Unlocking Uganda's growth through its secondary cities

Uganda's economic future will not be determined in Kampala alone. That is not a criticism of the capital, it is a recognition of scale. With the ambitions set out under the Fourth National Development Plan (NDP IV), and the broader push to significantly expand the size of the economy, it is clear that growth must be distributed.

The question is no longer whether our cities will grow, but whether they will grow in a way that is productive, investable, and sustainable.

In my experience, both in Uganda and across the region, this is where secondary cities become decisive. A secondary city is often misunderstood as simply a smaller urban centre.

In reality, it is a city with a defined economic role, one that connects production to markets, supports regional trade, and provides a platform for services and employment outside the capital.

Cities such as Mbarara, Gulu, Jinja, and Mbale already perform this function to varying degrees. Each sit within a distinct economic geography, whether in agriculture, trade corridors, or industrial activity.

The opportunity is not in identifying these roles; it is in strengthening them. The National Planning Authority of Uganda, through NDP IV, has rightly positioned urbanisation and regional development as drivers of transformation. The intention is clear, cities must become engines of growth.

The challenge, however, is execution. Economic activity remains heavily concentrated in Kampala. While this has delivered efficiencies, it has also created constraints, rising land costs, congestion, infrastructure pressure, and a steadily increasing cost of doing business.

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Judy Rugasira
Planning

These are not abstract concerns; they shape real investment decisions. Secondary cities offer a pathway to relieve this pressure, but only if they are developed deliberately.

What is evident across many of these cities is that growth is happening, but not always in a structured way. Demand for housing, logistics, retail, and services is real and visible. Yet much of this demand is being met informally, without the level of planning or investment required to support long-term productivity.

This is where urban planning becomes central. Planning is not simply about regulation. It is about aligning land use with economic purpose, ensuring that industry can access infrastructure, that housing is viable and connected, and that commercial activity serves real markets.

When this alignment is absent, cities expand, but they do not necessarily become more productive. We are already seeing the consequences, fragmented development, under-serviced areas, and inefficiencies that increase the cost of doing business. These are far easier to address early than to correct later.

A successful secondary city is not defined by its skyline, but by how well it functions. It has a clear economic base, infrastructure that supports that base, and a structure that allows investment to take place in a predictable way.

There are early signals of this potential. Jinja, with its industrial heritage and proximity to power generation, offers a strong foundation. Mbarara sits at the centre of a productive agricultural region with clear opportunities for value addition. Gulu is increasingly important as a trade gateway. But potential, on its own, is not enough. It must be translated into something investable.

Uganda's long-term growth ambitions cannot be delivered within a single urban centre.

They require a network of functional cities, each contributing to national output. Secondary cities are not peripheral to that network, they are central to it. They represent the next layer of Uganda's economic infrastructure.

Unlocking their potential will require more than policy intent. It will require deliberate planning, coordinated investment, and a clear understanding of the economic role each city is meant to play. The question is not whether these cities will grow. It is whether we will unlock that growth in a way that drives real economic transformation.

Judy Rugasira is a Fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (FRICS) and Managing Director, Knight Frank Uganda