EP.3 - AgSpirations Podcast with Dr Mandefro Nigussie Transcript

Dorine Odongo [00:00:00] Hello, and welcome to another episode of AgSpirations by AWARD brought to you by African Women in Agricultural Research and Development, AWARD. This podcast features immersive conversations with leading global experts and thought leaders to explore how we can accelerate inclusive, agricultural-driven development in Africa.

[00:00:28] I am your host, Dorine Odongo.

[00:00:40] Today we are thrilled to be joined by Dr. Mandefro Nigussie to discuss how we can scale institutional policies to drive country-wide gender responsive agriculture. Dr. Nigussie is an agricultural researcher and the State Minister for Agricultural Development at the Ministry of Agriculture in Ethiopia. Until 2020, he was the Director General at the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research, EIAR.

[00:01:10] Dr. Nigussie has a PhD in genetics and plant breeding with over two decades of experience in policy, research and development across Africa. Mandefro it's an absolute honor to have you join us Today.

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:01:25] Thank you Dorine. It's a pleasure for me to.

Dorine Odongo [00:01:26] Thank you so much.

[00:01:42] Okay. One of the longstanding ambitions and missions of the research and development community is to influence evidence-based policymaking and having experts like yourselves at the helm of policy decisions is an excellent achievement for the R&D sector. Could you please share with us your journey into policymaking? What was your motivation?

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:02:02] So I started my career as an agricultural researcher working mainly on the development side of programming. Then I left that and joined the World Bank to coordinate a project. Finally I left the UN agency and went to civil society organization and then to UN. And I came back with all this diversified skill sets in order for Ethiopia or any developing nations to bring in a social change, the biologists think, or the agriculturalists think that just pushing technology and innovation can bring social change and advocacy people would think that advocating for a specific policy change can bring social change and UN and agencies, and, you have multiple organizations who do have their way of thinking to bring a social change. So after working with this organizations, I said there is no one solution for social change.

[00:03:22] So we need to have the right policy, the right programming, and this should be backed up by inclusiveness in terms of bringing the social of change. Why do we need inclusiveness? A supply driven social change doesn't last look, but when you engage the primary change agents the users, the people we serve, the people we care about, then you can sustain because you will begin a social change by asking a question, what are the key challenges that the society is facing?

[00:04:06] So you start from the root cause of the problem. You start building interventions together with other actors and the community that you're serving, it's only then, you can be on the right track, you can be result-oriented or impactful. So this skill set that I had with these organizations helped me to think about a multi-dimension of social change.

[00:04:38] That's how I went to the EIAR as a DG, and the Ministry of Agriculture as a State Minister, and that opportunity helped me to make policy changes. The key changes that we want when we were biologists, we don't see that part. Now, when you see from the human rights side, the rights-based programming side, it's only then you understand there is inequality, there is these category of people at different layers of government, then you have actors working on the same problem, but they are not coordinating, they are not collaborating, and they don't have the right policy that can support their effort. Then, we had a discussion with the Ministry leadership in terms of bringing in a policy change in area where we are deficient.

[00:05:42] We have some policy, we don't have some policy and the policies that were generated a decade or two decades ago, the context is now different. So we need to modify, we need to improve. That's how I went into the policy dimension of social development.

Dorine Odongo [00:06:05] Indeed a very eclectic career journey. I must say you've had such a stellar career and really, I think you've gone full circle, starting by working with the grassroots, to the people, going into research, going into policy and advocacy, going into research for development organization, and coming back to the government, you are at the helm of leadership of the National Research Organization, Agricultural Research Organization in Ethiopia. And you had such a good run there as the Director General and for us, particularly at AWARD, the lasting legacy for us was when you came in and you imposed a moratorium on recruitment and then had to recruit a hundred, more than a hundred new young graduates, all of them women just in a bid to shift the dynamics of the organization in terms of gender balance and gender responsivity. I want us to shift and talk about your journey at EIAR.

[00:07:06] What are some of the strategies you used during your leadership at EIAR to increase women's participation in leadership and how are you scaling this at national scale?

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:07:15] So what we want is a social change and that change has to be positive, significant, and sustainable. In order for us to have these three characteristics of development or social change, we should be very inclusive.

[00:07:33] You don't have to leave anyone behind. So taking that motto and bringing that and translating to what we are doing, we serve both men and women, young and old, all categories of the farming and the pastoral community. Then, if we are starting from the root cause, from the people that we care about, then women constitutes 50 or more percentage of the entire population of the farming community or the pastoral community. EIAR when I joined, we only had 10% women researchers. In Ethiopia, like any other country, women researchers do have limited access to talk to women farmers and women pastoralists. Men don't have that or there would be a social challenge for men researchers to interact with women farmers in the pastoral initiatives.

