



# BRINGING CLEAN COOKING TO THE MISSING MIDDLE OF THE MARKET



EEP Africa 2020  
**RISING ENERGY  
LEADER**

## ELANA LAICHENA

Founder and CEO,  
Acacia Innovations (Kenya)

Elana began working in the clean energy sector while studying urban planning in New York. Renewable energy and energy efficiency seemed best able to address her intersecting passions for solutions to climate change and poverty alleviation. After several years managing green community development programs in the U.S., with jobs at Green Jobs-Green NY and SolarOne, Elana moved to Kenya in 2015.

Elana first learned about clean cooking while working at GreenChar Solutions, a Kenyan start-up focused on carbonized briquettes for households. She was immediately interested in the technology's potential to recycle waste, reduce deforestation, and improve women's health. Elana soon identified a huge untapped potential to sell briquettes to Kenyan schools, over 90% of which cook with firewood in large volumes, so she decided to start her own company to do just that.

*"Most school owners and school cooks had never heard of briquettes. They were completely shocked that you could use anything other than firewood or charcoal to cook. I realized there was a real opportunity - that this clean cooking technology wasn't getting to schools because a lot of other companies target large-scale industry or households. But schools are where many children in Kenya get the majority of their nutrition."*

With EEP Africa financing, Acacia has tripled monthly production and expanded to three new branch offices to reach underserved regions in Kenya. Elana has also designed the first portable institutional cookstove for briquettes on the market in Kenya (patent pending). The company is piloting a new type of carbonized briquette that can be used by low-income households in any ordinary charcoal stove with less smoke emissions.



Elana with a Kuni Safi briquette and cookstove, specially designed for schools and small businesses in Kenya.

Schools accounted for 90% of Acacia’s customers at the beginning of 2020, so the company was severely impacted by school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Elana managed to retain most staff and even increase production output by broadening the target market upwards to industry and downwards to households.

With over 500 institutional customers, Acacia is now the largest supplier of clean cooking fuels to schools and small businesses (those serving 20-2000 people daily) in Kenya. And there is a lot more room for growth in the market.

*“In Kenya we have around 40,000 schools, which almost all cook with charcoal and firewood. Today we have served 400 of them, which is not nothing but is still only 1% of the potential market. We are also looking into industry – each tea factory literally uses hundreds of trees per day that could be substituted with more clean burning briquettes. In the coming years we plan to set up new branch offices across Kenya so we can maintain closer relationships with our customers and offer after-sales training, which we have found really critical to ensure the kind of behavioural change to cooking that makes all the difference.”*

Elana’s commitment to innovation and her ability to adapt to challenges has resulted in a company that is producing a high-quality product for an underserved market. As production increases and economies of scale are reached, Acacia Innovations is on track to reach breakeven in 2021. Beyond that, Elana plans to expand Acacia’s reach and retail offerings to provide healthier alternative cooking fuel to a range of customers. There is also potential to expand to other countries, such as Uganda, with a similar reliance on wood fuels and a concentration of agricultural waste. Elana’s overall goal is to run a social enterprise that is financially sustainable and makes a significant environmental and social impact.

*“More than anything, Elana has a firm grasp on the industry and is well versed with the intricacies of biomass briquettes and clean cooking. She has a good business mind, which is geared towards encouraging the use of renewable energy amongst SME’s as well as schools in rural Kenya. Her commitment towards leading the way in empowering women and local talent in promoting renewable energy is exemplary, ultimately resulting in a positive socio-economic influence in rural Kenya.”*

Hitesh Gohil,  
Director (board member) of Acacia

