



Tribute to an icon in agriculture: **Dr Denis Tumwesigye Kyetere**

‘Our success comes from the support and collaboration of many partners’ were the words of the founders of AATF in 2003 during its conceptualisation and formation.

In addition to the contribution of partners, the success recorded thus far by AATF has been due to far sighted vision and astute leadership at the institution.

Dr Denis Kyetere, or just Denis as he prefers to be called, joined the AATF in 2012. He found the fledgling institution in dire need to build trust and confidence with its partners and internal stakeholders following turbulent leadership challenges. At the time, AATF needed to maintain its gains and realise growth.

With a steady hand, always on the ready, Denis lifted the hearts and spirits of all he worked with at AATF. With clarity and compassion in equal proportions, he wove around him an endearing web of enduring friendships and partnerships that would anchor the organisation on a steady course during the 10 years of his leadership at AATF.

Magnanimous to the extreme, Denis has a comportment that exudes absolute humility. The man who prefers to

be addressed simply by his first name created sound harmony among staff that has helped build synergy within and across projects and departments, creating room for focus on the organisation’s bigger picture – serving smallholder farmer interests.

A scientist of no mean repute, Denis commanded respect among the organisation’s scientists and experts as he constantly nudged them to evaluate their work against the ever-increasing needs of smallholder farmers on the African continent.

His leadership and management style centered on building teams and teamwork, encouraging self-evaluation and ownership of results while building confidence and mutual respect among AATF staff and partners.

Denis joined AATF with a rich dossier of impressive leadership credentials. He had served on the Board of the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA), chaired the Board of the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) for two terms and led the National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO) in Uganda as Director General.



Dr Denis Tumwesigye Kyetere

As the Executive Director of the AATF, Denis knew only too well that rural communities thrive when smallholder farmers prosper. Under his leadership, AATF has worked with partners to help farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa access practical technology solutions that have increased yields by between 100 and 300 per cent across several crops, thus having a direct impact on livelihoods.

His passion for agriculture is rooted in a childhood spent tending livestock and crops on his family's homestead in rural Uganda, and this has contributed to his drive to see an Africa with greater agricultural innovations.

Under his watch, AATF was able to demonstrate how progress is possible when private sector, governments, NGOs, researchers, and farmers work together to develop technologies that address specific production challenges. He led AATF and its partners in collaborations aimed at making that needed difference such as in developing maize (corn) varieties that can withstand the dual impacts of drought and insect pest including attacks by the destructive fall armyworm which can ruin an entire field in just a few days.

Denis has a special interest in maize because it is an essential food and cash crop for Africa's smallholder

farmers. In fact, his PhD research at Ohio State University, USA, identified and mapped the first gene which confers tolerance to the devastating maize streak virus disease (MSVD). He sees real value in using technology to improve staple crops.

During his leadership, AATF delivered on its promise to produce a cowpea crop that is resistant to the pod borer *Maruca Vitrata* that had hitherto devastated farmers' crops. He led the organisation in coordinating an efficient and effective international partnership that culminated in the historic release of the first transgenic food crop variety in Nigeria and Africa other than South Africa. Commercialised as SAMPEA 20-T in 2019, the pod borer resistant cowpea is a pioneer crop that is already popular among farmers who have tried it.

One of his popular statements is that 'biotechnology is an approach that can complement conventional crop improvement methods, address huge food deficits and reduce poverty in Africa. I am proud that AATF is contributing to wealth creation and the health of smallholder farmers. Biotechnology is one tool in the farmers' toolbox that contributes to food production with precision and speed.'

As a reward for his dedication, commitment and untiring efforts, Denis was recently named the Biotechnology Food Hero for 2020 by CropLife International.

Innovation and initiating new ways of doing things was not strange to Denis. During his tenure, AATF established two new entities including QualiBasic Seed Company, often referred to as QBS, and Agridrive. QBS is the first in Africa to focus wholly on availing foundation seed for seed companies as contribution towards certified seed availability, while Agridrive is a social enterprise that seeks to grow farmer interest for commercial mechanisation for sustainable agriculture.

Denis also helmed AATF through the realization of the commercial release of the first hybrid rice varieties indigenous to Africa with yields surpassing other varieties at over 10 tonnes per hectare and the seeds are already being produced for farmers' use.

Another key achievement during his tenure is building the Cassava Mechanisation Project (CAMAP) that turned out clear differences at the farmer level – increasing yields by over 250%, incomes by over 180%, and saving time by over 90%. The success story of CAMAP in Nigeria saw the birth of Agridrive Ltd, formed to continue with the mechanisation service provision on a sustainable and commercial business model.



When the success story of biotechnology and indeed technology transfer in Africa is written, Denis' name will stand out prominently.

Although his term ends at a time when the world faces a serious challenge brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the operations of many organisations, through his leadership, AATF and partners have surmounted the challenges by delivering technologies to farmers.

He leaves a diverse portfolio of projects at AATF, well-resourced to deliver their mandates, including those addressing challenges in maize – (TELA maize Project and TAAT Maize Compact), rice (Hybrid Rice for Africa and Nitrogen Efficient, Water Efficient and Salt Tolerant Rice – NEWEST), an enabling environment for technology (OFAB, TAAT Policy), cow pea (PBR Cowpea), improved seeds (Seeds2B), and mechanisation (CAMAP, AgriDrive), among others.

Under his leadership, AATF also established wide networks with like-minded partners, including various governments, the African Union Commission (AUC), African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD), Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), African Green Revolution Forum (AGRF), the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA), the Centre for Coordination of Agricultural Research and Development for Southern Africa (CCARDESA), West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development

(CORAF), Coalition for African Rice Development (CARD), agricultural research organisations, local and international private sector, farmer organisations and community based organisations, faith based organisations, academia and many development partners.

Denis exits AATF at a time when he should be celebrating some of the gains he helped to champion. Under his watch, the organization has made steady progress towards reaching its goal of 16 million farmers as proposed in its current strategy 2018-2022.

Dr Ousmane Badiane, Chair of the AATF Board of Trustees, paid glowing tribute to Denis saying that his leadership had helped steer the organisation into a professional technology transfer outfit with a team of dedicated staff who are committed to getting agricultural innovations to farmers in the most efficient and effective manner.

'As Dr Kyetere retires, I wish to convey appreciation from the Board, staff and partners alike who recognise his commitment and undivided attention to leading AATF through some of the most challenging situations and into realisation of key strategic goals,' said Dr Badiane.

From AATF we say Kwaheri Denis, for you came, you improved and delivered when it mattered the most. You toiled in fidelity and humility – Walking the talk and not talking the walk!

The AATF fraternity wishes Denis all the best in his retirement.