

Business people often ask: "Where is the market?" The real turning point, however, is not asking where can I sell, but where should I sell.

Take the example of fish. Bank of Uganda statistics indicate that fish exports stood at about \$158m in 2025, excluding regional exports. In total, fish exports reached \$241m. The difference – roughly \$83m – reflects fish exports to the East African Community (EAC), particularly the DR Congo. While sophisticated exporters target the European Union (EU), small and medium enterprises can find strong opportunities in regional markets. There is space for everyone as businesses move up the value chain.

A closer look at Uganda's formal merchandise exports shows growth of about 57%, from roughly \$8b in 2024 to \$12.6b in 2025. At the same time, informal cross-border trade contributed about \$793m, a 21% increase from \$598m in 2024.

Uganda has multiple market options. Market selection, therefore, is strategic, not random. In export trade, choosing the wrong market can be as costly as failing to export at all.

There are both formal merchandise trade and informal trade opportunities for the business community. Uganda Bureau of Statistics and Uganda Revenue Authority, working with the Bank of Uganda, continue to highlight the importance of informal cross-border trade data.

EXPORT MARKETS BEYOND BORDERS: WHERE SHOULD UGANDA FOCUS NEXT?



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Opportunities exist across the EAC and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. Globally, Uganda benefits from preferential market access arrangements with the EU and trade relations with countries such as China, India, South Korea and Morocco. Uganda does

not lack market access, rather often lacks market focus. In reality, many exporters enter markets blindly. Some follow friends or middlemen, react to one-off orders, or chase high-price markets. This approach leads to inconsistent demand, rejection risks and payment challenges. Exporting without market intelligence is a gamble – not a strategy.

Market selection should be approached through four key

lenses. First, is there consistent demand? Second, what are the entry requirements including standards, certification and traceability? Third, what is the cost of entry, including logistics, tariffs and compliance? Fourth, what is the level of competition – who else is supplying that market?

Regional markets offer strong opportunities due to proximity and lower logistics costs, though they are often price-sensitive and informal. The EU offers high-value markets with premium pricing, but comes with strict compliance requirements. The Middle East is a growing destination for food imports, while Asia presents long-term potential.

It is important to match the right product to the right market. The right product in the wrong market will struggle, just as the wrong product in the right market will fail.

In Uganda, we talk a lot about coffee – but how many people actually drink Ugandan coffee regularly? This explains why most of our coffee is exported to Europe

and regional markets. If we do not consume it locally, we should at least promote it – whether as a gift to friends or to visitors.

Public and private institutions must work together to promote market access. Export promotion agencies, including Uganda Free Zones and Export Promotions Agency, alongside embassies and trade attachés, should provide structured market intelligence and guide exporters.

As a practical approach, exporters should start with one or two markets and build depth rather than spreading themselves too thin.

Time should be invested in understanding buyer requirements and avoiding trial-and-error exporting. Successful exporters focus before they expand.

Uganda's export success will not only depend on how much it produces as a country, but on how wisely it chooses its markets. In global trade, opportunity is everywhere but success lies in choosing the right one.



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