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# Gabon's International Priorities for Transformative Growth and Regional Progress

**HE Emmanuel Issoze Ngondet**

Foreign Minister of the Republic of Gabon

**Chair: Walker Kimball**

Managing Director for Infrastructure, Bechtel

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## **HE Emmanuel Issoze-Ngondet**

It is my pleasure to be here today and I would like to extend my gratitude for your attendance. I would also like to take this moment to say thank you to the organizers here at Chatham house for hosting this event. This renowned Royal Institute of International Affairs, acting as an independent and non-biased policy institute, promoting a secure, prosperous and just world is the most apt place for me to be in order to discuss matters regarding Gabon and the region.

The title for this discussion is Gabon's international priorities for transformative growth and regional progress. This will therefore lead to me to discuss the following matters: human development in Gabon and across the continent, social reforms initiated in Gabon by the president and the government, good governance and the eradication of corruption, Gabon's relations with the Western world and our efforts to balance our francophone history and our increasing openness to the Anglophone world. All of the above which allows Gabon to be a key regional player, whose role in the Central African Republic (CAR) has been crucial – the last and final topic I would like to broach.

'The importance of human development within Gabon and across the continent'. This term is widely used and often repeated by politicians, civil society, aid workers, etc. For the sake of clarity I will use this human development with the following definition: where people's lives are enlarged, primarily by being able to live a long and healthy life, to be educated and to be able to have a decent standard of living – it also extends to the access of rights such as political freedom, guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect. This definition is from the first ever human development report. Africa has long been plagued by a history that has seen the majority of its citizens exempt from these rights, from these liberties, from these choices. We are now in 2014, and we still have cases where people live in unacceptable environments. This is not what we would call an 'African curse' and exists all throughout the world. Gabon, however, has decided that this is no longer acceptable for any of its own citizens. The president therefore decided to undergo a study, conducted under the auspices of the first lady, to ascertain the levels of poverty, social exclusion and inequalities within Gabon.

People may ask why this is so important, isn't economic growth the key to success? Well, Gabon has decided this is not the case. Gabon cannot pursue its desire for growth and progress and still have inequalities and social exclusion affecting such a large swathe of its population. Within a relatively small country, blessed with immeasurable natural resources, we can no longer accept and tolerate this. Earlier this year, our president and our government therefore launched what is known as the social pact.

This social pact is centred on assisting those in the society that are most vulnerable - assisting them in obtaining their basic food, sanitation and educational needs. It will help protect the elderly, the disabled and orphans. In addition, it will also focus on helping the vulnerable to develop activities that generate revenue. Finally, it will aim at reducing inequalities in accessing public services, which include but are not limited to health, education, access to potable water and electricity. To this effect the president announced major reforms: the allocation of two hundred and fifty billion Central African francs, roughly three hundred million British pounds, hundred percent cover for health care costs for those most economically weak, hundred percent cover for those suffering from cancer, hundred percent cover for urgent medical costs for the first twenty four hours and longer if needed in the case of a vital diagnostic and the implementation of work apprenticeships in companies with more than fifty employees. Parallel to this is the refurbishment of existing hospitals and the construction of new hospitals throughout the country. There are also various and numerous initiatives afoot to help support the youth of Gabon to find employment and promote entrepreneurship. For example, we have created a competition called the 'Grand Prix de L'Excellence' – the Grand Prize for Excellence for innovation and entrepreneurship in conjunction with the newly opened Gabon Business Innovation Lab, a national incubator for entrepreneurs.

Globalisation, global commerce, global finance, global politics are no longer hypothetical concepts. These have firmly arrived at all of our doorsteps and we live in a truly global world, interconnected in all aspects. Africa has been no exception to this phenomenon. Gabon, specifically, has opened itself up to the world at large. In terms of Gabon's reorientation towards the Western world, we can demonstrate this in three major domains: economically, politically and academically.

First, under the tutelage of the current president, elected in 2009, the country has undergone major economic reforms. Gabon put into place a strategy for an emerging Gabon by the year 2025. This was based on three main pillars: Gabon services, Gabon industry and green Gabon. In terms of services, the principal decision was to strengthen our infrastructure as well as Gabonese human resources. With regards to industry, the principal decision was to cease the export of our crude raw materials, in order to promote local processing, and thus create value added products for exportation. Green Gabon comprises the sustainable aspect of this plan - to ensure that all of our projects are conducted with respect and protection to our environment and to our ecosystem, ensuring a country that is rich and plentiful for all future generations. These three elements complement each other, building an economy that is more diversified and will bring the country towards inclusive growth. This is Gabon's version of sustainable development, and not just unbridled economic growth. We believe that with this reorientation and transformation of our economy, we have sculpted an economic system and environment that is attractive not only for the West, but to the East, North and South alike.

