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# Standing Committee on International Trade

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Chair: Judy A. Sgro





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• (1110)

[*English*]

**The Chair (Hon. Judy A. Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.)):** I'm calling the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 30 of the Standing Committee on International Trade.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, February 12, 2026, the committee is resuming its study of Canada's trade with North and West Africa.

Mr. Mantle, go ahead.

**Jacob Mantle (York—Durham, CPC):** Chair, I wonder if I could beg your indulgence to address a small matter of committee business at the start of the meeting. I think we have reached agreement on a notice of motion I gave orally, prior to our constituency weeks.

**The Chair:** Could you read it to the committee please?

**Jacob Mantle:** The notice of motion I gave to the committee members reads as follows:

That the Standing Committee on International Trade:

1. reaffirms its steadfast support for Ukraine sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity;
2. acknowledges and supports the Government of Canada's assistance provided to Ukraine;
3. requests that the Minister of Finance immediately and unconditionally extend the period for which remission is granted pursuant to the Ukraine goods remission order or any other instrument from goods that are imported during the period beginning June 9, 2022, and ending on June 9, 2026, to goods that are imported during the period beginning June 9, 2022, and ending on June 9, 2031;
4. requests that the Minister of Finance respond in writing to the committee's request within 15 days; and
5. directs the chair to immediately report this to the House.

To remind members, this was to extend the time for access to the Canadian market under the Ukraine goods remission order from a one-year period to a five-year period, because we have heard consistently that a one-year period is very difficult for businesses to plan around. We're simply asking the Minister of Finance to consider extending that period to something that would provide more reasonable access to Ukraine during the wartime period.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Is there any discussion on the motion?

I'm not seeing any discussion. I understand there is agreement by all of the committee.

All those in favour of the motion please raise your hands.

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Mantle.

I apologize to the witnesses for those few minutes of delay.

We have with us today, from the Senate of Canada, the Honourable Amina Gerba, senator. From Blackburn Tétreault and Associates, we have Sylvain Tétreault, international business introducer and key facilitator in the African market. That sounds very unique.

Welcome to both of you.

We'll start with five minutes of opening remarks.

Senator Gerba, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Amina Gerba (Senator, Quebec (Rigaud), PSG):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, thank you for having me here today.

I am deeply interested in the subject of your study. I have devoted 25 years of my professional life to it, specifically to the development of markets and international trade, particularly trade between Africa and Canada.

In the context of the essential diversification of our markets, trade with African countries is imperative, as recently documented by Canada's Africa strategy, launched in March 2025, and the Senate report titled "Canada–Africa: Seizing a Strategic Opportunity," tabled in February 2026.

With this in mind, I would like to immediately make six recommendations related to the objectives of your study.

First, Canada must explicitly include Africa in its trade diversification strategy, state this officially and identify priority countries and sectors where Canadian companies can be competitive in the African market, including agri-food, clean energy, infrastructure, training, health, financial services, critical minerals and digital technology.

Second, it is essential to strengthen our financial tools. FinDev Canada's capacity must be expanded, and the capacity portion allocated to Africa must be clearly defined. Export Development Canada's risk assessment mechanisms must be reviewed to reflect African realities. Canada must create an instrument such as an investment fund dedicated to the African diaspora to complement its capital and expertise.

Third, as it does for other regions of the world, the Government of Canada must organize high-level trade missions, coordinated with the trade commissioner service, to strengthen on-the-ground efforts and send a clear political signal to our African partners.

Fourth, in support of the African priorities set out in Agenda 2063, the Canadian government must urgently undertake the preliminary work essential to potential trade contracts and agreements with countries or regional economic communities on the continent.

Fifth, Canada can play a strategic role in the development of regional value chains in Africa by promoting co-production and local processing.

Sixth, Canada's membership in the francophonie and the Commonwealth can be a key asset in developing our economic relations with Africa. We hear many statements on this subject. I believe that the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development could conduct an in-depth analysis of the opportunities that this membership offers on the ground in Africa.

The study should also address the issue of visa processing systems, the predictability of which remains problematic. In this regard, the introduction of a visa for francophones could constitute a pragmatic and immediate step forward.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you. I would be pleased to your questions.

• (1115)

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Madam Senator.

Monsieur Tétreault is up for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

**Sylvain Tétreault (International Business Introducer and Key Facilitator, African Market, BLACKBURN TÉTREAULT & ASSOCIÉS):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Members of the committee, please forgive me for being a bit nervous; I am not in the habit of appearing in this kind of forum. However, I'm very proud to be here this morning. If anyone knows Africa and the African business world well, it's me.

I wear two professional hats: I have been a professor at the École de technologie supérieure for nearly 31 years, and I am also a consultant. I run my own consulting firm specializing in personnel management and supervision.

Quebec and Canada weren't big enough for me; I had an international vision. What launched me onto the international stage was the series of books I wrote with my wife, adapted for the French-speaking European world. In fact, there are two francophone com-

munities in the world: the Quebec francophone community and the European francophone community, which is a bit more anglicized. Here, the book series is titled *Gérez mieux, stressez moins*, whereas in Europe, it is titled *Managez mieux, stressez moins*. It's a minor adaptation.

I tried doing business in Europe, but it wasn't a success because the bureaucracy and regulations were too cumbersome. By necessity, I got to know African partners. I immediately fell in love with Africa and Africans. I had imaged the Africa I learned about when I was very young. In school, when we were young, Africa was considered the third world. But I quickly discovered an extraordinary continent.

Over the past decade, I've developed a third professional role: that of a business introducer. As the chair so aptly put it, I'm a general facilitator. I'm a bit like the Tinder of the business world. I connect businesspeople, buyers and sellers. This has been my passion for 10 years, and I've discovered that Africa is the land of the future for the planet. Africa has it all—people and raw materials—and everything is yet to be done. I compare Africa to Quebec and Canada in the 1950s.

We share many similarities: Quebeckers—I know Quebec much better—were water carriers until 1960. In 1960, the Quiet Revolution took place: we took control of our economy and built it into what it is now. I see a very important parallel with Africa. For the past decade or so, Africa has been targeted by the three major powers—China, Russia, and the United States—because the decision was made to shut out everything European, including France. As they say, Africans may have traded six of one for half a dozen of another, but that doesn't matter. I tried to connect Canadian businesspeople with African businesspeople, and I realized that the three major powers had already staked their claim. That's when I told myself that, in business, you have to be imaginative and find the right approach. Everything remains to be done in Africa. I realized that Africans love Canadians and Quebeckers. Africans don't see us as Europeans or Americans. They see us in a very distinct way, and they see us as working in collaboration with them.

Over the years, I've tried to connect people, but I've faced constraints, irritants and the power of China. China has a very strong presence in Africa. It practises a rather unique form of economic colonialism, which I might write a book about one day. So we cannot compete. Canada has its strengths and weaknesses. I have developed a business model, which you likely have in front of you. It summarizes the 2023-2024 Canada-Africa business plan. I have given myself two years to implement it.

• (1120)

It can be summarized by this saying: "We don't sell fish; instead, we train people to become skilled fishermen." This is quite unique in international trade, because in international trade, we sell fish, we sell our products, we source raw materials from Africa and then we process them. That's what China does. China sources the timber, mines the resources and carries out the processing in its own country.

I said we were going to develop that model—a partnership model.

That's the summary of the business model. This model succeeded because a Quebec company sold its expertise in prefabricating wooden housing structures. It's unique because, in Africa, homes are made of cement. When we came in with this wooden housing model, it was new. Africa has everything: it has the labour force and the wood. We managed to sell a license. The business model isn't about selling products and services. That can be done in parallel. In Quebec and Canada, we have exceptional expertise.

I've travelled all over the world, and I can say that Canada has everything to offer. Housing is the project of the future. Let me give you an example. In some cities, there are projects to build 20,000 housing units. Here, we have 200 units to build, and that's exceptional.

• (1125)

**Sylvain Tétreault:** In conclusion, I have some recommendations to make. The business plan faces three major obstacles, and the government can resolve this issue.

