,” which to me is serenity, and lies at the heart of every decision I make.”

My journey (so far!)

Growing up in Germany in a Malawian political family, I was surrounded by conversations on justice and integrity. In fact, issues of justice and the role of multilateral organizations in administering it have been central to my purpose and motivation—from my dad bringing me along to meetings, to writing an essay on the terminology used in the Rome Statute in my final year of my first degree for a War, Peace and International Security module.

In 2023, I encountered obstacles in taking up my PhD placement. Rather than being disillusioned, I decided to apply for the AfYWL. I was excited by the prospect of joining nearly 40 of my peers on this varied yet shared fellowship journey and believed that adding the practical experience of working for a multilateral organization would broaden my understanding of my field.

In addition to providing opportunities for personal and career growth, the Fellowship offered me the unique opportunity to learn how to navigate and advocate for a better perception of the African continent. I myself learned how many of our cultures assign great value to community, which creates an enabling environment that has allowed for us Africans to innovate, thrive and, at times, overcome persecution.

I am no stranger to challenges and hurdles that require I justify my Africanness—from visa barriers to the narrative of Africa needing external help, to sometimes feeling out of place in my country of birth and in the diaspora. I have internalized various scenarios of how to address those who disregard my identity and heritage and those who reduce the capacity and agency of the continent I call home to being a place of need.

The Fellowship reinforced my conviction that the best use of my experiences, my trauma, my skills and my voice is to find innovative ways of addressing the injustices faced by many, in a just collaboration with the global community.

Impactful milestones

In December 2024, I had the privilege of attending an event organized by the UNDP Regional Service Centre for Africa to mark the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. I was asked to be on a panel titled, 'Towards 30 Years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.' This was particularly special to me as the co-moderator and a panelist were also Fellows. As a young woman, it was important for me to acknowledge the work of the women behind the Beijing Declaration and beyond who have paved the way for us young African women to be a part of professional programmes, such as the AFYWL Fellowship.

It took that invaluable opportunity and used my position as the last speaker to spotlight the importance of humanizing survivors and to inspire others to take our roles as changemakers seriously.



This was taken at the reception before a presentation and discussion that myself and a colleague organised for the Director of the Germany Representation Office at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin. It represents the joy of seeing your hard work come to fruition.



Me under the AU emblem, an institution I hope to work with one day.

Having this moment alongside other Fellows, and sharing the platform with Ms. Matashane-Marite, a gender equality specialist, and a true he-for-she, Dr. Ayaji Olumide, was an honour I will cherish for a long time to come.

Lessons learned

This fellowship has been both a challenging and empowering experience. One of the key insights I gained, and which I believe is applicable in multiple contexts, is that having a true north is more important than anything else. My dad raised me to identify my true north, even from when I was a toddler shadowing him at his meetings.

Whenever I faced complex, challenging and at times impossible crossroads during the Fellowship, I would fall back on my true north—which for me is the pursuit of serenity. Serenity does not just mean peace and harmony to me—serenity means that the decisions I make fully align with my principles, morals and purpose in life. Having a true north has provided clarity and made difficult decisions easier and the consequences of those decisions acceptable.

The second key insight is the importance of sisterhood. Having other women that understand the specific circumstances that frame your experience is worth more than gold. Through this fellowship I got to know incredible women, some of whom I am lucky to now call my sisters.

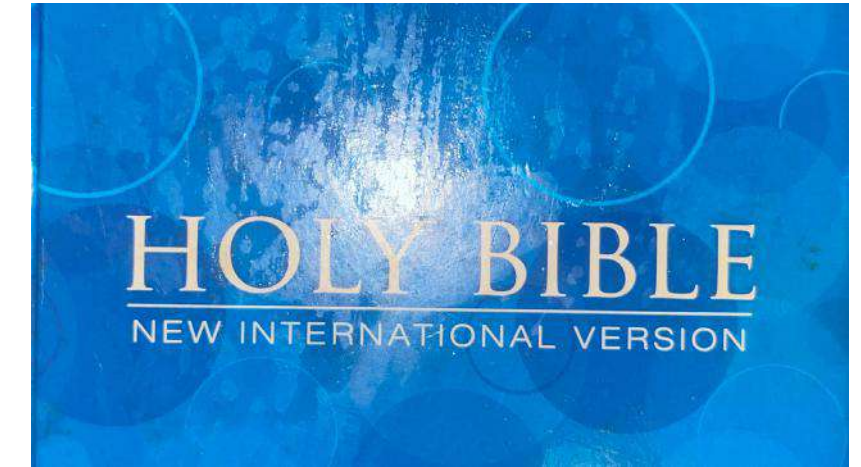
Looking ahead

My hopes and ambitions beyond this Fellowship lie in applying the skills and lessons learned to my research and eventual practice. My immediate hope is to continue with my studies and research issues of justice, particularly for the most vulnerable populations on the African continent. The time I have spent as a fellow has been extremely valuable in sharpening my approach to research and the impact I plan for the research to have.

Although I do plan to stay rooted in academia, I hope to also branch out and use my expertise to support efforts to ensure higher rates of long-term treaty compliance. My mid-term career ambition is to work with multilateral organizations, academia, policy think tanks and regional institutions on strengthening treaties, especially as they pertain specifically to the protection of children, and more generally to the survivors and victims of international crimes.



This picture is my favourite picture of me and my dad and was taken when I was around 1, in Japan. It represents that my dad has my back, which is the reason I know I can tackle any experience no matter how daunting it may seem.



My bible. It has accompanied me wherever I go and is integral in guiding me towards my true north.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

This Fellowship is an amazing, unique and empowering opportunity to work with the biggest development agency in the world. It will be challenging, it will push you to grow beyond what you thought you were capable of and, most of all, it will reveal a strength and determination in you that you did not know you had.

You might be deployed to a country you have never been to, but you will have a network of sisters made up of inspiring, caring and strong women who you can count on to support you throughout the Fellowship and beyond.

"The river that is humble lies lowest, yet is always the fullest."
—Honourable Akeke K. Banda

The motto means that you do not centre yourself, rather you respect and elevate the sources that flow into you and give you wisdom. It is not the river that is important, but the water in the river.



Mellon Ncube

From: South Africa / Duty station: United States

“Amani is the silent whisper of peace in the darkest of nights, where dreams defy limitations. Amani Africa means resilience, where African voices, once silenced, rise in peace together in a geopolitically fractured world.”

My journey (so far!)

I come from Vosloorus, South Africa, a community full of energy, creativity and strong people. It is part of the East Rand, which has produced some of South Africa’s most influential leaders, like Chris Hani, whose fight for justice inspired people around the world.

My first encounter with the United Nations was in 2018 at the Global Youth Leaders Summit in China. Being among young changemakers from across the globe and learning about the United Nations work up close made me realize I wanted to be part of this bigger mission. That experience stayed with me and became a clear goal.

After completing my master’s degree in Hungary, I found out about the AFYWL. That is when I really started focusing on joining the United Nations system and manifesting being part of the Fellowship. Visualizing myself at the centre of global decision-making gave me the drive I needed to apply and prepare.

I had always envisioned myself walking among a world of diplomats and leaders, yet starting the AFYWL at the United Nations headquarters in New York was a different giant. Imposter syndrome definitely showed up! However, I kept reminding myself of something former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf said: “The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them. If your dreams don’t scare you, they’re not big enough.”

Gradually, I found my rhythm. I moderated important discussions and had the chance to share the stage with leaders like Rwandan President Paul Kagame and UNDP’s Ahunna Eziakonwa. I realized my background was not a weakness but a unique perspective that gave me a valuable voice in these spaces. The biggest lesson I have learned is that as an African Young Woman Leader, I have a responsibility to challenge old ways of thinking and bring forward innovative ideas and not just be at the table but contribute to the table.



I was in Rwanda, doing what I'm most passionate about, advocacy and public speaking, at YouthConnekt. I spoke on "Reimagining the African Youth Charter", a topic close to my heart. It was a powerful moment of purpose, sharing ideas that matter and inspiring change among Africa's next generation of leaders.

Impactful milestones

One of the most impactful moments of the AFYWL was moderating a session titled "Reimagining the African Youth Charter" during the YouthConnekt Africa Summit in Rwanda at the Kigali Convention Centre. The room was filled with over a thousand vibrant, young, African leaders, thinkers and changemakers from different corners of Africa, each one carrying their own vision for the continent, united by the common goal of building the Africa we want. Standing on that stage, where the Rwandan President, Paul Kagame had stood, I saw Africa's future staring back at me and I felt proud of my journey and how far I have come in my journey.

The panel itself was powerful. I was joined by passionate youth leaders, including Ngabo Brave Olivier, Fadimatou Ousmanou, Paul Lawer Kenney and Joshua Kweikuma Quaye. Each brought unique insights on how the African Youth Charter could evolve to reflect the lived realities of young people today, from promoting education and employment to ensuring access to civic spaces and digital technology.

I wore a traditional Ghanaian fugu outfit on that day, an outfit historically worn by Ashanti military forces as a war dress.

It was not just a fashion choice but an intentional act of Pan-African solidarity. Moderating that session was not just about guiding a discussion, it was about helping to hold space for young Africans to be heard, to be bold and to reimagine the systems meant to support them.

Lessons learned

One of the biggest lessons I have learned from the AFYWL is to overcome fear and self-doubt. You do belong in those rooms. You are an African leader and every room you enter is an opportunity to advocate for what you believe in. Take up space, unapologetically. Let your thoughts and ideas be heard. **Be bold about your convictions and always show up with courage and confidence.**

Preparation is everything. Be ten times more prepared than expected. Do not allow self-doubt or shyness to hold you back. Speak up. Bring bold ideas to the table, because "normal" is overrated. I have learned that doors will open when you simply ask. If people do not know where you are headed, they cannot help you get there.

Another invaluable lesson is the power of sisterhood. The AFYWL has given me a lifelong network of bold, visionary young African women that I know I can count on. That sense of community, support and shared purpose is something I will carry with me for life.

Lastly, I learned to challenge narratives and disrupt the status quo when necessary. As a former Miss South Africa, Zozibini Tunzi, once said, "Women, take up the space in the society and cement yourselves!"

Looking ahead

As I look ahead, I see myself continuing to lead in the areas of development, youth empowerment and economic inclusion. I want to bridge the gap in economic inequalities across the continent, ensuring that no young person is left behind and no decision is made about us without us. Through my NGO, Career Care, I aim to create more opportunities for youth to thrive.



This was my first day at university. My parents and both sisters came to help me move into the residence. Their proud smiles warmed my heart. I was on a pilgrimage to break generational curses, as the first in my family to attend university and earn a degree from one of the best universities in Africa.

I also want to continue building strategic partnerships between Africa and the rest of the world, championing issues of emancipation, black consciousness and inclusive development. I want to continue being a globetrotter, learning, growing and laying every brick on the road to becoming "Madam President." Because why not?

My journey is not just a journey of one, but a testament to the power of a collective, unstoppable force: the African spirit. I want to be a woman leader on a continent that no longer seeks handouts, but handshakes. I seek to be part of a rising Africa that contributes our voices, wisdom and vision to the global conversation, firmly seated at the table of change and progress.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

I would say Take it. Run with it. Own it.

