

# Interim Report of the Pilot Mentoring Program for young scholars of the African Section of the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association (AAEA)

By

Saweda Onipede Liverpool-Tasie, Michigan State University

Chair, AAEA Africa Section 2017-2018

July 2018

## Background:

One of the goals of the Africa Section of the AAEA (since its inception in 2015) is to support young scholars on the African continent. During the 2016/17 tenure of Dr. Awudu Abdullahi (Professor and Chair of Food Economics and Food Policy, Department of Food Economics and Consumption Studies, University of Kiel,), the section co-sponsored a session on mentoring at the 2016 triennial meeting of the African Association of Agricultural Economists held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The section also worked with the International section of the AAEA to organize a preconference workshop on Grant Writing for Early Career Professionals that took place during the 2017 AAEA meetings.

At the 2017 business meeting, the incoming president, Dr. Saweda Liverpool-Tasie (Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics, Michigan State University) presented a proposal (based on reflection and interaction with various young and established scholars over the previous year) to build on the section's activities and improve its support to young African scholars.

Though there is increasing research being done in Africa and by Africans in the field of agricultural economics, the extent to which African scholars on the continent are leading research studies (about and on the continent) that get published in international peer reviewed journals is low. Two observations stand out. First, the methods being used by many scholars need to be updated and better linked to theory. Second, the writing skills of many African scholars need to be improved to get research outputs published. This presented several opportunities for the section to promote scholarship on the continent through training and mentoring:

### 1. TRAINING – Possible areas discussed

- i. Analytical Methods – e.g., Jeffrey Wooldridge (*author of numerous articles and books on econometrics*) indicated his willingness to do a short course or workshop on cross-section and panel methods
- ii. Theory – e.g. Agricultural household models, Technology adoption (Nicole Mason and Saweda Liverpool-Tasie have done trainings on this theme in Zambia, Kenya, and Nigeria and are willing to conduct them as part of a workshop if there is interest)
- iii. Soft skills – writing, presentation skills (Thom Jayne and Tom Reardon expressed interest/willingness to support training on writing journal articles)

**Note:** All this came from a very limited solicitation. Thus, it is likely that if the interest of the entire section was explored, there would be many more areas and trainings that could be delivered by the section.

## **MENTORING**

The second initiative involves mentoring generally but particularly for research (data collection and analysis as well as writing and publication): The question here is how could the Africa Section develop a strategy for mentoring young African scholars? Could matching young scholars with senior researchers in a commitment/goal to jointly publish articles within a specific time frame be an option? While many in the Africa section are already doing this, could the section do some coordination and serve as a platform to link scholars with mentors and feature such joint work? The possibility of doing so through a hosted session at AAEA and/or at meetings of regional, national or continental organizations was raised. Working towards getting outputs from such collaboration publicity (such as a selection of best papers into a special issue of a journal such as the *Journal of African Economies- JAFE*) was another consideration.

Following interactions with established agricultural economists to gauge the chances of securing a strong mentor pool for these activities, Saweda got confirmation of interest from 10 senior researchers at seven different universities / research institutes across the USA. She also got responses and CVs from 10 young scholars (who attended the mentoring session at Addis) indicating their interest in being mentored.

There was general support for the proposals on training and mentoring. With African universities increasingly giving higher priority to quality publications for promotion of faculty, this effort was considered strategic. It would be of mutual benefit to young scholars on the continent and their colleagues/partners across the world. Another capacity building need highlighted at the meeting was that of communicating effectively with policy makers and other non-academic audiences (verbally and in writing). Some proposals for designing a mentoring effort to address this need were offered. There was encouragement to reach out to and learn from previous and current efforts of the AAEA on similar initiatives. There was also a suggestion to look and learn from efforts of organizations other than the AAEA (to learn what worked and what did not).

### **The AAEA Africa Section Pilot-Mentoring Program for Young Scholars:**

Following the business meeting the executive committee met and decided that the section would start off with a pilot mentoring program for the 2017/18 year. The pilot program would be structured based on the existing findings as well as findings from other mentoring efforts with a view to scale it up in the future. The committee agreed to start the pilot with 3 mentees. Given the desires to build on interactions started at the 2016 Africa meetings in Addis and indications of interest from it as well as to avoid a very formal call for applications for only 3 spots, the committee agreed that the selection of mentees would be conducted as follows:

A list of young scholars who had indicated interest in participating in a mentoring program was developed. A list of PhD students/ recent PhD's among the section members based on the continent was produced. A request to all interested mentees for a CV and a short description of their research with reasons why they wanted to be mentored was made.

