

Institution: University of Cambridge		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 19		
Title of case study: Establishing and regulating sustainable charcoal production in northern Uganda		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: November 2017-January 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Adam Branch	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Reader in International Politics	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 02.09.2015-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: July 2018-August 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact Branch's research on charcoal production in northern Uganda was a major driver for the creation of a new advocacy movement, new local environmental monitoring mechanisms, and the drafting of new government legislation. The legislation was passed into law by the Kitgum District council and was under review by the other district councils in the Acholi sub-region. By providing evidence and capacity building, Branch's research, and the legislative and civil society changes it underpinned, has significantly advanced environmental sustainability and energy policy in the region.		
2. Underpinning research This case study is based on research since 2015 led by Adam Branch, Reader in International Politics at the University of Cambridge, with co-investigators: Paul Omach, Eric Awich Ochen and Laury Ocen (Makerere University, Uganda); Paska Aber (Human Rights Focus, Gulu, Uganda); Arthur Owor (Centre for African Research, Uganda) and Giuliano Martiniello (American University of Beirut, Lebanon). Branch led the research programme, and developed the intellectual foundations to examine environmental issues in their post-conflict political context [R1][E1]. He was involved from the initiation of the research right through to its knowledge translation activities. The United Nations estimates that charcoal is the primary energy source for up to 80% of Africa's urban population, but its production is leading to serious social, environmental and economic harms [E2]. The research revealed how charcoal production caused environmental devastation in northern Uganda, and identified various political strategies for addressing the main sources of the problem. The research team examined charcoal production from multiple perspectives, focusing on the region's socio-political history, and on broader patterns of agrarian transformation. Fieldwork took place over seven months in 2017 in five districts of northern Uganda. It involved: focus groups with charcoal producers and dealers; community workshops with residents in gender- and age-differentiated groups; and key informant interviews with local government, traditional authorities, politicians, charcoal traders, intermediaries, brokers and labour crews. Branch's research at the University of Cambridge identified two previously overlooked aspects of charcoal production. First, environmental degradation was chiefly the result of large-scale charcoal production operations, not peasant farmers, as has been the conventional wisdom. Second, large producers informally collaborate with, or are protected by, government officials [R2]. The research team concluded that the solution was to tackle the behaviour of large producers by informing local communities and leaders about harmful practices, and working with them to devise solutions through different channels: legislative reform to regulate production, monitoring of compliance, and support for activists advocating environmental sustainability.		
Finding 1: Large-scale charcoal production is chiefly responsible for environmental devastation The research team found that attributing environmental devastation to small household producers is wrong. There are two distinct charcoal commodity chains in northern Uganda: 1) small		

household producers, and 2) large-scale, semi-industrialised producers. The research identified a clear link between large-scale production, environmental harm, and economic injustice [R2], in particular deforestation and forest degradation [R1]. Contrary to conventional academic and policy wisdom, the research demonstrated that there is no evidence that household producers are producing charcoal unsustainably. Branch and his collaborators concluded that because donors and the government misdiagnosed the problem, they have implemented misguided policies aimed at the rural poor [R2]. Solutions have focused on small-scale production through improved kilns, forest management practices, and reduced consumption. However, these technical solutions have not addressed the main culprit: unsustainable large-scale production.

Finding 2: Unsustainable charcoal production can only be addressed properly by political interventions

Why has this problem been so consistently misdiagnosed? The research demonstrates that the main impediment to change is political not technical, namely, large-scale production driven by elite political and business networks [R2]. Branch and his team argue that political change – encompassing both legislation to regulate production and a shift in political culture – is necessary to translate widespread popular concern about large-scale production into effective environmental policies and practices. Reforms in these areas offer the most viable path towards a more sustainable form of charcoal production.