The first obstacle is visas. The administrative process that African businesspeople must go through to come here for a few days is unacceptable. There is a significant administrative burden involved in obtaining a simple short-term visa for a stay of just a few days. You can't do business if you can't invite your partners. That is the first major constraint.

The second constraint is government programs. There is a lot of red tape and they are disconnected from reality. Let me give you an example: you have to prepare a project three months in advance to get the funding needed to travel to Africa. However, a trip to Africa is decided just a few days in advance. I've made six trips to Africa. Even after five trips, I hadn't scheduled any meetings on the first day. Do you see the problem?

I'll talk about the third constraint. The various federal departments must work together, for example, the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship and the Department of International Trade. Currently, they work in silos.

The senator said it: there's a lot we can do, but there are obstacles. If we don't remove these obstacles quickly, we won't be able to do business and we'll miss out on an opportunity.

[English]

**The Chair:** We still have many questions, so you will have an opportunity to reiterate some very important points. We appreciate that very much.

We are going to start with Mr. Groleau for six minutes. I'll have to be very tight with time because the clock is ticking.

[Translation]

**Jason Groleau (Beauce, CPC):** Good morning, Madam Chair.

Greetings, honourable colleagues and guests.

Mr. Tétreault, I love your intensity.

Senator, what are the opportunities in Africa? We want to increase sales. We are ready to do so and we are seeking partners.

In your opinion, what priorities should Canada focus on in relation to Africa?

**Senator Amina Gerba:** Thank you for the question.

In fact, Canada's priorities are actually to make Africa a priority. What does that mean? It means we must start by acknowledging that Africa is a priority and that Africa is a market. Now, when Canada enters the African market, we must recognize that it has advantages. Canada has the advantage of being a bilingual country with tremendous access to all African markets because of its two languages. Another priority is to approach it sector by sector. Canada has sectors with extensive expertise, such as the agri-food sector. Currently, Africa has to feed 1.5 billion people. In Africa, 60% of the arable land is not being farmed. We have this knowledge; we have these technologies; we have these processing mechanisms. We already have that here in Canada. In every province, we can set a goal of establishing partnerships in Africa to feed Africans and we will benefit in return, because it's not just Africans who will benefit.

I used agri-food as an example, but Canada is already active in mining. Canada is recognized as a country with a strong mining processing sector and as a country where mining companies have a recognized approach to corporate social responsibility. This is a second sector in which we already have a presence in Africa.

I will now turn to education. You will see that, in every African country, people will say that the elites were trained by Canadians. Education and vocational training are an undeniable priority. Why? Because you cannot claim that you are in favour of development, that you want to be among the emerging nations, if you are unable to train young people. In Africa, the median age of young people is 19. We want to train them to do the important jobs. India and China have focused on training. Canada can position itself in the training sector in Africa, and in both languages. However, I would highlight French, because Africa currently accounts for 62% of the global francophone community, which is immense.

• (1130)

**Jason Groleau:** Thank you very much.

My next questions are for Mr. Tétreault.

I love your energy and I'm happy to meet you, Mr. Tétreault.

You mentioned the administrative burden. Do you find the Canadian government to be efficient?

I'd also like to know what the business opportunities are. You talked a lot about the resources you'd like us to prioritize.

**Sylvain Tétreault:** The administrative burden does not lie with the government, but with bureaucratic structures. I'll give the example of Export Development Canada and the CanExport SME program. These programs are managed by a Canadian organization. These structures need to connect with business realities, with federations of chambers of commerce and employer associations, so that these programs can simplify the assistance they provide. That is the issue. It's not related to the government; the guidelines have been set. It really is the disconnect—

**Jason Groleau:** Ultimately, they need to communicate better with each other.

**Sylvain Tétreault:** Here's what could be done: These programs could be delegated to employer federations or chambers of commerce. That way, they would be overseen by government agencies. It would make the programs far more accessible and much simpler. This support is essential. A trip to Africa costs between \$15,000 and \$20,000 per person. So this initial support is important.

On the other hand, we mustn't forget the visa program—this is important to me. On four occasions, I've tried to organize business missions to bring Africans here. You can't imagine what's asked of businesspeople. They're asked to show their bank accounts and prove their identity. It's crazy. When I go to Africa, I have to apply for a visa, and in 15 minutes, I get a visa to go to Africa. Why does it take us 15 minutes, when it's different for Africans? They need to come see our products. They need to come see our expertise.

What was the second question?

**Jason Groleau:** Bilingual countries have business opportunities with the francophonie, including countries in Africa. What are the main opportunities?

Please give a brief answer because I have run out of time.

**Sylvain Tétreault:** The opportunities are all there. Let's offer our expertise. Let's sell our expertise.

The Thetford Mines company is selling its licence. A consultant will travel to Africa and train Africans to build their own homes in their own factory, but the opportunities are there when it comes to food.

Just this morning, I was in touch with people from Senegal. They're looking for meat, chicken—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Tétreault. I have to go on to the next member. Your passion creates a lot of questions, but the committee has to have time to ask them.

Madame Lapointe.

[*Translation*]

**Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome to our witnesses and I thank them for accepting our invitation.

I was the one who moved the committee undertake this study, and I was the one who moved the motion on how to create more

business ties between Africa and Canada, naturally through the francophonie.

I will start with Mr. Tétreault, to whom I could put questions for an hour.

You say you travelled frequently to Africa to try to create business ties. When Canadian companies try to enter the market, what is the most common mistake you see them make?

● (1135)

**Sylvain Tétreault:** You can't do international business without support. Whether you're going to China, the United States, or elsewhere, you need to be accompanied. Business practices, laws and business culture are different.

Over the past 10 years, I've spoken with hundreds of Canadian companies. They say they want nothing to do with Africa because they've had bad experiences. However, when asked whether they had been supported, their answer is no.

My advice to companies is to seek support from trade commissioners at Canadian embassies, business facilitators and local contacts where they are going. You don't go into the jungle without a guide; the world of international business is a jungle. Would you go into the jungle without a guide? That answers the question.

**Linda Lapointe:** You're talking specifically about the trade commissioners who support companies. Earlier, you mentioned visas and selling our expertise. In fact, the senator mentioned that as well.

Do you prioritize certain countries?

After your response, I'd like to ask the senator for her opinion.

**Sylvain Tétreault:** Yes, of course. There are countries that may not be any safer, but the government maintains a travel advisory website that provides guidance to travellers. I took part in a business mission to Togo, to name it specifically. I was asked if that country was safe. I replied that people should consult that website, which ranks levels of risk using its colour-coded system. Togo has the same colour as France, which is yellow. There may be a dozen or so countries where it would be easier to do business initially, but over time there could be a ripple effect.

All the countries along the coast, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin and Senegal, are somewhat more open, and their governments are, let's say, less unpredictable. There are certain countries in Africa where governments are a bit unpredictable. When doing business in Africa, there's one key player you have to consider: the government. Here, the business world is fairly distinct from the government, but over there, government plays a relatively prominent role. There are about a dozen countries where doing business would be much easier, provided that sources of friction are addressed.

**Linda Lapointe:** Thank you.

Senator, would you like to add anything?

**Hon. Amina Gerba:** Mr. Tétreault has said almost everything, but I'd like to add something.

When you decide to do business in Africa—which I've been doing for 25 years—you need to be accompanied. The trade commissioner service needs to be strengthened. They aren't present in every country.

Take Cameroon, for example. Did you know that our trade commissioner in Cameroon represents five countries? That's too many. He doesn't have the resources and can't manage it. He represents Cameroon, Gabon, Chad, the Central African Republic and Equatorial Guinea all at once, but he doesn't have the resources. I've seen it first-hand.

I'll move on to our representation in Côte d'Ivoire. This is a country we need to take very seriously. These are countries that are moving forward and where our companies are present. Did you know that we already have nearly 150 Canadian companies operating in Africa? The government doesn't know about them. The Canadian government isn't aware that we have companies succeeding in Africa.

I've accompanied these companies. I hosted in Montreal, as part of the largest networking platform, businesspeople from Africa representing some twenty African countries. These were mainly French-speaking countries that came to attract businesses. Do you know what the visa refusal rate was? It reached 70% in some cases. Businesspeople want win-win partnerships.

