

Report of the Africa Study Group Conference

The Importance and Role of the Canadian African Diaspora in International Trade and Foreign Policy

St. Paul University, Ottawa October 5, 2024

INTRODUCTION

On October 5, 2024, under the auspices of the Africa Study Group, a conference was held in Ottawa on “The Importance and Role of the African-Canadian Diaspora in International Trade and Foreign Policy”. Initiated as an action-oriented forum of dialogue, the conference brought together a good number of intellectuals and leaders from the Canadian African Diaspora with the presence of some stand-alone and “Umbrella Organizations” grouping over 70 individual organizations. Representing the Canadian government were the Honorable Robert Oliphant (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Ms. Cheryl Urban, Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) for Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, the Dean of the African Diplomatic Corps in Canada and 8 ambassadors or senior representatives from African countries attended.

This report is a summary of the discussions and the conference program is included below for ease of reference.

OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE

Dr. C. T. Bangoura (President of the Africa Study Group) welcomed over 75 in-person and 100 online conference participants from Canada and abroad. Underlining the importance of Africa to Canada, he highlighted the most recent evolutions in Canada-Africa relations. He stressed the importance of strengthening the role of the Canadian African Diaspora in international trade and various foreign affairs relations between Canada and Africa. Prof. Philip Onguny who coordinated with St. Paul University to host the conference encouraged the attendees to move forward with efforts to organize the Canadian African Diaspora.

Parliamentary Secretary Oliphant and ADM Urban made it clear that the Government was fully aware of the opportunities and challenges facing Africa. Their assessment of opportunities was optimistic (e.g. a growing, educated, well-trained and eager supply of young workers; a growing middle-class market, made up of consumers eager to strengthen trade with Canada and spend on Canadian goods and technologies; an agricultural sector on the verge of being able to feed the world). Nevertheless, they were clear that the Government is very open to concrete advice from the Canadian African Diaspora as to what would be the best way to advance Canada-Africa mutual interests. In his approach, the parliamentary Secretary emphasized that any future relationship between Canada and Africa would not be based on aid but one between equal partners, focussed on key pillars of joint interest. He stressed the need to focus more on the opportunities, and not only on the challenges, when approaching our

relations with African countries. Canada's future well-being is dependent on a successful Africa and Canada would build on its strengths, prominent amongst which was the Canadian African Diaspora.

DISCUSSION PANELS

The Keynote Speaker Prof. Wisdom Tettey (Prof., University of Toronto, Scarborough and chair of the Continental African Diaspora Scholars Network) highlighted the need to “shake us out of relative slumber”. He highlighted the historical goodwill Canada has with Africa, which he warned “can dissipate very quickly.” He recommended that Africa’s youthful populations be properly supported to provide the expected demographic dividends. Prof. Tettey strongly encouraged a deeper engagement for Canada with Africa but a different one with a more equal partnership. The starting point is for the government of Canada to listen to Africans and especially to the Canadian African Diaspora.

The first panel addressed “Why does the Canadian African Diaspora Matter” with a particular focus on the trade and economic side.

Prof Edward Akuffo (Prof. Political Science, University of the Fraser Valley, BC) moderated. Several panelists pointed out that Africa’s population is projected to grow from 1.4 b. to 2.5 b. by 2050. Susan Namulindwa (Africa Trade Desk) spoke about the critical role of “cultural translators” that the diaspora community can play on trade and investment discussions. Drawing on her lobbying experience with ONE, Elise Legault called on the conference to find a way to create a lobby/advocacy group for the Canadian African Diaspora to shape priorities of elected officials. Dr. Yaovi Bouka (Chair and CEO of Force Leadership Africain, Montreal) outlined the multidimensional capacities of the Canadian African Diaspora in African countries. In the light of his organization's solid track record, he shed light on the paramount role of the Canadian African Diaspora in improving Canada's investment in Africa and stressed the need for Canadian banks to support Government in boosting trade and investments in Africa. In a video contribution that could unfortunately not be visualized during the conference for technical reasons, Germaine Basita (Co-chair of the Canada for Africa Group) emphasized the need for more action from Global Affairs Canada to engage the Canadian African Diaspora in policy-making, in delivering humanitarian assistance and in advancing sustainable development goals. Wrapping up that panel was Dr. Sulaiman Walhad who felt that Canadians were being too cautious and there was plenty of space to increase and diversify trade relations.

