



18 August 2017

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Re: Submission to Senate FADT References Committee *Inquiry into Australia's trade and investment relationship with the countries of Africa*

Dear Senate FADT Reference Committee,

I am pleased to make this submission for consideration as part of the Committee's *Inquiry into Australia's trade and investment relationship with the countries of Africa* and believe that this inquiry presents an important opportunity to enhance wider Australia-Africa relations.

Introduction and background

I am making this submission in my professional capacity as an International Relations academic at the University of Western Australia (UWA) and the submission represents my personal views. My teaching and research interests focus on the regional and international politics of Africa, including contemporary Australia-Africa relations. I teach units on The International Politics of Africa and on Peace and Security in Africa.

I am the founder and coordinator of the UWA Africa Research Cluster, established in 2015 as a mechanism to support and promote the University's Africa-related collaborations and engagement across academia, government, industry and Diaspora communities. A short summary of the activities of the Cluster is attached to this submission. I am also the founding co-chair of the Worldwide Universities Network's Global Africa Group, an international research network that promotes global-Africa collaboration on themes relevant to the contemporary African development agenda and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

This submission draws upon insights and findings from a number of research projects and publications that I have (co)produced over the last several years, including the volume D. Mickler and T. Lyons (eds.), *New Engagement: Contemporary Australian Foreign Policy Towards Africa* (2013), which captured the enhanced level of activity in the relationship under the previous Labor governments of 2007-13. This work also drew upon the previous parliamentary inquiry on this

theme, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade *Inquiry into Australia's relationship with the countries of Africa* (2011), and indeed the book featured a contribution by the chair of that inquiry Senator Michael Foreshaw.

While my own individual research has focused on security, governance and diplomatic issues in Africa and in the Australia-Africa relationship, rather than trade and investment issues per se, I would argue that there are a number of wider contextual issues that directly impact upon opportunities, challenges and responsibilities in enhancing Australia-Africa trade and investment. I will outline a number of these key contextual issues below, with some recommendations for policy actions, noting that there is necessarily some area of overlap.

1. A need for greater mutual Australia-Africa knowledge and understanding

There remains in Australia—among both elites and the general population—a relatively low level of knowledge about Africa compared to knowledge about other regions and peoples of the world. Australian government programs, and indeed Australians individually, have made commendable efforts to develop greater 'Asia literacy' in this country to build on more extensive existing knowledge of Europe and North America. However, knowledge about the continent of Africa—containing over one quarter of the world's states (55) and over 1.2 billion people—remains relatively low across Australia. Trade and investment opportunities would be supported by better knowledge of Africa by Australians, and in turn better knowledge of Australia across the continent (and particularly outside of the resources sector). In addition, the limited exposure to Africa that the majority of Australians do experience is through media reporting, which is often focused on presenting 'negative' stories and narratives on war, famine and disease. In turn, this can create particular attitudes and approaches to Africa and Africans (and African-Australians) by the wider Australian population, sometimes termed 'Afro-pessimism' but also forms of racism, which can militate against the development of more positive, equal, productive and sustainable relationships with the continent and its peoples. Greater knowledge and understanding of Africa—and all of its diversity and dynamics—it critical to overcoming such obstacles. More specifically, greater awareness by potential Australian traders and investors of Africa's highly diverse historical, socio-political, cultural, economic, security, environmental, legal and regulatory contexts would enable more reasoned decision-making on potential trade and investment activities.

Recommendations:

- The Commonwealth should commit funding towards a national 'Africa Research and Engagement Centre' (AfREC, or similar title) in Australia. This was one of the few recommendations of the 2011 JFADT inquiry that was not adopted by the then-Labor government and, six years later, Australia continues to have no dedicated physical centre mandated to promote Africa-related knowledge and engagement. Given the concentration of Africa-related activity in Western Australia, the proposed centre should be Perth-based and directly linked to education and research institutions, relevant industry groups, African community organisations and relevant

State and Commonwealth government departments. Furthermore, the centre should also have a publicly accessible sister 'hub' based on the African continent (such as in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the continent's 'diplomatic capital', or else Nairobi or Johannesburg) to serve as a 'one stop shop' for Africans seeking to engage with Australian-based individuals and institutions in pursuit of education, research, trade, investment and other collaborative opportunities. This would greatly enhance Australia's 'visibility' on a continent in which Australia is relatively unknown.

- The Commonwealth should commit resources towards the development of a national 'Africa literacy' program in Australia. This could include support for developing greater African content in primary and secondary school curricula, university courses, media programming and in popular culture. This would include creating specific funding schemes for reciprocal exchanges between African and Australian students (building on the New Colombo Plan model, which currently excludes Africa, and going beyond the currently limited and one-way Australia Awards for Africa scholarships). This could also include better resourcing existing Australia-Africa knowledge and research networks—such as the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) and the Australia Africa Universities Network (AAUN)—to better enable them to perform their roles as knowledge generators and collaboration builders.
- The Commonwealth should support a series of major public cultural and educational events across Australia to celebrate annual international Africa Day (25 May). This day commemorates the 1963 founding of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), a milestone in the ongoing projects of Pan-Africanism, self-determination and decolonisation. This would be an important opportunity to not only celebrate African political achievements and culture but also to educate the wider Australian population about the continent through high-profile activities. Moreover, this is critically important in a time of rising xenophobia and white nationalism in Western societies, including in Australia.

