



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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# Standing Committee on International Trade

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 036**

Tuesday, May 5, 2026

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Chair: Judy A. Sgro





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• (1105)

[English]

**The Chair (Hon. Judy A. Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.)):** I call the meeting to order. Welcome, everyone.

This is meeting number 36 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.

We have with us today, as an individual by video conference, Hamid Fadili, international trade adviser, Europe and Africa markets. We also have Souad Elmallem, president and chief executive officer, by video conference. From Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec, we have Ruth Vachon, president.

Welcome. We're glad to have you in person.

We will start with Mr. Fadili for an opening statement of up to five minutes, please.

[Translation]

**Hamid Fadili (International Trade advisor, Europe and Africa markets, As an Individual):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good morning, honourable members.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Hamid Fadili. I am an international trade adviser for a provincial economic development agency. I am here today as an individual to provide evidence on a very important topic, and a major economic issue for Canada. The issue is our strategic positioning in the markets of North Africa and West Africa.

As you know, honourable members, the world is changing rapidly. Supply chains are become redefined, competition for access to resources is forever intensifying, and new growth centres are emerging. In that context, a key question must be asked: Is Canada sufficiently well positioned in the markets that will make up tomorrow's global economy? This includes the African market and, specifically, the markets of North Africa and West Africa.

Those two emerging markets are changing rapidly; they are major consumers. We are talking about 600 million people, with a combined GDP of more than \$1,600 billion in Canadian currency and a growth rate between 3% and 6%. West Africa alone is a market of more than 400 million people with some of the fastest economic growth rates in the world, between 5% and 6%. Its infrastructure needs are estimated at about \$135 billion in Canadian cur-

rency. By 2030, one consumer in every five around the world will be from Africa, making the region particularly promising for the coming years.

Despite this considerable potential, Canada is somewhat behind. Less than 1% of our foreign trade goes to Africa. Just imagine, Canada exports about \$6 billion to \$8 billion in Canadian dollars to the continent annually. At the same time, China exports more than \$330 billion to Africa. For the European Union, the figure is more than \$400 billion and for Turkey, it's \$40 billion. These are economic opportunities that Canada is losing.

We often think that Africa is a long way away. In reality, it is closer than one might imagine, especially using the Atlantic corridor. Here's an example. Between the Port of Montreal or the Port of Halifax and the strategic hubs of Tangiers or Casablanca in Morocco, the distance by sea is about 6,000 or 7,000 kilometres, depending on the starting point. By comparison, shipping cargo to the port of Houston or to other ports in the southern United States involves much the same distances, sometimes even greater. But less than 10% of Canada's trade crosses the Atlantic.

The most promising economic sectors where Canadian companies could be involved would include infrastructure, technology, energy, financial services, agri-food, aerospace, health and transportation.

The two regions of Africa, North Africa and West Africa, are complementary regions. North Africa is close to Europe and the Middle East and has a production base with developed infrastructure and competitive costs. We are talking about major industrial and logistical hubs. West Africa is an engine of growth, as I said before. It has 400 million consumers, rapid urbanization, and huge and pressing infrastructure needs. The market there is expanding in a major way.

In conclusion, the facts are clear. These regions represent a major strategic market for Canada. But we are under-represented there. Other powers are already well established. But opportunities still exist, especially in an evolving geopolitical context, where political levers are in motion and where new economic corridors are opening up.

As for recommendations—

• (1110)

[English]

**The Chair:** Mr. Fadili, I'm sorry. That's your five minutes.

If you could, please make your quick closing remarks as your five minutes are almost completely up.

[Translation]

**Hamid Fadili:** That's fine. My recommendations will not take long.

Speaking personally as a Canadian citizen who comes from the region and knows those markets well, I would recommend that Canada reposition itself in those markets and develop a clear and coordinated strategy for Africa. For example, some of Canada's recent decisions on international positioning provide concrete economic levers. I also recommend establishing a transatlantic economic corridor, speeding up economic agreements among those countries, actively supporting Canadian companies that want to export to and invest in those regions, focusing on major projects and adopting a considered, regional approach.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Fadili. You can cover the rest of your presentation in response to questions, possibly.

We'll go to Ms. Elmallem, please, for five minutes.

[Translation]

**Souad Elmallem (President and Chief Executive Officer, 6temik):** Ladies and gentlemen, honourable members, it's a great pleasure for me to be with you today.

In a rapidly changing world, the successful countries, organizations and companies are those who know how to build bridges, to forge alliances and to think outside of their borders. That is exactly the meaning of the speech that Prime Minister Carney gave in Davos. He saw a clear break and validated it. From now on, the priority is to diversify our economic partnerships, to reduce our vulnerabilities and, in part, to redirect our north-south focus to east and west. Asia and Europe are at the heart of that ambition. But a major region in Canada's immediate vicinity remains underestimated and undervalued. This is the South Atlantic, which includes the countries with Atlantic shores in both South America and North and West Africa.

Morocco is an excellent example of the dynamics at play because of its geographic location, its quality infrastructure and its strategic vision. It has made itself into the very gateway to Africa. To give you some figures from the many I could provide, Morocco has among Africa's best-developed networks, with about 50,000 kilometres of paved roads, 2,000 kilometres of freeways, which will extend to 3,000 kilometres by 2030, high-speed rail lines that will very soon extend to 630 kilometres, and functioning 5G.

Today, Africa is the world's demographic engine. My colleague, Mr. Fadili has already quoted a lot of figures to illustrate that. So I will skip that section.

With the progressive implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, the market will soon have the second-biggest potential market of the 21st century, after India and China. What makes this a particularly strategic area for our Canadian partners is that it is already connected. Where China invested several billion dollars to build its silk road to Africa, Canada has an already existing network in operation. The Tanger Med Port Centre is the fourth-busiest port in the world today. The future Port Dakhla Atlantic, scheduled to open in 2028, will become a major hub towards West Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and the Americas. We should also not forget the future port of Nador, in the northwest of Morocco.

There are also deep-water ports in Dakar, Abidjan and Tema. From Saint John, New Brunswick, it takes between 10 and 15 days to reach one of those destinations, scarcely more than it takes to get to the great ports of Europe, and three or four times less than for the major markets in Asia.

As a result, very specific doors open. Canada and Morocco share a number of common interests: stability, innovation, training, economic openness and the wish to develop lasting relationships. Morocco has free trade agreements with the European Union, with the 18 countries of the Greater Arab Free Trade Area, and with the major economies in Africa. Morocco therefore offers access to a market of 450 million people and a combined GDP of more than \$4,200 billion. Its Atlantic initiative for the countries of the Sahel provides ocean access to landlocked countries through Port Dakhla Atlantic. A number of Canadian mining companies are already conducting activities there.

Together, we have the opportunity to build much more than a simple trade partnership. We can build a strategic relationship that will be used by companies, by investors and by the younger generations in both countries. In a world marked by uncertainty, it is becoming essential to diversify our markets, to strengthen our supply chains, and to develop wise partnerships. That is exactly what the Canada-Africa relationship makes possible, not to mention the relationship between the two south Atlantic coasts. It can develop in a number of areas: agri-food, technology, renewable energy, strategic mines and minerals, infrastructure, the digital future, education and health.

However, to succeed, a clear vision is needed. We must believe in what each can provide to the other. Canada has expertise, innovation, structure and access to international networks. Morocco has a regional anchor, connections with Africa and a business-friendly environment. As a strong member of the francophonie, Canada has no colonial past, a major African diaspora and, as a result, an enviable reputation. Together, that creates something of remarkable value.

I firmly believe that the most lasting relationships are not built on economic exchanges alone. They are built on trust, on mutual understanding and on the common will to move forward together. The South Atlantic is the one missing piece in the full Canadian picture. It is precisely what can make our Atlantic neighbourhood and a partnership between Canada and Morocco into a key element of a successful future model.

• (1115)

Thank you for your attention.

[English]

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

Please go ahead, Ms. Vachon, for up to five minutes.

[Translation]

**Ruth Vachon (President, Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec):** Good morning, everyone.

Thank you for this opportunity to make a presentation to the committee.

I have been the president of the Réseau des femmes d'affaires du Québec for 16 years. But for 15 years, the Réseau has focused solely on market access for female entrepreneurs.

Our focus is on programs that diversify suppliers, mainly in the United States. But when those programs were abolished in 2025, it was vital for us to find specific pathways through which to strengthen trading relationships and maintain the international focus of Canadian companies. For us, that work is with women.