The submissions were then vetted by members of the executive committee, and 3 young scholars who were concluding their doctoral studies/ early career PhD holders were selected to participate in the pilot program. The three scholars were matched with the senior researchers working on themes closest to their interests so that mentors could have a significant influence on the research and writing efforts of the mentees. Four of the five mentors chosen were from the initial group indicating support for the mentoring program and willingness to serve. The fifth mentor was approached as a good fit for the mentee and agreed to so serve. In one case, the

scholar and mentor already had prior interactions and thus it was agreed that they would continue to work together towards a particular output under the auspices of the AAEA Africa section-pilot mentoring program. In that case only one mentor was assigned to the mentee. For the other two mentees, we adopted a group mentoring approach.

The decision to use group mentoring (2 mentors and 1 mentee) was made for several reasons. First, if a mentee is paired with two senior researchers that could potentially reduce the load of any one mentor, given that most mid-level and senior researchers are very busy. Having multiple mentors potentially stimulates each mentor to focus on areas of strength while enriching the mentoring experience for the mentee. For example, some senior researchers are excellent writers with extraordinary communicating skills, while others are more technical with strong modelling, research design and econometric skills. Having such diversity therefore, not only reduces the work load but also exposes the mentee to several perspectives, enriching the mentoring experience for all.

Consequently, the three mentoring teams for the pilot AAEA Africa section mentoring program were composed as follows:

1. **Dr. Gilbert Adjimoti**, from the **Republic of Benin** with a PhD in Applied Agricultural Economics and Policy, from the Department of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness at the **University of Ghana**, Legon (GHANA). Dr. Adjimoti received his PhD in 2016 and his research interests include agricultural policies with particular interests in market development for agricultural inputs and outputs in Africa; rural livelihood strategies; social capital and food security. Some of his particular issues of interest are: Participation into cashew value chain market and household food security in West Africa; the role of social capital in assessing and adopting agricultural technologies; and political economy of agricultural mechanization in Francophone West Africa

Given his interest in mechanization in Africa alongside his interest in food security, value chains and input markets, he was matched with **Prof. Alex Winter-Nelson (University of Illinois)** with a long history of working in Africa on issues related to food security and input use and markets. He was also matched with **Dr. Hiroyuki Takeshima (IFPRI)** who has extensive research experience on mechanization in Africa and on input use and markets

2. **Mr. Divan van der Westhuizen**, from **South Africa** is a PhD Student (Agricultural Economics) at the **University of Pretoria**. He is the project manager of the Bureau's Farm and Inputs Division, focusing on primary production in South Africa, but also in Southern- and Eastern Africa. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics with a focus on mechanization adoption in Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular with case studies in Tanzania. Mr. Divan has already had prior interaction with **Prof. Thomas Jayne (Michigan State University)** and thus it was agreed that the team would work on a particular project together under the auspices of the AAEA section.
3. **Dr. Kemi Obisesan** from **Nigeria** is a faculty in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, **Federal University of Technology, Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria**

She has a Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics from University of Ibadan, Nigeria awarded in 2014. Her research interests include impact assessment, welfare economics, agribusiness and farm management, agricultural marketing and agricultural finance.

Given these interests and her background, Dr. Obisesan was paired with **Professor Derek Byerlee (Georgetown University) and Dr. Tewodaj Mogues (IFPRI)**. Professor Byerlee has a reputation of excellence in research, teaching, administration and policy advice in developing countries. He is also the editor in chief of the journal Global food security. Dr. Mogues's research interests are in social capital and public investments in rural areas alongside experience in Nigeria ( as well as Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique and Uganda)

The objective of the pilot program was to mentor the young scholars in conducting research. One of the specified tangible outputs from the process is a manuscript that could eventually be submitted to a peer reviewed journal and subsequently published. However, there are numerous other tangible and intangible outputs expected, including the learning opportunity the program provides for the section. For example, it is expected that in addition to learning with and from each other, the interaction between mentors and mentees might build some relationships that extend beyond a formal program of the section.

