## TECH ECOSYSTEMS

# Uganda's start-up ecosystem thrives through strengthened collaboration

Picture this: You have a game-changing idea—something the country lacks. You sketch it out, refine it, build. Prototype in hand, you test, tweak, and iterate until it clicks. You find a co-founder, register your company, launch. The world hears: I made something.


Cirus Sumika, CEO of Sumic IT Solutions


Emmanuel Twesigye, CEO and co-founder of Everlend.

Users trickle in. Do they stay? If yes, you push to 1,000, then more—four years deep, chasing scale. If not, you relaunch. And relaunch. Just like Rocket health, NUMIDA and Safe Boda.

Then, just as things smooth out, a bigger hurdle looms—breaking into global markets. You've built the foundation, but cracking international networks? That's where most local start-ups stall.

### The missing link

Mentorship fuels start-up ecosystems, but in Uganda, it's underdeveloped. Incubators like Outbox, Innovation Village, and Makerere's Innovation Center offer programs, but their reach is limited.

The biggest gap? A structured network linking seasoned entrepreneurs, investors, and industry experts with early-stage founders.

Startups—especially in fintech, agritech, and healthtech—struggle to find mentors who've scaled businesses. Instead, they rely on hit-or-miss informal networks, lacking strategic guidance.

Even when mentorship exists, it's of-

ups struggle with brand credibility overseas. Without an international presence, attracting investors, partners, and customers is tough.

A couple of start-ups under JICA's ICT Industry Promotion (UJ-Connect), Entrepreneurship Support and set-up Ecosystem Strengthening Advisory propose some solutions:

Global start-up programs – Connecting Ugandan founders with foreign investors and partners, leveraging digital platforms to expand reach.

Policy reforms – Streamlining trade agreements and regulatory barriers to ease cross-border expansion.

The idea? Stronger mentorship and global exposure can make Uganda's start-up ecosystem globally competitive.

### Real-world struggles

Cirus Sumika, founder and CEO of Sumic IT Solutions, knows the challenge firsthand. His company builds tech solutions for SMEs—software development, IT consultancy, mobile apps, and e-commerce platforms.

"The biggest challenge?" he says. "Find-

cess. The solutions exist, but the missing link is bridging local innovation to global opportunities.

Projects like UJ-Connect, a collaboration between JICA and the Ministry of ICT & National Guidance, are now playing a crucial role in nurturing Uganda's tech ecosystem.

The four-year initiative focuses on: policy support for ICT talent development, training & mentorship for young tech entrepreneurs and business matching between Ugandan and Japanese companies.

Last year, the mentorship program rewarded top start-ups with up to $5,000 in cash prizes. But the real prize? A ticket to GITEX Global, Dubai's massive tech expo where start-ups meet investors from around the world. Everlend, the overall winner, seized this golden opportunity.

and robots, Ugandan start-ups innovate with purpose—solving real, local challenges where impact matters most.

"We lack the market for advanced tech," Twesigye notes. Even in agriculture, convincing farmers to use a mobile app for seed orders is tough—they'd rather walk long distances to buy supplies.

Despite securing 25+ investor meetings at GITEX, Twesigye faced a familiar challenge: "They knew Kenya, but not Uganda. That's our real hurdle—we need to sell Uganda to the world."

Still, he's unfazed by funding struggles. "Money follows demand," he says. "Build something people want, and investors will come."

### Market access

Sumika stresses that market access—not financing—is the real challenge for local innovators.

"A company survives on sales. Without a sustainable market, growth is impossible," he explains. Even mobile apps struggle due to low smartphone adoption.

The key? Sensitization. "Start-ups like mine offer tech

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Even when mentorship exists, it's often short-lived—focused on pitch training rather than long-term business growth. As programs fade, founders are left to navigate challenges alone.

## What's the fix?

Structured, industry-specific mentorship beyond competitions, incentivized models where seasoned entrepreneurs are rewarded for coaching new founders and stronger corporate-Start-up ties, with established businesses mentoring and sharing resources.

Without these, mentorship remains Uganda's weak link—one the start-up ecosystem can't afford to ignore.

## The market barrier

But mentorship alone won't cut it— Ugandan start-ups need markets to scale. Low local adoption and tough cross-border access stall growth.

In addition, regulatory hurdles, high costs, and fierce competition make expansion even harder. Yet, global markets hold the key. The question is: how to break through?

Insights from Japan International Cooperation Agency's (JICA) start-up support project highlight major roadblocks:

Limited investor networks – Most Ugandan start-ups rely on local angels and small grants, rarely enough for serious growth. Without international backing, scaling beyond Uganda is an uphill battle.

Weak global visibility – Ugandan start-

ease cross-border expansion.

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"The biggest challenge?" he says. "Finding customers willing to pay the true cost of our services."

For instance, developing a single Android app costs around $8,000, but few clients can afford it. Without access to bigger markets, scaling is difficult.

"Uganda isn't known for tech," Sumika notes. "Our developers need global exposure—connections that help us refine prototypes, secure partnerships, funding, and talent."