2. A need to develop ethical, stable and sustainable relationships with Africa

The creation of cross-cultural literacy and competency should be inherent to the development in Australia of greater knowledge and understanding of the diverse African continent and its peoples. As part of this, Australians should be encouraged to develop ethical relationships in their engagements with Africa across education, research, cultural exchanges, trade, investment, industry, tourism and beyond. This would mean developing genuine understanding of and respect for local contexts—historical, social, cultural, legal, political and environmental—committing to ongoing consultations with African stakeholders, pursuing equal and mutually-beneficial partnerships, and in general operating with ongoing and critical self-reflection on the nature of the evolving collaborations, partnerships, agreements etc. This has been a fundamental set of considerations that have underpinned our research collaboration work in the Worldwide Universities Network Global Africa Group, for example. It is particularly important to ensure that commercial activities are in line with local, national and regional African development priorities, programs and regulations, such as the African Union's *Agenda 2063* and the African Mining Vision, and to ensure

that respect for local agency, human rights and human security underpin any such relationships in line with SDGs 16 and 17.

In addition to the central importance of building ethical relationships is the need to ensure greater consistency and sustainability in Australian relationships with Africa, particularly by the Commonwealth government. Following a period of rapidly enhanced relations under the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments, for example, there has been a sharp decline in Australian engagement with Africa under the Coalition since 2013, which has oriented Australian foreign policy towards greater engagement with Asia at the expense of other regions including Africa. Governments of course have the prerogative to determine policy and diplomatic priorities, but, given Australia's relatively small overall global diplomatic footprint, this can have disproportionate and counter-productive impacts in regions in which developing relationships have been undercut by the withdrawal of government resources and attention. Given the (growing) global political significance of Africa—such as its 54 UN votes, its natural resources wealth, its demographic boom, its challenges of violent extremism, its innovations in regional governance—it is prudent for Australia to try to develop a more sustained and sustainable relationship with the continent rather than the boom-and-bust cycle that currently characterises the relationship and which undermines Australia's credibility as a reliable and long-term partner for Africa. This would no doubt provide greater certainty and stability for Australians engaged in or exploring trade and investment opportunities in Africa.

Recommendations:

- The Commonwealth should commit to a higher ongoing level of engagement with the critically important region of Africa, even if foreign policy priorities are directed towards other regions at specific points in time. It should aim to build reliability and sustainability into its African partnerships.
- The Commonwealth should actively support the diversification of forms of Australia-Africa engagement. While trade and investment—particularly in the resources sector—have been a prominent feature of contemporary Australia-Africa relations, there is both scope and a need to develop a broader base for the relationship. There is substantial potential, for example, to enhance education and research collaboration opportunities between Australia and Africa from the currently low base of activity. This also includes supporting and strengthening people-to-people linkages by promoting greater opportunities and channels for Australians to travel to and engage with the African continent directly.
- Relatedly, active efforts should be made to more effectively draw upon the enormous expertise, experiences, ideas, networks, entrepreneurialism and ingenuity (including business knowledge and acumen) in the growing African Diaspora in Australia. This would mean the creation of structures and the provision of resources to actively consult the African Diaspora and its community organisations in Australia—including by enabling greater representation by community leaders on relevant committees—on core issues including Australian foreign policy towards the continent/specific countries in Africa, on trade and investment opportunities, on cultural engagement and on creating deeper and wider knowledge about Africa within Australia.

3. Need for greater coordination of Australia-Africa relations

In recent years, there has been an increasing concentration of annual Africa-related activities in Perth in the first week of September, in what has come to be labelled “Australia-Africa Week”. This is centred upon the major annual resources industry conference, Africa Down Under, and has expanded to include the annual Australia African Universities Network Forum, the Australia Africa Research Forum, and a range of other industry gatherings and community-led cultural events which attract major resources companies, ministers and diplomats from African, Australian and WA governments, academics, students, community organisations and a range of other stakeholders. While this expansion of activities and participants brings welcome focus and attention to Australia-Africa relations—including for trade and investment opportunities—there are a couple of challenges that need to be addressed to better leverage the opportunities presented by this. First, it is unclear that this Africa Week has wider profile or resonance across Australia more broadly and more could be done to use it as a platform for national attention and associated activities in other states. Second, there is an increasing need for enhanced coordination of Australia-Africa Week across industry, government, academia, community organisations and other stakeholders. More broadly, there is often a disconnect between different organisations and sectors when it comes to developing deeper Australia-Africa relations and more could be done to develop platforms for dialogue and coordination between different types of actors in this context.

Recommendations:

- As above, the Commonwealth could support the development of an Australian national ‘Africa Research and Engagement Centre’ to support and coordinate Africa Week—both as a concrete set of high-profile activities in Perth each year and as an ongoing platform to promote and coordinate wider Australia-Africa relations in partnership with relevant government, industry, education and community sectors in Australia.
- The Commonwealth should provide additional resources (including expertise from the Africa branch in Canberra) to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade WA State Office to support the coordination of enhanced Australia-Africa relations in line with the measures outlined above.

References

African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP):

<http://afsaap.org.au/>

Australia Africa Universities Network (AAUN): <http://aaun.edu.au/>

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Worldwide Universities Network Global Africa Group:

<https://www.wun.ac.uk/wun/research/view/global-africa-group>