In recent years, the Réseau has been mostly focused on female entrepreneurs doing business with each other. West Africa and North Africa are markets that would be very beneficial to develop, not only because the government is also interested, but also because business can be done with other member countries of the francophonie.

Since we are in Quebec, I would say that 75% of our women greatly prefer to conduct business in French. Of course, there is Europe, but Africa is a market that interests them greatly.

I had the opportunity to represent Canada at the World Association of Women Entrepreneurs. This network links almost 1 million women entrepreneurs around the world and is active in 120 countries. I have just come back from a congress in Egypt at which 40 countries were represented. Many company presidents from Africa attended, including from Mali. They have companies too, but they cannot all afford to pay for travel like that. They also want business opportunities.

We have believed in peer growth for years. You should know that 98% of the companies in Canada are small businesses. It means therefore that our women entrepreneurs also have small businesses. If they had the opportunity to develop projects in networks of women, it could be really productive.

In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, a community of women is manufacturing products that we could buy there and process at home. In so doing, we would be growing the companies both in Africa and in Canada.

We often aim at major contracts, but deliverables are very important. We put our money on our ability to deliver. If 98% of companies are small ones, we must be able to give them contracts that they can handle. That allows us to build a sustainable economy.

You should also know that 80% of women are in the service sector. It is much easier to expand businesses internationally with

women in the service sector. However, since many women entrepreneurs are in that sector, many are not eligible for the various programs that the government currently has in place.

But, no matter the size of the business, our current situation makes it essential to diversify markets outside the United States. In that situation, Africa is an excellent alternative, where we would provide companies owned by women with opportunities for which they have the capacity.

In the last three years, we have had federal support that has allowed us to create the Maïa platform, connecting women-owned businesses only. The goal is to display business opportunities that are available to each other. The platform was developed to facilitate commerce among companies in Canada, but it could easily be expanded internationally for all the markets we have just talked about.

For us, providing women entrepreneurs in Canada with appropriate opportunities and contracts is our real priority. This works well for small and medium businesses; it also works well for small businesses that are often ineligible for various programs.

To ensure that we are giving women a good base, we have created tools like the export index. Using artificial intelligence, the tools provide women with maturity assessments so that they can see when they are ready, which markets they could explore and where it would be best to go. So we suggest that they use the government-funded platform in order to develop markets on other continents and to maximize the investments that the government has already made.

In addition, given that we are in a situation where we have to diversify our markets outside the United States, regions like North Africa and West Africa offer strategic opportunities that are both available in French and aligned with our strengths. To derive the full benefits, the mechanisms available need to be tailored to small businesses if we want them to grow, if we want contracts they can handle, and if we want tools designed to support them.

• (1120)

To conclude, we would like to invite all parties to speak with one voice so that more women-owned companies are included in various government initiatives. Ultimately, this must become an economic decision, not a social program. Tomorrow's economy cannot be built without women.

Thank you.

[English]

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

We go now to the members.

Mr. Chambers, please go ahead for six minutes.

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

Welcome to our witnesses.

This has been a fantastic study, and I know we only have a few meetings left. I wanted to mention, given it was in the news, that the Chinese ambassador made some comments about recommendations for where members should travel. I think we have a study on Taiwan. I would be very eager to have a meeting before we left, and maybe even consider inviting the envoy here to clarify comments.

I would like to get back to our study. Thank you very much. One of the key things the committee will be able to do is make recommendations to the government on policy actions that you would like to see.

One of the common questions I've been asking witnesses is, what is your biggest risk you think the government needs to keep in mind as it is expanding or seeking to expand its trade relationship with Africa, recognizing that Africa is a collection of a number of countries? If you want to narrow that down to a particular region, that's totally fine. I would appreciate feedback on that from each of you, because we may include this in the report.

Mr. Fadili, we can go in the order of your presentations.

[*Translation*]

**Hamid Fadili:** I can tell you that Africa is a market with its own characteristics and issues, just like any other. In some sectors, it is true that it's a little complex. I might mention defence and security, among others. That's where Canada could well tread carefully.

But other sectors, particularly in health, have a humanitarian mission, I would say. International co-operation works side by side with trade and investment.

It varies from one country to another. Some countries have a higher level of political and economic maturity than others. But it's up to Canada to set its own priorities. That is actually one of my recommendations: prioritize the countries in those regions into first, second or third levels according to their issues and consider how to deal with them differently.

I hope that answers your question.

• (1125)

**Adam Chambers:** Thank you, Mr. Fadili.

Ms. Elmallem, would you like to add anything?

**Souad Elmallem:** Yes.

I more or less concur with Mr. Fadili.

The continent of Africa contains 54 countries, not all of which are at the same level. They do not all have the same challenges and they are not all as advanced. However, it is interesting to see—and this explains my earlier comment—that some countries are more advanced than others in business. They have the infrastructure, the will and the strategies needed for it. I feel that, in terms of risk management, the vision Canada must opt for is to establish solid relationships with the countries that are already prepared for them.

Geographically, it is clear to me that Morocco is in that position. Not only Morocco, but some countries in West Africa. When I refer

to countries that have deep-water access to that corridor, meaning the West African countries with deep-water ports, the idea really is to create solid relationships, comprehensive partnerships between governments. Clearly, the priority must be with countries that are best prepared in terms of infrastructure and business capacity.

[*English*]

**Adam Chambers:** Thank you very much.

Just to confirm, I hear a distinct suggestion that Morocco represents, in your view, the largest or easiest potential opportunity we should be exploring in the short term. Is that correct?

[*Translation*]

**Souad Elmallem:** Absolutely, because it is geographically close. In my view also, it has the infrastructure, the business acumen and the national will to take that position. The relationship between Morocco and Africa already exists in all aspects: the road network, the business sector and the presence of Moroccan companies all over the continent. I see Morocco as an obvious focal point.

As an entrepreneur who has set up a number of companies, I speak from experience. I have helped several companies to set up in Morocco, such as Bombardier Aéronautique, which has now been there for 15 years. We are able to build high-tech projects, which, from a distance, may seem beyond what we can imagine today. But we have the needed conditions.

[*English*]

**Adam Chambers:** Thank you very much.

Madame Vachon, with 30 seconds left, if you would like, you can include what you think is the biggest risk. I note that you said there used to be a government program. Would you like to make a recommendation on something you would like us to include in the report?

[*Translation*]

**Ruth Vachon:** To maximize our chances of success, it is really important to go to countries where our governments, whether provincial or federal, and our major partners like Desjardins, are already heavily invested. We just have to understand that we are mostly dealing with networks. Developing and keeping relationships is the main key to success, in our view.

**Adam Chambers:** Thank you.

[*English*]

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

We'll go to Madame Lapointe.

[*Translation*]

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

My thanks to the witnesses for joining us.

I really appreciated your evidence.

Ms. Vachon, I know that you have been to Africa several times with trade missions. You have also told me that, to have business relationships, once cannot be enough.

You mentioned support before, and Desjardins and all that. But are our trade commissioners doing the right work? Does it take better discussions? Must there be more of them?

I would like to hear your comments on that.

**Ruth Vachon:** I feel that each embassy is different. That's natural. Some perform better, some a little less so. But in general, the service is really good.

Given that most of our clients are in the service sector, it is often more difficult for us to focus on contracts. Our approach is multi-sectoral, which means that, when we arrive, our challenge is a little more complex. This does not mean that there are fewer opportunities, but it does mean that the challenge is different and we need quite intense, targeted focus from the trade commissioners.

• (1130)

**Linda Lapointe:** You mentioned the service sector. In that area, are there regions that you find encouraging and where we could have better trade relationships? I know that you have been to Morocco, but you have also been to Egypt.

**Ruth Vachon:** We went to Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. We visited a number of countries. The great thing about Egypt is that many African countries are centred there and most of them want very strong networks, where communities come together and make products. We want to maintain that link, to extend it to our country, so that products made there can be processed and sold here, thereby growing both communities at the same time.

**Linda Lapointe:** Thank you very much, Ms. Vachon.

I have a question for you, Ms. Elmalle.

You are very knowledgeable. My constituency of Rivière-des-Milles-Iles is in the Lower Laurentians. You are well aware of the aerospace sector there.

A little earlier, I was talking to Ms. Vachon about trade commissioners.

Do you believe that improvements can be made to strengthen our trade ties in the sector? Could it be in a hub in the north, in Morocco, or in Côte d'Ivoire?

I would like to hear how you see that.

