



Africa Visa Openness Report 2023



AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK GROUP

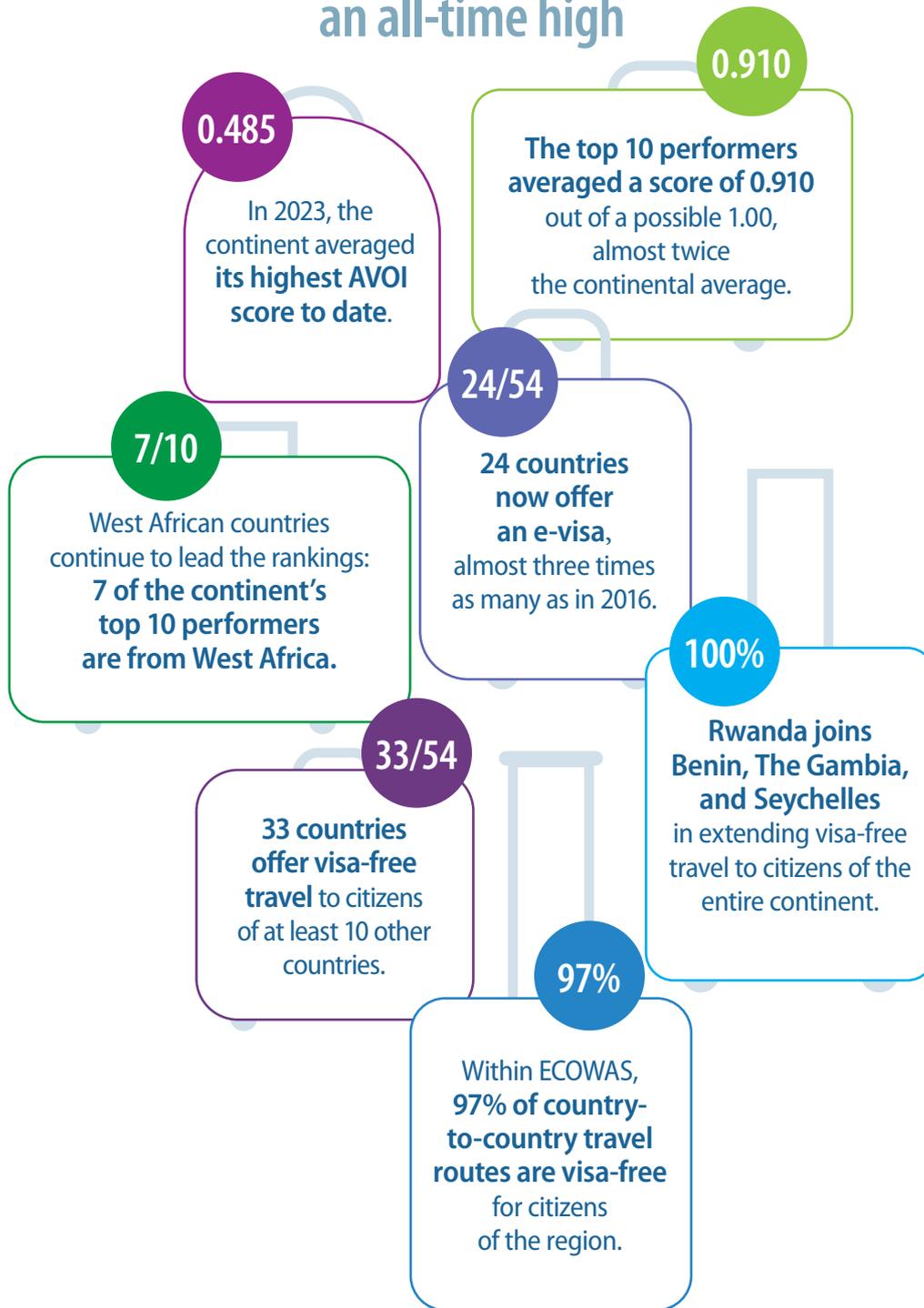


“Trade is not done in a vacuum. It’s people that trade. Apart from the fact that you need connectivity, you also need freedom for people to move from one place to the other.”¹

Dr. Akinwumi A. Adesina
President, African Development Bank Group

Highlights from the 2023 AVOI

Visa openness in Africa reaches an all-time high



Africa Visa Openness Index

The Africa Visa Openness Index (AVOI) measures the extent to which African countries are open to visitors from other African countries. The AVOI analyzes each country's visa requirements to show which countries on the continent most facilitate travel to their territory.



For each country, the AVOI calculates the number of African countries whose citizens must obtain a visa before travelling there, the number of countries whose citizens may obtain a visa upon arrival, and the number of countries whose citizens can enter visa-free. Each country is then assigned a AVOI score and ranked accordingly.

First published in 2016, the AVOI also tracks changes in countries' scores over time. It does the same for the eight regional economic communities recognized by the African Union. The report analyzes these trends in light of other developments in Africa and the world.

Data for this year's edition was collected in July and August 2023. The main source of information was the International Air Transport Association.

Acknowledgements

Now in its eighth edition, the Africa Visa Openness Report 2023 presents this year's findings of the Africa Visa Openness Index (AVOI), a joint initiative of the African Development Bank and the African Union Commission.

Since 2016, the AVOI has tracked the visa regime of each country in Africa vis-à-vis every other African country and calculates each country's score. It does the same for the eight regional economic communities recognized by the African Union.

The continent's progress on visa openness, chronicled in these pages, is encouraging. Despite the hurdles—a pandemic that grounded people around the world; conflicts that shut borders, sometimes without notice—visa openness is higher today than in any year measured by the AVOI.

This is a noteworthy achievement in its own right: it makes it easier for Africans to visit their families, pursue education and business interests abroad, and discover Africa as tourists. It also contributes towards the fulfillment of aspirations for a prosperous, integrated continent where people can develop their potential unhampered by overly restrictive visa regimes.

The AVOI is part of that movement. By tracking countries' and regions' scores over time, it tells us which countries and regions are advancing and which are not. It also explains the trends and exposes some of the innovations.

The AVOI would not exist were it not for the vision of the leadership of the African Development Bank and the African Union Commission. 'Integrate Africa' is one of the Bank's High 5s, and free movement is a pillar of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement and the African Union's Agenda 2063. This report, and the analysis that informs it, are helping that vision take form.

I would like to thank Dr. Emile Rwagasana, the AUC's Deputy Chief of Staff in the Bureau of the Deputy Chairperson, Sabelo Mbokazi, the AUC's Head of Labour, Employment, and Migration, and Jean-Bertrand Azapmo, Principal Adviser to the AU's Commissioner for Economic Development, Trade, Tourism, Industry and Minerals, for their technical support and guidance.

Special thanks go to Zodwa Florence Mabuza, who led the Bank's production of the report again this year, and to Gbanbele Coulibaly, Johanna Pangeiko Nautwima, and Tomoki Fukunaga, whose rigour in collecting and analyzing the data was of the highest standard.

The report was written by Eckart Naumann and edited by Jennifer Petrela. Peggy King Cointepas designed the report and graphics. They are an exceptional team.

Jean-Guy Afrika

Acting Director, Regional Integration Coordination Office
African Development Bank Group

Methodology

How the AVOI calculates each country's score

Scores and rankings. AVOI scores range from 0 to 1, where 0 designates countries with the most restrictive visa policies and 1 designates countries with the most welcoming policies.

The higher a country's index score, the more "visa-open" is the country and the higher it ranks.

Categories and weightings. To calculate each country's score, the AVOI assesses the country's visa policy vis-à-vis each of the other 53 countries in the continent and classifies each policy in one of three categories. The AVOI gives each category a weighting:

Category	Weighting
Visa before travel	0
Visa on arrival	0.8
Visa-free	1.0

Calculations. To compute the country's score, the AVOI follows four steps:

1. It counts the number of countries that fall in each visa category (visa before travel, visa on arrival, visa-free).
2. It converts that number into a percentage of all countries in Africa.
3. It weighs each percentage according to the weighting given to each category.
4. It adds the figures.

Formula: $AVOI \text{ score} = [(\% \text{ of African countries whose nationals must obtain a visa before travelling} \times 0) + (\% \text{ of African countries whose nationals may obtain a visa on arrival} \times 0.8) + (\% \text{ of African countries whose nationals are not required to obtain a visa} \times 1)]/100$

An Example

Country X requires the nationals of 13 countries to obtain a visa before travel. It allows the nationals of 30 countries to obtain a visa on arrival, and it allows the nationals of 10 other countries to enter its territory visa-free. Country X's score is calculated as follows:

$AVOI \text{ score for Country X} = [(\text{visa required before travel: } 13/53 \times 0) + (\text{visa upon arrival: } 30/53 \times 0.8) + (\text{no visa required: } 10/53 \times 1)]/100 = 0.642$

Terminology

Visa openness refers to the ease with which visitors are authorized to enter their country of destination.

A more **visa-open country** has a liberal or relaxed visa policy for visitors, meaning that visitors either do not need a visa to enter its territory or can obtain a visa upon arrival. A **visa-restrictive country** requires visitors to obtain a visa before they travel. Visitors might obtain the visa from an embassy, a consulate, or another source.

The **visa openness rate** refers to the percentage of other countries in Africa whose citizens are permitted to enter a country's territory without having obtained a visa before arriving. Earlier editions of the AVOI referred to this as the "liberal access rate."

Abbreviations

AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AfDB	African Development Bank Group
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union
AVOI	Africa Visa Openness Index
AU	African Union
CEMAC	Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa
CEN-SAD	Community of Sahel-Saharan States
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
EAC	East African Community
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
E-visa	Electronic visa
GDP	Gross domestic product
GTI	Guided Trade Initiative
IATA	International Air Transport Association
ICBT	Informal cross-border trade
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
PAPSS	Pan-African Payment & Settlement System
PFMP	Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons
REC	Regional economic community
SAATM	Single African Air Transport Market
SADC	Southern African Development Community
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
USD	United States dollars

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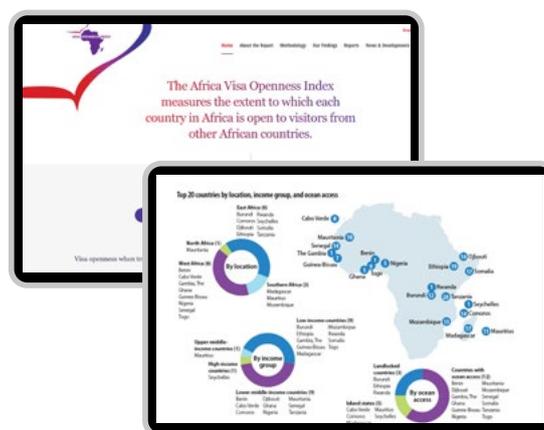
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www.visaopenness.org

THE AVOI'S ONLINE PLATFORM summarizes the visa policy of each country in Africa, shows the changes in each country's scores and rankings from year to year, and explains how the continent is performing on visa openness overall.



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Industrialise Africa Integrate Africa
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Foreword

African Development Bank Group

Over the past year, Africa has continued dismantling barriers to the movement of people across its borders. As this year's Africa Visa Openness Index (AVOI) shows, the continent's average visa openness score is higher than ever before.



It is particularly encouraging to note that pandemic-induced travel restrictions have now been fully abolished, and that visa openness today exceeds its pre-pandemic levels. Progress also continues on different facets of the AfCFTA, providing realistic prospects that the agreement's benefits will soon be felt across the continent. The goal is clearer than ever: a more integrated continent where goods, services, capital, and people can move freely across borders.

As we read this eighth edition of the Africa Visa Openness Report and reflect on progress since 2016, we take pride in noting that 35 countries have improved their score over the past eight years.

In addition, four countries have abolished all visa requirements for African travellers, up from three last year and one in 2016. Today, 42 countries offer visa-free travel to the citizens of at least five other countries, and more countries reciprocate visa-free travel privileges than at any previous time.

The regional context remains an important driver of visa openness, with regional economic communities continuing to lead the way on human mobility. Six of the eight regional economic communities recognized by the African Union improved their members' average visa openness over the past year. Some communities are showing fresh energy in implementing regional protocols that advance the free movement of persons.

That said, room for improvement remains. In 46% of country-to-country travel scenarios, Africans are still required to obtain visas at departure to travel to other African countries. Visa restrictions are especially pronounced in the northern and central Africa. Sustaining momentum on visa liberalization is vital to the realization of the 'Africa We Want.' Embracing liberal visa policies will not only facilitate seamless travel but also contribute to shared prosperity.

Marie-Laure Akin-Olugbade

Vice President, Regional Development, Integration and Business Delivery
African Development Bank Group

Continental integration advanced considerably over the past year as countries continued their work to implement the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the flagship project of Agenda 2063, the African Union’s framework for structural transformation. Through AfCFTA,



Agenda 2063 aims at increasing intra-African trade and producing more industrial, agricultural, and infrastructure development. The ultimate aspiration is a prosperous Africa grounded in inclusive growth and sustainable development.

The negotiations on AfCFTA are often complex. Protocols on trade in goods and services and on dispute settlement have been largely finalized. So, have disciplines on investment, competition policy, and intellectual property rights. Protocols on digital trade and on women and youth in trade are being negotiated. These are key components of AfCFTA’s transformative agenda.

In 2022, trading under AfCFTA began among a group of countries—some geographically remote—that until then had never traded on preferential terms. This pilot project is now being extended to trade in services.

Trade in goods cannot thrive without liberalizing trade in services, both of which rely on people moving across Africa’s borders unencumbered by excessive bureaucracy. Cooperation on intra-African labour migration and human mobility is inextricably interwoven with continental integration and is an inherent catalyst to the successful implementation of the AfCFTA. Extending the pilot project to trade in services will send an important signal that Africa is open for business.

Bolstering and fast-tracking policy initiatives that establish a simplified continental trade system that streamlines visa procedures, border procedures, and payment systems is paramount to achieving a socioeconomically integrated continent.

This year’s Africa Visa Openness Report reveals that Africa is continuing its upwards trajectory on freeing the movement of people on the continent. In 2023, visa openness achieved its highest score ever, surpassing levels last seen prior to the pandemic. Many changes were incremental relaxations of countries’ visa regimes. But 2023 also saw an increase in the number of champions that offer visa-free access to all African citizens.

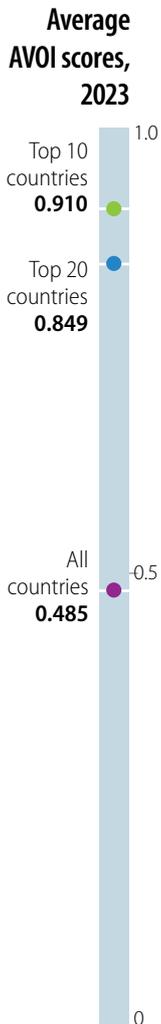
The African Union is proud of countries’ progress on freeing the movement of people. This report tells success stories from around the continent and recommends ways to realize even more progress in the years to come. We have never been closer to realizing AfCFTA’s potential to integrate the continent.

H.E. Ambassador Minata Samate Cessouma
Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development
African Union Commission



Visa Openness in Africa: 2023 Findings

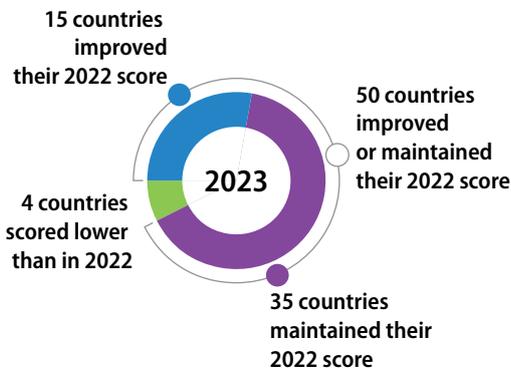
A new record



2023 is an important marker in the history of the Africa Visa Openness Index (AVOI). After years of fluctuation—most recently, because of the drastic brakes on mobility imposed to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic—in 2023 Africa’s countries recorded their highest average AVOI score measured to date. The continent’s visa openness score has now inched ahead of its previous high, recorded in mid-2020 for the previous 12 months. This suggests that the visa policy restrictions imposed by the continent during the pandemic years have been fully reversed, and that Africa is poised to open its borders further to the movement of persons.

Among the encouraging developments that took place in the last 12 months, 15 countries improved their score, up from 10 countries that had improved their score between 2021 and 2022. In addition, 35 countries maintained their level of visa openness, and only four countries recorded a decrease. Four countries had also logged a decrease on last year’s AVOI, but two of those countries (Senegal and the Central African Republic) are among those whose score increased this year.

