

Sounding Board: AfBAA Chair Dawit Lemma On Priorities, Challenges

[Molly McMillin Lee Ann Shay](#) June 02, 2025



Dawit Lemma

Credit: African Business Aviation Association

Dawit Lemma is the new chair of the African Business Aviation Association (AfBAA), a position he assumed on May 19. Lemma is the founder and managing director of Krimson Aviation Holdings, established in 2015. He is of Ethiopian origin and a Swiss citizen.

Lemma is a graduate of Purdue University in the U.S., where he earned a degree in aeronautical engineering and flight technology. Dawit is also president of the AfBAA-Ethiopia Chapter.

Q. What are AfBAA's priorities today?

A. The first priority, really, is engaging with our members and understanding what it is they want from the association. What I've learned over the past years is that member-driven associations sometimes tend to forget to speak with their members or they speak one way, but they don't have a two-way conversation.

So, our first pillar is really to understand: What do our members want? What is adding value to their membership?

Is it data? Is it more advocacy? Is it addressing key concerns that they have so that we're relevant and really maintain context with our membership?

Q. What is next?

A. The second pillar is general aviation: integrating general aviation and UAV and advanced air mobility, because in Africa, I always say that we've got corporate jets flying. But if you look at the definition to the FAA of "business aviation," it's the use of an aircraft as a business tool to save time. It's not the use of a Gulfstream or a Bombardier or a Dassault Falcon, it's the use of an aircraft.

On the continent, we actually have more turboprops and even Cessna 172s that are being used for that function. Rady (Fahmy), our founding executive director who passed away (in 2020) always used the anecdote of the commercial farmer who has multiple commercial farms and contributes significantly to the country's GDP, and he uses a Cessna 172 to go from farm to farm and to trading posts.

(The farmer) could have a Gulfstream parked at the capital city to get to where he needs to internationally. But he uses that 172, and the perception that he's not engaging in business aviation activities because he's flying a 172 doesn't "fly," if I can use that term.

So, we want to integrate our general aviation operators. And then secondly, Africa is the perfect use case for drones because of our lack of infrastructure.

Zipline in Rwanda is a prime example. They use drones to deliver blood and medicine to areas in 1 hr. 30 min. which would normally take days because of the lack of roads due to the terrain. Rwanda is known as the land of 1,000 hills. So, you can imagine, getting around is difficult.

I'm a serial optimist. The fact that, for example, here in the U.S., testing for advanced air mobility, testing for drones is very difficult in urban areas. And it's very restricted. We don't have those restrictions in Africa, so we're able to freely test the equipment.

The civil aviation authorities are just now starting to create regulations around drones. For example, in Ethiopia, if you used a drone 10 years ago, you were going to jail if you were caught flying it because of security and intelligence purposes. Now, drones are being practically used for aerial survey, mining, oil and gas, etc.

Q. You are on a mission to change perceptions. What are you working to alter?

A. We want to engage with our peers internationally. We want to make Africa relevant. Seven or eight of the top 10 fastest-growing economies are in Africa. We want to engage with our peers at MEBA (Middle East and North Africa Business Aviation Association), NBA (National Business Aviation Association), AsBAA (Asian Business Aviation Association) and create that synergy.

Unfortunately, there is this perception of Africa as the Dark Continent. When I speak at conferences and they hear me speak in English or in French or they hear my background they say, "You don't sound African."

Yes, we have our mud huts and our villages in Africa, but we also have skyscrapers. Creating the relationships and the bridges between our peers around the world will create opportunities for both parties.

Africa has the fastest growing, in terms of aircraft orders, brand-new aircraft—corporate jets—and also newer, pre-owned aircraft, less than five years. Whereas 10-15 years ago, Africa was literally the dumping ground of old aircraft. You've seen (Gulfstream) GIIIs flying around, or Hawker 800s from the '80s. Whereas now you're seeing new metal on the ground.

I think it's an opportunity for OEMs to enter the market. There are also opportunities across the board, from ground handling to maintenance. We want to make sure we're creating that bridge between our peers internationally to give them access to Africa; and for African operators and stakeholders, giving them the opportunity to learn but also expand into the U.S. and Europe, etc.

