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Tribute to Dr Lusike Wasilwa: **scientist, mentor, leader, farmers' champion**

By Murimi Gitari

In the quiet corridors of Kenya's agricultural research institutions and the vibrant smallholder farms, the name Dr Lusike Wasilwa carried weight, wisdom, and warmth. Her passing on September 20, 2025 marked the end of an era—but her legacy continues to bloom across the farming fields she so passionately nurtured.

As Director of Crop Systems at the Kenya Agricultural & Livestock Research Organization (KALRO), Dr Lusike, as she was fondly known, was more than a scientist. She was a systems thinker, a policy shaper, and a tireless advocate for food sovereignty. Her work spanned molecular plant pathology, horticulture, and climate-resilient agriculture—always grounded in the belief that science must serve people.

Dr Lusike's academic journey began with a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture degree from the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton. She went on to earn a Master's in Horticulture and a PhD in Plant Science from the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, followed by postdoctoral research in molecular plant pathology at Rutgers University. Her education laid the foundation for a career devoted to solving Africa's most pressing agricultural challenges.

Over 35 years, she moved from diagnosing crop diseases to redesigning agricultural ecosystems for resilience. Her work touched industrial crop value chains, food security, nutrition,

and rural livelihoods—always with a vision for inclusive, sustainable transformation.

Among her most impactful contributions was her unwavering advocacy for underutilised and indigenous crops. Dr Lusike believed Africa's food future lay not only in imported technologies but in rediscovering and commercialising its native biodiversity. Her research promoted indigenous fruits and vegetables, contributing to nutrition, income generation, and climate resilience.

She pioneered the integration of biodiversity into agricultural systems, leveraging precision agriculture to reduce losses from pests, diseases, and post-harvest inefficiencies. Her vision was clear: empower smallholder farmers, protect the environment, and build a food system rooted in Africa's strengths.

Her influence extended far beyond Kenya. She served on advisory boards for the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Horticulture, the Kenya Avocado Project, and the One Acre Fund. She was a board member of USTADI, the African Journal for Horticultural Science, and the East African Science & Technology Commission (EASTECO). Her leadership roles included chairing the Southern and Eastern Cotton Forum and contributing to Kenya's Climate Smart Agriculture Project (KCSAP), the Kenya Agricultural Productivity Programme (KAPP), and the Kenya Agricultural Productivity and Agribusiness Programme (KAPAP). Her service earned her three medals from the International Society for Horticultural Science



← (ISHS), recognising her global impact.

She was not only a scientist but a mentor, strategist, and visionary. She nurtured young researchers, championed gender equity in science, and inspired countless professionals to pursue excellence. Her leadership at KALRO shaped Kenya's crop research agenda, aligning it with global trends and local realities—from climate change to market dynamics.

Her humility, clarity of purpose, and unwavering commitment to equity defined her. Whether speaking at global forums or walking through a farmer's field in Kenya's Bungoma County, she embodied the principle that science must be inclusive, transformative, and rooted in community.

Dr Lusike's life was a testament to the power of science in service of humanity. Her work bridged continents, disciplines, and generations. Her final journey brought her home to Brigadier, Tongaren, where she was laid to rest—but her vision lives on in every seed saved, every policy reformed, and every young researcher she empowered.

She did not merely study crops—she cultivated hope. And in doing so, she sowed a future that will nourish generations to come.

May her legacy continue to bloom.



Dr Eliud Kireger

Director-General, KALRO

"Lusike was more than a brilliant scientist she was a visionary leader, a mentor to many, and a tireless champion of horticultural research in Kenya. Her passion for improving the lives of farmers was evident in everything she did, from spearheading innovations in fruit and vegetable value chains to empowering women and youth with practical solutions for agribusiness."



Dr Thuo Mathenge

Chairman, KALRO Board

"I will always remember her passion, her deep knowledge, and her ability to inspire everyone she worked with, from young researchers to policymakers. Her work on African indigenous vegetables, horticulture value chains, and commercialisation of research outputs has left a lasting impact on food security and nutrition in this country."



Sustainable Agriculture Foundation (SAF) – Africa

Business Partners

"We valued her wisdom, collaboration, and inspiration to agricultural transformation. Her legacy will continue to motivate generations of scientists, farmers, and leaders. As a partner organisation, we remain grateful for the collaborations we shared with her. When we officially rebranded and unveiled our African entity, SAF-A, Dr Lusike honoured us with her presence and reflected on our shared vision for agricultural transformation through our initiatives with KALRO."



