

Changing the fate of Rukiga District requires boldness and fairness

Dear Tingasiga: The returning motorist who has been away from Uganda for 20 years will be impressed by the remarkable expansion of paved all-weather roads in all regions of the country. From just over 3,000 km in 2010, we now have over 6,000 km of tarmacked roads. Despite suboptimal maintenance, these roads have been transformative for many communities, just like an ambitious road construction project did to Canada in the middle of the last century.

The Trans-Canada Highway's paving revolutionised national unity and economic development. Completed in 1962, this 7,821-kilometre tarmacked road connected isolated communities from St John's, Newfoundland, to Victoria, British Columbia, transforming weeks-long journeys into manageable drives. Remote regions suddenly accessed markets, healthcare, and education. Tourism flourished as families explored their vast nation by car, fostering a shared Canadian identity.

Industries expanded beyond rail corridors, with trucking enabling cost-effective goods transport nationwide. The highway facilitated internal migration, allowing Canadians to relocate for opportunities while maintaining family connections.

This infrastructure masterpiece did not just link provinces—it wove disparate populations into a cohesive country, proving that physical connection nurtures national consciousness and prosperity.

As I continue to reflect on the near-total absence of tarmacked roads in Rukiga District, I am struck by the isolation of this once prosperous part of Uganda, pretty much cut off from the gains in transportation that President Yoweri Museveni's government rightly and legitimately celebrates.

My appeal for tarmac roads in Rukiga District is not just because dusty and muddy roads are a nuisance for the occasional or visiting motorist. All-weather roads are the most fundamental catalyst for development in emerging economies.

These roads—capable of remaining passable throughout the year regardless of seasonal conditions—represent far more than simple transportation corridors. They are lifelines that connect isolated communities to markets, services, and opportunities, fundamentally transforming the economic landscape of developing nations.

I have recently driven along the Mbarara-Ishaka-Kagamba-Ntungamo highway, the Mbarara-Ibanda-Kazo-Nyakahita-Mbarara circuit, and the Mbarara-Kikagati highway—all of them in Ankole. Except for the Mbarara-Ibanda leg, which is a potholed mess because of poor maintenance, we have good reason to congratulate the government for a job very well done in this area. I have been similarly impressed on my drives through other parts of Uganda and have read very positive reports from places I have not been to. Ugandans in areas that have been favoured with tarmac roads have good reason to receive the President's claim of "protecting the gains" with credibility. These are impressive gains that have transformed local communities, enhanced regional economies, and moved the country forward.

The most immediate impact of all-weather roads lies in their ability to ensure reliable market access for rural producers. Smallholder farmers in places like Rukiga District constitute a significant portion of the population, yet their potential contribution to the economy remains constrained by inadequate road infrastructure. It warrants restating that during rainy seasons, such as we are currently experiencing in these highlands, unpaved roads become impassable quagmires, effectively cutting off entire regions from commercial centres. This seasonal isolation forces farmers to sell their produce locally at depressed prices or watch their harvests spoil. Tarmacked roads eliminate this cycle of loss by providing year-round market connectivity, enabling farmers to transport their goods when prices are favourable and reach more lucrative urban markets. This consistent market

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Letter to a
Kampala Friend



access translates directly into higher incomes for rural households and increased agricultural productivity as farmers gain incentive to expand production beyond subsistence levels.

Beyond agriculture, all-weather roads catalyse broader economic diversification by reducing transportation costs and improving reliability. Lower transport costs make previously non-viable economic activities suddenly feasible. Small enterprises can access raw materials more affordably and distribute finished products more efficiently. The certainty of year-round road access encourages entrepreneurship, as business owners can confidently invest knowing they can maintain supply chains and serve customers regardless of weather conditions. This reliability is particularly crucial for time-sensitive goods and perishable products, opening opportunities in sectors like horticulture, dairy production, and small-scale manufacturing that require dependable logistics.

All-weather roads also play a vital role in attracting investment and fostering regional integration. Investors, whether domestic or foreign, require reliable infrastructure to justify capital deployment. The presence of quality road networks signals government commitment to development and re-

duces operational risks for businesses. Manufacturing facilities, processing plants, and service enterprises naturally gravitate toward areas with dependable transportation infrastructure. Additionally, these roads facilitate regional trade by connecting neighbouring countries and enabling the movement of goods across borders, allowing developing nations to participate more effectively in regional value chains and benefit from economies of scale that transcend national boundaries.

The multiplier effects of all-weather roads extend throughout the economy in ways both direct and subtle. Improved roads reduce vehicle maintenance costs, as the wear and tear on vehicles travelling smooth, paved surfaces is significantly less than on rough, unpaved tracks. This reduction in operating costs benefits everyone from individual boda boda (motorcycle taxi) operators to commercial trucking companies. Furthermore, reliable roads enhance government capacity to provide services, including disaster response. When administrators and service providers can reach all areas of their jurisdiction year-round, governance should hopefully improve.

Clearly, realising these benefits requires more than simply constructing roads. Insisting on proper design, quality construction, and ongoing maintenance should be a non-negotiable culture of the custodians of this sector. Roads built without adequate engineering considerations or using substandard materials quickly deteriorate, negating initial investments. Sustainable maintenance programmes, though often overlooked in favour of new construction, prove essential for preserving road functionality and maximising return on infrastructure investment.

The government has already demonstrated that all-weather roads are a transformative investment for our country. However, places like Rukiga District have been left behind. Changing the fate of these orphaned communities requires boldness and fairness in recognising that the residents in those areas are also citizens, with needs and rights that are no less than those in areas that have enjoyed the lion's share of the gains of the last 40 years.

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