Visa Liberalization in Africa: A Political Promise of Economic Complexity
https://african.business/2025/02/trade-investment/time-to-tear-down-africas-visa-barriers

In *"Time to Tear Down Africa's Visa Barriers,"* David Thomas laments the slow progress toward free movement across the continent, drawing on the Africa Visa Openness Report. Out of 54 nations, 17 improved their visa openness scores compared to the previous year, 29 remained stagnant, and 8 scored lower — two steps forward, one step back. According to the report, despite clear political commitments and high-profile meetings on the subject, large states such as Egypt, Algeria, and Kenya rank near the bottom and most countries still do not offer free entry, e-visas, or visa on arrival to all African travelers.

In early January 2025, the outgoing president of Ghana announced visa-free travel for citizens of all African countries, following Kenya, Gambia, Rwanda, and Seychelles. Weeks later, the African Union convened and issued a public endorsement, urging other African nations to align their visa regimes in support of regional unity and mobility. This surge of political momentum garners attention and reflects a broader ambition toward regional integration, raising the question of whether this leads to meaningful economic transformation.

To study this, I applied quantitative methods (Wesley, 2024), using OLS regression to assess the relationship between visa liberalization, with the Africa Visa Openness and Henley Passport indices as indicators, and economic development, measured by GDP per capita. Empirical results reveal that inbound openness, captured by AVOI, does not significantly correlate with higher GDP per capita, with or without controls for geographic region and income level. Across all model specifications, the coefficient on AVOI remains statistically insignificant, with p-values above 0.1. In contrast, outbound mobility, captured by HPI, reveals an increase of $117 in GDP per capita ($p < 0.01$) for every increase in HPI after accounting for regional and income-level fixed effects. Extending this analysis beyond conventional openness metrics, I incorporate network centrality measures, specifically PageRank and Katz, derived from a constructed network of visa-free agreements. Although these results are not statistically significant, the centrality indicators returned either negative or null coefficients, suggesting that visa liberalization alone is not a reliable pathway to development.

These findings suggest that the economic benefits of openness depend on the quality, not the quantity, of a country's connections, underscoring the importance of reciprocal, strategic relationships and strong institutions. In other words, simply allowing easier entry to fellow Africans does not automagically yield economic growth. It must be embedded within a broader framework of coherent institutional reforms in policy, infrastructure, and institutional credibility. This is a harder problem to solve, because institutions are persistent.

In their Nobel-winning research, Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) argue that Africa's present-day institutions are shaped by colonial legacies, which left behind extractive systems and weakened the state's long-term effectiveness. Building on that perspective, Nunn's work on the slave trades (2017) shows how forced displacement and violence eroded trust and social cohesion, leaving legacies that continue to affect inter-state cooperation. These historical conditions explain why some African states approach visa liberalization with caution. Collier and Gunning (1999), in their influential article, *"Why Has Africa Grown Slowly?"*, emphasize how fragmented governance and weak institutions have long hindered the implementation of cross-cutting policy initiatives. These challenges are relevant today, where uncoordinated policies, overlapping regional frameworks, administrative capacity gaps, skepticism about reciprocity, and political mistrust continue to blunt the effects of immigration and visa reforms.

Institutional quality also varies dramatically across the continent. Cagé and Rueda (2017) document how historical variations as simple as the differences in Christian missions created long-term disparities in governance and bureaucratic development. These path-dependent differences help explain why countries like Rwanda or Seychelles have been able to implement ambitious mobility policies with relative ease, while states such as Egypt remain cautious, and others, like Kenya, adopt reforms that are more symbolic than substantive. Archibong, Coulibaly, and Okonjo-Iweala (2021), in their work on Washington Consensus reforms, make a similar point, arguing that policies often fail not because they are poorly designed, but because internal and external incentives are misaligned. A liberal visa regime, for instance, may be politically popular and appealing, but it may stall or backfire from due to security concerns from strategic partners and administrative burdens.

Thomas's article outlines the harsh reality of visa liberalization that aligns closely with academic literature, empirical data, and historical analysis of development in Africa. While the article remains cautiously optimistic and calls for more regional cooperation and infrastructure to remove logistical hurdles, the larger challenge is institutional. Until these foundational issues are addressed, the economic benefits of greater integration will remain an aspiration.

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