Improvements since 2022



Visa-free entry

- 48 of 54 countries currently offer visa-free entry privileges to the citizens of at least one other country. Of the remaining six countries, four rank in the top 20 of this year’s AVOI because they offer a visa on arrival to the citizens of all other African countries.
- 33 of 54 countries offer visa-free travel to at least 10 other countries.
- Four countries now offer visa-free entry to the citizens of the rest of the continent, up from three countries last year.

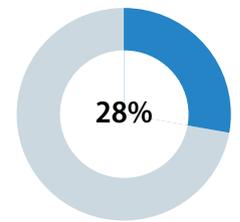
Visas on arrival

- 30 countries offer a visa on arrival to the citizens of at least one other African country.
- 12 countries offer a visa on arrival to the citizens of at least 35 other African countries. The same 12 countries only require a visa ahead of travel from the citizens of nine African countries.

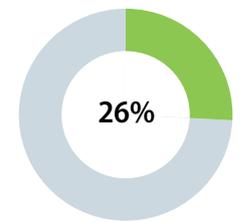
Visas ahead of travel and e-visas

- 30 countries still require the citizens of more than half the countries on the continent to obtain a visa ahead of travel.
- 44 countries require the citizens from at least one other country on the continent to obtain a visa ahead of travel.
- 24 countries ease travel by offering visitors an e-visa. This allows travellers to complete an important component of their travel arrangements more securely and conveniently before travelling.

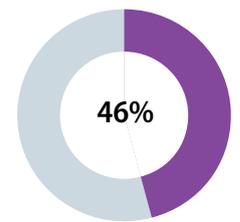
The ease of intra-Africa travel*



For 28% of intra-Africa travel, Africans do not need a visa
(up from 27% in 2022 and 20% in 2016)



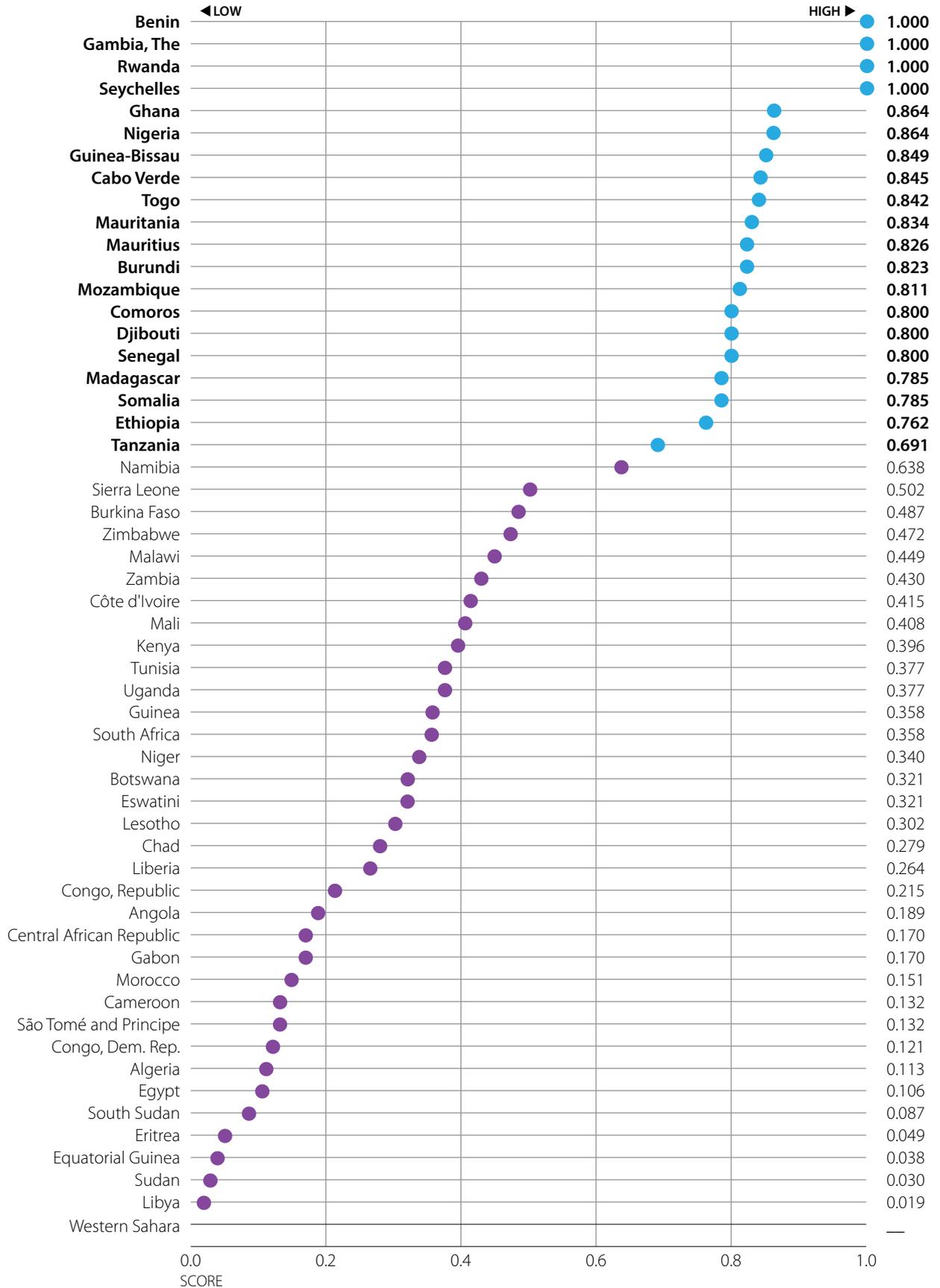
For 26% of intra-Africa travel, Africans can obtain a visa on arrival
(down from 27% in 2022, up from 25% in 2016)



For 46% of intra-Africa travel, Africans still need a visa before travelling
(down from 47% in 2022 and 55% in 2016)

* Intra-Africa travel refers to travel by African citizens between African countries.

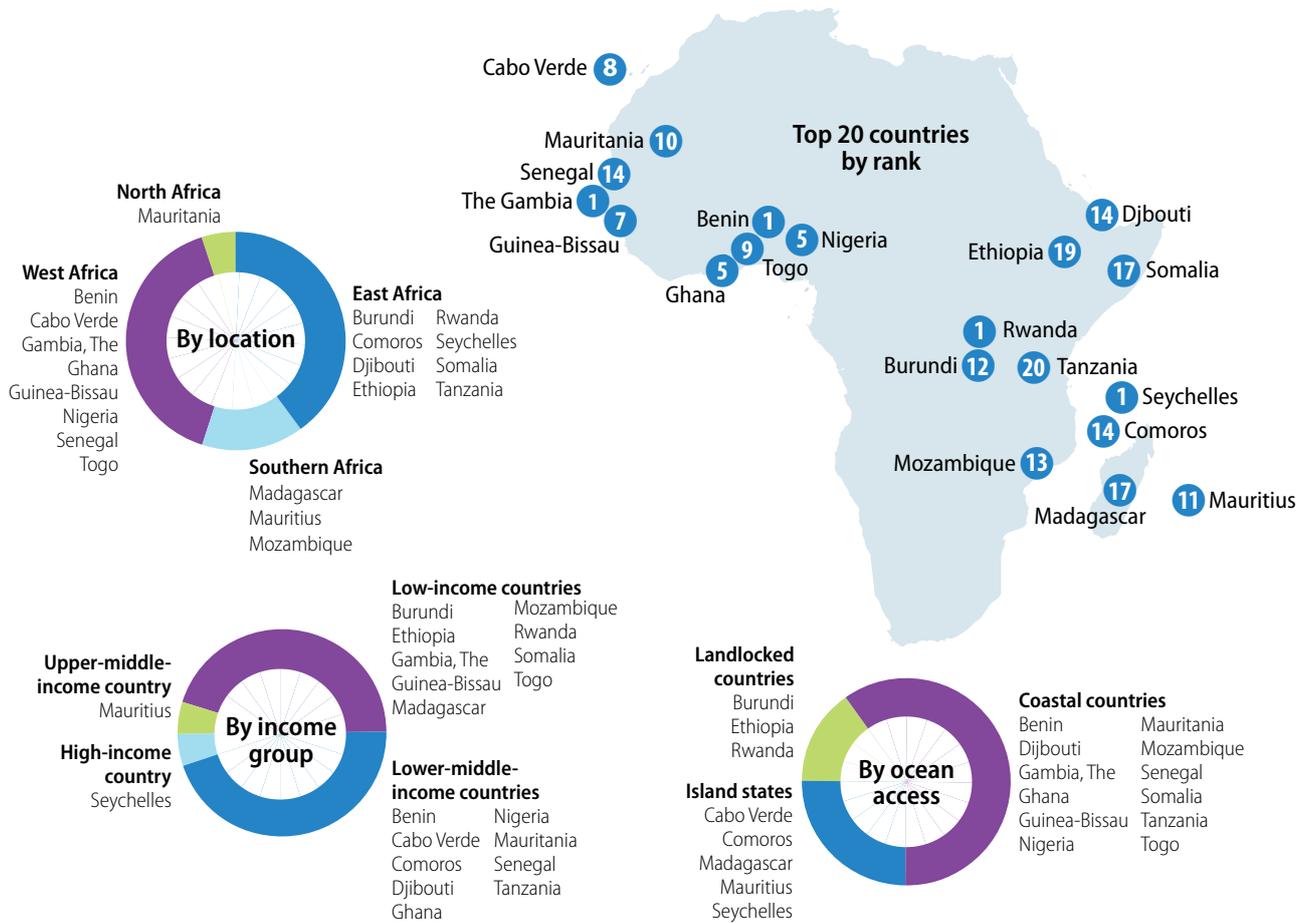
Visa openness in Africa 2023: Country scores and rankings



Scores range from 0–1 (highest)

Source: African Development Bank calculations based on IATA data, July–August 2023

Top 20 countries by rank, location, income group, and ocean access



Where are Africa's top 20 performers?

West African countries continue to lead the AVOI's rankings this year: seven of the continent's top 10 performers are from West Africa. West Africa and East Africa each contribute eight countries to the continent's top 20. The AVOI's four highest-ranking countries hail from West and East Africa in equal parts: Benin and The Gambia from West Africa, and Seychelles and Rwanda from East Africa. This is the first year that Rwanda is among the continent's top performers.

Southern Africa counts three top-20 countries: this number is unchanged from 2022 and is one less than in 2021. North Africa contributes one country to the top 20, as in all years except 2021, when it contributed two. No Central African country has yet ranked among the AVOI's top 20.

Do income levels influence rankings? Does geography?

Nine of the 22 African countries classified as lower-income countries figure among this year's top 20 performers. So do nine of the 24 African countries classified as lower-middle-income. In both cases, the proportion is impressive, and reflects low-income and lower-middle-income countries' generally more progressive visa policies towards the citizens of other African countries.

In contrast, upper-middle-income countries account for a much smaller proportion of visa-open countries. Only one of Africa's seven upper-middle-income countries figures among the top 20.

As for high-income countries, Seychelles is the only such country in Africa to rank among the AVOI's top performers. It does so by applying a visa-free policy towards all Africans.

Seychelles has been a top performer consistently since the AVOI's inception, initially holding the top position alone and then sharing it with Benin in 2018. The Gambia joined the two top performers in 2020, and in 2023, Rwanda brought the number to four.

As was the case last year, three of Africa's 16 landlocked countries are among the top 20 performers and seven landlocked countries are among the AVOI's top half. Most of Africa's landlocked countries share international borders with a number of neighbouring countries: this increases the impact of their visa-open approach for travellers within their region. Island states also tend to fare well on the AVOI: five of Africa's six island countries are among the top 20 performers.

The impact of the pandemic

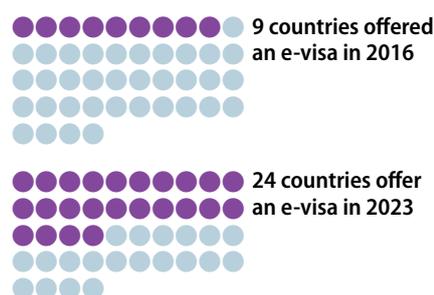
In 2022, after many countries lifted COVID-19-related travel restrictions, the AVOI observed a reversal in the previous year's deterioration of visa openness on the continent (and the world). 2022's gains in visa openness continued in 2023 as countries learning from the pandemic reassessed their policies on access to their territory.

In some cases, countries simply wished to respond to the pent-up demand for tourism-related travel, by making it easier for travellers to cross the border. More commonly, however, countries were motivated by a new appreciation of the importance of economic integration and the central part played by enhanced human mobility and the easing of cross-border travel. Continental integration initiatives such as the AfCFTA will only pay off if decisions to open borders to trade in goods and services are accompanied by liberal visa and immigration policies and efficient border facilities.

It is largely with this motivation that regional economic communities like IGAD and COMESA are taking steps to implement measures and policies to free the movement of people within their region. In some cases, the region had already developed such policies, and its member states had already endorsed them, but countries were not actually applying them on the ground.

The uptake of e-visas

As for e-visas, progress was slow this year. Indeed, following countries' initial enthusiasm for developing an e-visa system—both to ease the burden of travel for visitors and to relieve immigration authorities of administrative work—little progress has taken place over the past four years. Today, fewer than half of African countries offer any kind of e-visa, even though doing so would greatly simplify travel for those travellers who are still required to obtain a visa before travelling.

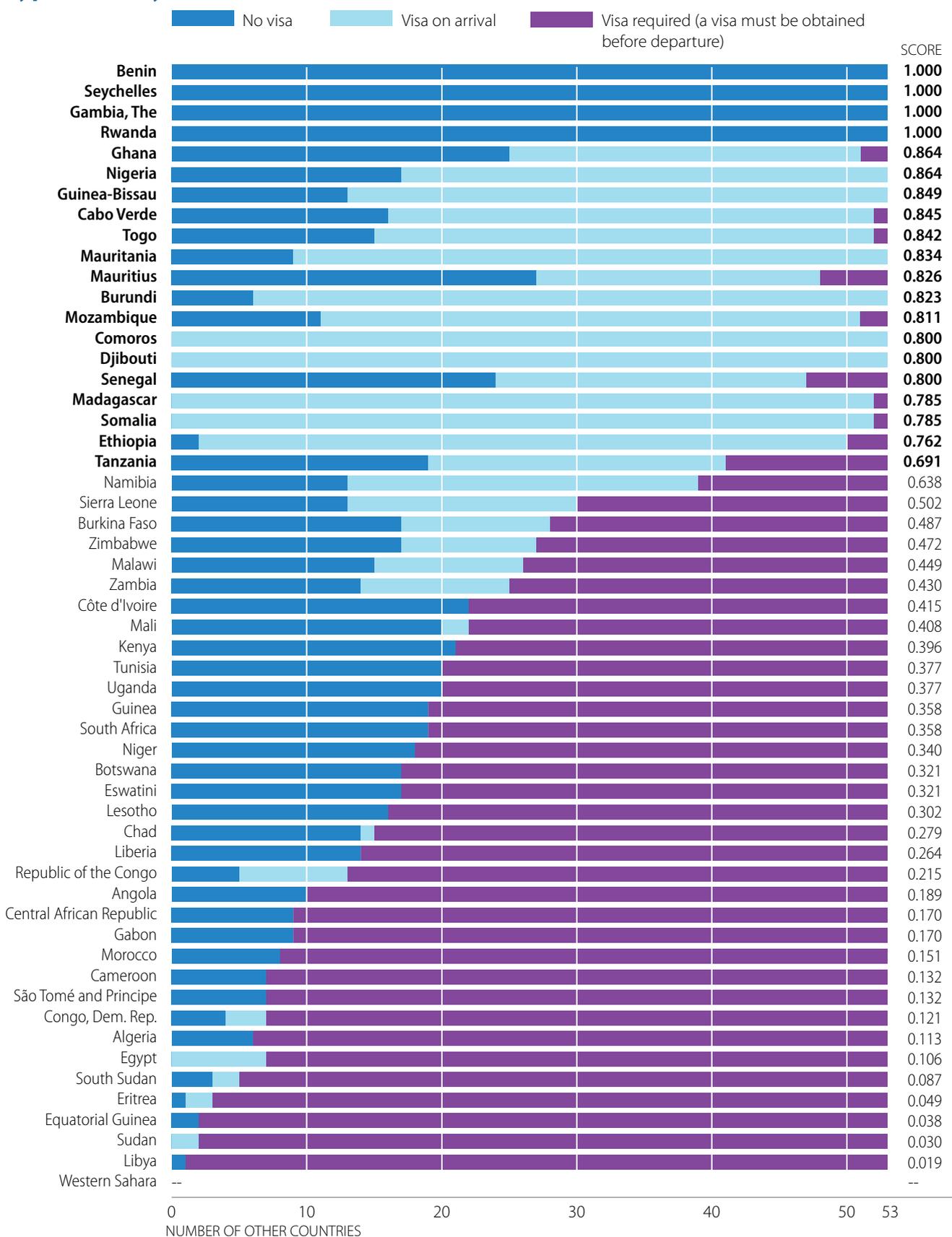


Developing reliable, accessible, and widespread e-visa systems is an important opportunity for progress and innovation. While it does not advance visa openness, it nevertheless eases the travel experience in situations where a visa is still required ahead of travel.