3. References to the research

[R1] Branch, A. (2018). From disaster to devastation: Drought as war in northern Uganda. *Disasters*, 42(S2), S306-S327. [\[Link\]](#)

[R2] Branch, A. and Martiniello, G. (2018). Charcoal power: The political violence of non-fossil fuel in Uganda. *Geoforum*, 97, 242-252. [\[Link\]](#)

Indicators of quality: [R1, R2] are articles in journals of international standing that have been through a rigorous peer-review process. The research was also supported through multiple competitive and peer reviewed grants:

Adam Branch, Principal Investigator (PI) - *Narratives of conflict, climate, and development: Re-envisioning sustainability from post-war northern Uganda* - AHRC/ESRC GCRF PaCCS Conflict Theme Innovation Award (AH/P008232/1) - November 2016-November 2018 - GBP94,599, with additional GBP5,000 for Indigenous Knowledge Project.

Adam Branch, PI - *Bringing environmental justice into the public sphere in Uganda* - ESRC Impact Acceleration Account Award - 1 July 2018-31 March 2019 - GBP19,950.

Adam Branch, PI - *Towards sustainable charcoal in Uganda: Shaping policy and supporting civil society through quality research* - GCRF Quality Research Funding, Research England - 1 January 2019-31 July 2019 - GBP70,400.

Adam Branch, PI - *From fuelling violence to fuelling peace: Charcoal and environmental justice in east Africa* - British Academy - 18 November 2019-17 November 2021 (ongoing) - GBP298,959.

4. Details of the impact

This project, led by Branch at the University of Cambridge, is the first instance of research being utilised to support and inform concerted community activism and policy action around a pressing environmental challenge in northern Uganda, a region where politics has been almost entirely defined by the atrocities of the 20-year civil war and its aftermath [E3]. Prompted by the research findings, local communities in the region challenged existing environmental development narratives, which focused on smallholder charcoal production, and instead directed attention to the problem of large-scale production.

Local collaboration was key to ensuring the uptake of the research within Uganda and built into the research design through close collaboration with local stakeholders. It was carried forward through multiple grants awarded to Branch.

The research team focused on three mechanisms for change. First, they provided evidence and support for a legislative process to regulate production and promote sustainable practices. Second, they helped mobilise an environmental activism campaign that generated widespread support for legislative change. Third, they assisted a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) in setting up an environmental monitoring process. These are documented in detail below. Their cumulative success is apparent from: changes in government policy, with new charcoal legislation finalised and passed by Kitgum District Government Council in December 2020 [E4]; shifts in media and public understanding, with a sustained focus on charcoal and deforestation issues emerging; changes in production practices, with a visible reduction in the impunity for illegal production and transport; and the cultivation of a more receptive political climate, as political leaders have started to denounce charcoal-driven deforestation, responding to demands for action from rural communities.

1. Provision of evidence and support for a bottom-up legislative process

Uganda's decentralised political structure makes district level policy key to change. Because district government is responsible for natural resource management and local economic development, the research team focused their engagement at this level. Their activities resulted in new draft legislation [E5] that was passed by Kitgum District Council and is under consideration by district governments across the Acholi sub-region [E4].

A charcoal policy conference, organised by the research team in July 2018 to discuss findings, initiated the process of legislative change. It brought together local government officials, academics, environmental officers and civil society actors [E3] [E6], and led to the formation of the Acholi Technical Working Committee on Charcoal (ATWCoC), comprised of Ugandan policy-makers, environmentalists and scholars, to which Branch was an adviser.

District governments tasked ATWCoC with drafting new legislation on charcoal production [E7] [E8]. The ATWCoC chairperson explains, "*[the research] helped provide the vision behind the drafting of the charcoal ordinance*" [E8]. Reflecting the research findings, the draft Ordinance introduces stringent regulation of large scale production [E5]. In early 2020, ATWCoC presented the Sustainable Charcoal Production and Marketing Ordinance to all District Councils in the sub-region for reading.

ATWCoC also prioritised public engagement to build wide support for the legislation. From 2018 to early 2020, ATWCoC met with national and local media, district lawyers, religious and cultural leaders, and security chiefs [E7, p. 3]. They held public consultations in all eight districts in the Acholi sub-region, each with more than 100 attendees, and revised the Ordinance in response. This highly consultative process resulted in strong local support for the legislative activity [E7].