[00:08:48] If we want to really address the root cause we need to bring that proportion up. Then we need to have women researchers who can really talk to women farmers and pastoralists in order to address women-associated challenges. And then, I had these over a hundred brilliant young graduates. All of them are female. Then, I change the proportion from 10% to 20% then it is not just about bringing these young graduates, it's about having a crash program so that they can move in accelerated way along their career to have further education immediately, to have a very consolidated and a holistic module or training to have mentors and a coach.

[00:09:50] Why are we doing that? We want these younger graduates who have an accelerated career. We want to bring them to a leadership position. Still. If you have these graduates and ahundred graduate level, just as a junior researcher, they can't influence the policy and the practices, and they can't influence the research programs, but when they have power related to leadership, related to management, they can really influence the systems, the practices, the procedures, the policy, and the strategy. That's how we ended up with these young women graduates and then took them to school. And some of them came back and became program leaders. Now they are leaders of programs of research and development. They can do anything, what they think is right, specifically in addressing challenges associated to women, youth, disabilities, we have all those inclusiveness characteristics. Again, many people argue this, women and men, if you give them equal responsibility, women are more responsible and result oriented that men.

[00:11:21] And this is not unique to Ethiopia. I have seen this in Asia where I had my PhD. The entire Asian development is all about women-driven, social change, all the professors are there, women, professors, women university leaders, women faculty heads so they can really bring change within an institution as well as outside the institution where the impact of research and development can be expressed or can be seen in terms of social change. So that was the main reason. It's not about having the numbers, its about their impact after joining the Institute and the changes that they can bring on women farmers and the pastrolists in the rural areas.

Dorine Odongo [00:12:16] Thank you very much for sharing with us, some of the strategies that you used. One thing that you say that I want to underscore, you've talked about the importance of it's not just changed, but we have to be focused on positive, significant and sustainable change. And I want us to now start talking about policies and policy making and the role of policies just in a bit. But before we do that, I want to talk about the issue of numbers. You've talked about, how you increase the number of women at EIAR from 10% to 20%. And it's not just about, getting them into leaderships, also equipping them, giving them the right environment.

[00:12:57] You've talked about mentoring and other supports systems that you've put in place to enable them contribute. But beyond merely enhancing the number of women in agricultural systems, what are some of the strategies to increase women's participation and indeed their contribution in the agricultural space.

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:12:40] One of the initiatives that we have taken in that particular exercise is we organized women researchers into an association. When they have an association, it is very easy to voice, it is very easy to address the challenges along the ways of our research system. One of the strategy is organizing them into some sort of association or corporate, whatever the name would be.

[00:13:14] For me, it was a women research association. So that association really helped. In addition to that, AWARD supported us to link this young graduates and young researchers to senior researchers, again, within Ethiopia and then networking them with international peers and international senior researchers.

[00:14:22] That kind of network is also very positive in terms of bringing the desire to change, cultivating this women researchers into senior and leadership positions. So networking and organizing the women researchers in a certain form can really help. Again, not only that, along the leadership career, bringing in short term training that can upgrade their skill sets in terms of management, planning, controlling, monitoring, and providing that type of shorter, modular training can also really help in terms of moving this women, researchers to a higher level in an accelerated.

Dorine Odongo [00:15:12] Absolutely important to ensure that there's a support system that enables them to continue learning from each other , and supporting each other, and of course thriving in the process.

[00:15:24] When you were at the helm of EIAR, you were at the leadership and you were able to make some policy changes that really saw the institution moving in a different direction in terms of increasing the number of women researchers in the institution and so the Institute getting to benefit from the resources that are available.

[00:15:43] And now coming into the national level as the State Minister, how can government policies advance the kind of environment that you created at EIAR, a gender-responsive institution and inclusive agriculture? So what do we see as the role of government policies?

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:16:05] The initiative can really begin at one point in one institution, but if this is not scaled at a larger government level, or at least at a sectoral Ministry of Agriculture level, you don't see a significant change on the livelihoods of the farming and the pastoral communities.

[00:16:32] So taking these experience, explaining to the Ministry of Agriculture and the importance and the value add of this initiative, the Ministry leadership, they bought the idea. And we had never had women step ministers, we have started having one, at least one in that mix. If this is the beginning of a social change in the men dominated world, having this kind of opportunity is very tough, but in an organized way, in a very systematic way, we can change the setup. And when we change the setup, it's not about having one State Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, it's about what do they do as a woman State Minister, something different from men is an area where we cultivate women researchers, women development practitioners, women State Ministers, and women ministers. And following that, not very long, sometime after 10 or 11 months, Prime Minister Abiy started talking about having an equal proportion of men and women in his cabinet and he did it. That is a time where I got excited.