Let's talk about the francophonie. Let's take a country like Senegal, for example. It's a stable country where our companies have a strong presence. Do you know how many trade commissioners we have in Senegal? We have just one to cover the entire country, despite its enormous potential. When I say we need to prioritize Africa, we must start with interdepartmental coordination.

Did you know that Canada's Africa strategy was developed within Global Affairs Canada—that is, the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development? Export Development Canada is not aware of it. FinDev Canada, which has a presence in Africa, is not aware of it either. We need coordination, and we need a real presence in French-speaking African countries.

• (1140)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I'm sorry; we've run out of time. Thank you very much.

Mr. Savard-Tremblay, go ahead, please, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot—Acton, BQ):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here.

I'll have at least one question for each of you.

Senator Gerba, it's good to see you. By the way, thank you for your past co-operation on the issue of supply management. We worked hard on that bill, which is now a reality.

You mentioned the culture of accountability among Canadian mining companies.

There have been several scandals and investigations. Many allegations have been substantiated, particularly in Africa. Scandals involving Canadian mining companies have occurred in Latin America, but there have also been some in Africa.

We also know there's an issue regarding who can register as a mining company in Canada. A mining company need only have little more than a post office box to claim to be Canadian, even if the profit centre, the workforce and the headquarters, for example, aren't actually located there.

Ultimately, this creates a flag-of-convenience culture, where mining companies have a vested interest—given that the vast majority of mining companies worldwide are registered as Canadian—to benefit from tax and speculative advantages associated with the Toronto Stock Exchange.

Add to this the fact that, as we speak, the position of ombud remains vacant, and it has been for quite some time. In any case, even when the position isn't vacant, the ombud lacks the authority to summon witnesses or demand the production of documents.

Before considering further business opportunities for these mining companies in a region still largely untapped in terms of trade relations—namely, Africa—even if it is absolutely necessary, should we not resolve this issue, that is, fill the ombud position as quickly as possible and grant the ombud real authority?

**Hon. Amina Gerba:** I'll start by saying that, yes, it's important to staff this position.

Let me come back to the image of Canadian mining companies in Africa. As you know, I've visited some 40 countries in Africa, most of which had mining operations. Take the case of Burkina Faso, which is no longer part of the Economic Community of West African States. When I look at the Canadian mining companies—which I won't name—and at what those companies have done in Africa, I think we can be proud.

Of course, there's still a lot that needs to be done. Of course, regulation needs to be made even more stringent. Of course, before entering into a trade agreement, we need to make sure our companies remain accountable. I fully agree with you on that.

That said, what I want to emphasize here is that Africans are already familiar with mining companies, whether they are registered or exist only as a post office box. I believe we have legitimate mining companies that create many jobs, contribute their expertise and act responsibly, as I myself have experienced. They are not all the same. There is competition that isn't always Canadian. This creates a certain ambiguity, where it's sometimes unclear whether a mining company is Canadian or not. For my part, I've experienced it first-hand, and I've seen how certain mining companies operate in Africa.

Finally, I would say that African governments themselves are in the process of re-examining their corporate social responsibility policies. As co-chair of the Canada–Africa Parliamentary Association, I recently learned that Senegal is in the process of revising its legislation to make companies doing business in the country much more accountable. There is a resurgence of nationalism in Africa, and Canada can support that.

• (1145)

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Thank you.

I want to clarify, of course, that I wasn't referring to all Canadian mining companies. As with anything else, it's the names of the companies that act improperly that tend to stick. When we find that the regulatory framework is too lax, it allows certain mining companies to behave badly, which ultimately harms the reputation of the entire sector.

Mr. Tétreault, there was an inaccuracy in your testimony. You began by saying you were nervous about being here. That wasn't the impression we had. You didn't seem particularly uncomfortable at all. Thank you for being with us.

Earlier, you asked whether we would go into the jungle alone. What would worry me most in the jungle—aside from getting lost—would be being eaten.

You also mentioned Chinese colonialism in this context. Given that form of colonialism, is there a risk in sending companies from here over there?

**Sylvain Tétreault:** The business model I advocate is one based on sharing expertise. Establishing a presence in Africa means entering into competition with China.

If we want to position ourselves and claim our share of the market, we must not do so using the same approach as those colonial powers. Instead, let's sell our expertise and support Africans in the spirit of “by and for” Africans. That kind of partnership will last for decades.

It's similar to setting up operations in Europe. When you establish yourself in other countries, there are rules and laws to follow. The risks are inherently too high. Let the colonial powers keep their role. Instead, let's position ourselves where we are strongest. In certain areas, we have greater expertise than the Chinese, the Russians and even the Americans. We've talked about mining. It's remarkable how much Americans would like to be partnered with Canadian mining companies. You see, that's a completely different angle of approach. Let's not operate in the same way as the superpowers.

I don't know if that answers your question.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. McKenzie, you have five minutes, please.

**David McKenzie (Calgary Signal Hill, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator, if I might, I'd like to ask you about the overarching structure and trade agreements. Often, our trade is realized compa-

ny to company and business to business, but under a framework that our trade agreements provide—an umbrella, if you will.

I wonder if you have an opinion as to where we stand with individual company or country trade agreements in Africa or anything that encompasses trading blocs. Where do we need to go with respect to these things?

**Hon. Amina Gerba:** If you'll allow me, I will answer in French.

[*Translation*]

Canada has trade agreements with every continent. However, we don't have any trade agreements with African countries. That's one point.

Where should we begin? As I've said before, the Government of Canada must start by accepting the fact that Africa is a market. I repeat: It must accept the fact that Africa is a market. In addition, it must organize Team Canada trade missions to Africa, which would allow us to better understand how to approach the African context.

Here, we tend to generalize Africa. Africa is made up of 54 countries. Today, we're talking about North Africa and West Africa, which are much more francophone, even though Nigeria is the economic engine of the continent. If we approach the Nigerian market, that gives us immediate access to a market of 400 million potential consumers across West Africa. That's a fact. In Nigeria, you find every sector, including digital technologies, housing, mining and agri-food. Nigeria can serve as a starting point in all the sectors where Canada is active.

On the francophone side, I mentioned Côte d'Ivoire, which gives us access to all francophone markets. It can serve as a hub for us. We're talking about all francophone markets in West Africa, in other words, just a few hours from Dakar, Benin and elsewhere. We can establish ourselves in these countries and gain an overall view and a foothold in African markets.

• (1150)

[*English*]

**David McKenzie:** Senator, I believe that Canada is the fortunate home of many who have their roots in Africa. We have an African diaspora.

You talked a bit about the trade commissioner service and the promotion of trade. I'm wondering what efforts we might make domestically to promote, assist and support Africans or individuals of African heritage who make their home in Canada to do business in Africa. Obviously, they are individuals who would know countries in Africa well.

Can you talk about what the trade commissioner service can do domestically here in Canada to promote trade with Africa?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Amina Gerba:** This question does indeed give me the opportunity to highlight the role of the African diaspora, which naturally—and I want to stress this term—represents the economic bridge we're looking for.

How can we activate the African diaspora? We need to be able to put in place a mechanism for dialogue and coordination with members of the diaspora. They are everywhere.

I've met many of them recently—a great many. As the Senate report points out, we need to establish a mechanism that allows us to engage with this diaspora, which is diverse, present in all sectors and brings a wide range of expertise. However, it's missing something fundamental: information and resources. The diaspora isn't even aware that FinDev Canada is active in Africa, and FinDev Canada isn't aware that the diaspora can be a tool for entering the continent and reducing risk in Africa.

From what I've heard, members of the diaspora aren't even aware that Export Development Canada and the Trade Commissioner Service can support them. We need this mechanism for dialogue and listening. I'm talking about a permanent council on relations relating to Africa in Canada, of which the diaspora would be an active member. Let me say that again: The diaspora would be an active member.

When it comes to the diaspora, there are two things: The diaspora needs funding, and the diaspora does not lack initiatives—there are plenty of them. I see them every day. Since Canada's Africa Strategy was released, I've seen just how active the diaspora is. It wants to get involved. We therefore need an investment fund specifically dedicated to the diaspora, which is a—

[English]

**The Chair:** I'm so sorry to interrupt. I know you're trying to get all your points across, but I'm trying to give members the opportunity to ask the questions.