*"We should work towards irreversible integration of African people, an option that defies borders, brings people together, and enables solidarity and complementarity."*²

Denis Sassou-Nguesso
President of the Republic of Congo

Types of entry that African countries offer each other, in order of AVOI score



Scores range from 0–1 (highest)

Source: African Development Bank calculations based on IATA data, July–August 2023



Progress since 2016

Easing travel for Africans

Ever since 2016, when the AVOI was first published, the index has used three principal indicators to measure visa openness in Africa. This year's edition of the AVOI shows all three indicators having made a net improvement since they were first measured eight years ago.

+40%
since
2016

The **first indicator** is visa-free travel, the gold standard of visa openness. In 28% of country-to-country travel scenarios within Africa, African citizens do not need a visa to cross the border. This is a marked improvement since 2016, when visa-free entry was only present in 20% of scenarios. This indicator of visa openness—where no visa of any kind is required—has achieved its highest result ever.

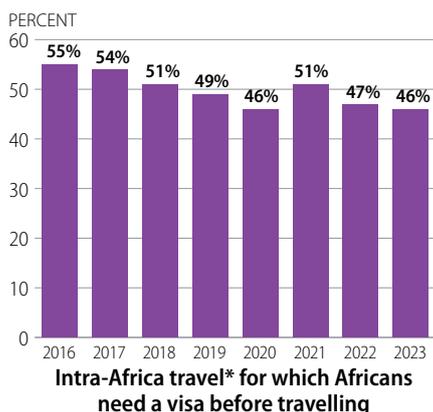
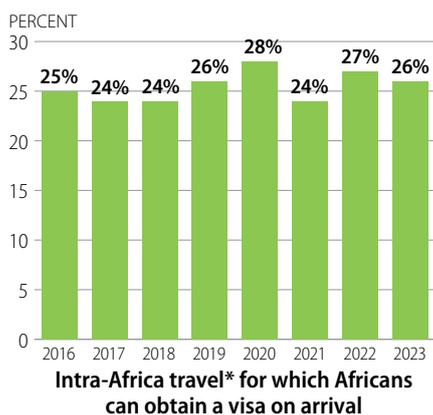
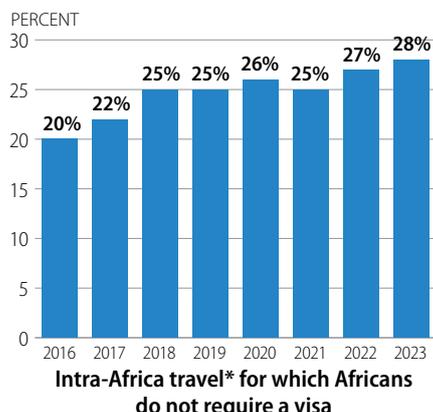
+4%
since
2016

The **second indicator** refers to visas on arrival. The incidence of visa-on-arrival regimes has changed little over the years. In 2016, African travellers could obtain a visa on arrival in 25% of travel scenarios. Today, the figure is 26%. But the apparent stagnancy of the result is misleading. In fact, some countries moved from requiring a visa to offering a visa on arrival: this caused the incidence of visa-on-arrival regimes to rise. Other countries moved from a visa-on-arrival regime to a visa-free regime: this caused the incidence to fall. In both cases, however, the evolution eased travel for Africans.

-16%
since
2016

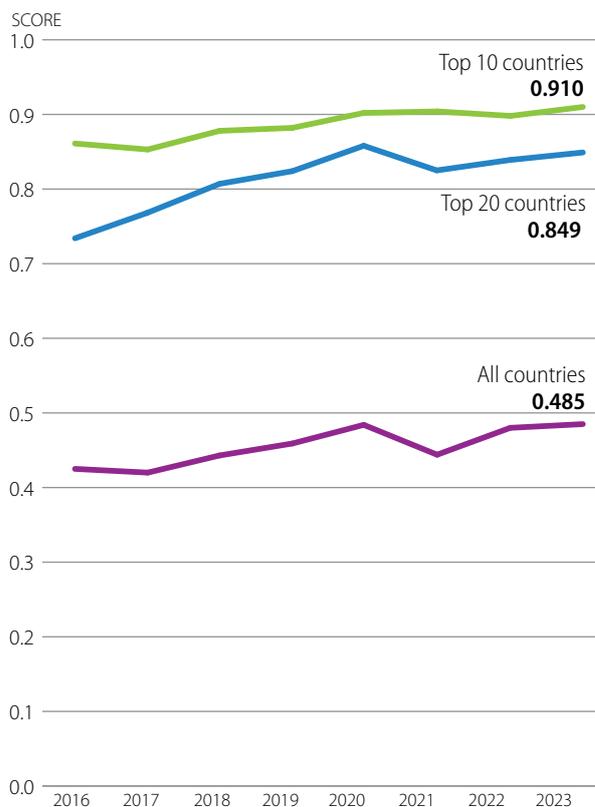
The **third indicator** is travel that requires Africans to obtain a visa before travelling. Like the metric for visa-free travel, the metric for visas before travel has improved greatly since 2016. It affects 46% of country-to-country travel scenarios today, down from 55% eight years ago. Furthermore, in many more scenarios today than in 2016, Africans have access to an e-visa. While an e-visa does not replace visa-free travel, it greatly reduces the burden of travel nonetheless.

Visa-free travel is growing more popular



* Intra-Africa travel refers to travel by African citizens between African countries.

Average AVOI scores, 2016–2023



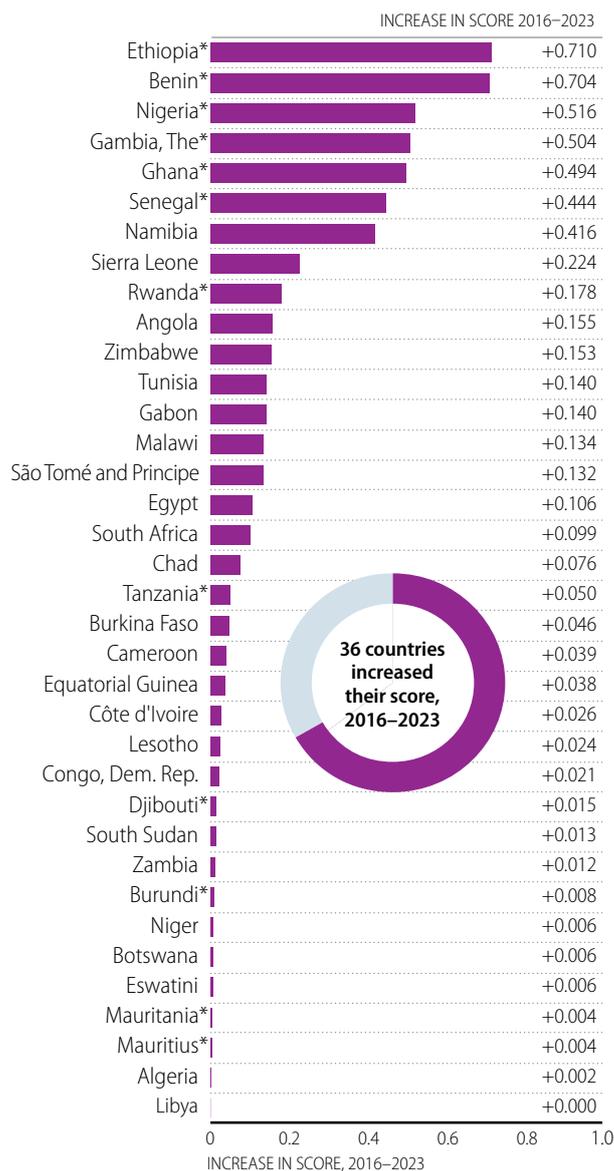
The consequence of all three indicators having improved to this extent is that in 2023, Africa’s 54 countries averaged their highest AVOI score to date. The average of the continent’s top 10 performers also recorded a new high.

In all, 15 countries improved their score since last year: three of them figure in the top 10, another three are among the top 20, four countries are in the middle tranche of performers, and five countries are among this year’s bottom 15 performers. This distribution is encouraging: it shows that visa openness has improved at all levels of performance.

Which countries climbed the most?

Since the AVOI’s first edition, 36 countries have improved their score. Furthermore, the number of countries with an e-visa regime has more than doubled (it now numbers 24). Africa’s visa policies vis-à-vis the citizens of the continent are more liberal today than ever before.

Countries that increased their AVOI score, 2016–2023



*designates a 2023 top 20 country

Spotlight on Rwanda



AVOI
RANKING
1/54

AVOI
SCORE
1.00

Since the AVOI was first published in 2016, Rwanda has always ranked among the index's top performers. This year, the country records the continent's largest increase in score, resulting in a jump from fifth place to joint first. As one of Africa's top four performers, Rwanda ranks alongside Benin, Seychelles, and The Gambia, all three of which obtained a perfect score in 2022 and repeat the feat in 2023.

Rwanda has embraced a liberal visa regime for years. In 2016, the country allowed the citizens of nearly 90% of African countries to obtain a visa on arrival; the citizens of the remaining 10% of countries could enter visa-free. By 2018, Rwanda had slightly increased the number of African states for whose citizens visa-free entry was allowed. And in March 2020, Rwanda announced that it would waive visa-on-arrival fees for citizens of African Union member states visiting for 30 days or less.

In 2023, Rwanda liberalized further by extending visa-free access to the citizens of all African Union member states. This has eased the burden of travel for the citizens of 35 African countries who had hitherto

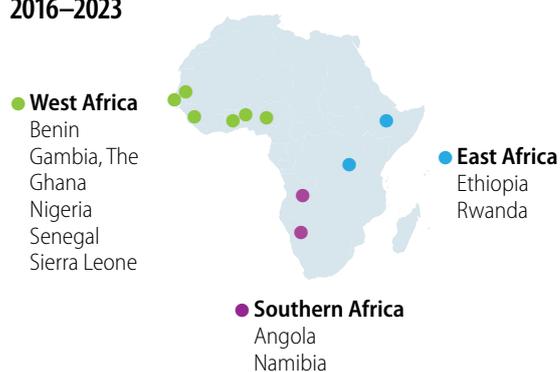
been required to obtain a visa on arrival. It has also given effect to the country's commitment to the African Union's Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment: Rwanda is one of only four countries that have signed and ratified it.

A landlocked country nestled between Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, and Uganda, Rwanda is an important destination for business and social exchanges. It is also a transit country for trade and people in a populous region. Tourism, especially nature-based tourism, is an important component of the country's economy. Before the pandemic, tourism was Rwanda's largest export and recorded double-digit growth each year. The sector is still lagging pre-pandemic levels, but is showing strong recovery: in the first eight months of 2022, tourism arrivals exceeded 650,000 visitors.³

Rwanda is an integral part of regional initiatives such as the EAC customs union and COMESA. It actively embraces initiatives for regional and continental integration.

Six of the 10 countries that progressed the most since 2016 are in West Africa. Another two countries are in East Africa, and two countries are in Southern Africa. The largest nominal increase in AVOI score since 2016 is recorded by Ethiopia, which ranks 19th of 54 countries (down from 17th in 2022). Ethiopia's score today is lower than in 2019–2020.

10 countries whose score improved the most, 2016–2023



The second-largest nominal increase since 2016 is recorded by Benin. Benin is one of the most visa-open countries in Africa: it has been one of the top rankers since 2018.

Following Ethiopia and Benin as countries whose score has risen the most are Ghana, Nigeria, and The Gambia. All three countries have significantly opened their visa regime since 2016, albeit mostly from a low base. It is notable that all three countries are members of ECOWAS, the regional economic community with the highest regional average and the most visa-free reciprocity among member states. Fellow ECOWAS members Senegal and Sierra Leone are two more countries whose AVOI score has improved markedly since 2016.

Of the five countries whose score rose the most since 2016, The Gambia has ranked first (with others) since the AVOI's 2020 edition. Ghana and Nigeria share fifth place. Ghana requires a visa ahead of travel from the citizens of only two countries, and applies a visa-free policy to half of the remaining countries and a visa-on-arrival policy to the other half. Nigeria's rise in the ranks follows Nigeria dropping its requirement that African citizens obtain a visa before arrival. Instead, Nigeria grants the citizens of 17 countries visa-free entry and offers the citizens of 36 countries a visa on arrival.

Rwanda, one of two East African countries at the top of the AVOI, is the ninth-most-improved country since 2016. Rwanda recently adopted a visa-free regime, causing it to jump from fifth position in 2022 to joint first position in 2023.

*"I believe we cannot say we have borderless trade when we put up barriers for people to travel. And I know the countries are making a lot of progress."*⁴

Dr. Akinwumi A. Adesina

President, African Development Bank Group

Southern African countries also figure among those countries whose score has changed the most since 2016. Angola and Namibia are among the 10 countries that improved the most, Angola from a very low base. Malawi, São Tomé and Príncipe, South Africa, and Zimbabwe also made significant strides, although only Malawi and Zimbabwe rank among the top half of AVOI performers overall.

In North Africa, Egypt and Tunisia are among the 20 countries whose score has risen the most since 2016. Both rank among the lower half of performers on the AVOI overall.

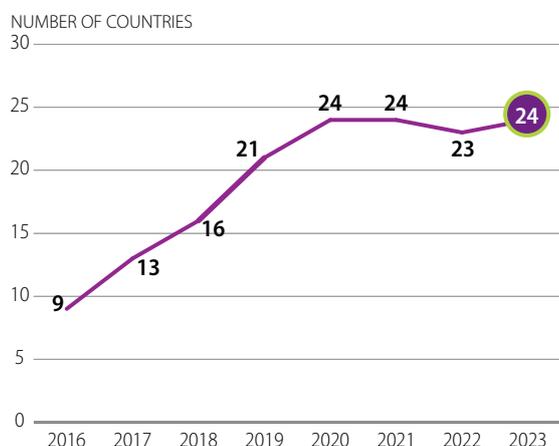
E-visas: What are they and how do they work?

A visa is an authorization for the holder to travel to the issuing country, where local immigration authorities decide whether to allow the traveller to enter. A visa generally takes the form of a stamp in the traveller's passport; it is often issued in a diplomatic representation office outside the country of destination, and the traveller must present it to local immigration authorities upon entering the country, at which point the authorities retain the right to refuse the traveller entry.

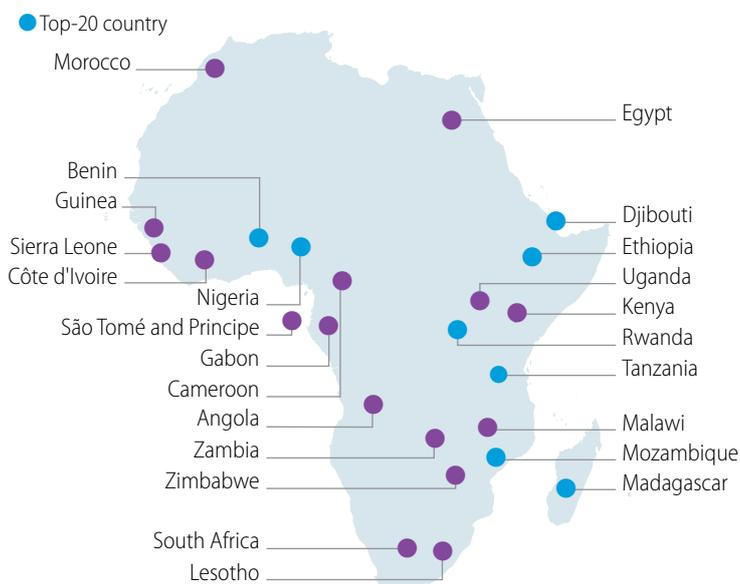
There are different classes of visa (transit visas, tourist visas, work visas, etc.) and countries use different procedures to issue them. In the past, travellers were almost always required to obtain a visa before travelling to their country of destination. Nowadays, e-visas are reducing the administrative burden associated with travelling abroad. They are making it easier for travellers to apply for and obtain a visa before leaving home, and are simplifying the visa-issuing process for immigration authorities in the traveller's destination country.

