

Uganda's secondary cities will not build themselves

Uganda's secondary cities are growing. Gulu, Mbarara, Arua, Mbale, Hoima, Jinja, and Fort Portal are expanding in population, economic activity, and strategic importance. Roads are being upgraded, municipal infrastructure is improving, and investment interest is gradually shifting beyond Kampala. However, growth alone does not build great cities.

In my previous article, I argued that Uganda's secondary cities will not succeed by design alone. Having a physical development plan, city status, or ambitious aspirations is important, but insufficient. The more difficult question is this: who will build Uganda's secondary cities? The answer is simple but often overlooked. All of us.

Successful cities emerge through deliberate coordination between central and local government, investors, financiers, professionals, businesses, and communities.

The government's role is to create the enabling environment for growth. Through national planning frameworks, strategic infrastructure investments, and fiscal prioritisation, government lays the foundations upon which cities develop.

Programmes such as the Uganda Cities and Municipalities Infrastructure Development initiative have already improved roads, drainage, and urban infrastructure across several municipalities and cities.

Investments in roads, electricity, water systems, and digital connectivity are helping unlock economic opportunity beyond Kampala. However, infrastructure alone does not create thriving cities. Roads do not automatically generate investment. Cities become economically vibrant when public investment is matched by private confidence and commercial activity. This is where local governments and city authorities matter greatly. Effective urban management, planning enforcement, land administration, and orderly development control determine whether cities become attractive places to

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Planning



invest, live, and do business.

Poor planning enforcement quickly erodes value. Congestion, incompatible land uses, and uncoordinated development reduce functionality and undermine long-term competitiveness. Cities must be planned not only for present demand, but for future growth.

Yet the biggest misconception is the belief that governments build cities. In reality, the private sector physically builds most cities. Governments rarely build shopping centres, hotels, warehouses, office buildings, industrial facilities, or housing estates at scale. These are typically delivered through private investment responding to economic opportunity.

If Gulu is to become a regional commercial and logistics hub, private capital will need to build warehousing, hospitality, agro-processing, and commercial facilities that support trade and enterprise. If Hoima is to benefit meaningfully from oil-related activity, housing, offices, and business infrastructure must follow.

In this process, real estate plays a far more vital role than many people realise. Too often, real estate is seen merely as a consequence of growth. However, it is one of its enablers. Cities need industrial space to support agro-processing. Farmers require storage and logistics infrastructure to reduce post-harvest losses. Businesses need offices

and retail space. Workers need housing. Hospitality infrastructure supports conferences, tourism, and business travel.

Economic activity creates demand for real estate, but equally, quality real estate enables economic activity to happen. This is why secondary city development cannot be separated from conversations around land use, logistics, commercial property, housing, and industrial development. No secondary city becomes economically competitive without functional and investable built environments. Yet even government and investors alone are not enough. Communities themselves must participate in shaping the cities they want. What kind of cities do we envision? Tourism cities? Industrial hubs? University cities? Agricultural logistics hubs? These conversations matter.

As thought leaders and trusted real estate advisors, we at Knight Frank believe the private sector also has a responsibility to contribute meaningfully to these conversations. Cities are not built through plans alone; they require deliberate dialogue between planners, investors, government, financiers, developers, and communities. It is partly for this reason that Knight Frank Uganda is taking a proactive role through the Secondary Cities Property Investment & Development Conference Series 2026, beginning with Gulu on May 22, 2026, to create practical, solutions-oriented conversations around how stakeholders can collaborate toward building competitive, investable, and liveable secondary cities.

Planners will not build Uganda's secondary cities alone, investors alone, or government alone. They will be built through a shared commitment to deliberate growth, one that aligns vision, planning, infrastructure, investment, enterprise, and community ownership.

The question is no longer whether Uganda's secondary cities will grow. They already are. The real question is whether we will deliberately shape them together or simply watch towns expand without purpose.

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