

## Strengthening the Relationship Between Africa and Asia, One Initiative at A Time

ASEACC Advisory Board Chairman Paulo Gomes shares his vision for African countries, including francophone regions and their relations with Asia, highlighting the key challenges for their businesses and entrepreneurs in today's world.



*Paulo Gomes is the Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Africa Southeast Asia Chamber of Commerce since 2014. The IMF Institute graduate has been working in the business and investment sector since 1995. Over the years, he has held several notable posts, such as the executive director of the World Bank Group and principal advisor at the Ministry of Finance of Guinée-Bissau. Mr. Gomes has also co-founded New African Capital Partners and Constelor Investment Holdings, where his work focuses on the investment sector and providing financial advisory in Africa.*

### **What is the importance of the French language in the business world where English is the dominant language?**

The French language's importance in the business world has its roots in colonial relations between Africa, France, and other francophone countries. I believe that this has profoundly shaped the organization of states, their institutional structures, and the legal framework, partially based on that of metropolitan France.

Today, French remains a significant language; it is very prominent in Africa given the number of French speakers per capita and per country. French is an invaluable part of sub-Saharan countries and of Maghreb, Cameroon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. It hence remains an important language even if it is progressively being taken over by English due to the latter's widespread use, accelerated by the phenomenon of digitalisation.

I am currently travelling to the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Kinshasa, which is likely the largest francophone capital outside of Paris. Kinshasa has a population of over ten million inhabitants, making it a large French-speaking metropolis in the heart of Africa. This is proof of the language's digital imprint in the business world even as it increasingly faces more pressure from the use of English.



Yes, they are using English more often. Due to past colonial relations, a large proportion of French-speaking countries had aligned their commercial development with that of France. However, this relation has changed progressively over time towards China, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, where we see many of the countries conduct their business in English.

The diversification of commercial and economic relations of francophone countries is due to the fact that English has become increasingly important; I think that this will accelerate because a large part of the world economy is already re-orienting towards Asia. This reorientation will hence render English more important and the diversification of foreign relations of African countries will be sustained by an increase in their use of English in their conduct of business relations.

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**Are there instances when differences in language create obstacles instead of opportunities in the business world? How were these difficulties overcome?**

There are certainly cultural differences; there is no one single Africa. It is true that there is a sense of cultural unity in Africa and a pan-African spirit that persists and which has contributed in part to the resolution of the paths to independence. However, there is equally an “Africa of various Africas” in the heart of this large continent which is expanding demographically and in the vein of globalisation.

Look at the statistics: Africa’s population has increased by more than 300 million inhabitants over the past ten years.

This is an important demographic phenomenon which will have an impact on globalisation and will continue to be a weighty trend for the coming years. This will affect businesses and it is also an opportunity for an African market where Africans will be able to consume their productions rather than having an economic model of systematic exploitation of primary materials.

For this reason, there is the African Continental Free Trade Area that has been approved by African countries and which will be implemented from January 2021 onwards. We believe that this will allow the expansion of Africa’s portfolio of opportunities, and also for Africans to do more business amongst themselves regardless of their language or country. The new generation is increasingly bilingual, even trilingual, which creates new pathways not only for Africans but also for others who want to do business with Africa.

**What advice would you give to those who wish to start a business in the francophone world, especially in French-speaking African countries?**

It is important to build up one’s knowledge of French for business. If you look at Chinese delegations to Africa, for example, they always have a French translator in their group. Aside from the language, it is also crucial to understand the context in which the country of interest organises itself; look at the political, economic and social contexts, they are always important and you have to do some amount of “homework” before engaging with these countries, because the legal framework is different. There is also an institutional culture that is somewhat centralised which has roots in French Jacobinism and has significantly influenced the institutional structures of these countries. We hence find some characteristics of a centralised state which bear similarities to those of the French state. These are important aspects to bear in mind on top of, once again, the political, economic, and social context of the country.

**What are your roles as Chairman of the Advisory Board of ASEACC? According to you, what are some new opportunities for Southeast Asia and Africa this year?**

I am responsible for helping to expand relations between Southeast Asia and Africa, that is, to have an impact on these business zones in which one can create opportunities, meet new people and do business together, and share best practices be it in the public or private sector. As part of the advisory board, I work closely with the Chairman of the Chamber (Mr. Teo) and the co-Chairman (Mr. Diagou). We execute programmes and initiatives that reinforce relations between these two zones.

**In which sectors do you think that Southeast Asian and African enterprises are able to better collaborate together? How are the two regions able to benefit from their capacities in order to achieve economic progress?**

COVID-19 has indeed slowed the momentum in business relations, but I think that once we emerge progressively from this crisis, the business opportunities lie in the logistics sector, agro-alimentation and technology. All of these will be facilitated by trade finance. After the pandemic, there will be an important economic rebound that will provide the opportunity for businesses to proliferate. We hope to work with the Chamber to seize these opportunities for the world.



*Mr Paulo Gomes attending an African art exhibition in Singapore that aims to forge stronger business ties between African and South East Asian businesses*

**You were also a member of the board of the Green Climate Fund. What kind of measures or actions have been taken by different countries in Africa and Asia to help with various problems related to climate change?**

Yes, I was a member of the administrative council. I was also part of the team that worked towards the installation of the Green Climate Fund, in Korea, which addresses climate change issues. The association is meant to be something similar to the World Bank but for the financing of environmental issues. I am no longer a member of the council as I left many years back, but the association continues to finance countries in their fight against climate change, through their investments against coastal erosion, and for projects in the renewable energy sector like solar and wind energy.

The funds that were promised have not yet attained the level which everyone had wished for, but I believe that for five, six years, the Fund has allowed for the dispensing of important resources for its various member countries.

**In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges in the fight against climate change?**

The biggest challenge is the withdrawal of the United States [from the Paris Agreement], as it is a big polluter along with other large industrial economies. The USA's withdrawal has not boded well for the Agreement.

Regarding specific environmental challenges, we have to address global warming, the destruction of biodiversity, coastal erosions in Africa and the impact of climate change on agriculture. Issues relating to water will also be a large cause of concern. To stop the planet from continually warming up, which will have enormous consequences for life on our planet, there is a need to fund activities that allow for the world economy to decarbonise.

In order to do so, I feel that it is important to have carbon sinks, and to create conditions such that polluter countries pay up, and so that resources can be set aside to allow

for financing decarbonisation and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions which are a key cause of global warming.



*Map of Africa showing francophone regions in blue.*

**Advice for youth - What is the most important quality or asset for a person who is starting out in the current working world?**

Firstly, you must have an open mind: you cannot shut yourself in your own cultural world or in your comfort zone. Go travel and discover new horizons, not limiting yourself to what you read online or in reports in the media. There are always realities on the ground. There aren't civil wars or plagues in every corner of Africa! Even for the coronavirus, Africa has managed the pandemic better and is less affected than the majority of the other countries in the world. My advice, hence, is to be open-minded, interact with others, be a team player, and have a sense of purpose in your life.

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