An e-visa is a paperless version of a traditional visa for which a traveller can apply from the comfort of their home, office, or other location, before travelling. To apply for an e-visa, the traveller uses a dedicated online portal, where they fill out an application form digitally and upload electronic copies of their supporting documents, such as their passport, proof of funds, and proof of insurance coverage, as needed.

The growing use of e-visas, 2016–2023



Of the 24 countries that offer e-visas in 2023, 8 are top-20 countries



The number of African countries to have adopted an e-visa system more than doubled between 2016 and 2019, when it rose from 9 to 21 countries. The number rose again in 2020, to 24 countries, and has since remained unchanged except in 2022, when it fell to 23 countries.

Of the 20 countries that rank the highest on the 2023 AVOI, eight have adopted an e-visa system. Another four have dispensed African travellers from visa requirements altogether.

Does the AVOI measure e-visas?

At present, African countries' deployment of an e-visa system does not impact countries' ranking on the AVOI. This is because the AVOI's formula counts e-visas as visas required ahead of travel. In future editions of the AVOI, this may change. To be representative, the AVOI's formula would have to account for the fact that some countries' e-visa systems are only open to applicants (travellers) from certain countries. The formula would also have to consider how to weigh e-visa platforms that suffer from frequent outages or have poor security standards.

Benefits of the e-visa

■ Convenience

Travellers apply for an e-visa online from wherever they are: they do not need to apply in person. Because travellers do not hand their passport over to a visa office or agency, they can keep travelling while their visa application is being processed.

■ Reduced risk

The traveller no longer needs to relinquish their passport or other travel documents while their visa application is being processed. This reduces the likelihood of delays and the risk of their documents getting lost.

■ Less cost

Applying for a visa online dispenses the traveller from having to send or deliver their passport to their destination country's diplomatic offices. This eliminates shipping and travel costs. It also means that travellers do not need to take unpaid leave to deliver their passport in person or pay someone to deliver it on their behalf.

■ Efficiency

For the issuing country, an e-visa system reduces the need to dedicate consular resources to visa-processing tasks (paperwork, filing, scheduling appointments, interviewing applicants, etc.). Some countries' e-visa systems are fully automated.

■ Better data capture

E-visas allow the issuing country to capture travellers' data electronically, store it safely, and process it centrally. With more and better data, a country can better analyze traveller-related risks and see trends in visitor profiles.

■ More visitors

E-visas can speed turnaround times, encouraging business trips and leisure travel.

A word of caution

While e-visa systems can ease the travel process, they are not a panacea for the visa-related burden faced by many African travellers. Among other things, the time saved by an e-visa depends on access to a computer with a stable internet connection, and the degree to which the visa application platform is mobile-friendly. To truly ease travel, e-visa systems must be fully compatible with prevailing web browsers and platforms, offer secure connections, be reliable, and provide high uptime.

As for governments, e-visa systems require public investments in IT infrastructure that is secure and reliable. They also require efficient administrative processes for managing and streamlining the information that travellers submit digitally. Ideally, e-visa issuing systems are automated enough to shorten turnaround times.

That said, a smooth e-visa system offers numerous benefits both to prospective travellers and to the country of destination. The best way of easing travel and travel-related administration, however, remains the abolition of visas altogether: that is, visa-free entry.

The importance of data security

To instill trust, e-visa systems must treat data carefully. Prospective travellers want to be assured that the data they submit—everything from biometric data to medical and bank records—is secure. Issuing countries have their own concerns: they need an e-visa system that detects forged documents, encrypts data securely, and is run on IT platforms that meet modern standards of security and uptime redundancy.

Spotlight on COMESA



The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) comprises 21 member states that together cover almost two-thirds of the African continent. Founded in 1994, COMESA has its roots in a preferential trade area established in 1981. Although cooperation on peace and security is one of COMESA's objectives, member states' overriding focus is economic and trade integration among COMESA members.

Two legal instruments are designed to enhance the free movement of people in COMESA. Neither has been fully implemented. The first instrument is the Protocol on the Gradual Relaxation and Eventual Elimination of Visa Requirements. COMESA adopted it in 1984, inter alia to give the citizens of member states visa-free access to each other's territory for 90 days and/or a visa on arrival. Only certain member states are implementing some portion of this protocol. The protocol recognizes member states' right to implement bilateral arrangements that are more favourable to free movement than the protocol.

Adopted in 2001, the second instrument is the COMESA Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Labour, Services, the Right of Establishment and Residence. This protocol removes restrictions on the movement of persons, workers, and services and gives people the right to establish residence in COMESA member states. This protocol was designed to be implemented in stages, but as with the protocol adopted in 1984, COMESA members have not ratified it widely.

On visa openness, COMESA scores behind ECOWAS, SADC, and IGAD on the 2023 AVOI. COMESA scores second-lowest on visa-free reciprocity, an indication that there is currently less harmonization of visa-free travel within the region.

Recently, new energy and commitment to COMESA's protocols on free movement have emerged. The Report on the State of Integration, prepared for COMESA's 22nd Summit of Heads of State in June 2023, noted that "restrictions on movement of persons across the region hinders intra-regional trade in goods and services." In the report, COMESA promises to remedy hindrances to human mobility and escalate efforts to free the movement of persons, labour, and services.

In August 2023, COMESA ministers responsible for immigration and labour met and agreed on a revised strategy for implementing the region's protocols and building capacity in this regard. This encouraging development was preceded by several other initiatives over the previous year, such as the establishment of task forces on implementing COMESA's protocols on visa openness and free movement. These developments, amplified by countries' initiatives to ease access to their territory, suggest that COMESA's score on the AVOI may improve in future.



The African Continental Free Trade Area



54

As of October 2023,
54 AU member states had signed
the AfCFTA agreement.

47

The AfCFTA had 47 state parties
as of October 2023.

1

The AfCFTA aims to create
a single African market...

3.4

...valued at USD 3.4+ trillion...

450

...and expected to boost income
by USD 450 billion by 2035.

1.3

The AfCFTA covers
1.3+ billion people...

30

...and could lift 30 million people
out of extreme poverty.

This year's priority: Acceleration

The African Union's theme for 2023 is "Year of AfCFTA: Acceleration of AfCFTA Implementation." And with good reason. A flagship project of the AU, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers an unprecedented opportunity to realize a more integrated and prosperous continent as envisioned in the AU's Agenda 2063, Africa's framework for structural transformation.

The AfCFTA is the AU's principal mechanism for the inclusive and sustainable development of industry, infrastructure, and agriculture on the continent and more intra-African trade. It sits alongside five other initiatives related to integration and development:

- The Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment
- The Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa
- The Accelerated Industrial Development for Africa initiative
- The Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Program
- The Single African Air Transport Market

The AfCFTA has its origins in a decision adopted by AU Heads of State in 2012 to establish a continental free trade area that would culminate in a single market for goods and services in which businesspeople and investments may move freely across borders. Negotiations began in 2015 and the AfCFTA Agreement was formally launched three years later, but the Agreement only entered into force nominally on 30 May 2019, when the 22nd instrument of ratification was deposited. More ratifications followed, and over the past year, three more AU member states deposited their instruments of ratification with the AU Secretariat, bringing the total to 47.

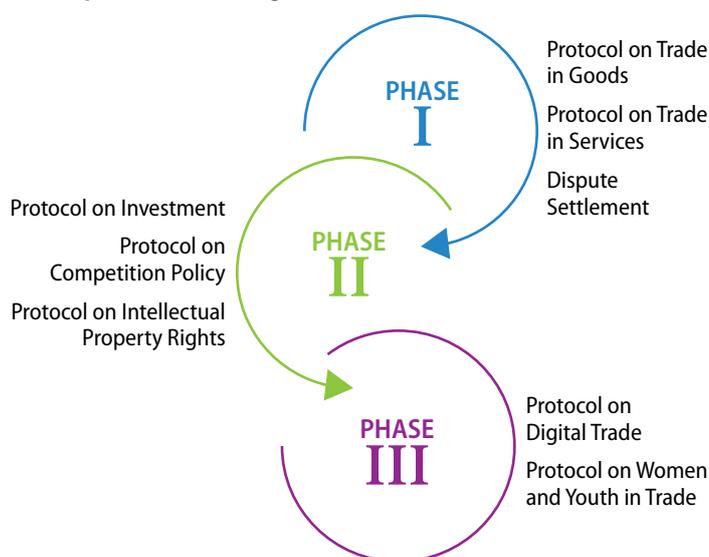
Although the AfCFTA entered into force in 2019, its signatories are still negotiating aspects of tariff concessions, rules of origin, and other issues. They acknowledge that preferential trade can only begin in earnest once these matters have been agreed. It is at that point that the AfCFTA will eliminate 97% of tariffs on intra-Africa trade and clear the way for the share of African exports traded within the region to rise beyond its current level, the lowest in the world.⁵

Once the negotiations are complete and the Agreement is fully implemented, the AfCFTA will be the largest free trade agreement in the world, a modern system whose instruments exist alongside pre-existing regional customs unions and trade areas. It will count more member states, cover a larger geographic area, and concern more people than any other trade agreement.

Three phases of implementation

Trade in goods was one of the AfCFTA's first areas of negotiation: it was considered part of Phase I, alongside trade in services and dispute settlement mechanisms. Protocols on these areas have been agreed, but negotiations continue on the annexes and such matters as rules of origin and schedules of tariff concessions. The negotiations on customs and border management, trade facilitation, and transit arrangements are complete.

The scope of the AfCFTA Agreement



Protocols on investment, competition, and intellectual property rights fall under Phase II of the negotiations and have been agreed as well. Some of these matters link to issues covered in Phase I: foreign direct investment, for example, often links closely to trade in services.

A protocol on digital trade and a protocol on women and youth in trade are being addressed now, as part of Phase III. These two protocols will cover e-commerce, gender-specific barriers to trade, and trade impediments that affect the continent's youth. Negotiations on these protocols are expected to conclude in 2023.

None of these phases and issues exist in silos. To a large extent, they all link to, depend on, and are enabled by the movement of persons across the continent's borders.

Trade in services—intertwined with the movement of persons

Trade in services accounts for a substantial share of a country's GDP and is a key driver of economic growth and job creation. Trade in services is deeply enmeshed with trade in goods and trade facilitation; establishment of a commercial presence (which falls under the Mode 3 category of services—see box below) is in fact foreign direct investment.

Truck drivers, for example, are service providers who act as essential logistical agents for trade in goods but whose efficiency depends on efficient border-crossing systems (customs and immigration), the mutual recognition of standards and certifications (axle weight limits, professional driving permits, and so on), the quality of roads, and the ease with which they can travel.

Tackling negotiations on trade in services

Phase I of the AfCFTA negotiations concerns trade in goods and services and dispute settlement. The AfCFTA models its negotiations of trade in services on the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services, which categorizes trade in services in four modes. Modes 2, 3, and 4 depend on the ability of persons to move across borders, either as consumers or as providers of a service.

Mode 1: The cross-border supply of a service from the territory of one country to the territory of another country (e.g., digitally transmitted architectural drawings, consultancy reports sent by email)

Mode 2: Consumption abroad: situations where the citizen of one country moves into the territory of another country to consume a service there (e.g., tourists or patients who travel abroad for medical care)

Mode 3: The establishment of a commercial presence (such as a branch or subsidiary) by the service supplier of one country in the territory of another country

Mode 4: The provision of a service through the temporary presence of the citizens of one country in the territory of another country (e.g., teachers or engineers working abroad)

“As we implement programs to facilitate the movement of persons across our borders for development, let’s make sure that we carry our people with us. That is the only way we shall be able to address negative perceptions of migration.”⁶

Cornelius Mweetwa

Provincial Minister for Southern Province, Zambia

In sectors other than transport, too, much of the trade in services—and the economic benefits of integration—depends on people being able to move freely across borders: whether to consume or supply a service abroad, or to establish a commercial presence in another country.

Article 4 of the AfCFTA Agreement commits the Agreement’s signatories to progressively liberalize trade in services. Trade in services has its own protocol (alongside the Trade in Goods Protocol under the AfCTFA) and several annexes. Negotiations on the Protocol on Trade in Services are underway and aim to conclude by the end of 2023. For now, commitments are being scheduled in five service sectors: financial services, transportation, business services, communication, and tourism. Future rounds of negotiations will cover other sectors, such as education, construction, and distribution.

The AfCFTA’s agenda on trade in services is an opportunity to accelerate progress in this area and compensate for regional economic communities’ (RECs’) relatively little headway. Even as negotiations continue, however, the AfCFTA does not prevent countries from negotiating reciprocal commitments in sectors or sub-sectors other than those prioritized in the current negotiations.

Informal cross-border trade and the movement of persons

In many border regions, informal cross-border trade (ICBT) is the lifeblood of communities, creating jobs and contributing to food security. Goods traded informally can be locally produced, like agricultural commodities or manufactured products, or produced on world markets and redistributed through informal but well-organized networks.

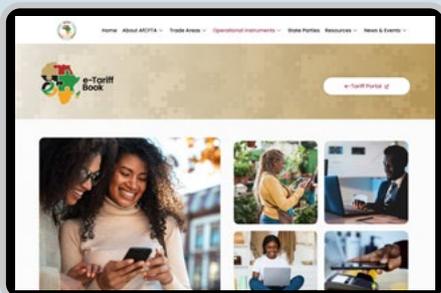
By some estimates, ICBT represents between 30% and 72% of all trade between neighbouring African countries, and between 7% and 16% of intra-Africa trade overall.⁷ In the absence of a formal definition of ICBT, common differentiators include whether transactions are formally captured by customs authorities (possibly with duties applied) and whether traders are registered.

ICBT has an important gender dimension. Studies show that in some regions, women account for over 70% of small-scale cross-border traders.⁸

Within some RECs, countries are simplifying trade regimes not only to regularize a portion of ICBT, but also to ease the burden on informal traders. They are waiving duties on consignments below a certain threshold or revamping administrative overheads to only apply to formal trade.

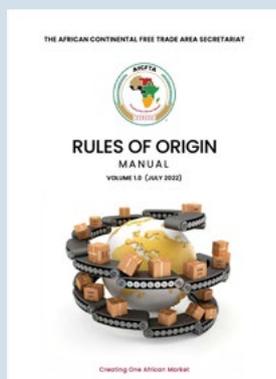
To have the most impact, though, trade facilitation measures require an open approach to people crossing borders. Easing border-crossing procedures by doing away with the need for a visa, or recognizing other forms of personal identification, can play a critical role.

Tools to help operationalize the AfCFTA



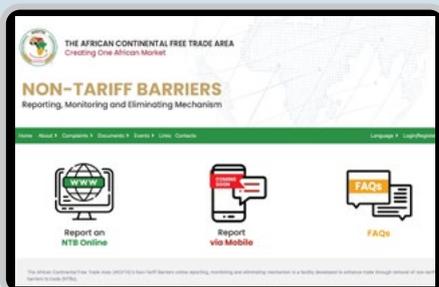
The AfCFTA e-Tariff Book

Transparency and access to information are key tenets of the AfCFTA. One of the AfCFTA's trade facilitation measures is au-afcfta.org/etariff, a digital platform that informs users of countries' tariffs and the classification of commodities. The platform presents the tariff schedules and tariff rates for all the AfCFTA's state parties and is based on the six-digit harmonized system nomenclature administered by the World Customs Organization.



The AfCFTA Rules of Origin Manual

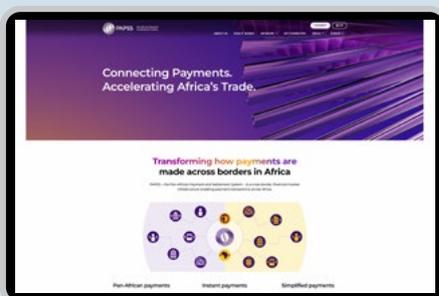
Goods traded under the AfCFTA on a preferential basis must originate in an AfCFTA state and conform to the AfCFTA's rules of origin. These are technical conditions that ensure that only goods made in countries that have ratified the AfCFTA Agreement benefit from the AfCFTA's preferential trading conditions. The [AfCFTA Rules of Origin Manual](#) sets out the rules of origin, clarifies their provisions, and helps users interpret them. The manual forms an integral part of the AfCFTA's trade provisions and helps businesses take advantage of opportunities offered under the AfCFTA.



