

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Smart Women, Smart Power
“The Special Forces of Trade and Development”

DATE

Wednesday, January 11, 2023

FEATURING

Enoh T. Ebong

Director, U.S. Trade and Development Agency

CSIS EXPERTS

Dr. Kathleen McInnis

*Senior Fellow, International Security Program and
Director, Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative*

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Kathleen
McInnis: This is Smart Women, Smart Power, a podcast that features conversations with some of the world's most powerful women.

Enoh Ebong: We're a small agency. Our establishing statute is simple and clear and it gives us the authority, yes, to promote infrastructure, yes, to do so in certain sectors where U.S. is strong, where we know we can export from, which is how we've come to clean energy, transportation, digital infrastructure, health infrastructure. And it says that we should absolutely promote exports, but it also allows us to be able to do that in a holistic kind of way.

Kathleen
McInnis: We feature thought leaders at all career levels where we explore, among other things, the many contributions that women make to the fields of international business, national security, foreign policy, and international development. Does having women in positions of power influence the outcomes of decisions in these fields? Why or why not? Join me, Dr. Kathleen McInnis, director of the Smart Women's Smart Power Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for these incredible conversations.

The CSIS Smart Women, Smart Power podcast is supported by BAE Systems.

I am delighted to welcome director of the U.S. Trade and Development Agency, Enoch Ebong, to the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast today. Director Ebong leads USTDA in its efforts to develop sustainable, clean infrastructure and imposter economic growth in emerging economies, while also supporting U.S. jobs through the exports of U.S. goods and services, which is an incredible portfolio, <laugh> that's at the cutting edge of where, you know, commercial interests are, climate change, national security, all of these things come together in your space. So, you know, just delighted that you're here. Director Ebong has spent over 15 years at USTDA, risen through the ranks and you've got additional experiences in law and nonprofit sector. So thank you so much, Director Ebong, for being with us today.

Enoh Ebong: Oh, thank you so much. I am so delighted to be here. You are right. It's an extraordinary space that the U.S. Trade and Development Agency occupies and works toward. So very, very delighted to open the windows a little bit to the agency, talk a bit about what we do and how I got here.

Kathleen
McInnis: Fantastic. Well, so let's actually dive right into it then. How did you find yourself in this space?

Enoh Ebong: I mean, I think it's such an interesting question. It's in some part sort of background and upbringing in some part education and in some part opportunity. I always start with the background. So I was born in Nigeria, in a city really 96 miles, sort of outside of Lagos called Ibadan. And I had my formative years in Lagos. And I'd add to that my father was Nigerian, my mother was from the Caribbean Island of St. Vincent. Funnily enough, from childhood, the import of infrastructure and developing economies, we sort of lived every day in Lagos. You know, power was not always reliable. In St. Vincent, they had to face the threat of they have a rather significant volcano on the island called La Soufrière, which is live and erupts from time to time. So I always heard and sometimes witnessed stories of challenges from insecure infrastructure and on the other side of that, the import sort of of it to just daily life. So I think somewhere there that was in the background.

Kathleen
McInnis: Was there a moment, just thinking about all of these moments in our childhoods where it's like things crystallized. Was there any sort of such moment for you watching these things?

Enoh Ebong: I mean, I think that they were more cumulative sort of tapestry to my life, right?

Kathleen
McInnis: Sure, sure, sure.

Enoh Ebong: So perhaps nothing that I can pinpoint right now, which was an "aha" moment. But I think that I absorbed all of the experiences and then when the moment came, I recognized what my purpose is and what my mission in this particular circumstance could be. And I've been very fortunate at USTDA what it came to be.

I would also add to the origin story a background of a family in public service. So my father worked in the Nigerian Government, was a longtime civil servant. And even my grandfathers on both my parents' side worked in the respective governments or local governments. So even though I started out as a securities lawyer, I've been very, very fortunate to have an extraordinary education because of the emphasis my parents put on education and the sacrifices they made for us to have a good education, I think, you know, took advantage of that. And often when you're focused on education and opportunity, the road leads to the United States, at least from the perspective of many. And certainly was true in, in my family. So came to the United States ended up-

Kathleen
McInnis: And what year was this?