A member of the ATWCoC secretariat observes that the process, and the draft legislation, was "*founded in large part [in] response to Dr Branch's research findings and advocacy initiative*" [E9] – a point that is also underlined in ATWCoC's official reports [E7, p. 1-2]. Branch also supported consultations with local stakeholders about the draft in progress, and participated extensively in drafting and revising the Ordinance with Ugandan lawyers and government experts [E8].

In late March 2020, a national lockdown in response to COVID-19 paused progress with the legislation soon after it was introduced in the District Councils. From August, ATWCoC actively sought support for emergency District Council meetings to continue the Bill's formal passage. These efforts were successful, with the first council tabling the bill in early November 2020 [E10] and adopting it in December 2020 [E4].

2. Mobilisation and capacity building of a locally-driven advocacy campaign

The widespread complicity of local government with illegal charcoal production meant that district-level legislation had to be accompanied by wider pressure to ensure its enforcement [R2]. Prior to the legislative process, local members of the research team co-founded an environmental pressure group *Our Trees – We Need Answers* [E3], based in large part on the insights generated by the research. This group has helped to keep environmental issues in the public eye and provide political oversight. One of the co-founders explains,

"[The group] was formed in response to loopholes in legal, administrative and political mechanisms in the preservation and conservation of the environment in the sub-region, many of which were first revealed by the research project." [E9]

Branch continued to support the campaign through providing expert commentary, consulting on strategy and establishing links with environmental activists internationally [E9]. These efforts equipped *Our Trees* activists with knowledge of the issues and other campaigns, as they led a high-profile campaign. Their campaign pressured officials to end illegal large-scale production and helped to prepare them to implement legislation as it came into effect [E9]. By March 2020, they had participated in more than 50 radio talk shows and carried out over 30 community meetings in northern Uganda, collaborating with researchers, human rights organisations, and local print media. They convened hundreds of people in charcoal production "hotspots" to discuss the problem, propose solutions, and learn about environmental challenges through drama groups and music performances. They also contributed to media training workshops, environmental justice football matches, and cultural festivals, including the Acholi Cultural Festival [E9].

Their innovative environmental campaign made *Our Trees* a regular presence in the national media. They were an important, early part of an upsurge of environmental activism in the region, including *Save Our Beyo* [a tree species] and *Friends of Zoka Forest* [E9], whose leader won an EU Human Rights Defender Award in 2019. Newspaper coverage illustrates their contribution to shaping attitudes and pressuring local government to take action [E6].

3. Establishing a new local environmental rights monitoring programme

Informed by the research led by Branch, a local NGO, Human Rights Focus (Hurifo), established a new monitoring programme that has helped to hold charcoal traders and local government to account. Hurifo made environmental justice a priority after collaborating on the funded research [E1]. In 2016, they incorporated environmental rights into their strategic plan and established a new programme on environmental justice, with charcoal production identified as a core concern.

This programme involves environmental 'sensitisation' (building awareness about production practices' environmental impact), monitoring and evidence building. As part of their contribution to the funded research, Hurifo, with Branch, translated research findings into a 'fact sheet' that was heavily used in these sensitisation efforts [E1]. The NGO built a new network of community volunteers to monitor and ensure accountability of local practices, training 71 new environmental monitors [E11]. By early 2020, Hurifo's team had reached nearly 5,000 people.

Branch advised Hurifo about how to implement this programme and train volunteers. This support was key to building an evidence-based programme. It equipped volunteers with data collection skills, which have been essential in advocacy and monitoring activities [E1].

These sensitisation and monitoring efforts helped to change community views and behaviour. The Hurifo Executive Director states: *"Since the sharing of the findings of this first research work on environmental justice, and the transformation and commissioning of the Community Environmental Monitors and volunteers, the public perceptions and community reactions to the environmental issues and generally climatic change knowledge have changed"* [E1].

Change is visible in two areas of community activity. First, there have been new community efforts to effectively challenge illegal commercial charcoal traders, through peaceful campaigning and protest [E1]. Second, there has been new community engagement in rebuilding and protecting the local environment by conserving forest and planting trees [E1].

