

Tribute

The scientist is credited for bridging science and media coverage, leaving a lasting legacy in agricultural genetics across Africa.

BY LOMINDA AFEDRARU

In Uganda and across Africa, a journalist like me, specialising in agricultural science reporting, found Dr Andrew Kiggundu remarkably easy to reach for an interview. He was always just a phone call away, ready to enlighten journalists on agricultural science and policy.

In his death last week, Uganda and Africa lost a towering figure — a gentle giant in agricultural science, and more specifically, agricultural genetics.

Dr Kiggundu (1969–2026), a renowned plant biotechnologist, leaves behind not only a compelling body of agricultural research but also an enduring legacy — a moral compass for agricultural science at a time when challenges to food security in Uganda, Africa and the wider world loom large.

The steadfast Kiggundu met his untimely death on April 7 after returning from a meeting at the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) in Entebbe. He tragically fell from a ladder while repairing a faulty water system on the roof of his home in Temagalo, Busiro, Wakiso District.

He was laid to rest in the same village on April 10, the very date he was born 57 years earlier, with hundreds of mourners in attendance.

The accident is believed to have occurred as he prepared his homestead to host friends and relatives for his birthday celebration. Evidence of this was clear, with electric bulbs twinkling across the compound, a neatly slashed lawn, and a homestead polished to perfection.

Fine scientist

While eulogising Dr Kiggundu, the Director General of NARO, Dr Yonna Baguma, said his colleague was a fine scientist who spoke with authority on agricultural science, adding that he died in the line of duty, driven by his love for science.

"Naro had assigned Dr Kiggundu to chair a committee constituted to reposition NARO's Laboratory Centre of Excellence at the National Agricultural Research Laboratories (NaRL) in Kawanda. The work was already concluded, and Dr Kiggundu, on the fateful day, came to present the draft paper. He was expected to present the final paper the next day. In other words, he had already tied up the loose ends," Dr Baguma said.

Dr Baguma explained that he joined NARO at the same time as Dr Kiggundu, 33 years ago, both as young scientists in the position of research assistants. This was after completing a Bachelor of Science in Botany and Zoology at Makerere University.

"I noticed a very brilliant young scientist and was tempted to ask what exactly he specialised in, to which he quickly answered: plant genetics," he added.

Dr Kiggundu would later pursue a Master's Degree in Agricultural Plant Breeding, Genetics and Biometrics at the University of the Orange Free State in South Africa, and a PhD in Plant Biotechnology at the University of Pretoria, specialising in recombinant protein engineering.

Dr Kiggundu: Plant breeder who gave it all to journalists



Relatives, friends and colleagues in the science fraternity attend the burial of the late Andrew Kiggundu, a renowned plant biotechnologist, in Busiro, Wakiso District last Friday. PHOTO/LOMINDA AFEDRARU

He rose in his profession, holding various appointments, including heading the biotechnology research programme at NaRL, where he worked on plant genetic resource conservation, biological control and biotechnology.

WHAT JOURNALISTS SAY

Ms Sarah Mawerere, a producer at Uganda Broadcasting Corporation radio, said Dr Kiggundu's death leaves a huge gap for journalists reporting on agricultural science, as he was always accessible and could simplify complex science.

"I am so perturbed because Dr Kiggundu has passed on so abruptly and at a time the media fraternity needed him most to explain activities of the anti-tick vaccine where he was now working. The media fraternity will miss him and may his soul rest in peace," she said.

Daily Monitor's Seeds of Gold columnist Michael J Ssali described Dr Kiggundu as a friend of the media who sensitised him and others about genetic engineering, adding that he enjoyed reading his articles and giving feedback.

He said Dr Kiggundu defended him against opponents of GM technology, who used to attack him with uncomfortable messages via email and WhatsApp groups.

Ms Linda Asante Agyei, a science journalist from Ghana and senior editor at the Ghana News Agency, described Dr Kiggundu as a statesman deeply passionate about research.

To her, he was a friend who sensitised journalists across Africa about plant breeding.

Dr Kiggundu served as project manager for the Virus Resistant and Nutrient Enhanced Cassava for Africa (VIR-CA Plus) Project, coordinating collaborators in Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda and the United States, alongside the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center in St Louis, Missouri. He also managed the Virus Resistant Cassava for Africa Project.