Enoh Ebong: First time in the United States for school in 1987. Okay. So I came to do a degree initially in communications. You wouldn't believe it, Kathleen. I thought I wanted to be a political consultant. <laugh>

I don't know how, you know, in my journey I experienced things. I saw one election here, I'm like, "This is what I want to do with my life." And so I actually went to school and did a master's in communication at the University of Pennsylvania, focusing on visual imagery and political ads. And I worked a little bit in the space and I thought, "Actually not so much, not so much." But then I will keep the story short, but ended up at the University of Michigan for law school and really loved that experience, decided to do what many of us do. I became a corporate securities lawyer. But this is, again, this will feed into the USTDA experience because I started out my professional career very much in the private sector world.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Enoh Ebong: And the private sector imperatives business and taking companies public and these, the kinds of investment decisions that are made and that are critical, albeit more in a commercial context, not a developed one at that point.

But in any event, all of these things came together. I practiced securities law for several years in a large law firm in Boston. But then I think that calling that sense of, "Okay, but why am I here and what is it that's going to sort of make my heart sing and make me enjoy at the same time as feeling that I'm contributing?"

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Enoh Ebong: And so I happened upon, through a mutual friend who put me in touch with a mutual friend who as I was searching actually and just seeking to learn about opportunities and what the United States government does in the international world. And I came upon this jewel of an agency of USTDA as we call ourselves for short or the U.S. Trade and Development Agency. And it brought everything together, Kathleen. It really did in both its mission, which I can get into and the way it does its work.

Kathleen
McInnis: Well actually, let's segue into that, if that's okay. What is USTDA's mission and what priorities for USTDA do you have as director, given all of this wealth of experience, you bring to the position?

Enoh Ebong: Oh, thank you. It's a wonderful, rich question. The agency is really unique. It is a foreign assistance agency, but it also has a mandate to support jobs and exports in the United States. So we are tasked with promoting the development of high quality infrastructure in emerging economies, but to do so in a way that we bring U.S. private sector expertise, technologies, goods services to the projects that we support.

We provide grants. And the idea is to support development of infrastructure project by really getting in at the early stages so that we are preparing projects, taking a concept that our partners in countries that are seeking to grow their economic base take these concepts and help to test the feasibility, help them at the early stages where they are looking for design options, making technology choices. And through grants for feasibility studies, for technical assistance, for pilot projects, we can help to prepare projects so that they will attract financing.

Which is really the critical thing in order for investors, whether it's a multilateral bank, a private bank, whether it's our own U.S. development finance corporation, or the Export-Import Bank of the United States, whomever it is, they are looking for projects that are bankable, that are tested, that are feasible, that they will feel comfortable to finance.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Enoh Ebong: And that's what we do. We provide grant funds for that kind of work to look at the feasibility of a project. And we focus in climate and clean energy, in transportation, in digital infrastructure. And also it's growing. And I'm very proud about this development healthcare infrastructure in our portfolio. And prepare these projects so that they can make good decisions about technologies that they can attract financing. And the most important thing for the other part of our mission is that we can expose them at these early stages to U.S. expertise in terms of, again, the solutions that we have for responding to their infrastructure challenges.

So just as we are preparing and providing grant funds for these activities, a U.S. firm will do the technical assistance feasibility study work. And in that way, open the knowledge, increase the knowledge of what the U.S. can offer when it comes time to implement. So we're leveling the playing field, I guess with our competitors. We are getting in early, we are saying, "This is what we have to offer. This is what you can choose from when you come to procure and to invest."

And it is a model that works because we see currently, for every dollar that we have programmed in grant funds, we see a return of \$136 of

exports. So we measure, in part, we also have developmental measures, but we measure, one of the metrics is how much do we see in exports on average.

