



**The Brookings Institution
Africa Growth Initiative
*Foresight Africa Podcast***

“Toward a new era for U.S.-Africa trade”

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Guests:

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Episode Summary:

Following the reauthorization of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) on February 3, 2026, host Landry Signé kicks off our fifth season with a conversation on the trade program’s past and future. He is joined by special guests Florizelle Liser, president and CEO of the Corporate Council on Africa, and Ambassador Christopher Kirigua, deputy chief of mission at the Kenyan Embassy in Washington, D.C.

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SIGNÉ: Hello, welcome to season five of the *Foresight Africa* podcast. As always, I am Landry Signé, your host for this podcast and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, Global Economy and Development Program, and Africa Growth Initiative.

In this season of the *Foresight Africa* podcast, we are looking beyond the headlines to see how global shifts in economy, technology, and culture, politics are shaping the relationships between African countries and the United States.

In this special episode, we start with the much anticipated reauthorization of the African Growth and Opportunity Act, AGOA, and examine the future of U.S.-Africa trade and investment amid growing competition with China and other global partners.

Following its expiration in September 2025, AGOA was reauthorized on February 3rd, 2026, through December 31st, 2026, with retroactive effect. Meanwhile, China, which already far outpaces the U.S. as Africa's biggest trade partner, has announced tariff-free access for import from 53 African countries beginning May 1st.

To what extent has AGOA been a reliable framework for U.S. and African trade? And as we race towards the next deadline in December 2026, what should private sector and public stakeholder be working on to expand or replace it?

To answer these questions, I turn to our distinguished guests. I am honored to have with me in the studio today Florizelle Liser, president and CEO of the Corporate Council on Africa, an organization that has been promoting business and investment between the U.S. and African states for over 30 years. Florie previously served in the office of the U.S. Trade Representative, including most notably as assistant U.S. trade representative for Africa from 2003 to 2017, where she oversaw the early implementation of AGOA firsthand.

Welcome Florie.

LISER: Well thank you so much Landry for having me here and Ambassador Kirigua as well from Kenya, a major beneficiary of AGOA. And this is a critical time. So thank you so much for having me.

SIGNÉ: Always a pleasure having you, Florie. I am also joined by Ambassador Christopher Kirigua, deputy chief of mission for the Embassy of Kenya in Washington, D.C., and from 2020 to 2024, Chris was director general of public-private partnerships in Kenya's National Treasury, where he led the mobilization of private capital for industry and infrastructure. He also has an extensive background as an investment banker in the private sector. Welcome, Ambassador Chris.

KIRIGUA: Thank you. Thank you very much, professor, for having me here today at Brookings. It's such an honor to be here to engage on a very important topic currently not just for Africa, but for the world. And thank you my panelist and friend, Florie, for being here with me today also.

[4:17]

SIGNÉ: Thank you both for joining us.

Florie, for those unfamiliar, what is AGOA and what were its original objectives when it was championed at the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative? And what was it intended to achieve for U.S.-Africa relations?

[4:39]

LISER: So first of all, AGOA is a unilateral trade preference program that gives eligible African countries in sub-Saharan Africa access to the U.S. market duty free for 1,800 products over and above the 5,000 products that they are eligible for under the Generalized System of Preferences. And that's globally.

And I think many know that the GSP program actually lapsed four years ago. And so the only reason that African nations are having access to the U.S. market, duty-free access, for both GSP and AGOA products, is because AGOA has continued.

So now that it's been extended, you know, we're really looking at has it achieved the goals. And essentially our view is that it it it has achieved a lot of the goals it was intended for to diversify African exports to the U.S. market, particularly a value added product. So all countries, for example, under GSP could ship, for example, pineapples to the U.S., But the Africans could ship pineapple juice and canned pineapples, and all of those products as well. So value addition was important.

AGOA was meant to shift the focus from aid or development assistance to trade. And also to now investment in value addition on the continent.

So yes, we think it's been successful. We think that it has allowed African nations such as Kenya to expand exports of key products-- textiles and apparel, agribusiness and horticultural products, manufactured goods. And, we believe that despite China's large and significant growth in trade with Africa, they mostly import commodities. Whereas through AGOA we are importing value added products.

And I'll just say if you look at Africa's top exports, for example of automobiles, you will not see China listed there. So,

SIGNÉ: absolutely.