Emmanuel Twesigye, CEO and co-founder of Everlend, faces a similar battle. His start-up helps farmer cooperatives access climate-resilient seeds on credit, repaying later with harvested produce. Initially, Everlend provided cash credit—but farmers often diverted funds elsewhere and defaulted.

"We pivoted to giving farmers seeds on credit instead," Twesigye explains. "It was a new model we were piloting."

## The role of accelerators

During this transition, Everlend joined the mentorship program under the ICT Industry Promotion project, which focuses on investor readiness, business strategy, and product-market fit—critical knowledge for start-ups navigating Uganda's tough ecosystem.

"But the real surprise?" Twesigye adds. "There were awards at the end of the program."

Stories like Sumika's and Twesigye's underscore Uganda's biggest start-up bottlenecks: mentorship and market ac-

policy support for ICT talent development, training & mentorship for young tech entrepreneurs and business matching between Ugandan and Japanese companies.

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## Lessons

Thanks to UJ-Connect and GITEX, Everlend now has global opportunities.

"Our exposure in Dubai opened doors to the UAE market," says Twesigye. "We've secured partnerships, including with NinjaCut, a major supplier linked to Walmart and Carrefour."

Dubai was an eye-opener. "Their investor-friendly ecosystem is light years ahead. Regulations favour startups, and the tech scene is on another level," he observes.

But while Dubai invests in flying cars

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"A company survives on sales. Without a sustainable market, growth is impossible," he explains. Even mobile apps struggle due to low smartphone adoption.

The key? Sensitization. "Start-ups like mine offer tech solutions to daily problems, but until we bridge the awareness gap, our potential remains untapped."

## New partnerships and opportunities

Bootstrap if possible. "First, refine your product— everything else can wait."

Start-ups should get their house in order: Build a solid product, acquire paying customers, keep financial records clean and stay compliant with URA, NSSF, and UNBS (if selling a product).

"Once these foundations are set, attracting investors becomes much easier."

Kolaborate, another beneficiary of the UJ-Connect program, matches young East Africans to global jobs by aggregating, reskilling, and vetting tech talent for



Ugandan start-ups and government officials visiting Japan

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Pearl D. Gakazi, founder at Kolaborate

markets in the US and Japan.

Co-founder Pearl D. Gakazi says UJ-Connect fills a crucial gap: "It gives start-ups global exposure, investor networks, and credibility—unlocking opportunities previously out of reach."

## The Japanese influence

For Gakazi, a key takeaway from collaboration with the Japanese company was attention to detail.

Her partner, Japan AI Consulting, embodied clarity, consistency, and politeness—but, she warns, "Their politeness isn't a lack of seriousness."

She also stresses Uganda's need for stronger project management. "We think we're doing fine—until we stress-test our processes against global standards." This insight helped her secure a major German project.

From the collaboration, she learned timely communication, project management tools, and process automation—boosting efficiency, reducing manual work, and driving productivity.

## UJ-Connect and Start-up Ecosystem Strengthening

JICA backs Ugandan start-ups through two major programs: ICT Industry Promotion Project (UJ-Connect) and Entre-


Ugandan startups participating in recently concluded GITEX Global in Dubai

in solving industry challenges.

Ugandan ecosystem can learn from this, treating start-ups as collaborators, not competition. By tapping into regional exposure, Ugandan start-ups can access bigger markets, forge cross-border collaborations, and build tech-driven solutions that cater to shared challenges across the region.

The key is policy and ecosystem support: Uganda needs more opportunities for start-ups to engage regionally through accelerators, expos, and government-led initiatives fostering cross-border collaborations.

As the EAC integrates economically, there's a huge opportunity for Ugandan start-ups to scale regionally, creating a vibrant, interconnected ecosystem that extends beyond Uganda's borders.

Mbabazi emphasizes the need for coordinated growth from all ecosystem play-


Juliet Lucima Akot, Head of Legal and Investor Relations at Flow Global

try problems, not threats.

## Government support

Recognizing the importance of both

Upcoming events like the GITEX Africa 2025 Expo in Morocco and Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) 2025 in Tokyo provide Ugandan start-ups opportunities to pitch to global investors, enhancing market access and technology transfer.

The ICT Ministry also developed the Uganda ICT IP Guidelines, which protect intellectual property (IP)—a critical asset for start-ups aiming for international markets. These efforts bolster global competitiveness by securing innovations.

Nakyejwe also points out that Uganda's participation in international events like GITEX Dubai Expo 2024 and the Uganda Japan Study Tours by JICA has provided valuable exposure, facilitating business connections that open doors to partnerships and investments.

## Future steps

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In partnership with Uganda's ICT and Trade Ministries, JICA supports: Policy & human resource development, business mentorship & accelerationand Uganda-Japan business matchmaking.

The focus? Scaling start-ups through international exposure, partnerships, and investment opportunities.

JICA Program Officer Ruth Mbabazi sees massive potential: "Uganda can attract millions in investment—if positioned right."

