Pan African Chamber of Commerce and Industry
BEYOND TRADE

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POLICY POINTER

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Stop Waiting for Jobs: *Build the Markets That Create Them*

Africa's employment problem is becoming too important to be left to ministries of labour. It is also too important to be left to the market and hope that jobs somehow appear. This is where African chambers of commerce must become more activist.

Not politically partisan. Economically activist.

Chambers should stop defining their role primarily as representing businesses that already exist. They should begin asking a more consequential question: **How do we create thousands of new businesses, suppliers and productive jobs around the companies already in our membership?**

This is particularly important outside Africa's major cities. FAO estimates that almost 200 million rural African youth will enter the labour market over the next 15 years. It argues that agriculture and food systems contain substantial untapped farm and non-farm employment potential. Africa therefore does not simply have an unemployment problem. It has a geography-of-opportunity problem.

Every Large Company Should Become a Job-Creation Ecosystem.

Consider a food processor buying maize from 20,000 farmers. The obvious jobs are inside the factory. But those may be the least interesting ones. Around that company exists an entire potential economy: seed multiplication, irrigation installation, tractor rental, equipment repair, aggregation, quality testing, warehousing, packaging, cold storage, transport, veterinary services, bookkeeping, digital payments, insurance, drone services, soil testing, recycling and dozens of other businesses. These activities can employ people where the value chain actually exists—not merely where the company's headquarters happens to be.

FAO's work in Zambia illustrates the scale involved. Its soybean value chain already supports nearly 700,000 people, with opportunities extending across production, aggregation, processing, retail and support services. This suggests a different way for chambers to think about employment. Don't count vacancies. Map value chains.

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Turn every chamber member into an employment map

A chamber should ask its 100 largest members:

- What are you importing that a local enterprise could eventually supply?
- What services do you need within 50 kilometres of your operations?
- Where are your farmers, suppliers and distributors located?
- What prevents young entrepreneurs from supplying you?
- Which functions could be outsourced to local SMEs?

Then publish the opportunities.

A brewery should not simply be recorded as employing 600 people. It may sustain thousands more through barley production, aggregation, logistics, equipment maintenance, packaging, distribution and retail.

A mining company should not be celebrated merely for creating 2,000 mine jobs. Ask why food, uniforms, maintenance, transport, catering, fabrication and environmental services surrounding the mine cannot generate another 10,000 livelihoods.

A hotel chain should create opportunities for farmers, laundries, furniture makers, food processors and digital service companies. The chamber's job is to connect these dots.

From Job Fairs to Opportunity Auctions

Chambers love job fairs. Young people arrive carrying CVs. Companies arrive with a handful of vacancies. Thousands compete for dozens of jobs. We should reverse the model. Hold Business Opportunity Auctions.

Large companies arrive with procurement problems rather than vacancies:

- "We need 20 tonnes of tomatoes every week."
- "We need 400 refrigerated deliveries every month."
- "We import $2 million worth of packaging."
- "We need maintenance services in six rural districts."

Then young entrepreneurs, cooperatives and SMEs compete to solve those problems.The chamber helps with standards, contracts, financing and technical capability.Suddenly entrepreneurship training is attached to actual demand.That distinction is critical.Africa does not need another generation of young people trained to write business plans for businesses nobody needs.

Take the Chamber to the Village

Why must a chamber be a building downtown? Create mobile rural chamber desks following the supply chains of member companies. Once a month, chamber staff, banks, buyers, insurers, digital platforms and business advisers travel together to production areas. Register businesses. Open accounts. Explain procurement opportunities. Help firms formalize. Connect producers with buyers. Solve certification problems. Offer digital training. Identify infrastructure bottlenecks. Bring the market to the entrepreneur instead of repeatedly asking the rural entrepreneur to travel to the capital.

Technology makes this considerably easier. A farmer with a smartphone should be able to see what buyers require, current procurement opportunities, quality specifications, financing -

-possibilities and training—in a local language.FAO's African programmes are already combining agribusiness incubation with digital and financial literacy and digitally enabled market access.