**Souad Elmalle:** Thank you, Ms. Lapointe. Your question is very appropriate.

I would just say, as Ms. Vachon did, that it depends on the projects, on the sectors and on the complexity. In general, there is a service, sure. Can it be improved? Of course, and I feel that it's a matter of working on details rather than staying with the generic. Relationships are one thing. People can be put together. However, I have been working on projects for almost 20 years now in the Africa-Canada corridor and I feel that a mutual relationship exists. That's what I wanted to emphasize. I have worked on a number of projects in aviation, but I have planted the seeds of other projects

too, especially in Morocco. On the Canadian side, we have to recognize the opportunities.

Here's a tiny example. If I had not been with Bombardier in 2005 and had I not started to preach to my boss that an opportunity existed, no one would have known. The information was not getting through. Information has to get through so that people feel confident. We talk about risk all the time but we do not talk about opportunities, and I feel that it is important that we do. Risk is everywhere, but if we focus on the risk and we do not focus on the opportunity, we miss the boat.

For example, in 2008, no one would have known that Morocco had 96 aviation companies. I had to do the job myself, to convince my boss to come with me to see for himself. Seeing is believing; when we see, our perspective changes. The quality of the development in some countries of Africa and in their industry is not well known in Canada. It's only when people go there themselves that they see the opportunities, which is why we miss.... In my opinion, there is work to be done if the opportunities are to become clear.

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

Earlier, I believe you talked about trust and mutual understanding. Does French help, does it make things easier in terms of the things we want to explore?

**Souad Elmalle:** It's fundamental, in my opinion. We must take advantage of the fact that we are part of the francophonie. The strength of the francophonie is that it creates....

My company is in Morocco. I find it extraordinary that people in offices in Casablanca can work with my teams and with our clients in Montreal.

**Linda Lapointe:** Thank you. My time is coming to an end and I would like to hear Ms. Vachon's answer.

**Souad Elmalle:** Sure.

**Ruth Vachon:** I will follow up on what Ms. Elmalle said.

Sometimes, the instinct is to turn to France. We may speak French but that does not mean that our languages are very close. I find that our culture is close to African culture in many cases. We communicate more easily with many countries in Africa.

• (1135)

[English]

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

[Translation]

**Ruth Vachon:** We have a lot of people in Morocco, a lot of people in Tunisia or Algeria, but it is very difficult—

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[Translation]

**Linda Lapointe:** Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** Next is Mr. Savard-Tremblay, please, for six minutes.

[Translation]

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

Thank you for joining us today, my dear witnesses, and thank you for your presentations.

Ms. Vachon, you represent the Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec. That's like the business situation in the whole of Quebec, but with its special aspects.

You mentioned business opportunities and you made a presentation on Africa, among other things. Is there anything that sticks out in terms of businesswomen and Africa in particular?

**Ruth Vachon:** We go where the opportunities are. We feel that there is a lot of space for our businesswomen in Africa. I would not say that it is because of the maturity of African companies—our companies are more mature than theirs—but, in terms of their production, we can see that a lot of women are in the agri-food industry. So it is very important and very helpful for us to create links with a number of countries in Africa, Côte d'Ivoire among them.

We are seeking to grow our companies. We do not want to invest time in Africa without a return. I speak for Quebec, but we work with Canadian companies too. We are trying to establish reciprocity in our trading.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** You are part of the Femmes d'affaires du Québec, are you not?

**Ruth Vachon:** Our organization is called the Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Your very name contains the word Quebec, and that does not bother me one bit.

A good part of Africa is French-speaking. The francophonie is exploding demographically. Does that make your task easier?

**Ruth Vachon:** Yes, it does make the task easier. That's where our interest in Africa comes from. Most women in Quebec are really good at doing business in French. As I said earlier, we certainly try to go where our governments go, whether Quebec or Ottawa, and to where our partners are. The aim is to lead our women to where we feel there are possibilities in which they may be interested.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** In that context, we know that the culture of Quebec companies is generally marked by respect, even solidarity. We are like that with fellow Quebecers. Even in the regions, we see that, if a company only wants to make money and does not work with others, it will generally be ignored. It won't even be sustainable. That's certainly the case in my Maskoutan community. We see it everywhere. If a company decides not to share the solidarity, it will be excluded from the group quite quickly. Our approach, then, is one of respect, but in Africa, they play hardball. Russian and Chinese companies, for example, can be very competitive and aggressive.

Can we survive in those shark-infested waters?

**Ruth Vachon:** We must not see things that way. We are not looking to do business with governments or with large companies in Africa. We are looking to do business with companies owned by African women. Above all, we have to sow seeds that will bear fruit when they come up in five or six years.

We know that we are doing business with small companies. I cannot help them to grow by taking them right to General Motors tomorrow morning. I have to help them to grow one step at a time, which is the kind of community that our businesswomen find very appealing.

We have been talking about Quebec, but Canada is also at the table. The quality you mention is one that I see particularly among women. We are looking for reciprocity and mutual benefits. We create links with the government through our governments, whether that's Quebec or Ottawa. We do not make agreements directly with those governments.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** I understand about the agreements, but the market there is filled by powers that are aggressively competitive.

Do you see any danger on the horizon? I understand the rewards, but are there risks too?

**Ruth Vachon:** When I get up in the morning, I don't see a lot of danger in my life. Maybe that's my problem.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** At least you are honest.

Several times, out of the corner of my eye, I have seen Ms....

**Ruth Vachon:** Elmallem.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Yes, I can see you nodding, Ms. Elmallem.

Would you like to add something?

**Souad Elmallem:** I agree completely with Ms. Vachon. Honestly, I can't talk about things being aggressively competitive. I have been doing business in that part of the world since 2005 or 2006 and I have never seen anything that is aggressively competitive.

There is competition. That's important. We have to be competitive ourselves in Canada. We have the opportunity to get out of our comfort zone. We are used to the comfort zone being North American. It takes effort to leave one's comfort zone and that's what we need to do. The global market is competitive. But I have never seen aggressive competition. Yes, we have to be competitive and we are not always.

• (1140)

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Do you have the same problem as Ms. Vachon? Do you see danger all around when you get up in the morning?

**Souad Elmallem:** I see no danger at all. If I had, I would not have succeeded in leading six industrial projects and in having my own company on the continent.

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

[English]

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

Go ahead, Mr. McKenzie, for five minutes, please.

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

Mr. Fadili, you mentioned energy as one of the opportunities for trade and increased trade relationships. I do believe I'm still the only member of Parliament on this committee who hails from western Canada, a place in Canada where we produce a great deal of energy.

Among the things I've read about north Africa and west Africa is that there's significant petroleum production, both crude oil and natural gas. North Africa, in particular, has become a very important supplier of liquefied natural gas to Europe. This is a result of challenges with Russian natural gas supply.

Do you have any comment on that? It seems that there's both great production and growing opportunities for import, and I presume that is primarily due to an increased need for energy. Again, it's something you mentioned earlier.

[Translation]

**Hamid Fadili:** Thank you for the question.

Given the sensitive nature of my position, I am not really going to go into depth in my answers. However, I can say that the energy sector is changing completely. Take renewable energy in Morocco as an example. The sector is growing by leaps and bounds. It is up to Canada to see the fit we could have with certain countries in terms of renewable energy.

[English]

**David McKenzie:** Thank you very much.

I have a second question for you.

I wonder about the importance of the diaspora of individuals resident in Canada now who have family connections, business connections or heritage that traces back to Africa and the importance of mobilizing the diaspora, here in Canada, for trade purposes.

Do you have a view on that?

[Translation]

**Hamid Fadili:** We know that the diaspora can play an important role in bringing countries together. That is certainly the case today, because we know that it is not self-evident, especially because there is no history, human or social, between Canada and Africa. The ties are really recent. So efforts must be made to get to know one another in order for the two sides of the Atlantic to come together.

In geographic terms, we are close to the Atlantic. As I mentioned earlier, the distance is not really great when compared to some parts of the world where the relationship is deeper. However, I would say that the diaspora can indeed play a very important role in bringing the two sides together, whether in terms of investments, society or culture. It's a French-speaking region, actually a significant cradle of the francophonie. It is worth Canada's while to get to know the other party. That's all I can say.

[English]

**David McKenzie:** Thank you.

Ms. Elmallem, you have your hand up on your screen.

**Souad Elmallem:** Yes.

**David McKenzie:** I'm going to presume that means you'd like to comment on the same subject: the importance of the diaspora in Canada.

