

African trade

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Several Minnesota businesses are seeking to explore business opportunities far beyond the state's borders.

Pictured: Rep. Keith Ellison (center) talks with area businesspersons about conducting business in various countries in Africa. Also pictured are Rep. Karen Bass (right) and Hussein Samatar, Executive Director of the African Development Center of Minnesota.

A group of area businesspeople recently met with 5th Dist. Rep. Keith Ellison, Rep. Karen Bass (D-Calif.) and members of the U.S. Commercial Service to discuss possible trade opportunities between Minnesota businesses and various African nations. The group also discussed potential hurdles facing those trying to do business on the continent.

"The U.S. is so far behind when it comes to business development in Africa," said Bass, who serves on the House Foreign Affairs committee and is the ranking member of the Africa, Global Health and Human Rights subcommittee. "We are lagging behind nations such as China and Brazil [when it comes to business development in Africa]."

Bass said President Barack Obama has set a goal to double U.S. exports to Africa by 2015.

Hussein Samatar, founder and Executive Director of the African Development Center of Minnesota, said this a unique time for those seeking to export goods and services to nations of Africa.

"For the first time ever, the middle class is gaining in the continent of Africa," said Samatar.

"Companies in Minnesota, both big and small, are looking to export to countries throughout Africa," said Ellison.

Nat Jackson of Headwinds Soutlions said a big obstacle to doing business in African nations

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such as Nigeria is a perception of corruption.

“The elephant in the room is the reputation of instability,” said Jackson. “We hear about money making schemes with African governments and companies, or ‘Watch those guys, they’ll rip you off.’ That’s not an environment for business.”

Ellison said it’s up to the foreign nations to improve their reputations.

“Nigerians have to fix Nigeria,” said Ellison.

To combat the negative talk about doing business in Africa, the congressman echoed Samatar’s earlier sentiments about economic opportunities in Africa. “Rwanda is on the rise and Ghana is on the verge of becoming a middle class country,” said Ellison. “It’s important to not paint with too broad of a brush when we talk of Africa.”

Mathew Woodle of the U.S. Commercial Service said his office works with businesses seeking to do business abroad and will help in identifying trustworthy partners in foreign nations. He said the office also assists with issues of shipping and customs.

Ellison said when looking to do business in countries in Africa, there may be certain grant opportunities.

“Sectors matter,” said Ellison. “You might be able to get more help if you have a product that will improve the infrastructure of a country. That will be favorably looked upon. Waste disposal could possibly be big business.”

The meeting was hosted by the African Development Center of Minnesota.