

Freedom of movement essential for Africa's transformation

KIGALI, Rwanda - For millions of ordinary travellers, inter-African travel is still too often a nightmare. Be it border hassles, lack of road or air routes linking key cities, or the frustrations of being refused entry to a country because of visas, the end result is to curtail the free movement of people, viewed by the African Development Bank as one of the pillars of regional integration.



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That freedom of movement is inextricably tied to the Bank's vision to create the next global market in Africa. As the Africa Economic Conference opens in the Rwandan capital Kigali, the theme this year: *Regional and Continental Integration for Africa's development*, also aligns with another major Bank priority - placing infrastructure development at the centre of Africa's regional integration efforts.

The annual Africa Economic Conference is the continent's leading forum fostering dialogue and knowledge exchange in the search for solutions to the development challenges of Africa. It brings together leading academics, high ranking government representatives and development practitioners from across the globe.

Free movement

Host nation Rwanda has taken bold leadership steps to champion regional integration, announcing at the beginning of this year an entry visa on arrival for travellers from all African countries.

The third edition of the Bank's Visa Openess Index, to be launched on day two of the meeting, will be an important opportunity to measure which countries are making improvements that support free movement of people across Africa.



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"The Index has helped raise awareness and drive visa policy reforms across the continent to ease movement of people, unlocking opportunities for intra-African tourism, trade and investment. In so doing, the Bank is directly contributing to the objectives of the AU initiative for a Single African passport," Gabriel Negatu, bank director general, East Africa Regional Development and Business Delivery Office said in his remarks during the opening plenary.

Speaking on behalf of Rwandan President Paul Kagame, Hon. Claudine Uwera, Minister of State in charge of Economic Planning, said the conference addressed a theme "close to our hearts".

"This conference is important to charting the way for inclusive integration...that would benefit all," Uwera said.

"Governance will determine the development path for our countries," Uwera added, noting the equally important role of political will and commitment from African leaders.

Transformative

AEC 2018 highlighted, "Transformative initiatives for accelerating progress in infrastructure integration that are inclusive and promote equity, including the removal of barriers for movement of people, goods, and services across borders."

Other convening partners to the conference, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), commended Rwanda's role as a front-runner for integration efforts in Africa and spoke on the urgent need to build on the momentum for an inclusive and equitable integration.

Also speaking at the plenary, Giovane Biha, deputy executive secretary, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), said while there were still major steps ahead, "we are moving in the right direction."

Highlighting the Bank's emphasis on research and knowledge management as important drivers of policy dialogue, good policy planning and implementation, participation this year's AEC is being organised under the leadership of the Bank's Research Department and Regional Integration Complex.

Sessions over the three-day meeting examined the social, cultural and political frameworks for successful integration, building on the landmark signing this year of the Africa Free Trade Agreement, the world's potentially biggest free trade agreement, which aims to create a single continental market for goods and services, with free movement of business persons and investments across Africa.

Participants also looked at the role of the private sector and civil society institutions.

Given the urgency of regional integration – "no longer a choice," according to its organisers, this year's meeting is a must attend for those interested in Africa's Development agenda.

"Important pages of our continent's development history are being written," Uwera said. "Let's take this opportunity to move the continent ahead."

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