The AFYWL is prestigious, impactful and empowering and what you put in is what you get out. Grab the opportunity with both hands. Let your wings spread as wide as you allow them to.



My passport has opened doors I never imagined. To date, I have traveled to over 25 countries, with a goal of reaching 30 before 30. In many ways, it has been my key to success, exposing me to new cultures, ideas, and opportunities that continue to shape who I am becoming.

Show up, be present, speak up and network like your future depends on it, because it just might.

This Fellowship is not just an experience; it is an awakening. It will test you, stretch you and, at times, overwhelm you. But it will also transform you. You will walk into rooms you never imagined, sit at tables where history is shaped and realize that your voice carries weight. If you are ready to be challenged, to grow and to lead, then step forward. The world is not just waiting for you. It needs you. The Africa we want is the Africa the world needs.

"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail"

Ralph Waldo Emerson.

This motto resonates deeply with me. As a norm breaker and narrative shifter, I often find myself at crossroads, choosing courage over comfort, and carving new paths for others to follow.



Mino Ramiandrisoa

From: Madagascar / Duty Station: Ethiopia

“To me, amari means hope—it’s that inner strength that keeps me going when things get tough, pushing me to grow, persevere and believe in the chance for something better.”

My journey (so far!)

My journey began in Madagascar, a country I call home but one that faces immense challenges. Growing up in a place where opportunities are scarce, I carried the weight of expectations—often fearing I would disappoint my parents, my family and even myself. While at university, I began to feel the pressure, with people around me thinking that studies were a waste of time and that a degree was just a piece of paper. I almost believed them. I was planning to stop after earning my bachelor’s degree.

But then, I landed a four-month internship with UNDP. That experience opened my eyes to a world I had never imagined. I saw the power of impactful work and met inspiring individuals who made me want to dare to dream big. They showed me that change was possible and I began to believe in my own potential. That internship didn’t just change my career path—it changed how I saw myself and my future.

Balancing work and studies wasn’t easy. I took on a job at an NGO while pursuing my master’s degree, sacrificing weekends, social life, sleep and even friends. Eventually, my hard work paid off and I joined the International Labour Organization, where I met some of the most incredible women—talented, driven and kind—who inspired me to push beyond my limits. For two years, I grew in ways I never expected, feeling valued and empowered in a supportive environment.

But as much as I loved where I was, I began to feel too comfortable. All the best things come at the right time; I learned about the AFYWL programme just two days before the deadline and it became a turning point in my career. It felt like the universe was answering a question I hadn’t fully asked yet. I spent two nights writing and rewriting my essay, reading it over and over.



I would choose this photo of my family above all else; this is how I want to see them every day—"happy". I'm forever grateful to my wise father, my strong mother, and my sister for their unwavering support and sacrifices. Their love and guidance have shaped me into who I am today, and this picture symbolizes everything they mean to me.

Tears welled up in my eyes when I lost my internet connection for the last question of the interview, thinking I had ruined my chances. But in the end, all the process and wait were really worth it; I passed the interview, and the AfYWL has turned out to be a life-changing experience.

Impactful milestones

I stepped into this Fellowship looking for experience, learning, new skills and opportunities. What I didn't expect was to find something so much more valuable: sisterhood. From the very first day in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, I was surrounded by an incredible group of women—each with her own unique personality, yet all connected by the same kindness, passion and heart. Together, we laughed, shared stories, supported each other and celebrated our wins. This bond we've built has become one of the most meaningful parts of my journey, something I'll carry with me long after the Fellowship ends.

But it wasn't just the people that changed me—it was the place, too. Coming from Madagascar, an island, and moving to the heart of Africa in Ethiopia was truly a transformative experience. It gave me a new sense of belonging and a deeper connection to this vast and vibrant continent. Working in a regional office, interacting with colleagues from over 20 different nationalities, all gathered in one place, opened my eyes to the incredible potential and rich diversity of Africa's people. It wasn't just about work—it was about understanding the beauty of our shared cultures, our shared struggles and our shared dreams.

Lessons learned

There's too much to say that can't possibly fit here, but what stands out most from my journey is that: Every challenge is a chance to grow. I had the incredible opportunity to be part of the UNDP Regional Service Centre for Africa (RSCA), supporting various teams—from communications and coordination to innovation and AfCFTA initiatives. I stepped into roles I never imagined I'd take on at the start of this journey, and each experience pushed me to grow in ways I hadn't anticipated. One of the most profound lessons I learned is the power of teamwork. I saw how diverse perspectives, shared goals and mutual support can transform challenges into opportunities and ideas into impactful actions. It taught me that success is not a solo journey but a collective effort, in which every voice matters and every contribution counts.

Moving to Addis Ababa was another transformative chapter in my life. While indeed I faced struggles, at the same time I learned to adapt to a completely new culture, met incredible people and built lifelong sisterhoods. I learned to embrace change, stay open-minded and developed the confidence to navigate whatever came my way. Looking back, this journey has made me stronger, more resilient and more self-assured. I am not the same young woman who arrived in Addis twelve months ago. I've grown into someone who believes deeply in her potential and is ready to take on whatever the future holds.

Looking ahead

The AfYWL has completely changed how I see my career and the path I want to take. For years, I'd been deeply involved in operational work—it's where I started and where I built much of my expertise. But diving into the programmatic side of development work during this experience has been eye opening. It's inspired me to find a way to balance the two, so I can keep using the hands-on skills I love while also working on bigger-picture strategies.

While I don't yet know exactly what lies ahead, I'm confident that this is just the beginning. The Fellowship has given me so much—new skills, amazing connections, inspiration and a clearer sense of how to step into new opportunities with purpose. I'm excited to explore roles where I can contribute to meaningful, impactful change and where my actions, whether big or small, can inspire others because I am convinced that even the smallest positive contributions can lead to greater collective impact. The future feels wide open, and I'm ready to step into it with determination and much hope.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her

You might look at the incredible stories of past Fellows and feel like you don't measure up, like you're not experienced or talented. I felt the exact same way when I applied a year ago. But here's the truth: you are enough, never compare yourself to anyone else. The AfYWL isn't about perfection; it's about potential. It's about growth, courage and believing in yourself even when it feels hard. Today, I'm proud to be part of the 3rd cohort, and I can tell you that if you take the leap, it could change your life in ways you never imagined. You've got this!



This gift was given to me by a dear friend many years ago. She said, "Seeing this butterfly reminds me of you—so quiet, yet your kindness and warmth shine brightly to everyone around you. Keep flying; the sky's the limit." Her words truly shifted how I see myself and how others perceive me.

« No dream is too big,
No dreamer is too small »
- Billie Jean King -

I've always found uncertainty challenging, but this quote has become a powerful reminder for me. It taught me that greatness begins with the courage to dream and the belief that I can achieve my goals, no matter who I am or where I come from. This fellowship has shown me that it's not just about dreaming big—it's about trusting myself to turn those dreams into reality.



Muna Ibrahim Omer

From: Ethiopia / Duty station: Mozambique

“To me, amari is the unwavering calm that empowers communities to rebuild, connect and thrive together.”

My journey (so far!)

I began my career advocating for the voiceless. As a Protection and Gender Advocate with local NGOs in Ethiopia, I designed gender-based violence prevention workshops and established referral networks. At UNICEF, I worked as a Child Protection Specialist, where I expanded these efforts nationally by coordinating women-led coalitions to respond to gender-based violence and securing mobile legal clinics; the work helped cut incident response times by 20 percent. These roles built my foundation in multi-agency coordination, crisis response and community empowerment, readying me for the dynamic challenges I would face working under the AfYWL programme for UNDP in Mozambique.

Mozambique was a transformative chapter in my leadership journey. As a Gender and Social Inclusion Analyst at the UNDP Country Office, I led the co-creation of a social-inclusion assessment tool for cyclone recovery, an initiative that blended rigorous data methods with community storytelling. I facilitated workshops across six provinces, empowering local women’s groups to identify priorities and adapt recovery programmes to their cultural context. Under the mentorship of senior UNDP managers, I navigated language barriers, logistical constraints and shifting disaster-response needs, honing my skills in adaptive planning, stakeholder negotiation and inclusive design.

Midway through the fellowship, our team earned UNDP's "Best Innovative Solutions" award. This recognition underscored the power of collaborative leadership and validated our approach: technical frameworks rooted in grassroots wisdom drive sustainable impact. Managing this complex, high-stakes project sharpened my confidence as a leader who listens first and acts decisively.

Impactful milestones

One afternoon in a small Mozambican village, I sat on a wooden bench beside Maria, a mother of three who had lost her home in a cyclone. She held a faded photograph of her children and spoke softly of her fears for their future. In that moment, I realized my role went beyond assessments and metrics; it was about offering hope. I shared stories of resilience from my own life, of growing up listening to elders speak of overcoming drought and isolation in Ethiopia. Maria's eyes lit up and she clasped my hand, finding strength in our shared humanity.

A week later, Maria invited me to a makeshift gathering beneath a mango tree. She had organized neighbours to rebuild her home's foundation, applying tips I had shared on community mobilization. When her children ran into the room laughing, I felt a surge of pride not for the tool I had helped create, but for the trust we had built together.

That afternoon, I learned that true impact is measured in human connection. It is in the courage of one mother rebuilding her life and in the bond formed when we see ourselves reflected in each other's stories. That experience continues to guide my leadership: always personal, always rooted in empathy.



The photo was taken during the 16 Days of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Activism campaign in 2024. As a gender equality advocate by heart and profession, this moment reflects my purpose: standing with my team, raising awareness, and contributing to meaningful change.

Lessons learned

The Fellowship in Mozambique taught me that adaptive leadership thrives on listening and humility. When initial plans clashed with community schedules during Ramadan and harvest season, I restructured our timeline, deepened local partnerships and turned constraints into culturally relevant engagement opportunities.

I also learned that celebrating incremental victories fuels momentum. Securing a small municipal budget allocation based on our tool and seeing the formation of women-led committees offered tangible progress that galvanized stakeholders more than broad policy promises.

Finally, accountability and transparency proved crucial. By co-authoring success indicators with community representatives and inviting external monitors into workshops, I fostered trust and created a culture where UNDP staff, local leaders and residents held each other to shared standards, ensuring genuine, sustainable change.

Looking ahead

Building on my AFYWL experience in Mozambique, I will launch a pan-African Leadership Lab that scales co-designed social-inclusion tools across diverse contexts. This low-bandwidth digital platform will host modular case studies, peer forums and practical toolkits derived from Mozambique's cyclone recovery and Ethiopia's gender-based violence response.

I aim to mentor emerging women and youth leaders in adaptive governance—guiding them through stakeholder mapping, coalition-building and ethical advocacy. In partnership with regional NGOs, I will co-author policy briefs that integrate frontline insights into national frameworks on protection and social inclusion. By publishing our collaborative models in professional outlets, I intend to influence donor strategies and government policies toward empowering, community-led solutions.