Finally, our fifth pillar is communications, PR (public relations) if you will.

I feel that Africa has been rather quiet in terms of visibility globally. I think we want to be proactively creating visibility for the association, but also proactively, as mentioned earlier, busting perceptions. That happens through good communications, structured communications and branding, and marketing.

Q. You are a world traveler. Where are you based?

A. I'm based in Ethiopia ... but I've been traveling quite frequently for my business. So, home is actually Geneva, Switzerland. I have my feet in both Geneva and Ethiopia. I'm a Swiss citizen.

I've actually been spending quite a bit of time in the U.S., as my company is expanding to this side of the pond in the Caribbean, and we've set up an office here in the U.S. ... Our home office is in New York, in Manhattan.

Q. Where do you see the biggest areas of opportunity, given every city and country are different?

A. It's a conversation I had with Doug (Carr) from NBAA right before our IBAC (International Business Aircraft Council) meeting. We're looking to launch a project around operations ... something very simple--setting up a Zoom call between African operators and American operators so that there's information sharing ... It's having them conversing with each other, giving reality on the ground, giving tips and facts of how to make life easier.

It's also a two-way conversation. We also want some American operators and crews and chief pilots to help our operators here in Africa when they're flying into the U.S.

Q. AfBAA lost members during COVID. How many members do you have today?

A. We have 51 members as of Dec. 31, 2024. We had about 150 members before COVID-19 ... Unfortunately, COVID happened and then marketing budgets were the first thing to go and then in that budget is association memberships.

We went from 150 to 70 almost immediately. Half of our membership did not renew during COVID.

Back to our pillars: Some of those numbers we should have been able to retain if we were able to show them the value of maintaining their membership, especially during COVID with the evacuations and the growth of business aviation when all the airlines were shutting down, especially on the continent.

I think there was not enough communication with members and the industry at large as to why they should retain their membership ... (Today) there is a renewed interest in becoming a member or renewing memberships ... I think we've gotten maybe 10 or 15 new members just off of EBACE (European Business Aviation Convention).

I'm hopeful we can continue on that growth path. We want to push not just our African membership but also our Pan-African (people of African descent worldwide) membership.

Q. You brought up a number of pillars that AfBAA will be working on and its challenges. What is your biggest challenge?

A. I think perception, and perception ties in with everything from making sure we're communicating effectively to (changing) that perception of the Dark Continent. It comes back to communications and PR ... I'm a serial optimist. I see the silver lining. It's an opportunity for me to break that perception.

I have a little dual flag pin that I always wear. It's a Swiss flag and the Ethiopian flag crossed. And that's always a great conversation starter. I think conversation is the first way to break perception.

Q. During a time of a shortage of pilots and mechanics, you mentioned that there is a surplus of mechanics in Africa. How so?

A. There is a plethora of licensed aircraft mechanics in Africa. For example, Ethiopian Civil Aviation is authorized or licensed by EASA (European Union Aviation Safety Agency) and FAA. So, a mechanic in Ethiopia can work on European- and American-registered aircraft.

Also developing programs on the continent to create awareness around the fact that you can do anything you want in aviation. You can be a lawyer; you can be a marketing agent; you can be a fashion designer. I think that misperception is preventing not just Africa, but globally, (young people's) entrance into the industry.

We're facing competition with robotics and technology and apps ... It behooves us to open up the awareness about what you can do in aviation, and that it is still cool. A lot of kids don't know that a lot of today's technology came from aviation.

Q. How did you first get interested in aviation?

A. When I was seven years old; we were living in Zambia at the time. This is in the early '80s. My best friend (an American) and I, said, "When we grow up, we're going to be cowboys or pilots." And we were both excited.

We told our parents. And our parents said, "You know what, being a cowboy is not really a career path anymore."

So, we both responded: "We're going to be pilots." (My friend is) a chief pilot at [Alaska Airlines](#). Everything I've done since then has been around aviation.



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