



There and Back Again

Interviews and Profiles



David M. Bamlango

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EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT BANK

NAIROBI, KENYA

There is a slight bend in the Congo River, 1,300 miles from its mouth on the Atlantic Ocean, where the river becomes unnavigable due to Boyoma Falls. The city of Kisangani occupies this bend. It is the adopted hometown of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the independent Democratic Republic of Congo. Kisangani, the nation's most important inland port after the capital city of Kinshasa, has also been the site of regional conflict, particularly in the 1990s as the nation transitioned to multiparty rule.

David M. Bamlango, general counsel of the Eastern and Southern African Trade and Development Bank (TDB), grew up in Kisangani while it was part of Zaire, then governed by a one-party totalitarian dictatorship. His father, a teacher, school principal, and later a Christian religious leader, and his mother, a homemaker, encouraged him to concentrate on his studies. He attended a Salvation Army elementary school and a Roman Catholic high school, where he recalls studying Roman history. Bamlango identified with the Roman plebeians who were struggling for political rights. "This idea of the fight for freedom, fight for equality ... studying that at the same time Congo was going through its own transformation in the early '90s to embrace democratic systems, it just felt like becoming a lawyer was the right way to become somebody who could influence the course of events as people tried and tried to reach for equality and civil and human rights."

After high school, Bamlango completed his three-year law degree from the Université Libre des Pays des Grands Lacs in Goma. He then moved to the United States to continue his studies. But before learning the common law legal system, he felt the need to earn his bachelor's degree in law from the Université Lille 2 Droit et Santé in 2001, and his master's in business law from the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne in 2003. He earned both degrees while living and working in Chicago. In 2007, he earned his JD from the Chicago-Kent College of Law in the same city.

Bamlango initially worked for the law firm of Mayer Brown, where he learned that spending enough time understanding the issues pays dividends. "Don't jump into an assignment, project, or client request until you understand what the real issue is, because oftentimes our clients don't always articulate their issues the way we lawyers would articulate them," he cautions. He also found that most clients prefer to know his — or any lawyer's — actual opinion. Bamlango remembers the first compliment he received from a client: "You are not afraid to tell me what you think, and I like that. You don't give options and stop at that. You don't just go around. You actually tell us what you think is the right course of action. And we appreciate that."

It's something that has stuck with him as he gained more experience. After Mayer Brown, he moved to DLA Piper, also in their Chicago office, where he made partner in January 2015, after nearly four years as an associate. Throughout his time in Chicago, he stayed involved in community organizations like the Congolese Community of Chicago, an organization established by Congolese immigrants and refugees from the Chicago area to assist one another, welcome newcomers, and provide a platform for leadership development with the goal of creating new Congolese leaders.

When Bamlango met the CEO of the Eastern and Southern African Trade and Development Bank in

the spring of 2017 on the sidelines of the IMF/World Bank Spring meeting, he thought he was meeting a prospective client. He didn't know he was going to be offered a job. When the CEO invited him to consider the general counsel role, he realized this presented a unique opportunity to use his skills to help the region where he was born and raised. It was, he says, "a small way to try to make a difference in the lives of millions of Africans."

Furthermore, with a general counsel role, he was curious what it would be like to be on the other side of the table.



The bank's mission is to finance and foster trade, socio-economic development, and regional integration. The bank is owned by 22 African countries but includes other shareholders that are not sovereigns and non-African shareholder countries like China. Its reach spans the continent, from Egypt in the north to Swaziland in the south and Indian Ocean nations like Comoros, Mauritius, Madagascar, and Seychelles. And the number of member states who own the bank in Africa is growing, Bamlango says. "With the addition of a new country come new issues, new challenges, and new geographies to cover," he explains.

The bank's balance sheet has grown significantly over the last five to six years, from about a billion US dollars to US\$5.2 billion. By the end of 2022, its strategic plan calls for US\$8 billion in assets. Bamlango predicts the success of his tenure as general counsel will be measured by how he responds to the growth, both geographic and financial.

The bank is not driven solely by commercial considerations — it will not provide services to projects that do not serve the interests of its member states. Its focus is on two main areas: trade finance and project and infrastructure finance. It helps members trade with each other and with the outside world.

It also funds projects and infrastructure, like the 2015 underwriting of the largest wind farm in East Africa, which will have a tangible impact on a member state. The bank also provides advisory services and fund management for its member states.

Bamlango admits that he didn't know exactly what he was in for until he started the job. He tried to prepare and anticipate the role, but the reality is different than what he imagined, he says. He has a particularly strategic role, which is bolstered by his close relationship with the CEO.

His department has 10 lawyers but, because of the bank's growth, hopes to have 12 lawyers by the end of the year. When he joined, the legal department did not have paralegals but has since employed them so legal officers can focus more on advising clients and high-value legal work.

There are more prosaic challenges as well, Bamlango notes. He travels frequently, locally, visiting member states, and globally for other strategic needs. While the compliance department is separate from the legal department, the legal department does provide work on key compliance matters. As a multilateral organization, the bank is not overseen by one particular regulator. The bank is essentially self-regulating, which means Bamlango needs to ensure that the bank holds itself to the highest possible standards, to meet the expectations of its shareholders, funding partners, and rating agencies. Operating in emerging markets means that there is a premium on organic information, Bamlango says. "You have to supplement your know-your-customer checks, which are based on the standard database products, with information from being on the ground, from knowing people or hearing from other people," he shares.

"We are aware of the fact that our region is a very risky region because historically the government institutions, the governance framework, and the regulatory framework have not been solid, although things are getting better by the day," he asserts.

Bamlango's career has taken him many places. He didn't realize that he would be making the journey back to Africa, with a goal of helping the continent that birthed him.

[Joshua H. Shields](#)



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