

As Uganda's gaming sector continues to grow, the focus is shifting toward sustainability. Regulators are working to strengthen compliance and ensure that gaming remains entertainment rather than a financial trap.

BY RACHEAL NABISUBI

Uganda's gaming industry is booming. In the 2024/2025 Financial Year, Ugandans staked Shs8.2 trillion, with payouts reaching Shs7.7 trillion. The figures highlight how deeply gambling has become woven into the economy. Yet behind this lucrative growth lies risk, especially for the youth, leaving regulators with the daunting task of balancing opportunity with protection.

From Kampala's bustling streets to trading centres upcountry, betting houses and slot machines attract crowds chasing fortune in games of chance. Technology and smartphone penetration have expanded access like never before, fuelling the surge.

Denis Mudene Ngabirano, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the National Lotteries and Gaming Regulatory Board (NLGRB), stresses that gaming must be understood first as entertainment, not a livelihood.

It's not that all the Shs8.2 trillion was taken by operators. Ugandans received Shs7.7 trillion back, and we collected about Shs323 million in taxes from both operators and players," Ngabirano explains, adding, "But gaming must be seen for what it is—entertainment, not a guaranteed way to make money."

Ngabirano emphasises that the Board's role is not to encourage gambling, but to ensure it is conducted responsibly. "People should not think that once they stake, they will earn. We urge Ugandans to bet responsibly—only with money they can afford to lose. Gaming should be treated like going out for entertainment, not as an income source."

To reinforce this, NLGRB introduced new directives in late 2024 requiring operators to implement tools that promote responsible play. Compliance checks are ongoing, and adherence to these standards will be a key factor in licence renewals.

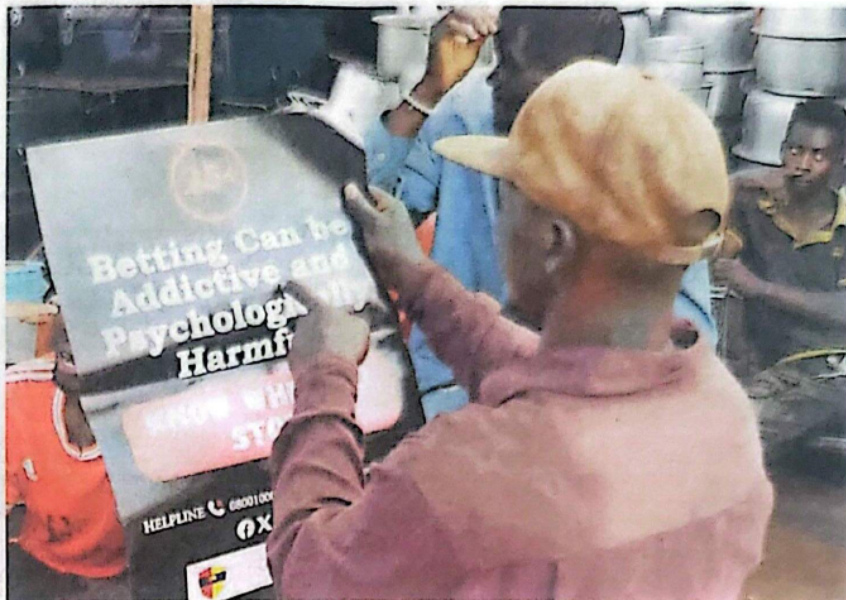
"Our mandate is to protect the public from the adverse effects of gaming," Ngabirano says, noting that operators, regulators, and the public must all play their part.

#### Growth

Over the past four years, gaming has seen tremendous growth, with operators investing in new technologies, including AI-driven systems. Ngabirano believes this growth will be sustained, provided compliance remains strong. He points to South Africa as a benchmark for gaming standards, noting that

**Projection.** Analysts predict that the sector will soon exceed the Shs10 trillion mark.

# Regulators balance growth with responsibility after Shs8.2t bets



A man reads a betting poster. Gaming is entertainment, not a livelihood. PHOTO/FILE

Uganda is not far behind.

"If we can close the gaps we've identified, Uganda will rank among the best regulators in Africa," he says.

However, there are some challenges that the gaming and lotteries sector faces, including poor public perception.

"Many people think gaming is illegal or something that shouldn't happen," Ngabirano notes. "But gaming is a legal business in Uganda. Our focus is to change the narrative by showing that with proper regulation and responsible play, it can coexist with social protection."