**Souad Elmallem:** Yes, I would. Thank you for the question.

[Translation]

Actually, I just wanted to draw your attention to the fact that I am the president of an organization called United Actions for Africa. It is a group made up of the African diaspora in Canada and around the world. Our mission is very clear: We try to make sure that a link to the continent is maintained and to work on constructive projects from Canada to Africa.

All the members of my organization are professionals, business-people and entrepreneurs in various sectors. They work not only to promote that bridge, but also to create it. We develop genuine projects that we are already working on in order to be involved in building projects for the African continent. We count on each member's knowledge and relationships on the continent.

Some members of the group were in the African diaspora elsewhere. Now they have businesses in Africa, hence the solidarity of the group.

• (1145)

[English]

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

We'll move on to Mr. Lavoie for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

**Steeve Lavoie (Beauport—Limoilou, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

My thanks to the witnesses for joining us. I am sharing my time with my colleague Mr. Ehsassi.

My question is for Mr. Fadili and Ms. Elmallem. The question will be the same, so perhaps each could reply in 30 seconds.

The committee recently heard from officials from Export Development Canada, or EDC. The organization supports companies around the world, often helping banks with the security of banking services. The EDC officials stated that they had only one representative in Africa.

My question has two parts. Is that enough? If not, how many would it take?

**Souad Elmallem:** I can start, Mr. Lavoie.

It is true that there is only one. There used to be several, but the number has unfortunately been reduced.

The subject of EDC is key. I have been involved myself. I am going to be frank because it is important that the truth be told. I was involved in some projects. The private sector was ready to be part of a project to the continent. But we heard that EDC was not ready because of the risks associated with supporting projects of that kind with mechanisms that, in my opinion, are quite archaic and make no sense today.

It's a valid issue. I have already made the case for changing things to EDC.

**Steeve Lavoie:** Mr. Fadili, could you answer the question in 30 seconds?

**Hamid Fadili:** I echo Ms. Elmalle's comment.

Canada certainly should bolster its presence in Africa, and not only through EDC, but also through the other organizations that exist to support our Canadian companies.

[English]

**Hon. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.):** Thank you.

Allow me to start by thanking all three of the witnesses. You obviously come at this with many years of experience.

For the purposes of preparing our report and adopting some recommendations, I thought I would ask if any of you had any concrete suggestions insofar as the trade commissioner service is concerned in Africa. Has it been helpful? How can we realign it to do a better job?

Any of you can respond first.

Ms. Vachon, would you like to start?

[Translation]

**Ruth Vachon:** It's important to be really familiar with the market. The focus must be clear, so that we can deal with "our" clients, not clients in general. If we want our companies to become the HVTs of the world, we have to accept that they must start small first so that they can grow. Maybe the services will have to be different, but, at the very least, there must be a presence, for all Canadians.

That's my main recommendation.

[English]

**Hon. Ali Ehsassi:** Did you find it was inaccessible, or did it not know the market?

[Translation]

**Ruth Vachon:** It's not that they are not accessible. It's just that 98% of the clients we represent are small businesses.

Since we represent small companies, we are sometimes left behind a little. In addition, when we work with programs with different suppliers, it can be complicated because our organization is multisectoral. When trade commissioners who specialize in one area show up, they have difficulty serving us.

It might take someone on the inside who would act as a kind of "dispatcher" for all sectors. That would help us a lot. They must also accept all their clients. We don't necessarily need full-time atten-

tion, but we do need services to be provided to small business, not just big business.

• (1150)

[English]

**Hon. Ali Ehsassi:** Thank you.

Mr. Fadili or Ms. Elmalle, do you have any particular observations, concrete suggestions or recommendations?

[Translation]

**Soud Elmalle:** Personally, I can add to what Ms. Vachon said. I agree with her but I would add one thing.

The service that the trade commissioners provide goes from A to B, but not from B to C or C to D. When you are involved in a major project, it's often important to have good support. I am not blowing my own horn, but the support that 6temik, my company, provides goes beyond putting people in touch for the first time. This requires specific expertise, such as the knowledge of a sector, subsidies, proper negotiating, proper support and comprehensive project management.

The team may include the trade commissioners or all the services we have in Canada. But in international projects, we have to be sure that the team is made up of people who know a specific market. For me, that's crucial.

[English]

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

Mr. Savard-Tremblay, you have two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

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

Ms. Elmalle, let me go back to your answer to my last question, the one that followed the conversation with Ms. Vachon. You said that you did not sense any aggressive competition. You also stated that the perception of risk vis-à-vis the African continent has to change, so that we stop seeing any risks in our dealings with Africa. But the risks are real. I understand that you are not dealing with the government, but institutional corruption still affects companies. There is forced labour and violence in that part of the world.

I understand that perceptions have to change, but, in your opinion, which risks are really serious and well founded?

**Soud Elmalle:** Is that question for me, Mr. Savard-Tremblay?

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Yes.

**Souad Elmallem:** It's important not to generalize. I have been managing projects in Africa since 2005 and I have never seen any corruption. I have never witnessed anything like that. So I cannot talk about something of which I have no knowledge. Perhaps it's a matter of attitude. If you seem to be corruptible, people may come and corrupt you. However, if your attitude shows that you are not corruptible, the issue won't come up. That's my experience anyway.

Africa has 54 countries. Maybe it happens in some of them—we all hear about it and we know that it exists. But I cannot say that it is the case in all countries in Africa. Hence the importance of our choosing the countries where we are going to start our trading relations, so that we can have, and build on, a positive experience.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** So you are still classifying some countries in Africa as better business destinations than others. Is that correct?

**Souad Elmallem:** Yes, because there is an international classification of economies around the world. You can see what is working and what is not working in every country. It's accessible to all, and it's not just for Africa, but for every continent and every country in the world.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. You have 18 seconds.

[Translation]

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** In 18 seconds, can you tell us whether you use any classification other than the World Bank's?

**Souad Elmallem:** No. Basically, that's the one I use.

Thank you.

[English]

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

Mr. Mantle, please, you have five minutes.

**Jacob Mantle (York—Durham, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing and providing valuable testimony for our study.

The government's Africa trade policy document released last year estimates that Canada's merchandise trade with all African countries was about \$15 billion, which, of course, is a rounding error when it comes to Canada's overall merchandise trade with the world and with the United States, our largest trading partner.

What, in your view, would be a base case and then an upper limit of where that number could go in the next five years? I'm looking to understand the scope of the benefit Canada could receive by expending resources or effort in expanding trade with Africa.

I'll ask each of the witnesses to respond, starting with Mr. Fadili.

• (1155)

[Translation]

**Hamid Fadili:** I really do not have figures to forecast the potential volume of trade between Canada and Africa in general, or for North Africa and West Africa specifically. I believe that [Technical

difficulty—Editor] the potential we could be looking for if we strengthen our position in those markets.

[English]

**Jacob Mantle:** Go ahead, Ms. Elmallem.

I'm sorry. The translation was a little bit slow on that, Madam Chair.

[Translation]

**Souad Elmallem:** I feel that it's quite a story. If I understood correctly, your question was about what we are going to invest in relation to the return on that investment we are going to get. It matters little whether the project is in Africa or in Europe because a project is a project. I see no difference between them.

As a businesswoman, when I am managing a project, I personally see no difference between the return on investment and the location of the project. Quite the contrary. If one location gives us more opportunity, so much the better. However, it's not a compromise. I do not see all of Africa as a compromise at all, because none of the projects I have done on the continent was a compromise.

It will always depend on the will we have as a country to invest in that part of the world and to have relationships, not only in trade, with the continent.

**Ruth Vachon:** I will follow what Ms. Elmallem said.

We see it rather from the perspective of the investments. Given that the work has not quite started, that it isn't really visible, we talk in terms of a period of ten years. We ask ourselves what the seed we are going to sow will be able to provide.

Right here, right now, I would not be able to suggest any figures to show what the returns will be because our key performance indicator focuses on the number of projects we can bring to, and grow in, Africa. For now, we do not focus on the return.

[English]

**Jacob Mantle:** As I understand it, all African countries except one have joined China's belt and road initiative for infrastructure and other projects across the continent. If Canadian businesses are going to expand and invest into the continent, should Canada establish guardrails for interactions with Chinese state-owned entities or other entities that are funded through the belt and road initiative? Does that present a risk for Canadian companies?

Mr. Fadili, may I start with you again?

[*Translation*]

**Hamid Fadili:** As was mentioned previously, there is always risk. Canada has a lot of work that it should do in prioritizing sectors and projects, according, for example, to the current global context, according to the opportunities offered, according to the potential of the sector and according to the strategic vision for the years to come.

