

Report on IBA BIC Committee on International Trade in Legal Services ‘Internationalisation Conference: helping local lawyers with the internationalisation of legal practice’

8 December 2025, Four Points by Sheraton, Lagos, Nigeria

Prepared by Iain Sandford, Chair, BIC ITILS Committee

Executive Summary

- On 8 December 2025, BIC ITILS delivered its latest ‘Internationalisation’ conference in Lagos, Nigeria, in collaboration with the Nigerian Bar Association and its Section on Business Law (NBA-SBL).
- Attendance (173 individuals, in person and virtual) was broadly in line with the series’ historical average.
- The conference came in well under its £35,000 budget, at a final cost of £21,342.97, aided by extensive organisational support from NBA-SBL.
- Feedback from participants was strongly positive.
- The main challenges were traffic delays that pushed back the start of proceedings and a high rate of non-attendance among registrants.
- No fundamental changes to the conference content model are recommended, but the report below suggests contingency planning for future host bars with less organisational capacity, hybrid or multi-day formats for large cities, and measures to reduce no-shows.

Background

The BIC Committee on International Trade in Legal Services (BIC ITILS) has a proud history of *identifying specific challenges* for bars and lawyers that arise from the increasingly traded nature of legal services and *devising targeted solutions* to help bars and their members navigate those challenges.

Consistent with this history, the mandate of BIC ITILS includes ‘to assist Bar Associations to understand, and be in a position to respond on, and adjust to trade liberalisation affecting the legal profession’.

Consistent with this mandate, the Committee’s business plan for 2025-2026 includes an aim to ‘Organise conferences in collaboration with selected developing country bars/bodies aimed at assisting local bars to deal with the consequences of increasing internationalisation of legal services’.

On 8 December 2025, in collaboration with the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) – and in particular its Section on Business Law – BIC ITILS delivered a one-day conference in Lagos, Nigeria.

The Lagos conference in context

The Lagos conference marks the 11th occasion on which BIC ITILS has organised the ‘internationalise your business conference’.

Since 2016, BIC ITILS has organised conferences worldwide to help lawyers in developing countries to ensure that more of the legal work from cross-border international transactions affecting their countries takes place within their jurisdictions.

Ten conferences have been held to date:

- Zimbabwe (2016);
- Kenya (2017) for the East African Community (EAC) region;
- Zambia (2018) for the Southern African Development Community (SADC);
- Cambodia (2018) for countries who are members of LawAsia;
- Costa Rica (2019) for Central America;
- Fiji (2019) for the Southern Pacific;
- Fiji (2021, hybrid) for the Southern Pacific;
- Indonesia (2021, hybrid);
- South Africa (2023) for the Southern African Development Community (SADC); and
- Chinese Taipei (2024).

The events have, over the years, been attended by almost 1,800 lawyers from the respective target markets, including last year's Lagos conference.

Attendance in Lagos (in person and virtual) numbered 173 individuals, making it slightly above the average attendance.

The Lagos conference: overview

The conference program was prepared based on the model program deployed during previous 'Internationalisation' conferences. The programme covered a series of issues relevant to how lawyers in Nigeria engage with internationalised and other cross-border legal work.

The format combined presentations from members of BIC ITILS, other international speakers and the BIC Chair, with panels of local lawyers offering both local and best practice observations on the selected topics.

Summary details of the sessions are attached as an [Annex](#).

Budget

The BIC allocated a total budget of £35,000 for this year's conference. That was a reduction from previous years and less than the £50,000 requested by BIC ITILS in its budget submission for the 2025 fiscal year.

The budget proved adequate, with the final total cost amounting to **£21,342.97**.

The cost of venue and services were above the initial budget projection. Speaker costs were lower, on account of only three international speakers travelling (compared to higher numbers at previous conferences). In contrast to previous conferences, which used services supplied by the European Lawyers Foundation (ELF) to organise and plan conference details, this year's conference leveraged the close connection of two ITILS committee members with the NBA-SBL to secure extensive organisational support from the NBA-SBL.

As noted below in the 'Recommendations' section, this model may only work under very specific conditions – namely, when a highly developed local bar infrastructure exists (as it clearly does in Nigeria), and where committee connections with the local bar can secure extensive support.

Successes, challenges and recommendations for the future

Successes

Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, with comments indicating that the conference assisted lawyers attending to keep up with contemporary developments in cross-border practice – consistent with BIC ITILS's mandate to inform lawyers and bars about issues in trade in legal services.

Informal feedback from the NBA team gathered at the time of the conference was also positive. No further feedback was provided in response to a subsequent request.

Challenges

MOVEMENT FROM PROFESSIONAL TO 'VOLUNTARY' MODEL FOR ORGANISING THE CONFERENCE

Although this was the 11th 'globalise your practice' conference organised under the auspices of the BIC ITILS, it was the first organised without the hands-on assistance of ELF. It succeeded because ITILS Committee Vice Chair Mfon Usoro was able to draw on a motivated and professional team (including professional support staff) from the NBA Section on Business Law. The SBL team was able to take the reins on all logistical and organisational matters, including securing local speakers and chairs to coordinate session content.