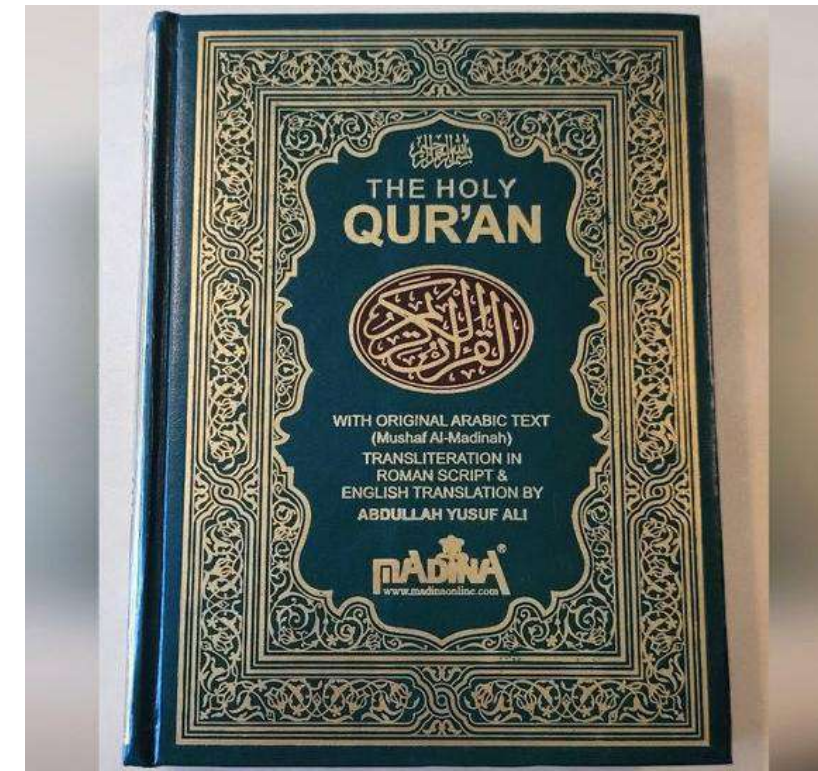
I would save the photo of me sitting in the UNDP Mozambique office. It captures my first time leaving my family, country, and comfort zone for a new land with a different language, culture, and religion carrying only three suitcases and a heart full of dreams.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

The AFYWL challenges you to lead with empathy and agility in complex environments. I was lucky to be able to co-create solutions alongside communities and gain mentorship from UNDP experts. I refined my skills in participatory design, crisis adaptation and stakeholder engagement culminating in real world impact. Fellowship experiences may differ, but I guarantee that if you're passionate about empowering others and driving inclusive change, this opportunity will sharpen your leadership skills and expand your network across borders.

Make it Best,
It can be!

I first heard these words from my professor in 2017, and they changed my life. Each time I face doubt or obstacles, I return to this reminder: take one step at a time, and make it your best, it truly can be.



The Qur'an is the most valuable object in my life. It is my guidance, my peace, and my foundation. The words of Allah, the Most Merciful and the King of all kings, shapes my heart, my decisions, and my journey.



Munashe Miranda Mataranyika

From: Zimbabwe / Duty station: Rwanda

"Amani is the peace and hope in knowing my life is not insignificant and that my purpose shines in every encounter I have with the people around me."

My journey (so far!)

My journey to the AfYWL was one of bold faith. I had been studying in the United States for six years and had just received my post-studies work authorization. However, the job search was an uphill battle, especially for me, an African student trying to break into the tightknit field of international relations. I was faced with a choice, either stay and continue knocking on doors until one opened or take a risk by annulling my work authorization and doing a six-month internship while I applied for this Fellowship. Failure for me at the time meant going back home to Zimbabwe without a stable plan for the future, so a lot was at stake. I poured my heart out to God, believing in what we could accomplish together, as we had done countless times before, and eventually found myself as part of the third cohort of the AfYWL.

The first challenge I encountered working at the UNDP Country Office in Kigali, Rwanda, was being tasked to work in economic governance, an area I was unfamiliar with. My job was to map how our office could craft a strategy focusing on supporting the government of Rwanda with its economic governance frameworks while balancing the intricate factors that made this sector quite complex. Additionally, for a significant time during the Fellowship, I felt I did not have room to truly perform to the best of my abilities and that made me feel lost.



This is one of my favorite photos from my fellowship journey- the last official event that I got to help coordinate and facilitate. I helped convene colleagues from across UNDP Africa Country Offices for the Governance Community of Practice and it was a fulfilling summation of the past year.

My biggest triumphs were in me overcoming the feeling of being stuck and overwhelmed by the problems I was seeing and being able to connect with people, both in other UNDP country offices, and outside the organization altogether, who were working on economic governance. Being able to make use of the knowledge pool found in connecting with others strengthened my collaboration skills in tackling challenging tasks and increased my appreciation for mutual learning.

Impactful milestones

My most impactful milestone was when I harnessed a new professional skill in communication. I discovered I could weave stories in an engaging way as I spoke to various audiences, and before I knew it, I was being asked to host and emcee many events within the country office. These events varied from "small" platforms like hosting staff meetings and staff awards, to "big" platforms such as hosting the Regional Director for the Youth Café that took place during the Youth Connect Summit and hosting a couple of events with various implementing and development partners, including government agencies and ministries with whom we worked. To me, all these experiences mattered, big and small, and it was an honour for me to be trusted with facilitating conversations to enhance both our work and our well-being.

Hosting and emceeing events allowed me to have a creative outlet within my AFYWL journey and it was something I had not expected to experience. Growing this skill has boosted my confidence in my professional skills that go beyond my technical abilities.

Lessons learned

One of the key lessons I learned was to be confident in my value and what I can achieve, even in seemingly impossible situations. This experience really required me to recall overcoming past difficulties and trust that I am well equipped to be successful, even as I am thrown into uncharted waters.

Another lesson I learned was to have expectations for myself by which I can keep myself accountable and track my progress. That said, I also had to learn how to have grace for myself, as I discovered that I can do difficult things, and do them well.

Lastly, this experience taught me to enjoy what I could do to the fullest, whether it was a field trip deep within the countryside where I was faced with a language barrier or navigating tense situations while doing the work; still many moments inspired joy within me.

Looking ahead

I want to redefine what it looks like to lead within the professional spaces I occupy. I want to deepen the strengths I already have and develop those that I identified through the AFYWL. Hopefully I can mold a diverse and prolific set of skills that will be useful as I explore a career in international cooperation and sustainable development. I dream of enhancing my hosting and facilitating skills and aspire to host panels and discussions on the global stage in the near future.

More specifically, I would like to work in sustainable financing and domestic economic governance towards achieving the SDGs, work that I was involved in during my Fellowship. I would like to contribute the perspective I have gained from being in the UNDP Rwanda Country Office, observing how the Rwandan government has managed to develop the country while working towards its goals to become a middle-income country by 2050.



This is a picture of one of my sisters and I. Although not all of my siblings are in it, it is a symbol of the relationship I have with them. My siblings mean the world to me and I hope I will always be a shoulder they can lean on with arms they can rest in.

Further into the future, my ambition is to give back by setting up scholarships and fellowships for other Africans, as someone who has benefitted from them since the age of 16. I would like to believe in others as much as I have had people believe in me.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

The AFYWL will give you the chance to test yourself and evaluate how well you adapt to the wild world beyond the borders of your comfort zone. It will push you to grow and force you to look deep within yourself to find the answers you will need on the journey. Regardless, you will come out of it having refined your definition of what it means to exist as a young woman, an African and a leader, just like myself and the third cohort of my sisters have done.



This is a picture of one of my bibles. My mom gifted this to me just before I left for university in the US. The words in this book have been constant reminders of who I am even in the most difficult situations and I wouldn't have made it here without it.

" Oh baby girl, your God is on his feet and fighting for you my dhije! ♥ "

This was a comment left on one of my graduation photos by my oldest friend, Nakisa. I had shared how difficult my Masters journey was and how grateful I was to God for helping me get through it. Her comment was a true reflection of the nature of my relationship with God from my early years.



Nabila Maman Sani Allassani

From: Niger / Duty station: Cameroon

"In my vernacular language, amani means trust or faith. Which means we have to believe in people and be confident about what they are able to achieve."

My journey (so far!)

I am a trained legal expert with a passion for business. However, by chance, after my master's degree in business law in Senegal, I found myself teaching law and personal development in Niger, where my teaching vocation was born. Through my religion, I developed the habit of engaging in community activities, which I was able to easily integrate into my teaching schedule. It didn't take long before I realized how aspects of my life that I thought were separate fit together perfectly to shape the person I am.

Upon my return to Niamey, Niger, after obtaining my master's degree, it seemed like everyone had a life plan for me simply because I was a woman. I heard things like, "You've chased after your degree for more than five years, it's time to get married now."

The economic climate in Niger wasn't conducive to me being an entrepreneur, so others in my community sought to reduce my entire life to being a wife and mother.

One day, one of my neighbours who I had taught in the past sent me a video of his students giving testimonials on how good of a teacher he was. He credited this success to me because, according to him, it was thanks to the support I had shown him, the advice I had given him and especially the teaching style I used that shaped his approach to the teaching profession. I had no idea that I had made such an impact on him and my heart filled with immense pride.



These are all photos of events organized for young people with the aim of informing, raising awareness, or providing practical assistance in helping them seize opportunities related to employment, networking, and training or financial support.

I thus became even more motivated to deepen my professional knowledge because it allowed me to be more efficient in teaching and for doing community activities. Five months before the application process opened for the third cohort of the AFYWL, I started at the Niger civil servant programme at the Niger Ministry of Justice base in Niamey. I met a gentleman there who works at UNDP in Niger who told me about the AFYWL and strongly encouraged me to apply because he had believed in me from the very beginning. He wanted me to acknowledge the professional and personal qualities that he had valued during our collaboration at the Ministry. Well, I was awarded the Fellowship and assigned to design an employment programme for young graduates in Cameroon.

Impactful milestones

One day, I took my sixth-grade students to visit a woman who offers literacy classes to underprivileged children in her neighbourhood. She welcomes around thirty children every week and volunteers help her teach them, while others, like me and my students did, bring food to distribute to the children at the end of lessons.

During food distribution that day, I noticed one little boy stuffing all the food we were giving him into his clothes. I approached and asked why he wasn't eating, and he told me, "I need to bring this home to share with my two little sisters, otherwise they might go the whole day without anything to eat." This answer broke my heart; I felt so powerless in the face of this boy's misery. I felt the urgent need to find solutions that would ensure no child in my country, or even in the world, would ever have to worry about finding something to eat each day and put an end to such extreme poverty.

Lessons learned

The AFYWL unlocked in me unexpected skills, such as communication and creativity. I knew I loved contributing to the sustainable improvement of the lives of those around me, I knew I loved sharing my knowledge and experiences and I knew I enjoyed the company of others, especially young people. But I didn't know there was a job that allowed me to bring all of that together in one place.

The Fellowship provided me with a clarity about the career I want to pursue and, at the same time, it allowed me to clearly identify the skills I need to strengthen or acquire. I now understand the necessity of building sustainable, high-quality relationships and, above all, to believe in and work for human development. I have many dreams and ambitions that were once quickly labelled utopian, but since working with UNDP and, more broadly, the United Nations, I now know exactly the approach to take to make these dreams a reality, and, most importantly, I feel fully capable of doing so. This remains my greatest gratitude toward the AFYWL.

