ACP EU MIGRATION ACTION

Visa facilitation and new technologies.

This session considers the impact of new and emerging technologies on current trends in visa issuance and management. Over the past few decades there has been a significant increase in the number of technological tools available to streamline visa processing and related boarder management. These tools present many potential opportunities for increased efficiency, security and data management. They can also present a wide variety of challenges including being difficult to implement, expensive to build, and requiring significant maintenance. Throughout the work of the Action, many countries have explored the viability of harnessing these technologies to support their border management.

Some of the systems using available and emerging technologies are listed below:

On-line visa application systems
These systems, more commonly known as eVisas (or similar), are very much on the increase. They allow prospective applicants (generally short-term visitors) to apply, pay for and receive a virtual visa on-line regardless of the location of the applicant or of the availability of traditional visa application centres. On-line visa application systems are generally self-funding. Off the shelf (OTS) products are available although some countries opt for bespoke systems. Generally speaking, eVisa systems require an existing, established set of visa application and border control regulations and procedures as a base.

Holders of eVisas are granted permission to travel to the receiving country with a reasonable expectation that they will be granted entry for the duration and purpose for which the visa was issued.

Such systems are already available, or in the process of being introduced, in many ACP countries.

Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) Systems
These systems, usually applying only to persons who already benefit from a visa waiver, determine the eligibility of visitors to travel to the nominated country but do not determine whether a traveler is admissible. An assessment and determination of admissibility is conducted solely at the border.
These systems are used principally as a security mechanism whereby applicants have been security cleared for boarding at the point of embarkation. Largely speaking, ETAs are not regarded as visas because they do not include an assessment of admissibility.
Probably the most recognised ETA system is the US ESTA system, although this is also operated in Australia, Sri Lanka and several other countries.

Advance Passenger Information (API) Systems

API systems are electronic data interchange systems which require identification details from the passport (biodata) and basic flight information to be collected by carriers, usually commercial airlines and shipping companies, and then submitted to the destination country. This information is usually collected and transmitted by airlines and shipping companies during the check-in process but can be requested earlier. When travelling to or from certain countries, passengers are required to provide advance passenger information (API) before they check-in or they will be unable to board. As with ETA, the most commonly known API system is the US APIS, although similar systems are operated by a number of countries including several in the Carribean.

Other related technologies currently available include:
• Biometric visas;
• Biometric passports;
• Biometric residence permits.

Typically, the above documents include a digital photograph which can used for facial recognition technology. Other biometrics captured include fingerprints and irises although this technology is continually evolving.

eGates

ePassport gates are automated self-service barriers located at immigration checkpoints in arrival halls in some airports, offering an alternative to using desks staffed by immigration officers. The gates use facial recognition technology to verify the user's identity against the data stored in the chip in their biometric passport. This technology could, in principle, also be applied to biometric visas and residence permits. eGates are widely deployed in the UK and a number of other countries.

****

Some question explored in this session include:

• Can pre-screening of travellers eventually replace visas?

• Is there a growing need for the use of pre-travel security clearance for passengers -especially for travel by air? How does this differ from obtaining a visa before travel?

• What part should be the role of airlines, shipping companies and international rail companies (often known as carriers) in carrying out pre-clearance?

• What are some of the challenges (privacy, etc) to managing and sharing the data collected by these systems? Should data sharing be encouraged or discouraged between governments? What are the obstacles related to this?

• When, given often limited government capacities and resources, is introduction of one or more of these technologies justified?

• Do these technologies need an established visa and border control infrastructure in place before their introduction?