

Africa is ripe for more investment deals, fund chief tells London meeting of Afrimari network

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Henry Obi, chief operating officer of Helios Investment Partners

Africa is ripe for more investment deals, fund chief tells London meeting of Afrimari network – By James Brewer

An upbeat assessment of business prospects in Africa has come from one of the most successful private equity firms in the region.

Henry Obi, chief operating officer of Helios Investment Partners, was speaking at a meeting of Afrimari – a professional networking group with a focus on cultivating African maritime and trade related business – which celebrated the second birthday of the group.

“Africa has survived the economic downturn,” Mr Obi reminded the London meeting, hosted by the shipping services group Braemar Seascope. Growth rates were running at about 5%, and ratios of gross domestic product to debt were so favourable that “you could get some of the central banks in Africa to ‘take over’ Greece,” he said.



l to r: Wassim Sasso, Niyi Adenubi , James Brewer, Temi Binitie, Gemina Cooper and Shelly Ogilvie.

“Despite what commentators say, Africa is not a basket case,” Mr Obi insisted. It was not always a rosy picture, but there were good investment opportunities, he said, citing problems in infrastructure, health care and so on.

Stories of famine, drought and other tensions resulted in negative imaging, but “these are not the images I see in Africa.” Some 200m or more Africans were moving into the middle class. “As such, there are so many investment opportunities you can tap into.

“We also have enormous wealth in terms of mineral resources. With the growing mineral demand from China, that augurs well.” Increasing trade meant that the shipping industry could see some relief in the developing markets.

Helios operates funds and related operations, aggregating more than \$1.7bn in capital commitments. Just over a year ago, in partnership with independent trader Vitol, the company agreed to purchase for around \$1bn most of Shell’s shareholding in downstream assets – including petrol stations, commercial fuels, lubricants, aviation and marine fuel – which the oil and gas giant saw as non-core. This came at a time when the number of cars was rising, and given the poor quality of roads, people were using more petrol.



l to r: Clarkson's Nancy Drakou, Infospectrum's Marina Lebedeva and AllAboutShipping's Anny Zade

Established in 2004 and led by co-founding Nigerian partners Tope Lawani and Babatunde Soyoye, Helios has managed funds on behalf of investors including the US government's Overseas Private Investment Corporation and leading American corporations.

One of the biggest Helios projects was to raise \$250m from financier George Soros, former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright, Lord Rothschild and the International Finance Corporation. Mr Obi outlined another major deal whereby in December 2009, an investor group led by Helios bought for \$146.8m INM Outdoor (since re-named Continental Outdoor Media) from Independent News & Media of Northern Ireland. With operations in 14 African countries that business has some 38,000 advertising locations.

Mr Obi warmly congratulated Temi Binitie of AET Tankers and Gemina Cooper of Braemar Shipbrokers, founders of Afrimari, for their achievements in building the group, which has developed a database of 200 professionals in shipping, logistics, legal, risk, energy and trade specialties.

<http://www.allaboutshipping.co.uk/2012/03/30/africa-is-ripe-for-more-investment-deals-fund-chief-tells-london-meeting-of-afrimari-network/>