



A TALE OF ONE CONTINENT: AFRICA'S DIVERGING IMMIGRATION PATHWAYS – DIGITAL OPENNESS VS LOCAL CONTENT WALLS

Introduction

A country's visa policy is more than a border-management tool, it is a statement of intent. It signals whether a government is ready to welcome investors, entrepreneurs, skilled professionals, and partners who can help accelerate national development. In a global economy where talent and capital move quickly, nations that simplify entry procedures tend to attract more opportunity; those that restrict mobility risk being left behind.

Across Africa, the picture is increasingly mixed. On one hand, several governments are adopting e-visa systems, digitalising their entry processes in ways that enhance transparency, predictability, and ease of travel. These reforms send a clear message: Africa is open, modernising, and eager to engage with the world.

Yet, on the other hand, a parallel trend is emerging. Local content laws, stricter labour controls, and more complex work-authorisation processes are reshaping how foreigners engage with African markets once they arrive. While designed to protect local jobs and promote skills transfer, these policies sometimes create unintended hurdles that discourage investment and slow the flow of much-needed expertise.

This article explores these diverging pathways—Africa's embrace of digital openness at the border, and the growing rise of internal protectionism—and asks a critical question: Are African countries truly open for business, or are new regulatory walls limiting the continent's economic potential?

Across Africa, immigration policy is undergoing a quiet but profound transformation.

On one side of the continent, governments are embracing **digital openness**, rolling out e-visa platforms designed to simplify entry, attract investors, and rebrand themselves as modern hubs for tourism and commerce. On the other side, several states are simultaneously **tightening domestic labour rules**, using localisation and protectionist frameworks to restrict foreign participation in their economies.

This duality—digital access at the border, protectionism beyond it—captures the complex reality of mobility across Africa today.

In East Africa, **Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda** have expanded fully digital visa platforms, allowing travellers to apply online with greater transparency and speed. **Ethiopia's** streamlined e-visa system is now one of the most efficient gateways into the Horn of Africa, supporting its bid to remain a regional aviation hub. In West Africa, **Nigeria's** reintroduction of e-visa-on-arrival for certain business categories signals a shift toward tech-enabled entry processing, even as it tightens enforcement for work authorisations. **Benin** has gone further, introducing near-visa-free entry for many nationalities and positioning itself as one of the continent's most open states.

Yet in contrast, other countries are reinforcing local content and national labour controls. **Angola, Tanzania, and Ghana**, for instance, apply strict rules around expatriate quotas, skill-transfer requirements, and sector-based restrictions. Even where business visas are easily obtained through e-platforms, foreign workers often face significant hurdles at the work-permit stage, reflecting deliberate efforts to protect domestic labour markets.



This tension is not accidental. African governments are navigating the competing pressures of global competitiveness, domestic unemployment, and geopolitical shifts. Digital visa systems show a desire for investment and mobility, stronger localisation rules express concerns about economic sovereignty and equitable development.

The Path Forward — Recommendations for African Governments

To build a more coherent mobility environment that supports both national priorities and cross-border economic integration, African states should:

1. **Harmonize visa and work-permit frameworks** so that easier entry does not conflict with opaque or restrictive employment procedures. Predictability encourages compliant business travel and long-term investment.
2. **Adopt continental or regional e-visa standards**, especially within ECOWAS, EAC, and SADC, to reduce administrative burdens and boost intra-African trade.
3. **Create transparent, skills-based pathways** that protect local labour without discouraging essential foreign expertise critical to infrastructure, energy, and digital sectors.
4. **Strengthen digital security and interoperability**, ensuring e-visa systems are robust, secure, and integrated with border-management and labour departments.
5. **Build feedback channels with the private sector**, allowing governments to refine visa and work policies based on real mobility challenges faced by companies and travellers.

Conclusion

Africa stands at a pivotal moment where movement—of people, skills, and ideas—will determine its competitiveness in a fractured global economy. Balancing openness at the border with structured, fair labour policies inside the economy is not only possible; it is necessary for the continent's next decade of growth.

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