Looking ahead

I feel extremely fortunate to have been able to participate in this Fellowship and I know that today I have no reason not to accomplish everything I want because so many opportunities have been made available to me and so many doors have been opened. It's now up to me to carve my own path. At the heart of my future actions, I have the desire to give back to others.

I want those who have never had the chance to participate in initiatives like this to at least get a glimpse of it through me. Especially, I want more young women to realize everything they can offer the world and rise up to fulfill their potential.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

It only takes one person who believes in you for you to be capable of moving mountains. It could be you, someone else or an entire team of recruiters, but one thing is certain: always make sure you are prepared to seize every opportunity that comes your way. This is what people will call luck.



This is a necklace with the symbol of my religion (The Bahá'í faith), which plays a very important role in my life. This faith has incredibly contributed to shaping the person I am today and the person I aspire to become. This necklace reminds me to never forget the values that define me.



This photo personifies the love that has nurtured me throughout my life, the support I know I can lean on whenever the need arises. My parents gave me everything they could to ensure that I have all the tools to become a strong and independent woman.

Good Luck is the outcome of the meeting point of good preparedness and opportunity.

I have never read a quote that has given me such a clear understanding of the responsibility we each have regarding the path that lies ahead of us. This quote fuels my curiosity for learning, my motivation to stay creative, and my determination to remain authentic in order to always seize right opportunities.



Najwa Younes

From: Tunisia / Duty station: Ethiopia

*"In Arabic, amari means wishes.
For me, amari signifies the fulfillment
of human potential."*

My journey (so far!)

My path to the AFYWL has been one of resilience and growth. After nearly three years working in the private sector conducting research for investment briefs, and analysing investment climates in emerging countries, I felt a strong pull to return to the mission-driven work of non-governmental organizations (I had previously interned with Amnesty International). It was during this transition that the Fellowship opportunity presented itself. Interestingly, I hadn't even discovered the application link myself. My former supervisor saw the advert and, recognizing my potential, strongly encouraged me to apply. In that moment, it felt like a destined opportunity, a natural progression in my career. Despite the challenges I knew lay ahead, I felt a deep sense of alignment with the AFYWL goals and a strong belief that it was meant to be.

The initial phase of the Fellowship was marked by a significant period of adjustment. I was assigned to the UNDP Ethiopia Country Office. Adapting to a new culture and navigating the complexities of a new country presented challenges. However, the bigger challenge was venturing into post-conflict zones, which was a deeply transformative experience. The remnants of violence and instability painted a vivid picture of human suffering and resilience. These environments strip away the veneer of normalcy, forcing a confrontation with the raw, unvarnished truth of human experience. Even though I grew up in Tunisia, with its own share of political and economic instability, the privilege inherent in my own life became painfully apparent, and a profound sense of humility took root.



My last field mission on March 2025, in Tigray, northern Ethiopia — capturing a photo of one of the beneficiaries of the Peace Support Facility.

My Fellowship journey was more than just eye-opening; it was a catalyst for change. It instilled in me a renewed sense of purpose, reminding me that the fight for justice and equality is so very far from over. The scale of human suffering demands action, a commitment to causes that transcend individual concerns. My AFYWL experiences served as a potent reminder that I am part of a larger human narrative, and that my actions, however small, can contribute to a more equitable and just world. I see the fight for human dignity, particularly in the face of immense adversity, as not just a noble cause, but a moral imperative.

Impactful milestones

During my time at the UNDP Country Office in Ethiopia, I contributed to several impactful milestones. Firstly, I organized crucial field visits, specifically communication-focused visits, enabling stakeholders to gain firsthand insights into the impacts of UNDP programmes. These visits facilitated a deeper understanding of the realities on the ground for both national and international audiences and local and international development stakeholders, and at the same time fostered stronger connections with local communities.

Secondly, I played a key role in coordinating and organizing high-level roundtables. These events brought together prominent development and government partners, creating a vital platform for dialogue and collaboration on critical issues. Successfully managing these complex events required meticulous planning and execution, ultimately contributing to strengthened partnerships and informed decision-making.



A family photograph (printed) taken during my brother's wedding — our first reunion in nearly three years.

Most significantly, I prioritized amplifying the voices of those most affected by the conflict in northern Ethiopia. Through the writing of human-impact articles that were published on the UNDP Ethiopia website, I was able to share the stories of individuals whose lives were profoundly impacted, ensuring their experiences were heard and acknowledged. This involved sensitive and ethical communication to raise awareness and inspire action. By giving voice to the voiceless, I hope I contributed to a more just and compassionate response to the crisis. Taking photographs and videos was another way I helped communicate the hidden realities of northern Ethiopia.

Lessons learned

One of the most crucial lessons I've learned is the paramount importance of patience. In international development, sustainable change requires a long-term perspective. It's not just about immediate results, but about building trust, fostering relationships and navigating complex systems. Cultivating patience allows for deeper understanding, more effective collaboration and the ability to persevere through inevitable setbacks. I've realized that true impact comes from consistent, deliberate effort and a willingness to embrace the gradual nature of progress. Patience is not passive waiting, but active engagement with the process of positive change. Traveling to the field, beyond the familiar comforts of daily life, delivered its own stark and often unsettling reality check and deep learning.

The disparity between my lived experiences and those of individuals enduring extreme poverty was jarring. Witnessing firsthand the daily struggle for basic necessities exposed to me the fragility of human existence and underscored the urgent need to dismantle systemic injustices. These missions were not mere observations; they were visceral encounters that etched themselves into my soul.

One particularly difficult personal growth aspect was encountering individuals whose intentions were not aligned with my best interests. This experience, while disheartening, reinforced the importance of discernment and building strong, trustworthy relationships. It highlighted the importance of the robust support systems and mentorships within the Fellowship programme. Overcoming these interpersonal challenges was a crucial learning experience, strengthening my resilience and ability to navigate complex professional landscapes.

Looking ahead

It would feel remiss if the profound lessons I gleaned from field missions did not translate into sustained action. In refugee camps, schools, detention centres, police stations and courts, I witnessed stark disparities and the enduring scars of conflict. I feel as though these experiences demand not fleeting empathy, but a commitment from me to actively contribute to dismantling the systemic roots of poverty and injustice.



My cat, Ananassa. I adopted her during my fellowship in Addis Ababa and brought her back to Tunisia when it ended — she represents my life's journey

I see a future in which I advocate for policy change that prioritizes equitable resource distribution and sustainable development, particularly in post-conflict settings.

Furthermore, I realize that fostering cross-cultural understanding and promoting human rights education are crucial. I aim to be part of the global community that amplifies the voices of marginalized communities and shares their stories. We must cultivate a global consciousness that compels action. I envision leveraging my experiences to build bridges, facilitate dialogue and support initiatives that empower individuals to rebuild their lives and communities.

The fight for a more just world is a marathon, not a sprint. Looking forward, I commit to continuous learning. I strive to contribute meaningfully to creating a future where human dignity is universally upheld and the stark inequalities I witnessed can become a relic of the past.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

It's not going to be easy. Expect an emotional rollercoaster and moments of intense pressure. But if you're committed to growth and willing to embrace challenges, the AFYWL will be a game-changer. You'll learn more about yourself and your capabilities than you thought possible and you'll emerge significantly stronger.

We are our choices.

A quote by Jean Paul Sartre. I believe that we are always one choice away from our life-changing experiences, be it positive or negative. Every decision we make, shape our identity, that is why we need to choose wisely, and that is how I live my life.



Natacha Tsivery

From: Madagascar / Duty station: Senegal

"To me, amani evokes peace! And a powerful sentiment of great optimism and collective aspiration for a thriving, inclusive and promising future."

My journey (so far!)

I was born and raised in Tolagnaro, a small town in the south of Madagascar, an area severely impacted by drought, famine and rural exodus. Growing up in such an environment deeply shaped the person I am today and influenced the choices I've made so far.

For years, I was seen as overly idealistic and sensitive, but it's hard not to be when you witness the harsh realities of life. I saw children of my age having to drop out of school to work and support their families. This experience fueled my determination to pursue a life dedicated to fighting injustice, inequality and ensuring equal opportunities for everyone. This passion led me to study law and, after graduating, to pursue legal work in France. However, job offers fell through due to administrative delays in securing a work permit and the companies chose other candidates, which, at the time, felt like a terrible setback.

But looking back, I now see it as a redirection toward a more fulfilling path—human rights and humanitarian work. A few months later, I received notice from the AfYWL programme that I had been selected.

When I arrived at UNDP Senegal, I joined a remarkable team that provided me with the space to grow, learn and contribute. Each challenge became an opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth. I never felt alone and I'm incredibly grateful for the colleagues and mentors who supported me along the way. My Fellowship journey has been truly transformative, filled with challenges and growth. I found myself in an unfamiliar context, navigating a new culture, country and its sociopolitical landscape. With little prior knowledge of project management, I had to learn quickly, ask questions and remain patient and open as I embraced the unknown.

Beyond the initial learning curve, my Fellowship with the Senegal Country Office also came with logistical challenges. Navigating office relocations, rotation schedules and finding my footing in a constantly changing environment demanded great adaptability. However, to my surprise, I not only coped with these changes but also adjusted remarkably well. Ultimately, AfYWL has been an invaluable experience, reshaping me in profound and unexpected ways, far beyond just acquiring new skills or meeting performance goals.

Impactful milestones

Standing on a stage at YouthConnekt in Kigali, Rwanda, sharing my experience during the closing ceremony in front of a large audience, was a defining moment in my journey. Public speaking had always been one of my biggest fears—*anxiety would creep in, my voice would tremble and I would second-guess what the audience might think of me.* But something changed. Taking the microphone that day was more than just delivering a speech; it was a personal breakthrough. As I stood in front of a room filled with young leaders, policymakers and changemakers, I felt the weight of my own doubts lifting. I realized that my voice also mattered—not just in that moment, but in every space; spaces I had hesitated to take up before.



This photo captures the moment I confronted my fear of public speaking at YouthConnekt Kigali 2024. In the intensity of the moment, I didn't fully realize it then, but this image will always remind me of that experience.

That experience pushed me beyond my comfort zone in ways I never expected. It was not just about overcoming stage fright; it was about recognizing my own ability to articulate ideas, and to connect with others. More than anything, it was a reminder that sometimes, growth happens the moment we dare to step forward—even when we are more than scared.

Lessons learned

At the beginning, I silently struggled with imposter syndrome, questioning whether I was the right person for the job. I doubted my competence, especially since it wasn't directly related to my field of study. For months, I hesitated to share my perspectives in meetings, fearing I might make mistakes, even though my colleagues provided me with the space and time to express my thoughts.

However, everything changed during the meetings with women leaders and leadership training we attended in Addis Ababa. It was there that I realized the importance of using my voice and contributing. I will always remember what Her Excellency Hannah Tetteh, Under-Secretary-General and Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to the Horn of Africa, advised: "Make the most of the platform you've been given and be exceptionally prepared." This inspired me to shift my mindset. I stopped questioning whether I belonged, which was a waste of time, and instead focused on finding ways to contribute meaningfully.

This new mindset has been transformative, allowing me to embrace unfamiliar challenges, tackle new tasks with less hesitation and overcome self-doubt. Though imposter syndrome occasionally lingers, I now understand that my presence in these spaces is not a coincidence—it's an opportunity to learn and do my best.