And we have a calculus of formula for doing that. And then over the course of our existence, and we were stood up as an agency through something called the Jobs Through Exports Act in 1992. This is our 30th anniversary. You'll be hearing more of that.

Kathleen
McInnis: Congratulations!

Enoh Ebong: Thank you. Thank you. But from that point, and we have been recording our metrics since then, we have promoted and we have been able to see \$115 billion in exports. So it is a model I think that was very far seen when it was stood up back then.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Enoh Ebong: And it shows results both in terms of the kind of infrastructure that is supported and built. And I'll give you some examples of that if you're interested.

Kathleen
McInnis: Sure.

Enoh Ebong: Sometimes it helps to crystallize things.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah. Yeah. That would be helpful.

Enoh Ebong: So we see both results on the ground and then in the support to our economy to jobs and to exports here.

So just to give you two quick examples, I'm picking the most recent ones. There are many more, but I think sometimes it's helpful just to highlight a little bit of what's been in the, in the news recently.

In August, I was honored to travel with Secretary Blinken to the Philippines, where he witnessed one of our grant signings. And this was for a wind project in the Philippines looking at the feasibility of a three gigawatt offshore wind production in the Philippines. So this is on a rather large scale, it really, it comes down to probably they're looking at three different locations, eight to ten facilities of about 300 megawatts each. And so it, I think could be as large as a three gigawatt study, which would be quite impactful. On the other side of the spectrum, your listeners may have heard recently, Poland chose Westinghouse to provide the very first nuclear power plant in the country. USTDA did the front end engineering design.

Kathleen
McInnis: Really?

Enoh Ebong: Yes, in conjunction, across, we co-funded with the interagency, with the State Department, with DOE, and also the companies themselves put in some funding there to be able to do that study. And so USTDA is again working on scales where they're trying to move away from coal, trying to buttress energy security. And that is another example of the kind of work that we've done recently.

Kathleen
McInnis: And how long did that feasibility study take?

Enoh Ebong: Actually we did it very quickly. It was just about a year.

Kathleen
McInnis: You know, I was in Europe recently. One of the big conversations in Europe is how to divest from Russian energy supply and not just for 2022, but 2023 and 2024. And so nuclear power has to be a key part of that equation.

If I could turn to a question that's certainly on the economic, business, and national security communities minds, which is the Belt and Road Initiative from China. How does USTDA play a role in countering or competing with BRI?

Enoh Ebong: It's a really important question, Kathleen, and the way we look at it, it's just so important for us here in the United States and our government to show the alternatives that exist.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yes.

Enoh Ebong: Because in my travels on the road, whether it's in Africa, whether it's in Europe and I just returned from Africa, they see us as natural partners.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Enoh Ebong: They see us as offering a way of partnering and working together and addressing these issues that is respectful of choice, of mutual benefit, and of all of our prosperity.

Kathleen
McInnis: Right.

Enoh Ebong: So I think we do have a responsibility to make sure that we are uplifting and making very clear what the distinctions are. And the way that we do that here at USTDA, first of all, is again, preparing excellent projects,

getting in at the early stages, making sure that our feasibility study work is of quality and that the projects that we support are of quality.

We have in the past been turned to, to redo work that has been done by others. And I will say China, I won't be shy to say it. So I think that there's a value there in the hard work that's done preparing projects.

One of the last things I'll say is we help our companies compete head to head. So in a situation where they are up against a competitor who I might say is offering a lot of, what should I call them? Benefits to choosing a particular company, we will compete. We will say, look, if you choose and we are allowed to do this within the OECD guidelines, if you choose the U.S. firm offering you these services, offering you these product, these technologies, we will actually come in and train you and your workforce above and beyond so that you can truly make this sustainable.

And it is a very, very appealing tool that is used a great deal in key areas. We saw great success recently with undersea fiber optic cables, which carry a lot of volume, a lot of data.

Kathleen
McInnis:
Enoh Ebong:

Oh, that's, and that is a huge area, right.

