

# DAILY MONITOR

TRUTH EVERY DAY

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 Reviews

## Righting wrongs: The Ugandan on Obama's commission



Julius Ecuru

[\(email the author\)](#)

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 In Summary

## About Ecuru

- *Born: December 4, 1973, in Mbale.*
- *Attended Ocokecan Primary school in Soroti, Kiswa Primary School in Bugolobi, Gulu Public School, Father Hilders Primary School in Soroti.*
- *PLE at Soroti Demonstration School in 1987.*
- *Joined St Peter's College Tororo in 1988, for both O' and A' level.*
- *Graduated from Makerere University with a Bachelors degree in Chemistry in 1997.*
- *Joined Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) in 1997.*
- *Got married in 2001.*
- *Graduated with a Masters degree in Environmental Science at Makerere University in 2003.*
- *Graduated with a Post Graduate Diploma in International Research Ethics at the University of Cape Town, in 2005.*
- *Became Assistant Executive Secretary, UNCST, in 2006.*
- *Nominated to the International Panel for President Barack Obama's Bioethics Commission.*

*When Julius Ecuru got an email asking him to be part of the bioethics commission to report on the protection of human subjects in scientific studies, he was both shocked and honoured. He tells **John K. Abimanyi** what this means to him and his career.*

As medical workers wheeled out trolley-fills of vaccination in the famous Kick Polio out of Uganda campaign over a decade ago, some rural mothers with babies suckling on the breasts stopped in their tracks with trepidation. They suspected the drugs were a western ploy to sterilise African children and some avoided the vaccination exercise.

But although the drugs were safe and there was no western ploy to harm Ugandan children, some citizens of the world can only wish they had been as questioning as the Ugandan mothers. Citizens of Guatemala, a Central American country, were intentionally infected with syphilis and gonorrhoea in a scheme that sought to test for the effectiveness of Penicillin between 1946 and 1948.

American public health doctors paid for syphilis-infected prostitutes to sleep with prisoners, poured the bacteria onto prisoners' penises, faces and arms, and in some cases, infected them by injection. Over 700 prisoners, mental patients and soldiers were infected and none was asked for their consent.

The grotesque act was kept a secret, until late last year when a research doctor unearthed files detailing the act. It was an egg-on-the-face moment for the US and President Barack Obama's government apologised to the Guatemalan

people affected in the scheme.

President Obama then created a bioethics commission to report on the protection of human subjects in scientific studies. That commission has now named an international research panel for the work, and on that panel, is Ugandan Julius Ecuru, an Assistant Executive Secretary at the Ugandan National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). According to a memo that Obama wrote to the bioethics commission, the international panel will meet thrice and deliver its recommendations and findings to president Obama before October this year.

Of the 13 members, 37-year-old Ecuru is the only panellist selected from Sub-Saharan Africa and the scientist does not take the feat lightly. "I think it is an honour," he says. "It's something worth praising God for. I am deeply grateful for this opportunity."

Not one to get clouded in the excitement of the moment, he quickly adds that the hard work has only just began. "Though I am happy, I don't think I will celebrate. I think the celebrations will come after we have presented the report and the findings can lead to some reforms in some of our policies to improve the research environment and protect the human research participants."

Although he knew of the Guatemala infection case, Mr Ecuru says it never occurred to him that he would ever be part of the commission's panel. "I didn't even dream about it," he says, until the news dropped unannounced. "I got an email saying, 'Julius, we have identified you and we would like you to serve on the panel' and asking if I would be willing. Just that," he adds.

With cyber crime arguably in its prime, and using email as its weapon of choice, emails from strangers can be a cause for worry, especially if the mail is delivering unusually good news, as was this case. But Ecuru says he did not doubt the mail's authenticity. "I took like a day or two to first ponder and ask what this was all about and then I said, 'Fine, I will be willing to offer my contribution,'" he says.

Mr Ecuru has spent a considerable time of his career working in science research and the ethics that govern it. And that is the reason he thinks led to his nomination to the panel. "I keep wondering why it was me that was chosen. Why Julius? Why Julius at UNCST and in Uganda? But I do think that possibly the work I do and the experience I have attained and UNCST's success led me into getting chosen," he says.

The scientist has worked at the organisation since 1997 when he joined as a Graduate Associate in charge of research registration and analysis, straight from Makerere University where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in

Chemistry. He later worked at the organisation as a Science Secretary where he headed the Scientific and Industrial Research Unit and as a Science and Technology Associate until 2006 when he became an assistant executive secretary.

Through his career, he has since played a pivotal role in developing biotechnology and bio safety systems with Bio-Earn, a programme aimed at enabling the use of biotechnology sustainably in eastern Africa. This was geared towards making sure that research with potentially hazardous chemical and biological substances, including genetically engineered organisms, is safe for both human beings and the environment.

At UNCST, Ecuru helped develop revised guidelines for science researchers to follow when carrying out research that involves human beings as study specimen. Ecuru holds a Masters degree in Environmental Science and did a Post Graduate Diploma in International Research Ethics at the University of Cape Town.

Julius Ecuru carries a very disarming poise, smiling warmly as he throws his hand at you for a warm embrace at first meeting. Clean shaven and with a slight baldness, he looks a little younger than the 37 years he has lived. Colleagues describe him as a calm individual. "I know him as a man who is composed and with integrity," says Paul Assimwe, a friend and professional colleague. "He does not take decisions in a rush. He is dedicated to the use of science and technology for development and he does not use it simply for rhetoric but in practical terms," he adds.

Looking back at his history, it's no surprise that Ecuru has got this far. He scored aggregate four in his Primary Leaving Examinations, back in 1987, at Soroti Demonstration School. "It's remarkable because it was at the height of the insurgency in the whole of Teso. There was a lot of cattle rustling and rebel activity and these events displaced us from the village. We came to the town and started living like internally displaced persons," he says. He attended St Peters College Tororo for his High school where his academic record maintained its shine, scoring 12 aggregates in 6 at O' level, and 15 points at A' level having done Physics, Chemistry and Biology.

He is married to Beatrice and they have two sons.

Ecuru's nomination to the panel gives Uganda the chance to have its views and indeed experiences in science research expressed to the rest of the world. He says UNCST is running investigations to check if there have ever been any human abuses during research in Uganda, especially in pre-independence times although none has been cited yet.

As the first black American president, President Obama is a near-cult-head in Africa, and many would do anything e just to meet him. Ecuru himself thinks of Obama as, "A great leader who really appreciates values and is very considerate about what affects the everyday man. For me, he is a great inspiration." Ecuru is now off to do an assignment for a man many would die just to meet.