But for real growth, she stresses government action: Better policies & tax incentives, stronger infrastructure and branding Uganda as an investment hotspot.

## Regional exposure

Uganda's start-up scene is full of potential, but regional exposure is where it could truly thrive.

Currently, local innovators are often stuck within Uganda's borders, where opportunities are limited and scaling beyond feels distant.

But the real magic happens when start-ups expand into regional markets, like the East African Community (EAC), which offers a larger, more diverse customer base and greater demand for tech solutions.

Kenya is a great example. It's not just a neighbor; it has a start-up ecosystem where giants like Safaricom and Microsoft actively support startups, running accelerators and treating them as partners

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Mbabazi emphasizes the need for coordinated growth from all ecosystem players: "Everyone must do their part to ensure sustainable growth."

## Financing hurdles

Despite the government's efforts in infrastructure and talent development, capital remains a major challenge for start-ups.

Juliet Lucima Akot, Head of Legal and Investor Relations at Flow Global, a fintech company, highlights access to finance as a significant barrier.

Traditional banks, focused on collateral-based financing, often don't understand local tech startups' business models, leaving innovators struggling to secure funding.

Many turn to impact investors abroad, but these investors are scarce, and the funding often comes in foreign currencies (like US dollars), exposing start-ups to forex risks. Akot also notes that Uganda lacks hedging solutions, further increasing the cost of capital. During her visit to Japan, Akot witnessed that majority of start-ups there are nurtured from universities. The University of Tokyo's Open Innovation Institute bridges academia, government, and the private sector, ensuring ideas don't die as research papers but evolve into funded ventures, initial public offers, or acquisitions.

Kenya offers yet another lesson. At Kenya Innovation Week, Akot saw how industry giants—Safaricom, Microsoft, and Kenya Airways—run accelerators, treating start-ups as partners for their indus-



Juliet Lucima Akot, Head of Legal and Investor Relations at Flow Global

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## Government support

Recognizing the importance of both software and hardware for scalable solutions, the Uganda Government is focused on creating an environment where innovation can thrive.

A key initiative is the National ICT Innovation Hub at Nakawa, which provides state-of-the-art facilities, high-speed internet, and collaborative spaces, helping start-ups reduce operational costs.

The Hub also offers Incubation and Acceleration Programs, mentorship, and business development support, linking start-ups to industry networks.

The Ministry's Digital Skills and Training initiatives, like the Data Ladies, Leap Program, and ICT Bootcamp, have impacted over 6,000 individuals.

To extend these opportunities beyond Kampala, regional innovation hubs at Kabale University, Soroti University, and Muni University are enabling local innovators to develop region-specific solutions, fostering nationwide innovation. A start-up policy is also under formulation to compound these aforementioned.

The National Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Policy seeks to support tech startups, particularly in BPO and innovation, by developing tax incentives that ease financial pressures and allow for reinvestment in growth.

Shirley Gladys Nakyejwe, Senior ICT Officer & Intellectual Property Management Specialist at the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance, highlights that the Ministry is working with international partners to improve venture capital access.

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## Future steps

The Ministry of ICT and National Guidance acknowledges that while progress has been made, there is still work to do to fully mature Uganda's start-up ecosystem.

Increased awareness and sensitization are crucial. By ensuring start-ups understand policies like the National BPO Policy and the Uganda ICT IP Guidelines, the government believes innovators can leverage these resources for growth and international success.

Additionally, there's a push to establish more platforms—such as trade missions and partnerships with global tech accelerators—to connect Ugandan start-ups with international investors and customers.

Strengthening start-up capacity is also a priority, with a focus on training in international market standards, export regulations, and cross-border strategies to prepare start-ups for global competition.

Uganda's start-up ecosystem is on the brink of a major transformation, powered by strategic policies, international partnerships, and a rising pool of talented innovators. With government support through infrastructure, mentorship, and market access initiatives, Uganda's start-ups are ready to scale globally.

For this potential to be realized, ongoing efforts in awareness, capacity building, and international collaboration are crucial. Ugandan start-ups have the ideas; with the right mentorship and exposure, they could conquer the world.

# The EastAfrican

# No respite in Congo despite fresh meeting

**Rwanda and Congolese leaders met in Doha on the back of US pressure but their pledges for ceasefire fell flat as M23 took another town, signalling continued fighting.    | P.4-5**

Members of the M23 rebel group, shown here supervising the exit of mercenary troops in the streets of Goma amid conflict between them and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Picture: Reuters

## Madam President

Tanzania President Samia Suluhu Hassan congratulates Namibia President Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah after her swearing in at State House, Windhoek, on March 21. Nandi-Ndaitwah won the elections last year, becoming the first woman to be elected president of Namibia. Picture: Pool/Courtesy

## Cooking gas tariff blows off in Arusha

Kenya fails to convince the region of the wisdom to tax imported cylinders | P10

## Counter-terrorism efforts off to new hurdles

Somalia scrambles agencies to push back al Shabaab after latest attacks | P5