

...bribery and inflated payrolls. This labour and early marriage contribute delivered results to...

Infrastructure is East Africa's moment

There are moments in a region's economic journey when ambition, necessity and opportunity align. The recent announcement that Uganda and Kenya will collaborate on a refinery in Tanga, alongside renewed commitments to complete the Standard Gauge Railway from Nairobi to Kampala, is one such moment. Add to that the intervention by Aliko Dangote — who has pledged to help deliver the refinery within five years if the region unites and what emerges is not just a set of projects, but a test of East Africa's collective will. At the Uganda National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, we are heartened by these developments. For years, the private sector has argued that the region's greatest constraint is not a lack of resources, but the absence of co-ordinated infrastructure to unlock them. These latest signals suggest that our leaders are finally converging around a simple truth: East Africa will not industrialise in isolation.

Consider what is at stake. Uganda sits on commercially viable oil reserves in the Albertine Graben. Kenya offers a strategic



coastline and access to global shipping routes. Tanzania, through Tanga, provides a natural outlet for refined products. Yet for decades, these advantages have remained fragmented — each country pursuing parallel strategies, often duplicating costs and diluting impact. A shared refinery, backed by regional commitment, would mark a decisive shift from competition to collaboration.

The same logic applies to the Standard Gauge Railway. The incomplete link between Nairobi and Kampala is more than a missing track — it is a bottleneck in the region's economic artery. Every day, businesses across Uganda face high logistics costs, long transit times, and unpredictable supply chains. These inefficiencies are not abstract; they are embedded in the price of every bag of cement, every litre of fuel,

every export consignment.

Complete the railway and the equation changes. Transport costs fall. Trade volumes rise. Industries become more competitive. And perhaps most importantly, the region begins to function as a single market in practice, not just in policy. This is why these projects matter. They are not simply infrastructure investments; they are enablers of productivity. They are the difference between exporting raw materials and building value chains. Between subsistence enterprise and scalable industry.

From the vantage point of the business community, the case for regional infrastructure has always been clear. We have seen how fragmented markets limit growth. We have seen how small, disconnected economies struggle to attract large-scale investment. And we have seen how, when markets integrate—even partially—capital follows.

It is in this context that Dangote's interest becomes particularly noteworthy. Fresh from completing the Dangote Refinery — the largest on the continent — he brings not just capital, but hard-won experience in executing complex, capital-intensive industrial

projects. That refinery is already producing refined fuels and fertiliser, demonstrating how a single, well-executed investment can catalyse entire value chains. His willingness to replicate a version of that model in East Africa signals confidence in the region's potential, but also offers a subtle lesson: scale matters. Integrated projects that combine refining, petrochemicals and fertiliser production create deeper economic linkages, support agriculture and industry simultaneously, and generate the kind of multiplier effects that smaller, fragmented investments simply cannot match. Indeed, investors of that scale do not come lightly. They are drawn to projects that offer not just returns, but certainty — certainty of demand, of policy alignment, of execution. His condition — that the region must come together — is both a challenge and an opportunity. It underscores what we have long known: that the private sector will lead where governments coordinate.

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The author is the President of the
Uganda National Chamber of Commerce
and Industry