The Fellowship has also reaffirmed a fundamental truth: life is an ongoing journey of learning. The challenges I once saw as overwhelming have become my greatest teachers, shaping not only my resilience but also expanding my vision of what is possible. They pushed me beyond my comfort zone, prompting me to think critically, adapt quickly and find creative solutions.



I was honored to receive this symbolic award at the annual retreat, even in my absence that day. It holds a special meaning for me as it reflects a year of learning, hard work, and meaningful connections—a reminder of the experiences and people who have shaped this journey.

I've also come to understand that growth is not linear—it is built through trial, mistakes, failure, doubt and the courage to step into the unknown. Sometimes, the most effective approach is simply to take the leap: take action, learn and adjust course along the way. As I move forward, I carry with me the lessons of resilience, adaptability and the power of continuous learning.

Looking ahead

I find myself at a pivotal crossroads. Where should I channel my passion and efforts moving forward? How can I refine my skills and specialize in a meaningful way?

While I may not have all the answers yet, I am confident that the experiences, skills and insights I've gained will guide me in the right direction. As I look beyond AfYWL, my greatest hope is to create meaningful impact and give back to my community and beyond. I firmly believe that each of us has a path meant for us, and while the journey may require patience and resilience, every experience brings us closer to our purpose. This Fellowship has reinforced my commitment to being part of solutions that uplift communities and create opportunities for those who need them most. I aspire to contribute to tangible change and progress in my own country and across the continent—whether through policy, advocacy or grassroots initiatives.



I will always choose this photo, as it represents what matters most to me—my family, my foundation, my guiding light. Their unwavering support and encouragement have shaped me into the person I am today, no matter where life takes me.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

If you are looking for a transformative experience that will inspire and shape you both professionally and personally, AfYWL is the perfect opportunity. It is an incredible stepping-stone, especially for early-career professionals aspiring to join international institutions, as it provides firsthand exposure to the field realities.

Beyond professional growth, it is primarily a journey of self-discovery. It shapes who you are and empowers you to make a meaningful impact. You will build a powerful network, a true sisterhood, and gradually gain the confidence to navigate complex working environments. It also equips you with the mindset and skills required for whatever path you choose.

*Lorsque tu ne sais pas où tu vas,
regarde d'où tu viens.*

The translation of this proverb would be: "Whenever you feel lost and uncertain, it is important to return to your true motivation and driving forces and look at how far you have already come."



Nozipho Hlophe

From: South Africa / Duty station: Ethiopia

“Amani means fostering unity, resilience and collective action through mining the wisdom of our heritage in order to shape Africa’s future.”

My journey (so far!)

Growing up in South Africa, in Soweto’s vibrant streets, I was always drawn to understanding the economic forces shaping people’s lives, why some families thrived while others struggled. This curiosity was like a compass that led me to pursue advanced studies in econometrics to analyze South Africa’s fractured landscape.

My journey, however, was initially forged by navigating vastly different worlds: the pulsating energy of Soweto, the manicured lawns of wealthy suburban Johannesburg and the sunbaked simplicity of rural Pella Matlhako, where my mother’s roots lie deep in communal soil. Each space demanded a different version of myself, code-switching dialects, reconciling township grit with suburban expectations and honouring rural traditions while chasing modern ambitions. These collisions of identity weren’t just personal challenges; they became lenses through which to dissect the fractures in our society—how geography, history, and policy intertwine to create pockets of exclusion or privilege.

Thus, through a childhood kindled in those mixed environments, I pursued studies to untangle the knots of economic fragmentation and contribute meaningfully to Africa’s development agenda. I am committed to reshaping systems so that prosperity becomes accessible, not accidental, and that prioritizes well-being as policy, not an afterthought. I am fortunate to stand at the intersection of skill and purpose, leveraging both data and empathy to drive change. But clarity sharpens with time.

I believe that my journey has prepared me to ask better questions: Not just “What does the data show?” but “Who does the data serve?”



On the sidelines of the AU Assembly, moderating a joint UNDP RSCA and UNDP Ethiopia town hall to advance shared learning and collaboration. February 2025, Addis Ababa.

Impactful milestones

Three months into my fellowship, I embarked on my first mission to a place I had never been. Excitement quickly gave way to shock when, upon landing, I received the devastating news that a close friend had passed away. In that moment, I faced one of the hardest questions of my journey: was the path I had chosen worth it?

The days that followed were heavy with grief, and I wrestled with whether being far from loved ones was justified. In the months that followed, through engagement with youth and local communities, I gradually gained clarity. These young people did not speak of impact but embodied it through the ideas, initiatives, and practical solutions they implemented to address challenges in their communities. From small-scale initiatives to innovative solutions addressing persistent challenges, their commitment to creating meaningful change was evident in every action. Their courage, creativity, and steadfast determination showcased resilience and agency within their communities and illuminated the deeper purpose and lasting significance of the work we were undertaking.

Through their efforts, I discovered resilience, reaffirmed my commitment, and came to realise that this path was not only one I had chosen, but one that had chosen me, guiding me toward a purpose larger than myself.

Lessons learned

Working as a Regional Trade Analyst (AFCFTA) during my Fellowship has taught me that growth thrives at the intersection of collaboration and humility. Early on, I assumed technical expertise alone would drive success, but working with communities revealed the irreplaceable value of listening. When a youth programme stalled due to differing priorities and implementation approaches, I learned to pause, ask questions, and reframe solutions with stakeholders rather than for them—a humbling lesson in co-creation.



During the AFYWL leadership training, I had the opportunity to share experiences with fellow fellows and engage in meaningful cross-learning. A valuable space for reflection, collaboration, and strengthening our leadership journeys. September 2024, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.



This photo captures a moment when I was surrounded by the people who shaped my earliest sense of love, safety, and belonging. Their presence—my dad, aunt, mom, and grandmother—is a reminder of the quiet strength and care that grounded me as I grew.

Another insight I've gained through the AFYWL is the power of iterative progress. I once fixated on crafting "perfect" outcomes, only to realise that adaptability matters more. By embracing small, incremental wins, such as piloting a workshop series and refining it based on feedback, I saw how flexibility fosters resilience in both projects and teams.

Finally, the Fellowship underscored that leadership is about empowerment, not control. Mentoring younger participants pushed me to shift from directing to supporting and trusting others' strengths even when their approaches differed from mine.

Above all, the experience redefined success for me: it's not about individual achievements but the relationships built and the collective capacity nurtured along the way. These lessons, rooted in humility, adaptability, and shared purpose, will continue shaping how I approach challenges and leadership opportunities long after the Fellowship.

Looking ahead

I hope to weave the concept of *Mayibuye iAfrika*—"Let Africa Return"—into the heart of my work. My ambition is to create platforms through which initiatives rooted in cultural pride inform national strategies for inclusive growth. Too often, development frameworks overlook organic models of resilience. I want to amplify them, proving that progress isn't exclusively importing ideas but also mining the ingenuity already thriving in our communities.

I also plan to mentor emerging leaders, not as a guide but as a co-learner, always asking, "What if we trusted our own stories?" *Mayibuye iAfrika*: we'll truly return when our systems fully reflect the people they serve.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

If you crave a journey that challenges you to lead with people, not for them, apply. This Fellowship isn't about adding lines to your resume; it's about unlearning the myth of the "expert" and discovering the transformative power of humility. You'll wrestle with discomfort, rethink what impact truly means and join a tribe of thinkers who prioritise questions over answers. Most importantly, you'll learn that Africa's greatest resource isn't its minerals or markets, but its people's relentless creativity. Come ready to listen, adapt and see your ambitions reframed through the lens of collective purpose.

*"Likho'ithemb' ukuth
amaphupho abo azofezeka
- Umdali, Zoë Modiga*

*There is hope that their
dreams will be fulfilled.*



Oluwafumikè Naomi Francine Afouda

From: Benin / Duty station: Côte D'ivoire

"To me, amani means strength, peace and hope, empowering women to navigate challenges, advocate for justice and strive for sustainable change."

My journey (so far!)

I grew up in Benin in an average-income household with significant disparities between my mother and father in terms of job and income. My father is a university professor and researcher, while my mother works as a tailor. Although they seem like opposites, they share a strong work ethic and a commitment to their passions and goals. Thanks to their sacrifices, I was fortunate to receive an excellent education and achieve success in my studies by emulating them and wanting to make them proud.

During my first year of university, my mentor encouraged me to reflect on my "wheel of life." I had to outline my life goals, both personally and professionally. Although I was accustomed to setting goals annually, this exercise allowed me to see the bigger picture. After extensive research, reading mountains of books and spending time in self-reflection, I realized that I wanted to work in international organizations, advocating for the rights

of young girls and promoting women's empowerment. That would have been hard for me to imagine as a child, because in my neighborhood, there weren't many leaders I knew who worked in international organizations.

After successfully defending my second master's degree in rural development at the University of Ghent, Belgium, I looked forward to gaining professional experience. I applied for job opportunities in both corporate firms and United Nations organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization and UNDP. Despite several rejection letters, I passed a few interviews and even received two job offers from private firms in Belgium. While these offers were appealing for an early-career professional, I stuck to finding something more aligned with my vision. The AFYWL was recommended to me by my mentor, who urged me to apply, saying it could be a good fit. I am incredibly



This is me during the international volunteering day 2024 in Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire.

grateful he did.

Impactful milestones

Surprisingly, this section is more difficult to write than I anticipated. Not because I have no milestones to share, but rather because it is hard to decide which to choose. In Côte d'Ivoire, I worked as a programme assistant providing technical support to the environment team, focusing on biodiversity projects. I contributed to the development of the environment unit's portfolio, which included outlining its objectives, creating a theory of change and planning activities.

Additionally, I was actively involved in implementing several projects, including BESNET, BioFin and CBIT2. My responsibilities included drafting concept notes, conducting social and environmental screenings, promoting gender empowerment, contributing to ecological transition, participating in the design process of Côte d'Ivoire's Country Programme Document (CPD), creating project work plans and engaging with stakeholders at both national and local levels.



Lessons learned

The road hasn't been easy up to this point. I struggled with self-doubt and balancing the expectations others had of me. As a firstborn girl with two younger brothers, I was taught from an early age to be an example and a role model for them. I had to show confidence for them to turn out well. However, when you play the role of the strong one your whole life, you kind of forget how to let go and deal with your emotions.

But through this experience, I truly grew as a person. I learned to trust myself more and let go of negative emotions. Professionally, I have built a network and gained an abundance of transferable skills from experts for which I'm truly grateful.



My iPad. I use it for everything, note-taking during meetings, organizing my thoughts, writing my to-do list in the morning, journaling, (etc) it is always with me.

Looking ahead

I hope to continue to grow as a leader, breaking barriers and empowering other young people (women and men). I hope to be able to continue working in the environmental and sustainable development field, particularly on agriculture and climate change adaptation programmes and policy analysis. I may not have a clear plan right now in terms of job opportunities right after the Fellowship and I've learned that is ok because I trust that with the experience I gained during the AFYWL, it is just a matter of time before I land my newest favourite opportunity.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

The AFYWL is ideal if you seek a life-changing experience that fosters personal and professional growth. It will challenge you to question everything you believe. Over the course of 12 months, you'll learn to confront your fears as a leader, find solutions in difficult situations and develop self-belief.



