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Munro Part of NSF-Funded Team Studying Food Security in Africa

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— The National Science Foundation has awarded a \$480,000 grant to a team of five researchers including Illinois Wesleyan University's William Munro. The research team will investigate female farmers' participation in a well-funded initiative to boost yields and sales in three countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with part of the funding supporting the participation of undergraduate students in the research.

In 2014, 805 million people suffered from chronic hunger, with the highest malnutrition rates in rural sub-Saharan Africa, according to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization's most recent estimate. To address the issue, a multi-lateral effort from aid agencies, philanthropic foundations including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and African governments have committed billions of dollars to the goal of raising productivity among small farmers.

This multi-billion dollar strategy known as a "Green Revolution for Africa" (GR4A) seeks to more tightly integrate small farmers into formal markets in order to improve their access to yield-boosting inputs and to encourage the sale of crop surpluses for cash, according to Munro, the Betty Ritchie-Birrer '47 and Ivan Birrer, Ph.D. Endowed Professor and a member of Illinois Wesleyan's [political science](#) faculty.



Women process cashews in Cote d'Ivoire (in West Africa).



A woman bears a child while tending sorghum in Mali.

The team of researchers includes principal investigator Rachel Schurman, University of Minnesota; Thomas Bassett, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Heidi Gengenbach, University of Massachusetts Boston; Bill Moseley, Macalester College, and Munro, an expert in African politics and development theory. Munro said the powers behind GR4A believe the solution to Africa's hunger problem lies in unleashing women's potential in agriculture along with small farmer market integration.

"Essentially, we're interested in how the theory plays out," said Munro. "There is an imperfect understanding of whether and how women farmers benefit from participating in agricultural value chains, and under what circumstances women farmers' income gains translate into reduced household poverty and malnutrition.

"It's paradoxical, really, that on a continent where most people live off the land, they are still food insecure," he added, noting that precise mechanisms to determine success of the GR4A initiative remain ill-defined.

Through interviews and in training rural women to use food security assessment tools, the research team seeks to demonstrate whether and how the "woman-farmer-centered" agricultural value chain works in practice, and whether evidence supports donor enthusiasm about predicted nutritional outcomes for farming households. Moseley will focus on sorghum and millet markets in Mali, Bassett will look at cashew markets in Côte d'Ivoire, and Gengenbach will study cassava markets in Mozambique. Munro's work will include personal interviews with policy makers in the United States and Africa, as well as research the roles of African multilateral organizations on the ground in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire. The grant will provide funds for an Illinois Wesleyan student to serve as a research assistant starting in the spring semester. Funding will also support graduate student research at Illinois, Minnesota and UMass Boston.

The idea for the five-year project grew in part from research Munro and Schurman conducted for their 2010 book [Fighting for the Future of Food: Activists versus Agribusiness in the Struggle over Biotechnology](#) (University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

Munro said the project is novel and exciting. "No one else is doing anything like this on a comparative basis, so we think the project is going to generate some very interesting results."