



March 2026

Star Staff

How Acola's muddy hands are creating impact in Pader



Rwot Onen Acana, flanked by other Cultural Leaders across the country waters a tree he planted on his birthday/Courtesy Photo

UNOC, KKA to Green Acoliland

GULU - On 24th March 2026, the Paramount Chief of Acholi, Rwot David Onen Acana II, marked his 60th birthday with a transformative living legacy. Surrounded by other traditional leaders from Karamoja, Lango, Bunyoro and even as far as Teso and Buruli, the Paramount Chief signalled a new era for Northern Uganda by planting the endangered historic healing tree, Warburgia ugandensis. Known locally as Abac, this historic tree -- whose healing leaves slaves at Fort Patiko were forced to chew before commencing their forced march north -- served as a symbolic first step toward reclaiming a landscape whose indigenous trees are defined by multiple uses.

This royal gesture is the public face of a massive environmental restoration campaign that seeks to heal the scars of unsustainable charcoal production and timber harvesting -- a legacy of conflict.

Ker Kwaro Acoli (KKA), the traditional cultural institution of Acholi, has partnered with the Uganda National Oil Company (UNOC) and Kijani Forestry with an ambitious plan of planting 40 million trees across Acoliland. This



UNOC's Paul Ngura

mission was firmly experimented on the ground with a 40-acre pilot plot planted a year ago in Patuda Village, ... Parish, Paicho Sub-County, Gulu District. With the lessons learned from that experiment, the partnership is set to accelerate its efforts throughout this year, ensuring that the reforestation drive takes deep root in every corner of the Acholi Sub-Region.

Even as the Paramount Chief worked to green the land, he remained equally focused on the future of its people. Under the theme Empowering Girl Child Education, the celebration doubled as a fundraiser with a target of Shillings 1 billion. From the construction of dormitories at Kitgum High School and Padibe Girls' School to the establishment of modern changing rooms at Paibona Primary School, the initiative seeks to remove the barriers that keep girls out of the classroom.

As Rwot Acana enters his sixth decade, his legacy is being written in both the rising canopy of a greener Acoli, increased household incomes, and the brightened prospects of every girl child in Acoli.



Acola supervises work at one of the Nursery Beds in her area. The ACs work with Branch and Parish Coordinators/File Photo

PADER - While much of the world spent the month of March celebrating International Women's Day with speeches and galas, Harriet Acola (38) spent it in the dirt, leading a small troop of 24 Parish Coordinators, propagating and planting nearly two million trees.

Acola, Kijani Forestry's Area Coordinator in Pader District, isn't your typical supervisor. Despite holding a Master's degree in Agri-Ecology, she doesn't work from the comfort of a desk in a comfortable office. Since joining Kijani less than six months ago, she has redefined what leadership looks like in the field.

Breaking the "Boss" Barrier

Under Acola's wing are 4 Branch Coordinators and a dedicated team of 24 Parish Coordinators working with 110 Farmer Groups bringing together 2068 farmers spread across Acholibur, Atanga, Laguti, Lapul, and Pajule. In many organizations, these layers of management create distance. In Acola's world, they create a family.

"In our team, you cannot differentiate an Area Coordinator from a Branch Coordinator or a Parish Coordinator," Acola explains.

"We work as one. When I give them work, I do not supervise from a distance, we do it together."

This flat leadership style is yielding dividends for the ambitious targets Kijani sets to combat deforestation. By removing the barrier between the boss, supervisors, and workers, Acola has fostered a culture where passion outweighs protocol.

The March to Two Million

In just one month, Acola's team has achieved the potting of 1,748,404 bags and had over 273,000 seedlings successfully pricked and progressing. This means every one of those nearly 1.8 million bags was touched, filled, and prepared by a team that Acola visits personally.

Part of the Gang

Ms Acola is part of a gang of 20 or so Area Coordinators spread across six Sub-Regions of Acholi, Bunyoro, Karamoja, Lango, Teso, and Tooro. They represent the bridge between local realities and global environmental goals. While international climate reports discuss carbon sequestration and biodiversity, the ACs are the ones ensuring those concepts have deep roots in farmers' gardens.



Shea butter is a common commodity on shop shelves in the region/*Courtesy Photo*

The Charcoal Dilemma

Kijani's Roadmap Beyond the Ban on Charcoal Burning

KAMPALA - The crackle of a charcoal stove and the flare of firewood is the rhythm of most Ugandan kitchens, a sound that connects approximately 94% of the nation to its daily sustenance. For years since the guns fell silent in Northern Uganda, many landowners sought cash for reviving their post-conflict recovery from the sale of trees to feed the growing demand for charcoal, firewood, and timber. That is, until 2023 when His Excellency the President issued Executive Order Number 3, that slapped "a ban on the cutting of trees for commercial charcoal production in northern Uganda."