The second panel turned to “How Can Canada’s African Diaspora Strengthen its Contribution to Canada’s economic and foreign policy with African countries”.

Prof Thomas Tiekou (Professor, Politics and International Relations, Kings University College, Univ. Of Western Ontario) moderated and spoke strongly about the need for the community to be better organized or ‘risk being ignored.’ In his panel key-note he enlightened the conference on aspects of "How to work individually between Canadian institutions and African Governments/organizations". He stated: “We have to learn how to be ‘super networkers’”. Prof Akuffo outlined prior efforts to increase Canada-Africa relations (e.g. Kananaskis 2002) but noted a long-term failure to put resources behind areas of interest (international justice, peacekeeping, investment). He commented that Canada has been very much successful in supporting civil society organizations. Prof Akuffo urged the creation of a

Canadian Council of the African Diaspora and called for a more conscious effort to build economic relationships, think strategically about regional priorities of African countries and key institutions (e.g. the African Union) and organize the Diaspora's public advocacy in an inclusive and non-partisan way. Templar Kalundu (Managing Partner of Preponderant Advisory and Senior Fellow, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy) returned to the theme of needing a well-organized and unified group to lobby for the interests of the African Diaspora. Describing collaboration between members of the Canadian Diaspora as an investment, he insisted to this end on the need for more consistency and intentionality. He also called for more academic focus on Canada-Africa relations. Susan Namulindwa observed that the current reality in which members of the Canadian African Diaspora are either working in silos or competing with each other and therefore undermining our common voice. She noted the recent creation and registration of the Federation of the Canadian African Diaspora.

At the end of the panel discussions, Ms. Urban, answered a number of questions raised in relation to Global Affairs Canada's prospects and platform for building a sustained partnership with Africa. In the light of the approach outlined by the Honorable Oliphant in his speech, she notably expressed the commitment and action-oriented vision of the Pan-African Office of Global Affairs Canada with a view to Canada building on its strengths, prominent amongst which was the Canadian African Diaspora. Emphasizing the importance of investing in collaborations/relationships, the ADM underscored a greater focus on economic cooperation and opportunities for diaspora communities to share their perspectives. She shared ways for the diaspora to engage with Global Affairs Canada.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PANELS' DISCUSSION, AREAS OF CONSENSUS AND A POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD

- **A Canada's Africa Strategy**

- The conference agreed that there was a multi-dimensional Canada-Africa agenda that holds the potential to bring significant benefits to both partners. To realize this, a comprehensive strategy was called for, one that was based on equal partnerships with the goal of mutual benefit.
- The Government has gone from a Strategy, to a Framework, to an Approach with respect to defining its proposed relations with Africa. There was a consensus that "words matter" and that what Canada should develop is a **Strategy** for its relations with Africa.
- Like the \$2.3 billion financial commitment over 5 years to implement Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, Canada's eventual African Strategy should come with equivalent funding commitments.

- **The Role of the Diaspora**

As Secretary Oliphant stated in his opening remarks, key to the success of any Canada-Africa Strategy is for Canada to build on its strengths, including, significantly, the Canadian African Diaspora. In that context:

- The Canadian African Diaspora should be an effective part in the decision-making process of the Canada-Africa relations

- It was agreed that, fundamentally, Diaspora members are best placed to be 'interpreters' and 'bridges' between Canada and their homelands and should play a 'bigger' role in Canada-Africa relations; the Canadian African Diaspora is already very active in supporting Canada –Africa relations, through diverse economic activities, transfer of technology and vast sums of remittances (over \$1 billion and greater than Canada's Official Development Assistance - ODA), but they need and want to do more
- Suggestions included diaspora members cooperating with/replacing/augmenting services provided by trade commissioners and technical experts
- It was agreed that the Canadian African Diaspora be an effective 'lobby'. To do so, It must particularly :
 - accept that it is a lobbyist, or advocacy organisation, which is an honest role in public sector decision-making
 - understand that Governments listen to those that are organized and have a clear, consistent message
 - accept that lobbying/advocacy is a long-term activity as personnel change positions.