[00:18:09] If you make as a team change and that change has a value, certainly it will be scaled up, but what you should do is document the process and promote the idea to a higher level. And, it's not about me alone talking about it, convincing the leadership at the sector level, and then they need to start talking about inclusiveness.

[00:18:39] When do we do that, our impact can be greater. So that is how I solved it within EIAR and in the Ministry. Wherever I go now I talk about that proportion in order to bring a social change. Have the last mile, the impact in your mind and work using who can bring that desired change easily, who can bring those changes with less cost and who can bring those changes by being inclusive, social sensitivity, and so on, you know, religious dimension, there are many barriers for women not to take up a leadership position, especially in developing nations and culture-rich religion is some of those dragging factors.

Dorine Odongo [00:19:50] Very interesting. I'm hearing you talk about the need to identify the strategic actors that need to be involved, who has the power to make meaningful change, but also to equip them with the knowledge and to convince them why this is important, and how to achieve that change, that you have their support and they need to work together because this cannot be one person's agenda or one person's role, you can’t do it alone.

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:20:20] Women researchers and development actors, as well as policy makers do have some social responsibilities, like caring for babies. There are many responsibilities, again, in those areas, you need to have mechanism to support so that they spent more of their time on their work than taking care of babies or, other social responsibilities. So the baby room we have at EIAR is established at that point where we had this and that was also adopted by the Ministry of Agriculture, and they don't have to stay at home. If they don't have a babysitter, they can bring in, we have these facilities and any time when they have a break, they can go and visit the babies.

[00:21:19] So that kind of support is very important. Secondly, social protection. Women would be liable to a number of factors, especially when they drive, when they travel to rural or even urban areas, then, you need to think about a proper protection for women to be safe and secure.

Dorine Odongo [00:21:48] Actually Mandefro you've just answered my next question, I was going to ask what progress Ethiopia has made in ensuring gender considerations are at the heart of your policy-making processes to transform their country's agriculture. And you've started talking about how you're paying attention to the social status and the needs and priorities of women, for example, and beyond paying attention to those needs, the social needs, how can gender-responsive, agricultural policies enable more inclusive agriculture and food systems really?

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:20:20] So that brings us to what is the source of the social change? What are the critical challenges women do have? what are the critical challenges that young girls do have? So if you can dissect and get those challenges, you can design a proper intervention. So the first thing that we equip this women researchers and development practitioners with is the tools that they are going to use from problem identification, all the way to impact measurement. Once they have those tools, then they can easily go through identifying the challenge, putting in the intervention, how can you measure. whether you are moving towards the right direction or not, those kinds of things.

Dorine Odongo [00:23:27] One of the things that you talked about last time was social change, and the kind of change that you want. And there's something that you mentioned last time about the need for technical expertise and combining policy with practice, which is the kind of knowledge and experience that you bring on board. And I'm just wondering, how can we be intentional in ensuring that we combine policy and practice? Because it's not just about the policies that we put in place, it's not just about bringing in more women, you've talked about the need to go beyond the numbers, but also how can we be intentional in ensuring policy and practice. There's policy development, implementation, and evolution to actually have a lasting change on inclusive agriculture.

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:24:14] This is a very important area, especially, in institutions that do have several policies. This can cut across not just in Africa, but anywhere. In many countries, in many institutions, they have the right policies, but some of the policies are not practiced.

[00:24:37] So if there is a policy which is not supported by practice, it means there is no policy. And that's why, when we design a policy, we will make sure that policy will be practiced through creating accountability mechanisms. And this is special for the leaders of institutions or departments.

[00:25:06] So there is a policy that has to be put into practice if not the institution head or the department head should be held accountable for not practicing that. For example, you might have an intentional bias to have more women to go to school or to give them better opportunity in certain categories. So if you have that policy and you don't practice and let women and men compete for a specific opportunity and you are affecting women by not implementing that policy. That really drags our development, that really drags the social change. So it's not about a policy and a practice it's about ultimately dragging the impact that we want to bring on a social setup. The key thing when we develop or when we design our policy, it has to be supported by practices or action plan. So that's a critical element.

Dorine Odongo [00:26:28] That is very critical yes. But one other critical element that you've mentioned that I really wanted to emphasize or to highlight is accountability. And you say to that, the person in charge, the head should be held accountable. And for me, what this means is that it is very important to ensure that we have the right people leading these initiatives. Am I right?