It's a huge, it's a new cable. Huge, huge development going from Africa through Asia to Europe. And the New Jersey company called SubCom LLC was up against HN Technologies, formerly Huawei. And we came in and we offered to part of the consortium that was going to implement this massive undertaking. If you select SubCom, we will train and we will help you to make sure that this is an investment that is of value and sustains over time. And I love these because it's very much a whole of government approach. So the Department of Commerce came in with advocacy, the State Department came in, it shows us at our best. And it shows us as we work together and we coordinate. Because I think people don't often see that we actually do do it. So I'm always very proud and pleased to be able to uplift those examples of that work together. And so in those ways, those are just some of the ways that we are working to show our value and our values and to offer alternatives to what others bring to the table.

Kathleen
McInnis:

I think that's fantastic background to help our audience understand the decision that you want to talk about today, which is, you know, it took place when you were USTDA's then acting director in 2017, and you approved grant funding for a feasibility study to support the development of solar powered microgrids in Zambia. So start with setting the scene for us. Why was this study so important to you?

Enoh Ebong: Yeah, it's really interesting and it's sort of, is very much contrasted by what I've just been talking about, right. This project was a small project. It was looking to stand up and test the feasibility of standing up 120 individual microgrid systems that are very small solar powered, but basically fit in sort of a shipping container.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yes.

Enoh Ebong: And only stood to power perhaps 18,000 households, when all is said and done. So when you think of an agency working on this scale, typically that we do sort of in the way that I just described, the three gigawatt project I talked about in Philippines, it would take 9 million solar panels to sort of have the equivalent, right? This project that I'm talking about in Zambia, like 5,000. So just really small and scale, which would mean then Kathleen, because I've talked about exports quite a bit, I mean we stand from some of those major projects to see exports in the billions, the Zambia project, if we are fortunate single million kind of number. Right?

So I had an immediate question of scale, like why, where we have set criteria, which this project would fit a lot of the criteria. So we had a grantee who we had tested could implement, there were going to be developmental impacts, parties here had passed the diligence. The thing that was not going to be huge, necessarily, was exports. And the scale of the development until impact, at least to begin with, wasn't going to be enormous. Right?

Kathleen
McInnis: Sure.

Enoh Ebong: So lots of indications of, well this is not something that we really should be investing all of the time in. However, it's really interesting because looking at the sort of criteria that all ticked through, except for the ones that I've indicated, I felt that, and I think this is where little bit one's experience, I guess you bring the whole of who you are to your work and to your decisions.

Where I could see the potential for impact, you know, within communities. There's got to be something to be said for that. And I think it's a funny thing, but it's almost, I will say that the outcome and the impact I think perhaps has been more affecting to me as a woman actually.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Enoh Ebong: Rather than the actual decision itself, which I think the decision crammed in a lot of factors, but then what I've done with the learning,

and you talked a little bit earlier on about vision, I think it has informed how I think about how I want to lead the agency and the kind of balanced approach to one's portfolio and one's work. Because I do think it's possible absolutely to have your cake and eat it too, in the sense of if we are doing projects that are consequential in terms of national security, in terms of billions of exports, then surely that creates room for us also to do those projects that have a human impact that are not quite at those scales.

Kathleen
McInnis: Those small micro levels that are so impactful for ordinary, you know, people.

Enoh Ebong: For people.

Kathleen
McInnis: I mean, but it's, and sometimes it's that smaller start where you can catalyze communities that kind of get lost in the big infrastructure discussion.

Enoh Ebong: Exactly. And so this is exactly sort of what happened, Kathleen, because fast forward a few years. So that was when I was acting director and still a career civil servant in that sense. I then had left the agency and then again was privileged and honored to be nominated by the president to come back and lead as his political appointee then was confirmed by the Senate earlier this year.