A blurry picture of my family and I one night of March 2024, after diner, chitchatting. I don't see my family very often, so moments like this means everything.

Professionally, you will gain insights into the field of international development. You'll collaborate with brilliant individuals, expand your network and receive guidance from some of the greatest leaders and mentors of our time.

You'll emerge transformed and ready to make an impact. Prepare yourself, as it will certainly be challenging. Fortunately, you're not alone in this. You'll connect with a wonderful community of peers who are in a similar situation and will provide support.

"Rooted in values, growing through action."

I consider myself to be a purpose driven person, with good ethics. I continuously strive to create meaningful change with integrity, adaptability, and deep commitment to sustainable and inclusive development. This motto translates all of the above.



Oluwafunmilayo Chinonye Samuel

From: **Nigeria** / Duty station: **Lesotho**

"Amani means peace, stability and unwavering hope. Amani is the foundation for transformation, unity and Africa's continued rise."

My journey (so far!)

From a young age, I have been passionate about African development. I often imagined a future where Africa was so enviable that people would say, "If you haven't been to Africa, you haven't been anywhere." But more than just dreaming, I saw myself actively shaping that future.

This passion shaped my career path, leading me to pursue a Master's in Rural Development in Europe. During my first year, I had a divine encounter with Grace Vanderpuye, an alumna of the Fellowship. As she shared her experience, something clicked—I saw myself in the programme's vision. Reading through its details, I thought, "This is me!" I applied immediately after my Master's, and when I was selected, it affirmed that I was on the right path.

I was posted to the UNDP country office in Lesotho, working under the Strategy and Policy Unit. My greatest hurdle was confronting the stereotype that young professionals should only observe and support, not lead. The notion that youth can contribute meaningfully to decision-making is still evolving in many African workplaces. As the youngest and first AFYWL Fellow in my office, I had to consistently prove that young professionals are not just the future—we are the present, bringing valuable skills and fresh perspectives.

My responsibilities during the Fellowship were broad. I supported all units within the UNDP Country Office. Initially, I worried this would limit my ability to deepen my expertise in agricultural economics. However, my Resident Representative encouraged me to embrace a T-shaped approach, which was broadening my scope while strengthening my core skills.

At first, my contributions were met with hesitation. But I quickly realized that humility was my greatest tool for overcoming this challenge. Instead of demanding to be heard, I listened first, earning trust before introducing fresh insights. I demonstrated my value through action, not assertion, gradually shifting perceptions among colleagues and stakeholders. The moment I knew that mindset had changed was when I was nominated and awarded the Ideas in Action Award, a recognition based entirely on staff votes. Even more affirming were senior stakeholders saying, “Funmi is not an intern; she is a professional.”

Impactful milestones

The first weekend I arrived in Lesotho, it was Easter, and the country was quiet. Unexpectedly, the Resident Representative, Dr. Jacqueline Olweya, who had been away on a field mission, insisted on meeting me informally during the holiday to welcome me. We went for a drive, just talking. I was amazed, not just by her position but by the depth of the person before me. Her passion for young people was palpable. She was a wife, mother, grandmother, sister, friend, boss and leader—all seamlessly woven together. She carried her authority with warmth, strength and grace, and she was also a person of faith, which resonated deeply with me.



As a panelist at a symposium on “Bridging the Gap between Research and Commercialization,” I discussed funding opportunities for innovation in Lesotho, highlighting UNDP initiatives like Timbuktoo, Unipod, and STEAM, as well as continental efforts such as the AFCFTA to drive African innovation forward.

Watching her later in the office was even more powerful. I saw firsthand how she navigated complexities without losing her authenticity. She was decisive, compassionate and unwavering in her values despite the pressures of leadership. For me, this was the image I had longed to see. I had always been passionate about development, but this Fellowship allowed me to witness an African female leader in action up close. That image is now imprinted in me—a constant reminder that I, too, can lead without losing my authenticity, my faith or the balance in my personal life.

Lessons learned

First and foremost, development is about people and love for people is a key virtue for working in this sector. Secondly, leadership requires flexibility and adaptability without losing authenticity. It also means embracing diverse perspectives, seeing synergies and drawing people into collaboration. Excellence is non-negotiable; it distinguishes impactful leadership from mere participation.

This experience gave me a panoramic view of a United Nations office, helping me see the interconnectedness of different units and identify opportunities for collaboration. It also sharpened my ability to learn quickly, ask deeper questions and focus on maximizing on-the-ground impact. Most importantly, it taught me to embrace my multidimensional nature as a strength.

As I mentioned earlier, humility is powerful. When intertwined with professionalism, it helps young African professionals break stereotypes and earn respect across generations. This experience reshaped my leadership philosophy. I learned that influence is not about demanding space—it’s about creating undeniable value. And sometimes, the most powerful way to challenge a stereotype is not by fighting it head-on but by disproving it through quiet excellence.

Finally, sisterhood is gold. The sisters I met during this fellowship inspired and supported me in more ways than I can count.



My family is my safe haven—their love and support have shaped my journey. This photo, taken during our reunion in Lesotho after three years apart, captures pure joy and deep emotions. I hadn’t seen them since leaving for my Master’s in Europe, making this moment truly priceless.

Looking ahead

Africa is rising, but there is still much ground to cover. I want to remain a part of the rising cadre of leaders driving Africa’s transformation. This Fellowship is trailblazing a path for the next generation of African female leaders and empowering them to step up and rebuild the continent.

One of the most valuable lessons from the Fellowship has been understanding the interconnectedness of Africa’s development challenges and the need to shift from siloed approaches to systems thinking and collaboration. I plan to apply these insights as I return to the drawing board to research Africa’s food systems transformation, a sector deeply intertwined with every aspect of the continent’s development.

Additionally, I will continue building my expertise in development planning, contributing innovative sustainable solutions, policies and frameworks tailored to Africa’s unique needs. I hope to expand my footprint across African countries, engaging with diverse economies to drive inter-African collaborations through a systems-thinking approach.

Ultimately, I want to be part of those reshaping Africa’s global narrative—ensuring that the continent is not just rising but leading.



This photo captures an object that reminds me of my identity—a symbol of my multi-dimensional nature and evolving journey. It represents the different roles I embody, the cultures I connect with, and the values that ground me. It is a constant reminder of who I am becoming.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

The Fellowship will stretch and refine you in ways you never imagined. It will deepen your love for Africa and expose you to complex challenges that will unlock solutions within you. No matter where you are in life—seeking clarity, transition or growth—this experience will equip you with dexterity, depth and resilience. You will sit in rooms that shape African leadership, tap into grace for your journey and build a network that challenges and inspires you. It will strip away excesses, demand authenticity and push you toward growth beyond comfort.

I have faced many difficult learning curves—this was the steepest, but also the most rewarding. By all means, apply!

*“Expect Great Things From God,
Attempt Great Things For God”
William Carrey*

The most impactful opportunities in my life, including this Fellowship, came through steps of faith—knowing that I am placed in these spaces to represent God and make a difference. This motto keeps me grounded in purpose and excellence.



Oluwatomi Elizabeth Omogbai

From: Nigeria / Duty station: South Africa

"To me, amari means finding strength in unity, embracing peace in the face of challenges and creating opportunities to uplift myself and others."

My journey (so far!)

I grew up in a humble home, the daughter of an Educator and an Electrical Engineer. My mother would often speak about all the things she once aspired to become, the dreams she held onto as a young woman. But each story seemed to end the same way: "Then I got married, had kids...and that was it." Her dreams just faded quietly under the weight of responsibility. I love my mother deeply. She gave her all to raise us. But hearing those words, "I had children, so I couldn't," stayed with me. They stirred a quiet rebellion in me; one I did not fully understand until I became a mother myself.

My academic background in energy and environmental studies laid the groundwork for my journey. During my internship programme, I was introduced to carbon markets and something shifted in me—I saw the connection between markets, climate action and real development solutions. That spark led me deeper into energy access work and, over time, I found myself fully immersed in the carbon market space. I loved the work; I believed in it, but something was missing.

I was supporting projects in Latin America and Asia, but rarely in Africa. That disconnect stayed with me. So, when the UNDP AFYWL fellowship opportunity came, I poured my heart into the application. In the essay, I tackled this very gap—proposing a solution that would bring Africa into the centre of carbon finance. The fellowship became my opportunity to align my passion with purpose.

When I was selected, I was overjoyed but also terrified. I was a first-time mom. Leaving my daughter behind to move across countries felt like splitting myself in two. The guilt, the fear, the uncertainty—they were all there. But I also knew I had to go. Not just for me, but for the little girl I was raising. I needed her to see her mom living her dreams.

When I arrived at my duty station, my resident coordinator welcomed me with a simple question: "Who are you?" I began listing my degrees, roles and credentials. He stopped me and asked again, "No—who are you?" That question cut deeper than I expected. This time, I answered honestly: I am a mother who left her baby back home to honour her dreams, a woman determined to make room for both career and motherhood. That was the real beginning of this journey.



Standing before an engaged audience, I was proudly presenting the first workshop of a program I had the privilege to implement for UNDP, supported by Sweden. Taking it from its agreement phase to action, this moment in Zambia reflects the dedication and hard work poured into bringing it to life.

Impactful milestones

There are moments during this Fellowship that I will carry with me; they were not perfect, but they pushed me to grow in ways I never expected.

One of those moments was when I had to manage the entire unit alone. No hand-holding, no passing the baton—just me, a desk full of unfinished work and the quiet pressure of making sure nothing fell through the cracks. I coordinated meetings, hosted workshops, responded to partners and still showed up to every call ready to contribute. It was hard, but it taught me that I could lead even when the path wasn't clear.

Beyond the office, the most transformative part of this fellowship was engaging with grassroots project developers during our stakeholder workshops. These were beyond technical sessions; they were real, unfiltered conversations. We spoke with people who are doing the hard work on the ground, trying to access carbon markets that often feel like a world away from their reality. Many had never been in a room where someone listened, truly listened to their challenges. And it hit me deeply. Because their stories were not far from mine. Starting with little, trying to build something meaningful, often navigating systems not designed for us. In those rooms, I wasn't just a fellow, I was a bridge. I helped translate complex market language into something tangible.

I asked questions others overlooked. I stayed behind to hear what did not make it into the presentations.

That work reminded me of why I am in this space. Policy is powerful, yes, but it means nothing if it does not touch the people it is meant for. The impact was not just in the reports we submitted or the workshops we held. It was in the shift I saw in people's eyes when they realized they were being seen, not just surveyed.

Lessons learned

This Fellowship taught me that leadership is not about being the loudest voice in the room; it is about truly listening. It is not about having all the answers, but creating space for questions, for growth and for collective solutions. I learned that failure is not an endpoint; it is a necessary redirection. When things did not go as planned, I leaned into the discomfort, reflected deeply and adjusted my path.

Networking, too, took on a new meaning for me. It goes beyond collecting contacts or business cards; it is about building authentic relationships, showing up as your real self and offering value without expectations. I found unexpected courage in vulnerability. There were days when I cried silently, missing my daughter fiercely, yet I showed up with a strength I did not know I had.



This photo means everything to me—my husband and daughter, my greatest cheerleaders. Through every challenge, every trip away, and every moment of doubt, they hold me together, lifting me up with love and support. They are my why, my strength, my heart.

