

Easing visa policies will help boost economic growth

By [Nicky Smith](#)

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Security considerations aside, improvements to visa processes and policies will benefit travel and trade, with direct benefits to gross domestic product (GDP) growth and job creation.



"As a result, problems in much of the world with obtaining visas should be addressed as a trade issue," says Thea Chiesa, head of aviation, travel and tourism at the World Economic Forum. Her comments come amid a boom in trade and the rejuvenation of border towns after SA eased visa restrictions for Zimbabweans and Mozambicans.

Both countries are members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), among whose main objectives is easing travel among member states. Negotiations with Angola have been described as "ongoing".

"Linking the issue (of visas) with trade and connectivity" is central to gaining traction with governments and security agencies to solving the often slow process of issuing visas to allow people to travel, says Chiesa,

She was attending the World Travel and Tourism Council annual regional meeting in Seoul, South Korea, this week.

Travel and trade linked

She says that governments respond better to the idea that travel is related to trade, and there is a need for changing the dialogue to use words that they better respond to and understand.

"We are looking at creating a process of processing visas to expedite (it). To make the traveller's able to apply online, while at the same time injecting the security parameters that are necessary so that national security agencies are able to screen them before that traveller moves or is in the decision phase of the visa," she said.

The World Economic Forum has made the problems of accessing visas one of its priority focus areas this year, in an effort to boost the travel and tourism sector which, according to its statistics, made a total contribution to global GDP of 9.3%, or US\$6.84trn.

Asean (the 10-member Association of South-east Asian Nations) is looking at a common visa process. "This is work in progress, and they are trying to understand how to implement the common visa. Whether it will be something like a Schengen visa (is not clear). They are in the process of making those decisions," Chiesa says.

Schengen visa

The Schengen visa allows cross border access to 25 European member states with a single visa.

Doug Anderson, the president and chief executive of Carlson Wagonlit Travel - which is one of the world's largest travel companies, managing 60m travel transactions last year and assisting its clients with 250,000 visa applications - says addressing the issue of visa policies is crucial to the industry.

"The challenge in many cases is that business travel is decided on short notice. When visa processing gets in the way, business suffers and that has implications for the economic growth which would be associated with the transactions that business people do," Anderson says.

One of the reasons why governments were slow to act on making travel less cumbersome was security concerns.

Visit Britain chairman Christopher Rodrigues says this was because there was a need to keep the bad guys out, while letting the good guys travel.

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation's Sustainable Tourism - Eliminating Poverty chairman Young-Shim Dho says visas are the biggest barrier to travel and are getting more attention from governments. Visas were a subject of discussion at the organisation's general assembly held in Victoria Falls last month.

"When we talk about visa barriers, let's be honest with each other. This is not just cumbersome bureaucratic processes. We are talking about money," Dho says.

Single visa solution

She says if in Africa a prospective traveller wanted to visit more than one country, for example Ghana and Togo, it could cost between US\$100 and US\$200, with the money generated from the visa sales being ploughed back into the industry.

The second issue is tax, such as eliminating the need for travellers to pay value added tax. "Who are the biggest enemies to this? Bureaucrats in the tax office," Dho says.

It was only after a presidential decree in South Korea that amendments were made. "Governments still fail to grasp how integral travel is to national economies," Rodrigues says.

However, some ground is being gained, says Chiesa, who praises the work done by institutions such as the International Civil Aviation Authority, the International Air Transport Association, the World Travel and Tourism Council and World Economic Forum for helping get the message across.

"Governments are starting to get it and the dialogue has shifted towards tourism trade. If you link tourism with trade it becomes a completely different argument, because they understand trade," Chiesa says.

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