

Rise of Uganda's insurance chief

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Last week, Dr Sande Protazio was appointed Acting chief executive officer of the Insurance Regulatory Authority of Uganda (IRA), replacing Ibrahim Lubega Kaddunabbi. In an interview, he explains that the journey to the top is never a straight line.

Dr Protazio Sande's story does not start in a boardroom. It starts in Kiryadongo, a village in Kyenjojo District, where he was born on January 27, 1976. From these humble beginnings emerged a man whose journey would defy expectations, proving that greatness is not defined by where you start, but by the courage to pursue a bigger purpose. His father, the late Leo Gafabusa, worked with the East African Post and Telecommunications Corporation. His mother, Restituta Nyanjara, is still alive in her late 80s.

Like many children growing up in rural areas during the 1980s, he did not have access to nursery education. At seven years old, Sande started school in Primary One at Busaiga Primary School. Although it was a rural school with limited resources, it laid the foundation for a pattern that would follow him through life: excelling despite constraints.

He completed primary school in 1990 with a first grade. That grade could have opened doors to prestigious schools like Nyakasura or St. Mary's College Kisubi, but without the fees, his family had to choose a cheaper government school 17km away—Kyenjojo Senior Secondary School.

The distance was too far to walk daily from home, so Sande and his elder sister rented a room in town. When rent became unaffordable, they moved in with their grandmother, six kilometres from school. For four years, from Senior One to Senior Four, he walked 12 Km a day—six in the morning, six in the evening.

It paid off. In 1994, he sat his O-Level exams and became the first student in the school's 20-year history to get a first grade.

His hard work paid off. In 1994, he sat for his O-Level examinations and became the first student in the school's 20-year history to earn a First Grade.

"I remember going to pick the results with my mother, the excitement was overwhelming after years of paying fees late, often being sent home, and studying through uncertainty," he recalls.

The then headmaster, Mr Patrick Adyeeri Rwebembera, became a father figure, allowing him to sit exams even when the fees were unpaid. Then, for A-Level, his brothers, who

Sande's 12Km walk that changed everything

had left school to work and run a business, pooled resources to send him to Nyakasura School.

"It was a step up. Boarding at a school of that standard felt like a privilege. But on the eve of my final exams, I fell ill. I pushed through, going to the sick bay for injections and coming back to write papers," he recalls.

The illness took a toll, and he scored 15 points in History, Economics and Geography. It was not enough for government sponsorship, and his family was disappointed.

Rather than give up, he took a year off to teach in schools around Kyenjojo to raise money. With support from his brothers, he enrolled at Makerere University in 1998 for a Bachelor of Social Sciences, majoring in Economics. He graduated in 2001, narrowly missing a first-class degree by 0.04 points. By then, he wanted to become a teacher.

His first job was with an NGO called Innovative Vision Uganda, through a connection made by his brother, a policeman. "The pay was low, but it was a start. A year later, Professor Augustus Nuwagaba, who had taught me at Makerere, offered me a role at REEV Consult, one of Uganda's larger research firms," he shares.

At REEV, Sande worked as a research associate. But when projects slowed down, Makerere called him back as a teaching assistant in the Department of Economics. "Teaching was where I felt at home. I rose quickly from teaching assistant to assistant lecturer to lecturer by 2010. I coordinated exams for the entire faculty for years without a hitch and acted as head of department at times," he recalls.

Insurance node

The next turn came in 2012, when the Insurance Regulatory Authority of Uganda (IRA) advertised for an assistant director of Research and Market Development. Over 20 people applied for one position. Sande applied, was interviewed, and two weeks later, he was selected. Joining the IRA meant entering the corporate world after years in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), research, and academia.

"I immediately enrolled for professional qualifications with the Chartered Insurance Institute of the UK, and became an Associate of the Chartered Insurance Institute within five years—a tough course few in the market complete," he

recalls.

In 2018, after an organisational review created the Department of Strategy and Market Development, he became acting director. By 2019, he was confirmed as director of strategy and market development, until last week when he was appointed IRA's Acting chief executive officer.

That 360-degree view—NGO, research, academia, regulator—has shaped how Sande sees institutions. It also pushed him towards his doctoral research. As he interacted with boards at higher levels, he observed a pattern where well-structured public agencies were underperforming despite having the right policies and funding on paper. He wanted to know why.

