

## Africa's Visa Openness in 2023: Analysis of the Africa Visa Openness Report

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Cross-border movement of persons is essential for Africa's regional integration; for the facilitation of trade in goods, growth of trade in services and related service sector development, as well as cross-border value chain development for the continent's industrialisation. Visa facilitation is critical in fostering the growth of service industries by allowing for the free movement of labour. As services contribute substantially to economic development and industrialisation in today's world, streamlining labour mobility through efficient visa mechanisms is imperative for the success of African development. Recognizing this, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Secretariat has identified tourism, transport, business services, communication services, financial services, and tourism and travel-related services as five priority sectors. By easing visa restrictions and promoting cross-border movement of labour, the continent can accelerate the industrialisation process.

The recently released [Africa Visa Openness Report 2023](#) presents an overview of the current state of visa policies across the continent. With 28% of country-to-country travel within Africa allowing African citizens visa-free entry – a notable increase from 20% in 2016 – it seems that there has been tangible improvement in openness to migration. In 2023, 24 African countries (44% of the continent) offered e-visas, a marked increase from nine countries (17%) in 2016. Fifteen countries improved their visa openness score in the past year, with three in the top 10 and another three in the top 20. Additionally, 36 countries enhanced their scores since 2016, showing progress in West, East, and Southern Africa. Nine of the top 20 performers are low-income countries, including three landlocked nations.

In 2023, Africa achieved its highest AVOI (Visa Openness Index) score. Scores surpassed the previous high recorded in mid-2020 suggesting a reversal of pandemic-era visa policy restrictions; and fifteen countries improved their AVOI scores in the past year. Out of the 54 countries, 48 currently offer visa-free entry, with 33 providing visa-free travel to at least 10 other countries. Additionally, 30 countries offer visas on arrival, and 12 countries extend this service to citizens of at least 35 other African nations.

West African countries continue to lead the AVOI rankings, constituting seven of the top 10 performers. East Africa contributes eight countries to the top 20, with Benin, The Gambia, Seychelles, and Rwanda securing the top four positions. Seychelles, an exception among high-income countries, stands out for its comprehensive visa-free policy for all Africans. The report also notes a correlation between island geography and visa openness, with island states, such as Seychelles, exhibiting favourable AVOI rankings. It is likely that their openness is due to the fact that the ocean presents a barrier to migration in the first place.

Six out of eight RECs showed improved average AVOI scores in 2023. The EAC recorded the most significant improvement, followed by IGAD, COMESA, ECCAS, CEN-SAD, and ECOWAS. SADC and AMU, however, maintained scores close to the previous year. Examining a longer timeframe, six out of eight RECs exhibited higher average visa openness than in pre-pandemic 2019. Even those with slightly lower scores in 2023 compared to 2022, like SADC and AMU, maintained averages higher than in 2019.

The EAC's score, though lower than pre-pandemic levels, experienced the most significant absolute improvement since 2022. The expansion of the EAC's member states significantly influenced the regional average score, making even small changes impactful. IGAD, with the second-highest score improvement, moved on a positive trajectory. Member states actively worked toward adopting a single electronic visa regime, showcasing a commitment to enhancing visa openness.

COMESA, ranking fourth among the RECs, achieved the third-highest rise in score in 2023. That year's score was the highest since 2017, excluding 2020. Kenya's announcement to offer visa-free entry signaled further improvement, and COMESA's decision-making bodies exhibited renewed energy in accelerating visa openness. ECCAS slightly improved its average AVOI score, continuing a trend of incremental increases since 2018. Despite ranking lower among RECs, it showed progress, especially considering shared membership with the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC).

CEN-SAD experienced the fifth-highest rise in AVOI score since 2022, reaching its highest score since the AVOI's inception in 2016. CEN-SAD then ranked second among RECs, tied with SADC, boasting an average regional visa openness surpassing both 2022 and pre-pandemic levels. Despite having the largest number of member states, CEN-SAD's proactive approach aligned with ECOWAS standards for easing travel within its territory.

ECOWAS, with its pioneering Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment adopted in 1979, remained the frontrunner among Africa's RECs in visa openness. Despite ranking sixth among RECs in score gain in 2023, ECOWAS maintained a comfortable lead. Despite a slight dip from its 2020 level, ECOWAS witnessed an overall increase in visa openness within its territory over the past three years. Notably, ECOWAS members achieved the highest levels of regional reciprocity on visa openness, reaching an impressive 97%.

SADC shared the second spot with CEN-SAD, showcasing higher average visa openness in 2023 than any year preceding the pandemic. Although SADC's average in 2023 was slightly lower than in 2022 due to changes in Angola's visa regime, the region anticipated a positive shift with Angola's recent announcement of an expanded visa-free policy. Additionally, Botswana and Namibia concluded a bilateral agreement allowing the use of national identity documents other than passports at border crossings, contributing to high levels of reciprocal visa-free entry among SADC member states.

AMU, in contrast, experienced a slight decrease in its 2023 AVOI score compared to 2022, making it one of only two RECs with a decline over the last year. While slightly higher than its pre-pandemic level, AMU faced challenges in maintaining or improving visa openness within its member states.

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