

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Inquiry into Strengthening Australia's Trade and Investment Relations with Africa

Submitted by: Fluent Cargo

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1. Executive Summary

Fluent Cargo welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Trade Subcommittee's inquiry into strengthening Australia's trade and investment relations with Africa. As a technology company focused on global trade visibility, freight market intelligence, and supply chain decision-making, Fluent Cargo is uniquely positioned to address structural barriers that currently constrain Australia–Africa trade.

Africa represents a significant growth opportunity for Australian exporters and investors, particularly in resources, agriculture, energy, infrastructure, healthcare, education, and advanced manufacturing. However, limited market transparency, fragmented logistics networks, high transaction costs, and information asymmetry continue to impede commercial engagement.

Fluent Cargo's digital platform reduces these barriers by providing real-time freight pricing, route visibility, carrier performance data, and trade intelligence across international shipping corridors, including emerging and under-served African markets. By improving certainty, lowering risk, and enabling data-driven decisions, Fluent Cargo can materially support Australia's efforts to diversify exports and deepen economic engagement with Africa.

2. Overview of Fluent Cargo

Fluent Cargo is an Australian-founded supply chain technology company that enables exporters, importers, freight forwarders, and logistics providers to make better decisions using live freight and trade data. The platform aggregates and normalises data across shipping lines, airlines, ports, freight forwarders, and customs environments to deliver:

- Real-time freight rates across air, sea, and multimodal transport
- Route and transit-time visibility
- Carrier reliability and performance benchmarking
- Market-level trade flow and capacity insights

Fluent Cargo operates globally and is designed to support trade into both mature and emerging markets where data fragmentation and opacity are most acute.

3. Australia's Existing Trade and Investment Relations with Africa: Key Challenges

While Australia has strong sectoral alignment with many African economies, trade volumes remain below potential. Key impediments include:

- **Limited logistics and freight market transparency**, particularly for intra-African and Australia–Africa trade lanes
- **High freight costs and volatility**, with limited visibility on competitive routing options
- **Complex port, customs, and regulatory environments**, varying significantly by country
- **Lack of reliable performance data** on carriers, ports, and transit corridors
- **Risk perception gaps**, driven by insufficient operational data rather than underlying demand fundamentals

These challenges disproportionately affect small and mid-sized Australian exporters, who lack the scale or internal resources to absorb uncertainty.

4. How Fluent Cargo Can Assist in Strengthening Trade and Investment with Africa

4.1 Reducing Information Asymmetry and Market Risk

Fluent Cargo provides Australian businesses with objective, data-driven visibility into freight costs, routes, and service reliability for African markets. This directly reduces perceived and actual risk when entering new destinations, enabling exporters to price accurately and commit to delivery timelines with confidence.

4.2 Supporting Export Diversification to African Markets

By exposing viable shipping options to ports and inland hubs across Africa, Fluent Cargo enables Australian exporters to identify non-traditional markets beyond established gateways. This supports diversification into fast-growing economies aligned with Australia's strengths, including East, West, and Southern Africa.

4.3 Enabling Efficient Supply Chains under the AfCFTA

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is expected to increase intra-African trade volumes and regional manufacturing. Fluent Cargo's platform helps Australian companies understand how AfCFTA-driven trade flows affect capacity, congestion, and routing—allowing them to integrate more effectively into regional African supply chains.

4.4 Lowering Trade Costs and Improving Competitiveness

Freight costs are a major determinant of export competitiveness. Fluent Cargo enables Australian businesses to benchmark rates, identify inefficiencies, and select optimal transport solutions, directly improving landed cost outcomes for African-bound exports.

4.5 Supporting Government and Trade Promotion Agencies

Aggregated and anonymised trade and freight data from Fluent Cargo can support Australian Government agencies by:

- Identifying high-potential Africa trade corridors
- Informing infrastructure, trade facilitation, and capacity-building initiatives
- Supporting evidence-based trade missions and market prioritisation
- Measuring the real-world impact of policy and trade agreements

5. Role of Government and Opportunities for Collaboration

Fluent Cargo's capabilities align closely with DFAT and Austrade priorities relating to export diversification, market access, trade facilitation, supply chain resilience, and SME participation in international trade.

Fluent Cargo sees strong potential for targeted public–private collaboration to support Australia–Africa trade objectives, including:

- **Integration of digital trade and logistics intelligence** into Austrade country and sector market profiles, export plans, and go-to-market briefings
- **Support for data-driven trade facilitation initiatives** that reduce information asymmetry and operational risk for Australian exporters, particularly SMEs
- **Inclusion of freight transparency and supply chain analytics tools** within export readiness, Landing Pads, and market entry programs
- **Collaboration on pilot initiatives** focused on priority African markets and sectors identified by DFAT and Austrade, including agribusiness, resources, clean energy, health, and advanced manufacturing
- **Use of aggregated trade and freight data** to support economic diplomacy, trade mission design, and evaluation of policy effectiveness

Government support for digital trade infrastructure, logistics transparency, and data interoperability will be critical to achieving Australia's objectives of resilient supply chains, diversified exports, and deeper economic integration with Africa.

6. Illustrative Case Study: Supporting an Australian Exporter Entering an African Market

The following vignette is illustrative and reflects common challenges faced by Australian exporters.

An Australian mid-sized agribusiness exporter is assessing entry into East African markets to supply processed food products to regional distributors. While market demand indicators are strong and Austrade market insights identify clear commercial potential, the exporter faces uncertainty around freight costs, routing options, port performance, and transit-time reliability. This uncertainty constrains the exporter's ability to price competitively and commit to delivery schedules.

Using Fluent Cargo's platform, the exporter is able to:

- Compare real-time sea freight rates from Australia to multiple East African ports, rather than relying on a single traditional gateway
- Identify alternative routings that reduce congestion exposure and improve schedule reliability
- Assess carrier performance and historical transit-time data to support commercial negotiations
- Model landed costs with greater accuracy, supporting competitive and sustainable pricing strategies

With improved logistics visibility and reduced operational risk, the exporter proceeds with market entry, supported by Austrade's in-market networks and trade facilitation services. The result is a commercially viable export pathway that may otherwise have been deferred or abandoned due to uncertainty rather than lack of demand.

This example demonstrates how digital trade and logistics intelligence can convert market interest into realised trade outcomes—directly supporting DFAT and Austrade objectives around export growth, diversification, and sustained engagement in African markets.

7. Recommended Government Action

The Committee should support the incorporation of digital trade and logistics intelligence tools into Australia's Africa trade strategy, including through Austrade export programs and DFAT-led economic diplomacy, to reduce market entry risk for Australian SMEs and measurably increase the number, value, and sustainability of SME export transactions into African markets.

8. Conclusion

Strengthening Australia's trade and investment relations with Africa will require more than traditional market promotion. It will require reducing uncertainty, improving transparency, and enabling Australian businesses to operate competitively in complex and evolving logistics environments.

Fluent Cargo provides digital trade infrastructure and intelligence that directly support these outcomes. By empowering exporters with real-time freight and trade data, Fluent Cargo can play a meaningful role in unlocking new commercial opportunities, supporting export diversification, and deepening Australia's long-term economic engagement with Africa.

Fluent Cargo welcomes further engagement with the Committee and relevant Government agencies to support this important agenda.

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