It was really interesting because in that time period I was able to visit Zambia and visit the project. And it was amazing because from the moment I stepped into the community and the project is focused on rural and sort of peri-urban communities. And from the moment I walked into the community and I was slated to meet a number of people who were directly working and directly impacted all community members, amongst the first community person that I met actually was the head of the rural electrification authority.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Enoh Ebong: Who was so proud to tell me two things. One, it was the first time that he had worked with the private sector and the private sector, both in his country because the company, the Zambian company doing this project is a private company. And the U.S. company who is putting in the technology, you know, another private sector, it's actually a company called Standard Microgrid in California. And he said to me, "This is the first time I've worked with the private sector and it worked." And he was sort of <laugh>, you know, it was so interesting. Because to me it's like a no-brainer. But for him it was a new

experience and it was meaningful and it opened a whole new world to him.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Enoh Ebong:

And then I met the people who were running the platform. So it, you got your power on a subscription basis and so it was run through mobile phones and who was doing this? Young women. And two young women came up to me and they were in charge and you could tell they were in charge because they knew everything that was going on. And we exchanged, "What did this mean?" And it's like, well, I have my own income. I'm actually an important part of this community. And again, I have to stress this as young women. I mean, I think it matters in those communities.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Enoh Ebong:

And then the other thing that I was really taken by was that the engineers, the young people, again, young men that were fixing, whenever there was a hiccup, they had been trained. Again, I come back to training.

Kathleen
McInnis: Oh, it's so important. I mean like, you know, training is what sustains things.

Enoh Ebong: It's what sustains it. So these guys, they were all ready to show me what they could do. They kept up the technology. They could always phone back to headquarters if issues, but they weren't the people doing it on the ground.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Enoh Ebong: And then I met a businessman and he had this small shop and I said, "So what has this meant to you? I see that you are a business owner." He said, "Actually I have two businesses, <laugh>." I'm like, "Ok, sorry, two businesses."

And the fact of the access to power meant that actually he could expand and open his second shop. And then the last on my way, as I began to make my way out after all the children, it was so much fun. I mean it's, I have to say everybody, you know, you should actually, it makes a difference when you visit the project.

So on the way out I was told, "You know, this lady will be willing to talk to you about what it's meant to her." And it was a mother, she said to me, I asked her, you know, "What difference has it made for you?" And

she said, her daughter is able to study and to study at night and she has the ability to be able to do her schoolwork.

And that meant the most to her. So <laugh>, I really, when I come back to the vision, and how we need to move forward, I think, and actually President Biden and the administration has been actually very far seeing on this. And from the first moment has talked about the ability to ensure that, you know, we are first of all taking care of and developing and promoting high quality infrastructure at home and abroad, but also then that we're opening up the opportunities for everyone.

Yes, for our businesses. It should also include small businesses, disadvantage businesses, women owned businesses, it should also include diaspora businesses. And I think to me, when I see the impact, when I saw there with respect to the women that I met, the impact to them in the context of their communities, I certainly have committed myself to making sure that those opportunities are there. That we do more outreach as an agency.

We do excellent development overseas. It's how we develop really good projects. But I do think we need to do more at home to be able to let all of these communities know that there are opportunities, we have skilled people here who could contribute.

And I think that it's also important to keep in mind the impact of infrastructure in a gender basis. I always, when I go overseas, make sure to convene women leaders, women, young people so that I understand from their perspective the impacts. And so I think in the end, Kathleen, that small project <laugh> that really I tossed and turned a little bit about with respect to scale and how, you know, given the thrust of the kinds of projects, first of all to decide to do it and then not just that, but build on that so that we can inculcate in our approach and ability to take a measured look and a balanced look across our portfolio so that we don't overlook some of the meaningful impact that we can make large as well as small.

Kathleen
McInnis:

And when I think about problems like strategic competition, when I think about competing with authoritarian actors, when I think about the trajectory of international order, right? I tend to conclude based on what I'm seeing, that it's actually this radically local community building where we have enormous power to help impact. There's so much opportunity. So it's wonderful to hear that your agency is paying attention to that. Because again, like USAID, like a lot of these projects are so massive and they're run out of capitals and got their own logics and they're doing their own things and that's great, but often local

people don't see the impacts or understand these things because it's so remote from their own existence. Right.