The AfCFTA's online mechanism for reporting non-tariff barriers

Non-tariff barriers raise transaction costs significantly and are one of the reasons that intra-regional trade is lower in Africa than in many regions of the world. Using World Bank data, *tralac* calculates that non-tariff trade-related costs on goods traded between Africa's RECs often exceed 300% of the price of the goods (the ad valorem equivalent).⁹ By some estimates, reducing non-tariff barriers and facilitating trade—for example, by streamlining border procedures—could double intra-African trade.¹⁰

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) runs a dedicated portal that encourages the private sector to report non-tariff barriers online or by SMS so that governments can dismantle these barriers within a reasonable timeline. The portal also tracks the resolution process. The portal can be accessed at www.tradebarriers.africa.



Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS)

Developed by the African Export-Import Bank in collaboration with the AU and the AfCFTA Secretariat, PAPSS is a system that Africans can use to make cross-border payments in local currency. By facilitating foreign exchange transactions, PAPSS is expected to reduce the cost of trade across Africa's borders. It is available at papss.com.

Update on the Guided Trade Initiative

Given the non-linear progress on the negotiation and adoption of various components of the AfCFTA, in July 2022 the AfCFTA's Council of Ministers invited countries that had submitted their tariff schedules to begin trading under the AfCFTA. Not only did this create an opportunity for countries that had not previously traded with one another on a preferential basis to conduct commercially meaningful trade for

the first time, it also sent a message to countries that had not yet concluded their tariff negotiations: African economic operators are ready to trade under the AfCFTA, and the process won't wait.



The AfCFTA Guided Trade Initiative

Known as the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI), the trading program applies

to eight countries: Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Tunisia. The GTI makes more than 96 products eligible for trade among these countries, with additional products to be added in 2023. To qualify for trading under the GTI, products must be covered by a tariff offer (concession), and criteria for rules of origin have to have been agreed. Eligible products include ceramic tiles, batteries, horticulture products, avocados, flowers, pharmaceuticals, palm oil, tea, and rubber.

An initiative similar to the GTI is now planned for trade in services in the AfCFTA's five priority service sectors: financial services, transportation, business services, communication, and tourism. The modalities of the new trading program are not yet final, but like the GTI for trade in goods, the program will be an interim arrangement that falls away once the Protocol on Trade in Services and its annexes are implemented.

Like the GTI, the success of this program hinges, at least in part, on the free movement of persons between countries.

Progress on rules of origin

For a free trade agreement to function, the parties must agree on several key provisions. One provision concerns tariff offers: the concessions that each country applies to the goods that another country seeks to export to it. Another provision concerns rules of origin: the criteria that determine the economic nationality of a good. Designed to ensure that only goods produced by the parties to a free trade agreement benefit from preferential access under the agreement, rules of origin set out the conditions that products must meet if they are to be considered as having originated in the exporting country. Generally, rules of origin state that the product's inputs must have been wholly obtained in the originating country or—if the product contains imported materials—have been substantially transformed there.

As mentioned in last year's AVOI report, the rules of origin agreed under the AfCFTA apply to preferential trade between countries not already part of a REC that already operates a preferential trade regime.

Finding the right balance

The design of rules of origin is time-consuming and highly technical. It is also consequential: a region's industries can thrive and new economic activity incentivized, depending on how the rules are designed. Working with countries to agree on a common standard for what constitutes a product "made in Africa" is all the more challenging when countries have different resources, are economically diverse, or are at different stages of development.

Insofar as producers are concerned, restrictive rules of origin impose a higher burden in that they require a larger share of a good's components to originate on the soil of parties to the preferential trade area. Liberal rules give producers more flexibility: they allow a larger share of inputs to be sourced from third parties—parties located outside the preferential trade area.

A delicate balance is required, one that encourages local industrial activity and incentivizes the development of regional value chains, while recognizing that trade under the AfCFTA will flounder if the region does not produce enough of the inputs, at a competitive price, that African producers need for their exports to qualify for trading under AfCFTA's preferential terms.

Progress over the last year

Most of the AfCFTA's rules of origin have now been agreed; the only outstanding rules are in automotive manufacturing and the textiles and clothing sector. These sectors have long been sticking points, not least because countries around the continent are involved in their production chains and have a vested interest in how their rules of origin are designed. It is generally recognized that the rules of origin for these sectors could impact Africa's industrial development significantly.

The provisions for several tariff lines and product categories in these sectors have now been agreed in principle, and the final negotiations are being conducted through the AfCFTA Council of Ministers responsible for trade. The council has dedicated task teams to advance the negotiations.

Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons in Africa

The Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment¹¹ has been signed by 32 African countries: 30 when the protocol was launched in March 2018 alongside the AfCFTA, and two later. By freeing the movement of Africans throughout Africa, the protocol will facilitate intra-African trade and investment, create and promote employment opportunities, make labour more mobile, and raise living standards.

The protocol will be implemented in three phases. In the first phase, it will liberalize the right of entry; in the second, the right of residence; and in the third, the right of establishment.

Despite a promising beginning, only four countries have ratified the protocol to date: Mali (ranked 28th on the AVOI), Niger (ranked 34th), Rwanda (ranked joint first), and São Tomé and Príncipe (ranked 45th). Ratification does not correlate with visa openness: Rwanda offers visa-free entry to citizens from all African countries, while São Tomé and Príncipe still requires the citizens of 46 countries to obtain a visa ahead of travel.

Most of the highest-ranked countries on the AVOI have not signed the protocol. The number of ratifications has not changed in recent years and is well below the threshold of 15 countries needed for the protocol to enter into force.

The slow pace of ratification is likely rooted in concerns about national security, poor or insufficient border management, and perceptions of a loss of control over national migration policy. It might also stem from a misunderstanding of countries' obligations and the timing of the protocol's implementation.¹² Domestic political and social narratives also play a role, especially where high unemployment feeds concerns about jobs for nationals, where security issues are prominent, or where civil registry systems and possibilities to exchange information between countries are considered inadequate.

Parallel tracks

The freedom of movement in Africa sometimes progresses more quickly at the regional level than on the continental level. In some RECs, high levels of reciprocal visa-free travel have caused countries to climb the ranks of the AVOI. ECOWAS and EAC operate regional movement protocols, and COMESA is reviving a protocol that was never fully adopted and implemented. SADC has facilitated the movement of people as well, less by means of a regional agreement than by bilateral agreements that leave plenty of room for national sovereignty.

At the country level, too, many countries that have not yet ratified the protocol have made significant strides towards visa openness. Some have introduced innovative ways to ease travel and entry.

Whatever the channel, for free trade in Africa to become a reality, Africans need to be freer to move across the continent. Cross-border investment, the development of regional value chains, and broad-based economic integration all depend on it. Addressing legitimate concerns about the mechanics of the protocol, clarifying the protocol's roadmap for implementation, and helping countries exchange information more transparently would move free movement forward.

Creating an enabling environment for African value chains

The value and volume of intra-African trade has long lagged the value and volume of trade between Africa and other regions of the world. The nature of trade is different, too. With partners outside the continent, Africa mostly imports finished goods and exports primary goods and extractive materials. This leaves the most lucrative activities in the value chain—the beneficiation of raw materials—profiting parties outside Africa.

The AfCFTA is helping create an alternative to this model. Rules of origin aim to incentivize the use of African inputs in manufacturing and processing. Trade facilitation measures will help streamline intra-African customs. And countries that had long imposed tariffs on each other's goods are agreeing to remove tariffs on most trade. All of this will encourage economic diversification and intra-African trade.

Part of the AfCFTA's strategy is to drive the development of regional value chains. More value chains within Africa would create jobs, make production more efficient, raise living standards, and increase food security. Countries would have more reasons to specialize in their areas of comparative advantage, developing greater expertise in downstream beneficiation activities that add more value than extraction and raw production.

These developments can thrive in a fertile environment where the flow of goods and services across borders takes place efficiently and without undue barriers, and where people and skills can move freely.

“Trade is ongoing in goods, provision of services, investment, tangibles and intangibles. However, for goods, services, and investment to move across borders, there is need for a human interface.”¹³

Chileshe Mpundu Kapwepwe
Secretary General of COMESA

How conflicts affect visa openness

Conflict between countries or between regions within a country can displace large numbers of people, often suddenly, and often across borders. Authorities may react by restricting movement and requiring visas, denying entry to some travellers but not others, or closing borders outright—sometimes without notice and always at great cost to people. Political upheaval and undemocratic regime change contribute to the phenomenon.

Regions experiencing conflict or political instability may perceive the free movement of persons as a security risk and argue that inward travel needs to be controlled more closely. As for countries, conflict tends to absorb their attention and their resources. If the conflict has undermined parliamentary processes and democratic governance structures, countries' latitude for action shrinks further.

For these reasons, conflict often alters countries' performance on the AVOI, sometimes significantly.



Regional trends in visa openness

Freeing movement within Africa's regions

Africa's regional economic communities (RECs) drive economic and social integration in Africa, often among countries that appear to have little in common. The African Union recognizes eight RECs and considers them building blocks for deepening regional integration on the continent.

RECs pursue integration at different levels. For example, they might cooperate on customs, the movement of people, or the development of infrastructure. Some RECs afford their members preferential terms for the cross-border trade of goods and services, while others coordinate a regional response to natural disasters or health emergencies. Many RECs cooperate politically as well. Coordinating their members' policies in areas of common interest tends to improve sociocultural cohesion in the region, increase peace and security, and generate economic benefits from more regional trade.

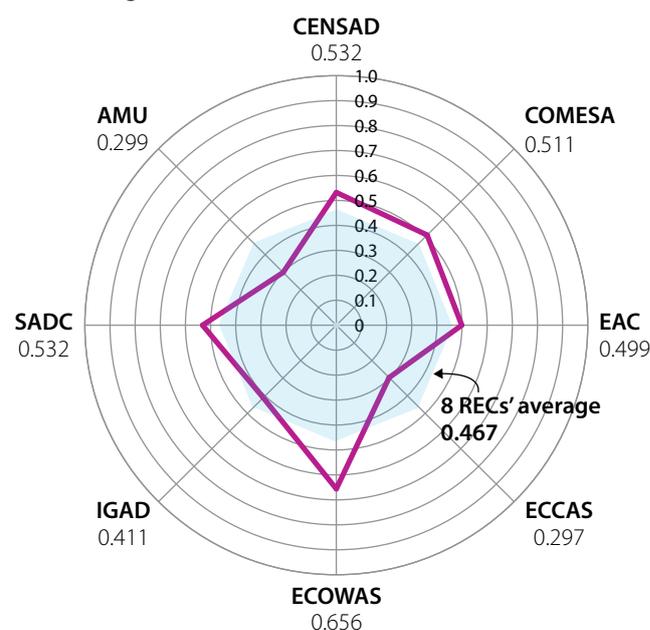
Last year's AVOI report found that in terms of visa openness, Africa's RECs had rebounded from the pandemic, in some cases fully reversing the temporary restrictions that they had imposed to curb the spread of the virus. It is therefore especially encouraging to note that six of eight RECs improved their average AVOI score again this year. The EAC increased the most, followed by IGAD, COMESA, ECCAS, CEN-SAD, and ECOWAS. The scores of SADC and AMU are only marginally lower than last year.

Looking back further, in six of eight RECs, average visa openness is higher today than it was in pre-pandemic 2019. Even SADC and AMU, whose scores are slightly lower in 2023 than they were in 2022, have a higher average score today than in 2019.

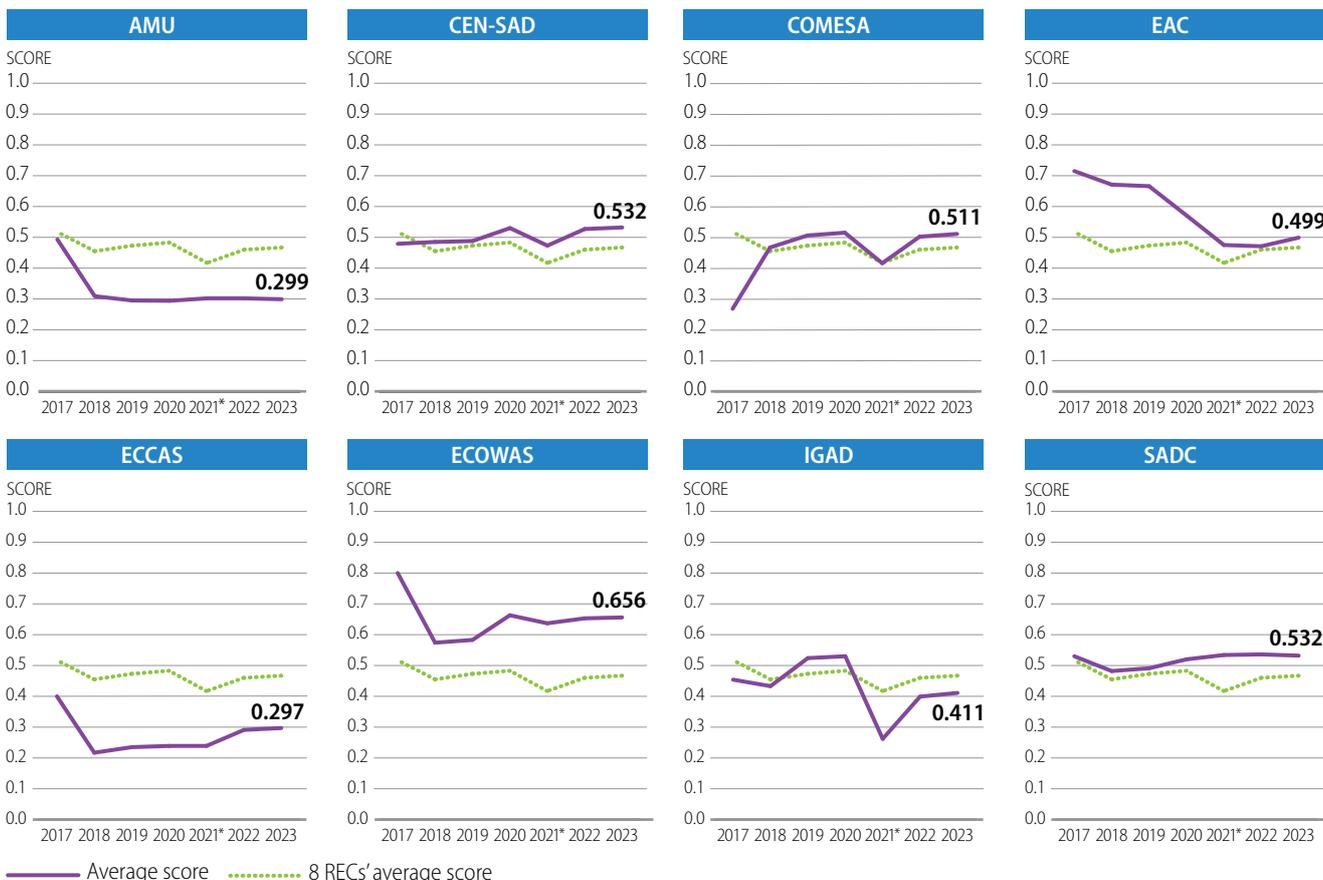
■ The **EAC's** score, while lower today than before the pandemic, improved the most in absolute terms since 2022. The EAC earned the AVOI's highest regional average score in 2017: its subsequent sharp decline can be principally attributed to the EAC having expanded the number of its member states. Because the EAC has a smaller number of states than many other RECs, even small changes to one member state's visa openness have a large bearing on the region's average score.

- **IGAD's** score improved the second-most in 2023. Its score had increased significantly in 2022 as well. The trend is set to continue, with IGAD member states working to adopt a single electronic visa regime.
- The third-highest rise in score since last year was earned by **COMESA**, which ranks fourth of the eight RECs. COMESA's score this year is higher than in any year since 2017, bar 2020. As in ECOWAS, COMESA's average visa openness has improved slowly but steadily over the past three years. Recently, Kenya announced its intention to offer visa-free entry to all African citizen before the start of 2024: this would raise COMESA's score further. In parallel, COMESA's decision-making bodies are showing fresh energy in accelerating visa openness and implementing the bloc's protocols on migration.
- **ECCAS** slightly improved its average AVOI score in 2023. Every year since 2018, ECCAS's score has risen in small increments, except from 2020 to 2021, when it did not change. ECCAS still ranks lowest among RECs, just behind AMU, even though six members of ECCAS are members of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC), most of whose members allow each other's citizens to enter their territory visa-free.

