The government talks about empowerment, but we need to move beyond talk and into deliberate policy. It's not about shutting the door on foreign investment, writes **Immanuel Ben Misagga.**



A welder at the Hoima Stadium construction site. There are calls for the government to attach skills-transfer clauses in contracts with foreign firms. PHOTO/COURTESY

Let's empower locals to build our country

Walk through any major town in Uganda today; Kampala, Gulu, Mbarara, and you will see the cranes. They tower over our skyline, lifting steel and concrete to build the hospitals, highways, and high-rises we desperately need. But look closer. Those cranes don't have Ugandan names painted on the side. The project managers on-site rarely speak Luganda or Luo. And the multi-billion-shilling contracts? Signed in boardrooms in Ankara, Beijing, or Nairobi.

I've spent years in this industry, and I have watched a troubling pattern repeat itself: Uganda's infrastructure is booming, but Ugandan contractors are being left in the dust. We are not just missing out on profits; we are missing out on a generation of expertise, and it's time we had a frank conversation about it.

The government talks about empowerment, but we need to move beyond talk and into deliberate policy. It's not about shutting the door on foreign investment; far from it. We have so much to learn from the outsiders. Take the Chinese model, for instance. It's brilliant in its execution. When you see five Chinese companies bidding against each other for a single road project in Kampala, you have to appreciate the strategy. They are backed by their government with machinery, financing, and soft loans. No matter who wins the tender, China wins. The profits go home, the equipment is made there, and the expertise remains with their engineers. They build their nation's wealth on our soil.

But where is the clause in our contracts that builds ours?

Right now, the local contractor is an afterthought. We are brought in as subcontractors, often handed the most difficult and least profitable parts of the job. We are squeezed on payment, given impossible deadlines by the main contractor, and expected to just be grateful for the crumbs. I have seen colleagues finish a job, only to spend years chasing their dues. That's not partnership; that is exploitation.

We don't have to reinvent the wheel. We just need to look at the smarter deals our neighbours are making. While working in Namibia and Zambia, I saw a model that actually works: a mandatory skills transfer clause. In those countries, if a foreign firm wins a government tender, they don't just bring in their own crew. They are contractually bound to invest in local capacity. Over five years, they must train a specific number of local engineers and project managers, effectively working themselves out of a job on the next big project.

Can you imagine the impact of that here? Our universities are producing hundreds of engineers every year. They have the theory, the degrees, and the hunger. But they lack the practical and on-site experience that comes from managing a complex build. If we attached a skills-transfer clause to every major contract, these graduates would not be riding boda bodas; they would be running projects.

Benchmark.
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Look at the recently-completed Hoima Stadium, a beautiful facility built by Turkey's Summa. It is a world-class project, and Summa did a fine job. But during construction, the reality was stark: Turkish engineers and foremen were doing the skilled, technical work, while Ugandans were mostly mixing cement and digging trenches. Now, spare a thought: what if the contract had stipulated that 20 Ugandan civil engineers had to be embedded with Summa's team, learning to operate that specific machinery and manage that scale of project, with the goal of them being able to build a stadium on their own within the next decade? That would be a real legacy.

And here is the kicker; Summa, like several of these giants, is partly financed and promoted by their own government. They have the muscle of the Turkish state behind them. So, why are we competing against state-backed behemoths with one hand tied behind our backs?

For instance, when I was working for Namibia's Roads Contractor Company (RCC) – the government-owned construction firm – as the project manager North Western Province along Chavuma-Kabompo-Zambezi River and Katima-Sinazezi Road, I was given a work permit for only three years.

It could only be renewed or extended after proof that I had trained at least nine engineering graduates as my understudies, including diploma holders.

In the end, the locals benefited in terms of skills from my experience. On the other hand, I also benefited in networking with them.

Take maintenance, for example. We have a habit of bringing in foreign firms to build a road, and then years later, bring in another foreign firm to patch the pot-holes. It is madness. Why can't we place capable Ugandan contractors in our five major cities; Gulu, Mbale, Mbarara, Kampala, and Jinja—with a rolling contract to maintain the road network? It would keep our people employed, keep the money in our economy, and ensure quick response times when a feeder road is washed away. It would also, incidentally, give young people in those regions a reason to stay, curbing that desperate rush to the capital if the roads in their own districts are well-kept.

For a local contractor like me, the biggest barrier is capital. To build a modern high-rise, you need a crane. A single crane can cost millions of dollars. No local bank is going to lend me that kind of money against the promise of a future tender, especially when they know I'm competing against international conglomerates with bottomless pockets. We are locked out before we even begin.

This isn't about nationalism or kicking out foreigners. It's about common sense. It's about ensuring that when we pay a foreign company billions for a project, we are also investing in our own future. We need a policy that says: you are welcome to build in Uganda, but you will leave Ugandans behind who can build just as well.

It's time we stopped just building structures and started building a nation of experts.

Immanuel Ben Misagga is an infrastructure contractor.

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