TRAFFIC/ACCESS IN LAGOS

Lagos is a large city with challenging traffic conditions. A blockage on one of the roads leading to the district in which the conference venue was located delayed the arrival of many delegates, leading to a delay with the start of the conference amounting to 45 minutes – a delay that persisted through the day. The delay to the schedule caused some issues for speakers, either because of fixed travel plans or because they were participating virtually.

ATTENDANCE

A total of just over 100 individuals attended in person. Registrations numbered 180 (capacity), so there was a 'no show' level exceeding 40 per cent. Online registrations exceeded 300, with around 70 attending online – a 'no show' level of over 75 per cent (with a likelihood of lower overall engagement during the day).

Recommendations

The conference worked well, with the content reflecting a model that has proven popular for more than a decade. I therefore have no recommendations for fundamental changes to the content.

However, considering the challenges outlined above, we should consider the following points for future conferences.

- In future, we may not have similarly motivated and well-organised local collaborators – this is a material risk for the future of the conferences (either preventing them from happening at all or risking a poorly executed or poorly attended event). This risk would be mitigated by considering engaging again with a professional conference-organising body (eg, ELF or the IBA secretariat) for future conferences, particularly where we wish to hold the conference in a developing country less-developed than Nigeria or Brazil (where a conference is planned for 2026).
- Given factors like traffic in large developing country cities, in future, if one-day events are held in large cities, we could consider making arrangements for hybrid attendance or encouraging attendees to stay at the conference hotel (particularly for multi-day conferences).
- Given the high proportion of 'no shows', we should consider measures to incentivise attendance at future events. For instance, we could hold the event over more than one day at a hotel or venue outside of the city – if people need to travel, they may be more likely to attend the full programme. Another idea would be to charge a fee to impose a higher 'cost' for non-attendance.

Conference summary

This annex summarises each session of the conference, organised in the order in which they took place, based on the working programme and the session transcripts. This summary was prepared with the assistance of Claude (Sonnet 5).¹

1. Welcome remarks

Speakers: *Iain Sandford, Foley Hoag (Paris); Chair, BIC International Trade in Legal Services Committee*

Sandford welcomed delegates, outlined the IBA's history and the International Trade in Legal Services Committee's mandate in respect of the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services (WTO/GATS) framework and regional trade agreements, and traced the conference series back to 2016 (prior editions have been held across Africa, Asia and Latin America, with almost 1,800 participants to date). He explained the series' goal of helping local lawyers secure a fairer share of the cross-border work arising in their own markets, thanked the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) for co-hosting, and introduced the day's themes of fair collaboration between international and domestic firms.

2. Welcome address

Speakers: *Afam Osigwe SAN, President, Nigerian Bar Association*

Osigwe welcomed delegates on behalf of the NBA, voicing Nigerian lawyers' historic wariness of foreign entrants and insisting that cross-border cooperation be equitable rather than extractive. He referenced a bill before the National Assembly to amend the Legal Practitioners Act, with the intent of permitting narrowly scoped foreign lawyer collaboration on single transactions. Osigwe further expressed hope that arbitrations involving Nigeria would in future be seated locally with Nigerian lead counsel, and welcomed international engagement provided Nigerian lawyers participate as full partners rather than minority shareholders.

3. Keynote Speech

Speakers: *George Etomi, George Etomi & Partners (Lagos); Co-opted Member, BIC International Trade in Legal Services Committee*

Etomi traced the NBA's cross-border legal services debate back to 2006 and argued that Nigerian lawyers must be 'in the room' to shape terms rather than simply object from outside. He called for the harmonization of West African business law (citing Francophone Africa's OHADA regime as a model) and criticised government agencies for reflexively briefing foreign firms. He then proposed that domestic firms brief foreign counsel – rather than the reverse – to secure fairer fee-sharing, and stressed the importance of continuing legal education and Nigeria's WTO/GATS obligations.

¹ Method: A transcript of the conference was generated from video posted to YouTube and included in a folder with the conference agenda. The summary was generated using the prompt 'Can you please prepare a short summary of what was covered, organised by session. The summary of each session should include the title, the speakers and give the gist (in around 50-100 words) of what was discussed.' I undertook light edits of the content required.

4. Introduction to international trade in legal services and its applicability in West Africa

Speakers: *Mfon Usoro, Paul Usoro & Co (Lagos); Vice Chair, BIC ITILS*

Usoro gave a technical primer on how legal services are traded under the WTO's GATS and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), covering the four modes of supply (cross-border supply, consumption abroad, commercial presence, presence of natural persons), and the distinction between market access and national treatment commitments. Using Nigeria's and other Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) actual AfCFTA schedules as examples, she showed that most West African countries remain 'unbound' on legal services and urged bar associations to build trade-law expertise and secure seats on national negotiating teams.