4. A multi-faceted effort to change the commitment and action of local leaders

By supporting multiple strategies to consolidate sustainable production – encompassing legislation, campaigning, and monitoring by civil society – the research has played a critical role in re-shaping the understanding and behaviour of political leaders in northern Uganda. Top district officials responded to community pressure, fostered through well-attended community forums. This built an important link between community organisation, environmental campaigning, and the formulation of legislative proposals. For example, officials who attended forums were often subjected to intense criticism, as communities challenged local leaders and charcoal dealers after

being made aware of the political dimension of the problem through Hurifo and *Our Trees* activism [E9]. In March 2020, Hurifo reported that rural community leaders had come together and evicted over 400 charcoal merchants in three districts (Omoro, Gulu, Pader). In addition, more than 20 charcoal trucks were impounded by district leaders, and merchants arrested and fined [E11] see also [E1] [E6, p.21].

Some local leaders publicly responded with new commitments to policy change, and, since 2018 there has been increased public demand for accountability from charcoal dealers and the officials who have protected them [E6]. One sub-county chief explained his response:

"I mobilized the community to chase away charcoal dealers who bought trees in 80 hectares of land ... I also sensitized people in my chieftdom on dangers of destroying the environment through cutting trees in [sic] large scale, they understood this and made it easy for us to stop [the] charcoal business here; there are no trucks which come here for charcoal the way they used to loiter here day and night. I thank HURIFO for opening our eyes to save our environment." [E11]

A prominent Human Rights Lawyer based in Gulu attests to the "unprecedented" [E3] nature of the changes:

"... this awareness and spotlight brought about an increase in arrests, prosecution and impound of the illegal charcoal and forest producers. There has been a surge in activism, where everyday persons and groups are demanding accountability from leaders regarding natural resources." [E3]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[E1] Testimonial: Executive Director, Human Rights Focus, Gulu, Uganda, 31 March 2020.

[E2] Report: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *The Charcoal Transition: Greening the Charcoal Value Chain to Mitigate Climate Change and Improve Local Livelihoods*. Rome, 2017. [\[Link\]](#)

[E3] Testimonial: Managing/Principal Partner, Komakech-Kilama & Co. Advocates, 31 July 2020.

[E4] Newspaper article: Kitgum district passes bill regulating charcoal production. *The Independent* (Uganda), 11 December 2020 [\[Link\]](#).

[E5] Ordinance: ATWCoC. (9 March 2020). *The local governments (..... district) (sustainable charcoal management) ordinance, 2020*. Revised draft.

[E6] Media coverage: Activism efforts and legislative change: i) Taylor, L. *Reuters*, 12 Mar 2019 [\[Link\]](#); ii) Kitara, J. *New Vision* (Uganda), 20 Jul 2018; iii) Kitara, J. *New Vision*, 23 Jul 2018; iv) Opinion. *New Vision*, 24 Jul 2018; v) *Xinhua*, 19 Feb 2019 [\[Link\]](#); vi) *Daily Monitor* (Uganda), 2 Apr 2019 [\[Link\]](#); vii) Makumbi, C., Kalokwera, P., Owiny, T. J. *Daily Monitor*, 23 Sept 2020 [\[Link\]](#); viii) Robert, O. *Radio Pacis* (Uganda), 23 Dec 2019 [\[Link\]](#).

[E7] Report: ATWCoC (October 2019). *Report of the Acholi Technical Working Committee on Charcoal (ATWCoC) on stakeholder consultation meetings for the proposed bill for an ordinance regulating sustainable charcoal production, transportation and marketing in the Acholi sub-region*.

[E8] Testimonial: Chairperson (deceased), ATWCoC and District Vice-Chairperson, Kitgum District, Uganda, 6 March 2020.

[E9] Testimonial: Co-founder of *Our Trees*, Member of the Secretariat, ATWCoC and Director, Centre for African Research, Gulu, Uganda, 21 July 2020.

[E10] Newspaper article: Kitgum district leaders table bill to regulate charcoal production. *The Independent* (Uganda), 12 November 2020. [\[Link\]](#)

[E11] Project report: Human Rights Forum and University of Cambridge. (16 March 2020). *Success story: Fighting charcoal-driven deforestation in northern Uganda*.