Secondly, we have ensured that our political system remains just and fair, democratic and open and most importantly representative of the needs of our population. In 2009, Ali Bongo Ondimba, was voted and elected as the president of the republic. We have a political system in place that supports and encourages the diversity of opinion, free speech and the right for all citizens to associate with any and all political parties. Gabon protects this system; we all know that democracy is a product of diversity, open debate and the right to multiparty politics. In creating this safe haven, we have ensured the political stability of our country. Ensuring that public institutions conduct their affairs and manage their public resources in an honest, fair and transparent manner is essential. Government bodies must ensure that they represent and act on behalf of all of the society and not just for a select few. Countries cannot be taken seriously if they permit or close a blind eye to poor governance and corruption – this is not a way to attract international investment and install confidence in the international market place. These reasons have been the backbone for our recent initiative to clean up our public institutions and to make sure that all public finances are spent correctly and transparently. We are also launching a full-scale investigation into any public individual who is alleged to be involved in any form of corruption and the misappropriation of public funds. We stand united behind our strong and fair judicial system. Our commitment to protect political stability as well as fair distribution of wealth makes us attractive to the West, to the East, to the North and to the South alike.

Thirdly, we are a country that believes in our youth, in our education, in a necessity to bind ties with Gabonese academic institutions and their equivalents abroad. School enrolment in Gabon is essentially 100 per cent - there are no obstructions to obtaining education – for men and women alike. We have signed multilateral agreements with Tunisia to send several hundreds of qualified teachers to Gabon, helping us compensate with our deficit. We are trying to increase our partnerships with international institutions. We also have an extensive governmental scholarship program available for Gabonese students studying across the United States as well as offering technical placements for students from French universities. Gabon invests in our youth, through promoting and ensuring high-level educational access to all, so as to prepare our future generations for our developing and diversifying economy.

Why are we doing this you may ask? Because we strongly believe that these are necessary steps towards the growth of our country.

All of these reforms are domestic, but they strengthen our position on the world stage and how we are perceived and viewed by our international partners. This leads me to the efforts Gabon's has undertaken to find the correct balance between its francophone history and a growing Anglophone orientation. There is a term in French that refers to the relationship held between France and many of its ex colonies: *Françafrique*. Gabon is proud to say that it cherishes its independence as a sovereign state. Our president, as well as our government, believes in diplomatic relationships that are mutually beneficial, mutually respectful, and mutually harmonious. We believe that Gabon has now installed this practice with France, breaking from past traditions. In the same breath, we have been expanding our relations with countries that were little known to us before. We have built political, economic and cultural ties with whole range of Anglophone countries, which include the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom. We have also extended our relations with emerging markets, such as India, China, Turkey and Morocco.

In parallel with the changes I have mentioned earlier, I hope it is becoming clear just to what extent Gabon has been transforming itself in a time period of only five years.

Gabon undergoes all of these reforms in a region of the world where stability and peace is not necessarily a *de-facto* environment. Growth and development have no space to take hold in conflict zones. Gabon has been fortunate to have had continued political and social cohesion and stability since its independence. This is a key element in our path to growth and development and one we will fight hard to protect and ensure for all future generations. If we look slightly northeast of where Gabon lies, is the country of the Central African Republic. Unfortunately, the country has been plagued with socio political unrest, and more recently, a disastrous civil war. As a member country of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa, Gabon is extremely keen to see peace restored in this country. We have played a fundamental role in the peace-keeping forces within the Central African Republic. We have also been key promoters in the country's desire to achieve political stability as well as terminating the social disruption. We contributed Gabonese troops, but we have also used our hosting of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa, to advocate for future peace talks. Regional peace and stability are fundamental aspects that promote growth, development and progress. Without this, not only the afflicted nation but the region as a whole will suffer. We must stand together for the benefit of all our futures.

I hope that I have been able to highlight clearly to you all the key priorities and reforms that Gabon has implemented for growth and progress. We believe that we have not just focused on economic growth, but a wholly broad based and inclusive form of sustainable development. We are also fully aware that there is much more that needs to be done and to be implemented – the road is still long. However, I am proud, both personally and publicly in my official position, to stand here today, before an international audience, presenting Gabon's achievements and aspirations. We believe in a united and bright future for our country, for our citizens and for all our future citizens. We see a Gabon at the forefront of Africa's transformation, with a strong democracy, a resilient economy and a just society.