To achieve the tangible output of having a manuscript developed through the program several additional activities were conducted by the section leadership

1. **The section created a space for presenting the research output of the mentoring program:** As was discussed during the business meeting in August 2017, creating opportunities for young scholars to present their work and get feedback is important. Thus to support the mentees in this regard, the section leadership did the following:
  - a. ***Applied to the AAEA board for funding:*** The funds were to support the participation of our 3 mentees at the 2018 AAEA annual meetings in DC. We presented the section's goal on capacity building and the progress made on matching researchers as well as the desire to use this pilot program to learn how best to do mentoring or at least how to do mentoring better. We also expressed clearly that the section understands that financial support for mentees on a yearly basis would be an expensive venture and thus while considered ideal for this first phase, the section would be thinking of sustainable ways to support mentees to present their work. Our application was approved and the board agreed to provide up to \$4,000 to each of the three mentees towards their travel and lodging expenses for the conference.
  - b. ***Applied to the AAEA for a venue for mentee presentations.*** We asked for a room to hold a 1.5-hour session during the AAEA meetings where the mentees could present their work. Working with Mary Annen (AAEA) the section was able to get a room for the mentee presentations on August 5, 2018, just before the business meeting of the section
  - c. ***Applied for registration waivers for mentees:*** To facilitate the participation of the mentees at the 2018 AAEA meeting (beyond just their presentations) the section leadership applied to the AAEA for waivers for the conference and registration fees for the mentees. These had to be submitted to Sarah Kenner by March 7 2018, as per AAEA guidelines and were approved

2. **The section provided exposure to international best practice in peer-review:** As part of exposure to international best practices (and to also provide some tangible deadlines for the mentoring groups) the section leadership adopted the approach used for international peer review. Each mentee was asked to prepare a complete draft of a manuscript for submission by June 15, 2018. This draft was shared with senior researchers (other than their mentors) to provide them with written feedback, as one would receive from a peer reviewed journal.
  - a. In this regard, the section chair reached out to some established and reputable scholars; many of whom had also indicated interest in the mentoring program to determine their willingness to review the manuscripts. There was a very favorable response to this request. Chris Barrett (Cornell University), Travis Lybbert (University of California Davis), Harounan Kazianga (Oklahoma State University), Melinda Smale (Michigan State University), Ben Wood (3IE and Integra LLC) and Ume Lele (International Policy Expert) all agreed to be reviewers for our mentees.
  - b. Mentee manuscripts were all received on time (June 15) and circulated to the reviewers. The section leadership coordinated the allocation of the 3 manuscripts to the 6 reviewers and then coordinated the return of these reviews to each mentee and their mentors.
3. **The section followed up with mentees throughout the year.** Through periodic emails (monthly for some mentees but at least every two months for others), the section chair checked in with the mentees to enquire on the status of their work and also checked in/confirmed that there was some interaction going on with the mentors. There were no serious challenges but this enabled the section chair keep abreast of the progress of the mentees and to know when additional deadlines or support was needed.
4. **The section worked with mentees during the visa application process as needed:** The section chair worked with Kristin McGuire (AAEA) to assist the scholars in their visa applications. Unfortunately, one of the scholars, Dr. Gilbert Adjimoti was refused a visa and thus will be presenting his paper via a prerecorded PowerPoint sent ahead of time in case there is a challenge with connectivity. He will join via skype/WhatsApp to take any questions and the questions will be recorded. This adjustment will prove a useful learning tool to the section as a prerecorded power point presentation might be an attractive alternative (that is more cost efficient) to have mentee work reviewed by others.

### **Lessons learned:**

To learn from the pilot mentoring program several efforts have been made.

First to learn from the experiences of the mentees and mentors, the section chair designed and administered a short questionnaire (see appendix 1 for the questionnaire) to each participant. Participants were informed that the responses were going to be anonymous and thus encouraged to freely express their opinions, so the section could learn from their experience. A summary of the findings from the survey are presented below:

Respondents indicated that mentees and mentors interacted on average 5 times over the year with the minimum interaction being 3 times. Overwhelmingly the main means of communication was email (used by 100% of the participants). Skype was also used but successfully by only 1 mentee. Mentors were considered to be very responsive 100% of the time. While mentees were considered very responsive (rank of 1 out of 5 (option a-e of question 2 of the questionnaire in Appendix 1) with one being very responsive and 5 being unresponsive) and somewhat responsive in 2 and 3 out of 5 responses respectively. This indicates that contrary to the often perceived notion that mentors are too busy to respond to mentees, the mentees were quite pleased with the level of response they received. On the other hand the mentors were not as completely satisfied with the responsiveness of the mentees and future programs might want to emphasize this to mentees.

