

## Trading Places

Prince George's Seeks to Foster Business Connections in Africa

By Anita Huslin  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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Over the past two decades, [Prince George's County](#) has evolved as a gateway for African immigrants to the American middle class. Now the county is building a bridge to their homelands that it hopes will lead to new business.

Before a room packed with politicians, bureaucrats and members of the local business community, County Executive [Jack B. Johnson](#) last week announced the creation of a new Africa Trade Office. Partially funded by a \$400,000 grant from the [Small Business Administration](#), the office will serve as a matchmaker between African and local businesses, sharing information, expertise and financial incentives, when possible, with businesses that want to engage in international trade.

"It's happening now because it can," said Johnson, who enlisted [U.S. Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin \(D-Md.\)](#) in acquiring the funding. Since his first campaign for county executive six years ago, Johnson has reached out to immigrants, backing Latino day-laborer centers, Indian merchants and tech firms, and African small businesses.

In his second term, he has made trade-oriented visits to [India](#), [Senegal](#), [Gambia](#), [Nigeria](#) and [Tanzania](#). He's invited members of African business groups to join him: the African Business Owners' Forum, the African [Business Roundtable](#) and the Association of Maryland Africa Societies.

"[Africa](#) is the last emerging market on the face of the planet," said Remi Duyile, president of Image Consulting Group and treasurer of the African Business Owners' Forum. She traveled to Nigeria with Johnson's entourage last fall, and was inspired by the meetings with government officials and businesses that were eager to work with Americans.

"It's an opportunity for us, especially in Prince George's County," Duyile said. "We want to be partakers of this, rather than just observers."

Kimberly Ann Elliott, a senior fellow at the [Center for Global Development](#), said the United States' perception of Africa has not kept up with economic and political progress. But, while international trade programs can be useful as promotions, they generally yield modest, if any, immediate commerce, she said.

Prince George's is the only county in [Maryland](#) to have an Africa Trade Office. As the largest and wealthiest black-majority jurisdiction in the country, it is a logical place, Johnson said, to establish programs that capitalize on the African Growth and

Opportunity Act, which lowered trade barriers between the United States and 37 African nations.

The volume of U.S. trade with Africa is small but growing, and local business owners suggested that even modest local stimulus programs can yield results.

"America is missing the party in helping to develop Africa," said Wilson Adewole, a broker for Bonview Mortgage who was born in Nigeria but has lived in Maryland for more than half of his life.

"Our dream is to take an American business idea and take it over to Africa and expand it," Adewole said. "We know how to do business in Africa . . . we can bridge that [cultural] gap very quickly. The bottom line is for everyone to make a buck in the community they serve."

Patricia Hayes-Parker, a vice president of the Prince George's County Economic Development Corp., will oversee the new trade office. Last week, she began a seven-week training course for local companies interested in doing business in Africa. With new staff, the trade office will create a Web site with information about business opportunities on the African continent and grant programs for future trade missions.

"This is necessary because you know African markets do represent an above-average risk," Hayes-Parker said. "But if our companies are prepared, if they understand the culture, the politics, the business practices there, then there truly is a chance of success."

The trade office will buy industry research databases and help screen African companies to ensure they are ready to engage in work in the county, she said.