It's true that there is competition. China is out there. Russia is out there. But Africans' view of Canada is positive; we have a good reputation. I feel that we are welcomed with open arms and that will continue to be the case. We just have to start the initiative on our end and everything will fall into place.

Ms. Elmallem, do you want to add something?

**Souad Elmallem:** Yes.

I want to say that, as soon as I saw Mr. Carney leave to do business in China, I saw it as a new opportunity to do business with China in Africa. I see no risk to that. On the contrary, we should work with China on the continent of Africa just as we want to work with China elsewhere.

Thank you.

[*English*]

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

Next is Mr. Naqvi, please, for five minutes.

**Yasir Naqvi (Ottawa Centre, Lib.):** I want to thank the excellent witnesses who are here and are giving us some really good advice

Let me start with this question. I think all of us know that Africa is a very big continent with a large population base. It's a very diverse continent, as well, in terms of its makeup. Can I get advice from perhaps all three panel members as to where Canada should focus on doing more trade with Africa?

In terms of regions or countries, where do you see that we can be far more effective in growing our economy here in Canada and also helping the African economy?

Perhaps we can start with Madame Elmallem, and then go to Mr. Fadili and Madame Vachon.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

**Souad Elmallem:** Thank you, Mr. Naqvi. That's a very interesting question.

When I think about the continent and when I talk about my concept note on the South Atlantic, which includes North Africa and West Africa, a part of the world with arable land and huge potential, when I consider food autonomy and food sovereignty, I see Canada conducting agri-food projects that will not only benefit the continent but will also ensure a kind of food sovereignty in Canada. Canada could then get everything it currently imports from the United States or from other places and could produce what it does not have during the winter months. That's a form of agricultural autonomy.

I see it as an extraordinary win-win that is within Canada's grasp tomorrow morning.

[*English*]

**Yasir Naqvi:** Thank you.

Mr. Fadili, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

**Hamid Fadili:** As for specific actions Canada could start in order to take advantage of the potential, one, as has been mentioned, is to prioritize a half-dozen countries in the region. They would be stable countries, with strong economic development potential and with more links to Canada than others.

It also reinforces our diplomatic position in establishing some trust with investors and with civil society.

The issue of financing also came up. For example, it may be worthwhile to explore the possibility of Export Development Canada, among others, establishing funds specifically for Canadian investors who would like to explore all the business possibilities in the region.

In terms of logistics, we spoke earlier of the benefits of establishing transatlantic links between the ports of Montreal and Halifax and ports in Africa, like Dakhla, Tangiers and Dakar, and of seeing whether agreements on logistics are possible.

Protecting investors is always an issue as well. Protecting the investors who would like to explore those markets is a policy issue.

These are general examples of the things that could be set in motion in the coming months. It all starts with establishing a bilateral level of trust between Canada and each country, according to their own distinct reality.

[*English*]

**Yasir Naqvi:** Madame Vachon, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

**Ruth Vachon:** We do not intend to target many countries.

Ms. Elmallem spoke about the agri-food sector. Though we operate across multiple sectors, I would say that agri-food is the sector with the greatest potential for us.

The francophonie is also very important, but I would add that, for us, it is important to rely on the research carried out by our government. We can provide feedback, but our government, through its own research, knows where it is important to invest. Of course, at the outset, we go forward trusting the government's assessment of which sectors are less vulnerable for us.

[*English*]

**Yasir Naqvi:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you to our witnesses for very valuable testimony for our study.

I will suspend for a moment while our other panel comes up.

Thank you again to our witnesses.

• (1200) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1210)

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

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, February 12, 2026, the committee is resuming a study on free trade within Canada.

We have with us today, from the Canadian Pork Council, René Roy, chair, and Claire Citeau, senior vice-president. From the Québec International by video conference, we have Carl Viel, president and chief executive officer.

Welcome to you all.

Mr. Viel, we open the floor to you for up to five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

**Carl Viel (President and Chief Executive Officer, Québec International):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Members of the committee, I would first like to thank you for inviting me to speak to you about free trade within Canada, a fundamental issue for our business competitiveness and that of Canada.

Since I have already had an opportunity to testify before you, I will not revisit all of our economic development agency's mandates, but it is important to remember that one of our mandates is market development, an essential lever for supporting business growth.

Historically, both in Canada and Quebec, our businesses have built their commercial relationships primarily along a north-south axis. This reality stems from geography, economic structure, and decades of supply chains organized in this direction. While these relationships remain important, they should no longer be the sole foundation for business growth.

Today, it is increasingly clear that developing a genuine east-west dynamic within Canada presents a largely untapped potential. Yet the Canadian market offers a remarkable diversity of expertise, industries, talent pools and innovation hubs, which are often complementary from one province to another.

However, developing interprovincial business relationships does not happen automatically. Establishing business practices, building a network of trust, and understanding the unique business realities of each province require time and support. All too often, companies underestimate business opportunities within Canada itself while prioritizing more distant and demanding markets. That is why free trade within Canada must be viewed not only as a regulatory issue, but also as a goal that depends on a shift in business culture. Encouraging businesses to think in terms of an east-west axis, to collaborate more with companies in other provinces, and to integrate Canadian partners into their value chains strengthens the resilience of our national economy, which we need.

In this regard, we welcome the ongoing efforts and regulatory changes to facilitate trade within Canada. Reducing non-tariff barriers, harmonizing certain standards, mutually recognizing certifications and simplifying rules governing the movement of goods, services and labour are important steps forward. Above all, they send a clear signal: The Canadian market must function as a truly integrated economic space.

However, such regulatory advances must be accompanied by action on the ground. Businesses, particularly SMEs, need guidance to take full advantage of new opportunities, identify partners across the country, understand provincial regulatory frameworks, adapt their business strategies and build strong networks beyond their natural market.

In this context, economic development agencies play a key role. At Québec International, we act as a catalyst by supporting businesses in their commercial readiness, facilitating interprovincial networking and contributing to the creation of Canadian economic corridors. We have observed that when businesses develop lasting relationships within the country, their ability to grow and export outside Canada is also strengthened. Interprovincial free trade is therefore much more than a domestic issue. It serves as a strategic tool for diversification, resilience and competitiveness for our businesses while reducing their dependence on a limited number of markets.

In closing, if we want to strengthen Canada's economic performance, we must fully tap into our own market's potential. That requires more flexible rules, certainly, but also a shift in mindset: moving from a primarily north-south approach to a truly east-west business culture.

By promoting trade between provinces, supporting the creation of an interprovincial network and actively assisting businesses in this process, we are strengthening not only domestic trade but also Canada's position in the global economy.

Thank you.

• (1215)

[*English*]

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

We'll go on to Mr. Roy and Ms. Citeau.

[*Translation*]

**René Roy (Chair, Canadian Pork Council):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Madam Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to comment and provide guidance on this topic.

My name is René Roy, and I am a pork producer from Quebec and the chair of the Canadian Pork Council. The council represents Canada's more than 7,000 pork producers, who collectively support more than 100,000 jobs and generate over \$5 billion in farm-gate receipts annually. With me today is Claire Citeau, senior vice-president.

[English]

Canadian pork is a cornerstone of both the domestic food supply and international trade, with more than 70% of our production exported to more than 80 countries. This success is built on a reputation for excellence in food safety, traceability and animal health, all underpinned by the rigorous oversight of Canada's federally inspected system. Indeed, that system has already solved our internal trade challenge in pork, as some 94% of our products go through federally inspected plants.

While CPC supports the spirit of strengthening Canada's internal market, we must ensure that our global market continues to welcome our products, thanks to its faith in our federally inspected system. Products processed in federally inspected plants move between provinces without any barriers, and we would object to any move deeming provincially inspected meat products as equivalent to federally inspected meat. At present, meat from provincially inspected plants may be sold only within the province of production.

This framework reflects real differences. Federally inspected facilities must meet the requirements of the Safe Food for Canadians Act, with continuous veterinary oversight, validated preventive control plans, traceability measures and pathogen testing protocols aligned with the Codex Alimentarius standards.

CPC does not support the weakening of our existing system. Deeming provincial inspection equivalent to federal inspection without an improvement of those standards in a unified way across the country would jeopardize food safety, consumer confidence and Canada's international reputation.

We do have an example of a provincial plant seeking to upgrade to a federal facility, and we invite this committee to work with government officials to find the mechanism to help this plant. Northern Farms is a perfect example of a group of farms attempting to implement what the government is asking for, but finding that the internal functions of government are not keeping pace with the agenda from the policy-makers.