Mr. Fonseca, go ahead, please.

**Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank you, our wonderful, tremendous witnesses, Senator Gerba and Monsieur Tétreault, because of the passion, the experience and the knowledge you bring.

Senator Gerba, you've travelled to 40 countries throughout Africa.

Monsieur Tétreault, I wish we could harness all of the experience you bring.

You are true champions for trade between Canada and Africa. That's what we need to see with the goals we've set and with what we want to achieve.

I want to ask you both to take us through an experience where you've helped a firm, an organization or a company, either an SME or a larger company, to navigate and increase their trade with Africa. Could you take us through a bit of a case study?

We could start with you, Senator Gerba.

**Hon. Amina Gerba :** I will talk about myself and my companies. I'm not involved in those companies anymore.

• (1155)

[Translation]

I've been an entrepreneur since 1995. I established some companies that were primarily focused on Africa. It's not enough to say that Africa has resources; we must make the most of them.

I chose an important sector, among others, because I wear many hats. The company I'm going to talk about is a cosmetics business. I travelled to Burkina Faso in 1996. I met women who produced shea butter. These women needed to promote their product—their raw material—in North America.

I returned with 500 grams of shea butter. I started knocking on the doors of agri-food and cosmetics manufacturers, but nobody was familiar with this ingredient. I decided to open my own shea butter processing plant in Laval.

I also established a social fund for women, and this plant has since made it possible to support more than 2,000 women in Burkina Faso. We have the advantage of taking social responsibility seriously in Canada. This social fund enabled us to set up a health mutual, which provided these women with free medication and health care. It's an experience that I hope every one of our businesses will bring to Africa.

Go and see for yourself, because Africa can't be fully understood through words alone. As Mr. Tétreault says, Africa is something you have to experience, and anything is possible there.

[English]

**Peter Fonseca:** Congratulations.

Monsieur Tétreault.

[Translation]

**Sylvain Tétreault:** I told you about AmeriCan Structures, a company in Thetford Mines that specializes in prefabricated homes. In the coming weeks, the entire housing component and everything related to it will be rolled out. A residential neighbourhood isn't just dwellings; it also has sewers and electricity.

There's also a huge need in terms of waste and recycling in Africa. So I'm working with a company that has expertise in sorting recycling, in waste management. I'm showing them the advantage of training good fishers, because it doesn't happen automatically. We're used to selling our products and services in business. Selling expertise is a bit abstract. But they've understood the principle that they could do it from one country to another.

There are countless cases like this. I'm just waiting for our irritants to be removed. But don't worry, members. The senator and I will pave the way for you. Isn't that right, Senator?

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll move on to Monsieur Savard-Tremblay for a tight two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to pick up where we left off when you were speaking about sharing skills and expertise, Mr. Tétreault. Is that sharing done directly with the public institutions there, or is it done with the companies, the powers you were talking about, which will be there?

**Sylvain Tétreault:** That's a good question. The people buying the expertise are business people, rightly supported by the government. Let's take the example of prefabricated wooden homes. The forests are owned by the government. Sawmills and prefabrication plants are private companies. However, by necessity, you can't do business in Africa without state intervention. However, the government must be given a much more limited role. You have to focus on the business people. The funding is there. It's all there. It's just a matter of convincing Africans to come here.

As an aside, the right symbolic gesture we could make to show Africa that Canada is serious would be to plan a Canada-Africa economic summit in the next few weeks and to bring stakeholders here from a dozen countries, people from the political realm. It would be a strong symbol that would help us show that the United States is one thing, but there's so much more than the United States: There's also Africa.

Senator, you and I could organize that together.

**Hon. Amina Gerba:** I'll take this opportunity to wrap up on the idea of a summit like this. All of our partners in Japan, France, China and Italy are already holding summits. Canada never thought of that. It would be a great idea to put in place.

**Sylvain Tétreault:** With the contacts we have, we'd get it done in a few weeks. This is serious. We have to stop talking, we have to move on this, because we're going to miss the boat if we waste another year or two going around in circles. We have a huge opportunity.

Before the meeting, I sent a photo of myself to my African network. They all wished me well. They want to do business with Canadians. There are those who don't want to work with us; we won't say which ones, but there are those who want to work with us. Why not invite them and show them all the great expertise we have?

• (1200)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** It's a wonderful idea. We should immediately start working on that. Thank you so much.

Mr. Lavoie, go ahead, please, for five minutes. He's our last person.

[*Translation*]

**Steve Lavoie (Beauport—Limoilou, Lib.):** Good afternoon.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us. It's fascinating. I echo my colleagues in telling you that your enthusiasm is infectious.

I'm going to play another role today. In my previous life, I was a banker for 20 years. I had both individuals and businesses as clients. The role we played with businesses was to meet with their representatives who were looking for financing, to understand the

market these businesses were operating in, to get to know their executives, to see if there were any barriers that might hinder their entry into the market and to understand how they did business. After that, we had to convince our credit sector. There was a Chinese wall between the two, because we really had to study business development.

I'm going to kind of play devil's advocate here. When the file got to the credit people, they looked for all the blind spots, because the goal of a bank that lends money is to ensure the sustainability of a business. The business has to be sustainable. That's the goal. The goal isn't to put them in a tight spot. So the credit people were looking for blind spots.

Witnesses, we're going to play the game with you today. What are the blind spots? Why is Canada not at the table like some countries are today? Tell me about the blind spots that need to be looked at, what's holding things up, because if things are being held up, there's a reason for that. I want to know what those blind spots are.

Do you understand what I'm getting at? You told me about everything that works well, everything that could work, and I believe you. However, we have to be realistic. There are things going on in this world that we have to be careful about. What are our blind spots with Africa?

When you know the blind spots, you're able to react well. That's the purpose of my question.

Maybe I'll start with you, Senator Gerba, and then I'll go to you, Mr. Tétreault.

**Sylvain Tétreault:** We can reassure the banker.

**Steve Lavoie:** Reassuring the banker, that's it, you got it.

**Hon. Amina Gerba:** That's a very good question. The first blind spot is risk analysis.

At Export Development Canada, I found that the risk in the African market was exaggerated. I've experienced it. I told you about my products. I've sold in most of the francophone countries in Africa. However, when I went to get my insurance, I saw differences between—

**Steve Lavoie:** Are you talking about Export Development Canada's insurance?

**Hon. Amina Gerba:** Exactly. I saw the difference between the insurance policy I was being sold for the U.S. market and the one I was being sold for Mali. It's unbelievable.

The bank will look into it. The bank ended up funding my operations because they deemed them to be profitable. So before the bank—because the banks work with Export Development Canada—accepts this blind spot from EDC, EDC has to guarantee credit in some cases.

**Steve Lavoie:** Yes, and you agree that EDC plays that role to some extent in those blind spots for banks to enable them to do business directly. If EDC weren't there, the banks wouldn't be lending directly.

**Hon. Amina Gerba:** Does EDC ask the same questions when it comes to Asian markets? I doubt it. It's because we, the government, have already made it clear to EDC that this is a priority market.

Let's focus on the word "priority". Until there's a political will to remove risk from Africa, to open up to Africa, to organize summits, to go like everybody else with a Team Canada approach including ministers and the Prime Minister, to say that we want—

• (1205)

**Steeve Lavoie:** Let's stick to the blind spots. I'm sorry, Senator Gerba, I see that time is running out.

Maybe we can hear what Mr. Tétreault has to say.

[English]

**The Chair:** Make it very short, please.

[Translation]

**Sylvain Tétreault:** That's a very good point. If you look at the history of Canadian trade over the years, a lot of it has been with the United States. It was easy. There was little to no risk. So we're used to that. We haven't developed a culture of risk. If we want to do business elsewhere, whether in China or across Africa, we have to develop a culture of risk and bank guarantees must be front and centre.

I also connect people for gold, fuel or lithium delivery. These are big projects worth billions of dollars. I just closed a \$4-billion deal in gold. It was done remotely by bank guarantee. It's crazy! Why couldn't we do that? We have to develop that culture. We have to educate the banks a little to show them we can do business by getting our ducks in a row, as they say, through international bank guarantees. Look, there are banks that make these guarantees.

