

Junior Scientists Tandems

Final Report

Name of student: Rehanna Mayat

German Research Institution: Justus-Liebig-University Gießen

Supervisor at German Research Institution: Prof. Dr. Gudrun Keding

National University (Country) (if applicable)

Supervisor at National University:

International Agricultural Research Center (incl. Country): International Livestock Research Institute, Kenya

Supervisor at International Agricultural Research Center: Dr. Immaculate Omondi

Start and end date of career exploration stay: June 2025 – December 2025

Title: "The impact of innovations to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work on the nutrition of families in Kenya: How does it change the dietary quality of men, women and children?"

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Overview

In June 2025, I began my six-month stay at the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) in Nairobi, Kenya, funded by ATSAF e.V. through the Junior Scientists Tandem Program.

My time in Nairobi was meant to focus on data collection for my master's thesis on "The impact of innovations to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work on the nutrition of families in Kenya: How does it change the dietary quality of men, women and children?" as part of the Ripple Effect I4RR project. But it turned into much more than just thesis work.

I not only had the chance to facilitate my own focus group discussions, but also to work with many intelligent and experienced researchers from different backgrounds. I gained insights into the daily life of researchers and learned a lot about both qualitative and quantitative data-analysis tools.

On a personal level, I learned what it means to arrive in a completely different country with a different culture—and to be welcomed with open arms. Daily life in Nairobi taught me what it means to truly be part of a community.

The I4RR Project

The project "Scaling innovations for reduced and redistributed women's unpaid care work in smallholder livestock feed provision in rural Kenya and Ethiopia" is implemented by Ripple Effect and co-funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Global Affairs Canada. Its goal is to ease women's unpaid care workload by introducing several innovations:

- Promoting, integrating and commercializing donkey services to reduce women's workload in transporting livestock feed
- Strengthening village childcare services to relieve women involved in livestock feed provision
- Encouraging more equal work-sharing norms within households and communities
- Promoting gender-responsive forage species and labour-saving technologies for growing, processing and storing forages

My Work at ILRI

When I arrived at ILRI, I was highly motivated to start working and to learn as much as possible about the lives of the people I would be writing about. But I quickly learned that things are not always as straightforward as expected. The first challenge was dealing with a lot of bureaucracy to obtain my work permit. Luckily, my supervisor Immaculate Omondi and Marvin Wasonga from the CapDev team at ILRI supported me through every step.

Contrary to my expectations, only a small part of my stay involved actual fieldwork. Most of my time was spent in the office doing background research on the study area and on the tools and methods I planned to use. About one month into my stay, I began preparing for fieldwork, which took place in August in Bungoma County in western Kenya. My stay there lasted seven days and involved nine FGDs. I organized everything myself—from preparing the questionnaires and budgeting to running the FGDs—always in consultation with my supervisor Immaculate Omondi and my professor at JLU, Prof. Dr. Gudrun Keding.



Picture 1: Women fetching water on Mt. Elgon

After returning from the field, I took a few days off to process everything and wait for the final transcripts. Once I received them, I began analysing the data using NVivo, which I had never used before. Thankfully, several experienced researchers supported me in developing the codebook and conducting the coding. As I write this report, I still have a few weeks left in Nairobi, during which I hope to begin the next analytical steps.

In parallel with the qualitative work, I also wanted to include quantitative data, which meant deciding what additional information needed to be collected in the survey. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to participate in the quantitative data collection, but I am grateful that I could supplement the survey tool with my questionnaires.

Besides working on my thesis, I regularly joined the bi-weekly meetings of the People, Policies and Institutions (PPI) department at ILRI. These meetings helped me connect with colleagues and learn about their work, as someone different presents ongoing projects at each session. From time to time,



I was also able to attend seminars and workshops—for example, one on “The gendered dimensions of scarcity” and a stakeholder workshop on co-designing an interactive Food System Model for Kenya. These events were great opportunities to broaden my perspective and meet people from various parts of the food system.

Most of the time, I organized my own work schedule. Besides fixed meetings or seminars, I had no set hours, which gave me a lot of flexibility. This freedom was great, but it also required discipline and good self-organization.

My Life Outside of Work

Outside of work, my life was fun, diverse, exciting, and sometimes chaotic, hectic, or challenging. It was important to me not only to connect with colleagues but also to meet people from different communities and learn how they live, what challenges they face, and what they enjoy.

I was lucky to already know some other ATSAF-funded students online before arriving. So when I came to Nairobi, I immediately had a group of people who had already been there for a while. They quickly became my main support system and close friends. Together we experienced everything: eating lunch in local “hotels,” taking the loud and lively matatus without fixed schedules, trying street food, going paragliding, and exploring Nairobi’s vibrant nightlife. Having these people around made it much easier to settle into my new home. And even after some of them left, I never felt lonely—ILRI hosts students from all over the world, so whenever one person left, someone new arrived.

Since dancing is a big part of Kenyan culture and something I love myself, I joined dance classes in Nairobi. Though I was nervous at first—thinking everyone here must be great at dancing—I quickly realized there was no need to worry. The teachers and other participants were incredibly welcoming, patient, and encouraging. It was all about having fun, and Kenyans truly know how to have fun.

Most of my six months were spent in Nairobi, but I also took the opportunity to travel around Kenya and even to Tanzania. Both countries have stunning landscapes, plenty of activities, and cultures rich in hospitality. Since I love hiking (of course—I’m German), I explored various trails, from short hikes around Nairobi to climbing an active volcano in Tanzania and finally summiting Mount Kenya. These trips were a great escape from the sometimes chaotic city life and helped me relax and recharge.

Challenges

Of course, no experience comes without challenges.

In terms of work, I faced several difficulties. I started with the proposal I had written for my ATSAF application, including my research questions and study design, but I had to revise it multiple times

throughout my stay. At first, this made me feel insecure, as if I had not prepared well enough. But through talking with colleagues, I learned that this is completely normal. Research rarely goes exactly as planned, so I had to learn to be flexible and adapt.

Another major challenge was my fieldwork. I tried to prepare as well as I could by designing the questionnaires, reading about FGD facilitation, and talking to experienced colleagues. But once in the field, I felt lost at first. The pre-test did not go as expected, some groups were overly talkative while others said almost nothing, and meanwhile I had to stay on top of the budget and payments. Without the team of mobilizers, translators, and especially my note-taker Sylvia, I would have been completely overwhelmed. Despite the stress, the warmth and kindness of the FGD participants made up for everything.



Picture 2: Sylvia and me, after we finished the final FGD

Outside of work, there were fewer challenges. As mentioned, having people around who were going through similar experiences helped a lot. Still, Nairobi could be overwhelming at times. Walking outside often meant being called “mzungu” or being stared at—not in a negative way, but out of curiosity. On days when I just wanted some quiet time, it sometimes felt like a lot. But even this is something I know I will miss when I return to Germany.

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The sense of community here amazed me from the beginning. From the owner of my favourite “hotel,” who taught me how to prepare chapati, to Joyce, who always picked the best avocados for me at her market stall, to Violet, the motherly tailor who made me beautiful dresses—I now feel, after almost six months, like I have become part of the Uthiru community.

Many thanks to Atsaf e. V. for making all of this possible!
