

Amb. Jan Sadek, Head of the European Union Delegation to Uganda and H.E Vice President Jessica Alupo toast to celebrate 50 years of EU-Uganda partnership in Kampala on Thursday, May 7. PHOTO/COURTESY

EU-Uganda at 50: Reflections on a reliable partnership and a shared future

Over 50 years, the European Union (EU) – Uganda partnership has grown from building foundations in infrastructure and agriculture to driving transformation through trade, energy, and skills – now focusing on green growth, jobs, and sustainable value chains under the EU's Global Gateway strategy. In this interview, **EU Ambassador Jan Sadek** reflects on 50 years of partnership with Uganda and shares his vision of the future of the partnership.

Which milestones best reflect the impact of the EU and Uganda partnership and what are the most significant achievements since the opening of the EU Delegation in Kampala in 1976?

Half a century is long enough for big changes! It is hard to pick only a few milestones, however I would say: helping rebuild key sectors like agriculture in the first years, especially tea and coffee, assisting in rebuilding Northern Uganda after the conflict ended, or more recently, major infrastructure investments like the Northern Bypass, or the Atiak Laropi and the surge in trade between the Uganda and the EU.

Ugandan export to the EU has nearly tripled since 2019 to about EUR 1.5 billion today. In addition, over EUR 5 billion has been provided in EU development cooperation, alongside significant European private investments of around the same amount. I think this is not bad for a period of 50 years. But beyond the numbers, the real achievement is a long-standing partnership that has adapted, delivered, and is now focused on jobs, green growth, and the future.

How can the EU-Uganda trade relationship and European investment better support Uganda's move up the value chain, especially in agriculture and manufacturing?

For me, it really comes down to one idea: adding value here in Uganda, not elsewhere. The opportunity is already there – Uganda enjoys duty-free access to the EU market. Now the focus is on processing more locally, improving quality, and supporting Ugandan businesses to grow. Entrepreneurs don't just want to export raw coffee, cacao or other products – they want to transform, brand, and sell a finished product. That's exactly the shift the EU is supporting by investing in coffee value chains, in skilling of entrepreneurs and facilitating access to finance. Because that's where the jobs are, and that's where real transformation happens.

What would you tell Ugandan exporters and traders who wonder why the EU does not fully remove all product standards and regulations for imports coming into the EU?

I would tell them that those standards help protect our consumers – in the EU as well as in Uganda – and our shared environment. They ensure safe, high-quality products that build trust in Ugandan goods across Europe. Meeting these standards pushes Ugandan producers to add value, stand out, and command better prices. We are not closing doors; we are helping you to walk through them even stronger – look for example at Uganda's thriving coffee exports to the EU. We are working together to help strengthen compliance and certification, because this is in our joint interest. That is the real win-win.

How does the EU view Uganda's role in regional peace, security, and integration?

Uganda is a key regional actor, hosting almost 2 million refugees – with the EU as the biggest supporter – and being a leading contributor to peace and stabilisation efforts, not least through its long-standing engagement in Somalia, which is supported by the EU. Uganda also remains a key promoter of enhanced regional economic integration within the East African Community (EAC) and across the African continent. In short, I would say that Uganda takes responsibility for the development and stability of its region.

Europe is striving to be the first climate-neutral continent. How are EU-funded projects helping Uganda adapt to climate change?

We are helping Uganda adapt to climate change through practical, on-the-ground projects – like channelling funds directly to districts for flood-resilient bridges, irrigation, and climate-smart agriculture. Team Europe is offering EUR 170 million to rehabilitate the Nalubaale–Kiira hydropower system, which secures reliable clean energy while boosting climate resilience for decades ahead. The EU-Uganda Forest Partnership fights deforestation and creates green jobs in sustainable value chains. It is about empowering local communities to build their own resilience, aligning Europe's climate-neutral ambitions with Uganda's sustainable future.

We hear a lot about the EU's Global Gateway strategy, what is it and why is it important for Uganda's next phase of development?

Indeed, we talk a lot about the Global Gateway, and it may need an explanation. Let me break it down in simple terms: Global Gateway is the EU mobilising EUR 300 billion of investments in smart, green infrastructure worldwide. This includes things like clean energy, digital networks, better roads, health systems. It mixes grants and loans to be able to bring in more private sector investments to support key development priorities. For Uganda, it's a game-changer, lining up perfectly with the Government's Vision 2040 on green jobs and climate resilience – a real partnership that powers growth for the long haul.

How does the EU engage with Uganda on issues sometimes perceived as contentious such as governance, human rights, and the rule of law?

We engage on these things through a consistent dialogue with all relevant stakeholders, including the Government, civil society, the media and others. We also empower local voices, including youth and marginalised groups to push for accountability. During my years in Uganda, I have had many frank discussions with different interlocutors, which I am sure I will also have in the future. However, as diplomats, we prefer to not have such discussions out in the open, even though some people might sometimes request that from us. The aim is not confrontation; it is partnership for accountable governance that benefits everyone.

Looking ahead, what are the EU's main priorities for engagement and partnership with Uganda over the next decade?

In very uncertain times, the EU will bring predictability and reliability through the EU's upcoming 2028-2034 budget – a seven-year budget, which includes international partnerships, with Africa as the largest recipient of EU development cooperation. Looking ahead in Uganda, we'll continue to focus on key shared priorities like green transition and inclusive growth. Global Gateway will drive more private investments in energy and transport, while we expand the Forest Partnership for climate resilience. Agriculture value chains, SME finance, and skills will also remain central.

Finally, Ambassador, you have worked across Sudan, Ethiopia, Botswana, and now Uganda – what lessons have these postings taught you about Africa, it's people and partnership with the world?

To me, the big lesson is that partnerships are built on mutual respect and long-term commitment, not short-term fixes. I believe in diplomacy and the potential in bringing Africa and Europe closer to each other in every respect. My family and I have lived on the African continent for 17 years now, and I have learnt a lot. No country is like the other, and Africa's diversity demands listening first, then co-creating solutions. The continent has taught me optimism and its youth, innovation, and warmth have made every mission personally rewarding.

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