As a path forward, CPC recognizes the intent of Bill C-5 to enhance internal trade. We believe that through two actions, this goal can be achieved without undermining Canada's food safety framework.

The first is preserving the requirement that interprovincial trade in meat products must come from federally inspected plants licensed under the Safe Food for Canadians Act. The second is supporting provincial facilities that wish to transition to federal licensing through cost-sharing programs, as discussed earlier with regard to Northern Farms.

We are not against provincially inspected plants. We just want to make sure that their products stay within the province.

CPC urges the Government of Canada to maintain the integrity of federal inspections, preserve consumer and international confidence and ensure a level playing field for all operators. We support interprovincial trade in pork only when provincial plants are upgraded to federal standards. In this way, Bill C-5 can achieve its objectives while safeguarding the long-term strength and competitiveness of Canada's pork sector.

On this, we welcome questions. Thank you.

• (1220)

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

Mr. Mantle, you have six minutes, please.

**Jacob Mantle:** Thank you to our witnesses for appearing and providing their valuable testimony for this study.

Mr. Viel, I'll start with you.

I have a simple question. In your estimation, do we have free trade within Canada right now?

**Carl Viel:** It's a good question. As I said in my testimony, I think there is some work to continue to do to manage and leverage some of the barriers we face in the Canadian system.

If I may, I have three examples.

The first one is the two official languages. If you're a Canadian based in Vancouver and you're looking to export to the provinces of Quebec, New Brunswick or Ontario, you're going to be looking at a potential customer who speaks French. There might be a language barrier.

The second one is the two sets of laws that we have in Canada—common law and civil law.

The third example is the differences in taxes between the different provinces. That's the third element that we have to work on.

As I said, the other element is that over the years we have been mainly looking from north to south, instead of east to west or west to east. With the current situation, I think that Canada is moving in the right direction to improve trade between the different provinces and territories.

**Jacob Mantle:** Thank you.

Mr. Roy and Ms. Citeau, I'll ask the same question of both of you.

In your estimation, do we have free trade in Canada right now?

**René Roy:** From the perspective of the pork sector, yes, we do.

**Jacob Mantle:** Is that through the federally inspected system?

**René Roy:** Yes. That's as long as we keep the federally inspected system and we allow those who are smaller to abide by these standards when it's time to trade beyond their provincial borders.

**Jacob Mantle:** We had testimony from McCain Foods. I'd like to put some of that testimony to you and see if you agree with the comments from Mr. McCain. He said:

...for way too long, Canada has supported a virtually unknown second-tier food safety system. The second system is a patchwork of substandard provincial and territorial regulations. These regulations all differ. They fall desperately short of modern food safety standards, and I would judge the food produced by these substandard systems as unsafe.

Do you agree with his comments?

**René Roy:** I wouldn't go that far.

What I would say is that there is a patchwork. There is asymmetry. Beyond this point, we have to make sure that it is safe. Not all standards are equal from one province to the other. I think it would be unfair to say that every provincially inspected plant produces unsafe food.

**Jacob Mantle:** In your view, should the federal government use its constitutional authority to seek to harmonize or produce a single food safety framework?

**René Roy:** Could you repeat the question?

**Jacob Mantle:** Do you think the federal government should use its constitutional authority, such as it has, to seek to harmonize food safety standards across Canada or seek to create a single food safety framework to eliminate this patchwork that you've described?

**René Roy:** I'll stay on the technical perspective. I won't go into the political one.

It is important that there is an agreement among provinces that, when it's time to trade beyond their borders, there is a standard that is recognized. We cannot afford, as an industry, to reduce these standards for the sake of trade. We have to keep it at a level that keeps the trust of our consumers.

• (1225)

**Jacob Mantle:** Thank you.

Mr. Viel or Mr. Roy, I'll ask you both for comments on this.

There was some testimony from the Parliamentary Budget Officer last week with respect to interprovincial trade and internal trade. The new Parliamentary Budget Officer said:

...we could track progress, I think that's something we could certainly do separately, or the government could establish metrics that it could commit to follow in terms of how it plans to target that aspect of what success looks like in interprovincial trade. Whether that's the government bringing that forward through its economic budget, updates, departmental plans and departmental results or...the committee asking the parliamentary budget office to do that within our work plan....

Do you think it will be helpful for the Parliamentary Budget Officer to review metrics for success for interprovincial trade and report to this committee, Mr. Viel?

**Carl Viel:** The first thing I'm going to say around that is that the data they were able to get their hands on in terms of knowing the trade was about two years behind. If you were to ask me today in 2025 what the number one company in your region was in terms of export, I would not have the numbers because I'd have to go back almost two years to get some numbers from the Quebec City region, as an example. To be able to support the work that we do, getting access to data would also help us to do a better job.

**The Chair:** There are 11 seconds remaining.

**Jacob Mantle:** You're aware that the Parliamentary Budget Officer has access to all that data and could get it from the government.

**Carl Viel:** It's getting it—

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

Mr. Fonseca, please go ahead for six minutes.

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

Mr. Viel, in your testimony, you mentioned that Canada is moving in the right direction when it comes to dealing with internal trade and interprovincial trade. We've heard similar comments from many stakeholders who have come before our committee. We've heard comments from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business and others that more has been done in these last 18 months than over the past 20 years in terms of trade. I understand why that is happening and how the world has changed.

You spoke to looking and thinking east-west. When you made that comment, is it a paradigm shift that we're looking at for businesses to start thinking east-west? That takes time. It takes reinforcement. It takes work with all stakeholders—government, business and labour all working together—to be able to get there.

**Carl Viel:** The short answer is yes. For our own organization, over the last few months, we've been with companies in Alberta, Toronto and Ottawa. We were there last week for an event that was around trade between la Francophonie and the different provinces. That was hosted in Ottawa. It's bringing the companies together so they know what the opportunities are, where they are and how we can help them get access to those opportunities.

At the end of the day, it's like going to any other market. It's helping and making sure we're supporting the companies so they understand how, for example, they can sell a product to LCBO, to Loblaws or to any other type of company. It's providing access, providing them the information and also ensuring that the company that is in the process of selling a product or a good has the capacity to produce the amount that's going to be requested if they sign an agreement.

All of those things have to be done and have to be taken into account when we're working with companies to help them move and gain some sales or exports to other provinces.

It's a bit funny to say, "export to another province". We're in the same country. I'm going to say, "expand their sales across the country".

**Peter Fonseca:** Rather than always looking north-south through many of the trade missions or in terms of expanding business, it's looking east-west and continuing on that path in a concerted way. That is what I'm hearing from you.

• (1230)

**Carl Viel:** Yes.

**Peter Fonseca:** I've also heard from foreign businesses in terms of investing in Canada. How do internal barriers affect foreign direct investment here in our country?

**Carl Viel:** If you look at it from an FDI perspective, we have seen a change over the last few months. We were discussing this earlier this morning with some colleagues. We saw that there is more appetite for countries in Europe, for example, to consider coming into Canada and looking at the opportunity. At the end of the day, we all know that we're 40 million in terms of population. We don't have the largest population in the world, so people will also be looking at other markets.

If you look at the other panel you just hosted, political stability and other elements that were also brought up during the other panel also make Canada the right place to invest. There are major opportunities to sell afterwards in the different provinces, wherever you establish your subsidiary.

**Peter Fonseca:** Thank you.

We are looking to have a trillion dollars of direct foreign investment over the next five years. Addressing this concern for those businesses would help in terms of achieving that goal.

**Carl Viel:** Attracting some companies that are going to come in some of the defence.... If you look at submarines and other things like that, you'll see that it's going to increase the selling. It's going to increase the value of our companies because they're going to be selling more at the end of the day.

**Peter Fonseca:** Thank you.

Mr. Roy and Ms. Citeau, you're saying that Northern Farms is doing an exercise now in terms of getting to that federal level, as a collective, to be able to then sell interprovincially. It's only 6%. Ninety-four per cent are plants with federally inspected products already. It's how to bring everybody to that level.

Your recommendation, to get to that level, is to take the example or the model that Northern Farms is implementing. Is that what you were saying in your testimony?

**René Roy:** The challenge is that Northern Farms is provincially inspected plants, and it is trying to upgrade. Even if there has been a political signal, it is not translated through the various programs, so it has a hard time accessing these programs. Ultimately, if we want to have our sovereignty, we have to be able to process our product within the country and trade it throughout the country. Right now, Northern Farms is trying to upscale, and that's a real challenge for it.