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:26:47] Yes. If you have a leadership position, and you're not living to that level, then you need to leave the position. Whenever you have opportunity to turn policy into practice, do it. And if you have difficulties in terms of putting the policy into practice, change the policy. So you can do this when you have the power. Someone who has the power has to really exercise the power in a proper way. If not, then the system has to hold the person in charge accountable and the first accountability is just, a mindset. So I should hold myself accountable to myself, am I doing the right thing? Then my team should hold me accountable for doing something incorrect and the should motivate me and inspire me for something that I did good. So the second layer is your team can hold you accountable and that requires an upward accountability mechanism. That system, that process has to be in there. The advantage that I had in the EIAR or in the Ministry, I was in the leadership position and I can make decisions, but if you don't have that power to make decision and to change your policies and the practices, then it is very difficult for you to influence existing policies practices.

Dorine Odongo [00:28:42] Very important, indeed. This is something that we cannot be oblivious of. Policy making, policy changes, policy decisions, really, you need to be in a powerful position. You need to have the power to make the decisions or to make the changes. And as we bring this conversation to and end, in your role as a policymaker, both at the institutional level, and now at the national level, what are some of the lessons that you've learned that you would want to highlight for other policymakers to take note of?

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:29:17] Yeah. So one thing that I would like to highlight if we are really working in our silos, bringing social change, would be a nightmare, very difficult, even if you achieve it over decades. Having a holistic map of the holistic changes that we would like to bring is key. Secondly, networking and collaborating with various actors in the area where we would like to bring the social change is very important.

[00:29:51] So don't discriminate government, civil society, thinktanks, UN agencies and so on. Bring all those actors together so that you can create synergy, so that you can bring a better change compared to institution doing something alone. So that collaboration is very critical. In order for various institutions to have that kind of collaboration you need to bring in ashared the vision. So what do we want to change? And what is our common goal? What is our common target? And then you can specify roles and the responsibility of each actor within that network. And then bring in this accountability element again. So when we are together, we plan together and one institution or one individual don't deliver, then, institution should hold each other accountable

[00:31:00]. And this one applies again for teams working together as a team. That collaborating, working with other institutions is very important. And again, social change is not just in one country. Our collaboration with various institutions across Africa, across Europe and other continents is also critical.

[00:31:29] Some of the institutions can bring in resources, some will bring in knowledge, some will bring in contexts. So you have various actors who can contribute and accelerate the changes that we are targeting. As I said, positive, significant, and sustainable change that really takes care of inclusiveness.

Dorine Odongo [00:31:53] Indeed, going back to we need to keep our eye on positive, significant and sustainable change. What I'm hearing you say is we need to be intentional in identifying and leveraging the strengths of other actors so that we can work together towards a common goal. And you've really emphasized on the need for being very clear about the social change that you want to see. What problem are we solving and what policy change or policy decision does it require?

[00:32:27] It's been an absolute honor listening to you and having this conversation with you, Mr. Mandefro. As we bring this to a close, do you have any parting shot?

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:32:39] One thing I would like to highlight is that social change is not an easy change and it requires multiple actors in it also requires sophisticated technologies, practices, procedures, and thought.

[00:33:00] So any change, if it is a service the public sector would take care of the development partners can support, other networks can support, but if you turn that into a business, then the enterprise should be owned and run by a private sector. It's only then you can bring in a sustainable change so that the public sector alone cannot bring a significant change nationwide for a hundred plus million people. We need to turn some of these opportunities, some of these interventions channelling them towards business enterprises. Then you cultivate a private sector. You bring in the private sector, public and private can work together, UN agencies, civil society organizations like AWARD can really ignite and trigger those social changes.

[00:34:02] My dream was found to be true because AWARD supported us quite heavily, especially on the mentorship, connecting us with international experts. That kind of continental and international level networking organizations are very important. Me sitting in Ethiopia I can't have access to a global pool of experts, but you have as AWARD a global pool experts and you also have access to finances, access to data, and knowledge sources, you need to support other countries like us bringing social change into action.

[00:34:53] So, I would like to appreciate and acknowledge the support that we had from AWARD. And I want to really, to push that type of support to many research and development actors in Africa.

Dorine Odongo [00:35:11] Thank you very much. Thank you. We also really enjoyed the splendid partnership that we had with you at AWARD, and indeed the foundation that you set for that partnership has ensured that we continue to enjoy that partnership even beyond your leadership with the current leadership at EIAR. So really thank you very much.

Dr. Mandefro Nigussie [00:35:28] Thank you.

Dorine Odongo [00:35:33] Friends, that brings us to the end of today's episode. We hope you enjoyed the conversation. I have been talking to Dr. Mandefro Nigussie, the State Minister for Agricultural Development at the Ministry of Agriculture in Ethiopia. We would like to hear your views on the topic and how you think we can advance inclusive, agricultural research and development.

[00:35:56] We also welcome your feedback and suggestions on guests you would like us to host in the future. Until next time, thank you and bye-bye.