

**Charles Onyango-Obbo > Ear To the Ground**

Coffee man Rugasira, a new world, and the election that disappeared

As the strange and laughable events of 2016 come and go in Uganda, the cancellation of the December 16 election for the Uganda National Chamber of Commerce is definitely among the top six.

Trade and Industry minister Amelia Kyambadde scrubbed the event, citing "serious" "national security threats and concerns", following a letter from the current chair of UNCC Olive Kigongo.

When you read of "national security threats and concerns" you think uprising, violence, terrorism, but no. In reality it was a fear that youthful outsider, author and chief of Good African Coffee was going to win and upset the old UNCC guard.

Rugasira probably unnerved Kigongo and her camp with his sleek social media campaign.

Still the old Chamber of Commerce and Kyambadde were right to worry an uprising, an insurgency. However, it was not of the gun and bomb type. It was of the paradigmatic variety.

Rightly or wrongly, Rugasira represented that shift. Kenya underwent this change a short while back, with the election of a relatively Rugasira-type good man called Kipprono Kitrony as its chairman.

Traditionally, chambers of commerce in Uganda have been trade associations. They were organisations that enabled buying and

selling of goods, i.e. helping Ugandan maize producers sell the stuff to Kenyan processors.

UNCC is still partly stuck in that mould, and only managed a half successful transition to a business association. What does that mean? A business association is more sophisticated, putting together business people dealing in a more diverse back of goods, including services.

So if government passed a law opening up the energy market to private money, with generous terms, a tech company might want to find local partners for an investment in a solar power plant in West Nile, and a deal to sell the surplus to Umeme.

The current shift is to chambers of commerce as enterprise drivers. This is a highly innovative space, and it is not just sophisticated, but involves positioning for businesses that don't exist yet. It is here that I think globally-minded and tech savvy people like Rugasira would help our economy.

Even if the powers that be feel threatened by Rugasira the person, a forward-thinking minister or government should still look to bringing people with his profile to the UNCC.

I speak with quite a bit of knowledge on this. When I was leading editorial operations at *Mail & Guardian Africa*, we did several business, enterprise, and innovation events around Africa either as media partners or conveners and brought some of the richest

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people on the continent and the world to the room.

We did two Zimbabwe events, Ghana, both focusing on the natural resources investment; we did thought leadership events on cities as economies, with some wonderful convenings in Johannesburg and a blow away day in Lagos with the visionary then-governor Babatunde Fashola.

We did Ethiopia; financial inclusion with several companies, including Samsung and Visa; and a several-times-over subscribed Kenya-South Africa summit at the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg.

The latter was a classic entrepreneurship platform. Kipprono (or simply Kip as he's known) flew in with a planeload of future-looking business leaders. There were ministers in the room, who mostly sold Kenya's strategic and anchor position on the edge of the Indian Ocean rim. Safaricom telco CEO

Bob Collymore typified this shift with his presentation. He didn't sell mobile phone services, or even his company's M-Pesa, the world's most successful mobile money payment platform.

He spent quite some time speaking about the Safaricom Academy, which hadn't opened yet. It's a place even many Kenyans don't know about yet.

Question is why? As anyone who follows these things knows, the money in voice is over. Half the people who call me do so on WhatsApp, Facetime, or Skype.

The money for mobile phone companies going forward is in data, payment solutions, and the internet of things (IoT). That means more people who develop things like M-Pesa, WhatsApp, Uber, WeChat, the homestay and accommodation app AirBnB, and so on.

And for IoT things like the box that controls the lights and security system, and even sprinklers, at home, that I can manage remotely over my phone. That means in addition to software, smart hardware.

Safaricom is looking to raise a generation of innovators who will create software and hardware that people will control using their phones over their network in the years ahead.

When that will happen, what type of products they will be, no one knows. But it will happen. It's interest nationally and abroad, is to get people into a creative pipeline that makes that end possible.

Ms Kigongo is probably a wonderful woman, but she's not the person to conceptualise that world. You may not like him, but this is more like Rugasira's thing.

The alternative is for Uganda to miss the boat again.

Onyango-Obbo is the publisher of Africa data visualiser Africapedia.com and explainer site Roguechiefs.com. [Twitter@cobbo3](https://twitter.com/cobbo3)