The late Kiggundu coordinated teams in the United States, Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria, ensuring efficient planning and implementation of project activities, including developing transgenic plants, stewardship, regulatory reviews, field trials and financial oversight.

At the time of his death, he was the production manager of the Anti-Tick Vaccine at the National Livestock Resources Research Institute (NaLRRRI) in Nakyesasa, Wakiso District.

He was also the chairperson of the Uganda Biotechnology and Biosafety Consortium (UBBC), a body that brings together scientists and journalists to deepen knowledge on plant genetics and the policies safeguarding them.

Dr Baguma thanked the late Kiggundu for his immense contributions to zoology and botany, particularly in characterising plants and isolating genes to introduce resistance against virulent pests, diseases and a rapidly changing climate.

"Naro was grappling with serious crop and animal diseases and pests, but when I first met Andrew, he had high qualifications in molecular biology to tackle complicated cases of viral, fungal and bacterial diseases, and Dr Kiggundu found a way through the thicket," he said.

Mr Robert Ssebunya, a former Member of Parliament for Nansana Municipality and now head of the Government Delivery Unit in the Office of the Prime Minister, described Dr Kiggundu as a generous scientist with a passion for plant breeding.

"Fellow mourners, did you know that this man now lying here breathlessly is the key scientist renowned worldwide for solving the ferocious banana bacterial wilt (BBW) and cassava brown streak virus disease (CBSVD), which swept through plantations like wildfire? All of us were helpless, but it was Dr Andrew Kiggundu who, using his rare genetic engineering skills and techniques, successfully diagnosed the cause of the wilt and virus streak infections."

"He used the same rare techniques to identify ways to tackle bacterial and viral infections in all banana and cassava varieties when the world was at a standstill. He isolated the genes that effectively fight the wilt and the streak — menaces across sub-Saharan Africa," Mr Ssebunya said.

Ssebunya also took a swipe at opponents of genetic engineering, particularly non-scientists, for their loud anti-GMO stance, which left politicians

hesitant and doubtful about legislating the introduction of genetically modified (GM) crops — products born of Dr Kiggundu's relentless work.

A priest from St Balikuddembe Catholic Church, Buloba, Rev Fr Joseph Mpigi, who presided over the requiem Mass and burial, said Dr Kiggundu was his confidant, a childhood companion with whom he grew up and went to school with.

He described him as a simple, God-fearing man who was loving to all around him. "He would call me any time to come home and have a drink and food. He would tell me life is meant to be enjoyed. Therefore, I urge you mourners to enjoy life because it is too short," he said.

Dr Kiggundu's son, Jason Ssali, and daughter Catherine Nagawa, said the father was a loving parent who taught them many things, especially about conserving plants and the environment.

They explained that their father's love for nature was the reason his home resembled a botanical garden. He taught them hands-on work and, while fixing the water tank, he worked side by side with his son.

A friend of journalists

This writer first came to know Dr Kiggundu around 2010, when scientists at Naro sought to have their research processes and findings published.

Naro often teamed up with the non-profit Science Foundation for Livelihoods and Development (Sci-fode) to sensitise journalists reporting on agriculture, helping them grasp the intricacies of plant science so they could write compelling articles.

Dr Kiggundu soon became a friend to many science journalists, not only in Uganda, but across East Africa and other developed countries. He placed great trust in publications on agricultural science in the *Daily Monitor* and other media outlets in Uganda, often using them as reference points.

This writer recalls Dr Kiggundu calling to request a link to a story about Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, who made a bold decision to attend the World Food Prize conference in Iowa, USA, in 2013.

The story highlighted how Cardinal Turkson appreciated the work of agricultural scientists using genetic engineering to increase food production. Though urged not to attend because the conference promoted genetic engineering, he told the gathering that anything concerning food security was too important to ignore.

Dr Kiggundu wanted the story to showcase during a meeting he led with scientists to sensitise leaders and members of the Uganda Joint Christian Council, who at the time did not understand the application of genetic engineering in plant breeding.

That is how passionately Dr Kiggundu kept track of science journalism in the country.

He is survived by...

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DR KIGGUNDU'S
AGE



Dr Andrew Kiggundu