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Cocoa: West Nile's economic lifeline

BY RASHUL ADIDI

For decades, the West Nile Sub-region has been known for the production of tobacco, cotton and coffee as its main cash crops. However, fluctuating market prices, unstable demand and stiff competition have increasingly affected returns from these traditional commodities, pushing farmers to search for alternatives.

Now, cocoa is emerging as a new frontier. With global cocoa prices soaring and demand for chocolate rising, farmers in districts such as Koboko are taking advantage of the opportunity to boost production. Among those leading the shift is former Koboko County MP James Baba, who has turned to large-scale cocoa growing.

Ms Fatuma Welle, 47, a farmer in Kijimin Village, Ayipe Parish, Kuluba Sub-county in Koboko District, says she ventured into cocoa six years ago after making losses in other enterprises.

"I tried cassava, groundnuts and maize, but I worked at a loss. For cocoa, in six years, I have seen profit," she says.

Ms Welle explains that cocoa has two harvesting seasons annually, which guarantees farmers more regular income.

In her first season, she earned Shs700,000, followed by Shs1 million in the second. In 2025, she earned Shs2 million. Over two years, she says, she has realised Shs3.7 million from cocoa.

She has used the proceeds to mould bricks, support construction projects and pay school fees for her children.

Her main challenge, however, is labour.

"I face difficulties in weeding, pruning and harvesting because I am alone and lack enough capital," she says.

Mr Elly Asiki, a farmer in Koboko Municipality, says cocoa is not only profitable but environmentally friendly.

"We were known for tobacco, but tobacco destroyed our environment. Cocoa is friendly and supports us a lot. I want to encourage members to grow trees to avert climate change," he says.

Some of the cocoa trees at the farm of former Koboko County MP James Baba. PHOTO/RASHUL ADIDI

Mr Asiki earns more than Shs4 million annually from cocoa. He notes that many farmers intercrop cocoa with bananas, allowing them to earn from both crops.

"When you grow cocoa with bananas, you harvest from both. It has helped me plan better for my future," he says.

Mr Bran Aluma of Gbulagbulenga Village recently sold 47kgs of first-class cocoa beans. In April last year, he sold 53kgs to Nature Harvest, bringing his total to 100kgs and earning Shs2 million, which he used to clear his children's school fees.

360 COCOA FARMERS

According to records, West Nile has about 360 cocoa farmers across Koboko, Yumbe, Moyo, Adjumani, Maracha, Pakwach and Madi Okollo districts.

Mr Robert Arike, the administrator of the West Nile Cooperative Union, says 350 farmers are registered, except those in Nebbi who are yet to sign up.

"We didn't have any crop that could identify us as a region. The opportunity that came was for farmers to grow cocoa. This started in 2018 through James Baba," Mr Arike says.

Through the cooperative formed in 2024, farmers are being trained in nursery establishment, farm management, harvesting, fermentation and marketing.

"Our target is to identify West Nile with cocoa. That is why we distribute seedlings to farmers every year," Mr Arike adds.

He says the market is ready. In Koboko, companies such as Nature Harvest buy beans for resale. The long-term target is to have beans feed a local processing factory.

To add value and meet international standards, farmers have handed over infrastructure for the establishment of a processing factory that will produce chocolate and cocoa powder for export to European and Indian markets.

For Mr Baba, cocoa farming has become more than a side venture. He says he started growing cocoa in 2018 and now owns 25 acres — 15 acres in Nyabiri, Kuluba Sub-county, and 10 acres in Lobule Sub-county.

In 2023, he harvested 3.5 tonnes of cocoa beans and earned Shs78 million. In 2024, he projects earnings of about Shs42 million.

"Cocoa has become a game-changer for me. I decided to leave politics to focus on farming, and it has been a sweet move," he says.

Mr Baba stepped down during the 2026 electoral cycle to concentrate on agriculture.

He plans to produce half a million quality seedlings by March and support young people to venture into cocoa growing.

"I want to continue promoting cocoa in West Nile and Koboko. I encourage parents to give their children land to engage in agriculture," he says.

Mr Rene ter Neuzen, a cocoa ex[illegible] from Holland, says opportunities in cocoa are enormous due to global demand for chocolate.

"The demand for chocolate will always be there. What has been done in the last four years is commendable, especially on Baba's farm," he says.

However, he notes challenges in fermentation and disease management, urging farmers to focus on quality to meet export standards.

BACKGROUND

Uganda's cocoa production is still developing, but the country is among notable producers globally. As of early 2026, cocoa prices in Uganda have surged due to high demand and supply challenges in West Africa, with dried beans trading between Shs15,000 and Shs31,000 per kilogramme. In the 12 months to June 2025, Uganda exported 72,545 metric tonnes of cocoa beans, earning a record $620.43 million (about Shs2.2 trillion).