LISER: Yeah. So that's the purpose of AGOA. And we think it's been successful. Could it do more? Absolutely. So that's why this discussion today of AGOA renewal and then beyond AGOA is so important.

[7:01]

SIGNÉ: Fantastic, Florie. In light of its recent short term authorization and growing global competition, how do you assess AGOA's performance in 2026 relative to those original goals?

[7:18]

LISER: So, you know, a lot of people talk about the fact that AGOA has only been beneficial in a few sectors for a few countries, but that actually is not true. These are people who haven't really studied the data like you or, for example, like the ambassador here, to know exactly what the Africans are doing.

So in 2024, which is the most recent data we had, out of 32 African nations that were eligible for AGOA, 22 of them were exporting more than a million dollars to the U.S. under AGOA. And that's important. It may not seem like a lot here, but I've personally been to many, many factories across Africa and the AGOA nations. And I've seen with my own eyes what that means for them. Containers of products shipped to the U.S. regularly to stores like Whole Foods, Target, the Children's Place, et cetera, as well as automobiles that are coming in.

The last thing I'll say that's important that people don't understand is that it has established value chains, regional value chains in Africa, so that Botswana and Lesotho are exporting parts to South Africa for their automobiles, which then get shipped to the U.S. And I think it's important to understand that particular role of building regional value chains. Those exports from Botswana and Lesotho are not included in their exports to the U.S. under AGOA, but they clearly are part of the AGOA story.

[8:51]

SIGNÉ: Amazing, Florie. Turning now to Ambassador Chris. How has access to U.S. markets under AGOA impacted Kenyan firms and individuals in the past 25 years?

[9:09]

KIRIGUA: I think that's a very good question, and I'd like to start by actually what Florie actually touched on, was about value addition. AGOA has enabled us to focus significantly on value addition. And especially when you look at the apparel sector in Kenya, a number of U.S. firms are able to come in, get their apparel manufactured, which is a very labor intense sector, which becomes more difficult to process in the U.S. They've been able to work with great partners like Kenya, for example-- we've had a strong relationship with the U.S.-- for them to come and manufacture using Kenyan firms and import into to Kenya.

This is not just critical for Kenyans. It's also very critical for the United States. They've been able to ensure they maintain prices in the increasing labor market. And get access products from from friendly nations and also diversify supply chains.

AGOA has also been extremely instrumental in strengthening the private sector participation and strengthening private sector growth in Kenya. The textile industry alone employs over 60,000 Kenyans.

SIGNÉ: Amazing.

KIRIGUA: Yeah. And, 70% of those are women. So it's a very strong economic driver, so we don't take it for granted. We see the partnership as very valuable. Just the textile industry, as of 2024, is \$600 million.

SIGNÉ: Wow!

[10:27]

KIRIGUA: The opportunity for growth in this sector alone, just the textile sector, has an opportunity to grow up to \$2 billion. As I've said earlier, it doesn't just help create

jobs or create new industries in Kenya. It actually helps the United States significantly in inflation pressures for items that are related to textile, because if you manufacture the the same product in a much higher cost location, the products will be much more expensive in the U.S. So AGOA is critical not only for the textile industry in the U.S. but also within the region.

AGOA has helped Kenya significantly on strengthening our bilateral relationships with the United States. Economic ties have helped us in a big way in strengthening our partnerships. It has not only strengthened the G2G partnerships, but has also strengthened the the B2B, the business to business partnerships between U.S. businesses and Kenya businesses. That has been a very good factor that has helped our relationships with the United States.

There's one more other ag sector that Kenya's currently prioritizing right now is to strengthen cotton production. AGOA has enabled us look at this sector in a much stronger way, and has attracted a lot of private sector investment for both from the United States and Kenya.

SIGNÉ: Fabulous!

[11:42]

LISER: Can I add something though that we haven't touched on yet, which is really important? And the ambassador reminded me of this. AGOA has also helped U.S. companies and U.S. workers and U.S. consumers. So it is beneficial in two ways, mutually beneficial. So beyond diversifying our sourcing so that we don't depend only on Asian countries to supply, we're also able here in the U.S. to create jobs that are linked to AGOA.

