

The Single African Passport - Curb the Enthusiasm, Challenges Abound

Written by Michael Asiedu

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MICHAEL ASIEDU, MAY 17 2017

To progressively bring independent African states together in order to foster unity, continental integration[1] is a long cherished ideal of the forbearers of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), now African Union (AU). The pursuit of this ideal, however, looks farfetched. It's been over half a century and yet the continent has a very restrictive regime in terms of movement of persons within, so is continental trade. The AU, however, has announced to introduce a single African passport in order to facilitate easy movement of persons and trade activities across the continent. The first part of this article examines some of the merits implementing the single African passport will bring; the second part deals with some of the challenges that may come with it as well as the highlight of a central critique.

The 2016 Visa Openness Report by the African Development Bank established that an African can travel to only 20 percent of African countries without a visa. Requirements for visas among African countries were indicated as the main stumbling block withholding access and travel within the continent. The good news however is that, by 2018 the AU proposes to abolish visa requirements for all African citizens with the introduction of a single African-wide passport, within Africa's Agenda 2063. The passport was launched at the AU Summit in Kigali in July 2016, a move seen as a concrete step towards the realization of easy movement within the continent. Earlier works have also contributed towards this cause, for instance, the Lagos Plan of Action and the Abuja Treaty have previously indicated free movement of citizens as central to Africa's development.

The implementation of the AU passport could be a huge win for the continent economically. For sometime now, 'Africa Rising' advocates have complained that one of its main obstacles to increased trade within the continent is the restrictive visa regime. Thus, rather than fighting for peripheral spots in markets outside of Africa, free movement within Africa could boost trade across the respective regional blocs per the Free Trade Area Instrument, if implemented properly.

The introduction of the AU passport is also more likely to promote top-notch recruits easily – it will permit skilled Africans to cross borders to find opportunities thereby progressively reducing the attendant costs that come with expatriate recruitment outside the continent. Additionally, the passport, when operational, could facilitate business across borders – this is great for budding African entrepreneurs in establishing their ventures within the continent inextricably creating employment, thus tackling African's huge and growing unemployment problem. This could also reduce the often dangerous journeys of many African youths in their attempt to reach Europe mostly through the Mediterranean Sea; after all, it is anticipated that jobs will be springing up within the continent, therefore, moving to a country within will sound smarter than trekking yonder the Sahara and Mediterranean for pastures anew.

Africa is also going to be ripe for a lot of trade activities and movement. Economic projections indicate Africa to be a \$29 trillion dollar economy by 2050. Currently, the continent has four of the world's fastest growing economies, and there were six in 2015 with Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Mozambique, Tanzania and Rwanda in the fore (World Economic Forum, 2016). Besides trade, this passport could be following the path of the Schengen zone model where a single visa with multiple entries could permit you to access 26 states. No wonder Europe has been the hotbed for tourism. Tourism already ranks among the top foreign exchange earners for African countries such as Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Tanzania, etc. With the introduction of the passports, African

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countries could enjoy an even greater tourism proceeds, essentially, many Africans who are put off by restrictive visa regimes of some of the African countries they would want to visit, will reconsider their decisions.

Irrespective of all the enthusiasm, there are however challenges that need immediate attention as their forfeiture may culminate in Africa's single most significant and revolutionary promise over the last many decades to become its most agonizing nightmare.

The first is the way in which the passports are being piloted. A central critique of mine is that it reflects Africa's 'big man politics' as usual. The passports are only available to AU heads of states, ministers of foreign affairs and the permanent representatives of the AU (Ole, 2016). The irony though is none of these people face any significant hurdles in terms of travelling within the continent. The fact is, they have the smoothest travels possible. Besides, I fail to see any novelty that may emanate from them being the sole holders of the passports for now. The best placed to identify the challenges these passports could bring are not the heads of states; selected African businessmen[2] – not necessarily the top-notch – and an African security intelligence tuned to the dynamics of the continent could produce significant feedback with regards to the challenges and deficiencies of these passports from a pilot.

Again, owing to the huge economic disparities among African countries, say South Africa and Eritrea[3] the introduction of the passports could lead to a non-reciprocal horizontal migration pattern. Essentially, countries within the continent perceived to offer better prospects will see larger inflows of migrants in their quest for better opportunities. Afrophobic outbursts could be the end results as witnessed in South Africa (Misago, 2017).