For his doctorate, he studied the role of

Outshine
'Never try to outshine your boss. Learn where authority lies and respect it.'

Key recommendations

- Make governance certification a prerequisite for board appointments, even for former politicians. Insist on technical skills relevant to the sector," he notes.
- Correspondingly, separate governance from politics in practice, not just on paper. And institutionalise independent board evaluations tied to real performance indicators.

board governance in the performance of public agencies in Uganda, focusing on six agencies under the Finance Ministry. He interviewed 31 people—board chairs, CEOs, board secretaries, heads of strategy, plus oversight bodies such as the Office of the Prime Minister, Auditor General, Parliament, and governance experts. He also reviewed minutes, reports, and audit findings.

The core finding was what he calls the "governance paradox."

"Public agencies often have excellent governance structures documented, but in practice, those structures are undermined. Boards appear compliant on paper but are weakened by three realities," he notes.

Sande's discoveries

First, political influence in appointments. Laws say boards should be appointed based on qualifications. But in practice, political connections often override merit. This leads to boards lacking the technical expertise needed for real oversight, with management guiding the board instead of the other way around. Second, ritualistic governance. Many boards meet quarterly as required, receive reports, and give approvals, but focus on formalities rather than results. The study found instances where strategic plans were discussed in 5-10 minutes.

Third, lack of independence and accountability. Some board members are captured by CEOs, holding pre-meetings to pass issues without scrutiny. And crucially, boards are supposed to monitor management.

But who monitors the board? Most do self or peer evaluations with no teeth, so everyone passes, regardless of actual performance. From this, he concluded that per-

Dr Protazio Sande, the Acting chief executive officer of Insurance Regulatory Authority. He says public agencies have good governance structures but those structures are undermined. PHOTO/MICHAEL KAKUMIRIZI



formance in public agencies hinges on three things: who is appointed—merit-based, skilled, independent members drive better outcomes; what boards do such as actively engaging strategy and holding management accountable versus rubber-stamping; and how boards are held accountable. Without external accountability, complacency sets in.

His recommendations

Sande's recommendations are practical.

"Make governance certification a prerequisite for board appointments, even for former politicians. Insist on technical skills relevant to the sector," he notes.

Correspondingly, separate governance from politics in practice, not just on paper. And institutionalise independent board evaluations tied to real performance indicators.

At IRA, he's applied this thinking directly. The insurance sector in Uganda is private, so boards face stricter shareholder pressure. But IRA still faces governance challenges, particularly around the fit and propriety of board members. Some companies want to appoint relatives of shareholders who lack competence.

"IRA subjects all nominees to fit and propriety tests and has rejected those who don't meet the bar," he asserts.

Regulatory changes he has helped drive include requiring at least 50 percent of board members to be resident in Uganda, ensuring more than 50 percent of boards are independent non-executives, and shifting to a risk-based capital regime. Under risk-based capital, insurers face capital charges for risky underwriting.

The result has been more responsible risk-taking and improved profitability across the industry.

His lessons

Looking back, Sande says three things have been essential: adaptability, integrity, and learning from every role.

Research sharpened his analytical skills, while teaching gave him the ability to communicate complex ideas for hours. Regulation gave him exposure to corporate and international standards.

He advises young professionals not to settle and to stay open to opportunities. But he's blunt about what matters once you are in the door: deliver value, not just credentials.

"You don't get what you deserve. You get what you bargain for," he says. Bargaining, in his view, is shown in reliability, going beyond the 5 p.m. clock-out, and delivering before deadlines. Above all, protect your integrity. He has also learned to navigate organisational politics. "Never try to outshine your boss," he says. Learn where authority lies and respect it. Understand the people around you, because sometimes the people you least expect will undermine you. Do not to fight other people's wars when you are new. Currently, Sande is a founding member of KIND Initiative for Development, a community NGO in Kyenjojo.

He chairs the School Management Committee at St. Paul Day and Boarding Primary School, Kitagobwa, and sits on the board of Insurance Training College. He reads widely on corporate governance, trying to understand why oversight fails even when structures exist. On May 8 2026, he graduated with a Doctor of Philosophy at Uganda Management Institute (UMI).