

How the free movement of people could benefit Africa

By [Tshepo T. Gwatiwa](#), [Michael Noel Sam](#) 15 Mar 2018

The African Union (AU) has adopted a [Free Movement Protocol](#) and a draft plan of action to go with it.

The idea was first set out in the [Abuja Treaty](#), which was endorsed in 1991 at the establishment of the African Economic Community. The AU's protocol defines free movement as the right to enter and exit member states and move freely within them, subject to the states' laws and procedures. It regards the freedom to travel or move goods across the continent as likely to boost the economic integration of Africa.



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There are several reasons why the protocol is an important development.

First, it will directly affect ordinary people. Up until now the effects of most of the AU's treaties and protocols have filtered down to people's lives from a distance, if at all. This protocol applies directly to citizens' movement.

Second, it moves the AU closer to the progress that sub-regional groupings have made on migration. For example, the East African Community (EAC) [launched its passport](#) in 1999 and has recently started a process to issue an [EAC e-passport](#). This is a passport with digital identification features.

In West Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) launched a [regional passport in 2000](#), but implementation by member states has been slow.

Lastly, free movement of people in other regions has been beneficial. For example, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [reports](#) that the average unemployment rate has been lowered by 6% in Europe due to free movement within the European Union (EU). And according to the International Monetary Fund, free movement has resulted in [better institutions and better economic management](#) in Eastern Europe.

Advantages of free movement

There's a great deal of evidence that [migration boosts the economies](#) of receiving countries. Free movement in Africa can be expected to enhance business and investment as the EU example has shown.

According to an [African Development Bank report](#), tourism in the Seychelles increased by 7% annually between 2009 and 2014 when the country abolished visas for African nationals. By 2015, thanks to increased revenues, it had become a [high income country](#) with thriving real estate, aviation and service industries.

The same report also states that African travel to Rwanda has increased by 22% since it [eased its visa requirements](#) in 2017. Since then Rwanda's cross-border trade with Kenya and Uganda has increased by 50%. This is evidence that free movement of labour and capital, boosts economic activity.

Addressing the challenges

But the protocol in its present form doesn't go far enough, and the AU needs to revisit parts of it. For instance, it should choose a biometric African identification card rather than an [African passport](#). A biometric ID is cheaper to produce than a passport and could be based on existing designs of national IDs instead of brand new documents. This could help overcome resistance to the passport on the grounds of cost.

The biometric ID could be introduced [alongside existing national IDs](#). It could be rolled out in instalments and, for example issued to diplomats, business people and students to begin with.

The ID would accompany ordinary sub-regional passports and exempt the bearers from visa requirements. It is instructive to note that national IDs can and do [facilitate](#) free movement too.

For example, 15 ECOWAS member states have introduced national IDs and plan to launch a biometric card to serve as a travel document in the region. Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda have an agreement to use [national IDs for travel](#) within the three countries.

Finally, there are some overlaps between the protocol and other African Union instruments such as the [Refugee Convention](#) which recognises the special needs of vulnerable groups. Rather than restate the provisions of the convention, the protocol should be refined to provide unique protections for these special groups.

Security issues and xenophobia

Free movement does not have to become a security threat for individual member states. The protocol does not encourage undetected movement. Rather, it requires stricter security controls at ports of entry. This means that blacklisted individuals who could be a threat to national security can be kept out.

The AU's Special Technical Committee on Defence and Security can also be given the job of improving intelligence sharing as well as cross-border police co-operation.

Xenophobia is also a legitimate concern when it comes to free movement. The AU could use structures and instruments like the [Continental Early Warning Systems](#), and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council [ECOSOC](#) to help it manage issues of security and xenophobia.

Gains to be made

The protocol is poised to deliver significant gains for Africa. It embodies the spirit of African integration and marks progress in regional partnerships. It promises great investment and trade opportunities, as well as the possibility to boost physical infrastructure such as roads, as has been the case in [America](#) and [Asia](#).

However, various state and non-state actors must sensitise domestic populations on the benefits of free movement in order to avoid a surge of nationalism, [anti-immigrant hysteria](#) and the kind of right wing politics that has swept across [Europe](#) and [America](#) over the past four years.

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