

The year of Africa: Getting Congress's attention

by [David Beckmann](#) in the [July 1, 1998](#) issue

Washington is devoting an unusual amount of attention to Africa this year, and this provides an opportunity to help reverse the trend toward more widespread hunger on that continent. President Clinton's 12-day trip to Africa made us all more aware of promising economic and political developments there. He listened to Africans and made some promises.

Newt Gingrich has also helped to make this Washington's year for Africa. His interest is longstanding, since his Ph.D. dissertation was about education in the Belgian Congo. Gingrich encouraged a bipartisan Africa trade bill, called the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which passed the House of Representatives this spring. It offers U.S. trade and investment benefits to African nations that are shifting toward free-trade and free-market economics. The AGOA has attracted support from all of Africa's ambassadors to the U.S., most of the Congressional Black Caucus and some U.S. businesses that see opportunities in Africa. AGOA helped shape President Clinton's Africa policy, and the administration is pushing for passage.

In addition, this spring Representatives Doug Bereuter (R., Neb.) and Lee Hamilton (D., Ind.) introduced another Africa bill, the Africa: Seeds of Hope Act, which would boost small farm agriculture and improve food security in Africa. Bread for the World members and many churches are urging Congress to pass this bill.

But religious advocacy groups, including Bread for the World, are less happy with the AGOA, arguing that eligibility criteria in the Africa trade bill are too narrowly focused on free-market policies, and that the U.S. should use its economic clout to encourage a more balanced approach to development.

Part of a more balanced approach would be to encourage democracy and focus on reducing poverty. Religious groups succeeded in getting the House sponsors of AGOA to mention democracy and poverty reduction in the bill. They also added a clause that bans trade concessions to governments with abysmal human rights

records. However, contrary to the recommendation of religious groups, AGOA still remains focused on “opening up Africa to capitalism,” as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put it on her trip to Africa last year.

AGOA does include some provisions that are clearly good for Africa, and good for poor people in Africa. It would give some African countries increased access to U.S. markets, establish mechanisms for high-level U.S. dialogue with African governments, and direct our government’s business promotion agencies to focus some of their resources on Africa. Bread for the World has concluded that AGOA, even as it stands, would do more good than harm to Africa’s poor. But most other religious groups are not ready to support the bill in its present form. Both trade unions and Ralph Nader’s Public Citizen organization oppose AGOA. African-American leaders are divided.

But apathy is an even more formidable obstacle facing the bill. Because lots of other issues are far more important to members of Congress, Senate committees have so far delayed even considering AGOA. In addition, the textile industry has mounted an attack against it, even though African textile exports would amount to only 1 percent of the U.S. market. Senators from textile states, including Jesse Helms (R., N.C.), may strip the bill of some of the provisions that religious groups find most positive.

Bread for the World is trying to channel some of the interest in Africa toward measures that would clearly benefit its poor rural majority. Bread for the World’s main campaign in 1998, the nationwide Offering of Letters, aims to bring about passage of the Africa: Seeds of Hope Act. This act would increase U.S. support for rural credits and for agricultural research and support. For example, the U.S. government’s Overseas Private Investment Corporation would, for the first time, invest in nongovernmental organizations that promote small-scale African businesses. The act would also give more flexibility to nongovernmental organizations, such as Catholic Relief Services, that administer food aid. It would establish replenishment mechanisms for the grain reserve our government keeps for humanitarian emergencies.

Bread for the World is asking people to urge their representatives and senators to cosponsor the Africa: Seeds of Hope bill. We hope that a thousand churches will ask their members to write letters to Congress on behalf of Africa’s poor.

Representatives Bereuter and Hamilton, the lead sponsors of Seeds of Hope, are also strong supporters of AGOA. They see the two bills as complementary, while others view Seeds of Hope as an alternative to AGOA. It's not yet clear whether one or both bills will make their way into law, and how they may, in the process, influence and connect to each other. In any case, grass-roots support for Africa: Seeds of Hope will focus some of Washington's attention on ways to raise incomes and reduce hunger.

Because 1998 is an election year Congress will adjourn early. Only a short time remains in which to pass this legislation.