

A visa-free Africa still faces hurdles

Would an Africa in which Africans require no visas to travel boost prospects for intracontinental trade? The African Union (AU) and many of the continent's economic organisations think so and want it to be a reality by 2020. It is not an entirely original concept (the European Union already has a visa-free policy for its citizens), and many experts laud the AU's position, at least in principle.



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The idea of an African passport dates back a quarter of a century but has failed to catch on with countries that fear an increase in smuggling, illegal immigration, terrorism, and the spread of disease as well as a negative impact on local job markets. With migration, legal and illegal, blamed for recent outbreaks of xenophobia in South Africa, some of these fears seem credible.

Visa-free travel for Africans in Africa could be a logistical nightmare given that some citizens do not have travel documents and others lead nomadic lives. Individual countries may need to enact legislation to adopt the African passport. Few African nations use the biometric data that an African passport requires.

Last year the AU launched an African passport, a signature project of former chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. However, the passport is currently available only to senior diplomats and top officials of AU's 55 member states.

Of those member states, only Seychelles offers visa-free access to all African countries. "The large and fast-growing

economies aren't following suit because the visa regime itself has created a bureaucratic habit," notes Daniel Silke, director of the South Africa-based Political Futures Consultancy.

"Old habits are hard to break, although there is justification for hesitation in terms of the legitimate layer of security that visas provide."

Silke adds that growing and large economies worry about the impact that increased population movements might have on labour markets and cities. Some of Africa's fast-growing economies are Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Guinea, Senegal and Tanzania. Out of desperation, thousands of immigrants travel to South Africa, the continent's largest economy, to find work.

"With urban cities expanding rapidly across Africa, government institutions are strained, and cities that offer opportunities for trade, health care, a booming labour market, infrastructure, among others, will be under increased pressure," notes Silke.

He suggests a focus on efficient and affordable visa procurement processes, advising regional communities to enact and implement policies that make it easier for their citizens to move from one member state to another.

Biometric technology

In November 2017, after 15 years of negotiations, the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), comprising of Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of Congo, ratified the visa-free movement of its citizens.

Under the policy, member states will adopt biometric technology, ensure police and security services' coordination, and respect for different labour regulations.

The next best thing to a visa-free system is visa on arrival, which may include authorization to stay for up to 90 days. Rwanda adopted this protocol in 2013 and has witnessed an increase in African visitors and investors, noted Anacleet Kalibata, the country's director general of immigration and emigration.

Kalibata told *Africa Renewal* that between 2013 and 2016, the number of Africans receiving visas on arrival at Rwandan entry points increased by more than 100%. "We have also hosted many more conferences as a result of the removal of travel restrictions," he said.

He maintained that crime rates in the country did not increase because of visa on arrival, contrary to fears initially expressed by skeptics. "Most of the people entering our country do so for good reasons," said Kalibata. He pointed out that Rwanda has "laws governing criminality associated with the movement of people. We also believe in competitiveness in terms of skills... So, opening our borders has attracted new talent and investment."

Like Rwanda, Ghana now offers visa-free access to a third of AU member states and visas on arrival to the other two-thirds. In so doing, the country has made the most progress of all African states toward a visa-free Africa for Africans, according to the *Africa Visa Openness Report 2017* by the African Development Bank (AfDB).

Senegal is offering visa-free access to 42 African countries in a bid to reenergize its tourism sector.

At his swearing in as Kenya's president last November, Uhuru Kenyatta announced that all Africans will henceforth receive visa on arrival.

An alternative to adopting visa-free access or visas on arrival is for countries to enter into reciprocal arrangements with other nations. Namibian authorities are making efforts to finalise such arrangements, meaning that citizens of countries allowing Namibians visas on arrival will receive reciprocal service at Namibian ports of entry.

Although Rwanda already offers Africans visa on arrival, it is also receptive to reciprocal arrangements with other countries, explained Kalibata. “We’ve proven just how effective unrestricted regional travel can be through the issue of a unified national identity card and border pass for citizens of Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda.

“Another border pass agreement between Rwanda, the DRC, Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda has fostered regional social cohesion, and we’ve seen cross-border trade in our countries now contributing 42% to GDP, which is very significant,” he added.

Negative impacts

Rwanda’s experience, however, is not enough to change the perception of the negative impacts of liberalising entry visas. Jean-Guy Afrika, AfDB’s principal policy expert and a contributor to the *Africa Visa Openness Report 2017*, notes, “The 2016 analysis of Africa’s visa policy regimes demonstrated that on average Africans needed visas at departure to travel to 54% of other African countries (from 55% in 2015); could get visas on arrival in only 24% (from 25% in 2015); and do not need visas to travel to just 22% (from 20% in 2015).”

The reasons African countries remain closed to each other, says Afrika, vary significantly. “The key reasons advanced by policy makers generally relate to fears of job losses and security concerns. But there could also be issues of culture and trust. The answer probably lies somewhere in the nexus between politics, culture, history and economics.”

Afrika confirms that at the regional level, East and West Africa lead in visa openness. “In the 2017 rankings of the Africa Visa Openness Index, 75% of countries in the top 20 are in these two regions. Only one is in the North and none in Central Africa.”

The AfDB, the AU and the World Economic Forum Global Agenda Council on Africa collaborated on the *Africa Visa Openness Report 2017*, the second of its kind. Researchers gathered data from the International Air Transport Association and from responses to questionnaires administered to national focal points.

“Overall the trend is positive, given that just four years ago only five countries offered liberal, arrival or no visa, access to citizens of all African countries. Today that number stands at 14, but we want that number to keep moving up,” Afrika says.

Visa liberalisation is not a magic bullet, he cautions, even if it can foster Africa’s integration. He recommends other reforms and massive investments in connectivity to complement visa liberalisation, citing Rwanda as an example of a country benefiting from coordinated investments and policy reforms, including in business and air transport infrastructure.

“Visa openness may only be one piece of the interconnected African states puzzle, but it is nonetheless a very important one,” concludes Afrika.

Source: [Africa Renewal](#).