

"Uganda Is Innovating. It Is Just Not Cashing In Yet"



Somewhere in a university laboratory in Kampala right now, a researcher has just solved something remarkable. A new method for extending the shelf life of a local food crop. A low-cost water purification technique. A material derived from agricultural waste that could replace imported packaging. The science is solid. The problem it solves is real. And within a few years, it will almost certainly disappear, not because it failed, but because nobody knew what to do with it next.

This is Uganda's real innovation problem. It is not that we are not innovating. Walk through Makerere, Kyambogo, or Mbarara University of Science and Technology, and you will find evidence of genuine scientific and technological creativity. The ideas are there. The problem is what happens, or more accurately, what does not happen, after the discovery.

Most people assume that innovations fail because of funding. Money is certainly part of the story. But it is rarely the primary reason a promising invention never reaches the hands of the people it was designed to help. The more common reasons are quieter and less discussed: a researcher who has spent five years mastering a scientific process has rarely been trained to understand a market.

A product developed in a laboratory has never been tested against what a consumer actually wants, what a distributor can actually move, or what a regulator will actually approve. There is also the question of timing, innovations that are not accompanied through the market entry process at the right moment lose their window. A competitor fills the gap. The moment passes. Packaging, pricing, supply chain, compliance, these are treated as afterthoughts when in reality they

are the difference between an idea and a business.

Commercialisation is not simply selling. It is the full journey from a validated idea to a viable, scalable business, and it requires a completely different set of skills from those required to make the original discovery. Market research. Product development and standardisation. Regulatory navigation. Investor readiness. Distribution strategy. Brand positioning. Most innovators do not have these skills, and they should not be expected to. A scientist who is also expected to be a marketer, a lawyer, an accountant, and a salesperson is a scientist who will eventually run out of energy, and the innovation will run out with them.

This is precisely the gap that the Science, Technology, and Innovation Secretariat, is working to close. Our mandate spans

the full innovation journey, from supporting research and development at the earliest stages, to walking innovators through the commercialisation process all the way into the market. We recognise that an innovation ecosystem cannot be built by intervening only at one point in the chain. A researcher who cannot access R&D support will never produce the product. And a product that receives no commercialisation support will never reach the consumer. Both ends of the journey matter, and we are active across both.

On the commercialisation side specifically, our market and investment readiness support helps innovators understand not just whether their product works, but whether anyone will buy it, at what price, through which channels, and under what regulatory conditions, and it prepares them to walk into an investor conversation with more than an idea and a hope.

We have an innovation pipeline. What we are missing is a commercialisation infrastructure."

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Our enterprise and business development support builds the operational discipline, the systems, the standards, the supply chain rigour, that transforms a promising product into a business that can actually deliver at scale.

The proof is already visible. Our Kayoola electric bus, a homegrown innovation, is a capable, competitive product. But capability alone does not create a market. To generate sales and revenue, an innovation must find its route to market. For the electric bus, that meant deploying it on the road through the E-Bus Express, giving commuters a direct experience of the product. It meant the Pearl to Cape Town Expedition, a 13,500-kilometre journey that demonstrated the vehicle's performance across multiple African markets and gave regional buyers the confidence that the product genuinely works.



These are not marketing stunts. They are deliberate, innovative route-to-market strategies, and they are one example of how we are moving our innovations from the labs into commercial reality. The Made in Uganda platform extends this further, ensuring that our domestic products and innovations have a structured pathway to reach not just national and regional markets, but global ones. Because the destination for our innovations is not the Uganda market alone. It is the world.

Events such as the National Science Week are part of this same effort, creating the public platforms where innovations are seen, where investors and innovators meet, where the conversation between science and economy begins. Visibility matters. An innovation that nobody knows about cannot find its market, its investor, or its champion. National Science Week is how we ensure that our best ideas do not remain hidden in laboratories and reports, but step into rooms where they can be recognised, resourced, and taken further.

This is not a new problem globally. The countries that have built the strongest innovation economies, from India's biotechnology sector to South Korea's electronics industry, did not succeed simply by producing brilliant scientists. They built deliberate systems for moving innovation from research into revenue. They treated commercialisation as seriously as they treated discovery. That is the model we are now building, not importing someone else's blueprint, but constructing our own commercialisation architecture, grounded in our own resources, our own innovations, and our own ambition to compete on the world stage.

Because the goal is not simply to have more innovations. The goal is for these innovations to thrive in global markets. Matooke flour that reaches a food manufacturer in Japan. A water purification technology that is licensed to municipalities across East Africa. A Ugandan health innovation that competes on a shelf in the Middle East.

The Nation has set its sights on a 500 billion dollar economy. That

target will not be reached on the back of raw materials alone. It will be reached when our innovations move through the full value chain, when what leaves our borders is not just the crop, but the product; not just the resource, but the brand. Every Ugandan innovation that finds a shelf in a foreign market is a contribution to that number. The export earnings, the jobs, the industrial capacity, these follow when we stop exporting potential and start exporting finished, globally competitive products that carry "Made in Uganda" with distinction. What stands between here and there is not the quality of our ideas. It is the structured, sustained support to take them the distance. That is what we are building.

If you are an innovator, a researcher, or an entrepreneur with a product that has never made it past the idea stage, the question worth asking is not whether your idea is good enough. Chances are it is. The question is whether you have the commercialisation support you need to take it further. That support is being built. And it is being built for you.