While the Order was a necessary emergency brake to halt the unsustainable harvesting of ancient indigenous treasures like Yaa (Shea) and Cwaa (Tamarind) trees as well as hardwood timbers like Beyo (African Mahogany), the dilemma of what the 94% of the people reliant on charcoal and firewood should use to cook with remains. The challenge now is to transform a destructive and unsustainable extractive trade into a regenerative and environmentally sustainable industry.

The Kijani Visionary Approach

At a recent high-level Environmental Policy Dialogue hosted by the Economic Policy Research Centre and the Office of the President, Michael Tebere, Kijani Forestry's Director for Government and Partner Relations, presented a visionary response to this crisis, framed as the



A Kijani Staff prepares Charcoal using dry wood the Kijani Way/File Photo

"The Seven Horns of a Dilemma: Rethinking Modern Charcoal Supply Chains, Markets and Livelihoods in Northern Uganda."

The first two horns laid out the sheer scale of our environmental deficit. With almost the entire population relying on biomass, the resulting pressure has led to a disastrous loss of tree cover. However, Executive Order Number 3 offers an opportunity to pivot from desperation to design. Kijani's model suggests that the solution lies in the third and fourth horns: ecological restoration and decentralized seed banking. Instead of viewing the Savannah as a warehouse of fuel to be depleted, we must view it as a biological engine. By establishing resilient tree seed collection systems

in every agroecological zone—a feat being pioneered at Kijani's Research and Development Farm in Paicho Sub County, Gulu District—we can ensure that the next generation of woodfuel trees comes from fast-growing, "farmed" woodlots rather than the "chopped down" remnants of our natural heritage.

To truly honor the intent of the Executive Order, we must address the fifth and sixth horns: the professionalization of the trade and the efficiency of conversion. Charcoal must be elevated from destructive and unsustainable extractive product to a regenerative and environmentally sustainable new green enterprise for farmers. When a farmer views woodfuel as a low-maintenance, high-value crop,

they are incentivized to grow it for income and to protect their land holdings. And by retooling traditional charcoal burners with modern, efficient kilns and retorts, we can triple the charcoal yield from every tree branch harvested. This technological leap effectively "shrinks" the energy footprint, allowing us to meet urban demand with a fraction of the wood previously required.

The final seventh horn brings the mission home to the consumer. Even the most sustainably farmed charcoal must be used with reverence. By

promoting improved, energy-saving stoves, we complete a circle of efficiency that begins with a tree nursery in Gulu and ends in a kitchen charcoal stove in Kampala.

Healing the Landscape

Michael Tebere's presentation was a polite, professional affirmation that while bans can stop the bleeding, it takes a dedicated agroforestry system to heal the landscape. By disarming the "seven horns," Kijani Forestry is proving that Northern Uganda can transform from being the ELdorado for Black Gold to become tUganda's new green heartland—meeting the energy needs of today without sacrificing the cultural and environmental monuments of tomorrow.

Kijani to Partner with Teso Districts to combat poverty and Climate Change

TESO - A new chapter of environmental resilience is beginning to take root in the Teso Sub-Region where the horizon meets the shimmer of Lake Kyoga. Last month, Kijani Forestry moved beyond its established northern Uganda strongholds to engage in a series of vital inception meetings across Amuria, Kaberamaido, and Kalaki districts. This thrust eastward into the Teso Sub-Region was in response to the distress calls of smallholder farmers neighboring Amolatar, Alebtong, Dokolo and otuke Districts in the neighboring Lango Sub-Region.

Herbert Himigu, the Deputy Chief Administrative Officer for Kalaki, painted a stark picture of the challenges facing his community. Decrying the biting poverty that grips the region, Himigu noted that many residents find themselves trapped in a cycle of desperation. "People burn charcoal indiscriminately to get money as they have nowhere else to turn to," he observed, highlighting how economic hardship has forced the community to harvest their future to survive the present. Kijani's entry into

Kalaki offers a vital exit ramp from this cycle. By introducing models that transform sustainable tree growing into a viable livelihood, the initiative seeks to replace the destructive charcoal trade with a restorative economy.

In Kaberamaido, this vision found a natural home within the halls of local government. Matthias Magambo, the District Natural Resources Officer, welcomed the partnership with open arms, noting that Kijani's arrival fits seamlessly within the district's existing strategic plans for combating climate change. For Magambo, the collaboration isn't just an external project, but a timely reinforcement of the district's own environmental ambitions.

As the meetings concluded, the path forward became clear: the signing of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with Kijani Forestry Limited to formalize these partnerships. By aligning Kijani's expertise with the administrative will of Amuria, Kaberamaido, and Kalaki, the expansion promises to turn the tide against deforestation and poverty.



The Deputy CAO of Kalaki District Herbert Himigu welcomes Kijani team to the District/Courtesy Photo