As Uganda's gaming sector continues to grow, the focus is shifting toward sustainability. Regulators are working to strengthen compliance, expand awareness campaigns, and ensure that gaming remains entertainment rather than a financial trap.

With improved governance, digital transformation, and stronger enforcement, the industry is poised to deliver both economic opportunity and social protection.

#### Responsible gaming

Uganda's gaming industry is expanding at breakneck speed, but with growth comes challenges. Regulators are racing to clamp down on illegal gambling, even as international operators continue to outpace local protections. The elephant in the room remains addiction, how to shield citizens, especially the youth, from the risks of

excessive play.

To minimise harm, Ngabirano discloses that NLGRB has introduced directives requiring operators to provide tools that empower players to manage their gambling behaviour.

One of the most important measures is self-exclusion, which allows individuals to voluntarily block themselves from betting for a chosen period. This gives players the ability to step away when gambling becomes unhealthy.

Another safeguard is limit-setting features, enabling players to cap how much money they stake or how much

they are willing to lose. Once the set limit is reached, the system automatically restricts further play, helping individuals avoid excessive losses.

NLGRB has also prioritised awareness campaigns to educate Ugandans about the true nature of gaming—that it is purely a source of entertainment, not a revenue stream.

"Every gambler must know when to stop, when to walk away, and when to run," Ngabirano says, adding, "We also encourage them to be responsible because this is primarily entertainment. It is not a money-making venture, and it is not a business that you wake up and say, 'I am going to bet to make a living.'"

Mr Rogers Barungi, a betting consultant, told *Business Outlook* that operators face strict penalties if the lotteries and gaming regulators find them operating without properly displaying the rules of betting. "These rules, such as the age requirement, must be visible on both online platforms and in retail locations. If these rules are not displayed, operators risk having their licenses revoked."

#### Regulation

Amendments to the Gaming Act are being finalised to strengthen oversight, particularly in the fast-growing online space. These include stricter penalties for illegal gambling and improved safeguards for players. Budget allocations to the regulator have grown from Shs3 billion to Shs17 billion, signalling govern-

ment commitment to tighter control. Industry experts say Uganda's directives reflect global best practice, benchmarking against countries like Malta, the UK, the USA, and South Africa.

"Compliance is no longer optional; it is now the cost of doing business in a sector where growth must go hand in hand with responsibility," says Alicia Atukunda, Senior Manager for Licensing and Responsible Gaming at NLGRB.

The growth in question saw revenue rise sixfold from Shs50 billion in FY2019/20 to Shs323 billion by June 2025. Elsewhere, industry turnover surged from Shs500 billion in FY2021/22 to Shs8 trillion in FY2024/25. This was attributed to the rollout of the National Central Electronic Monitoring System (NCEMS) and further strengthened oversight, with about 52 companies now operating in Uganda's gambling and betting sector as of 2025.

Globally, the World Health Organisation (WHO) projects gambling revenue will reach \$700 billion by 2028, driven largely by smartphone use in low- and middle-income countries. Uganda's growth trajectory mirrors this global trend.

#### Transformation

During the inauguration of the new NLGRB last year, Finance Minister Mr Matia Kasajja hailed the transformation of Uganda's gaming sector, commending the outgoing NLGRB Board for turning a once chaotic industry into a credible institution.

"The outgoing Board didn't just maintain the status quo; they improved, multiplied, and grew the institution," he said.

Kasajja highlighted milestones including the formalisation of illegal operators, appointment of Ithuba Uganda Limited as the National Lottery Operator, and expansion of NLGRB's regional presence. He also endorsed the acquisition of permanent premises in Bugolobi, signalling stronger institutional stability.

As Internet access continues to rise, analysts predict that the sector will soon exceed the Shs10 trillion mark. The challenge lies in ensuring that safeguards keep pace.

Ngabirano believes success lies in compliance, innovation, and responsibility. "With improved investments and stronger regulation, the perception of gaming will change. Success for us as regulators means protecting the public while ensuring the sector grows sustainably."

As Uganda positions itself among Africa's leading regulators, the message is clear: growth must go hand in hand with responsibility, and the future of gaming will be judged not just by revenue, but by how well citizens are protected.

## THE NUMBERS

52 ▲

Registered. Companies in Uganda's gambling and betting sector.

Shs323 million ▲

Taxes. The money NLGRB has collected in taxes from both operators and players.

Shs17 trillion ▼

Funding. Budget allocations to the regulator have grown from Shs3 billion to Shs17 billion.