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

Mr. Savard-Tremblay, you have six minutes.

[Translation]

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

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for joining us today and sharing their thoughts on this important issue.

Mr. Roy, if I'm not mistaken, you are a Quebec producer. Please tell us about the pork-specific system and the joint systems.

**René Roy:** Thank you.

In Quebec's case, marketing operates under the joint system. All producers therefore have a shared contract with processors. If there was too much flexibility in transporting products and we did not take into account Quebec's policies and regulations, it could undermine Quebec producers' ability to do business with their processors in Quebec.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Is there anything in legislation arising from Bill C-5 that seeks to remove trade barriers between provinces?

**René Roy:** There would be a risk if this were not done in a structured manner. Take the example of slaughterhouses in Ontario. I'm using Ontario as an example because it's close by, but it could be any other province.

If an Ontario slaughterhouse inspected by the provincial government exported its products to Quebec without being part of the collective system, it could undermine market access.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** When you say "undermine", it might sound theoretical. What happens in practice?

Here's an example from my district. In Saint-Hyacinthe, there are processors such as Olymel. What could actually happen? What is the danger? Could you illustrate this with a specific case? Let's say it starts with a producer—what happens next?

• (1235)

**René Roy:** I won't name a specific processor. I'll talk about a case in algebraic terms, so to speak.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** The example is fictional, but it serves to illustrate the point.

**René Roy:** A processor may import from other provinces. In Quebec, processors are inspected by the federal government and are governed by the marketing act. Those inspected by the provincial government are not governed by this joint plan. They may import pigs from Ontario. On a small scale, there are no repercussions, but if it were known and recognized, repercussions could grow and create instability in the marketing structure.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** You say: "if it were known and recognized". It is already in effect—that has been the case since Bill C-5 was passed. Have I understood correctly?

**René Roy:** Currently, there is an exemption. There are no opportunities for interprovincial trade for provincially inspected processors.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** In Quebec, what is the ratio between federal government inspections and provincial government inspections?

**René Roy:** I don't have the exact figures, but I believe it's in the range of 94% at the Canadian level.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** So the vast majority would be—

**René Roy:** Absolutely.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** All right. I think we fully understand the risk. It's interesting, because I often say that removing barriers—whether it's interprovincial or international free trade—is the same thing; that is, it shouldn't be taken as gospel. Some barriers are relevant.

In life, a barrier exists on a strictly physical level. A good fence can have many benefits in some cases. Let's agree that removing those that are unnecessary can help producers, processors, exporters and so on. Of course, if some can help block certain unwanted forces, I don't think we should oppose them just for the sake of it. Your example, I believe, is quite clear on that point. Thank you for the warning. I believe the committee will bear this in mind.

I would now like to turn to Mr. Viel to continue along the same lines, but not entirely. Free trade is often desirable and often beneficial. However, several companies are accustomed to receiving preferential treatment—but once an agreement is in place, they will no longer receive it. They will be told that they are on an equal footing with foreign competitors.

In the interprovincial context, would there be a need for adaptation and preparation?

**Carl Viel:** It depends on the sector. Back when Canada signed the free trade agreement with the European Community, businesses were made aware of how, on the one hand, they could export to Europe and, on the other hand, how European companies could export to Canada. Yes, we need to look at all of that. Pieces will fall into place, so it will be important to raise awareness and properly prepare businesses, and to see how they can benefit from opportunities that arise for them in other Canadian provinces or territories.

[English]

**The Chair:** You have 14 seconds remaining.

[Translation]

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

[English]

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

Go ahead, Mr. Groleau, for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

**Jason Groleau (Beauce, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Roy, welcome back to the committee. It's always a pleasure to welcome a witness from the most beautiful region in Canada—Beauce, of course.

Last year, the government announced that it was removing tariff barriers. They still exist—they're still very much in place—but they do have somewhat less of an impact on the pork sector.

What can we do to help our producers in Beauce?

**René Roy:** I'm going to stray a bit from the topic of Bill C-5.

A problem in our region was highlighted last week during a press conference on the problematic issue of foreign workers in the agricultural sector. We have coverage; we're fine. However, when our agri-food processing sector is affected by cuts to foreign workers, we feel the impact.

Here's a very concrete example. The Olymel plant in Vallée-Jonction faced cutbacks and labour shortages. It was forced to close a slaughterhouse. In our region, several producers have shut down and ceased production.

• (1240)

**Jason Groleau:** How many workers lost their job at Olymel?

**René Roy:** There were over 1,000 workers at the plant.

**Jason Groleau:** This problem isn't limited to the agricultural sector; it's clearly present across all manufacturing sectors.

**René Roy:** Let me add something. I'll speak as a producer: It's disastrous to dismantle an industrial network that was built up over decades.

**Jason Groleau:** And yet, it would be so easy to solve. Why don't they?

**René Roy:** I don't have all the details, but it would be advisable for certain people and levels of government to communicate more with one another and find solutions that, I believe, could be quite pragmatic and have a direct impact on our economy.

**Jason Groleau:** Before getting back to the issue at hand, 1,500 workers are leaving our Beauce region. That represents half a billion dollars in annual revenue for our businesses. That's significant.

In your remarks, you mentioned Northern Farms in Ontario and their expansion issues. Could you please explain the problem briefly?

**René Roy:** I just want to point out that after Olymel closed its slaughterhouses in Quebec, Ontario producers had to redirect their pig production and shipments from Quebec to the United States. That's unfortunate, because we lost added value.

Some producers took matters into their own hands and purchased a processing plant to enable processing in Ontario. However, they face regulatory challenges and a lack of government support. In fact, the government said it would be there, but currently, it is not. Politicians made promises, but the government apparatus is struggling to deliver and meet this demand on the ground.

As a result, the company is having trouble achieving its goal, which is to reach a level that requires federal inspection.

**Jason Groleau:** Earlier, you mentioned workers and labour. Is there a possibility of labour exchanges and ensuring labour mobility between provinces? Is that a problem for you?

**René Roy:** In my humble opinion, based on what I know, the challenge isn't so much about exchanges, because the agricultural sector is quite a small market. There aren't many workers, and there's also a language issue.

I believe access to foreign workers should be provided, as well as a pathway to citizenship for them, because if Canada is able to feed its population, it reasserts its sovereignty as a country.

**Jason Groleau:** It's not easy to find people who speak the Beauceron dialect. They're few and far between.

Mr. Viel—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds.

[*Translation*]

**Jason Groleau:** —I have a quick question for you.

Why has it been easier for years to do business north-south than east-west? Can you explain that to me?

**Carl Viel:** Since you're from Beauce, you know that you've long been involved in forging north-south relationships. I am not from Saint-Jules—Mr. Roy's hometown—but I simply want to say that we have ties with the United States.

On top of that, people from many families have moved to the United States and made initial contacts through family ties.

[*English*]

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

We'll move to Ms. Acan, please, for five minutes.

**Sima Acan (Oakville West, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Roy, earlier this year you highlighted the importance of collaboration among government, producers and processors in maintaining Canada's strong food safety reputation, and that is exactly the kind of partnership we want to build on as the government.

As we move forward with internal trade reforms, how do you see the right balance between reducing barriers within Canada and protecting the inspection systems and on-farm standards that are essential for maintaining access to export markets?

**René Roy:** Thank you for the question.

I would like to stress the fact that there is a need for provincially inspected plants. Our question is not there. It is when it is time to make trade interprovincial. We do not question the reality on the ground that there is a market that is serviced by those little—most of the time—processing plants, especially in communities that are far from the large centres.

Our objective is to make sure that we keep the trust. To make sure that we keep this trust, we have to keep a standard that will allow the interprovincial trade to upgrade to the same standard as the federally inspected plant. If we do this, we will create confidence not only for our consumers but also internationally, because if there were an erosion of interprovincial trade and, after exportation of this meat, there would be substandard levels of food security, then it could create a major issue for the confidence of our international partners.

• (1245)

**Sima Acan:** In my own previous line of work, I was supplying products to manufacturers within the pork industry. I saw first-hand

how critical quality control, traceability and consistency are, and not just for compliance but also for maintaining the trust across the entire supply chain. From your perspective, do the current measures under Bill C-5 provide enough certainty to preserve those standards in the pork sector, or are there still gaps that need to be addressed? Do you want to add anything on top of your answer?

**René Roy:** The only thing I would add at this point is that with 94% of our processing federally inspected, we are confident that the marginal part could continue to trade within the province.

