



**NATIONAL
BUILDING
REVIEW
BOARD**

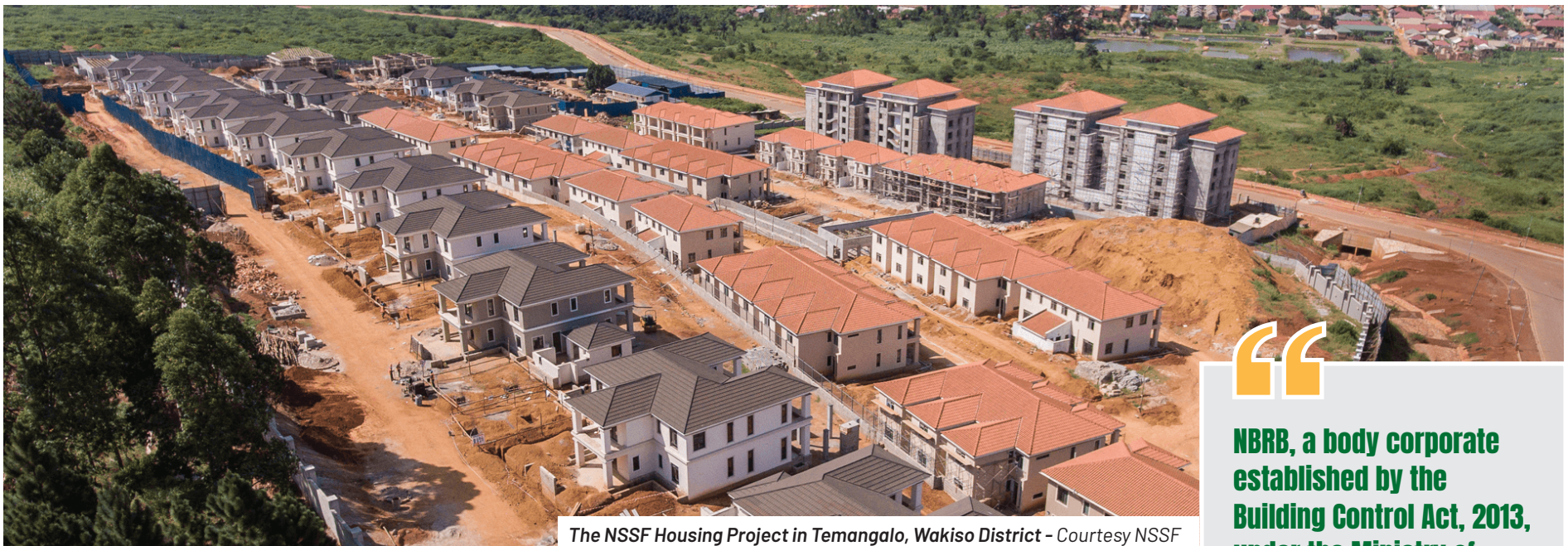
Safe Building, Better Living

The Building Guide

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The 'Amended Building Law': What it means for you!



The NSSF Housing Project in Temangalo, Wakiso District - Courtesy NSSF



NBRB, a body corporate established by the Building Control Act, 2013, under the Ministry of Works and Transport, was mandated to oversee and regulate Uganda's built environment."

The Building Control (Amendment) Act 2026: What it means for you?

By Shafic Kiyaga & Joan Atukei - NBRB

When the Building Control (Amendment) Act 2026 took effect on March 19, many people heard one message and stopped there. Then came a whirlwind of concerns which only stirred fear.

For many non-compliant property owners, one fear tops the list. Will my building be demolished?

Another concern follows fast. What is the cost of the permits? Then comes a third question. What happens if I built in earlier years but did not fully comply with the provisions of the law?

Yet the aim of the law is far from such fear. Read in plain English, the law does not announce a war on homeowners or property owners. It pushes the sector towards order.

Uganda wants safer buildings and stronger enforcement action against unsafe work/structures. This is a public safety law. It is also a public service law.

This is not a brand-new burden

Building control in Uganda did not start in 2026. The subject traces formal regulation of the sector back to the colonial Public Health Act of 1935.

In 2013, the Building Control Act, Cap. 136, which harmonised the scattered laws under one framework, was enacted, now operationalised by the National Building Code, 2019 and the Building Control Regulations, 2020.

The National Building Review Board (NBRB), a body corporate established by the Building Control Act, 2013, under the Ministry of Works and Transport, was also established by the Act and mandated to oversee and regulate Uganda's built environment. The Act also established Building Committees (BC) at every district and urban authority.

To date, all 177 local governments have already been trained and audited for full compliance of the Building Control process within the national legal framework. Fast forward to 2026, a few aspects of the law have been amended. So, the public should not treat the amendment as a sudden trap. The broader system has existed for years. The amendment updates and strengthens it.

What are the major changes?

The Building Control (Amendment) Act 2026 redefines the composition and powers of the NBRB and BCs, and

regulates the use of unconventional construction technologies.

The biggest institutional shift directs that the Board shall now consist of nine (09) members, reducing its composition from 16 members.

These shall include: One representative of the Ministry of Works and Transport, one representative of the ministry responsible for gender, one representative of the ministry responsible for lands, one representative of the ministry responsible for local government, one representative from the Attorney General's Chambers, one representative of engineers, one representative of architects, one representative of physical planners and one representative of surveyors.

Building Committees (BC) at the district, city and urban councils shall now consist of five officers responsible for engineering, physical planning, health, architecture and environment. Eliminating political leadership and emphasizing membership by technical officers.

For you, this matters because leaner technical structures often mean clearer responsibility. It also

introduces a complaints resolution mechanism with the accounting officer for building-related offences.

What this means for you at home or on-site

For a Ugandan who is currently building or is planning on starting construction for a home or any development, the building control process has always provided a clear path. You need approved plans from a BC in your area, and you need the right professionals where the project class requires them.

Therefore, for all developers, the cheaper route is compliance from the start. That is not red tape for its own sake. It protects your investment, protects your family, the public and property.

