

Toronto Raptors president Masai Ujiri is concerned that Africa could struggle to host NBA games due to a lack of quality basketball venues.

The Nigerian-Canadian, who is also the Vice Chairman of the Ontario team, is among key figures championing the move to bring the NBA games played on the African continent for the first time in the championship's history.

While speaking to BBC Sport Africa, Ujiri said that a number of NBA's top names also want it to happen – but finding facilities good enough to host the games remains their biggest obstacle.

“There is a big challenge in Africa – a lot of these countries don't have arenas,” he said.

“That's what President Kagame did – he built an arena in Rwanda (opened in 2019), and President Macky Sall built an arena in Senegal (completed in 2018). And those are the places that are getting the games.”

The NBA, together with the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), created the Basketball Africa League (BAL), in which teams from various countries across the continent come together in one location for a series of matches. The overall winner gets crowned the African club champions.

These close links between the two competitions meant that the BAL's president Amadou Gallo Fall was recently able to announce that discussions have been happening around potentially bringing a pre-season NBA game to Africa for the first time ever.

But finding enough venues to sustain that plan beyond one season is a challenge, Ujiri said, adding that he was especially frustrated by the fact that there was nothing he felt was appropriate in Kenya, whose capital he was visiting as part of his Giants of Africa project.

“We need an arena in Kenya,” he said.

“This creates jobs, it creates revenue. It builds the ecosystem of sports; it builds the ecosystem in our environment.

“We need this badly. Nairobi is one of the most vibrant places in the world. These arenas will host concerts, events, fiestas, games, leagues.

“We need one big one here, we need one good one in Nairobi” said Ujiri.

Ujiri added that, if the NBA does make the plan work, he hopes the Raptors are involved.

“We have a lot of African players, and there’s a priority there that we need to grow this continent and also give ourselves an opportunity here with basketball,” he said.

He added that other elite NBA names were also keen on the idea.

“Adam Silver, Amadou Fall, Victor Williams – these guys are right at the front of it, they want to grow the game on the continent big time.

“As you know, the Basketball Africa League is growing, spreading around Africa.

“So then one of the next things I’m sure will be a basketball game,” he noted.

Other major American leagues have successfully begun experimenting with playing fixtures outside the United States, notably American Football’s NFL, which annually takes matches at Wembley Stadium in London, United Kingdom.

The Giants of Africa project has made a commitment to build 100 basketball courts across Africa.

So far 26 have been unveiled, including the latest three in Nairobi.

“We feel that the next opportunity is infrastructure,” Ujiri said.

“We come and do basketball camps and basketball clinics, but they also need the space, a safe space to