

Adopt Intra-Africa Visa-free Travel in 2020

One of the shames of Africa's (dis)integration is the difficulty ordinary Africans have to go through to visit other African countries. The best thing African nations should gift their citizens in 2020 would be enacting visa-free travel policies for all Africans.

My hometown of Kisoro in Southwestern Uganda is, literally speaking, a stone's throw from the Democratic Republic of Congo border. I have relatives across the border, and I speak a couple of languages from that country. In fact due to the huge size of the geography of DRC, 26 districts of Uganda have border points with the country. Uganda's entire western flank is shadowed by the DRC.

If I wanted to fly to Kinshasa from Kampala, however, I would need to go through a sickening bureaucratic jigsaw, wait for days to obtain a \$200 single-entry visa, before boarding a plane to the capital.

DRC is not alone.

I was travelling to Abuja, Nigeria for 2 weeks of research assignment last April. I was given a one-month business visa for \$100. When I was returning to the same country in June for a separate mission, I had to get another visa, pre-travel, from the Nigerian High Commission in Kampala.

I will never forget an experience I had in Johannesburg's OR Tambo Airport a couple years ago. I was returning from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with South African Airways. When I landed at OR Tambo and was going through security to catch a connecting flight to Entebbe, Uganda, I noticed a strange man following me everywhere. In the line he singled me out and asked me to step aside, asked me endless questions regarding where I was

coming from and going, etc. So, I suspected him to be some conman. He had no uniform or any visible ID.

As a result I refused to answer his questions and snapped when he insisted to search me. Later I was to learn that he was an employee of South African Immigration police and wanted to make sure that I got on my connecting flight to Uganda, rather than disappear and illegally enter South Africa. How ridiculous!

I have been to South Africa multiple times over the last ten years. Normally they would give me 3 months multiple entry visa. But a couple years ago I was shocked when they gave me 5 days visa (yes, 5.0 days!) when I was going for a 2-day conference in Cape Town. What if I fell sick or had another difficulty while there, I wondered!

Roots in colonialism

One of the most frustrating things in Africa is how much we continue to struggle with getting rid of the vestiges of 19th century colonization by European powers. That Berlin Conference of 1884-85 that sliced and diced the continent as if it were a piece of cake, ironically continues to be inadvertently implemented by African "independent" states. The "General Act of the Berlin Conference", the de facto 'communique' from this conference, aimed to avoid clashes between different European powers over the control of territory and sought to peacefully share 'spheres of influence' without resorting to war.

Post-independence African leaders have failed to do away with this colonial project.

The 2019 Africa Visa Openness Index report by the Africa Development Bank and the African Union Commission shows that Africans on average can only travel to 27 countries visa-free or with a visa on arrival, in what the report authors call 'progress' because apparently a few years ago the numbers were

even lower. However, this progress, clearly, is NOT enough! Only Seychelles and Benin offer visa-free access to all Africans, according to the report. South Africa recently announced visa waivers for citizens of Cuba, Ghana, and Sao Tome and Principe but stays mum on its earlier promise of easing travel restrictions on other African citizens.

To the contrary, nearly all African countries extend either visa-free or visa-on-arrival privileges to nearly all Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. How can Africans allow Europeans, North Americans and other OECD titans, travel privileges they do not accord their fellow Africans? Citizens of only 15 African nations, for example, can travel to South Africa without a visa, yet holders of 28 different European passports can enter the country freely.

In 'Agenda 2063', African Union's futuristic 50-year development strategy adopted in 2013, all African states endorsed an Africa-wide passport, visa-free travel and the strengthening regional integration. Instead progress has been dismal at best. Only heads of states and a few AU commission bureaucrats have been given these passports and progress on economic integration and free movement of people has even worsened in some instances. Kenya recently announced a ban on Ugandan Milk, Tanzania charges astronomical fees for work permits and even [expels 'illegal immigrants'](#), while xenophobia has raged on in South Africa.

Whereas some of the reasons (more prosperous, growing) inward-looking African states give for travel restrictions are legitimate (such as the need to ensure cross-border security and prevention of crime, labor flows regulations), these shouldn't come at the expense of totally shutting down easy movement of people and goods.

The lip service many countries pay to Africa's integration are visible in many forms; from countries' [failure to pay](#) their

quotas to the African Union, forcing the body to rely on western donors to run, to protectionist policies imposed on brotherly states and retaliatory support of insurgencies in others. Clearly the road to Africa's integration is still a long way from fruition.

African countries however should not wait for the perfect time or conditions before taking action. Acts by independent nations are worthy of praise. For example, Rwanda's announcement of visa-on-arrival policy for most Africans, Ghana's visa-free privileges to nearly all African countries, Nigeria's recent announcement of visa-on-arrival policy to this list. It will commence in January 2020, and the more efficient efforts by regional economic blocs, should be scaled up into an Africa-wide effort that feeds into the realization of other continental-level initiatives such as the Continental Free Trade Area and Agenda 2063. Adopting a visa-free travel policy would be the most important indicator of seriousness to these commitments.