You make a good point. If you do business, you have to get paid.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

[Translation]

**Sylvain Tétreault:** If we have the same cultural approach with the United States as we do with Africa, we won't succeed. Do you see what I mean, Mr. Lavoie?

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Tétreault.

Senator, you just—

[Translation]

**Hon. Amina Gerba:** I just want to add something. The others do bank guarantees. China is succeeding precisely because China has set up financial tools specifically for Africa. We're not even thinking about it yet.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. I think you have us all very excited and informed about this study and the many opportunities that are clearly there, which I hope will come out as a result of the work the committee is doing.

Thank you very much to both of you.

We will suspend for a moment while we switch to our next panellists.

• (1205)

(Pause)

• (1212)

**The Chair:** I'm calling the meeting back to order.

I have a question for Mr. Savard-Tremblay regarding his motion about Taiwan.

We haven't yet been able to get the Minister of International Trade to attend the committee, which is what the motion calls for. Would you be satisfied if we could get the Minister of Foreign Affairs to attend?

[Translation]

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** It's better to have someone than no one, but we can also arrange to invite the Minister of International Trade, because if I'm not mistaken, this agreement falls directly under his purview. So I think it would still be preferable for us to have him explain.

[English]

**The Chair:** We will continue to pursue that. He has been travelling a lot and hasn't been available, but we will continue to pursue it.

[Translation]

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Unless I'm mistaken and the Minister of Foreign Affairs is central to this negotiation, to my knowledge, it's the Minister of International Trade. Can you confirm that information first?

[English]

**The Chair:** We will pursue Minister Sidhu over the next six weeks if he's in Canada.

If he's not available, would you like the clerk to reach out to the Minister of Foreign Affairs to see if she can attend?

[Translation]

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** If we know that the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development was involved in the file and that the minister is able to give us the straight goods, then that's fine.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll get started with this panel. We have with us, from Québec International, Carl Viel, president and chief executive officer. We have, as an individual, David Collins, professor, international economic law. We invited him back because we had insufficient time with him when he was with us previously. From the Chambre de commerce Québec-Afrique, we have Mr. Athounhin, chief executive officer. All are attending by video conference.

Mr. Viel, the others already gave their opening remarks when they were here previously. You have up to five minutes for your opening remarks, and then we will go to the committee for questions of all three people.

• (1215)

[*Translation*]

**Carl Viel (President and Chief Executive Officer, Québec International):** Ladies and gentlemen, Madam Chair, esteemed members of the committee, thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to discuss Canada's trade relations with North Africa and West Africa, which has high strategic potential for our economy.

As a leading partner in regional economic development, Québec International helps businesses expand to accelerate their success in Quebec, Canada and abroad, sustainably and inclusively.

As an economic development agency for the greater Quebec City region, Québec International strives to attract international investment and entrepreneurship, attract and retain talent, support technological entrepreneurship, productivity and innovation, and promote our business environment. Another part of our mission is market development, a key driver to support business growth.

For the vast majority of Canadian and Quebec businesses, the United States remains the main export market, particularly because of its geographic proximity. For example, over 73% of Quebec's international exports are destined for the U.S. market.

However, the past year has clearly shown the limits of overly concentrating trade in a single market. Trade tensions and the announcement of tariffs have brought to light the strategic importance of diversifying our markets and business partners. This didn't manifest as an option. It was a necessity.

However, there are challenges in developing new markets. Because of the geographic distance and sometimes limited knowledge of its business ecosystem, Africa is not yet a natural go-to market for Canadian companies, whereas the U.S. and some European countries, including France, certainly are. However, just because that reflex doesn't exist, it doesn't mean those markets don't have real potential.

The francophonie is a major driver here. According to the Organisation internationale de la francophonie, there were about 396 million francophones on the five continents in 2025, and nearly 65% of them live in Africa. By 2050, close to 590 million people could speak French, and approximately 90% of those French speakers would be in Africa.

In this context, it seems particularly strategic to focus on French-speaking countries in North Africa and West Africa. The fact that the majority of countries where French is spoken share a common language facilitates forging ties, reduces cultural barriers, fosters trust and accelerates trade relations. That's a real competitive advantage for Canadian businesses.

This is coupled with a strong demographic and economic dynamic. These regions are experiencing a population boom, they have a high proportion of young people and their middle class is emerging, and that all generates a growing need for infrastructure, technology,

services and sustainable solutions. This vibrancy makes Africa a key market to consider in the medium and long term.

It's also important to note that, like Canada, the economies of many countries in North Africa and West Africa rely heavily on small and medium-sized businesses, among others. However, SMEs need support to succeed internationally, to understand local practices, to identify good partners, to assess risk, to structure their funding and to know how to do business on the ground.

In this context, support from recognized and complementary organizations is essential. Some players, like Export Development Canada, which was referred to earlier, play a key role in providing businesses with risk management support, particularly to ensure access to financing and help secure transactions in emerging markets. Québec International acts as a strategic gateway by supporting businesses upstream to prepare exports, develop market intelligence and connect with structured business ecosystems. This complementarity reduces barriers to entry and significantly increases the chances of success for Canadian businesses, particularly in high-potential markets like Africa.

Le Rendez-vous d'affaires de la Francophonie de Québec, which will be hosting its third edition May 20-21 in Quebec City, was created precisely to respond to these challenges. The purpose of this event is to foster economic exchanges and partnerships in the francophone space.

• (1220)

In 2024, more than 1,000 business meetings were held as part of the event, and we estimate that the economic benefits generated were over \$10 million. Of the 25 countries represented at the event, 40% were from North Africa and West Africa, which clearly shows the interest and potential of those markets. Organized by Québec International and the Québec City Convention Centre, the Rendez-vous d'affaires de la Francophonie de Québec is a real springboard for Canadian businesses wishing to explore, understand and develop lasting relationships with Africa.

In conclusion, if Canada wants to take full advantage of the economic dynamics of North Africa and West Africa, it must strengthen its presence on the African continent, effectively leverage the francophonie as a driver for growth, and focus on structured support approaches and concrete networking platforms. It is by turning linguistic and cultural affinities into sustainable economic partnerships that Canada can consider strengthening its position and contributing to shared prosperity with its African partners.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. Groleau, please go ahead for six minutes.

[Translation]

**Jason Groleau:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our esteemed guests for being here.

I'll start with you, Mr. Viel. We have a beautiful bilingual country. We speak French, especially in Quebec City, as well as in Beauce. There are three francophonies: the one in Europe, the one in Quebec and the one in Beauce. I'm kidding. More seriously, what doors does the language open in terms of business development opportunities with West Africa and North Africa?

**Carl Viel:** I would simply say that, yes, there are business opportunities with Africa.

First, as I said in my opening remarks, I think we're used to it. This was mentioned by the people who appeared earlier, Mr. Tétreault and Senator Gerba: We have to focus on diversification. We have this opportunity on both fronts, namely North Africa and West Africa. We talked earlier about Nigeria, which is a more anglophone market, as well as a fast-growing country. We have language in common.

The goal of what we do, including the Rendez-vous d'affaires de la Francophonie de Québec, is to take advantage of the fact that the French language is the only one, alongside English, that is present on the five continents. How exactly can we work to develop relationships to help our businesses?

When we go to other countries, we really have to make sure that we're going to support and help businesses. These are countries we have less experience with. It's important to take the time and bring people along. Companies aren't going to successfully do business after a single visit or a single trade mission. It's important to develop contacts and provide them with good support. Africa is a fast-growing continent, and it's important to seize the opportunities that are opening up to businesses.

**Jason Groleau:** What are the priority opportunities?

**Carl Viel:** There are a number of them. Some were mentioned earlier, such as the digital transformation aspect. Some countries have made great strides in the use of digital technology. We're talking about infrastructure. We also talked earlier about the mining sector, which has many facets. There could also be more online businesses related to agri-food or forestry, among others. There are a number of possibilities that can vary from one country to another. We have to see how we can seize them. In North America, there is a lot of talk about digital technology, which has a lot of potential.