And finally, it's important to remember that AGOA has also created the atmosphere where the U.S. is now able to export its products to Africa, where the Africans are in a better position to buy from us. So our airplanes, our manufactured products, these are all things that have also increased during AGOA. So it's not just one way trade, Africans to U.S., it's also U.S. to Africa and benefiting U.S. companies, workers, and consumers.

[12:42]

SIGNÉ: Absolutely, Florie. And I really like that you emphasized those points. As a matter of fact, in a recent publication in Foreign Policy I discussed some of those benefits, including for specific states that AGOA has brought to the U.S. So, fabulous.

Florie, we stay with you. The benefits of AGOA to African country have been discussed a lot in the past year, but the Corporate Council on Africa, or CCA, has estimated that AGOA delivers almost a billion dollars in benefits to U.S. consumers and sustains around 450,000 jobs. Where do these benefits come from and how are they distributed in the American economy?

[13:35]

LISER: I was recently in a factory in Kenya where they are shipping high quality shirts to the U.S., various buyers here. Eighty percent of the cotton comes from the United States. So we're talking about a benefit to U.S. farmers. And then after it's processed on the continent and shipped to the U.S. here, it goes to various services facilities that are responsible for logistics and distribution. And so those are jobs that are in the logistics value chain, making sure that all of the stores that are using those products and selling those products from Kenya, have those products just in time in all the various stores. So you get hundreds of workers there. In fact, I saw a box that said that it was headed for Alabama.

SIGNÉ: Wow!

LISER: So, so in this factory in Kenya, there were shirts being packed into boxes that would go to Alabama, and from there those people in that Alabama facility would then make sure that the shirts were distributed to the stores throughout the U.S.

So that's like a perfect example from our cotton going to Africa, being processed there, being put into shirts that come into the U.S. under AGOA, and then back to the U.S. for U.S. workers to now take it to the final step of delivery to the stores. So this is how those jobs have been created.

Also, in the agribusiness sector, we know that many jobs are also being created here in the U.S. in the value addition that comes here. So, again, there are many examples of this, but I wanted to use a concrete one and one that was recent.

[15:28]

SIGNÉ: Fabulous illustration indeed, Florie. Ambassador Chris, over the past few years, Kenya and the United States have pursued a bilateral trade agreement conversation. Is this strategy complementary or competing with the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area?

[15:51]

KIRIGUA: So thank you very much, professor. I think that's a brilliant question. Over last few years, Kenya has had multiple engagements with the United States on the engagements. And we see that as a as a step to strengthen the partnerships between the Kenya and the United States, but wider-- Africa and the United States.

The United States is looking for partners and they selected Kenya, which we're very, very fortunate about. Will enable them create a template that can be replicated across a continent. So we don't see these as a competing strategy with the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement, but a complimentary strategy.

Kenya enables a small portion of the trade between Africa and the United States. The FTA will create scale, which will enable us be much more competitive in the trade between Africa and the United States.

So we see this as a very strategic move, a multi-layered strategy that Kenya has taken to drive this. And we'll work very closely with with the United States to increase

trade and also with our Africa partners, whereby we need to get skill to create competitiveness.

One of the key aspects that the U.S. has is they want huge scale, and working together with our Africa partners will enable us to drive that outcome.

[17:06]

SIGNÉ: Fantastic! Turning now to you President Florie. Something we at AGI explore in our 2026 Foresight Africa report is how African export to the U.S. remain largely in raw commodities. CCA has recently written on the potential of the AfCFTA to diversify and magnify U.S.-Africa trade. Can you speak on this potential and on how AGOA might incorporate or build upon it?

[17:47]

LISER: So first let me start with the fact that the share of commodities in AGOA exports to the U.S. from when it started in 2000 until 2025, has decreased significantly, which means that non-oil, non-commodity exports from Africa have actually increased over the years, so we need to also look at the increasing share and the trend.

So yes, even if commodities are still a large part, what we've seen is exactly what we hope for under AGOA, that more value added process manufactured products would come to the U.S. from AGOA-eligible countries.

Now, the AfCFTA what's really great about it-- it's really a game changer-- is that it has reduced barriers to intra-African trade so that regional value chains can develop and be more competitive as the ambassador here was saying. So one example again in textiles and apparel, but we have other ones, is investments from Kenya and Mauritius into Tanzania and Madagascar to produce zippers and buttons, for example. That's now something where those countries are part of that entire value chain.