Enoh Ebong: You make such an important point. And you know, I think it's so interesting because I think that the realization really has only hit home to me in the last couple of years really from that sort of looking at this project very critically and carefully. I do think that the ability that an agency like USTDA has to be flexible in that way, in the end, I could make the decision because we have the flexibility. We're a small agency. Our establishing statute is simple and clear and it gives us the authority to yes, promote infrastructure, yes, to do so in certain sectors where U.S. is strong, where we know we can export from, which is how we've come to clean energy, transportation, digital infrastructure, health infrastructure. And it says that we should absolutely promote exports, but it also allows us to be able to do that in a holistic kind of way. And I've taken that to mean yes, we can look at different sizes, we can measure the impact and the import of bringing this opportunity to small and large businesses here. If we look at it, you know, everybody knows our small businesses here are very much the engine of our economy.

Kathleen
McInnis: Economy. Exactly.

Enoh Ebong: <laugh>. They really are.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Enoh Ebong: And there's a lot of expertise that can be shared overseas, but they may not know of the opportunities. So I think it's incumbent on us to really raise the visibility of that.

Kathleen
McInnis: To what extent do you feel being a woman impacted this decision? Is it impacting the way that you approach the role? And you touched on this a little bit earlier, but I'd love to have a little bit more of an exploration of that.

Enoh Ebong: I think it's really interesting. I thought long and hard about this actually. And I think definitely in part, right? But it's with a compliment of things. I think that, and I don't know if there's a particularly female characteristic, but I will look at very carefully all of the factors and elements that go into a decision beyond what's written on paper, you know, beyond the criteria in a way the criteria, the core. And so we are going to look at, you know, can this be implemented? Can it be financed? Is there a potential for U.S. exports? Is there a potential for significant development impact? And is our robust due diligence

applied and successfully passed? But then I will say that I will look to what is going to be the impact here and to whom. So sometimes, I mentioned healthcare infrastructure and often I'll want to know, you know, is this just the privates that this is going to impact?

Who can go to these hospitals or in a digital infrastructure project, if we are talking about mobile use of phones, well, who has the phones and what communities are we talking about? If we're talking about refugee communities, is everybody, do they have the right, you know, so I tend to go, which I think might drive some people crazy, but I want to make sure that I understand every element and that I understand the human impact. Again, I don't know, which is why I said I thought very strong, long, and hard about this.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Enoh Ebong: I don't know if that's particularly a female trait, but it's certainly something that I definitely see in myself and bring, and I have not necessarily always seen with, and I have worked for a lot of male leaders and others.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Enoh Ebong: So I'm only comparing and contrasting in the context of the universe that I know. And that is something a little bit distinct that I see.

Kathleen
McInnis: And it's interesting, you know, I've had a number of conversations where this theme keeps copying up of women not just recognizing or seeing the formal structures, but also almost like hardwired to see what are the invisible structures, what are the invisible data points? In some instances, women just get on with it and understand the real dynamics based on their understanding of what's not on paper.

Enoh Ebong: I'm very comfortable with, and I think it's important to understand the full context, including what is not black and white on paper in front of you. I think that it makes for better decisions or decisions that are going to take into account the full compliment. And sometimes it triggers more thought and more discussion and opens up things that, you know, may not necessarily have been considered. So a little bit of that patience to explore and to understand fully and to see it as not a detriment to expeditious completion. <laugh>

Kathleen
McInnis: Not analysis paralysis, but <laugh>, you know-

Enoh Ebong: A necessity to be able to move forward in a way that will increase our highest likelihood for success, in my view.

Kathleen
McInnis: Director Ebong, thank you so much for sharing this amazing story and helping us all understand more about what USTDA does and the critical role that you guys are playing at the front lines of development and national security and positive change in the world.

Enoh Ebong: Thank you. It was a great pleasure to be with you. I really enjoyed our time together. Thank you very much. Appreciate it. Thank you.

Kathleen
McInnis: Thank you.

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