

Africa's open visa policy eases cross-border travel, unlocks trade and investment

Rwanda becomes the latest African country to offer visa-free access to all Africans, marking a recovery for the continent from setbacks caused by travel restrictions amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Positive advancements in visa openness policies across Africa are promising for enhanced cross-border travel, improved mobility, and increased trade in 2024 and the foreseeable future. The recently published [Africa Visa Openness Index 2023](#), released on Tuesday, 12 December, showcases significant strides compared to the seventh edition of the report published in December 2022.



Source: Supplied

The Africa Visa Openness Index (AVOI) measures the extent to which African countries are open to visitors from other African countries

The Visa openness achieved its highest score ever in 2023, surpassing levels last seen before the Covid-19 pandemic. The Africa Visa Openness Index (AVOI) measures the extent to which African countries are open to visitors from other African countries.

Over the period 2020-21, massive border closures to curb the spread of COVID-19, affected land and air travel, with additional restrictions due to screening measures, bans on gatherings, quarantines and such, causing stagnation in 2022.

In 2023, data from the report shows that 50 countries improved or maintained their 2022 score, with only 4 countries scoring lower. Since the first report was published in 2016, 36 countries have improved their score on the index. Forty-two (42) countries extend visa-free entry to citizens from at least 5 other African countries, while 33 countries do so to citizens of at least 10 countries. Four countries - up from three last year, - have eliminated all visa requirements for African travellers. They are Rwanda, Benin, The Gambia, and Seychelles.

All key overall matrices have shown improvements in 2023. In 28% of all intra-Africa travel scenarios, African citizens do not require a visa (an improvement from 27% in 2022 and 20% in 2016). A visa is still required in 46% of travel scenarios on the continent – down from 47% in 2022 and 55% in 2016.

"It makes it easier for Africans to visit their families, pursue education and business interests abroad, and discover Africa as tourists. It also contributes towards the fulfilment of aspirations for a prosperous, integrated continent where people can develop their potential unhampered by overly restrictive visa regimes," noted Jean-Guy Afrika, acting director of the African Development Bank's Regional Integration Coordination Office.

Highlights of the 2023 Africa Visa Openness Index

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- The AVOI reached its highest level in 2023, slightly exceeding the previous peak of 2020
- The continent now features 4 champions (Rwanda, Benin, The Gambia and Seychelles): countries that have abolished visas for citizens from all African countries
- 24 countries now offer an e-visa, almost three times as many as in 2016
- 15 countries improved their score in 2023, 35 maintained their scores, while only 4 scored lower
- West African countries continue to lead the rankings: 7 of the continent's top 10 performers are from West Africa

"As we delve into the eighth edition of the AVOI and assess progress made since 2016, we take pride in the complete removal of travel restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the surpassing of pre-pandemic levels in visa openness," said Marie-Laure Akin-Olugbade, vice-president for regional development, integration and business delivery at the African Development Bank.

"Freer movement of people could help galvanize the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), bringing us closer to the realization of our shared goal of an integrated Africa where goods, services, capital, and people move freely," Akin-Olugbade added.

Rwanda emerges as a new champion in 2023, following a progressively more liberal visa regime pursued over the past 8 years. In 2016, the country allowed the citizens of nearly 90% of African countries to obtain a visa on arrival; with citizens of the remaining countries being able to enter the country without a visa.

It later abolished visa fees for African citizens, and in 2023, Rwanda dropped visa requirements for the citizens of the entire continent. "This has eased the burden of travel for the citizens of 35 African countries that had until recently still required a visa on arrival," the report notes. In another positive development, news reports state that Kenya plans to remove visa requirements for African travellers by the end of 2023.

The report also measures average visa openness within the AU-recognised Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and finds that average visa openness has improved in 6 of the 8 RECs over the past year. RECs continue to be important drivers of visa openness through regional initiatives aimed at dismantling barriers to the movement of people.

In this respect, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) scores highest on the regional score and is where African citizens enjoy the highest levels of freedom to move across borders. ECOWAS has taken a progressive

stance on visa openness for decades, formalizing it in 1979 with a protocol on the free movement of persons, residence and establishment.

In addition to boasting the highest average regional AVOI score on the continent, ECOWAS also records the highest visa-free reciprocity rate: this is the rate at which the visa-free policies of individual countries within the REC are reciprocated by its member states. In 97% of travel scenarios, citizens can enter another country within the same REC without the need for a visa.

What's next for Africa? Recommendations and solutions

Despite the many improvements, there are still hurdles to overcome. In nearly half of country-to-country travel scenarios (46%), Africans are required to obtain visas ahead of departure to travel to other African countries. Visa restrictions are notably pronounced in northern and central Africa. Sustaining the momentum on visa liberalization is crucial for realizing the vision of the 'Africa We Want.' Embracing liberal visa policies will not only facilitate seamless travel but also contribute significantly to enhanced trade in goods and services, cross-border investment and shared prosperity.

Some of the recommendations include

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- Implementing any outstanding commitments on visa-free movement within regional economic communities,
- Extending visa-free travel policies to all AU member states, in increments if necessary,
- Streamlining and simplifying any remaining visa procedures and associated cross-border processes,
- Implementing and expanding e-visa systems that use secure, reliable, mobile-friendly platforms with a guaranteed response time, for countries requiring a visa ahead of travel

One key area for which further progress on visa openness is crucial, is the African Continental Free Trade Area ([AfCFTA](#)).

"Freeing the movement of people across Africa's borders is not only an important objective in its own right, but is also essential to continental integration," the report notes. With three more African Union member states ratifying the AfCFTA in 2023, bringing the total to 47 ratifications, the lasting impact of the negotiations, ratification, and execution of the AfCFTA depends to a significant extent on people's ability to cross African borders, unhindered by excessive administrative barriers.

"The flourishing of trade in goods is intricately linked to the liberalization of trade in services, both of which hinge on the smooth movement of people across Africa's borders without excessive bureaucratic hurdles," said Ambassador Minata Samate Cessouma, Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development at the African Union Commission.

"We have never been closer to realizing AfCFTA's potential to integrate the continent. The African Union is proud of countries' progress on freeing the movement of people."

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