And as I said earlier, you may not see those exports of the inputs or intermediate products from some of the countries in the region. You'll see the exports perhaps from Kenya. But that regional value chain is important and it is exactly why U.S. companies are now looking at pulling in Africans into the global value chains and supply chains.

As Africa becomes more competitive, reduces its own barriers, increases the ease of moving products across African borders, they then become more competitive partners in global supply chains. And we see that across various sectors, including automotive is certainly one of them. So, pharma is another, pharmaceuticals is another area where regional value chains are developing, and we should keep our eye on that because I think that means that Africa's role in the global economy will indeed increase and be enhanced. And the U.S. can be a major partner in that.

[20:12]

SIGNÉ: Fantastic! And that is almost the title of one of the essays in Foresight Africa 2026. So we are perfectly aligned.

Ambassador Chris, on the topic of diversifying trade away from raw materials, Kenya is a notable exception with the textile industry accounting for over 60% of your U.S. exports. What is it about this industry that allow it to thrive under AGOA?

[20:42]

KIRIGUA: First we created policies, the special economic zone policy that was established in Kenya enabled investors to strengthen and make it much more attractive for investors to come and invest in sectors like the textile industry.

One thing that Kenya has as a significant advantage is investors are willing to come in and put their money because of the enabling environment that Kenya does have. One of the key aspects I would say that investors look at when they're coming into any market is, are there foreign exchange restrictions? Which Kenya does not have. So it makes it very attractive for investors. So when investors are investing in Kenya, they can actually put in their money and get their dividends in their currencies when they when they want to.

What Kenya also has is investor protection laws, which are very advantageous to ensure that investors are well protected when they invest both local investors and international investors. Kenya also has a unique strength of a strong, educated workforce. The strength of the educated youth that we have in Kenya is very strong, and they're able to participate in this these sectors in a big way.

As I earlier mentioned, the textile industry alone, employees over 60,000 Kenyans. Yeah? When we move this industry, for example, from the current \$600 million level to \$2 billion, it just tells you the impact of employment that this will drive within the Kenya environment.

Another great thing that I'll say that what has enabled us strength in this industry is we've ensured in Kenya that we comply to global compliance We look at our ESG standards and also we look at the labor standards, which are equally the same as we have right here in the U.S. or any other part of the world. We don't compromise on that, and that's what has made it very attractive for global partners to work with Kenya in this sector.

[22:31]

SIGNÉ: I really like this one, Ambassador Chris. And what strategies can African governments take to position themselves for diversified trade in value added sectors?

[22:44]

KIRIGUA: I'll say that one thing is the collaboration. You asked me the question about African Continental Free Trade Agreement. One thing is that how do we work together to drive scale?

Secondly is what do we need to do to reduce cost of production? And one of the key aspects that actually impairs that is the cost of power. Kenya is working significantly to access the 10,000 megawatts of geothermal power. That is power that's actually globally at very affordable rates.

So we are looking to reduce production costs in a big way, and I think working as a, as a region, we can be able to leverage on each other's strength to access this.

I think one element that many of the markets can leverage on the experience from Kenya is creating the environment, the business environments and predictability to investors. That is something we actually do it by design. It's not a reactive process. We actually ensure that the business environment is actually conducive. So it's a big industry. I'll say that.

I think the second phase of AGOA allows us to ensure that we widen the access for various products to access this market. And that's something we're looking to work jointly together with Brookings obviously with CCA on.

[23:54]

LISER: Two points that we haven't touched on. People will ask, why such a short renewal period for AGOA? And what is it that the American government and private sector are looking for? What is it the Africans are also looking at?

And one of the issues is to improve AGOA. There's a lot of interest in the U.S. Congress and in the executive branch on enhancing AGOA. And so, you know, we're looking at ways that that can happen. We think that for the administration they will want provisions in AGOA that are focused on supporting the broader "America First" trade agenda, and likely looking at more two-way trade. How can AGOA be used to do that?