The process starts before the first bag of cement reaches the site by securing a building permit. The entire process has been made easier through the Building Industry Management System (BIMS), an online system that



Construction without a building permit draws a fine of two currency points for every square metre of built-up area under section 33(1). Use of a prohibited method or material draws 48 currency points ..."

helps ease tracking of the application process.

The developer is required to submit an application through BIMS and attach the required drawings for the project. Where the class of building requires professional input, registered professionals must take responsibility for the design and supervision. BIMS also handles payment of building control fees and scheduling of inspections.

After submission, the Building Committee in the district, city or urban authority reviews the application. The Committee checks whether the plans meet the Building Control Act, the National Building Code and related regulations.

If more information is needed, the applicant is asked to provide it. If the plans meet the requirements, the Committee issues a building permit. During construction, the developer presents the site for inspection so officers can confirm that the approved plans match the work on the ground.

An occupation permit comes at the end of the project. Once construction is complete, the owner applies for permission to occupy the building. The completed structure is then inspected to confirm safety, compliance and readiness for use. BCs can also issue temporary permits for unfinished constructions.

In simple terms, the building permit allows you to build. The occupation permit confirms that the finished

building is ready for public use.

What if approvals delay?

One of the strongest parts of the amendment is simple. If officials delay, you now get a route for redress at first instance.

Where a Building Committee fails to decide a building permit application within the required time, you first complain to the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) in a district or the Town

Clerk in an urban council. Once such a complaint lands, the local accounting officer directs the committee to decide no later than 30 days. If the delay continues, you appeal to the Board.

The law gives a similar ladder for occupation permits. First complaint at the local level. Then a directive. If no decision follows within 14 days, appeal to the Board.

For developers, this means less guesswork. For homeowners, it means less frustration. For professionals, it means a clearer process for project planning and client advice.

Are permits too expensive?

Permit cost is a real concern, especially for small builders. The first point to understand is that fees are not one flat charge for everyone. Fees depend on the building's size, location, and class.

A Class A building in a city costs UGX 2,200 per square metre, while a Class C building in a city carries a flat fee of Shs 500,000. There are also set parameters for inspection and occupation permits.

That means the honest question is not whether a permit is "expensive" in the abstract. The real question is what class of building you are putting up, where it sits, and what stage your project has reached.

Yet within the pages of the act, there lies a hard market message: non-compliance costs more. For example,

construction without a building permit draws a fine of two currency points for every square metre of built-up area under section 33(1).

Use of a prohibited method or material draws 48 currency points per square metre of area built using such method or material. Negligence leading to injury, death, or destruction of property now attracts up to 500 currency points or imprisonment for up to 12 years, or both.

What about buildings already outside compliance

This is where public anxiety sits. The amendment does not shut the door on correction. If your building went up without full compliance in earlier years, the smart step is early engagement so as to regularise the building operations.

In simple terms, those with building operations that are still active and non-compliant should seek to acquire a building permit from their area Building Committee.

For completed buildings, including those constructed before the coming into force of the act, you ought to apply for an occupation permit from the area Building Committee.

Engage professionals to guide you on the necessary processes.

Does the law mean demolitions are coming?

The short answer is that the amendment is not a blanket demolition order. In fact, section 40 and section 28A give BCs room to order remedial action where a building is unsafe, in disrepair, dilapidated, or showing signs of such failure. Demolition sits in the law, but remedial action sits there too.

The power to demolish is based on strict parameters under the building control regulations, which prevent it from being abused by the implementers.

Therefore, the public should read the provisions of the law for what they are. They are safety tools and not a blanket demolition programme announced against every building. The smarter reading

of the law is this. Unsafe work must stop. Dangerous buildings must be addressed. Non-compliance must be corrected.

What you should do now

If you plan to build, start with the permit. If you already hold a permit, check the dates and conditions. If your project needs registered professionals, engage them early. If your building records are incomplete, fix that gap now.

If your property went up without full compliance, step forward and regularise where the law provides room.

Do not wait for a notice. Use BIMS. Speak to your Building Committee. Ask questions before work starts or before work continues.

The public message from NBRB should be heard in that spirit. The amendment is not there to punish honest effort. It is there to reduce unsafe construction, shorten confusion, and protect life, property, and investment.

Safe building is cheaper than correction after failure. Lawful building is safer than guesswork. Early compliance is better than late conflict. That is what the amendment means to you.

KEY AMENDMENTS TO THE BUILDING CONTROL ACT, 2026

- The Act reduces the Board's membership from 16 to 9 members to improve corporate governance, while retaining representation from key ministries, the Attorney General's chambers, and professional bodies in engineering, architecture, physical planning and surveying.
- The Act expands the Board's mandate to hear and resolve complaints from any person, Building Control Officer, or Building Committee on matters relating to buildings or building operations.
- The Board can now issue stop or evacuation orders where a Building Committee fails to act on its recommendations and building safety is at risk.
- The Board now has broader enforcement powers, including issuing express penalties for strict liability offenses, accessing building sites, procedural guidance to Building Committees, reporting building-related matters to the police, and referring complaints of professional misconduct to the relevant professional bodies for action.
- The Act reduces Building Committee membership from 11 to 5 members, creates the positions of Chairperson and Secretary, and provides that members shall be appointed by the relevant Local Authority Accounting Officers (CAO for districts or Town Clerk for urban councils). These Accounting Officers will no longer sit on the committees, rather act as first instance complaints resolution mechanism.
- The amendment gives Building Committees stronger enforcement powers, including the authority to demolish or order evacuation of buildings constructed contrary to the Act and regulations.
- The Amendment promotes innovation by creating a formal pathway for unconventional building methods, materials and technologies to be assessed, approved, gazetted, and safely adopted for public use.
- The Amendment strengthens penalties for non-compliance with building standards, including building without permits, using prohibited methods, or causing accidents, with higher fines, penalties based on built-up area, and longer imprisonment terms for serious offences.
- Accidents inside completed buildings now carry the same liability as construction site accidents. The fine ceiling rises to 500 currency points. If a building you own, design, or build injures or kills someone through negligence, the law now reaches you regardless of whether construction had ended.