RECs' average AVOI scores, 2023



RECs' average AVOI scores, 2016–2023



*The 2021 scores reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

- **CEN-SAD's** score rose fifth-most since 2022: the bloc's average regional visa openness is now slightly higher than in 2023 and is firmly above pre-pandemic levels. Indeed, in 2023 CEN-SAD recorded its highest score since the AVOI first measured visa openness in 2016. This ranks CEN-SAD second among RECs this year, alongside SADC. Of the eight RECs recognized by the African Union, CEN-SAD has the largest number of member states. Many CEN-SAD member states are also members of ECOWAS, which has been particularly progressive on easing travel within its territory.
- **ECOWAS** adopted its Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment in 1979, and even though its gain over 2023 was only sixth-highest among the RECs, ECOWAS continues to lead Africa's RECs on visa openness by a comfortable margin. ECOWAS's average score is still a little below its 2020 level, but eight of this year's top 20 countries are members of ECOWAS and overall visa openness within ECOWAS has risen over the past three years. ECOWAS members also easily achieve the highest levels of regional reciprocity on visa openness (97%).

- **SADC** shares second spot with CEN-SAD: average visa openness among SADC member states is higher today than any year prior to the pandemic. SADC's average in 2023 is slightly lower than in 2022 because of changes in Angola's visa regime. In October 2023, however, Angola announced that it would expand its visa-free policy, effective immediately: SADC's average score for 2024 will reflect this. In other news, Botswana and Namibia concluded a bilateral agreement allowing their citizens to use national identity documents other than passports at border crossings. Reciprocal visa-free entry among SADC member states remains high.
- **AMU** scores slightly lower in 2023 than in 2022; it is one of only two RECs whose score fell over the last year. While slightly higher than its pre-pandemic level, visa openness within AMU is significantly down from its level in 2017.

How does each regional economic community fare?

In many ways, Africa's RECs are the continent's pioneers on visa openness. RECs frequently acknowledge that more trade in goods and services, greater prosperity, and more integrated and thriving communities depend on people's capacity to move across borders smoothly and inexpensively. This has spurred several RECs to implement protocols on free movement in tandem with trade agreements, in order to open their members' borders to the citizens of the region.

Yet the free movement of people varies considerably between RECs, and sometimes within RECs. In some cases, free movement never moves beyond a REC's founding instruments—mobility within the region is not the object of policies or action plans, and the region's citizens have difficulty crossing the borders of neighbouring countries. In other cases, protocols on free movement are negotiated and signed, but are not widely implemented. For a few RECs, however, the intra-regional movement of people is a key pillar of integration and their member states grant each other's citizens entry, visa-free.

To analyze visa openness at the regional level, the AVOI averages the scores of all the countries that are members of a given REC. This metric produces an average score for each of the eight RECs recognized by the African Union. Comparing the score of Africa's eight RECs reveals not only the degree to which the member states of each bloc open their borders to the citizens of other countries in the bloc, but to some extent, the degree to which that REC has a liberal visa policy that its members actually apply.

Reciprocity

In some RECs, members' visa regimes adhere closely to the principle of reciprocity: the practice of extending the same visa privileges to each other as the privileges they receive. Reciprocity makes no claims about visa openness. It merely measures the symmetry of the visa policies that countries apply towards each other's citizens. Essentially, reciprocity can reveal the harmonization of visa policies within a REC.

Reciprocity is measured as a percentage. A REC with an overall reciprocity score of 60%, for example, is a region in which 60% of the visa policies that its members extend to each other, are the same as the visa policies they are offered in exchange. The remaining 40% of individual country-to-country policies differ.

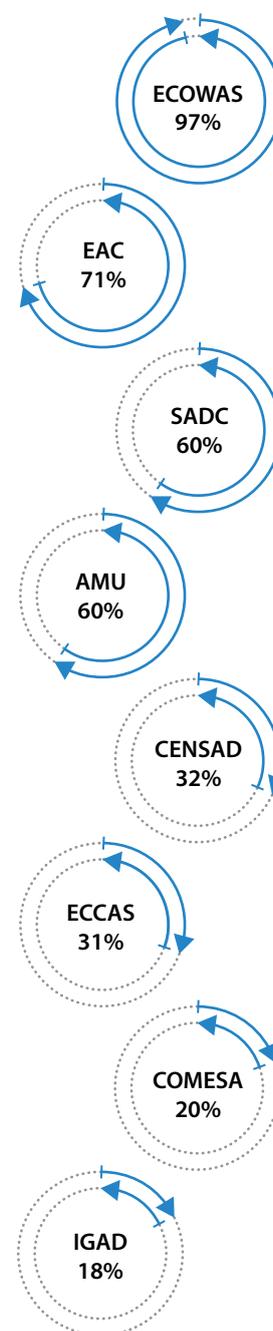
In this system, a **high reciprocity** score indicates that policies are largely harmonized. For example, Cabo Verde allows Zambians to obtain a visa on arrival, and Zambia allows Cabo Verdeans to do the same. Similarly, Algeria offers visa-free entry to Tunisians, and Tunisia offers Algerians the same.

A **low reciprocity** score often indicates that policies are mismatched. For example, Central African Republic requires Burkina Faso to obtain a visa before travelling, but Burkina Faso allows Central Africans to enter visa-free.

The best scenario—the scenario shown in the RECs' statistics in this report—is high **visa-free reciprocity**. This occurs when a region's countries allow the region's citizens to enter their territory, visa-free.

In all cases, a REC's reciprocity score not only reflects the domestic policies of the REC's member states, but may be an indicator of the presence (or absence) of a REC policy on free movement to which the REC's members adhere.

Visa-free reciprocity among RECs, 2023



“By facilitating seamless travel, [IGAD’s single visa system] has the potential to catalyze transformative benefits across many and various dimensions and...foster skill transfers and capital flows.”¹⁴

Workneh Gebeyehu, Executive Secretary of IGAD, August 2023

How a country’s AVOI score intersects with reciprocity

Sometimes, a country ranks highly on the AVOI (the index that ranks all countries on the continent) even though its REC scores low on visa-free reciprocity. This happens when the country’s visa policy towards the citizens of African countries in general is more open than the visa policies its citizens confront when they travel within their REC.

A variation of this scenario occurs when a REC’s member state is more open to visitors from other countries on the continent than to the citizens of countries that are fellow members of their REC. In other words, the member state’s visa regime is generally more hospitable to the citizens of non-REC members than to the citizens of some of its fellow REC members.

Situations like this can occur for different reasons. For example, the member state may belong to two RECs, one whose members have implemented the REC’s protocol to ease travel and migration, and the other that either does not have such a protocol or whose members have not yet implemented it. Or the member state may simply be reciprocating the inhospitable visa regime of countries within its REC. This is not uncommon, and shows that sometimes, visa openness goes beyond technical considerations.

In either case, discrepancies in visa policies can flag room for improvement and encourage RECs to continue to break ground on visa openness.

Charting visa policy reciprocity

The charts on visa reciprocity in the following section depict the extent to which the three types of visa policies measured by the AVOI (visa-free, visa on arrival, and visa before travel) are reciprocated among the member states of the eight RECs recognized by the African Union. The charts rank countries in descending order of reciprocal visa openness: at the top are those countries whose visa-free policies are reciprocated the most by others within the REC.

Countries’ rankings in the reciprocity charts do not relate to countries’ rankings on the AVOI. Neither do they necessarily reflect the average visa openness of each country’s REC. Instead, they show the extent to which countries’ visa policies—whether liberal or restrictive—are reciprocated by the other members of their REC.

From a policy perspective, high levels of visa-free reciprocity suggest more cohesion on visa policy within a REC, and may reflect liberal regional migration policies and higher implementation by the REC’s member states. If a country ranks highly on the AVOI but experiences low visa-free reciprocity within its REC, the cause may be that its REC has not developed a structure for harmonizing its members’ visa policies. It could also be that the country’s fellow REC members do not reciprocate the country’s visa-open stance.



- Algeria
- Libya
- Mauritania
- Morocco
- Tunisia

Arab Maghreb Union (AMU)

Visa openness

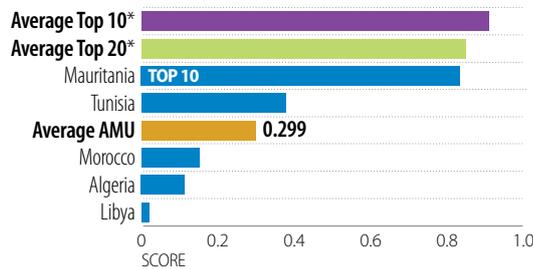
The Arab Maghreb Union comprises five North African countries. Since AMU counts such a small number of member states—smaller than any other REC—changes in individual country scores can have a relatively large impact on the region’s score.

One of AMU’s objectives is to free the movement of persons, but AMU’s average AVOI score is slightly ahead of the score of only one other REC, ECCAS. This was also the case in 2022.

Alone among AMU member states, Mauritania ranks among Africa’s top 10 again this year. Although Morocco’s score improved in 2023, Algeria’s remained unchanged and Tunisia’s declined.

Tunisia is the second-highest ranked country in AMU again this year. Like Algeria, it is particularly open to travel by the citizens of fellow AMU members.

AVOI scores, AMU



* The average score of the 10 or 20 countries that scored the highest on the 2023 AVOI

“What we need to do is to eliminate the borders, and in this context, the trade barriers between African countries. Then it will be Africa against the outside world.”¹⁵

H.E. Wael Attiya

Ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt to Kenya

Regional reciprocity

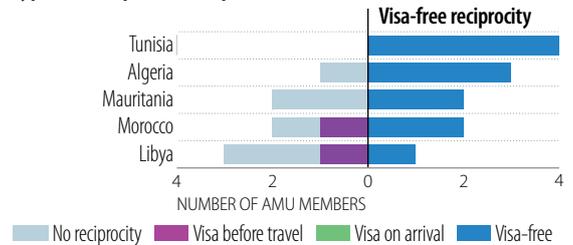
The visa regime of several AMU member states is far more open to countries within AMU than to countries elsewhere on the continent. With a visa-free reciprocity score of 60%, AMU ranks in the upper half of RECs in terms of member countries allowing each other’s citizens visa-free entry. AMU’s regional reciprocity score has not changed since last year.

Percentage of visa policies reciprocated within AMU



Of all AMU members, Mauritania ranks highest on the AVOI, but its visa openness is only reciprocated by two countries within the bloc. Tunisia enjoys the highest level of visa-free reciprocity within AMU, allowing visa-free entry to all AMU members and enjoying the same in return. Algeria’s visa-free reciprocity score follows Tunisia’s: Algeria offers visa-free entry to all AMU members, three of which reciprocate.

Types of visa policies reciprocated within AMU





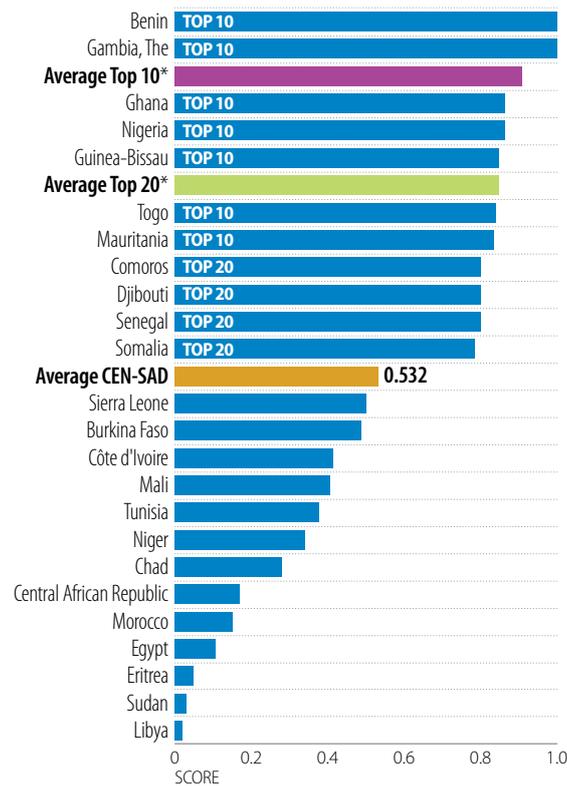
Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD)

- Benin
- Burkina Faso
- Central African Republic
- Chad
- Comoros
- Côte d'Ivoire
- Djibouti
- Egypt
- Eritrea
- Gambia, The
- Ghana
- Guinea-Bissau
- Libya
- Mali
- Mauritania
- Morocco
- Niger
- Nigeria
- Senegal
- Sierra Leone
- Somalia
- Sudan
- Togo
- Tunisia

Visa openness

CEN-SAD ranks joint second on visa openness in 2023, alongside SADC; its score rose slightly since last year, even as SADC's declined. As the REC with the largest number of member states, many of which are also members of ECOWAS, CEN-SAD boasts somewhat high average visa openness. Seven of the AVOI's 10 top performers are members of CEN-SAD, and another three members of CEN-SAD are among this year's top 20. Two members of CEN-SAD—Benin and The Gambia—are among the continent's four most open countries, all of which offer visa-free travel to the citizens of all African states.

AVOI scores, CEN-SAD



* The average score of the 10 or 20 countries that scored the highest on the 2023 AVOI

In contrast, six CEN-SAD countries—Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan—decline to offer visa-free travel even to the citizens of fellow CEN-SAD members. Some do, however, maintain broad visa-on-arrival policies.

Regional reciprocity

In terms of visa-free reciprocity (countries' mutual offering of visa-free entry), CEN-SAD's performance lies in the bottom half of the continent's RECs: in only 32% of all possible travel permutations among CEN-SAD member states, are the citizens of two CEN-SAD countries exempt from presenting a visa in order to enter each other's territory. No CEN-SAD member state has altered its policy on visa-free entry over the last year, and only a few states have shifted from requiring a visa before travel to offering a visa on arrival.

Percentage of visa policies reciprocated within CEN-SAD



As a result, in almost half of permutations, the citizens from CEN-SAD countries need to obtain a visa before travelling to each other's territory. These restrictions persist even though the free movement of persons, goods, and services is a core objective of the Community of Sahel-Saharan States Revised Treaty (Article 3, "Objectives of the Community").

The fact that some CEN-SAD member states apply a more restrictive visa policy to the citizens of other CEN-SAD member states than they do to the citizens of countries outside CEN-SAD, may be explained by their membership in more than one REC. Some RECs' policies on regional mobility are more liberal than CEN-SAD's, or have been implemented more widely.

Another explanation for the discrepancy might be national protectionism. As noted earlier in this report, the visa policies of low-income and lower-middle-income countries tend to be more liberal than the visa policies of higher-income countries, some of which use strict visa regimes to curb inward migration.

In CEN-SAD as in many other RECs, contrasting countries' AVOI ranking to their REC's reciprocity score reveals that a high ranking on the AVOI does not necessarily indicate more visa-free reciprocity within the region. For example, Benin and The Gambia both obtain a perfect score on the AVOI, but visa-free reciprocity in CEN-SAD is a low 32%. Furthermore, the visa-free travel privileges offered by Benin and The Gambia are only reciprocated by 13 of their 23 fellow CEN-SAD member states.

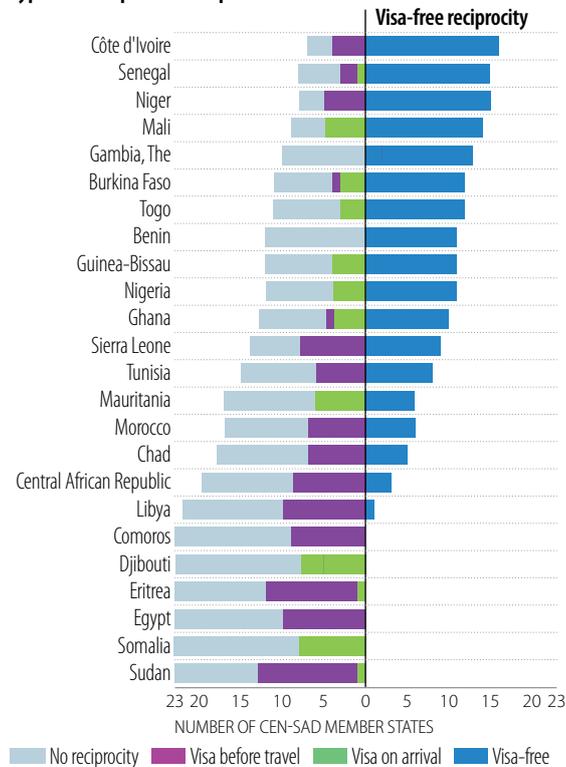
Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal do not rank as highly on the AVOI as Benin and The Gambia, but their visa-free policies are the most reciprocated in CEN-SAD.

