

Story of Change

The Mawazo Institute: Home of African Female Researchers



The Mawazo Learning Exchange (MLEx) Fellow and PhD student, Sylvia Mutinda, using genome editing tools to build parasitic resistance in staple cereals. Sylvia is currently studying molecular biology and biotechnology at the Pan African University/Kenyatta University.

The Mawazo Institute, RISA Funded Project Milestones

- Forty young African women researchers were empowered through the RISA grant and the Mawazo Learning Exchange Fellowship programme.
- Published study that contributed to the identification of a new, striga-resistant strain of sorghum that can be cultivated in western Kenya.
- A report on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on African research and higher education was published under the RISA grant.



About the RISA Fund

The Research and Innovation Systems for Africa (RISA) Fund is a programme to support and strengthen research and innovation systems in six countries: Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, and Ethiopia. The programme runs from 2021 to 2024 and is funded by UKAid.

Identification of New Strains of Sorghum

Sylvia Mutinda, an avid researcher and a PhD student of molecular biology and biotechnology, contributed to the identification of new strains of sorghum that are striga-resistant and can be cultivated in Western Kenya.

The Pan African University students' research focused on host-parasite interaction, including screening a large panel of sorghum strains and identifying natural mutants resistant to the parasite with the aim of helping farmers in Kenya and the wider region of Sub-Saharan Africa increase crop yields.

The RISA Fund contributed to the study through support of the Mawazo Institute fellowship programme, providing financial support towards Ms. Mutinda's research.

"Initially, I was not able to conduct sequencing to identify the smaller fragments in the research, since the seed funding received from Pan African University was not sufficient. Mawazo came in handy, offered financial support and I conducted sequencing of the rest of the samples. I am happy to say, we have got six more mutants, and this makes it twenty lines in total. Now we have twenty sorghum varieties that have been identified to be resistant based on marker assisted analysis," says Sylvia Mutinda.

"This is good news to researchers. We are happy and looking forward to carrying out further studies on the twenty lines and then deploy them in striga resistant soils to test how they are performing in the fields," she adds.

About the Mawazo Institute

The Mawazo Institute is a women-led African organisation based in Nairobi, Kenya, supporting early career women researchers as they work to find solutions to local and global development challenges. The main objective is to create African female researchers who are well equipped to improve African research ecosystems and development through homegrown knowledge and innovations.

The Mawazo Learning Exchange (MLEx) fellowship programme, supports researchers pursuing PhDs in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania. The programme provides tailored training and professional development courses, mentorship, networking, and dissemination of their research outputs to support career pathways and diversification. Other programmes include the Mawazo Alumni Support Programme, which creates opportunities for peer mentorship between past and current Mawazo beneficiaries, and the Mawazo Fellows Fund, which provides financial support for research activities.

Through these initiatives the Institute has supported fellows to complete genetic testing, undertake field work, purchase chemical reagents, and much more.

The Institute recently launched the MLEx Resource Library, which contains learning materials curated for use by African researchers.

Why African Female Researchers?

African female researchers have voices, skills, ideas and are passionate about scientific innovations. The Mawazo Institute provides funding, training, and technical support to prepare female researchers to launch successful careers in their field, and position them to be thought leaders with influence inside and outside academia. About forty young African women researchers have been empowered through the Mawazo Learning Exchange Fellowship supported by the RISA grant.

"I must say the programme has been highly impactful. I am one of the lucky women that has been trained by the Mawazo Institute on professional development and financial management. While conducting the research I managed funds on my own, applying what I was taught on budgeting and financial management," adds Sylvia.

The Mawazo Institute is committed to providing extra support to women researchers to enable them to complete their PhDs and have successful careers.

"We are supporting women who have enrolled as PhD students at institutions in Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Uganda, clearly differentiating our goal from others. Through the Mawazo Fellows Fund, incredible female researchers across East Africa received funding to complement their work," says Dr. Fiona Moejes, CEO, the Mawazo Institute.

In addition to providing financial and technical support, the Institute invited experts to facilitate a course designed to sharpen the fellows' public engagement and science communication skills. A monitoring, evaluation, and learning consultant was engaged to create a theory of change, revise its logframe, and lay the groundwork needed to produce rigorous evidence.

"The thing that is constant, is that our fellows are the centre of the Mawazo Institute, everything is built for them. We are trying to do everything to improve not only their capacities but opportunities to do amazing work and for them to be in places where their ideas are taken on board and influence change on the African continent," adds Fiona.

Report on Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on African Research

With the support of the RISA Fund, the institute published a report, opinion editorial, and interactive map that widely disseminated the results of a 2021 Mawazo survey on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on African research and higher education. This contributed to the base of evidence available to policymakers and regulators in higher education and research who seek to address the challenges created by the pandemic.

Organisation Name: The Mawazo Institute

Partner Contacts: Dr. Fiona Moejes, CEO


Email: fiona.moejes@mawazoinstitute.org

The RISA Fund Contact

Email: info@risa-fund.org

Website: www.risa-fund.org

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