Uganda bets on science to prevent disasters as SERENE project takes shape

By Dr. Morris Oleng – Senior Research Officer, NBRB

Normally, earthquakes are not what most people worry about. Traffic jams, rent, flooding after heavy rain, and the ever-rising skyline dominate conversation. Yet beneath that skyline lies a quieter risk, one that rarely makes headlines until something goes wrong. It is this mix of visible and invisible threats that Uganda is now beginning to confront more deliberately.

On April 16, 2026, government launched the Scientific Evidence for Risk Engineering, Norms and Education (SERENE) Project, a partnership between the National Building Review Board (NBRB) and the Global Earthquake Model Foundation. Beyond the ceremonial speeches, the launch signalled a deeper shift in thinking, from reacting to disasters after lives and property have been lost, to anticipating risk before tragedy strikes.

“Uganda must transition from reactive disaster response to proactive, science-led risk reduction and management,” Gen. Katumba Wamala, former Minister of Works and Transport said during the launch. “If we build safely today, we secure Uganda’s tomorrow.”

For many Ugandans, the disasters they encounter are more immediate than earthquakes. Seasonal floods routinely cut off communities and destroy livelihoods. Fires in congested urban settlements spread rapidly through poorly planned neighbourhoods. Landslides in mountainous districts continue to bury homes and displace families. Building collapses linked to poor construction standards have exposed dangerous weaknesses in the country’s fast-growing urban landscape.



Uganda must transition from reactive disaster response to proactive, science-led risk reduction and management,”

Gen. Katumba Wamala

The SERENE Project aims to close that gap.

According to Helen Crowley, GEM’s General Secretary, the initiative will support the development of Uganda’s first national seismic hazard map, identify vulnerable buildings and infrastructure, and generate a seismic risk map capable of estimating potential economic losses from future earthquakes.

While the focus is seismic, the implications stretch much further. In practical terms, the project represents a move away from guesswork. Whether dealing with earthquakes, floods, fires or landslides, understanding where risks are highest and which communities and structures are most vulnerable is critical to preventing catastrophe.

“This is not simply the launch of a project,” Crowley said during the launch. “It is the start of a long-term effort to strengthen the evidence, institutions and practice needed for safer development in Uganda.”

Uganda’s geography makes the issue difficult to ignore. The country sits between the two active arms of the East African Rift System, one of the world’s most seismically active continental regions. Earthquakes

are not hypothetical. They are part of Uganda’s history.

The 1966 Toro earthquake claimed 160 lives, injured thousands and destroyed more than 7,000 homes. The 1994 Kisomoro earthquake caused losses estimated at millions of dollars. Even the 2016 Bukoba earthquake in neighbouring Tanzania was strongly felt across parts of Uganda, exposing the regional nature of seismic risk.

Other disasters have left equally painful scars. The 2010 Bududa landslide buried entire communities. Floods in Bundibugyo, Mbale and Kasese have repeatedly displaced families and claimed lives. School fires, including the 2008 Buddo Junior School fire, shocked the nation and raised difficult questions about safety standards and enforcement.



Former Minister of Works and Transport, Hon. Gen. Edward Katumba-Wamala signs the official artistic impression that symbolises the SERENE Project during the launch of the project in Kampala.

Officials argue that rapid urbanisation is increasing exposure to such risks. More Ugandans are living and working in multi-storey buildings, often constructed in flood-prone or unstable areas. At the same time, concerns over substandard construction continue to grow.

For government, the challenge is no longer simply responding to disasters after they occur. The focus is shifting toward preventing ordinary hazards from becoming national tragedies.

The launch of SERENE also comes against the backdrop of directives issued by President Yoweri Museveni calling for stricter building inspections, stronger enforcement of standards and mandatory earthquake-resistant construction across the country. Officials say the project provides the scientific tools needed to turn those directives into measurable action.

Important to note is SERENE’s emphasis on local relevance. Rather than applying generic international models, the project will combine global scientific expertise with Ugandan data and local technical knowledge. Engineers, planners, regulators and researchers will receive training in hazard modelling, exposure mapping and risk assessment, helping build

expertise that remains within Uganda long after the project itself ends.

The initiative is also expected to support the revision of Uganda’s seismic design code, which officials say has not kept pace with the country’s changing urban realities over the last decades.

For the construction sector, the implications could be significant. Better risk data could influence where buildings are approved, how infrastructure is designed and how local governments manage development in high-risk areas. In flood-prone communities, it could improve drainage planning and building elevation standards. In landslide-prone districts, it could shape decisions about settlement and construction. In densely populated urban areas, it could strengthen fire safety planning and emergency preparedness.

If the ambitions of SERENE are realised, Uganda’s approach to disasters whether earthquakes, floods, fires or landslides could begin to change fundamentally. Not simply reacting when destruction has already occurred, but identifying danger early enough to reduce its impact.

And in a country building as fast as Uganda, that shift could make all the difference.

The scourge of lightning strikes in Uganda

By Eng. Lubega Isaac Sempogo and Eng. Picho Jerry

Lightning strikes are emerging as a silent but deadly threat across Uganda, claiming lives, injuring dozens, and exposing critical gaps in safety infrastructure, particularly in schools and rural communities.

Lightning, a powerful electrostatic discharge occurring within the atmosphere, can heat the air to temperatures as high as 30,000°C, hotter than the surface of the sun. While most lightning occurs within clouds, it is cloud-to-ground strikes that pose the greatest danger, often with devastating consequences.

In recent years, Uganda has witnessed a worrying increase in lightning-related incidents, especially during the rainy seasons of March to May and September to November. The Northern, Western, and West Nile regions have been among the hardest hit.

In February this year, two pupils were killed when lightning struck St. Mary's Primary School in Bushenyi District. Just months earlier, in November 2025, another pupil died and five others were severely injured at St. Augustine Nursery and Primary School in Buliisa District after a similar incident.

