

Managed migration for national development: visa policies and legislation

Visa policies are among the most important governmental formalities influencing development. The development of policies and procedures for visas - as well as for other important travel documents such as passports - is closely linked to increased mobility, business, tourism and trade.

Only half a century ago, travel was heavily impacted by customs regulations, currency exchange limitations and visa formalities. A great deal of progress has been made in their facilitation, which has contributed to the remarkable growth of international mobility, business facilitation and inward investment. However, despite the progress made, current visa policies are still regularly regarded as inadequate and inefficient, and are thus acknowledged to be an obstacle to national development.

Visas perform several functions - they serve to ensure security; to control immigration and limit the entry, duration of stay, or activities of travelers; to generate revenue and apply measures of reciprocity; and control tourism demand. Although “security” is commonly cited as the most important reason to impose a visa requirement, in practice, all the functions noted above are used as rationales to introduce or maintain a visa regime.

Travelers see visas mainly as a formality that

imposes a cost. If the cost of obtaining a visa—either the direct monetary cost imposed in the form of fees or the indirect costs, which can include distance, time spent waiting in lines, and the complexity of the process— exceeds a threshold, potential travelers are simply deterred from making a journey or choose an alternative destination with less hassle.

Despite many recent strides taken, visa requirements still affect global travel significantly. In 2012, destinations around the world requested, on average, that 63 percent of the world’s population obtain a visa before initiating their international journey. Another 2 percent of the population were at least allowed to apply for an eVisa, while 16 percent would be able to apply for a visa on arrival. Only 18 percent of the world’s population would not require a visa at all when traveling.

Five questions to consider. Can we:

Improve the delivery of information?

The availability and reliability of the information on entry formalities—especially visa requirements and procedures—that destinations provide are among the simplest, but also least addressed, areas of opportunity. This information—especially the elements of entry formalities of

importance to the traveler—should also be made available in multiple languages.

Facilitate current processes needed to obtain visas?

A major opportunity for improvement is the way visa requests for temporary visitors are processed in general, as well as the requirements linked to this process. Whether these requirements are official documents, certificates or personal interviews they usually produce at least temporary bottlenecks as well as uncertainty and longer wait times. Among the techniques suitable for improving these processes are the better use of modern information technology by service providers and the consideration of visas on arrival, or even a visa-free policy.

Differentiate treatment to facilitate business/tourist travel?

The technique of facilitating the visa process for certain types of visitors is widely used among economies, especially for temporary visitors who are visiting for tourism purposes. The form this facilitation takes can range from easing restrictions depending on the means of transportation—for example, cruise passengers can be allowed to disembark from the ship without a tourist visa or to arrive by charter planes—to special treatment for specified geographical areas or ports of entry.

Institute eVisa programs?

Currently, the most widely discussed opportunity is the use of eVisa. If an entry visa cannot be avoided, eVisa is the option preferred over the traditional, paper visa. It can be more easily obtained and requires neither the physical presence of the applicant nor the presence of the passport.

These considerations are especially important for destinations without a widespread network of embassies and consulates.

Establish regional agreements?

There are already many regional agreements in place that allow travelers from a third country to move freely between member countries once admitted by one of the participating countries, such as the EAC common travel visa. For citizens of one of the member states of some regions, such as the Schengen area in Europe, it is even possible to travel without a passport by simply using a valid national document of identification.