

We will be the landlords of Uganda again

asis-
r ac-
me-
ilies,
der

sets,
re
The
fair-
not
or
sa-
-
pro-
it
reco-
ve
inc-
ron-
fair,
in-
ion.

re

2-

3

it

h

i-

Perhaps one day, after countless trillions of shillings, it might actually happen; perhaps it never will. Since 2019, Ugandans have waited, waited, and waited for Lubowa International Hospital. Yet after Shs1.4 trillion (\$379.7 million), nothing.

While innovation spaces like the Makerere University Innovation Pod (UniPod) or the Nakawa ICT Hub run on budgets usually below Shs7.6 billion, these grand government projects like Lubowa swallow trillions and deliver almost nothing to the public. If that same Shs1.4 trillion had been poured into Uganda's innovation scene, it could have handed out Shs188 million equity-free grants to 7,500 Ugandan startups.

Uganda could have put up 130 modern innovation hubs at Shs11 billion each, one in every district. Those centres would offer high-speed satellite Internet, 3D printers, and AI servers to young people across the country. Even if only 2.5 percent of them achieved real success—and examples like SafeBangle or DuoGnostix reached proof-of-concept with far smaller sums—this would spawn a whole economy built around people solving real problems.

Who are SafeBangle and DuoGnostix? SafeBangle is a wearable security startup, and DuoGnostix is an AI diagnostics company taking healthcare closer to villages.

We shall come back to them, but they belong to a steady, hardworking shift settling across Uganda this year: people who no longer wait for help from outside. According to reports, on February 17, 2026, the University Engineering Innovation Bootcamp at Nakawa closed with student founders showing prototypes that do more than fix issues; they create a parallel system that makes the official state seem like something from colonial times.

The background stays familiar. The latest Inspectorate of Government reports confirm that Uganda still loses \$2 billion (about Shs7.4 trillion) each year to corruption—almost half its domestic revenue—yet ordi-

The signs are still early, but these sparks of innovation may signal the start of a nation without heavy central control...

Charles Onyango-Obbo
Ear to the Ground



nary people are increasingly responding by becoming more self-reliant. The state's main role has become that of an accidental midwife to a new form of national sovereignty: the workaround.

This self-reliance happens despite rules meant to protect the old order. In the air, the contrast is stark. Kenya and Rwanda have opened drone use for precision farming and journalism, but Uganda remains stuck with tight licensing and security concerns. Rwanda operates a national drone delivery system for medical supplies, and Kenya has registered more than 1,000 commercial drones for crop spraying and data gathering. In Uganda, innovators face layers of military approvals that keep the future on the ground. Still, the workaround carries on.

In just the past few weeks, William Ahaisibwe from ISBAT University showed a solar-powered Internet of Things crop dryer. In a country where post-harvest losses account for 40 percent of yields because state storage facilities are scarce, William's device lets farmers check their harvests through a mobile app. It amounts to a practical break from official neglect. Likewise, Esther Akello Okalany from Kyambogo University introduced the Solar Maximiser, a tracker that lifts panel efficiency by 40 percent. In rural places where the national grid is more promise than reality, these become tools of

real independence.

This outlook has reached right into public safety. Here is where SafeBangle Technologies steps forward. Started at Makerere and winner of the 2025 World Summit Award, it lets a woman send a distress alert to a trusted circle with one press. It needs neither a smartphone nor a steady Internet connection. Its pilot data shows emergency response times drop 63 percent, from 45 minutes to 10. The community becomes the first responder because the state arrives too late, if it arrives at all.

In the markets, Agnes Mbabazi of Agrifarm Uganda has built a national agribusiness network by bypassing state SME grants and securing her own credit from private banks. She has shielded her supply chain from the "bid security" corruption that crushes most small businesses. And in healthcare, Edson Kamugisha's DuoGnostix platform applies AI and microscopy to deliver malaria diagnostics off-grid. He works so that a child's survival no longer hinges completely on whether a local government health centre has power or medicine in stock.

The signs are still early, but these sparks of innovation may signal the start of a nation without heavy central control, where those long ignored supply most of their own electricity, safety, and healthcare. Despite drones staying grounded, the population's ingenuity keeps slipping past the gaps in the old setup.

The "gava", as the Kenyans say, will still be welcome, of course. Still, the Uganda of 10 years ahead may become a centrally planned republic on paper, but underneath it will rest a decentralised web of high-tech villages. They will have moved beyond a system that chose not to innovate, and, in doing so, become the true owners of the land again.

Mr Onyango-Obbo is a journalist, writer and curator of the "Wall of Great Africans". [Twitter@cobbo3](https://twitter.com/cobbo3)

Change in 10 years