



OPENING REMARKS

H.E. DR. WORKNEH GEBEYEHU, IGAD EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

Workshop on a Single IGAD Visa

28th AUGUST, 2023

- My esteemed Members of the IGAD Family;
- Distinguished guests;
- Ladies and gentlemen,

Good Morning,

I **extend my warmest greetings and welcome our, distinguished guests** here to the Secretariat of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the vibrant and peaceful city of Djibouti.

We are assembled today with a **shared purpose**, one that resonates with the aspirations of the women and men from our Member States—a purpose centered around the **realization of a unified electronic visa system for our region.**

In this dynamic and inter-connected world, **the advantages of a unified electronic visa for our IGAD region are obvious, multifaceted and far-reaching.** By facilitating seamless travel, this initiative has the potential to catalyze transformative benefits across many and various dimensions.

Let us look at the **comparative statistics** drawn from sister regions such as ECOWAS and the East African Community (EAC). The ECOWAS region implementation of a visa-free regime for its citizens has shown commendable results. When they implemented it, there was an **immediate and significant increase in intra-regional tourism, with an estimated rise of over 40% in travel within the region.** Furthermore, the ECOWAS region experienced an **impressive 15% boost in trade volumes** following the implementation of a unified visa scheme, reinforcing the argument that easier movement of people correlates positively with trade expansion.

Similarly, within the East African Community, **where an East African Tourist Visa has been operational, we have witnessed noteworthy outcomes.** This visa has been an essential catalyst for tourism growth, with tourists exploring multiple member countries. This approach has resulted in increased revenues, employment opportunities, and exposure of the unique cultural heritage of each nation.

In light of these successes, the potential gains for our IGAD region are undeniable. The unified electronic visa will not only stimulate tourism but also invigorate cross-border trade. As exemplified by unified visa regimes elsewhere, **it is reasonable to expect that a streamlined visa process will trigger a surge in trade activities among our Member States.** This, in turn, can boost the socioeconomic development of our region.

Furthermore, a unified visa approach will **foster skill transfers and capital flows.** By simplifying the process for skilled individuals to collaborate across borders, we can tap into a larger pool of expertise, thus accelerating our region's technological advancement and capacity building. Additionally, the easing of visa restrictions can facilitate capital investments, creating an environment conducive to economic growth and innovation.

At the heart of our mandate, vision and mission as IGAD is lies the objective of regional integration. This unified electronic visa aligns seamlessly with our core principles, and it shall **bring to life our policy instruments such as protocols of free movement and transhumance.** Moreover, it provides a **structured framework for the formalization of informal cross-border trade,** promoting fairness, transparency, and inclusive economic participation.

As we embark on this transformative journey, we must acknowledge the lessons from successful visa initiatives globally, as we have done from the Schengen visa in Europe, the KAZA visa in Southern Africa, and the aforementioned cases from ECOWAS and EAC. **These success stories are not merely blueprints; they are tangible evidence that our collective vision is achievable.**

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, **I invite you to imagine with me an IGAD region where entrepreneurs move effortlessly to seize opportunities, where researchers collaborate seamlessly on ground-breaking projects, where tourists freely visit all our diverse landscapes and attractions, and where students experience a borderless exchange of knowledge.** This is the vision that the unified electronic visa propels us toward—an interconnected and prosperous IGAD.

Even as we embark on this transformative journey, let us acknowledge the challenges that lie ahead. **A unified visa shall not work in an atmosphere where peace and security is absent.** This remains our priority for the benefit of our people and our region. Nevertheless, let these challenges remain a catalyst for our unwavering determination. Let us embrace this opportunity to shape a region that radiates unity, progress, and shared values.

I extend my call to each of you: **contribute your expertise, insights, and enthusiasm to this noble undertaking.** Let us, united, make the IGAD region a haven for economic dynamism, cultural exchange, and regional cohesion. With your collective efforts, we will usher in a new era, setting the stage for a more promising future.

With these thoughts, **I officially inaugurate this workshop** and eagerly anticipate the outcomes of your insightful discussions and fruitful deliberations.

Thank you very much.