When we look at Nigeria, as the senator mentioned earlier, there are plenty of areas where we can develop relationships. It's up to us to seize them. Unfortunately, we have to properly educate and train our people so that they're aware of the opportunities available in these countries, they understand how they will go about it and they make sure they have a good strategy if they go to one or more of the countries.

**Jason Groleau:** Thank you.

Mr. Parfait Aïhounhin, I'll ask you the same question: What do you think are the biggest opportunities for win-win agreements with Africa?

**Sègbédji Parfait Aïhounhin (Chief Executive Officer, Chambre de commerce Québec-Afrique):** They are in the agribusiness and agricultural technology sector; the energy sector, especially renewable energy; the digital sector; logistics; traceability; infrastructure and mining, to name a few.

The chamber of commerce did a study that led to the drafting of the strategic plan, and it was the high-value-added sectors that emerged.

• (1225)

**Jason Groleau:** Do you also see speaking French as a big advantage?

**Sègbédji Parfait Aïhounhin:** Absolutely. That's the case in all the sectors I just mentioned.

If I take the agribusiness and agricultural technology sector as an example, Canada has strengths in agricultural technology, as well as in standards, finance, trade and export support. The same is true in all the other sectors, so the potential is there.

We at the chamber of commerce believe there needs to be a complete paradigm shift. It's important to move away from the traditional angle of buying and selling raw materials to instead coproduce things. I think the senator and Mr. Tétreault spoke to that very well.

**Jason Groleau:** I'm going to come back to you, Mr. Viel.

You talked about productivity and talent retention. Last month, the unemployment rate in Quebec was 2.6%. Do we have the capacity to produce? Are we able to be competitive in terms of labour? I say this because it seems to be a problem in your sector and, as you know, in mine, in Beauce.

**Carl Viel:** I'll echo the comments that were just made. It's important to target the right sectors. In the Quebec City region, we're fortunate to have many businesses involved in secondary and tertiary processing, which helps us deal with the situation we're experiencing because of the tariffs.

The other aspect concerns the entire services component we just talked about, such as the digital component.

The agricultural component is also key. In fact, we had a webinar with people from Africa yesterday morning. The questions, particularly from their side, were about how we can help them export products from the agri-food sector or other sectors. That's because for them, Canada and Quebec are markets they still need to get to know. We have to help one another to help our businesses go to Africa, and to help African businesses market their products in Canada. I'm also thinking of the example from the senator, who went to a country, brought back a product, processed it and helped reinvest in the community. These are win-win examples for both sides that enable us to go further.

We can think about how to import agri-food products, such as olive oil, from certain North African countries. The right players need to be put in contact. On both sides, we need to understand the regulations and limitations on how to bring products in and how to proceed.

It's important to support and help our people so that they succeed and they understand how business is possible on both sides. Putting people in contact is one of the objectives we want to pursue through our Rendez-vous d'affaires de la Francophonie de Québec in May.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Viel.

We'll go on to Madame Lapointe, please.

[Translation]

**Linda Lapointe:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Welcome to the witnesses.

Thank you for joining us again, Mr. Collins and Mr. Aïhounhin.

Mr. Viel, that was very interesting. You just mentioned Québec International. Earlier, you talked about the importance of understanding the markets. We heard from the senator and Mr. Tétreault about this. How would you implement tools specifically to help with understanding markets?

**Carl Viel:** There are a number of ways to approach this.

One of the first things that is often proposed is an explanation of how to do business in various countries. Several have been mentioned, so I won't pick out one in particular. We need to enable our businesses to have discussions with the country's authorities to fully understand how to interact, enter the country and do business there. The same has to be done for an entrepreneur from another country who wants to come here. It's a matter of fully understanding the workings and the processes.

A business that wants to sell a product or a service of some kind in a country has to make an initial decision: set up shop there, or look for a local partner that will become the distributor of its product. I'm just using those two examples, but the choice of legal structure is another factor that has to be considered afterward. How can the business create a subsidiary, in a given country, that will adapt from one country to another? The business can then decide to establish a home base. Earlier, the senator gave an example in which Cameroon or Côte d'Ivoire served as a base. In such a scenario, it's important to think about how the business will be able to sell to certain other countries on the continent. There are all these factors to take into account. There may also be tariff barriers between two countries. Businesses need to clearly understand how to set up their structures and how to go about doing things. From there, are they taking on a partner? How are they going to do that? How do they establish this bond of trust with the person who will become the company's representative in a country?

On our end, we often start by offering a seminar that will give people an initial understanding of the market and the organizations that can help them, both in Canada and, down the road, in the country in Africa.

We then often try to set up a trade mission so that people can actually visit the country, meet people and make initial contacts. It's about trying to develop that network. Whether in Africa or in other countries, you can't go to a country just once and hope for the best. Yes, it can happen, but developing interpersonal relationships and

transactions is what will enable businesses to move forward to establish themselves and succeed.

Another aspect we could address involves calls for tenders. We touched on this earlier: This is another element that has to be clearly understood. There may be very specific needs in terms of construction or the development of various elements. That means it's important to fully understand and properly respond to the needs of a business or corporation.

There are a number of steps, but it's important to also take the time to go and see things. Even in other countries, sometimes people haven't adopted certain practices before arriving, which can create risks for the corporation.

● (1230)

**Linda Lapointe:** Thank you very much.

What would you improve about Export Development Canada and the government agencies? Also, what are your suggestions for the departments to work together?

I'll give you the floor, Mr. Viel, but I'd still like to hear the comments of the other two witnesses.

**Carl Viel:** I'll make a few comments. This was mentioned.

I think Export Development Canada is an important element, precisely for minimizing the risks for businesses that want to go to different countries, including those in Africa. That makes it important, because businesses have to be able to make sure that if, for example, they sell prefabricated homes in a given country tomorrow morning, they have a third party to ensure that they'll be paid, and so on. That's the first aspect.

The second aspect is the importance of having access to embassy or consulate staff to establish ties, gain a clear understanding and get help in terms of making connections and determining the way work will be done. If, tomorrow morning, a business is going to contact a department in a country, such as a mining department or a digital affairs department, it has to know how to work with that department and how to do business.

I was just with some young people from Laval University who are in the process of signing a training agreement—which also has an export component—with Gabon. It's important to know how to go about it and how to set up the process. All those things have to be well managed.

I have to say that we have often been very good at setting up agreements, but we also have to be very good at getting the full benefits. We don't have any with the continent, so it's up to the government to determine the best way forward. However, after that, we will also have to be very good at taking action so that our businesses can fully benefit from trade agreements.

I will stop there to allow others to speak as well.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you all very much.

We will move on now to Mr. Savard-Tremblay.

[*Translation*]

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would also like to thank the witnesses for their opening remarks.

Mr. Aïhounhin, we started some discussions during your previous testimony. We had time to finish some questions. However, let's continue.

I have a technical question first. You often mention the strategic plan. However, it didn't turn up when my team did a quick search on your website. Where can we find it?

**Sègbédji Parfait Aïhounhin:** We developed the strategic plan. We're currently redoing the website, so that's why you didn't find it there. I can send you a copy.

• (1235)

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** I think it could be of interest to all committee members.

Let us now go back to what you discussed in your testimony and in some of the exchanges last time: the issue of traceability. You talked about 90% traceability. First, remind us why this is important. Second, tell us whether it's realistic, because we know that in some supply chains, informal work is often quite significant.

**Sègbédji Parfait Aïhounhin:** Thank you for your very relevant question.

If I may, I'll return to the issue of facilitation tools before coming back to traceability.

The facilitation tools exist, including commercial financing from Export Development Canada, Investissement Québec, Québec International and CanExport SMEs.

However, we at the Chamber of Commerce think these tools need to be strengthened. In addition, there needs to be support for certification and standards, which leads to the issue of traceability. Here, the standards are quite high and few companies in Africa have access to these international standards. If we want to do business with companies in Africa, we need certification support.

We also need to strengthen logistical support and shorten transit times. If there is no traceability on what is produced or processed in Africa, once it arrives at customs, customs officers are forced to remove the goods from the container and check the contents one by one. That's what happens. If the goods are traced, they can scan a QR code and get all the information on them, such as where the seed was planted, where it was produced and where it was processed. Traceability is therefore becoming a central issue in the trade that will be conducted.