One of the deadliest tragedies occurred in November 2024, when lightning struck a church at Palabek refugee settlement in Lamwo District, killing 14 people, most of them children and injuring 34 others. Earlier that year, dozens of pupils in Nebbi District were struck while playing football, while separate incidents in Dokolo, Kisoro, and Iganga districts left multiple fatalities.

These cases are not isolated. In August 2020, ten children were killed in Arua City after seeking shelter during a storm, while in February 2020, lightning killed four

endangered mountain gorillas in Mgahinga National Park.

Experts say several factors are contributing to the rising death toll. Chief among them is the lack of lightning protection systems in many buildings, particularly older schools, places of worship, and homes in rural areas.

"Most structures in high-risk areas are simply not protected," an electrical



Most structures in high-risk areas are simply not protected," an electrical safety expert noted. "Even where systems exist, they are often poorly maintained or non-functional."

safety expert noted. "Even where systems exist, they are often poorly maintained or non-functional."

Environmental degradation is also playing a role. The cutting down of trees which are natural lightning interceptors has increased exposure in many communities. Additionally, Uganda's geography, including high-altitude regions and proximity to large water bodies, makes certain areas more prone to intense thunderstorms.

Uganda's National Building Code (2020) requires that all public buildings including schools, hospitals, churches, and halls be equipped with lightning protection systems. These systems typically include lightning rods, down conductors, grounding systems, and surge protection devices



designed to safely channel electrical energy into the earth.

However, enforcement remains weak, and cost is a significant barrier. Installing a lightning protection system can cost

approximately UGX 7 million for a single-storey structure and up to UGX 15 million for multi-level buildings, figures that are out of reach for many institutions.

To address this challenge, experts are promoting low-cost alternatives. These include the use of locally available materials such as rice husks and natural salts to improve grounding systems, reducing costs by about UGX 1 million. In some rural settings, properly managed trees are also being considered as natural lightning arresters, though they must be carefully positioned to avoid additional risks.

As lightning strikes continue to claim lives, stakeholders are calling for urgent action. Increased investment in protection systems, stricter enforcement of building regulations, and greater public awareness are seen as critical steps in reducing the risk.

For many Ugandans, particularly schoolchildren, the danger is real and immediate. Without decisive intervention, lightning will remain an unpredictable force, turning ordinary rainy days into moments of tragedy.

The Scourge of Lightning

The rainy seasons of March to May and September to November are the most dangerous periods.

For many Ugandans, particularly schoolchildren. The danger arrives without warning, turning ordinary rainy days into moments of tragedy. Two pupils were killed when lightning struck St. Mary's Primary School in Bushenyi District.

Ten children died in Arua City in August 2020 after seeking shelter during a storm. Lightning will remain an unpredictable force. Whether the buildings people shelter in protect them or expose them is unpredictable. That is a choice made through regulation, investment, and enforcement. Uganda's building framework provides the foundation. Applying it consistently is what saves lives.



Eng. Flavia Gutto Bwire, Executive Secretary, NBRB

NBRB championing Uganda's safe and sustainable built environment

By Herbert Zziwa – Manager Communications, NBRB

Over the last 40 years under the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government, Uganda's building and construction sector has undergone a major transformation. What was once dominated by traditional architecture rooted in indigenous practices has steadily evolved into a modern, regulated industry guided by laws, policies and building codes.

This transition has been driven by changes in governance, advances in technology, rapid population growth, increased urbanisation and sustained economic development. As towns and cities expanded, the need for a structured system to regulate construction and guarantee public safety became more urgent.

It was against this background that Parliament enacted the Building Control (Amendment) Act 2026, a law aimed at promoting planned, decent and safe building structures developed in harmony with the environment.

The Act also established the National Building Review Board (NBRB) to oversee and regulate Uganda's built environment.

Since its establishment in October 2018, the NBRB, guided by its strategic plan, vision, mission and core values, has registered significant milestones in improving safety, standards and compliance in the construction sector.

Digitising building control

One of the Board's most notable achievements has been the automation of building control processes through the Building Industry Management System (BIMS). This national e-permitting and compliance platform has transformed how building approvals and inspections are handled.

Through BIMS, developers can apply for building and occupation permits, engage registered professionals, schedule routine inspections and pay building control fees-all through a single digital platform.

To improve efficiency and accountability, the system is integrated with key government agencies, including the Uganda Revenue Authority for payment of building fees, the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development for land verification, and the Uganda Registration Services Bureau for verification of registered companies.

BIMS has also been integrated with the Integrated Revenue Administration System (IRAS), developed by the Ministry of Local Government through the Local Government Finance Commission, to strengthen revenue collection at the local government level.

Since 2021, the system has generated Non-Tax Revenue, collected from building permits, occupation permits, notices of commencement and appeals.

Strengthening compliance

Beyond automation, the NBRB has focused on strengthening compliance with the building regulatory framework. Through its Compliance Department, the Board has developed guidelines, checklists and statutory instruments to guide enforcement.

In a ground-breaking first-of-its-kind exercise, the NBRB has conducted comprehensive nationwide monitoring of building developments. The monitoring assessed compliance with the National Building

Code 2019, safety standards, provisions for persons with disabilities, approval of drawings, involvement of registered professionals and the availability of valid permits at construction sites.

So far, 29,375 buildings across the country have been monitored, providing critical data to inform policy, enforcement and planning.

Raising standards in construction

Before the creation of the NBRB, Uganda lacked comprehensive standards to regulate building operations. Since then, key legal and regulatory instruments have been developed, including the Building Control Regulations 2020, Building Control (Fees) Regulations 2020, Building Control (Appeal Procedure) Regulations 2021, and the National Building Code 2019.

The Board has also developed and distributed a Building Control Officer's Handbook to guide officers in enforcing standards consistently across the country. Capacity building has been another priority.

All 177 local governments (100%) have been audited for full compliance of their building control processes with the national legal framework. Significant gaps were uncovered and addressed through targeted, actionable recommendations for enhanced performance.

These committees are responsible for ensuring the Act is complied with, scrutinising and approving building plans, issuing permits, ensuring accessibility for persons with disabilities and reviewing applications for minor building works. In addition, the Board has trained Accounting Officers, Building Control Officers, School Inspectors and District Education Officers on building control matters.