We know there are some provinces that are requesting an opening, but there is a discussion that could happen among provinces too. It's not only the federal level that is taking care of everything under the umbrella. It can also be within provinces, but my understanding is that they will have to upgrade their standards if they wish to trade.

**Sima Acan:** Thank you.

In Burlington, which is adjacent to my riding of Oakville West, Fearmans Pork is the largest pork-processing facility in Ontario, processing upwards of 45,000 hogs per week and serving markets across Ontario but also selling to the eastern United States. We see first-hand the scale of operations like this and how dependent they are on efficient transportation networks to move their products across provinces and to export into markets. That volume generates significant truck traffic and relies heavily on the efficiency of local and regional transportation corridors.

With federal investments like the trade diversification corridors fund, do you see a real opportunity to strengthen logistics infrastructure for major agri-food hubs? If those transportation corridors were improved, what kind of economic impact would that have on the pork sector?

**The Chair:** I need a very brief answer from someone to the member.

**René Roy:** With major issues at the international level, when it's time to trade outside of the country, it's really important that, yes, we do strengthen our infrastructure.

**Sima Acan:** Thank you.

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

Mr. Savard-Tremblay, go ahead for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Roy, I'm going to take this a step further while staying on the same topic: Is there a challenge related to differences in standards? You gave an example of joint systems, but is there a challenge related to differing standards? For example, according to a study by the Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, some provinces use standards that are more akin to those in restaurants, whereas federal standards are quite different. Other provinces apply standards similar to federal standards, so there is greater harmonization.

Ultimately, does reciprocal recognition pose a risk of a race to the bottom?

**René Roy:** Thank you for the question. It'll help me clarify things in relation to a question one of your colleagues asked earlier about what another witness had said.

I'd like to highlight the fact that there is a range of standards across the provinces. Some are closer to federal requirements. I would have no hesitation in using products from facilities that apply those standards. However, I do have concerns about the less stringent standards. That becomes more problematic, especially if there's a significant amount of transportation involved.

So yes, if we allowed for a patchwork of smaller regulations, we'd risk a race to the bottom.

• (1250)

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** There's a risk, but how do you mitigate it? The question may seem broad, but I've been thinking about it. I'd be interested in hearing your thoughts.

**René Roy:** You can mitigate it mainly through standardization, by making sure that all the provinces are on the same page and agree on the same standards. Given how demanding we are when it comes to exports, the standards we're proposing are federal standards. Those are the standards that are used internationally.

Yes, it's demanding. We recognize that it's demanding, especially for smaller businesses. However, if a business is looking beyond provincial borders, it needs support. It needs to be possible for those businesses to take that leap.

[English]

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

Mr. McKenzie, you have five minutes.

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

Mr. Viel, I'd like to ask you this: What is it you've seen the federal government engaged in, over the last year, with respect to improving our opportunities for east-west trade within Canada?

**Carl Viel:** The first thing that we saw is the discussion that took place with the different provinces in terms of looking at how we can work on the different challenges that each of the provinces are facing to increase the trade between the different provinces and territories. That's the first element.

The second one we also see is the conversations that are taking place between the bureaucrats in the different provinces to find solutions and look at ways we can improve the trade between the provinces and territories. Those are the two first ones that come to mind in terms of what's going on right now.

The third one is the opening of discussion, as we saw, throughout the Confederation—the discussions that are taking place between the federal government and provincial governments in terms of the premiers having conversations, and the one-on-ones that are taking place between the federal government and individual provinces, looking at opportunities and finding ways to increase it.

**David McKenzie:** Thank you.

That meets what I generally understand to be the circumstances, which are that we're continuing to have a lot of conversations.

I'm wondering if you've seen concrete actions. In the event you have not, what would be top of your list for steps that can be taken now? What's within reach that we can actually stop talking about and start doing?

**Carl Viel:** The first is one that we actually started this year. It's increasing the number of trade missions that we're doing in other provinces or other cities to give access and opportunities to our companies to see what the opportunities are in Alberta, Ontario, New Brunswick, other provinces or wherever we're looking at. These are the first things that we can see.

There are a lot of opportunities to find companies that can actually work together to find ways to supply larger companies in the country and then, afterwards, around the world. For example, we know that there is going to be an announcement probably tomorrow around Airbus. That's a big opportunity for Canadians and companies across the country. They are going to be able to sell components to Airbus. Afterwards, they're going to sell their airplanes to Asia.

Those are great examples of what we can do to continue to help our companies move and see the opportunities the Canadian market is offering.

**David McKenzie:** I have to believe that an increased domestic trade or business opportunity for any particular company would improve its chances of attracting foreign direct investment. You mentioned that earlier as a key component for growth.

• (1255)

**Carl Viel:** Yes, it is. There are also opportunities through attracting companies from other countries to come to Canada.

I'll say one thing that was told to me once by the CEO of a company. It was that going to Toronto, Calgary or Edmonton is further away than going to Japan. If we have those companies located in our country, it's easier to build bridges and find ways to work with them.

Once you come in as a supplier, there are more chances that you're going to get into their supply chain. That's not only in Canada but elsewhere around the world.

**David McKenzie:** We certainly have a fair amount of experience with integrated supply chains. At the present, that's primarily north-south, as opposed to east-west through Canada or internationally.

Do you see opportunities there for Canadian companies to expand our trade outside of our U.S. relationship?

**Carl Viel:** Yes. In Quebec City, for example, we are very strong in NDT, non-destructive testing. There are major opportunities to work on the west coast with the pipelines, gas and other examples that come from the oil and gas industry.

There are some opportunities. It's bringing our companies to see what they are, meeting the right people and understanding the tendering process to obtain contracts.

**The Chair:** You have 18 seconds.

**David McKenzie:** I wonder if you have any comment on the role of our trade commissioner service domestically in terms of assisting some of the east-west conversations you've referred to.

**The Chair:** Give a brief answer, please.

**Carl Viel:** There are some in different cities. We have to work with them as well and increase our relationships with these people.

**David McKenzie:** Thank you.

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

Mr. Lavoie, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us. I'm happy to see them again. It's always a pleasure.

Mr. Viel, it'll come as no surprise that my question is for you. It has two parts.

The first part concerns the potential to be realized. You've spoken about this: a great deal of trade takes place along the north-south axis, of course. In your view, what is the potential of the east-west axis? In Bill C-5, the government has put forward an estimate of \$200 billion. Does that seem realistic to you? Does that represent strong potential or not? Depending on the potential, which sector would you prioritize?

**Carl Viel:** Thank you for your question.

First, it's important to look at the potential in each sector and assess the opportunities. Earlier, I gave the oil and gas sector as an example. In Quebec, companies such as Eddyfi are heavily focused on non-destructive testing. It's important to present these companies with the opportunities available across Canada and then help them connect with the right people to participate in tendering processes and secure contracts.

There is clearly significant potential in different markets. Earlier, the energy sector was mentioned, and I just referred to it.

The agri-food sector is definitely an important one. We have very large chains and brands in Canada and Quebec, as well as in the Atlantic provinces, such as Sobeys.

Tapping into this potential means supporting businesses by making sure they are competitive. As Mr. Roy mentioned earlier, it's very important to encourage businesses to adopt Canadian stan-

dards, which are aligned with international standards. It's always important to aim higher to help businesses meet Canadian standards, so they can quickly move into international markets. These are therefore opportunities.

In Quebec, there's also a services sector, in the information technology sector, for example. This sector isn't necessarily given much consideration, but it offers enormous potential for businesses. We've seen this, for instance, with Coveo, which signed an agreement with Bell and the Canadian government on artificial intelligence.

Therefore, the services sector is another very important element to take into account.

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

Madam Chair, I see my time is coming to an end, so I'd like to propose a motion before the end of the meeting. Is that still possible?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Have you discussed the motion with the members on the other side?

**Steeve Lavoie:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Is everybody all right with that?

[*Translation*]

**Steeve Lavoie:** I discussed it with my colleagues.

Do my colleagues want me to read the motion? It's the motion on Export Development Canada, the Business Development Bank of Canada, the Canadian Commercial Corporation and Invest in Canada.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** It's on notice, so it's fine.

Is everybody in agreement? Yes, it's carried unanimously.

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

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

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

**Steeve Lavoie:** Thank you.

[*English*]

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

As we go forward, I'd like to make sure that we don't have any surprises and that we make sure we're talking to each other about what we want to do and trying to build unanimity as we move forward with whatever the issues are.

Thank you all very much. Thank you to the witnesses.

Mr. Roy, it's good to see you here again.

The meeting is adjourned.







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