The biggest transformation for me was learning to trust myself. To own my whole story—not just the polished highlights but the messy, uncertain, evolving parts. In embracing my truth, I inspired others to embrace theirs as well, and that is why I am sharing my story exactly as it truly is.

Above all, I discovered that resilience is not the absence of struggle; it is the daily decision to keep moving forward, even when your heart is torn between home and your purpose. This Fellowship did not just change my career, it changed how I see myself and my place in the world.

Looking ahead

The Fellowship experience sharpened my vision and deepened my commitment to advancing climate finance that truly serves Africa's development needs. Moving forward, I see myself stepping up as a leader in spaces where I can influence policy and investment decisions to prioritize sustainable solutions that directly empower communities.

I am determined to bridge the gap between financial institutions and grassroots projects, ensuring that climate finance is accessible, transparent and impactful. I want to champion innovative models that unlock resources for clean energy access, support women-led climate initiatives and integrate local voices into global markets.

Beyond policy, I am committed to mentoring and uplifting the next generation of African professionals, especially women, who aspire to make their mark in this field but face barriers to entry. My goal is to build networks and platforms that nurture talent, foster collaboration and create pathways to leadership.

The work ahead is challenging, but I am driven by a clear purpose: to transform climate finance from an abstract concept into a powerful tool that delivers real, measurable change on the ground. This fellowship has given me the tools, the confidence and the networks to lead with impact—and now I am ready to take that leap.



This photo captures what guides me—my faith, my compass. Just like a compass points north, my Bible keeps me grounded, leading me through life's uncertainties. In every challenge, every decision, it is my unwavering guide, reminding me where I stand and where I'm headed.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

To the young woman wondering if she is ready for this Fellowship, let me tell you—you are. Don't wait for perfection. Don't let fear quiet your dreams. You don't have to have it all figured out. Don't let fear stop you from going after what you want. The Fellowship will challenge you in ways you did not expect. It will stretch you, push you and sometimes make you uncomfortable. But it will also help you find your voice, build real connections and grow your confidence to make a bigger impact.

So, to any woman thinking about it, don't wait. Leap! You will be surprised at what you can do.

Life's too short to be cynical. Believe in ridiculous, impractical, wonderfully beautiful plot twists.

Life is too short to be cynical, so I choose to have faith in unexpected plot twists. I dream big, envision possibilities, and go after them, no matter how impractical they seem. This mindset keeps me pushing forward, embracing challenges, and creating a life that motivates me.



Sarah Abel Zackie Ibui

From: South Sudan / Duty station: Ethiopia

"To me, amani means peace, and, for me, God is the provider of peace in my life."

My journey (so far!)

I grew up in Kenya and Uganda, as my family decided to leave Sudan due to the war. Thus, I witnessed firsthand the profound impact of humanitarian aid. Watching my mother work in different parts of Sudan further ignited my passion for development. After earning a bachelor's degree in International Relations at Nottingham Trent University in England, I took an internship in Juba with UNICEF South Sudan. There, I deepened my understanding of children's rights. That experience strengthened my resolve to pursue a master's degree in human rights law which I achieved at Nottingham Law School.

Following in my mom's footsteps, I worked as a Gender and Protection Officer with a national non-governmental organization in Juba, South Sudan. It was during this time that I received an email confirming my acceptance in the AfYWL. I was to be placed not too far away, in Ethiopia, which filled me both with excitement and apprehension. I knew instinctively that living and working in a new country would be a challenge, but also an opportunity for growth. Though I had never worked explicitly in the inclusive growth sector, to which I was assigned as a Social Protection Fellow, I was prepared to learn and the experience turned out to be incredibly interesting and enriching.

Impactful milestones

One of my biggest milestones has been gaining confidence in public speaking. During the YouthConnekt Summit, I had the opportunity to present a session on the role of e-commerce and social media for entrepreneurs at both the Export Accelerators Bootcamp and the African Union's Engumi Hub. Standing before an audience, sharing ideas and engaging with other young people helped me realize and shape the power of my voice.

Another defining moment for me was an impromptu presentation at the SASPEN Conference. Though unplanned, I embraced the challenge, and it solidified my belief that with preparation and practice, I can continue growing as a speaker. Public speaking is a skill I am actively building for myself.



Presenting at the Export Accelerators Bootcamp at the Youth Connekt Summit 2024.

Lessons learned

This Fellowship taught me the importance of my value as a development actor and finding and using my voice. I've learned to speak up, contribute meaningfully to discussions and embrace a collaborative and reflective working style, which enables me to listen actively, think critically and engage constructively with diverse teams.

Beyond technical skills, I have also realized the importance of adaptability—being open to new experiences, embracing uncertainty and seeing every challenge as an opportunity for growth. The more I step outside of my comfort zone, the more I learn about my potential.

Looking ahead

I hope to continue growing in the inclusive development field. This Fellowship opened my eyes to many career possibilities and I'm excited to see where the future takes me—whether it's in human rights, social protection or other areas of development.



Presenting at the Africa Union Engumi Hub at the Youth Connekt Summit 2024.

Moving forward, I want to carry the principle of “leaving no one behind” in all my work. It is crucial not just to focus on vulnerable populations but to also highlight their agency, resilience and ideas. True development comes not just from offering support, but from empowering communities to recover and thrive on their own terms.

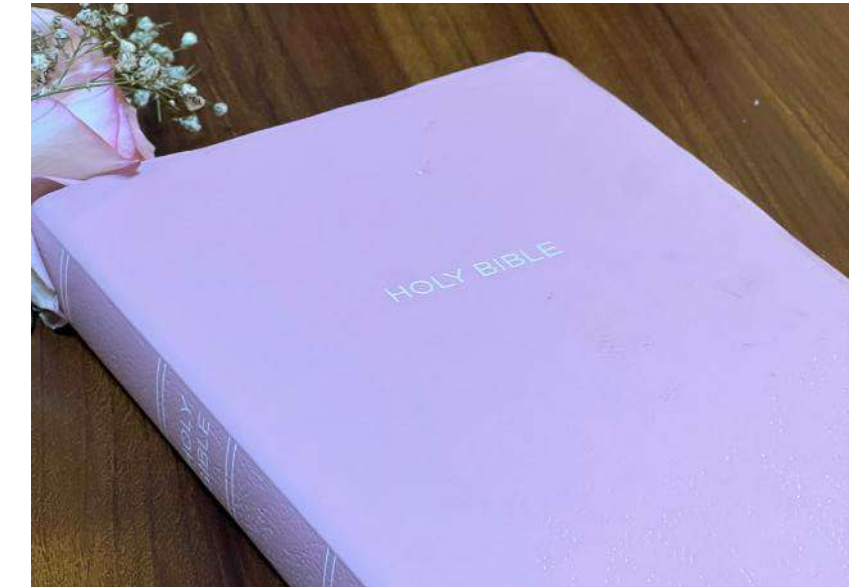
If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

Absolutely, yes! This has been an incredible experience—not just professionally, but personally. The work was enriching enough, but an unexpected gift was the sisterhood within the Fellowship. I have formed friendships that I know will last a lifetime.

My advice? Be open to learning, exploring and stepping outside your comfort zone. You never know which area of work will resonate with you the most. This Fellowship is an opportunity to grow, build your confidence and discover your strengths—embrace every moment!



This photo was taken at the start of the fellowship during the first major event involving all the Addis-based fellows. It was our first opportunity to work together, and I'm grateful for my fellow fellows.



My faith is essential to me, and the Bible keeps me grounded—it serves as both a source of guidance and strength in my life.

A river does not fear new paths, it carves its way with strength and grace.

This quote speaks to the value of being flexible and resilient. Like a river that carves new paths, we can face change with strength and grace.



Yfaliana Ny Fitia Andrianjafy Mbeloharimahay

From: Madagascar / Duty station: Democratic Republic of the Congo

"Amani to me is a dream of peace in the DRC, where love silences guns, children are protected and there is hope, healing and unity."

My journey (so far!)

I was raised by a 'warrior' mother, a father who believed in my craziest dreams and supported by a sister and brother who always have my back. Some people told me I dreamed too much. But I am making a habit of turning people's doubts into fuel, rejection into resilience.

At secondary school in Madagascar, I knew that to stand out I needed more than just a degree. That is why I acquired additional skills like English, the world's most widely used language, so that I could compete in international spaces. I used to point to the United States Embassy building and tell my mother: One day I will work in a place like that. And I did!

I admit that as a youth, I was captivated by the sight of diplomats being driven in nice cars, but as I grew, my knowledge of foreign affairs work matured and I soon understood that true fulfillment comes from doing meaningful work.

Next stop was the United Kingdom for a master's degree at Swansea University, through the Chevening Scholarship. I not only acquired a prestigious degree, I armed myself with knowledge and perspectives that I brought back to Africa.



A picture from my time in Addis is my best souvenir, capturing unforgettable experiences. I don't usually do braids, but there is a sense of pride in this picture, like I am connecting with my roots. (ADDIS)

I'm aware that education alone is not enough and have worked on causes that matter to me like poverty, climate change, migration, women's empowerment and peace. However, the job market is tough and it often felt like my age, gender and background spoke louder than my qualifications. And while I have nothing against coffee (Madagascar produces some of the best!) I could not help but notice how often women were expected to serve it, rather than fully participate in the work at hand.

So, I refuse to shrink myself. Being selected for the AFYWL is one of my greatest triumphs.

Impactful milestones

When I was deployed to the Democratic Republic of Congo through the AFYWL, some friends and family were in disbelief. "What will you do there?" they asked. To many folks, success means leaving Africa, not staying. Even today, few understand why I chose this path and work for Africa, especially in such a complex environment.

The moment I landed in Kinshasa, I was surrounded by chaos. The airport was busy, the air thick with tension and just a few metres out into the streets, I caught myself thinking, "What did I just get myself into?" I could not help but laugh: I love adventure, and this was an adventure.

Once working as a Young African Fellow for UNDP in the DRC, I saw how women had to fight for space. In one project meeting, I looked around: we were only three women in a room full of men. I was proud to be at that table, but I wondered why. Women were not absent because they lacked talent, but because they were not given the space. I quickly realized there is so much yet to be done to bring about change and uplift those who need it the most.

These challenges do not break me, they make me tougher.

My experience in the DRC deepened my understanding of resilience. It is not just about enduring hardship but about adapting, standing firm and pushing forward despite the obstacles. I learned that if you truly want something, you must fight for it, but fighting alone is not enough. You need to be strategic, continuously learn and equip yourself with the right skills.

The sustainable development journey for Africa is long, but it is not impossible. Working in a deeply patriarchal society showed me that women must claim their space, no one will hand it to us. Seeing young girls forced into survival choices no one should have to make reinforced the urgency of economic empowerment as a pathway to dignity.

I also learned that no one succeeds alone. You need a strong support system, people who encourage and uplift you, and I was fortunate to find that in Kinshasa—a special shoutout to the Representative and Director at UNOPS who was my mentor, my co-workers and my friends and all those who made my journey smoother.

From a development perspective, I saw the importance of ensuring impact at the grassroots level. Beyond discussions, there is a need to prioritize direct support for beneficiaries, ensuring that resources translate into tangible, lasting change.