Investigating building incidents

The NBRB is mandated to investigate building-related accidents, incidents, complaints and appeals to establish

their causes, promote accountability and improve safety within Uganda's built environment. Since its establishment, the Board has investigated several building-related incidents, generating valuable evidence to guide policy, enforcement and public safety interventions.

During FY 2025/26 alone, the Investigations Department registered significant achievements in fulfilling this mandate. A total of 34 building-related incidents were sanctioned for investigation, comprising 22 fire outbreaks, nine building collapses, two explosions and one accident classified under other causes.

Findings from the investigations revealed that building collapses were largely attributed to poor supervision of construction works, use of substandard materials, inadequate structural designs, foundation failures, engagement of unqualified personnel and non-compliance with building regulations.

Fire incidents were predominantly linked to human negligence, recklessness, arson, defective electrical installations and inadequate fire safety measures. These findings continue to inform stakeholder engagement, enforcement actions and policy improvements aimed at reducing future incidents.

To strengthen its investigative capability, the Board invested in modern technologies and equipment to support scientific, evidence-based investigations. A major milestone was the acquisition of a Mobile Laboratory Unit (MLU), which enables on-site testing and analysis of construction materials and structural elements, thereby reducing turnaround times for investigations and improving the quality of technical findings.

The Board also procured advanced engineering software to support forensic analysis, structural assessment, modelling and preparation of investigation reports. In addition, NBRB enhanced its digital investigation capacity through the acquisition of

3D scanning technologies and related digital tools for accurate documentation, reconstruction and analysis of accident scenes. These technologies enable investigators to capture detailed digital records of collapsed structures, fire-damaged buildings and other incident scenes, preserving critical evidence and strengthening investigative outcomes.

Further efforts were made to acquire drone technology to support aerial inspections, site mapping and collection of visual evidence, particularly in inaccessible or high-risk locations. The findings and recommendations arising from these investigations are regularly shared with stakeholders, including the Uganda Police Force, local governments, building committees, developers and construction professionals, to promote safer construction practices and prevent future incidents. The Board also continues to hear and determine appeals from persons aggrieved by decisions of Building Committees, thereby strengthening fairness, accountability and public confidence in Uganda's building control system.

A safer future for Uganda's built environment

The establishment of the National Building Review Board has marked a turning point in Uganda's efforts to create a safe, orderly and sustainable built environment. Through strong legislation, institutional reforms and digital innovation, the Board has transformed building control from a fragmented and largely manual system into one that is transparent, efficient and accountable.

As Uganda continues to urbanise and invest in infrastructure, the role of the NBRB remains critical. By enforcing standards, building capacity and working closely with stakeholders, the Board is helping to safeguard lives, protect property and ensure that development across the country supports national growth and improves the quality of life for all Ugandans.

Uganda gears up for the State of the Building Sector Conference 2026



An aerial view of Gulu City.

The conference will bring together key stakeholders to showcase best practices and inspire continuous improvement in building control, safety, and urban resilience.

By Faith Kukundakwe – NBRB Communications Dept.

A cloud of dust rises into the air as construction workers hurriedly mix cement beside a half-finished building in Kakoba division, Mbarara City. Wheelbarrows filled with wet concrete weave through a maze of bricks, timber and cement bags while a foreman shouts instructions over the roar of a concrete mixer. The pace is relentless.

For Byamukama Alphonse a senior six leaver hauling materials under the scorching sun, the rising structure represents more than steel and concrete. It is a source of livelihood, tuition for university, hope and survival. For the property owner, it is an investment. For future occupants, it will become a workplace, or a shopping centre.

But for Mbarara City authorities, every construction site raises an important question about its safety. Like Mbarara, rapid urban growth has transformed many towns across the country. From high-rise buildings in Kampala to expanding cities in Gulu, Arua and Jinja, construction has become a visible sign of economic progress and modernisation.

Yet beyond the bricks and concrete lies growing concern over building safety,

weak compliance with standards and gaps in regulation. Recurring incidents of collapsing buildings such as the recent collapse in Namakwekwe village in Mbale City which claimed one life have exposed dangerous weaknesses in the sector, prompting renewed calls for stronger enforcement and accountability.

The growing concern has pushed the National Building Review Board (NBRB) to convene the first-ever **State of the Building Sector Conference 2026**, a national platform intended to spark deeper conversations on safety, sustainability and the future of Uganda's built environment.

Slated for December 2026 under the theme **"Beyond Bricks: Advancing Building Standards for Sustainable Development,"** the conference will bring together local and international policymakers, professionals, contractors, development partners, researchers and civil society actors to examine the state of the construction sector and chart a safer path forward.

The conference will revolve around five key sub-themes reflecting the sector's most pressing priorities of strengthening building standards and regulations;

harnessing innovation and digital technologies; promoting climate-resilient construction; advancing institutional capacity; and fostering inclusive urban development through participatory approaches. The conference aims to benchmark sector performance, foster knowledge exchange, and generate policy actions that promote safety, sustainability, and accountability.

Eng Morris Oleng, the Senior Research Officer at NBRB says the conference will serve as a national platform to celebrate innovation, regulatory compliance, professionalism, and sustainability within the built environment.

"It will bring together key stakeholders to showcase best practices and inspire continuous improvement in building control, safety, and urban resilience. Planned as an annual event, the first edition is slated for December 2026, with preparatory milestones scheduled between October 2025 and December 2026," he explained.

The conference has attracted abstracts from Uganda, Nigeria, South Africa German among others with writers inclined towards the subthemes of strengthening building standards and

regulations and harnessing innovation and digital technologies. The Technical and Editorial Committee (TEC) is currently shortlisting abstracts for full-paper invitation and authors whose abstracts will be accepted will receive standardized author guidelines. All papers will further undergo a double-blind peer-review process, coordinated by the TEC and NBRB's academic and professional partners. Accepted papers will be scheduled for oral or poster presentations and finally compiled into a peer-reviewed Conference Proceedings volume, assigned ISBN and DOI numbers for citation.

