How West Nile is becoming Uganda's new trade frontier

Districts such as Arua City, Pakwach, Koboko, Zombo and Adjumani are not only viable for business but are increasingly central to trade across northern Uganda and beyond.

BY FELIX WAROM OKELLO

For decades, the name 'West Nile' evoked the image of a distant frontier, far removed from the pulse of Kampala, nearly 450 kilometres away.

Tucked into Uganda's north-western corner, the region was largely viewed as a transit corridor—a place one passed through rather than a destination in its own right.

It served aid workers heading to South Sudan and traders navigating the porous borders with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). To many in Kampala and Entebbe, West Nile remained a peripheral outpost, detached from the country's economic centre.

That perception has steadily changed. Over the last two decades, West Nile has undergone a profound transformation. What was once considered remote is now emerging as one of Uganda's most dynamic and strategic commercial zones, driven by geography, infrastructure development, and a resilient entrepreneurial culture.

Today, districts such as Arua, Pakwach, Koboko, Zombo and Adjumani are increasingly central to trade across northern Uganda and beyond. Their influence stretches into regional markets in the DRC, South Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR), positioning West Nile as a gateway to a much larger economic hinterland.

On market days, this transformation becomes visible. Every Wednesday and Saturday in Paidha Town Council, Zombo District, long convoys of trucks arrive from Lira, Soroti and Masindi, loading agricultural produce such as bananas, maize, Irish potatoes and beans. The produce is then transported back to supply markets across Uganda.

A similar scene unfolds on Sundays in Panyimur, Pakwach District, where traders from the DRC converge to buy fish. The market has grown into a critical hub for cross-border commerce, linking Ugandan producers with Congolese consumers.

Ms Jean Clarise, a trader from the DRC, says the Panyimur market has become indispensable. "This is our main market. Our people in Ariwara and Aru rely on fish from Panyimur. That is why many traders travel here," she said in an interview in Arua City.

She added that the market sustains livelihoods on both sides of the border. "Without it, cross-border trade would lose meaning. We are part of the East African Common Market, and we expect cooperation to strengthen trade and revenue for both countries," Ms Clarise said.

Local leaders echoed similar sentiments. Pakwach District chairperson Robert Omito added that the sub-region's natural resources, particularly its rivers, offer immense economic potential. "We are blessed with abundant water resources. If utilised well, they can generate revenue and strengthen trade with our neighbours," he said.

Mr Omito said West Nile's proximity to South Sudan and CAR gives it a unique advantage. "With better roads and the revival of the railway line connecting to Juba, this region can become one of the most competitive business hubs in the country," he added.

Traders load merchandise destined for the Democratic Republic of Congo onto trucks in Arua City. PHOTO/FELIX WAROM OKELLO

Geography has always been West Nile's greatest asset. Arua City lies within 100 kilometres of both the South Sudan and DRC borders, granting access to vast and under-served markets.

The DRC presents particularly strong prospects. With its mineral wealth and rapidly growing urban centres such as Bunia, Ariwara and Aru, demand for goods and services continues to rise. Already, traders from West Nile are actively doing business across the border.

Each week, more than 20 trucks from Juba, South Sudan, arrive in Arua carrying fish destined for the DRC market. This growing trade highlights the region's expanding role as a commercial bridge linking multiple economies.

A 2013 survey by the Rural Initiative for Community Empowerment (RICE-West Nile) and International Alert found that trade between Arua and Ariwara was already significant. Monthly trade flows from Arua to Ariwara were valued at over $88,000, while goods moving in the opposite direction stood at about $35,000.

Most imports from Ariwara consisted of foodstuffs, while exports from Arua included manufactured goods such as beverages, soap and second-hand clothing. The study also revealed that women dominated this trade, accounting for more than 70 percent of cross-border traders.

The future outlook is being shaped by infrastructure plans. In October 2024, President Museveni announced proposals to construct a road network linking Arua to the southeastern part of CAR to strengthen trade ties among landlocked countries in the region.

The proposed 1,100-kilometre corridor would pass through parts of the DRC and South Sudan, connecting markets and opening new routes for commerce. Former Ayivu County MP Bernard Atiku said such infrastructure could transform livelihoods.

"West Nile is strategically placed for trade with three countries. If this road network is implemented, it will unlock enormous opportunities," he said.

He also emphasised upgrading Arua Airport. "A functional airport will link West Nile to regional and international markets, including Europe," he added.

Experts say the region's next phase of growth depends on value addition and industrialisation. Mr Joel Aita called for the establishment of a special economic zone.

"West Nile is positioned to become a business capital. We need industrial parks to produce goods for export," he said. He also highlighted opportunities in mineral processing. "If we establish processing facilities here, the economic benefits will be significant," he added.

Other proposals include developing an inland port in Pakwach and reviving the railway line to improve logistics.

The impact of these developments is already visible. Investment in local processing facilities is creating jobs, reducing post-harvest losses and keeping more value within the region.

The growth of Arua City reflects this shift. It has become a financial and logistical hub, hosting more than a dozen banking institutions alongside expanding services in warehousing, freight forwarding and customs clearing.

These developments have enabled sectors such as manufacturing, agro-processing and cold storage to take root.

Yet infrastructure alone does not define West Nile's rise. Arua City hosts a diverse business community, bringing together indigenous traders and investors from across Uganda, as well as entrepreneurs from Sudan, the DRC and India.

Its markets—Ediofe, Adumi and the central market—are vibrant centres of commerce. The service sector is also expanding, reflecting growing demand in hospitality, finance and transport.

Despite these gains, challenges remain. Rapid growth has put pressure on urban services, and many feeder roads in rural areas are still in poor condition.

Nevertheless, West Nile is no longer a peripheral region but a key player in Uganda's economic future.

WEST NILE AT A GLANCE

- Three borders: DRC, South Sudan, CAR.
- $2.8b investment potential (10 years).
- 150,000 projected jobs.
- 96 million regional market population.
- Strategic gateway to Central and East Africa.
- Access to under-served regional markets.
- Growing logistics and financial hub in Arua.
- Expanding agro-processing and manufacturing.