

Technology must put people first, says Absa's boss

Six months down the road since his appointment as Absa's new managing director, Mr David Wandera, spoke to BD Life on a wide range of industry issues, including the acquisition of Standard Chartered Bank and the future of banking.

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How relevant is a bank in supporting the economy to play its rightful role?

Banks play a critical role in shaping the kind of economy we want to build as a country. Financing is not just about extending credit; it is about enabling transformation. For Uganda, that means supporting sectors that drive inclusive growth, create jobs, and build resilience in communities.

We are intentional about channeling capital towards sectors that are central to Uganda's development priorities. Our lending strategy aligns closely with the government's ten-fold strategy, particularly in areas such as agro-industrialisation, manufacturing, digital transformation, trade expansion, and infrastructure. This ensures that our financing directly contributes to national growth ambitions.

Over the past year, lending to the trade sector increased significantly and now makes up 26 percent of our loan portfolio, reflecting our commitment to fueling commerce and strengthening private-sector competitiveness. Personal and household loans also grew to 27 percent, up from 24 percent, as we responded to rising demand for accessible financial solutions.

Agriculture and manufacturing, two sectors critical to Uganda's long-term development, currently account for 10 percent and 9 percent of our loan book, respectively.

We continue to support agribusinesses, value chains, and industrial players through tailored financing, and we are actively exploring new opportunities to expand in these areas.

Promoting an inclusive economy requires expanding access to financial services. We are deepening partnerships with fintechs, mobile network operators, and community-based institutions to bank the unbanked and underserved.

Through these collaborations, we are enabling more Ugandans to save, borrow, transact, and access digital financial services that were previously out of

reach.

Our approach to lending is anchored in impact and sustainability, ensuring that capital flows to areas that drive long-term economic value while aligning with Uganda's broader development goals.

It was not long ago when you acquired Standard Chartered's retail and wealth banking operations. How will this development redefine your operation?

Acquiring Standard Chartered's retail and wealth banking operations presents a significant opportunity to strengthen our market presence and expand our customer offering.

While this transaction is still a work in progress and awaits regulatory approval, we are laying the foundations for a smooth and successful integration.

Effective leadership and teamwork are critical in such transitions, particularly in our sector where banks are custodians of customer deposits and trust is paramount. It requires aligning teams around a shared vision, clarifying roles, and fostering an environment where people feel empowered to act decisively.

Absa has demonstrated this capability across the continent, notably through the successful transition from Barclays to Absa Bank and the acquisition of HSBC operations in Mauritius. These experiences showcase the expertise we bring both locally in Uganda and across our Pan-African footprint.

I reassure Standard Chartered customers that they will experience the same high standards they expect.

Absa combines a strong heritage, a comprehensive product suite with tech-enabled solutions to ensure continuity, a seamless customer experience, and recognition as a Domestic Systemically Important Bank (DSIB) by the Bank of Uganda.

This process is about combining strong leadership, teamwork, and a customer-first approach to deliver a smooth integration, reinforce trust, and demonstrate that Absa is fully equipped to provide a modern, reliable, and high-quality banking experience for all our customers.

Financial sector is not immune to technological pressures and a

Standards

'Standard Chartered customers will experience the same high standards they expect.'

Absa Bank's managing director David Wandera. The Bank is still awaiting regulatory approval for the acquisition of Standard Chartered's retail and wealth banking operations.

PHOTO/ISAAC KASAMANI

high regulatory environment. How do you navigate this situation?

The financial sector today operates in an environment of constant change. Regulatory requirements are evolving, technological advancements are reshaping how we serve our customers, and customer expectations continue to rise.

While these factors create significant opportunities, they also place pressure on teams to adapt quickly while maintaining high standards.

We are working towards delivering on the four strategic pillars of our refreshed strategy. By putting the customer at the centre of everything we do, we are driving customer-led growth through tailored, relevant solutions.

We are building a diversified Pan-African business by fostering collaboration and leveraging opportunities across markets.

By embedding accountability, continuous improvement, and high standards into everything we do, we are driving excellence. By encouraging innovation, initiative, and informed risk-taking, we are unlocking new growth opportunities that will strengthen our position and impact across Uganda and the wider continent.

According to the Uganda Communications Commission, as of September 2024, there were 45.6 million registered mobile money accounts in Uganda, with 30.4 million active users.

Smartphone penetration stands at approximately 33 percent, driven by affordability and the popularity of mobile-first platforms, especially among youth, highlighting the increasing role of digital services in advancing financial inclusion.

Technology is at the heart of how we design solutions that make everyday banking seamless while strengthening our connections with customers.

We are reimagining the customer experience.

rience to provide convenience, speed, and real value that meets the needs of today's connected lifestyle.

We are exploring Artificial Intelligence integration across areas such as credit, reporting, and our contact centre to boost productivity and efficiency. Our goal is to combine technology with human empathy, ensuring interactions are not only fast and convenient but also personalised. This digital transformation is not just about automation—it is about creating meaningful impact.

Any lessons from the bank's digital transformation journey?

One of the biggest lessons from our digital transformation journey is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Markets are different, so what works in Nigeria, for example, may not necessarily work in Uganda.

Digital capabilities are deeply intertwined with internet and network connectivity, and adoption can take time. People may be initially hesitant, but if we clearly demonstrate the benefits and continuously educate them, acceptance grows steadily.

Another key lesson is that technology must solve real customer problems. It should not be digital for the sake of being digital; its value lies in how it improves convenience, access, and overall customer experience.

Technology must also enable human connection—it should feel personal and empathetic to avoid losing the emotional connectivity that builds trust and loyalty with our clients.

Finally, collaboration is critical. In a market like ours, we often partner with fintechs and other innovators who bring unique capabilities.

By working together, we can deliver solutions that we could not develop alone, ensuring that our customers benefit from a modern, digitally enabled and human-centred banking experience.

Where do you see Absa Uganda in the next decade?

Our ambition is to deepen financial inclusion by making banking more accessible, convenient, and relevant for all Ugandans from urban entrepreneurs to rural farmers.

We aim to expand digital access so that everyone, regardless of location, can benefit from modern financial services.

At the same time, we shall continue to support national growth by financing sectors that drive economic transformation including agriculture, manufacturing, trade, and Small and Medium Enterprises and by doing so help to create jobs and build resilient communities.

