

Letter to the Editor

Visa Relaxation Policies and Potential Implications on Public Health in Africa

Allan Komakech, MPH¹, Karl Angendu Baki, MPH^{2,3} and Jonathan Izudi, PhD^{4,5}

¹Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), ²Department of Disease Control and Prevention, The Democratic Republic of Congo National Public Health Institute, 012, Kinshasa, The Democratic Republic of Congo, ³Inserm U1094, IRD UMR270, Univ. Limoges, CHU Limoges, EpiMaCT - Department of Epidemiology of Chronic Diseases in Tropical Zone, Institute of Epidemiology and Tropical Neurology, OmegaHealth, 87000, Limoges, France, ⁴Department of Community Health, Faculty of Medicine, Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST), Mbarara, Uganda and ⁵Data Synergy and Evaluations, African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), 00100, Nairobi, Kenya

*To whom correspondence should be addressed. Email: komallanokot@gmail.com

Submitted 11 January 2024; Revised 11 February 2024; Accepted 15 February 2024

Key words: Visa relaxation, policies, public health, Africa

To the Editor-in-Chief

In November 2023, Rwanda adopted visa-free travel for all Africans. Kenya also began visa-free entry in January 2024. Between 2016 and 2023, the landscape of international travel in Africa remarkably changed due to policy reforms. Several African Union member states have relaxed their visa laws and requirements to open new trade as part of the African Continental Free Trade Area,¹ tourism and travel avenues. The trend towards visa relaxation in Africa is part of a larger global movement towards fostering and creating a ‘global village’, where international collaboration and economic integration might occur easily. According to the recently issued African visa openness index, visa-required travel around the continent has fallen by 16%, from 55% in 2016 to 46% in 2023.² African countries like Seychelles, The Gambia, Ethiopia, Benin and Nigeria all have lenient visa policies, allowing for more effortless cross-border movement—a shift aimed at realizing the African Union’s Agenda 2063 vision of a seamless and borderless continent.³ Visa-free or relaxed travel rules have ramifications for public health systems and policies. This write-up discusses the potential impact of African visa relaxation policies on public health. First, it has the potential to significantly increase access to healthcare services, especially for populations in transboundary regions who have previously faced mobility constraints due to cross-border mandatory visa requirements. Second, increased mobility is anticipated to enhance regional collaboration for tackling endemic diseases and to establish a unified disease surveillance and response system. However,

these changes may have negative consequences. In the context of already porous borders or ‘green borders’ in Africa, even with the existence of visa restrictions, relaxation of these policies may lead to a heightened risk of infectious disease spread, such as Ebola disease, as witnessed in the past in West Africa amidst overwhelmed surveillance systems,⁴ and more recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ Furthermore, the potential influx of travellers might overburden the healthcare system, particularly in regions with significant healthcare underfunding. Given these health implications of relaxed visa policies, we suggest implementing comprehensive health surveillance systems at major entry points using technology and deploying trained personnel, strengthening ties between African member states’ Ministries of Health for disease surveillance and emergency response through cross-border health initiatives for surveillance, establishing joint protocols for emergency responses and strengthening regional health systems through workforce capacity building, pooled funding, data sharing, shared diagnostic capacities and joint research on regionally important diseases.

The use of a One Health approach in addressing complex challenges related to visa relaxations cannot be underestimated. This is due to its collaborative, multisectoral and multidisciplinary nature in the early detection and quick response to zoonotic diseases. Building on this, National Public Health Institutes (NPHIs) play a pivotal role in operationalizing the One Health approach at a national level. They serve as central coordinating bodies, ensuring that One Health principles are effectively

translated into practice. NPHIs build a global health security network by facilitating the sharing of information and best practices using their connections with international health organizations and other NPHIs.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the science office of the Africa Centres for Diseases Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) for their substantial contribution towards the ideas in this article.

Funding

None.

Author contributions

A.K. conceived the idea of this article. A.K., K.A.B. and J.I. prepared the first draft of the article. All the authors contributed substantially to the writing, reviewing and editing of the article. All the authors approved the final version submitted for publication.

CRediT Taxonomy

Allan Komakech (Conceptualization [Lead], Resources [Lead], Writing—original draft [Lead], Writing—review & editing [Lead]), Karl Angendu Baki (Resources [Supporting], Writing—original draft [Supporting], Writing—review & editing [Supporting]), and Jonathan Izudi (Resources [Supporting], Writing—original draft [Supporting], Writing—review & editing [Supporting])

Conflict of interest

None declared.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be construed to represent the positions of the Africa CDC.

Data availability

No data was analyzed for this manuscript and therefore data sharing is not applicable.

References

1. African Union. *Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: African Union, 2018. [cited 2024 Jan 5]. Available from: <https://au.int/en/treaties/agreement-establishing-african-continental-free-trade-area>.
2. African Union Commission. *Africa Visa Openness Report 2023*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: African Union Commission. [cited 2024 Jan 5]. Available from: <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/africa-visa-openness-index-2023-progress-visa-openness-africa-ease-cross-border-travel-boost-trade-investment-and-regional-integration-66992#:~:text=The%20AVOI%20reached%20its%20highest,times%20as%20many%20as%20in>.
3. African Union Commission. *A Shared Strategic Framework for Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development & a Global Strategy to Optimize the Use of Africa's Resources for the Benefit of All Africans*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: African Union Commission, 2015.
4. Kamorudeen RT, Adedokun KA, Olarinmoye AO. Ebola outbreak in West Africa, 2014 - 2016: epidemic timeline, differential diagnoses, determining factors, and lessons for future response. *J Infect Public Health* 2020; 13:956–62.
5. World Health Organization. *Public Health Considerations While Resuming International Travel 2024*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization. [cited 2024 Jan 1]. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/articles-detail/public-health-considerations-while-resuming-international-travel>.