5. Arbitration of international commercial disputes – how to keep international arbitration local

Speakers: *Ladipo Soetan, Siji Soetan & Co (Session Chair); Jean Chiazor Anishere SAN; Isaiah Bozimo SAN (represented by Yahya Isa Abdul-Rashid); Priscilla Ogwemoh; Steven Richman, Chair, IBA Bar Issues Commission (joining virtually)*

Panellists debated why parties default to London, Paris and New York as arbitral seats over African centres, despite Nigeria's arbitration-friendly Arbitration and Mediation Act 2024, citing familiarity, perceived judicial interference, and enforcement risk as the key barriers. They called for investment in regional centres' facilities and staff training, international partnerships (such as the Nigerian Chartered Institute of Arbitrators' memorandum of understanding with the China International Economic and Trade Arbitration Commission (CIETAC)), and greater use of AI and virtual hearings to close the cost gap, while cautioning against states imposing local seats given arbitration's core principle of party autonomy.

6. Legal gatekeepers of global finance – how jurisdictional counsel shape cross-border capital raising

Speakers: *Yinka Edu, Udo Udoma & Belo-Osagie (Session Chair). Fireside chat with Jude Chiemeka, Nigerian Exchange Limited (NGX)*

Edu traced the history of Nigerian cross-border capital raising, from the United Bank of Africa's 1998 Global Depositary Receipt through Eurobond issuances, dual listings (Seplat, Airtel, GTB) and green/blue bonds, explaining lawyers' roles in structuring, regulatory coordination and risk disclosure. In the fireside chat, NGX's Jude Chiemeka discussed the exchange's push into ESG-labelled bonds, West African market integration, and shorter settlement cycles, stressing that strong local counsel and corporate governance are prerequisites for attracting international investors.

7. Creation of joint ventures – different forms of international alliances and their benefits

Speakers: *Funmi Iyayi, Templars (Session Chair); Mickael Laurans, The Law Society of England and Wales, Co-Opted Member, BIC ITILS (Presenter); Taiwo Afonja (Dentons ACAS), Joke Aliu (Aluko & Oyeboode), Wolemi Esan SAN (Olaniwun Ajayi, represented), Saadatu Hamu-Aliyu (Hamu Legal)*

Laurans outlined a spectrum of cross-border tie-up models – referral networks, exclusive 'best friend' alliances, Swiss verein structures, joint ventures and full mergers – and the regulatory questions each raises. Panellists shared contrasting expansion paths: Aluko & Oyeboode's membership of the African Legal Network (ALN), Dentons ACAS's Swiss verein partnership, Olaniwun Ajayi's organic London office (and a joint venture route in Cameroon), and Hamu Legal's individual-lawyer collaboration model, with recurring lessons on due diligence, cost overruns, cultural fit, and managing internal and client expectations.

8. Working with large international law firms – expectations of local firms; top tips for smooth operation

Speakers: *Olusolape Peters, Olajide Oyewole (Session Chair); Iain Sandford (Presenter); Ayotunde Owoigbe (Banwo & Ighodalo), Adeleke Alex-Adedipe (Duale, Ovia & Alex-Adedipe), Paul Harris Ogbole SAN (Leonard Silk, joining virtually), Buchi Douglas (joining virtually)*

Sandford's presentation framed cross-border referral relationships around trust, reliability and reciprocity, offering practical tips on personal connections, disciplined communication, clear budgeting, and giving collaborators genuine ownership of their work. Panellists discussed how one-off instructions mature into steady relationships through consistency, responsiveness, commercial fluency and professional visibility (directories, best-friend firms), shared case studies (including a decade-long Eurobond partnership and DLA Piper's Swiss verein with Olajide Oyewole), and agreed domestic counsel add most value as trusted business advisors rather than purely technical resources.

9. Building the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) – business opportunities for lawyers in international trade agreements

Speakers: *Adetola Onayemi, NBA-SBL International Trade Law Committee (Session Chair); Sam Erugo SAN; Nankunda Katangaza (Hook Tangaza); Fatima Bello (Nigeria AfCFTA Coordination Office, joining virtually), Hauwa Kaka Usman (Nigerian Chambers of Commerce Dispute Resolution Centre, joining virtually)*

The session opened with a minute's silence for Segun Awolowo, the scheduled presenter, who had recently passed away. Panellists examined the barriers to Nigerian lawyers practising continent-wide – chiefly sovereignty concerns and restrictive domestic licensing – contrasting Nigeria's relative openness with Rwanda's post-genocide liberalisation of legal practice and the EU's mutual-recognition model. They flagged digital trade, intellectual property and dispute resolution as growth areas, urged firms to engage with AfCFTA private-sector events, and discussed drafting enforceable multi-jurisdictional dispute resolution clauses ahead of the AfCFTA's still-developing investor-state dispute mechanism.

10. Closing remarks and conclusion

Speakers: *Ozofu Ogiemudia, Udo Udoma & Belo-Osagie; Chair, NBA Section on Business Law (Session Chair); Steven Richman, Chair, IBA Bar Issues Commission (joining virtually)*

Richman thanked the NBA and the ITILS Committee for a successful conference, reaffirmed the IBA's commitment to ongoing engagement with African bars on issues such as AI and arbitration guidance, and invited continued input throughout the year. Ozofu Ogiemudia closed with a vote of thanks to organisers, speakers and delegates on behalf of the NBA and its Section on Business Law.