This conference aligns with the NDP IV, Vision 2040, SDGs and Africa Agenda 2063, positioning NBRB to lead Uganda toward a safe, inclusive, and standards-driven built environment. More importantly, it will culminate in a flagship paper on the state of buildings in Uganda, titled *"A Baseline Survey of Buildings in Uganda,"* which will provide insights into the existing building stock to support evidence-based planning, informed decision-making, and effective regulation.

The 'Ugandan Biodigester Toilet' works

But not the way you were told

By Shafic Kiyaga – Communications Officer, NBRB

Walk through any residential estate in Kampala, Wakiso, Mukono, or Luwero, and you will find them: biodigester toilet systems buried under compounds, installed behind institutions, marketed at housing exhibitions, and recommended by builders across the country.

Biodigester toilet systems as utilised in the Ugandan setting are now one of the most widely installed onsite sanitation options. Installers market them with strong claims: they never fill up, they produce clean effluent, they eliminate odour, and they need no emptying.



The biodigester systems have a role in Uganda's sanitation sector, but that role must be clearly defined,” explains

Eng. Flavia Bwiire, the Executive Secretary, NBRB.

Promoters describe them as self-cleaning, odour-free, and maintenance-free. Hundreds of households, institutions, and multi-household compounds have invested in the installation of the technology based on those claims.

For the first time, that picture has been tested against independent scientific evidence. The National Building Review Board (NBRB), working with Makerere University, commissioned a comprehensive study of how biodigester toilet systems actually perform in the field and in the laboratory.

The reality is that this technology can serve a genuine role in Uganda's sanitation sector if applied correctly. The findings do not condemn

biodigesters. They clarify where the loopholes are in its implementation in Uganda, and give the public the information they need in order to use this technology safely and effectively.

What the study found about biodigester performance

The study found that the majority of the biodigester systems installed in the areas covered function primarily as containment and partial treatment systems, not as complete treatment systems.

Treatment performance inside the tank was limited. For most measured pollutants, organic matter, solids, nutrients, and microbial contaminants, removal efficiencies stayed below 35%.

In some cases, concentrations in the effluent were higher than in the incoming waste. The real treatment work, however, happened in the soak pit and the surrounding soil. Soil infiltration provides the primary pollutant attenuation. This means that where soil conditions are poor or groundwater levels are high, a biodigester system poses a contamination risk.

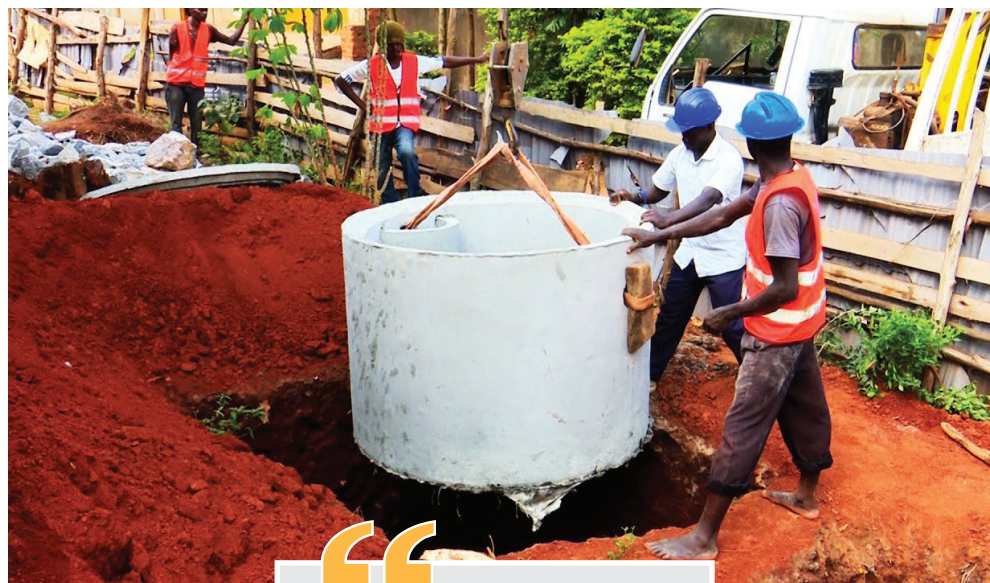
“The biodigester systems have a role in Uganda's sanitation sector, but that role must be clearly defined,” explains Eng. Flavia Bwiire, the Executive Secretary, NBRB.

“Installation must be guided by technical standards, site assessment, and compliance with the building control framework.”

The study found that over 90% of installers did not conduct soil testing before installation. Tank sizing was based on installer experience rather than engineering standards. These gaps increase the likelihood of systems being installed in locations where they cannot function safely.

Promoter Claims Tested Against Evidence

The study evaluated eleven specific claims routinely made by biodigester promoters and installers. The pattern across those claims is consistent:



This study does not say biodigesters should not be used. It says they must be used correctly. Where you install the system, how it is designed, and whether the site conditions are right, those are the decisions that determine whether this technology is safe and also whether it protects public health or undermines it.

Eng. Dr. Swaib Semiyaga

the technology works within a defined set of conditions, and the marketing has overstated its capabilities while understating the conditions it depends on. On cost, installation prices between UGX 2 million and UGX 3 million are comparable to standard septic tank systems. The cost advantage claimed by some promoters does not hold consistently.

On space, a biodigester requires a tank and soak pit together, occupying an area similar to a lined pit latrine. On suitability, the claim that biodigesters work in any location was not supported as soil permeability across tested sites was not up to required level.

In areas with limited infiltration or high groundwater tables, the soak pit cannot perform its function, and the system creates a contamination risk for the surrounding environment.

On effluent quality, the study measured significant levels of organic matter, nutrients, and microbial contaminants in tank effluent. Without the treatment provided by a properly functioning system, that effluent is not safe for discharge or reuse.

What About the Commercial Additives?

One of the clearest findings concerns the additives/enzymes sold alongside biodigester systems, often marketed as essential maintenance products.