There was a 100% agreement (rank of 1 out of 5 (option a-e) of question 4 of the questionnaire in Appendix 1) among both mentors and mentees that the mentoring experience was useful. The reasons offered by participants for the value/strength of the mentoring program include:

- a. The program provided an opportunity for a mentee to be exposed to a wider range of viewpoints, methods, and expertise than would otherwise be the case.
- b. Connecting mentees with researchers based in US institutions was considered useful to make mentees aware of the nature of debate and communication in the global/international research arena and the required quality of output to publish in such spheres. Such exposure challenges the mentees but provides them some guidance to enable them get to that standard.
- c. The program was perceived to benefit mentors as it brings more research active academics and local experts together, which can have important synergies that improve the quality of overall policy-research.
- d. It was considered an excellent opportunity for building research partnerships and collaboration.
- e. It provided the mentor with the opportunity to learn from working with other organizations and on new issues, and to co-publish along with the mentee and others in their network.
- f. It provides the mentees an opportunity to focus on a concrete event at which they can present to an international audience (AAEA conference)

Many participants valued the opportunity provided for the mentees to have their work peer reviewed by others (outside their mentoring team) as well as the opportunity to present their work at the AAEA meeting. Mentees commented that having the opportunity to submit their paper to a wider range of audience for refining the output would help improve its quality. They felt that attending and presenting at the AAEA would create opportunities for further networking and collaboration. Having a time set for the presentation (at the conference) created a deadline that constrained mentees to set time aside to get their work done.

There was strong interest in continuing the mentoring relationship. Only 1 participant (one mentor) out of 8 indicated disinterest in continuing the mentoring relationship. (this is because the mentor was too busy). Other mentors and mentees indicated willingness to continue the

relationship with one mentor indicating interest in working with the mentee on another project when the current project was concluded.

There was complete agreement amongst participants (100%) that a mentoring approach with two mentors for each mentee was preferred over a one-to-one match. The main reasons for this were first, it allowed for multiple perspectives and feedback (which improves research output quality). Second it was perceived that having two mentors makes the flow of guidance likely to be more continuous. For example, if at one time one mentor is really busy, the other may have more time. Third, it was expressed that having two mentors exposes the mentee to more relationships whose usefulness might extend beyond the particular research paper being worked on together.

While there was great satisfaction expressed by participants with the program, three main challenges were consistently observed. The first was poor network connectivity (mentioned in 4 out of 8 challenges offered by respondents) which made voice interaction difficult and reduced communication to email. The second challenge mentioned by participants was time constraint due to busy schedules and other commitments (also mentioned in 4 out of the 8 challenges offered). Two other challenges (mentioned by one mentee) are getting data and the inability to work with the mentor on one of the mentor's research projects. They only worked on the mentee's research project.

### **Suggestions for scaling up the mentoring program**

Several suggestions were offered by current participants for scaling up the program and can be grouped under three main themes:

- 1. Mentoring Teams:** Several suggestions were offered related to the use of mentoring teams or groups. They include
  - a. Encouraging multiple young African scholars to work in teams with one mentor. This would expand the reach of the program with a reduced work load on a mentor having to only comment on one paper worked on together by several mentees
  - b. Creating an opportunity for more interaction among young scholars while not assigning one mentor to too many young scholars. One example would be to have a platform where students can engage with one another in terms of challenges and/or questions regarding their research and for which they could be assisted by their peers.
  - c. Matching young scholars in the US (MSc students) with researchers in Africa with a similar goal of preparing both sets of young scholars to publish in reputable journals.
  
- 2. Structure:** Some participants requested for the program to set additional specific deadlines for participants during the course of the year in addition to the final manuscript preparation and presentation. This would help both mentees and mentors to appropriately prioritize the mentoring activity and feedback requirements.