“By supporting the free movement of people, we make it easier for Africans to do business in Africa. Free movement of people, especially workers, could help plug skills gaps, while enabling countries to fix skills mismatches in their labour markets.”¹⁶

Jean-Guy Afrika

Acting Director of the Regional Integration Coordination Office, African Development Bank Group

Types of visa policies reciprocated within CEN-SAD





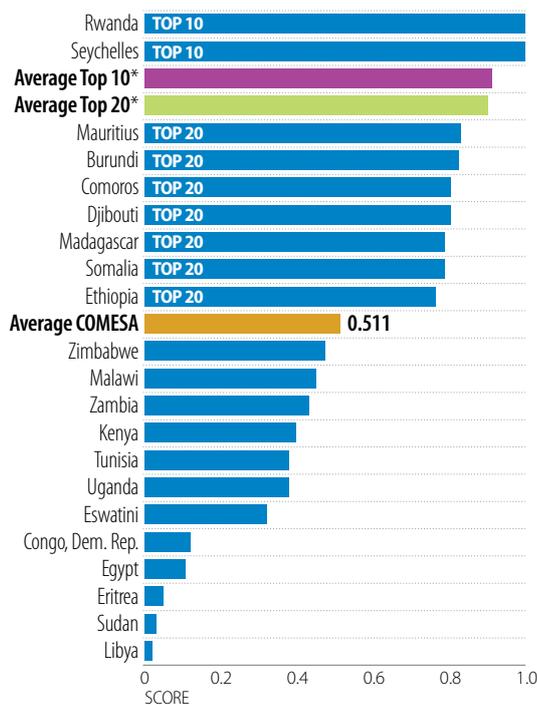
Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)

- Burundi
- Comoros
- Congo, Democratic Republic
- Djibouti
- Egypt
- Eritrea
- Eswatini
- Ethiopia
- Kenya
- Libya
- Madagascar
- Malawi
- Mauritius
- Rwanda
- Seychelles
- Somalia
- Sudan
- Tunisia
- Uganda
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

Visa openness

COMESA’s members include Rwanda and Seychelles, two of the four countries that obtained a perfect score on this year’s AVOI. Both countries offer visa-free entry to the citizens of all other African countries. In a recent development, Kenya announced that it would soon follow suit and allow visa-free access to all African citizens.¹⁷ Altogether, COMESA counts seven members among the AVOI’s top 20 and five members among the eight lowest rankers. This places COMESA in fourth position among RECs. COMESA’s two protocols on free movement have not been widely implemented, but recently, new interest in free movement has emerged.

AVOI scores, COMESA



* The average score of the 10 or 20 countries that scored the highest on the 2023 AVOI

Regional reciprocity

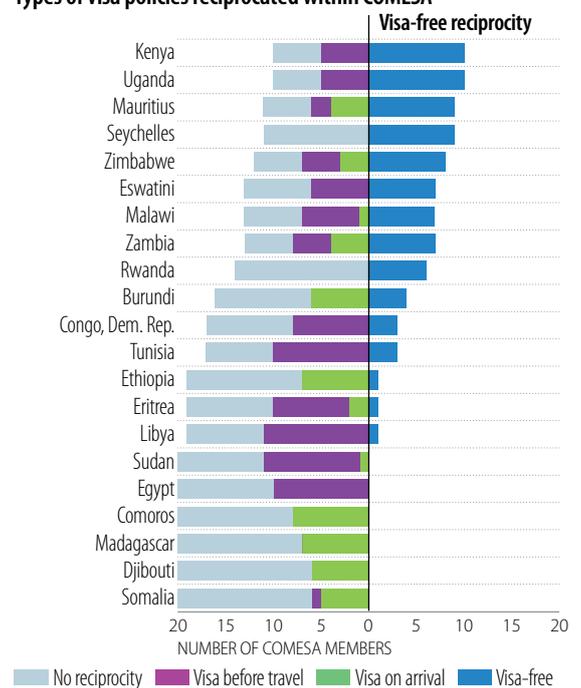
In COMESA, visa-free reciprocity—the practice of countries extending visa-free entry privileges to each other’s citizens—is only 20%, not far ahead of IGAD, Africa’s least reciprocal REC. Interestingly, COMESA’s score is unchanged from 2022 even though the reciprocity of COMESA member states’ visa-on-arrival policies declined slightly. This suggests that ease of travel within COMESA fell even as the region opened to citizens from Africa as a whole.

Percentage of visa policies reciprocated within COMESA



Kenya and Uganda are COMESA’s leaders on visa-free reciprocity: in addition to reciprocating visa-free entry for each other’s citizens, their visa openness is weighted in favour of citizens from the region. Following closely are Mauritius and Seychelles, each of which counts nine reciprocal visa-free agreements with fellow COMESA members. Recent reports state that Uganda and DRC have also agreed to abolish visa requirements for each other’s citizens¹⁸ (these developments fall outside the 2023 data-collection period). Rwanda is one the continent’s most visa-open countries, but its openness is little reciprocated by its fellow COMESA member states.

Types of visa policies reciprocated within COMESA



Six COMESA countries—Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Madagascar, Somalia, and Sudan—decline to offer visa-free entry to any fellow COMESA members. Comoros, Djibouti, Madagascar, and Somalia do, however, allow citizens from COMESA countries to obtain a visa on arrival.



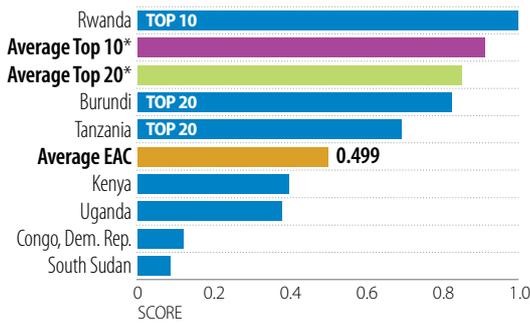
East African Community (EAC)

Burundi
Congo,
Democratic
Republic
Kenya
Rwanda
Tanzania
South Sudan
Uganda

Visa openness

Average visa openness in the EAC has improved over the past year but the bloc still ranks fifth of the eight RECs, behind COMESA and ahead of IGAD. Of the EAC's seven member states, only Kenya, Rwanda, and South Sudan improved their performance over the past year; the performance of the EAC's other four members did not change. Kenya's improvement was to extend visa-free entry privileges to the citizens of Djibouti and Mozambique, while Rwanda's was to extend it to all nationalities on the continent (for details, see the spotlight on Rwanda). South Sudan shifted to a visa-on-arrival regime for the citizens of Burundi and Rwanda.

AVOI scores, EAC



* The average score of the 10 or 20 countries that scored the highest on the 2023 AVOI

Three EAC member states—Burundi, Rwanda, and Tanzania—are among the AVOI's top 20 performers this year. Indeed, Rwanda holds a perfect score.

"It is time we realize the importance of trading among ourselves and allowing goods, services, people and ideas to move freely across the continent."¹⁹

William Ruto
President of the Republic of Kenya

Regional reciprocity

The EAC is an established customs union whose roots date to 1917. Economic integration within the EAC is high and the region has worked hard to align member states' external tariff regimes so that goods may circulate within the region without some of the barriers usually associated with cross-border trade.

Percentage of visa policies reciprocated within EAC



The next step towards greater economic prosperity is to break down or reduce barriers that undermine the movement of persons. The EAC's high visa-free reciprocity score of 71%, second only to ECOWAS's, attests to the region's progress in this regard. The EAC's score means that in almost three-quarters of possible travel permutations, EAC member states dispense each other's citizens from requiring a visa to enter their territory. The remaining permutations are evenly split between offering a visa on arrival and requiring a visa ahead of travel.

Types of visa policies reciprocated within EAC



On the whole, EAC member states are significantly more open to each other than to citizens from elsewhere on the continent.



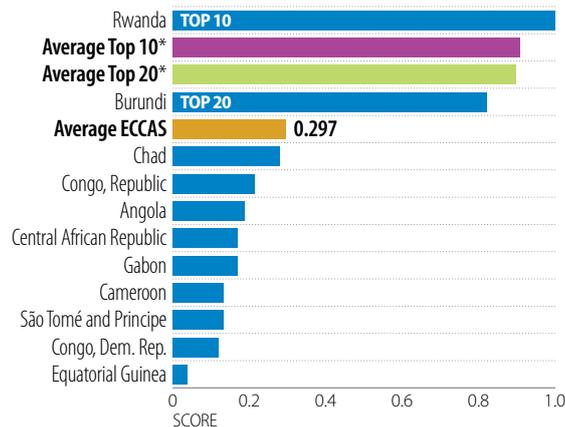
- Angola
- Burundi
- Cameroon
- Central African Republic
- Chad
- Congo, Democratic Republic
- Congo, Republic
- Equatorial Guinea
- Gabon
- Rwanda
- São Tomé and Príncipe

Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)

Visa openness

The average of the AVOI scores of ECCAS’s 11 member states is lower than the average in any other REC—this, even though two top 20 performers (Burundi and Rwanda) are ECCAS member states (and Rwanda holds a perfect score). ECCAS’s low score is not for a lack of intent: ECCAS adopted its Protocol on Freedom of Movement and Rights of Establishment of Nationals of Members States some 40 years ago and has since made changes to accelerate the protocol’s implementation. Yet little progress has occurred and the free movement of persons is effective in only a few ECCAS member states.

AVOI scores, ECCAS



* The average score of the 10 or 20 countries that scored the highest on the 2023 AVOI

ECCAS’s low score reflects the sizable number of its members that figure among the continent’s least visa-open countries. Rwanda’s new visa-free policy raised the region’s average score this year, but most member states continue to require that visitors obtain a visa ahead of travel. The only ECCAS member state besides Rwanda whose AVOI score rose in 2023 is Equatorial Guinea, which extended visa-free travel privileges to citizens from neighbouring Cameroon.

Angola’s score fell after it reversed its visa-on-arrival policy for the citizens of seven countries. In October 2023, however, after data collection closed for this report, Angola announced that it would offer visa-free entry to several African countries. This will improve Angola’s ranking next year.

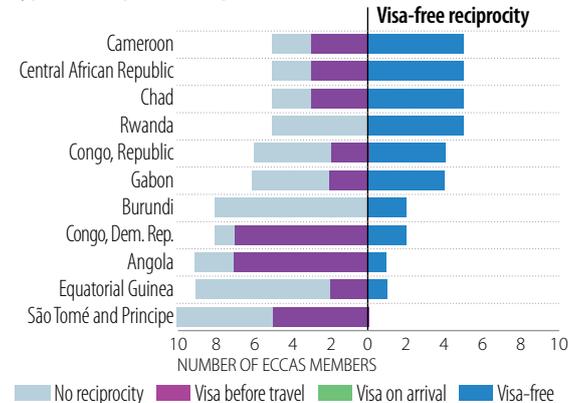
Regional reciprocity

In general, ECCAS member states are more welcoming to fellow ECCAS members than to countries elsewhere in Africa. This is reflected in ECCAS’s reciprocity scores. In 31% of possible permutations, ECCAS members offer each other’s citizens visa-free entry; in another 31% of permutations, they require a visa ahead of travel. This means that in almost two-thirds of travel routes, countries reciprocate each other’s visa policy, even if those policies are not always liberal ones. The foundation for visa-free reciprocity within ECCAS lies in the fact that most members of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC), a six-nation subgroup within ECCAS, reciprocate visa-free entry.

Percentage of visa policies reciprocated within ECCAS



Types of visa policies reciprocated within ECCAS



Meanwhile, visa-free reciprocity within ECCAS grew from 27% in 2022 to 31% this year, reflective of more countries in the region granting visa-free entry to member states that do likewise. At 31%, ECCAS surpasses visa-free reciprocity on the continent by a healthy margin (visa-free reciprocity in Africa averages 21%). Like last year, ECCAS members do not reciprocate visa-on-arrival policies, mainly because only Burundi has such a policy; ECCAS’s other member states either require each other’s citizens to obtain a visa in advance or allow them to enter their territory visa-free.



Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

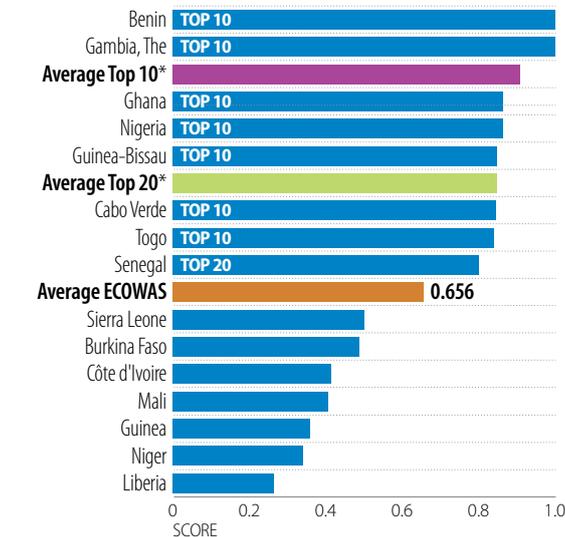
- Benin
- Burkina Faso
- Cabo Verde
- Côte d'Ivoire
- Gambia, The
- Ghana
- Guinea
- Guinea-Bissau
- Liberia
- Mali
- Niger
- Nigeria
- Senegal
- Sierra Leone
- Togo

Visa openness

With its members' average score topping the average of any other REC in Africa, ECOWAS is the region in Africa that is most open to Africans moving freely.

ECOWAS has taken a progressive stance on visa openness for decades, formalizing it in 1979 with a protocol on the free movement of persons, residence and establishment. Phase 1 of the protocol relates to the right of entry and has long been implemented. To a large extent, so too has Phase 2, which relates to the right to residency.

AVOI scores, ECOWAS



* The average score of the 10 or 20 countries that scored the highest on the 2023 AVOI

In 2000, ECOWAS introduced a common passport that exempts its holders from needing visas to travel within the region. In 2011, ECOWAS began implementing the ECOVISA, a visa that grants visitors from outside ECOWAS access to the territory of all ECOWAS member states. In May 2023, the Seventh ECOWAS Heads of Immigration meeting recommended a comparative analysis of visa regimes to ensure that the ECOVISA follows best practices. Once fully implemented, the ECOVISA will greatly ease travel in the region.

Seven of 2023's top 10 performers are part of ECOWAS, including two of the four top performers: Benin and The Gambia, both of which have fully liberalized their visa regime. Apart from a change in Burkina Faso's score, however (Burkina Faso relaxed its visa requirements for Moroccans), ECOWAS countries' scores are unchanged.

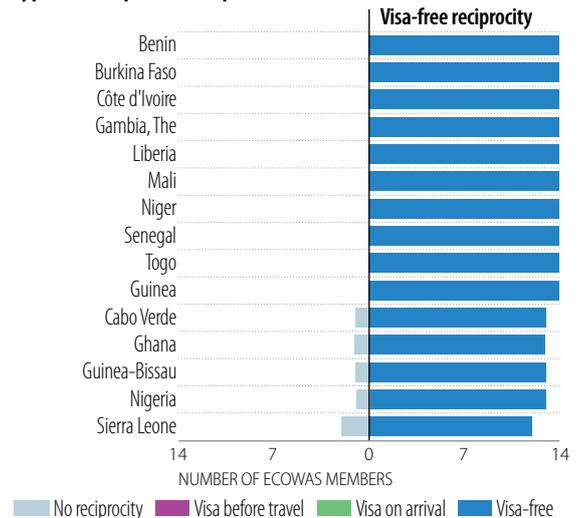
Regional reciprocity

In addition to boasting the highest average regional AVOI score on the continent, ECOWAS enjoys the highest visa-free reciprocity rate: the citizens of ECOWAS member states can enter 97% of all country destinations within ECOWAS visa-free, with the citizens of their host country doing likewise. This places ECOWAS far ahead of the EAC, the continent's runner-up, where visa-free reciprocity is 71%.