Become Activists for Production

This requires chambers to rediscover advocacy.Too often chamber advocacy means commenting politely on a tax proposal after government has already drafted it.That is not enough.Employment requires economic activism.

When electricity prevents a rural processor from expanding, the chamber should make noise. When collateral rules prevent 500 viable suppliers from obtaining working capital, make noise. When a border procedure destroys the economics of a regional value chain, make noise. When government procurement excludes small firms unnecessarily, make noise. When a company imports something that could competitively be produced locally with modest capability-building, bring the company, entrepreneurs, financiers and government together and ask: **What would it take to produce this here?**

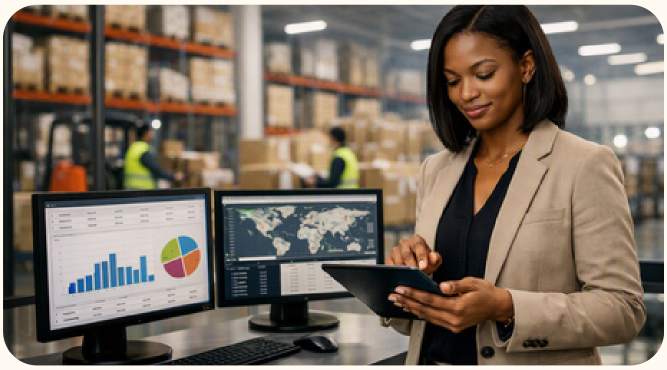
Activism in this sense is not anti-government. It is pro-production. The chamber becomes the institution continuously reminding government that every regulation, tax, infrastructure project and financing rule ultimately has to answer one question: **Does this make it easier or harder to produce, invest and employ?**

Digital skills should follow economic opportunity

The same principle applies to skills. "Digital skills" has become another fashionable development phrase. But training 50,000 young Africans in generic digital skills does not create 50,000 jobs. Start with the market. What digital problems do African businesses need solved?

Farm traceability. Inventory management. Mobile bookkeeping. Logistics optimization. Digital payments. E-commerce. Equipment diagnostics. Market information. Agricultural extension. Quality certification. Train young people to solve those problems.

Skills should follow demand rather than hoping demand eventually follows training. ILO and IFAD evidence similarly emphasizes combining skills with finance, technology and market integration rather than treating training as a stand-alone employment intervention.



Pay Chambers for Jobs Created, Not Workshops Held

One final change is needed. Stop measuring chamber employment programmes by: people trained; workshops conducted; participants attending; manuals distributed.

Measure: businesses created; contracts signed; suppliers onboarded; revenue generated; jobs sustained after twelve months; young people earning more than before. A chamber that trained 5,000 young people and created 100 jobs has not outperformed one that trained 500 and created 400 sustainable jobs. Development institutions funding chambers should recognize this too.

The New African Chamber

Africa needs a different chamber model. The chamber of yesterday represented established businesses. The chamber of tomorrow must help create the businesses that do not yet exist. It should be part advocate, part market-maker, part investment facilitator, part digital connector and part troublemaker when policies prevent productive enterprise from growing.

This matters enormously because Africa's demographic advantage does not automatically become a demographic dividend. FAO estimates that the continent needs to create more than 10 million decent jobs annually by 2035 to absorb its expanding workforce.

And those jobs cannot all be in Addis Ababa, Lagos, Nairobi, Johannesburg, Dakar and Abidjan. They must emerge wherever Africa produces. On farms. Around mines. Along transport corridors. Beside factories. In secondary cities. And throughout the thousands of rural communities connected to corporate value chains.

The objective should therefore not be to move every young African to where the jobs are. Move economic opportunity to where Africans already live. That is where chambers have an extraordinary comparative advantage. They already sit between businesses, governments, banks, investors and communities. Few African institutions have that reach. They should use it. Because the question facing African chambers is no longer simply:

"How do we serve our members?" It is: "How many new businesses and livelihoods can we build around every member we already have?" Answer that question seriously, and chambers cease being business associations. They become institutions of economic transformation.

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