Stephen Mwanzia

Director of SNFs BRAND and CEO of Frutas Plants Suppliers

"What was most remarkable about her was her humility and sincere concern for others. Whether engaging with farmers, students, or fellow researchers, she treated everyone with dignity and kindness. She had a strong belief in agriculture's potential to change lives, and she committed herself wholeheartedly to that cause."



Tabeel Nandokha

Dr Lusike's AWARD Mentee

"Dr Lusike Wasilwa was a beautiful soul whom I will greatly miss. Although I am not a horticulturalist, she took me under her wing to mentor me. Her capacity to rope different professionals and people with diverse skill sets to address issues in agriculture can only be described as super human. I am yet to meet her equal in generosity and inclusivity."



Rikki Agudah

Horticulture Sector Colleague

"Dr Lusike was an extraordinary person with passion, warmth and a very down-to-earth outlook despite her extraordinary achievements. She has been the backbone of the push for mainstreaming many forgotten foods, more so fruits that are indigenous to our nation."



Micro Enterprise Support Programme Trust (MESPT)

Business Partners

"Dr Lusike's brilliance extended across all crops, where she combined scientific excellence with a deep passion for transforming the livelihoods of farmers and strengthening food systems. Her visionary leadership and commitment to agricultural innovation touched every aspect of her work, from research and policy to on-the-ground impact. She was not only a brilliant scientist but also a tireless advocate for agrifood transformation, whose voice resonated powerfully in advancing food security and resilience. At MESPT, we were privileged to experience her partnership and inspiration firsthand."



AWARD Fellowships

Ke-AWARD

"An invaluable member of the AWARD community, Dr Wasilwa contributed significantly to our growth since inception. She was passionate about advancing equitable agricultural research leadership and nurturing future scientists. A four-time AWARD Mentor, she played a key role in shaping our strategic development and was instrumental in setting up the Kenya AWARD Country chapter, Ke-AWARD. Her visionary leadership and passion for mentorship remain a lasting legacy within the AWARD community."



Kennedy Mangwana

Secretary-General of PBAK

"We, the Plant Breeders Association of Kenya (PBAK) family, will always remember her as a mentor with passion, full of energy and blessed with a brilliant mind that always inspired

everyone around her. Her dreams were vast, her potential immeasurable, and her heart so genuine that she has left behind a unique legacy of servanthood, hope, kindness and vision."



Tiku Shah

Managing Director, Sunripe

"This is very sad news and we have lost a good friend and very dedicated colleague who had Kenya First as a policy when it came to horticulture, new crops, innovation, soils and building capacity. I have known Lusike for many, many years and we have been involved in so many initiatives together in the past decades."



Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research

Australian Government's Specialist Agricultural Research-for-Development Agency.

"Dr Lusike was a respected scientist whose expertise and dedication to agricultural research have left a profound mark. She played an instrumental role in several ACIAR-funded projects, including the SIMLESA programme, advanced work on mung beans, and, more recently, contributed to the SPARK project. Her commitment, knowledge and passion for improving livelihoods through agricultural innovation have positively impacted numerous lives and communities."



Kilimo Kwanza

African Agriculture and Food Systems

"Dr Wasilwa's career was not merely a profession but a calling—a relentless pursuit of scientific solutions to the continent's most pressing challenges

of food security, poverty, and climate change. This tribute honours her extraordinary life, celebrating a legacy of innovation, leadership, and mentorship that will continue to inspire generations to come."



Rebbie Harawa

Director - Africa and Country Representative Kenya | International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics

"Dr Wasilwa was not only a distinguished scientist and leader but also a valued collaborator and friend to ICRISAT. Her dedication to advancing agricultural research and development, particularly in strengthening drought-tolerant crop value chains and empowering farming communities, has left an indelible mark in Kenya and beyond. We remain grateful for the spirit of partnership and commitment she consistently demonstrated in her work with us."



Morris Akiri

Senior Regional Director, Africa at CABI

"It is with deep sadness that I learned of the passing of Dr Lusike Wasilwa. She was not only a brilliant scientist but also a visionary in agricultural research, a mentor to many, and a passionate advocate for innovation in food security and sustainability. Her genuine support for CABI's work, together with her broader contributions, have left an indelible mark on the agricultural sector in Kenya and far beyond."