The other thing that needs to be strengthened is information about markets and risks. I'll leave it at that in terms of facilitation tools.

Now, let's go back to the question you asked about traceability. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] of trade.

Our strategic plan has four pillars. The first is a collaborative traceability platform. It uses harmonization to connect African and

Quebec producers, processors and distributors. The platform will serve as a tool for strategic monitoring, logistical follow-up and regulatory compliance. In doing so, it will strengthen many aspects of international trade between Canada and Africa.

There are already ongoing activities, as Carl Viel from Quebec International said. Meetings are being held to promote that. However, a commercial platform, where businesses can find each other and do business directly without a lot of intermediaries, will encourage trade and reduce the time it takes to transit through customs.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Madam Chair, I'd like to know how much time I have left.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have one minute and 40 seconds.

[*Translation*]

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Aïhounhin, thank you for your answer.

I understand that it's realistic, but on condition that it be aligned with new technologies, such as the QR code you mentioned. Otherwise, it's unfeasible.

**Sègbédji Parfait Aïhounhin:** Yes. That's why, in my remarks earlier, I said that what the Chamber of Commerce is proposing is no longer a way to buy raw materials and process them, but rather co-production throughout the chain. The smiling curve features research, development, assembly, sales and distribution. Throughout the production chain, we will have to think about co-production.

In his remarks before ours, Mr. Tétreault said that we need to position ourselves differently. The other players on the ground, such as China, Russia and the United States, have their own approaches and methods.

How can we gain more markets? What is the language that current African leaders are using? If we listen and follow African geopolitics a little, we'll see. I think Senator Gerba mentioned this: Africa is nationalizing. If we want to go and work with Africans, we have to think like them, hence the proposal we are making. You have to co-produce.

Consequently, we need to put in place the tools required for co-production, train companies to adopt this way of thinking and penetrate the African markets available to us. Canada has the cachet in various sectors required to move forward with Africa. Therefore, it is up to Canada to position itself better.

• (1240)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Aïhounhin. I apologize, but I have to interrupt and get on to the next member.

Mr. McKenzie, go ahead, please.

**David McKenzie:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

There are so many levels to trade and so many different parts that must all work together. I'm going to ask Mr. Collins if he might be in a position to comment specifically about the African continental free trade area.

Could you update the committee on what is happening with the efforts taking place in Africa? Specifically, did they present an opportunity for Canada to plug in? Is that one of the routes the federal government, the Government of Canada, can take to create what I referred to in the first panel as the “umbrella” under which much trade activity must in fact take place?

**David Collins (Professor, International Economic Law, As an Individual):** Thank you very much, Mr. McKenzie. I'm so pleased that you asked me that. I was hoping to work in a comment on the African continental free trade agreement. Now you've given me the opportunity.

This is an amazing development that's unfolded over Africa in the last few years. It's the largest free trade agreement by number of countries, and probably coming close by population, but GDP not so much. I think it's an enormous opportunity, to answer your question.

Just to be clear, the continental free trade agreement is only a free trade agreement. It's not a customs union—not yet. It doesn't negotiate trade agreements as a bloc. I suspect that in the coming years—let's say decades—Africa will probably turn into a customs union. Maybe that's my wishful thinking, but I wouldn't be surprised if the African countries did indeed develop a unified trade policy vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

Until that happens, Canada can't really negotiate directly with the African continental free trade agreement. However, that doesn't mean it can't take advantage of the collective approach the continent is taking on things like the harmonization of standards and things like non-trade barriers.

Canada cannot participate directly in the secretariat as an observer of the African continental free trade agreement, but it can participate informally in the committees with respect to capacity building, technical assistance and helping African countries perhaps achieve the same level of harmonization in Canada by using its experience doing this with its trade partners. I definitely think that this is a very valuable opportunity. It's a wonderful thing for the rest of the world, and it's especially a good thing for Africans.

To follow up on a point made by one of the earlier speakers, if a Canadian business wants to invest in a particular African country with a view to accessing other countries around Africa to have, let's say, an integrated supply chain, it will have to deal with all of the internal African trade barriers. In light of the African continental free trade agreement, these barriers should come down. Even if they're not completely down—and by no means are they completely down; there are some there, especially customs issues at borders—this would be a way of identifying what the barriers are, and then work can be done in tandem with African countries to bring them down and help harmonize them. It's very much a valuable opportunity.

**David McKenzie:** Sir, to follow up on this, there are other nations around the world that wish to exert influence in Africa. China

is one. To the extent that they are there now and have influence, it would seem to me that the lending of technical expertise, as you're describing, not only plays to Canadian strengths but allows us to be in that area, to be developing relationships and, frankly, to be assisting African economic development in the various member countries.

Does that help us to push back against some of the influence efforts of other countries whose purity may not be what ours is?

• (1245)

**David Collins:** Yes, very much so. I like the way you phrased that diplomatically. I think you used words that are similar to what I would have said.

I don't think Canada should position itself confrontationally vis-à-vis China in Africa, but I think you're right to suggest that perhaps the Chinese presence in Africa has been a somewhat exploitative one. It's one in which a dependency has been generated.

Now, let's not undermine the vast infrastructure contributions that Chinese companies have made in Africa. They have been enormous, and I wouldn't purport to suggest that Canada could rival what China has done in those areas, but Canadian businesses can achieve other developments, such as capacity, training and technical expertise, in certain more specific industries. Canada can add a value or ethically driven investment that's more sustainable and more focused on the long term for long-term gain, training Africans to do things themselves rather than this somewhat one-sided arrangement that China has done. This is precisely the way it could be done—certainly not infrastructure, but technologically focused in specific sectors.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Lavoie, please go ahead for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Steeve Lavoie:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us today.

I am going to indulge in a bit of flag-waving today and commend Mr. Viel from Québec International, with whom I had the opportunity to work for a number of years. According to Mr. Viel's expertise, it is clear that an organization like Québec International is essential to a market. It is essential for opening markets to our businesses. It acts as a facilitator. I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge the work of this organization in international trade. In short, an organization like Québec International is essential.

Mr. Viel, I would now like to ask you my first question. I took note of the statistic you mentioned that 73% of Quebec's international exports go to the United States. We've talked a lot about diversification. There's a lot of talk about it, and as a former banker, I'm glad we're talking about it. I think it's high time we talked about it, because it's important.

I would like you to tell me about Quebec City businesses. Let's stick to Quebec City businesses.

You talked about sectors. In fact, that was one of my questions. You answered a question earlier. You talked about sectors including agri-food, forestry and mining. You used a lot of technical terms and talked about how things work when you travel there. You gave some concrete examples. You took part in activities as part of the Rendez-vous d'affaires de la Francophonie, whose objective is to rally businesses.

Do you have a few concrete examples of Quebec City businesses that have managed to succeed and achieve concrete results thanks to all that?

**Carl Viel:** Thank you for your question and your comments about the organization, Mr. Lavoie.

I'll draw a parallel with what the senator mentioned earlier. Keep in mind the diaspora, another factor that plays a role. In our case, we have concrete examples of businesses that originate in Quebec City but are run by people who come from African countries and that we have helped to build an implementation process.

I'm thinking, for example, of Momentum Technologies, a computer services company in Quebec City that was founded by a Quebecker and then sold to other company shareholders from Tunisia. We helped them get a foothold in the market by using Tunisia as a hub to develop the services side. That's a concrete example.

The second example is CGI, another technology company, which is now headquartered in another city. We've done a lot of work with them. I'm drawing a parallel because this is a company that initially focused on talent, but realized that there was talent in the market and that there was also an advantage to setting up shop and then using its base as a hub to develop the sector.

I won't list them all, but there is also Norda Stelo, another company in the region that has done significant things.

To come back to what Mr. Collins mentioned earlier, it's also important to take into account the fact that we're there long-term, on a permanent basis, whereas other players might have different objectives. We need to emphasize the Canadian aspect.

Another thing that Mr. Aïhounhin mentioned earlier about the diaspora is that we need to use the networks we have here to help our businesses get to market and move faster. As an African proverb says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." It's about seeing how everyone can work together to help our businesses.

