

GRADUATE AG RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT



Hira Channa

A lot of institutions are using the methodology we use, but at Purdue, it's interdisciplinary. Centers bring people together here."

Hira Channa, PhD student, Agricultural Economics

THE STUDENT: In a family of medical doctors, Hira Channa charted her own course toward business. The native of Pakistan completed her undergraduate studies at the Institute of Business Administration, Karachi before coming to the U.S. as a Fulbright Scholar. "Professionally and personally, the Fulbright program transformed my life," she says. She began to grasp the importance of agricultural economics to developing countries at Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, where she earned a master's degree in applied economics and management. Channa then returned to Pakistan, where she was an analyst for two years with the Pakistan Strategy Support Program, a project of the International Food Policy Research Institute (part of the global research partnership CGIAR). The experience increased her understanding of the different perspectives in agricultural policymaking. She applied to several U.S. graduate programs, but Purdue topped her list, and not just because her advisor at Cornell was an alumnus. "The faculty and peer group here are really supportive," she explains. She began her PhD studies in August 2015 under the guidance of Associate Professor of Agricultural Economics Jacob Ricker-Gilbert. "We have a good rapport," Channa says of her advisor. "He's passionate about the work we do and honest about giving feedback."

THE RESEARCH: Channa's research is based in Tanzania where she hopes to help solve the worrying puzzle of why farmers in the developing world tend to sell grain at lower prices at harvest, only to buy it back at higher prices later in the year. Her dissertation, funded by USAID, provides smallholder farmers with PICS (Purdue Improved Crop Storage) bags and loans at harvest. The loans allow farmers to borrow against their grain to meet immediate financial needs while safely storing it in PICS bags. When grain prices inevitably rise later in the year, the grain can be sold for a

higher price and farmers can then repay their loans. Channa spent April, May and June in Tanzania to set the project up as a randomized control trial, so that she can measure how the intervention impacts peoples' incomes and food security. Channa is working with commercial entities to lend money to farmers, so she hopes the combination of PICS bags and credit can be scaled-up to benefit more people if the initial intervention is successful. Another related part of her work involves evaluating demand for new technology and looking at why users choose to adopt or pass on it. "My research is practical in that results can be immediately useful, which is part of what attracts me to it," she says. "Also I'm learning research methods that have broad applicability."

THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE: Channa's employment as a research analyst before coming to Purdue "helped crystallize the kind of work I hope to be doing," she says. "Working on specific issues in connection with policymakers helps you be more realistic about who is going to use the research and the avenues you'll use to put it forward." How research results are communicated to busy policymakers is especially crucial, she notes: "I realized that our audiences have a million things going on, and this may or may not be a priority for them. I have learned the importance of being direct and specific."

FUTURE PLANS: Channa hopes to complete her PhD in two more years. Although she came to Purdue with career plans focused on working directly with policymakers, her time at Purdue has broadened her thinking: "I've realized academic projects can also be closely connected to policymakers, so I'm hoping to build a career in academics," she says. In her spare time, she enjoys running and gym workouts.