Another non-negotiable deficiency that comes with the African continent is its security in terms of porous borders. It is already difficult to detect smuggling, human and drug trafficking and other criminal syndicates (Aning and Pokoo, 2014). The introduction of the passports could magnify this situation, especially as individual countries could issue it. The point here is that a defect in one country's system could affect the whole system, for instance, evidence of fake passports by nationals of other countries within the continent is common (Abbey, 2014). Terrorism and its growing threat also adds to the mix. Tackling terrorism requires competent security acumen, presently the majority of AU countries lack the sophistication to detect illegal drugs and other smuggling chains, hence, the introduction of the passports will only aggravate this problem. The passports could thus, serve as embers that fester the infiltration of terrorists and other criminal syndicates as they seek safe havens.

Whilst officials have claimed that the passports are going to be biometric and secure (Ole, 2016), concrete plans concerning its implementation and potency are yet to be seen. To this end, the debate that needs to be going on in the continent is not idealistic politicking about the enormous benefits the passports may bring; but the actual plan and security regime on the table to ensure concerns of countries are assuaged. For instance, South Africa, considered by many Africans as relatively advanced to their respective countries, could be hesitant in opening its borders to all AU countries. Likewise, Ghana adjudged the freest country in sub-Saharan Africa (Acquah, 2015), may not readily open its borders to all AU members. Equally noteworthy is the fact that almost 37 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's population does not possess legal identification (World Bank 2016). It is this sort of challenges that make the promise of the passports very difficult to project.

On continental integration the aviation industry has done a great disservice to the continent[4], for instance there are few air routes connecting African capitals.[5] This in itself hinders the movement of people within the continent and has a negative bearing on trade activities within same too.

With regards to the passports, no country has objected to the plan; theoretically, it is an absolute winner and could be in reality too but first its concerns should be rigorously debated on the continent. Going forward, there should be a curb on the raging enthusiasm; the focus rather should be directed towards concrete plans. AU should roll out a verifiable plan especially with some of these challenges in mind and eschew the politics.

Again, what is expected on the African continent is an open debate on the mechanisms for implementation of these passports, for instance the security roadmap outlined by the AU and respective African countries to combat the attendant challenges that the passports may bring. Significantly, with the election of a new AU Chair, Chad's Moussa

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Faki Mahmat, the discussion should shift from idealism to scrutiny of policies meant to address the challenges that will emanate from the introduction of the passports. Without a shift in the debate and policies thereof, it is difficult to fathom how countries thought to have economic leverage will open their borders to AU member countries. This will inextricably ensure that the African continent keeps marking time in terms of the vision of the forerunners of the AU on continental integration and a continual upward developmental surge.

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[1] The OAU aimed to promote the unity and solidarity of African States; co-ordinate and intensify their co-operation and efforts to achieve a better life for the peoples of Africa; defend their sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence; eradicate all forms of colonialism from Africa; promote international co-operation, giving due regard to the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and co-ordinate and harmonize members' political, diplomatic, economic, educational, cultural, health, welfare, scientific, technical and defense policies. The AU has since adopted more comprehensive objectives contained in its Constitutive Act.

[2] Selected African businessmen who trade across the continent often have firsthand experiences of the hurdles they face.

[3] In the long-term, South Africa's GDP is projected to trend around 420.00 USD Billion in 2020. On the other hand, GDP in Eritrea averaged 1.27 USD Billion from 1990 until 2014, reaching an all time high of 3.86 USD Billion in 2014 and a record low of 0.34 USD Billion in 1990 (Trading Economic, 2017).

[4] Africa has a very poor aviation industry. A World Bank report indicated that the continent has less than 1 percent of the global air service market despite boasting more than 12 percent of the world's population.

[5] If you want to fly from Cape Town in south Africa to Lagos in Nigeria- both main business cities in Africa- the two countries double as Africa's two largest economies; a direct flight will take about six hours but there are no direct commercial flights. Hence, you would have to make a stopover. Moreover, should you travel via Emirate Airlines you will definitely be making a stopover in Dubai which will take you about 3,000 miles out of your way. Additionally, economies of scale enable Middle eastern and European airlines to run cheap flights to and from Africa compared to their African counterparts. Other issues in African's aviation debacle include its lack of cooperation with other countries on the continent and protectionist tendencies (Fortin, 2013).

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