



REPORT

Lessons from Kenya's Fraught Electronic Visa Policy

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Context

On 17 April 2025, the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), in collaboration with the African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC) and the Kenya Institute of Migration Studies (KIMS), hosted a seminar titled "*Lessons from Kenya's Fraught Electronic Visa Policy*". Experts in migration policy, trade, tourism, and regional integration gathered to assess the impact of Kenya's January 2024 introduction of an **Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA)**, replacing its visa-on-arrival system.

Chaired by **Otilia Anna Maunganidze** - Head of Special Projects (ISS), the panel included **Prof Michael Omondi Owiso** Professor of Political Science (Maseno University), **Dr Linda Ocho**-Executive director (AMADPOC), **Margaret Monyani** - Senior Migration Researcher(ISS), and **Dr Nancy Adossi** - Trade and Mobility Unit(IOM UN Migration).

While the ETA system was intended to **streamline travel** and bolster national security, its implementation has triggered challenges around accessibility, trade, and **regional integration**. Though **Kenya** has since exempted most African nationals (except Libyan and Somali citizens) from ETA requirements,granting up to **two months' stay**, and maintaining six-month rights for East African Community nationals,experts raised concerns over the policy's broader **economic and social ramifications**.

Impact on Tourism, Trade and Mobility in Context of AfCFTA

The seminar opened by highlighting a notable **downturn in tourism** since the ETA's introduction. Although data for the 2025 earnings in the tourism sector is yet to be published, anecdotal and sectoral indications indicate that the administrative burden of the new system has been a discouraging factor for travel to Kenya. **Visa accessibility** was identified as a key factor in travel decisions-making process, with travellers often deterred by uncertainty, delays and costs.

Informal cross-border movement, despite being outside legal structures and often overlooked, continues to stimulate **micro-economies** in transit hubs and border communities. As such, informal cross-border movement not only challenges state control, but also stimulates alternative economic systems centered around key **hotspots of mobility**.

Mobility was connected to trade facilitation under the **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)**, emphasising that goods cannot move without people. While security concerns require robust border control, including **biometric data collection**, the absence of **digital infrastructure** in some states hampers effective implementation. Kenya's recent signing of the **IGAD Protocol** on cross-border trade was mentioned as an important step, but the point was stressed that barriers to mobility must be reduced to allow for **cultural and economic** exchanges integral to African commerce.



Accessibility, Technology, and Communication Gaps

Concerns about **digital exclusion** were raised, noting that many border populations lack smartphones or digital literacy, effectively cutting them off from cross-border travel and informal trade. She questioned whether the ETA should have been piloted gradually or targeted only at **non-African** travellers. The rollout, in her view, would have benefited from a **phased approach** and greater community consultation.

The lack of clear, **accessible communication** surrounding the ETA was a recurring theme. Regardless of policy intent, participants stressed that success hinges on widespread public understanding. The media's role as an **agenda-setter** was underlined, with calls for policy updates to be disseminated in multiple languages and formats that reach **rural** and digitally excluded groups.

Institutional Capacity, Data, and Research

There is currently a significant **data vacuum** in Kenya's ETA policy. Universities and research institutions are subsequently limited in their ability to influence or support **evidence-based** policymaking. However, he emphasised that academic institutions could play a more active role in generating the data required to revise the system.

It was added that although the **Pan-African Forum on Data Sharing** meets only once every year, informal platforms for data sharing already exist. "**Learning missions**" to Rwanda, where policymakers from other Member States observed the operational mechanics of Rwanda's successful protocols is an example. It was argued that such experimental learning is critical to effective policy development, resulting in the proposal of a **dedicated platform** for data exchange on mobility policy.

Working towards Continental Free Movement

The need to align national policies with **continental aspirations** under the **AfCFTA** was underlined. Long-term mobility is essential for attracting investment and engaging diasporas, particularly through flexible visa implementation. Rwanda was presented as a success story, benefitting from **diaspora networks** through inclusive policies and strong state-diaspora relations. For Kenya to unlock similar benefits, policies must be not only well-designed but also widely understood and equitably applied.