Looking ahead

As I look beyond the AFYWL, my ambition is to humbly continue with the United Nations system, growing into a leadership role where I can influence strategy and ensure that every decision translates into real, measurable impact for people and the environment. Funding should translate into tangible improvements in lives and environments and lead to meaningful action that bridges high-level decisions with on-the-ground realities.

Beyond my own journey, I hope to see more young women and youth rise, find their place and take charge of their futures.



I will keep my picture with my parents because I am who I am because of them. They instilled strong values and nurtured my faith. Their love and sacrifices shaped my path. I owe them everything, and this picture reminds me of their unwavering support and guidance.



My gold necklace, a precious gift, symbolizes generosity and the depth of human connection. Gold, like true character, is unbreakable, pure, and enduring. It represents my heart strong and filled with gratitude. More than jewelry, it is a reminder of love's lasting value and the strength in giving.

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

We, as Africans, need to work for Africa and take charge of our own futures. This Fellowship goes a long way toward that goal. Through the Fellowship, you will enhance a variety of skills and discover more about yourself. Trust me, you will come out of this as a pro at making things happen, with or without a manual!

This is especially a great path forward for every girl who was told to stay in the background.

"They call us dreamers, but we are not the ones sleeping"

I chose it because it reflects the spirit of young leaders who are awake, dare to dream, challenge norms, and act.



Zara Fadimatu Mustapha

From: Nigeria / Duty station: The Gambia

*"To me, amari means hope and faith in divine will.
It captures the wish for something positive
and meaningful in life."*

My journey (so far!)

Mine has been a journey shaped by purpose, impact and divine guidance. My passion has always been rooted in ensuring that people, especially within my community, have access to the basic necessities of life—education, healthcare, food and energy. Representing my school at national Model United Nations conferences and engaging in extensive community service reinforced my belief that I was meant to dedicate my life to this mission.

One certainty guided me, I knew what I didn't want. A career misaligned with my mission to create a lasting impact was never an option. Yet, choosing a path that truly fulfilled this purpose was not without its challenges. One of the most defining decisions in my journey was transitioning from Petroleum Engineering to Environmental Engineering. This shift was more than an academic change; it was a profound realization that my true calling lay in prioritizing intergenerational well-being.

This realization led me to seek opportunities that champion these values, ultimately guiding me to apply for this Fellowship. The Fellowship presented an incredible opportunity to learn, grow and make a bigger impact, particularly in areas like energy access (with a focus on gender dimensions), enhancing biodiversity, food and water security.

The challenges I've encountered along the way have only deepened my determination. Navigating the uncertainty of finding the right path and declining opportunities that didn't align with my goals were tough. But each obstacle, each moment of doubt, was a necessary step toward shaping the person I am today and the impact I strive to create.

Impactful milestones

One of the most impactful and meaningful experiences I had as a fellow was when I joined a team of experts to assess the biogas potential in The Gambia. This journey took us to remote corners of the country where I had the chance to truly connect with the communities we serve. Traveling through these areas, I was struck by the resilience and enthusiasm of local entrepreneurs, from fruit sellers to dairy farmers, all eager to generate decentralized energy from their waste. Their excitement filled me with purpose.

A standout moment was visiting a small dairy farm. The owner, Mr. Mohammed Sanyang, shared his dreams of creating a sustainable business. Discussing biogas potential, his eyes lit up with hope. It was a powerful reminder of the circular economy's impact—turning waste into valuable resources.



Facilitating a panel discussion on one of the most critical issues of our time: sustainable waste management

Previously, I trained women to create products from plastic waste, empowering them economically. But the biogas assessment felt different. It had the potential to transform the energy landscape, reduce inequalities, combat climate change and seamlessly integrate the nexus of food, energy, waste and climate resilience.

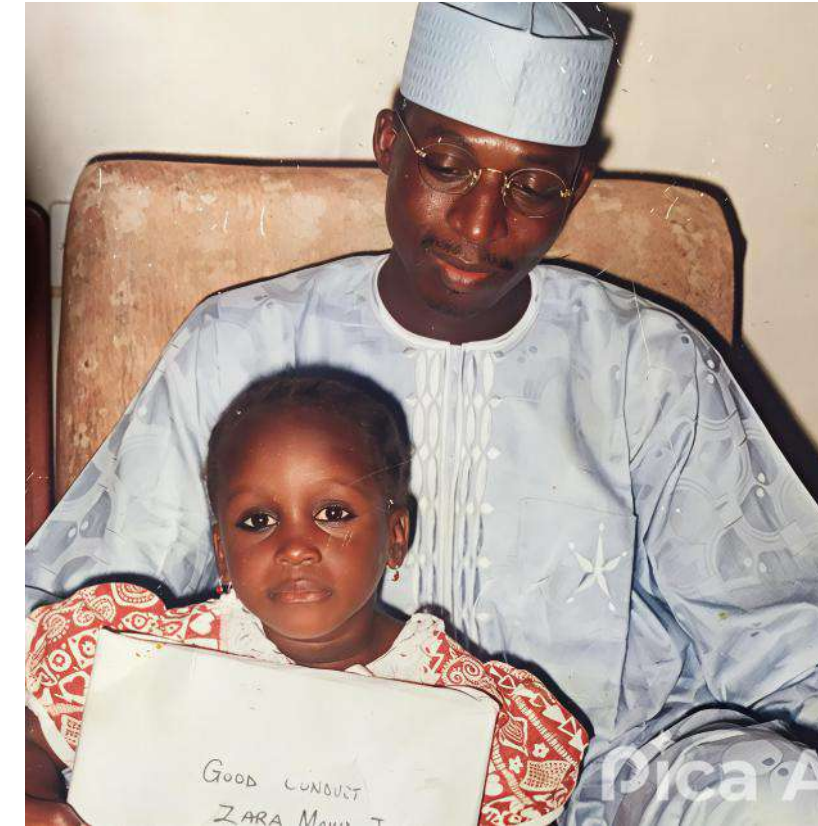
Seeing the tangible impact reinforced my commitment to driving meaningful change. It was a reminder that sustainable practices aren't just about technical solutions; they're about empowering people and creating a better future for everyone.

Lessons learned

Throughout my fellowship with UNDP, I've gained several key insights that have deeply impacted me. Firstly, I've come to appreciate the immense value of partnerships in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Working closely with NGOs and various government entities, I've had the privilege of contributing to strategic proposals that address critical areas such as energy access and enhancing agricultural value chains. These collaborations have shown me how collective efforts can drive significant progress.

Secondly, I've realized the importance of adaptability and continuous learning in a dynamic environment like UNDP. Embracing new ideas and approaches has not only enabled me to contribute effectively but also enriched my personal growth. Being open to change has taught me resilience and the ability to thrive in diverse situations.

Moreover, while adopting best practices from other places is crucial, I've learned that understanding the context and providing solutions based on the actual needs of users is equally important. This is where consultation and community ownership come into play. Engaging with communities and valuing their input has underscored the importance of creating truly sustainable and impactful solutions.



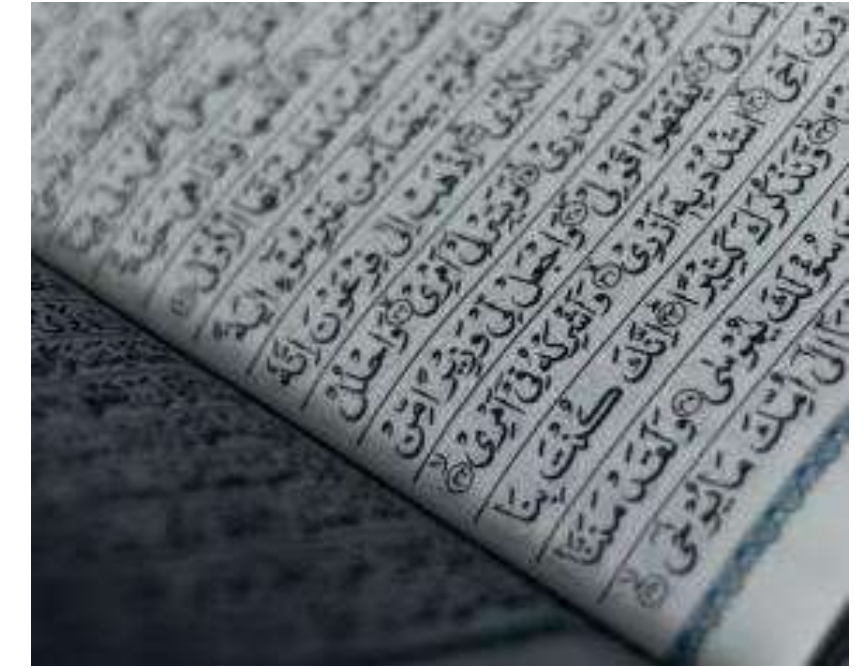
A photo of myself and my rock.

Looking ahead

As I look ahead beyond the fellowship, my hopes and ambitions are centred around continuing to make a meaningful impact in the areas I am passionate about. I aspire to leverage the skills and experiences I've gained to drive sustainable development initiatives, particularly in energy access and food security. But most importantly, I aim to be an exemplary young African leader, particularly to young women and girls. I want to inspire and empower them to pursue their dreams and contribute to their communities.

By sharing my journey and the lessons I have learned, I hope to show that with determination and resilience, they too can overcome challenges and achieve their goals.

In essence, my ambition is to be a catalyst for positive change, driving progress in sustainable development while uplifting and mentoring the next generation of leaders.



This is my life's blueprint. It provides me with guidance, solace, and, most importantly, a divine connection with my Maker

If you have to recommend the Fellowship to a friend, what would you tell her?

The Fellowship offers a unique opportunity to create meaningful change on a global scale. In fact, words alone cannot capture the depth of this experience, but trust that beyond its transformative impact on your personal and professional growth, it will challenge you in ways you never imagined. It will push your limits, expand your perspective and refine your approach to life itself.

"Is there any reward for good other than good?" Quran (55:60)

A timeless reminder of divine justice and grace

Audrey Bemananjara
Arij Bardaa
Bignon Priscille Bijou Dossou
Daisy Atieno Olielo
Deo Gracias Pitimbaye Naitati
Dina Omer Hamid Ismail

Diouma Kamara
Edith-Casely Ndidid Fordjoe
Emefa Duah
Fanto Vida Foday
Grace Divine Ongtouek Baketa
Grace Mwendu Kalii

Inutu Katoti
Irene Merveille Ngamy
Ivana Maria Godinho Manuel
Khawla Benyahya
Lala Mariam Dabo
Laura Ndayizeye Izere

Lisa Rumbidzai Simango
Liza Njambi Kiwara
Mai Tarek Shalabi
Manyika Suzanne Banda
Mellon Ncube
Mino Ramiandrisoa

Muna Ibrahim Omer
Munashe Miranda Mataranyika
Nabila Maman Sani Allassani
Najwa Younes
Natacha Tsivery
Nozipho Hlophe

Oluwafumikè Naomi Francine Afouda
Oluwafunmilayo Chinonye Samuel
Oluwatomi Elizabeth Omogbai
Sarah Abel Zackie Ibui
Yfaliana Ny Fitia Andrianjafy Mbeloharimahay
Zara Fadimatu Mustapha