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## Introduction

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The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) is a key program in US economic engagement with Africa which is up for reauthorization in 2025. As part of the 2024 AGOA Forum, the Wilson Center Africa Program hosted the AGOA Civil Society and Organized Labor Forum on July 24, from 2-5:30PM ET, which included panel discussions focused on how the United States and African civil society organizations, labor unions, and small business partners can collaborate to inform AGOA renewal and enhance the efficacy of the program.

## Opening Remarks

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### Speakers

- Dr. Robert Litwak, Senior Vice President and Director of International Security Studies, Wilson Center
- Ambassador Katherine Tai, United States Trade Representative
- Dr. Monde Muyangwa, Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Africa, USAID
- Oge Onubogu, Director, Africa Program, Wilson Center

To begin, Dr. Robert Litwak provided opening remarks on behalf of the Wilson Center.

Ambassador Katherine Tai shared her [insights](#) on American global trade and emphasized the importance of thinking outside the box of tradition. She noted that better results require better inputs and emphasized the need to invite and welcome those who have been left out. She noted that the convening power of AGOA is a critical pillar of the partnership and concluded that trade can and must help craft a more fair and equitable future for Africa.

Dr. Monde Muyangwa emphasized the United States government's commitment to Africa. She reflected on demands across the continent for inclusive societies and referenced several new USAID initiatives focused on creating more inclusive and equitable relations. She reflected on the importance of learning lessons from the past two decades of AGOA and prioritizing human and labor rights going forward. She emphasized the importance of learning lessons from the past two decades of AGOA and prioritizing human and labor rights going forward.

## Session 1: AGOA: Exploring the Human Rights and Trade Nexus

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### Moderator

- Gerardo Berthin, Vice President, International Programs, Freedom House

### Panelists

- Ndidi Okonkwo Nwuneli, CEO, ONE Campaign
- Michael Honigstein, Director, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, African Affairs, U.S State Department
- Rose Ugulumu, Program Coordinator, Business and Human Rights, Tanzania (AGOA Project Partner)

parallel. He noted that the criteria for AGOA are too vague and recommended that civil society organizations be involved in the assessment procedure for the program.

## SESSION 1 TAKEAWAYS

- Domestic CSOs: More actions towards enhancing the recognition of AGOA among all types of stakeholders need to be conducted. Civil society must have ownership to implement their advocacy actions towards promoting human and labor rights.
  - International CSO
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Rahama Wright opened the panel by sharing her story as a Ghanaian-American entrepreneur starting Shea Yeleen, which creates a bridge between shea goods and US markets to help increase the income of female entrepreneurs on the continent. She said that it is important to show examples of how small businesses benefit from AGOA – for example, her business is able to import products tariff-free because of the program. She noted the importance of creating a customer base for African products and an ecosystem where access to capital, training, data and knowledge are available for African SMEs. She recommended a simplification of the process of African SMEs to get the certification needed to export as an improvement to AGOA.

Vanessa Adams noted that entrepreneurs on the continent face barriers accessing capital at reasonable rates. She emphasized the importance of bringing people to the forefront of the AGOA trade discussion and challenged the idea that local sourcing is key, as many areas do not have access to all the crops/items they need domestically. While AGOA is complex, many communities are dependent on trade and people must be at the forefront of any negotiations. She stated that there needs to be more discussion of African institutional capacity building to support future developments and efforts to build supplier networks with anchor investments causing other investments to follow. She recommended that the AGOA review process be lengthened beyond an annual review to a longer review with more specific indicators on the scorecard, and African institutional and government capacity building to implement support systems for African SMEs.

Laura Akunga explained how AGOA is not relevant to many young people in Africa, who make up the majority of the population, and thus it is difficult to sell the benefits of the program to them. She said she would like to see more options for female entrepreneurs in Africa beyond cheap labor, but this requires derisking entry into more profitable, sustainable industries. In order to improve AGOA, she recommended that every beneficiary of AGOA implement a utilization strategy which could either be sector based or more specific penalties. However, it must be ensured that these do not harm individual farmers or workers if the issue is in corporate governance.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

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prioritizing people and not just policies. The African workforce of today is different from when AGOA was first introduced in 2000. The discussions highlighted that the success of AGOA should not be measured solely by export volumes, but by its ability to promote reliable labor conditions and standards. It emphasized the need for mechanisms to ensure that local workers are not punished or prevented from reaping the benefits of AGOA due to violations that they have no control over. Additionally, discussions emphasized the importance of support and investment to promote value chain integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). As we look to the future of AGOA, the speakers emphasized the importance of learning lessons from current AGOA implementation to avoid creating economic enclaves in certain industries (such as extractive industries) that end up benefiting only a few people within these societies, who are often not even the workers within these sectors.

Finally, they recommended that some provisions in the U.S-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) could be replicated in AGOA to strengthen the role of African organized labor unions. For example, provisions in USMCA such as, independent