And the last thing I'd like to mention is going beyond AGOA. I think from the very beginning, when AGOA was established, it was always a hope that we would move beyond a unilateral preference program to more extensive either free trade agreements or trade and investment arrangements with our African partners. And I think that this is an area that all of us should be focused on. How do we go beyond AGOA? What are the ways we can build on what's happening under AfCFTA? What are the ways that we can look at new initiatives on critical minerals? How can we pull in digital trade and digital services as well as financial services? Because of course, AGOA doesn't cover services, which is a huge competitive area for our African partners.

So I would just end by saying that let's look at how we can improve AGOA. CCA is going to be working with African and U.S. government officials as well as the private sector on how to improve it. And then also looking at the dialogues that we need to have on how we go beyond it.

[25:49]

SIGNÉ: I really love this one. Florie, is there an ideal configuration to be thinking about? Or is it something you hope to achieve true stakeholder engagement?

[25:59]

LISER: I think it's both. I think we have some ideas of things that can be improved in AGOA. For example, to provide more certainty to investors, buyers, and producers, we think that there should be an AGOA review every three years and not every

single year. Because for investors it's a little bit too unsure. If you're going to be investing hundreds of millions of dollars, you can't do it year to year. You have to have a long-term plan for that.

We're also looking at things that can be done in terms of graduation. What are the changes that can be made so that countries, for example, like a Mauritius, doesn't get graduated before the U.S. has something else to offer? What are they being graduated to? So you know, there are things like that.

Also Africans that export textiles and apparel to the U.S. have to have a special visa to do that. Other countries around the world that export apparel to the U.S., we simply have customs agreements with them to make sure that they are not shipping us products from other places, but they're actually coming from those places.

So, our view is that we should use our customs cooperation to ensure that Africans are shipping us textiles and apparel made there.

And I think finally that we have to look at specific countries in Africa who are leaders like Kenya in terms of where we go next. So we know that the Cabinet Secretary for Trade and Investment will be here next week and we'll be meeting with the U.S. administration to talk about bilateral trade between the United States and Kenya.

We support that just as we supported the free trade agreement with Kenya that was launched, the negotiations that were launched under the first Trump administration. And Kenya was the first country in Africa after Morocco to even enter into free trade agreement negotiations with the United States.

So we're also in favor of agreements that are bilateral in nature between key African countries that are ready for it, those who would like to enhance it, and we commend Kenya for being at the front of of of the pack for that.

[28:15]

KIRIGUA: Thank you, thank you, Florie, for that. But I'd like to add something to you, Florie, I don't think three years actually would be sufficient. And especially when you're looking at large investments. And I think one of the things that I think the three of us have spoken before is what do we need to do to ensure that within the next 12 months we get an outcome that's beneficial to both the United States and the African continent?

And one key aspect that we need to look at is, for example, if an investment investor is putting \$500 million into a new plant, the payback period is not three years. Yeah? The payback period is certainly excessive of a, mostly about seven years. Yeah? So you need a long-term strategy. You cannot have a strategy for three years because these businesses will come down, yeah?, if you do not have a long-term plan.

I see one big element that I think will engage on the strategy we're going to push forward as we go to the Hill and to the different policymakers here in the United States is what value add do we bring to the table? Currently, it's been very clear about the "American First" strategy is how do we bring in the "America First" strategy

together with the Africa strategy to work together for a positive outcome between the two? Our region and the United States.

One thing I see is a value that AGOA brings. If we manufacture jeans, for example, right here in Washington, D.C., the pair of jeans will likely double in prices. And I don't think that's the outcome the American consumers would want, also the administration would want, I think.

But what we need to do is drive a consistent partnership where we bring in the private sector of the United States and, for example, for Kenya to work with the private sector of Kenya to drive a mutual beneficial outcome. And that outcome needs to be articulated to the policymakers so that they understand it's beneficial, not just only, for example, to Kenya and the United States, it's beneficial also to the Americans in America.

SIGNÉ: What an excellent way to conclude. Thank you, Ambassador Chris for the enlightening discussion. And thank you President Florie for the powerful insight.

KIRIGUA: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much.

LISER: Thank you. Thanks for having us.

SIGNÉ: And finally, thank you, listeners for joining us for this first episode of season five.

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Stay tuned for the rest of the season for more insights and perspective on U.S.-African affairs.

I am Landry Signé, and this has been *Foresight Africa*. Thank you listeners for joining me today. The *Foresight Africa* podcast is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network. Send your feedback and questions to podcasts at Brookings dot edu.

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