



Alan Hirsch

January 14th, 2022

How Africa can promote the continental free movement of people

0 comments | 22 shares

Estimated reading time: 5 minutes



The African Union's free movement protocol has the potential to advance the continent's long-term development goals, but ratification since 2018 has been slow by member states. Professor Alan Hirsch addresses the barriers to the protocol's implementation and suggests a path for moving forward.

In Addis Ababa in January 2018, most African countries signed onto the **Free Movement of Persons** protocol. Its rationale was clearly set out:

'the free movement of persons, capital goods and services will promote integration, Pan-Africanism, enhance science, technology, education, research and foster tourism, facilitate inter-African trade and investment, increase remittances within Africa, promote mobility of labour, create employment, improve the standards of living of the people of Africa and facilitate the mobilization and utilization of the human and material resources of Africa in order to achieve self-reliance and development...' (AU, 2018a, p.4)

Research **supports** the developmental premises of the protocol, and its ability to support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The protocol was the codification of the commitment to free movement made by African countries in declaring the establishment of the African Economic Community in Abuja in 1991. Free movement is also one of the key goals for Africa's Agenda 2063. And yet, four years later, though over thirty countries signed the protocol, it has been fully ratified by only several relatively small African states: Rwanda, Niger, Sao Tome, Principe and (in population terms) Mali. At the continental level, progress is much slower than the **progress** on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Writing in 2018 in *The Conversation Africa*, I noted that driving the protocol forward would not be at all straightforward. After **recent research** including fieldwork in Africa and Europe, I identified some revealing patterns of policymaking and implementation and was able to make some suggestions about how to move the process forward.

It was striking that there have been significant advances towards free movement by many African countries on a unilateral basis, adopting a range of innovative visa-openness and **travel document solutions**. But most of the countries at the vanguard of this movement are relatively poor or small island states. Richer and larger African countries are the laggards in opening their borders.

Some regional economic communities, such as the East African Community and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have strong multilateral border opening agreements, though sometimes unevenly implemented, while other regions, notably the Southern African Development Community rely more heavily on bilateral agreements within multilateral frameworks.

Obstacles and opportunities

The reluctance of many African countries, especially the larger, richer countries, derive from several concerns. The first is that they are sensitive to citizens who fear that foreigners might take their economic opportunities. This issue is especially present in highly unequal countries where populist politicians can stir up emotions. But the threat of xenophobic mobilisation can be reduced if some legitimate concerns are addressed.

Many countries in Africa have inadequate systems of civil registration and many have **inadequate identity documentation systems**. This makes it difficult for home countries of migrants to vouch for their citizens to the satisfaction of host countries. Similarly, data on criminal and security issues should be well-managed and shared with partner countries when necessary. Agreement on repatriation processes is also important. All these concerns are opportunities for cooperation in the development of systems and training of officials in poorer countries, ideally as part of regional or continental processes.

Patterns of progress and stasis

At present it seems easier to move forward on a regional basis than at a continental level and smaller groupings seem to be able to move forward more easily. Where there is regional leadership and consistent internal or external support, progress can be made even in fragile states.

Slow progress in the adoption of the continental free movement protocol may be due to misunderstandings or concerns about the implementation process. Some key stakeholders believe that the protocol is not sufficiently understood and that publicising and championing the protocol will lead to more ratifications, but my view is that the way the implementation process is set out in the **implementation roadmap**, which accompanied the protocol, is not clear enough. Clarification and practical commitments to address some of the underlying concerns are more likely to take the process forward.

Manoeuvring forward

In addition to clarifying the implementation roadmap, the continental movement towards free movement could be promoted by encouraging regional groupings and even ad hoc groupings to move forward, even if they are moving ahead of other countries. When groups of countries agree to move forward together within the protocol's framework, they should be expected to mutually open their borders when the preconditions are met. Reasonable preconditions could be specified in a revised roadmap or implementation guide.

Another strategy for driving the process forward, as suggested in recent online forums and in a **paper** by Aphiko, Bissong and Byeirs, is for the free movement process to more explicitly and organisationally link to the free trade (AfCFTA) process.

In addition, the initiative should be proactive to enable poorer countries on the continent to progressively meet the preconditions for higher levels of integration at appropriate standards. This would entail the establishment of senior technical committees of member states and experts at both regional and continental levels to address issues holding the free movement project back. They should set out and promote a process whereby poorer countries are supported to achieve agreed preconditions for integration.

There are already several initiatives around the foundational prerequisites of civil registration and identity documents, such as the World Bank's '**Identification for Development**' for example, that could be harnessed. The EU's work on migration management in Africa could be extended beyond its preoccupation with emigration to Europe, as another example. However, for this to be a part of a credible continental strategy, the programmes should be led and indeed owned by African countries and regional organisations.

Photo by Random Institute on Unsplash

About the author



Alan Hirsch

Alan Hirsch is Emeritus Professor at the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance, UCT, where he was Director from 2011-19. He is a Fellow of Oxford Martin School at Oxford University, a board member of the European Centre for Development Policy Management and on President Ramaphosa's Economic Advisory Council. He has previously managed economic policy in the South Africa Presidency and has been a G20 Sherpa and co-chair of G20 Development Working Group. He has also been a visiting scholar at Harvard Business School, a visiting professor at Maastricht University, the research director for Zambia at the International Growth Centre, and a Bradlow Fellow at the SAIAA. He has published 'Season of Hope - Economic Reform under Mandela and Mbeki' and co-edited 'The Oxford Companion to South African Economics'.