These are important steps. It's a market full of opportunity that's waiting to be recognized. It's a changing continent. Some countries are moving very quickly on processing, but that's necessary. That's why we want to support them long-term and move forward with

them by adopting an approach that allows them to stand out from other countries in the way they do business in Africa.

• (1250)

**Steve Lavoie:** Thank you, Mr. Viel.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Savard-Tremblay for two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Thank you.

Mr. Viel, I think you were following the proceedings in the first hour. You must have heard the presentations, including the rather colourful one given by Mr. Tétreault. He identified a lot of barriers, and his business plan was quite specific. He was talking about sharing expertise.

Do you agree with his framing of the kind of obstacles we face and the way we should proceed?

**Carl Viel:** In connection with the question asked in the first hour by Mr. Lavoie about risks, it is definitely important to have a good plan and to have people here who have networks and can help us fully understand how to operate in a country that people may be less familiar with. It's important to have a diaspora and then to have access to resources in the embassies, who help us mitigate risk.

Next, it's important to look at the opportunities. Often, there are aspects, such as intellectual property, that are not taken into consideration when we arrive. Earlier, we talked about the entire traceability component, but these are important aspects. In some cases, it's a matter of safety. There are consumable products coming in or leaving, including medical products in the health sector. Traceability is therefore very important on both sides to ensure that we meet evolving needs and standards. In many cases, standards from certain countries, often from the European community, will later have an impact here in Canada, and then in Africa.

We have to take these factors into consideration to determine how we're going to respond properly, both here and in other countries, in Africa or elsewhere in the world. You have to have a good game plan and build those relationships, which takes time. We have to increase our involvement, be competitive and play the Canadian card.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Chambers, go ahead for five minutes, please.

**Adam Chambers (Simcoe North, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Collins, welcome back. It's a pleasure to have you again. The last time you were here, we chatted about some of the opportunities in terms of what you believe are excellent places to start. I recall you mentioned Morocco.

I want to ask your opinion. Some of the countries we've heard about this morning in both panels still have travel advisories in place through Global Affairs Canada. They have other warnings through third party NGOs or other observers with respect to not just the safety of people but also business certainty.

From your perspective, is there a good resource, index or third party reference that businesses or people could look at for an evaluation of not just safety but also, maybe, openness to business—an openness to respecting the rule of law and the safety of the person? Is there a resource you could recommend to businesses or Canadians?

• (1255)

**David Collins:** To directly answer your question, yes, absolutely.

The one that I tend to go to, academically, is the World Bank. The World Bank has the ease of doing business index. It has the rule of law index. They may have changed the names recently, but those are the ones that I think carry the most weight. You're right to point out that a number of African countries tend to rank low on those lists. This is why things like political risk insurance can be almost essential. Political risk insurance or support from Export Development Canada can certainly assist businesses in those places.

The other tool that can go a long way toward helping in those areas, especially when you have rule of law concerns, is having treaties in place. Unfortunately, Canada doesn't have any with African countries. There are some FIPAs, or foreign investment promotion and protection agreements, in place—one or two. The one with Egypt has been ratified. The other ones have been signed but not ratified. Canada should try to pursue those, because they tend to provide legal mechanisms through which businesses can protect themselves under international law if they face undue interference.

Importantly—backing up to the political risk insurance issue—the premiums for political risk insurance, or the policies available from the World Bank, the African Development Bank or perhaps even private banks, tend to be lower if there's a FIPA in place. They really go hand in hand.

**Adam Chambers:** Thank you. It's almost as if you anticipated a future question.

You mentioned a few things that a company, an individual or even the government could do to de-risk the activity. Some of those are third-party. You mentioned political risk insurance. You also mentioned EDC.

Are there steps the government should take to de-risk activity, or is it primarily, in your view, about signing additional FIPAs in these jurisdictions?

**David Collins:** As to what the Canadian government can do for Canadian businesses, it's yes to the FIPAs and yes to leveraging the assistance of EDC. The third thing the Canadian government can do—this goes back to international law—is pursue discussions at the World Trade Organization.

Basically, every African country is a member of the World Trade Organization. Canada is very active in the World Trade Organization. There are a number of committees in place—for example, the

SPS committee, the TBT agreement services committee and the trade facilitation committee. The Canadian government is liaising directly with the African country governments at the WTO on things like the harmonization of standards and generally promoting transparency and the rule of law.

We often say that the World Trade Organization has helped spread the rule of law around the world to encourage transparency. Canada pursuing that multilateral venue can be a way of feeding through on the ground in Africa in places where the risk is high.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll go on to Mr. Fonseca for the last several minutes.

**Peter Fonseca:** For my first question, I will go to Mr. Aïhounhin.

You brought up that in order to work with Africa, you must think like an African business. Can you take us through what you mean by that?

[*Translation*]

**Sègbédji Parfait Aïhounhin:** Thank you for your very insightful question.

In Africa, there's a proverb saying that no matter how long a log stays in the water, it doesn't become a crocodile. The culture, the way of thinking, the way of doing business, unofficial channels in the African business world and the many characteristics of the African market make it a distinct market, just like the Asian market. To do business on the continent, you have to take all that into account.

I'm just going to look at one of the indicators we often use for sustainable growth. Anyone who wants to implement sustainable growth must apply the concepts of governance, inclusion and risk management. To manage risks, we have to be able to connect young people, women and researchers, as well as the small and medium-sized businesses that are part of the market. A variety of corridors will be required to ensure active monitoring in order to manage risk on the African continent. People often think about Africa as one bloc, but there are 54 countries and more than 2,100 languages spoken. That means 2,100 different ways of talking.

I advocate a case-by-case approach, based on the countries we want to do business with on the continent, rather than a blanket approach. That's why I keep advocating co-production. Instead of sticking to the traditional model, we need to promote co-production, using existing support structures and existing African chambers of commerce. We need to structure them and help them set up, because they are also the conduit to the various African markets outside legally recognized structures such as Export Development Canada, Investissement Québec and Québec International.

• (1300)

[*English*]

**Peter Fonseca:** We've heard a lot about managing risk and how your organizations help those who are looking to do business—export and import—with Africa. Does our trade commissioner service also provide that service? Do they provide that information? Do they have people on the ground? Are they able to retrieve the information that businesses are looking for to have that assurance and to manage that risk?

I'll ask all three of you, but we could start again with Mr. Aïhounhin.

[*Translation*]

**Sègbédji Parfait Aïhounhin:** Yes. In reality, the structures that represent the Canadian government on African soil, such as trade delegations, need risk mitigation concepts.

Let's take the issue of cultural barriers, for example. Training must be provided so that companies that decide to go into the African market, or other markets since Africa isn't the only one, know what to do and what to know culturally before they go. They need to know the outlines and subtleties of the culture and how people think. For example, if someone goes to a wedding or funeral they weren't invited to, are the people who see them there going to be happy? It's little subtleties like that that people need to know.

Then there's the issue of political instability. There have to be clear assessments of the risks associated with countries. I think we

do that for currency volatility, for example. There are structures that guarantee contracts once they are signed. Not just one, but a combination of factors helps mitigate risks.

[*English*]

**Peter Fonseca:** Mr. Viel, does Quebec have offices in a number of the countries? With the trade commissioner service and your offices, how do you mitigate that risk?

**Carl Viel:** In Quebec, we have the opportunity to work with the Canadian embassy or with some of the Quebec delegations. It gives us a double opportunity.

Getting back to your question, the answer is yes. Most of the people working in the services are capable of providing some of the information.

Going back to the question that was asked of Mr. Collins, I'm just going to add one point. The other thing we look at is the global analysis done by The Economist, which also provides an index that we use. We're looking at that versus the World Bank. The one that's done by The Economist also helps us provide some pertinent information to companies.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

I'm sorry I have to end this meeting. Our panels have been very informative.

To the witnesses, thank you very much. We appreciate it.

We will now close off our meeting.

We'll have our meeting on Thursday. To those who are travelling, please ensure that you provide the clerk today with anything that's outstanding. Thank you all very much.

The meeting is adjourned.





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