

Far more than an all-Africa passport is needed for a fully-integrated continent

Samuel Baker analyses why an all-Africa passport is the right policy at the wrong time.

After thirty minutes at a standstill in traffic in Kigali on a motorbike, I ask Hodari, my driver what he thinks about the ongoing Africa Union (AU) summit. “It is a very good thing for the country because Rwanda will shine, but for me and other motorists alike, these traffic delays...will leave us with big losses.” For almost a week during the **AU summit in July 2016**, traffic delays across Kigali became the norm as roads were closed to allow AU delegates convenient travel. Although delegates at the newly-built Kigali Convention Centre enjoyed the best the Rwandan capital had to offer, Hodari, like many of his colleagues whose livelihood is transporting people by motorbike, was lamenting the negative impact of the summit on his business. Despite the growing frustration among people about the traffic jams however, media coverage was focused – on the launch of the **AU’s all-Africa passport at the Summit**.

The cross-continent passport initiative is aimed at encouraging the free movement of people to help create jobs, increase intra-African trade and stimulate economic activity therefore boosting economic growth across the continent. Intra-African trade accounts for only 12 per cent of Africa’s total trade; AU policy makers hope that introducing an all-Africa passport which allows free movement of people will help boost intra-Africa trade. The AU also hopes that the African passport will encourage social integration and remove restrictions that have long made it difficult for Africans to feel united. According to Chad president Idriss Deby Itno, the all-Africa passport will help to “**fast track integration** on the continent to achieve socio-economic growth for the wellbeing of the African citizens”. “I feel deeply and proudly a true son of Africa,” President Idriss Deby said on receiving the passport.



Rwanda’s President Paul Kagame, Chad’s President Idriss Deby, and Chairperson of AUC Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma unveiling AU passports

Photo Credit: AU

He was not alone in feeling this way. The sentiment was shared by most Pan-Africanists – at a local Global Shapers debate I attended, the moderator was quick to point how proud she felt on

hearing the news about the new passport. “We can now say that our goal has been achieved,” she noted, referring to the campaign by Global Shapers Kigali for a [visa-free Africa](#).

Proponents of the single African passport are right to argue that integration and free movement of people are very important for Africa, because a more integrated continent where people can move and trade freely would help create employment opportunities and support economic growth. Despite the fact that these factors are key to the continent’s growth, unlike what African leaders seem to suggest, an African passport is not a silver bullet.


Firstly, integration and free movement of people across Africa are not constrained by the lack of an all Africa passport. South Africa is a case in point. In 2015, the [attacks on African foreigners](#) in South Africa point to the fact that divisions in the continent are not caused by a lack of an all-Africa passport. In South Africa, there is more resentment towards African migrants than those from other continents, because locals feel threatened by increasing unemployment and fear losing jobs to fellow Africans who they see as immediate competitors. The all-Africa passport will do little to change this perception but may instead exacerbate tensions. The AU should therefore focus on creating a collective response to tackle unemployment across Africa, and infrastructure is a key factor.

Boosting intra–African trade is commonly cited by proponents of the all-Africa passport, but they fail to acknowledge that most barriers to trade have no relation to the lack of the passport. The continent still suffers from shortage of infrastructure to support the transport of people, goods and businesses. Transport links across different African countries are very poor and in some areas non-existent. A lack of proper transport systems increases the cost of travel, makes it harder for goods to reach markets and also discourages intra–Africa journeys. In order to boost intra-Africa trade, it is therefore crucial to have strong transport links and infrastructure that would facilitate efficient trade, enabling businesses to thrive.

Most African countries are also locked up within [Economic Partnership Agreements](#) with blocs such as the European Union which in most cases undermine efforts for intra–Africa trade. Most of these trade agreements keep Africa dependent on one or two commodities; trade strengthens when countries produce what their trading partners are eager to buy, but with just a handful of exceptions, this is not the case for Africa. It produces what it does not consume and consumes what it does not produce which underscores the need to increase intra–Africa trade, I do not see how an all-Africa passport will solve this.

Having an all-Africa passport may be a good idea, but in this case it seems a premature step that will only benefit the elite who already enjoy cross-continent exposure. Instead of celebrating the passport as a great Pan-Africanist milestone, it would be beneficial for the AU to focus on issues that matter for the ordinary African. Unlike the president of Chad, I do not need a passport to feel a true son of Africa. As a true son of Africa, I am more concerned about refugees from Burundi and [South Sudan](#) finding peaceful shelter in their countries, about African lives being washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean, and thousands of unemployed youths starved of opportunity because of nepotism and corruption across the continent, challenges to which the AU has often paid less attention. An all-Africa passport is the least of the worries for these people and will do little to help.

At the end of our conversation, Hodari noted “A passport means nothing to me, I actually did not need one to travel from my hometown Karongi to Kigali in search of a job, and I know I will probably never own one in my life”. Like him, there are very many other Africans with far more pressing needs than just buying an all-Africa passport which would mean an additional cost for them anyway.

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