Some participants suggested organizing a meeting of the mentoring teams early in the program/mentoring relationship. This could include physical meetings recognized to have

high cost implications but appealing, given the network connectivity challenges. Where one mentor is interacting with multiple mentees, such a trip to visit multiple mentees was suggested to be potentially valuable. Other suggestions include meetings via teleconferencing for which connectivity challenges need to be considered.

A third issue on structure related more to the focus/orientation of scholar exposure. One mentor pointed out the importance of exposing African scholars to trends outside Africa, to provide additional exposure for them on how other regions have developed by resolving (or not resolving) various problems. This will give them better ideas about the more fundamental challenges that constrain African development.

### **Mentee selection and pre-program preparation:**

There was some feeling among a minority of mentors (1) that there is a need to coach mentees on efficient and effective interaction. This includes guiding mentees ahead of matching to familiarize themselves with typical features/structure of journal articles and using online references. Because the contribution of mentors, i.e. the bang for the hour/time, was perceived to be higher for African mentees in the upper percentile of pre-existing capacity it was felt that mentors need to know more about the mentees, their qualifications and how they were chosen

One participant felt that focusing on young scholars currently on their last year of their PhD thesis might help to strengthen the quality of the thesis.

### **Other suggestions for mentoring young African scholars.**

Finally, respondents were asked for their suggestions on ways the section could support young African scholars. Five of the seven responses restated the value of the mentoring program and the appreciation of the organizers of the program. Suggestions offered on how else young African scholars could be supported include:

- The extension of the program to include writing competitive research proposals, exchange of information on call for application and papers, as well as collaboration on projects.
- A call for the mentoring relationship to continue beyond the completion of the program or specific paper
- A call for the creation of a common database which members of the section may use for their research. This database contains different datasets that people could explore



**Reflection points:**

1. Pros and cons and/or implications of mentoring teams composed of one professor with many mentees?
2. Pros and cons and/or implications of having a platform where mentees (current and future) can engage with one another when facing challenges during research.
3. Pros and cons and/or implications of matching MSc. students in the US with young African scholars.
4. Pros and cons and/or implications of Increasing program structure:
5. Pros and cons and/or implications of adding more structure to the program
6. Pros and cons of a more rigorous mentee selection process and requiring pre-program preparation:
7. What are the elements of a sustainable way to support mentee presentation of their work:

**Future steps (After the AAEA meetings)**

- Getting feedback from those who reviewed papers about certain central weaknesses/strengths of the papers?
- Getting feedback from mentors on the extent to which their comments and those of the reviewers were taken into consideration in the draft
- Getting feedback from mentees about the experience getting and dealing with feedback received
- Following up with mentees on when and where they submit these papers
- Finalizing the report

**Conclusion:** With the strength and weaknesses of the pilot mentoring project identified, we look forward to the possibility of consolidation and improvement of the project under the auspices of the AAEA Africa section and the extended network of our members.

THIS CONCLUSION WILL BE UPDATED AS NECESSARY AFTER THE REFLECTIONS HAVE BEEN FLESHED OUT AND THE INFORMATION UNDER FURTHER STEPS COLLECTED AND ANALYSED.



**Appendix**

**FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THE FIRST AAEA AFRICA SECTION PILOT MENTORING PROGRAM**

1. How many interactions did you have with your mentor/mentee?

i. Mentor 1

ii. Mentor 2

iii. Mentee

2. How responsive was your mentor/mentee?

a. Very responsive b. Somewhat responsive c neutral d somewhat unresponsive  
Very unresponsive

i. Mentor 1

ii. Mentor 2

iii. Mentee

3. What was the main form of communication you had with your mentor/mentee?

a. A. phone B. Email. C. Skype D. WhatsApp e. other, specify \_\_\_\_\_

i. Mentor 1

ii. Mentor 2

iii. Mentee

4. The mentoring experience has been useful.

- a. Strongly disagree b. Somewhat disagree c neutral d somewhat agree strongly agree
5. Would you be willing/interested to continue the mentoring relationship?
- a. Yes b. No
6. Do you think the model of having two mentors is preferable to having just one?
- a. Yes b. No, Why?
7. What were the strengths of this opportunity?
8. What challenges did you face during the mentoring process?
9. How can the mentoring program be strengthened?

10. What suggestions do you have for the organizers/Africa section if we want to scale up the program?

11. What other suggestions do you have for the organizers/ Africa section as we work to strengthen support to other young scholars in Africa?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME!