The mayor Uganda forgot, the town that won big

For 10 years, Sanya Wilson, 48, was hardly mentioned in mainstream Ugandan media. He should have been. Wilson was Koboko's mayor from 2016 until the January 2026 election.

You could argue there was little reason for Wilson to be in the news. After all, Koboko, although surrounded by striking hills and rivers, is otherwise an obscure town in northern Uganda, whose greatest claim to fame is that it is the hometown of former dictator Idi Amin, who ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979.

But that would miss the point. Over Wilson's years as mayor, Koboko became the site of one of the most striking small-town transformations in the world. While he was no big name in Uganda, Sanya was a valued member of Cities Alliance, headquartered in Brussels. He is the chair of the East African Counties and Local Governments Association.

As he leaves office, the Cities Alliance celebrated their man on their website:

"In ten years as mayor of Koboko, Sanya Wilson managed challenges that many cities face at scale: absorbing tens of thousands of refugees, expanding public services, and transforming a border town under pressure into a model of urban inclusion.

"When he took office in 2015, Koboko had no mains water. Electricity barely extended beyond the main road. Streets were unplanned and often impassable. Clinics ran short of medicine. Schools were overcrowded.

"Today, the municipality of roughly 68,000 people has paved roads, extended electricity into residential areas, secured water connections, strengthened health centres, built classrooms, and acquired garbage trucks. It has also absorbed more than 28,000 refugees from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, nearly half its population, without significant social disruption."

What drives him, one might ask? According to the story, "Wilson's conviction is personal. In 1979, amid the upheaval following the fall of Ugandan ruler Idi Amin, his family fled into what was then Zaire, now DR Congo, and into what is now South Sudan. By age six, he had lived in three countries, two as a refugee. 'I know what it means not to belong,' he says."

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Charles Onyango-Obbo
Ear to the Ground

Beyond the tribute, Wilson's achievements are quite impressive. Koboko has 80 percent water coverage, far higher than the sub-60 percent levels seen in many similar upcountry towns.

Recognising that 99 percent of Koboko's residents relied on non-renewable fuels, wood, and charcoal, Wilson established a network of solar-powered kiosks that provide charging services and clean lighting, reducing the municipality's carbon footprint and fire hazards in densely populated displacement areas.

Then, through the Global Cities Fund, he built a recycling economy where urban waste is collected and processed into eco-friendly briquettes. This created green jobs specifically for women and youth.

Wilson expanded solar street lighting into the town's informal sectors, leading to a drop in petty crime and enabling a 24-hour trade economy.

Before his tenure, waste collection in Koboko was sporadic. He professionalised the service, increasing the volume of solid waste diverted from illegal dumping sites to managed processing centres.

He launched large-scale composting initiatives to turn organic waste into fertiliser, which was then sold back to local farmers, creating a closed-loop financial system for the municipality.

The most measurable proof of his success is found in one of the places that doesn't lie - the municipality's balance sheet. In the financial year 2019/20, Koboko achieved a staggering 1,253 percent of its budgeted locally raised revenue target in certain quarters. This was driven by a 1,550 percent increase in park fees and a 211 percent rise in business licences.

His administration consistently ran a budget surplus, rare in Africa, exceeding 100 percent of its cumulative budget receipts, 111 percent in 2020, partly by raising external funds.

If this were a film, you would now be preparing for a happy ending. It is not. Wilson chose not to seek a third term as mayor. Instead, he contested the NRM primary elections in July 2025 for the Koboko Municipality MP seat.

He faced off against the incumbent MP, Charles Ayume, and lost. He has since expressed interest in contesting to represent Uganda at the East African Legislative Assembly.

If Uganda were run like China, Wilson would be appointed to clean up a struggling Kampala or made Local Government minister. Now, his political career in Uganda might well be over. If no place is found for his talents at home, as happened with former Executive Director of Kampala Capital City Authority Jennifer Musisi, Wilson will almost certainly land a prestigious scholarship or an international job.

Wilson's fate raises unsettling questions. Perhaps Ugandans are, in part, architects of their own condition. Although in Ayume he faced a solid rival, too often Ugandan voters reject men and women like Wilson and elect crooks, liars, and buffoons instead.

Mr Charles Onyango-Obbo is a journalist, writer and curator of the Wall of Great Africans. X@cobbo3

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