- **Lessons Learned from Previous Initiatives**

- The lack of a nation-wide coordinating structure for the Canadian African Diaspora is seen as the main weakness factor for its efficiency
- A number of attempts to set up a nation-wide coordinating structure for the Canadian African Diaspora have been unsuccessful, mainly due to disparities amongst the various associations
- In 2008, the Africa Diaspora Association of Canada (ADAC) was established but never gained traction and was never conceived and really activated as a nation-wide coordinating body for the Canadian African Diaspora
- For a nation-wide coordinating structure for the Canadian African Diaspora to efficiently exist, it would need to be inclusive, independent and fundamentally based on individual/personal memberships and an affiliative endorsement by the associations
- The lack, within GAC, of a clear responding/focal point for the Canadian African Diaspora was identified as one of the main reason for a lack of sustainable dialogue and cooperation line
- At the 2002 G-8 Summit, hosted by Canada, at Kananaskis, generous commitments were made to Africa, which were not fulfilled due, in part, to lack of involvement and 'lobbying' by the diaspora
- The Canadian African Diaspora is not properly represented and connected with the AU - Diaspora Division - to play an effective role in Canada-Africa relations and as an essential part of the AU 'Sixth-Region' concept.

- **The Way Forward**

- There was consensus that an **action-oriented agenda** was called for

- To that end, it was agreed that organization is key; ***“the Canadian African Diaspora needs to speak with one voice”***; for that purpose, a nation-wide coordinating body needs to be created for the Canadian African Diaspora
 - It was agreed that the nation-wide coordinating body of the Canadian African Diaspora would need to be “de-tribalize and de-nationalize”; it must be inclusive, independent and fundamentally based on individual/personal memberships and an affiliative endorsement by the stand-alone and different associations; a key indicator for this new coordination body is the interest it generates with the Canadian African Diaspora by becoming members; the coordination body does not have “hierarchical /supervisory authority” over existing African diaspora associations; legitimacy – and ultimately leadership by the coordination body – is gained through respect and trust in its quality coordinating/consensus-building work and the extent to which coordination is seen and perceived by the Canadian African Diaspora as a beneficial/indispensable service or support
 - It was consensual that GAC needs to pay more attention to the Diaspora, preferably with the establishment of a focal point within the Africa Bureau to boost/ease dialogue and cooperation with the nation-wide coordinating structure of the Canadian African Diaspora
 - It was suggested that, the recently-registered ‘Federation of Canadian African Diaspora’ be a good model for such a nation-wide coordinating body of the Canadian African Diaspora
 - Several participants called on the Government to provide support for the creation of a nation-wide coordinating body of the Canadian African Diaspora.
- **Some Possible Activities for the New Diaspora Organisation**
 - Foster collaboration and alignment across the Canadian African Diaspora through a high degree of consensus-building on strategy, response plan and the actual response
 - Provide from its membership an ‘Advisory Council’ on Canada-Africa issues to GAC’s Ministers and the Prime Minister
 - Work with Government to make Canada a ‘partner of choice’ for African countries and companies ; maintain and improve sustainable cooperation network with GAC
 - Improve knowledge of the importance and role of the Canadian African Diaspora to help policy-makers and practitioners understand the diversity of Canada's African diaspora and its rich potential
 - Develop key messages and agenda of the Canadian African Diaspora for the next 12-24 months
 - Should the Government agree to allocate funding for the Africa Strategy, commensurate with that for the Indo-Pacific Strategy, how should this \$2.3 billion over 5 years be spent
 - Through the individual Diaspora Associations, help Initiate business partnerships and identify business opportunities for Canadian businesses in Africa and vice versa.