

JAMES BABA: THE FORMER MP TURNING

PHOTOS BY ROBERT ADIGA

By Robert Adiga

When James Baba, the former Member of Parliament for Koboko County, quit active politics in 2025, he went into cocoa farming.

His passion for farming was kindled over 10 years ago in an attempt to rescue his constituents from abject poverty.

"During my 20 years in political leadership, the main agenda was my people's agenda and when I joined Parliament, the President appointed me as the state minister in the Office of the President, who was then Prof. Gilbert Bukenya.

Bukenya did a lot of work in livelihood programmes like *Ensamble* and *Borna* like *Ensamble*, among others. He coupled with the President's message on livelihood and this motivated me."

Baba said, "He tried many enterprises starting with the upland rice and mangoes both local and grafted though it was devastated after the 2015 drought. He then opted for sunflower and brought 20 tonnes from Serere, which he gave to farmers. However, at harvest, Mukwano Industries was buying sunflower and their price was sh200 above the politician's price and farmers plied to the former. Baba gave up on growing sunflower."

Then we partnered with Korean investors to grow green gram in 2015. There was a long dry spell and the 29 tonnes of green gram seeds brought from Serere district went to waste," he says.

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Before I could move further, I went to the agriculture ministry's directorate of crop rice and it was Sidonius (Isai) Opolot, the former minister of state for energy, who advised that soil tests be done first. We approached Agriculture Research Centre in Kawanda, Wakiso, which tested samples all over the sub-region and proved the growing of

that greenlight, Baba led 450 cocoa seedlings CAM Chocolate to an Italian-based buying company.

According to Baba, to plant



After quitting politics, former Koboko County MP Baba grows cocoa on over five acres and other crops



Currently, Baba is raising over 500,000 cocoa seedlings in Abuku sub-county, Koboko district, which to be distributed to farmers across West Nile sub-region

OTHER ENTERPRISES

Since cocoa grows under shade, James Baba has also planted a variety of trees like the albizia, gliceridia and *Musisi*, among others.

"It is climate-smart agriculture because cocoa requires shade and water, making the environment very healthy and if you go to Nyambiri, where the demonstration farm is, it is like a forest all green all over and it is helping to restore the trees people destroyed for tobacco," Baba said.

Besides cocoa growing, Baba also has five acres of high-yielding clonal robusta coffee alongside four acres of bananas, which provide shade for the cocoa plantation.

Today, under his farm named Nature's Harvest, he grows cocoa on over five acres around his homesteads in Kuniro parish in Abuku sub-county, located about 10km from Koboko town.

He also has another 15 acres in a demonstration garden in Myabiri, Kuluba sub-county in Koboko. He is planning another expansion of 20 acres in the same district.

one acre, one needs 450 cocoa seedlings, spaced at 3mx3m, with each seedling costing sh1,000.

"It takes approximately two years for a cocoa plant to start podding. On average, it costs sh700,000 to sh1m per year to maintain and look after the crop before one starts getting returns," Baba said.

EMPLOYEES
Nature's Harvest has a staff of 15 employees, including two managers.

The wage bill per month is sh2.5m paid to the permanent staff, while another sh1m goes to casual labourers hired on a daily basis.

Regarding the returns, on his farms, Baba harvests about five tonnes of coffee every season.

"If you calculate that by sh10,000, you realise that we are earning over sh50m in a year and our target is to reach 50 tonnes of beans from our 50 acres we are planning in the near future."

The farm is also a bulking centre where farmers bring their cocoa beans, which Baba said are sold at the current market price of sh10,000 per kilogramme.

He said the price of the cocoa has been fluctuating from as high as sh50,000 to sh20,000 and this year it has stabilised at sh10,000 a kilogramme from the leading buyers like ESCOM, ICAM Chocolate Uganda and Africa Trade wings, among others.

Baba adds that even if the price drops to as low as sh5,000, it is still profitable since the demand for cocoa products and confectioneries is very high.

FAMILY MEMBERS INVOLVEMENT
Baba said he has been fortunate that his children and the family members have embraced farming.

"My children are the ones running the activities, like training the farmers. One of the children, who studied food technology at university, has specialised in value addition."

Another child is interested in marketing as the ICT specialist and that is why it is very important to involve all the family members," Baba notes.

SUPPORTING FARMERS
For decades, the West Nile sub-region's cash crop story was written in tobacco and coffee — crops with shrinking margins and heavy labour requirements. Baba saw a different future hanging in green pods: cocoa as the magic bullet.

"I was persuaded to promote cocoa in Koboko and the West Nile sub-region."

"Whoever plants cocoa from which is already becoming popular in the sub-region, was launched in Tabi village in Dranya sub-county in Koboko district in 2018, where seedlings were given to farmers.

He notes that over 2,000 farmers are growing cocoa in West Nile, especially the districts of Koboko, Maracha, Terego, Zombo, Adjumani and Obongi.

"In Koboko alone, we have over 600 cocoa farmers and more are being trained," he says.