Percentage of visa policies reciprocated within ECOWAS



Types of visa policies reciprocated within ECOWAS



Broken down by country, ECOWAS's 97% figure reflects the fact that the citizens of 10 of ECOWAS's 15 member states do not require a visa to visit the territory of any other ECOWAS member, while the citizens of the remaining five states only need a visa to visit some countries within ECOWAS, not all. One such state is Sierra Leone, where reciprocity is lowest because Sierra Leone does not reciprocate visa-free entry with Ghana and Nigeria (it offers citizens of these countries a visa on arrival). No country in ECOWAS requires the citizen of another ECOWAS member state to obtain a visa ahead of travel.



Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)

- Djibouti
- Eritrea
- Ethiopia
- Kenya
- Somalia
- South Sudan
- Sudan
- Uganda

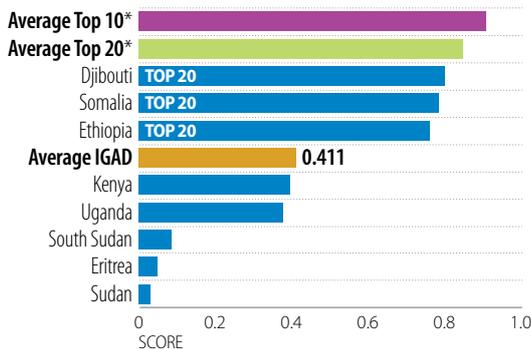
Visa openness

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development comprises eight East African countries whose visa regime varies significantly. Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Somalia are among the continent’s top 20 performers again in 2023, while Eritrea, South Sudan, and Sudan are among the bottom five.

IGAD’s average is lower in 2023 than in 2020, but the REC has made upward strides in the past three years, including in the last year. More particularly, in 2020, IGAD’s member states endorsed a protocol on the free movement of persons: seven states signed it in December 2022, and the eighth signed it in 2023. The protocol seeks to facilitate the migration of labour and other human movement across the region to deepen regional economic integration and foster stability.

For now, IGAD ranks sixth of eight RECs.

AVOI scores, IGAD



* The average score of the 10 or 20 countries that scored the highest on the 2023 AVOI

“Let Africans roam freely. Free movement of people is a must if Africa wants to enjoy the full benefits of the AfCFTA.”²⁰

Joseph Atta-Mensah

Senior Regional Adviser on Trade for the United Nations Economic Commission on Africa

Regional reciprocity

IGAD members’ visa policies are seldom reciprocal, and like last year, visa-free reciprocity (the mutual exchange of visa-free entry) is only present in 18% of possible travel permutations. Similarly low levels of reciprocity are seen for visas on arrival and visas ahead of travel. This indicates little policy congruence among IGAD member states and low levels of implementation. As mentioned above, however, member states have recently signed new initiatives to free the intra-regional movement of persons: once these measures have been implemented, they can be expected to ease regional travel going forward.

Percentage of visa policies reciprocated within IGAD



In a recent development, member states are contemplating a regime that would furnish visitors from outside the bloc with a single electronic visa that allows them to move freely throughout the IGAD region. While this would not necessarily improve IGAD countries’ visa openness ranking, it would be a modern step that eases travel to and within the region by the citizens of non-IGAD countries.

Types of visa policies reciprocated within IGAD



Of all IGAD’s member states, Kenya and Uganda demonstrate the most visa openness towards the citizens of other IGAD member states, and three of their fellow IGAD members reciprocate. However, both Kenya and Uganda still figure in the lower half of the AVOI’s country rankings.



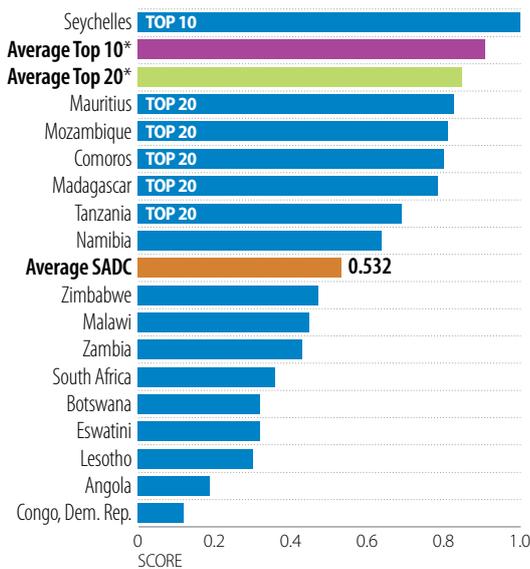
Southern African Development Community (SADC)

- Angola
- Botswana
- Comoros
- Congo,
- Democratic
- Republic
- Eswatini
- Lesotho
- Madagascar
- Malawi
- Mauritius
- Mozambique
- Namibia
- Seychelles
- South Africa
- Tanzania
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

Visa openness

Among the eight RECs, SADC ranks joint second. Seychelles achieves a perfect score, and Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, and Tanzania are among the AVOI's top 20 for 2023. Six SADC members feature among the lower half of performers.

AVOI scores, SADC



* The average score of the 10 or 20 countries that scored the highest on the 2023 AVOI

SADC is one of two RECs whose average fell slightly in 2023. The change came after Angola replaced its visa-on-arrival policy towards seven countries with a visa-ahead-of-travel regime, and Namibia extended its visa-on-arrival policy to Mauritians and Nigeriens but ended it for Nigerians. Meanwhile, Mozambique exempted Ivorians and Ghanaians from all visa requirements. In October 2023, however, Angola extended its visa-free regime to several African countries. This will advance the country's—and the region's—AVOI score going forward.

Only half of SADC members have signed the African Union's Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons. The signatories tend not to include island states and members of the South African Customs Union (SACU). Most SADC members signed the SADC's Protocol on Facilitation of Movement of Persons (2005), but only SACU members and Mozambique have ratified it, so it is not in force.

Regional reciprocity

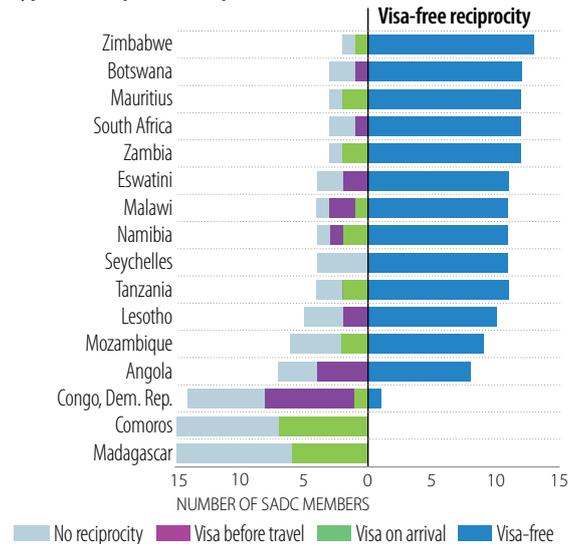
In 60% of country-to-country travel configurations, SADC member states reciprocate visa-free policies. In another 11%, they reciprocate visa-on-arrival policies. Mauritius, Seychelles, and Zimbabwe allow the citizens of the most SADC members to enter their territory visa-free; in the case of Zimbabwe, 13 members reciprocate. Four other countries—Botswana, Mauritius, South Africa, and Zambia—enjoy visa-free reciprocity with 12 other SADC countries, even though the AVOI scores of all but Mauritius are well down the scale. This shows that the borders of these countries are more open to Africans from within the region than to Africans from elsewhere.

Percentage of visa policies reciprocated within SADC



Taking reciprocity a step further, Botswana and Namibia agreed in March 2023²¹ to allow each other's citizens to cross their borders using a national identity card instead of a passport.

Types of visa policies reciprocated within SADC



In contrast, neither Comoros nor Madagascar offers visa-free travel to the citizens of another SADC member state, but both offer a visa on arrival to all Africans. For that reason, they rank among the AVOI's top 20 performers.



Moving forward

Recommendations

Average visa openness reached its highest level in 2023, with most African countries improving their visa regime or leaving it unchanged since 2022. Positive evolutions include more visa-free travel, which is particularly encouraging. There are also more provisions for a visa on arrival.

A visa on arrival does not eliminate the need for a visa, and some international travel and tourism organizations discourage visas on arrival in favour of electronic alternatives. But a visa on arrival is often a stepping stone on the path to more fluid cross-border travel. It reduces the burden of travel and is a viable interim option as countries progress towards a visa-free regime.

E-visas are another opportunity to facilitate and optimize travel, on condition that their platforms are dependable, secure, and widely accessible. E-visa systems must be adapted to the realities of different travellers: whether the travellers have access to an electronic device, whether their data network coverage is good, how feasible it is to submit copies of their travel documents and other evidence online.

Although most travellers find e-visas convenient, however, e-visas are at core a paperless version of a visa ahead of travel. Only indirectly do they support the drive towards visa openness in Africa.

Countries' concerns about liberal visa regimes should continue to be addressed in a supportive and collaborative manner. In some situations, for example in island states, largely automated electronic travel authorizations may advance visa-free travel while allowing for security and vetting. But electronic travel authorizations should not add excessive bureaucracy.

Adjusting for context, therefore, continues to be necessary. But the principle remains the same: freeing the movement of people across Africa's borders is not only an important objective in its own right, it is also essential to continental integration. Another three African Union member states ratified the AfCFTA this year. The lasting impact of the negotiations, ratification, and execution of the AfCFTA depends largely on people's ability to cross African borders, unhindered by excessive administrative barriers.

Suggestions for 2024 and beyond

- Extend visa-free travel policies to all AU member states, in increments if necessary (moving from a visa before travel to a visa on arrival or visa-free entry; moving from a visa on arrival to visa-free entry)
- Implement outstanding commitments on visa-free movement within RECs; to Africans citizens who are still required to obtain a visa, offer a visa on arrival
- Implement and expand e-visa systems that use a secure, reliable, mobile-friendly platform with a guaranteed response time, for all Africans who are still required to obtain a visa ahead of travel
- Implement REC-wide visas that allow travellers from outside a REC to apply for a single visa that covers travel within all REC member states
- Promote visa-free reciprocity within RECs as a stepping stone to more visa openness
- Offer longer-term visas to repeat travellers
- Ease work visa requirements and introduce categories for flexible work visas, for example for digital nomads
- Speed visa processes by automating procedures, lowering fees, and requiring fewer documents
- Keep government websites updated with reliable information on different categories of visas—tourism, business, study—and visa exemptions
- Present visa-related information in different languages and in an accessible format
- Consider using government social media channels to support and inform travellers

Travel document solutions

Travel documents are a necessary component of cross-border travel. Past editions of the AVOI report have suggested three solutions: to move them from ambition to reality, progress is needed.

- A regional passport or acceptance of a national identity card to ease travel within a region
- An African passport for businesspeople, issued by a competent authority using strict criteria, especially for providers wishing to furnish services or establish a commercial presence abroad
- The African Union passport for all African citizens, issued by national authorities using the criteria published by the African Union in 2016

Annex 1. Visa openness in Africa: 2023 country scores and rankings

Country	VISA OPENNESS INDICATORS (by number of other African countries)			Score	Rank
	No visa	Visa on arrival	Visa required*		
Benin	53	0	0	1.000	1
Gambia, The	53	0	0	1.000	1
Seychelles	53	0	0	1.000	1
Rwanda	53	0	0	1.000	1
Ghana	25	26	2	0.864	5
Nigeria	17	36	0	0.864	5
Guinea-Bissau	13	40	0	0.849	7
Cabo Verde	16	36	1	0.845	8
Togo	15	37	1	0.842	9
Mauritania	9	44	0	0.834	10
Mauritius	27	21	5	0.826	11
Burundi	6	47	0	0.823	12
Mozambique	11	40	2	0.811	13
Comoros	0	53	0	0.800	14
Djibouti	0	53	0	0.800	14
Senegal	24	23	6	0.800	14
Madagascar	0	52	1	0.785	17
Somalia	0	52	1	0.785	17
Ethiopia	2	48	3	0.762	19
Tanzania	19	22	12	0.691	20
Namibia	13	26	14	0.638	21
Sierra Leone	13	17	23	0.502	22
Burkina Faso	17	11	25	0.487	23
Zimbabwe	17	10	26	0.472	24
Malawi	15	11	27	0.449	25
Zambia	14	11	28	0.430	26
Côte d'Ivoire	22	0	31	0.415	27
Mali	20	2	31	0.408	28
Kenya	21	0	32	0.396	29
Tunisia	20	0	33	0.377	30
Uganda	20	0	33	0.377	30
Guinea	19	0	34	0.358	32
South Africa	19	0	34	0.358	32
Niger	18	0	35	0.340	34
Botswana	17	0	36	0.321	35
Eswatini	17	0	36	0.321	35
Lesotho	16	0	37	0.302	37
Chad	14	1	38	0.279	38
Liberia	14	0	39	0.264	39
Congo, Republic	5	8	40	0.215	40
Angola	10	0	43	0.189	41
Central African Republic	9	0	44	0.170	42
Gabon	9	0	44	0.170	42
Morocco	8	0	45	0.151	44
Cameroon	7	0	46	0.132	45
São Tomé and Príncipe	7	0	46	0.132	45
Congo, Democratic Republic	4	3	46	0.121	47
Algeria	6	0	47	0.113	48
Egypt	0	7	46	0.106	49
South Sudan	3	2	48	0.087	50
Eritrea	1	2	50	0.049	51
Equatorial Guinea	2	0	51	0.038	52
Sudan	0	2	51	0.030	53
Libya	1	0	52	0.019	54
Western Sahara					

* "Visa required" means a visa must be obtained before departure.

Scores range from 0 to 1 (highest)

Source: Bank calculations based on IATA data, July–August 2023

Annex 2. Visa openness in Africa: Developments and initiatives, 2023

Country	Rank	Top 20	Offers e-visa	Ratified AfCFTA ²²	Signed AfCFTA (not ratified)	Signed PFMP ²³	Joined SAATM ²⁴
Benin	1	●	●	●	●	●	●
Gambia, The	1	●		●		●	●
Rwanda	1	●	●	●		●	●
Seychelles	1	●		●			
Ghana	5	●		●		●	●
Nigeria	5	●	●	●			●
Guinea-Bissau	7	●		●			●
Cabo Verde	8	●		●			●
Togo	9	●		●		●	●
Mauritania	10	●		●			
Mauritius	11	●		●			
Burundi	12	●		●		●	
Mozambique	13	●	●	●		●	●
Comoros	14	●		●		●	
Djibouti	14	●	●	●		●	
Senegal	14	●		●		●	●
Madagascar	17	●	●		●		
Somalia	17	●			●	●	
Ethiopia	19	●	●	●			●
Tanzania	20	●	●	●		●	
Namibia	21			●			●
Sierra Leone	22		●	●		●	●
Burkina Faso	23			●		●	●
Zimbabwe	24		●	●		●	●
Malawi	25		●	●		●	
Zambia	26		●	●			
Côte d'Ivoire	27		●	●		●	●
Mali	28			●			●
Kenya	29		●	●		●	●
Tunisia	30			●			
Uganda	30		●	●		●	
Guinea	32		●	●		●	●
South Africa	32		●	●			●
Niger	34			●		●	●
Botswana	35			●			●
Eswatini	35			●			●
Lesotho	37		●	●		●	●
Chad	38			●		●	●
Liberia	39				●	●	●
Congo, Republic	40			●		●	●
Angola	41		●	●		●	
Central African Republic	42			●		●	●
Gabon	42		●	●		●	●
Morocco	44		●	●			●
Cameroon	45		●	●			●
São Tomé and Príncipe	45		●	●		●	
Congo, Democratic Republic	47			●		●	●
Algeria	48			●			
Egypt	49		●	●			●
South Sudan	50				●	●	
Eritrea	51						
Equatorial Guinea	52			●			●
Sudan	53				●	●	
Libya	54				●	●	
Western Sahara				●			

AfCFTA=African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement; PFMP=Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons; SAATM=Single African Air Transport Market

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This document was prepared by the Regional Development, Integration and Business Delivery Department of the African Development Bank.

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Published by:

African Development Bank Group
Immeuble du Centre de commerce International d'Abidjan
(CCIA)

Avenue Jean-Paul II
01 BP 1387

Abidjan 01, Côte d'Ivoire
Telephone: (225) 27 20 26 39 00

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Principal photography: shutterstock.com

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