The study tested seven commercially available products in controlled laboratory conditions, measuring their effect on sludge degradation, mass loss, dewaterability, and microbial reduction.

None of them performed better than the control samples with no additives. Mass loss across all treatments was minimal and generally below 2%. Reductions in microbial concentrations were consistent with natural die-off rather than additive action.

The products did not accelerate sludge breakdown, improve treatment performance, or eliminate the need for emptying.

The practical implication is direct. Spending money on commercial additives for a biodigester toilet is not supported by the evidence. System performance depends on design, installation quality, and site conditions. No additive changes those fundamentals.

Design improvements that do work

While additives showed no benefit, the study found that specific engineering modifications do improve performance.

Installing sanitary tee pipes within the tank improves hydraulic flow control, increasing the time waste spends inside the system and improving the removal of organic matter, solids, and pathogens. Connecting tanks in series produced further improvements in treatment efficiency.

Removal efficiencies improved progressively with each design modification tested. This is a significant finding for practitioners. Performance gains are available through better engineering at the design and installation stage, not through products sold in shops.

The study noted that adding a second tank did not produce proportionate improvements relative to the additional cost and complexity. This matters for anyone making investment decisions about system design.

What NBRB is doing with these findings

The NBRB presented the study findings at a stakeholder consultative workshop on 7 May 2026. The session brought together technical experts, practitioners, and sector partners to engage with the evidence and align on regulatory next steps.

The Board is using the findings to inform updates to building codes, enforcement procedures, and technical guidance for practitioners.

The study provides the evidence base for setting clear standards on soil testing requirements before installation, minimum design specifications for tank sizing, and appropriate site conditions for biodigester use.

NBRB's position is that biodigester toilets can serve as valid onsite sanitation options in Uganda, provided they are installed in areas with low groundwater tables and suitable soil conditions, designed to proper engineering standards and maintained periodically.

EXPLAINER BOX

WHAT IS A BIODIGESTER TOILET?

A biodigester toilet is an onsite sanitation system that collects and partially treats human waste on the premises where it is generated. The system has four main parts: a toilet interface, a sealed underground tank, a soak pit, and the connecting pipes between them.

Waste enters the underground tank, where solids settle and some biological breakdown occurs. The liquid that flows out – called effluent – passes into the soak pit, where the surrounding soil provides further treatment through natural filtration.

Biodigester systems are installed in homes, institutions, and multi-household compounds. They are not connected to a sewer. They require periodic emptying, proper siting in areas with suitable soil and low groundwater levels, and a design that matches the number of users.

A biodigester toilet is not a complete treatment system on its own. The tank provides primary treatment. The soil provides the rest. Installation without proper site assessment and engineering design carries real risks for groundwater and public health.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE NBRB-MAKERERE BIODIGESTER STUDY

- **Biodigester tanks treat waste partially, not completely.** Treatment efficiencies for most pollutants stayed below 35% inside the tank. The soak pit and surrounding soil provide the essential remaining treatment.
- **They do fill up.** Sludge accumulates depending on usage per person per year. Periodic emptying is not optional – it is a maintenance requirement, as with any containment system.
- **Commercial additives do not work.** Laboratory tests of seven products found no significant improvement in sludge breakdown or treatment performance.
- **Location and design are the critical factors.** Over 90% of installers surveyed did not conduct soil testing before installation. Soil type, groundwater depth, and proper engineering design determine whether a system is safe.
- **Regulation is coming.** NBRB is using this study to update building codes and technical standards. Installations without proper site assessment and design will not meet the revised compliance requirements.



Dr. Swaibu Semiyaga presents the findings of the study on the Biodigester technology use in Uganda during a stakeholder consultative workshop organised by NBRB.

STC Construction: the promise, the risk, and the lessons



By Eng. Ronald Kasolo and Denis Aine - NBRB

David Kagimu (not the real name), a property owner in Maganjo, Nabweru Division, Nansana municipality, had run a bungalow-style commercial building for over 30 years since inheriting it in the 1980s.

Around 2021, a promoter approached him with a proposal: convert the old bungalow to a storied structure using STC - the Steel, Timber and Concrete composite construction method.

The pitch was built on familiar logic. The area was changing. Storied buildings were rising around him. His property would lose value if he did not respond.

Kagimu borrowed to fund the works. However, the reality of the project was beyond his initial imagination, as costs continued to rise beyond the original estimate, and timelines slipped. Amidst all the chaos, his worst fear was realised. Part of the construction materials collapsed mid-project.

That was the straw that broke the camel's back, in this development that seemed to stress Kagimu over and beyond his bargain.

And in September 2022, STC was prohibited by Legal Notice No.11 of 2022, prompting several enforcement campaigns against the method. His property was flagged; the project engineer abandoned the site and stopped responding to calls. He further realised that his trusted engineer was not even registered with the Engineers Registration Board (ERB)

Kagimu was left with a stalled structure, unpaid obligations, and no clear path forward.

Restoring the property now requires a full engineering assessment. Once a building has been cut, loaded, or reworked under a questionable system, rehabilitation is itself a technical exercise. The loss is structural, financial, operational, and personal.

This is not one case

Kagimu is not alone. In March 2026, the National Building Review Board's (NBRB) enforcement teams returned to the Greater



Once a building has been cut, loaded, or reworked under a questionable system, rehabilitation is itself an engineering exercise. The loss is structural, financial, operational, and personal.

Kampala Metropolitan Area and found the same pattern playing out across more than 30 sites.

Working with the Uganda Police, the operation covered Nansana Municipality, Kira Municipality, Kasangati Town Council, and Wakiso Town Council. It focused on developers who had already received formal stop orders from the Board and area building committees and continued building regardless.

More than 30 case files were handled. Several developers have since been apprehended. Others remain at large.

The enforcement teams didn't only inspect active construction sites. They entered completed buildings already under occupation. In cases where structures were found unsafe or non-compliant, residents were advised to vacate as a precaution.

Kira Municipality recorded the highest concentration of violations. At least 15 developments were identified using the prohibited method. Some were occupied without approved occupation permits.