He says the Koboko District Cocoa Farmers Association has a membership of over 700. "It has a six-member executive chaired by Eli Asiki and deputised by Lillian Badani and their offices are located at the Koboko District Farmers Association one-stop centre."

Baba lobbied National Agricultural Advisory Services for extension support, linked farmers to buyers in Kampala and used his networks to secure a pilot fermentary in Lobule sub-county, Koboko.

Currently, Baba is raising over 500,000 cocoa seedlings in Abuku sub-county to be distributed to the farmers across the West Nile sub-region.

To further ensure success, Baba ensures regular hands-on training. "Demonstration farms that were set up in parishes among the communities have greatly supported the knowledge of cocoa growing in the region," Baba notes.

So far, all trainings have been conducted with support from the National Coffee Research Institute (NaCORI) cocoa experts, who trained the majority of the farmers.

Twice, the Mayuge district production officer, Emmanuel Kawul, has supported the training of farmers, especially in the key areas of pruning and fermentation.

"Occasionally, members

involved in cocoa growing are women and youths in Koboko," he notes.

Baba is also proud that the number of cocoa farmers in West Nile keeps increasing by the year.

Through cocoa growing, he has been exposed outside not only in Uganda but across the globe as they have started getting partners from other countries.

CHALLENGES
Among the

challenges Baba faces is the theft of premature cocoa, as the juice from the cocoa pod is very sweet. To stem this, "Local councils are being sensitised on security concerns of thefts, especially by young children who go to pluck ripening pods for them to suck the sweet juice and abandoning the pods wasted on the ground and continuous vigilance by all concerned should be the answer," Baba says.

The second challenge is the hindrances in accessing ferment equipment, as they need special boxes to ferment before drying.

A third challenge is farmers not following the right procedures as they process cocoa, for example, some of them store the harvest on moist grounds, affecting its quality.

Baba also notes that the lack of training is making some farmers not ferment their cocoa before drying.

PLANS
Baba says through the support from Korea International Co-operation Agency (KOICA), a chocolate factory is set to be constructed within a year in Koboko and the farmers have already been trained about it.

"This factory will process cocoa beans into powder and chocolate. We have supported cocoa growers in West Nile and KOICA has committed to building another factory at the farmers' one-stop centre in Koboko district," Baba said.

He asserts that the upcoming factories are a culmination

COCOA INTO WEST NILE'S NEW GOLD



Baba (fifth-left) with some of the farmers his farm trained. He trains farmers from across West Nile sub-region



Baba has four acres of bananas, which provide shade for the cocoa plantation

ABOUT COCOA

According to the National Agricultural Advisory Services, cocoa is Uganda's fourth-biggest commodity export after coffee, tea and fish.

Uganda's cocoa export earnings hit a record \$620.4m for the 12 months ending June 2025, derived from 72,545 tonnes of beans.

have also been taken for exposure visits to cocoa farmers in Bundibugyo district and to NaCORI in Kiunga."

Baba says cocoa farming is currently a family affair on communally-owned land in the area and that the youth and women are thus involved in that way.

"Currently, more than a third of 600 registered farmers

involved in cocoa growing are women and youths in Koboko," he notes.

ACHIEVEMENTS
Drawing more than 600 registered cocoa farmers to start growing the cash crop from 2018, who now earn a decent income, is one of Baba's greatest achievements. He says, on average, a farmer earns sh2m for every

100kg of dry cocoa beans produced per season.

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He asserts that the upcoming factories are a culmination

of years of emphasis on promoting perennial crops, mainly cocoa and coffee, to eradicate poverty in West Nile in line with the Government's development agenda.

Baba says their primary objective was to spread the knowledge of cocoa growing in West Nile.

"If every home has a quarter acre of cocoa, it will be our pride and there will be big capacity processing centres for making cocoa products for international markets and our dream is that internal demand for the cocoa products rises," Baba notes.

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OTHER VOICES

Silvano Alliga from Idralo village, Dranya sub-county in Koboko district, said he is now focusing on cocoa.

"Last year, as a test, I only sold 4kg of cocoa at sh7,500 per kilogramme and people abused me and told me that, if they can get sh30,000 with other crops, why am I wasting time on growing cocoa? Early this year, I sold 35kg at sh31,000 each," he said.

Alliga has about 1,360 plants from which he expects to generate more income once they mature. He said this will enable him to pay school fees and meet other needs of his children.

Mary Aate, a resident of Lurulo village, Gborokolongo parish in Abuku sub-county, who with seven children, is now grafting the cocoa and managing the nursery bed, said she has worked at Nature's Harvest for 14 years. Harvested and has benefited in many ways.

According to Aate, apart from the salary she earns, she has also acquired enormous knowledge that she has started planting cocoa at her home.

"I planted cocoa seedlings and now I sell my cocoa at Nature's Harvest, which has helped me to pay my children's school fees," Aate noted.

Tom Abiriga, the farm manager of Nature's Harvest, said he has so far worked there for close to 10 years and this has transformed his life in terms of livelihood, such as salary as well as cocoa growing.

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