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Uganda's urban future at risk: Why we must act now

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Uganda's cities are growing at an unprecedented rate, but without urgent and strategic action, this growth risks becoming a crisis rather than an opportunity. In just a decade, Uganda's urban population has surged from 8.4 million in 2014 to over 14 million in 2024, and is projected to reach 19 million by 2030. This rapid urbanisation reflects hope — Ugandans moving to towns and cities in search of jobs, better services, and improved livelihoods. However, for many, that hope is fading into frustration.

Across urban centres, the reality is stark. Jobs are scarce, housing is unaffordable, and basic services are overstretched. Informal settlements are expanding as more people are pushed into wetlands and unsafe areas. Traffic congestion is worsening, public infrastructure is under pressure, and environmental degradation is accelerating. Without intervention, our cities risk becoming centres of inequality and hardship rather than engines of growth.

The root of the problem is clear: urban population growth is far outpacing infrastructure development and service delivery. While the Government, private sector actors, and development partners have made commendable efforts, the scale and speed of urbanisation demand a more co-ordinated and forward-looking response.

Uganda must urgently strengthen urban governance systems. Transparent procurement, enforcement of planning regulations, and inclusive decision-making are essential. Too often, projects fail because communities are not involved at the planning stage, leading to underutilised infrastructure and wasted public resources.

Affordable housing remains one of the most pressing challenges. Strategic public-private partnerships can unlock solutions by enabling developers to access low-interest financing, reducing construction costs, and ultimately lowering rent for ordinary citizens. Housing is not a luxury — it is a basic necessity that underpins dignity and productivity.

Equally important is investment in modern, efficient transport systems. Innovative solutions such as cable-based urban transport, alongside expanded and well-maintained road networks, can significantly reduce congestion, travel time, and economic losses in cities such as Kampala.

Uganda should also deepen collaboration with international partners such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and the UN. These institutions can support financing for mass transit systems, slum upgrading, clean energy solutions, and digital infrastructure — key pillars of a modern urban economy.

The pothole showcase that featured recently in the media should serve as an opportunity for Uganda to develop a focused road rehabilitation and development plan per division in every fiscal year across all urban centres, given that resources directed towards the road sector remain insufficient. Taking Kampala capital city as an example, all resources planned for road maintenance in the coming financial year should be concentrated on Nakawa division, with all roads in that area worked on in accordance with the required standards. This would maximise resource optimisation while improving service delivery.

Digital transformation is another opportunity Uganda cannot afford to miss. Expanding affordable internet access and scaling up online services in health, education, transport, and commerce will reduce physical pressure on cities while increasing efficiency and inclusion.

There is also a need to invest in resilient infrastructure — roads, drainage systems, markets, schools and hospitals — that can withstand floods, population pressure, and climate-related shocks.

Urban authorities must go beyond reliance on local taxes and explore revenue-generating investments to sustainably finance development.

Uganda has already made notable progress in urban infrastructure development under the stewardship of President Yoweri Museveni, particularly through improved roads, markets, and drainage systems in several cities, delivered by the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development through the Urban Infrastructure and Municipal Management project. The good news is that the same ministry will soon be commencing the next phase under the Uganda Cities and Municipalities Infrastructure Development programme. However, it must focus on inclusive planning — ensuring that development projects are designed resiliently, with and for the people they serve, while safeguarding the fast-gro urban future.

This will help develop urban centres through better infrastructure and services.

Urbanisation is inevitable. The question is whether Uganda will manage it proactively or react to its consequences. With bold leadership, strong partnerships and inclusive policies, our cities can become centres of innovation, productivity and shared prosperity. The time to act is now.

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