For all who are still caught in the whirlwind of buildings constructed with STC, NBRB has found a similar pattern, site after site. The promoter, the pitch built on speed and cost, the contractor, all gone before the consequences arrive, yet the owner remains and carries the brunt of the consequences.

What is STC?

STC stands for Steel, Timber, Concrete Composite. Steel beams carry the main structural load. Timber joists form the floor framework. Expanded metal lath and mortar sit within the build-up. A concrete slab is then cast on top.

On paper, a composite system seeks to combine the strengths of more than one material. That principle is sound.

In practice, each material needs clear design rules, a tested and certified supply, sound detailing at every connection, and disciplined workmanship throughout.

The engineering challenge is that timber, steel, and concrete do not behave in the same way. Timber responds to moisture, shrinkage, termite attack, and fungal decay. Steel responds to corrosion, temperature change, and fire.

Concrete depends on mix quality, accurate batching, proper curing, and correct reinforcement.

Bring them together in one structural system, and the performance of the whole depends on the integrity of every joint between them and the accuracy of every assumption behind the design.

Why was STC prohibited?

On 19 September 2022, the former Minister of Works and Transport, Hon. Gen Katumba Wamala, prohibited the method under Section 42 of the Building Control Act through Legal Notice No. 11 of 2022.

STC was not prohibited because steel, timber, and concrete should never appear in one structure. The line was drawn because field observations and technical review showed major weaknesses in how the method was being applied on-site in Uganda.

When STC gained traction in the construction sector, developers were attracted to it as a lighter, cheaper floor system for multi-storeyed buildings.

NBRB constituted a multidisciplinary team to study it. The findings raised serious safety concerns.

Why it raised concern

The method raised concern because the conditions needed to make it safe were not present on the sites reviewed. NBRB found an inadequately skilled workforce in structural steel design and construction supervision.

Timber in use was not graded. No design standards supported the technology during early uptake. Fire risk and earthquake resistance had not been addressed. Drawings were not endorsed by professionals, and building permission had not been obtained.

The deeper engineering record is more serious. Ungraded timber means the designer does not know its strength or stiffness. Unseasoned timber changes shape in service, fasteners loosen, and in damp conditions, rot becomes a live risk.

On steel: members were found in contact with wet ground without concrete pedestals. Shear connectors were absent on some beams. If the composite claim is missing the details that make materials act together, the structural argument collapses before the slab enters long-term service.



On joints: in sampled structures, 85% of welds were recommended for redoing, and no weld drawings or procedure specifications were found. A structural frame stands or falls at its joints.

On concrete: visible cracking was recorded along beam positions, and concrete spacers were absent below the BRC mesh in many cases. Some slabs ranged from 50mm to 100mm in thickness.

The National Building Code ties a minimum one-hour fire rating to a minimum slab thickness of 100mm. Steel loses up to half its strength at around 300 degrees Celsius.

Lateral stability was unresolved, too. Inspected structures lacked shear walls or bracing, and masonry infill had not been properly anchored into the frame, leaving the whole building exposed under wind and seismic demand.

What the prohibition means now

STC continues to be a prohibited building method under the current regulatory position. For developers, do not proceed with a prohibited method, ignore stop orders, or occupy buildings without occupation permits.

Enforcement operations by the NBRB together with the Uganda Police will continue, to ensure compliance to the set standards, and also to ensure there is safety for people and property.

For owners of existing STC structures like Mr Kagimu, the first step is to conduct a structural integrity assessment by a registered civil/ structural engineer not panic. NBRB's 2022 notice stated that structures found

fit for strengthening would be retrofitted, while those found unfit would face action under the law.

Even for this prohibited method, it is not doom and gloom. NBRB is willing to extend an olive branch, but any such actions to be complaint they need to be based on findings by professionals, and not rumours on the word of the contractor who built it.

However, NBRB does not close the door on innovation. The amended Building Control Act creates a process to assess and approve unconventional methods. That process exists. It requires evidence, standards development, and formal approval.

Choosing a safer path

Build with methods backed by full design calculations, endorsed drawings, code references, material certificates, and continuous supervision by registered professionals.

Confirm the approval status of any proposed method with the Building Committee before work starts. That single check, done before money changes hands, closes the door that promoters walk through.

A building earns its place in the built environment because the design was right, the materials were known and verified, the workmanship was controlled, and all relevant checks done.

Speed and cost are legitimate considerations. They are not substitutes for any of those requirements.

The report and guidelines on STC construction method are available on the NBRB website. Visit nbrb.go.ug

PICTORIAL



The former Minister of Works and Transport, Hon. Gen. Edward Katumba-Wamala (L) shares a light moment with Helen Crowley, the GEM Foundation (C), General Secretary and Eng. Flavia G. Bwire, the NBRB Executive Secretary during the launch of the SERENE Project in Kampala.



The former Minister of Works and Transport, Hon. Gen. Edward Katumba-Wamala (L) is joined by Helen Crowley, the GEM Foundation (C), General Secretary and Eng. Flavia G. Bwire, the NBRB Executive Secretary (R) as t.



Helen Crowley, the GEM Foundation (L), General Secretary and Catalina Yepes-Estrada (C), the Senior Risk Modeller at GEM Foundation with the former Minister of Works and Transport, Hon. Gen. Edward Katumba-Wamala at the launch of the SERENE Project in Kampala



NBRB's Senior Research Officer Dr. Eng. Morris Oleng moderates a panel discussion with experts including Catherine Ahimbisibwe (2nd L) from Office of the Prime Minister, Moses Matovu from Makerere University (2nd R), and Catalina Yepes-Estrada (C), the Senior Risk Modeller at GEM Foundation (R).



Guests and participants pose for a group photograph during the official launch of the SERENE Project.



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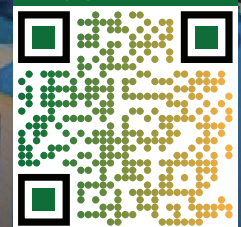
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Acceptance

October 15,
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Conference
Dates

December 9-11,
2026

 For more information
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