EALA roots for adoption of single tourist visa in all EAC members

By James Karuhanga

The East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) has urged the East African Community (EAC) Council of Ministers to fast-track the ratification of the Protocol on Tourism and Wildlife Management to facilitate implementation of an inclusive East African Single Tourist Visa.

This was one of the recommendations in a report presented last week by the Assembly's Chair of the Agriculture, Tourism and Natural Resources committee, MP Christophe Bazivamo (Rwanda).

Only Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya have a common $100 East Africa Tourist Visa (EATV) that was launched by their respective Heads of State in 2014.

Two years ago, the trio waived individual visa fees to allow easy access to the region's cultural and environmental diversity. Barrier-free and Tanzania are not part of the arrangement while South Sudan, the latest entrant into the now-six nation bloc, is also yet to join the initiative.

"In order to promote tourism across the bloc, all Partner States should implement the Single Tourist Visa," Bazivamo said.

As a group, together with Rwanda and Uganda are currently building the East African Tourism Portal which aims to popularise the region as a single tourism destination. Kenya together with Rwanda and Uganda are undertaking uniform EAC destination branding at the key entry points.

Bazivamo, however, noted there are challenges with the visa, especially from the Kenyan side.

"Some [Kenyan] tourists are not yet aware of the existence of the common tourist visa. Moreover, the fast-tracking of the Republic of Tanzania is also a challenge for Kenya since most tourists coming to Kenya often have Tanzania on the list of their destinations."

Therefore, the three countries implemented the single tourist visa using the principle of variable geometry, which refers to the flexibility in the process of implementing projects and programmes in the integration process and the possible progress of the activities in cooperation by some of the partner states as opposed to all partner states simultaneously.

Meanwhile, Bazivamo's committee also urged the EAC Council of Ministers to put in place a fund for interconnectivity which allows Partner States to track movements of tourists and revenues from tourism.

Hotel classification

Bazivamo also addressed matters regarding hotel classification in the region.

He said hoteliers should contribute to a love in funding the hotel classification programme as it facilitates them in marketing their businesses, regional hotels and restaurants should be included in the exercise; while the hotel staff and train personnel to execute classification of hotels. The committee also pointed to the need for criteria for hotel classification in Partner States, to be benchmarked on international standards and continually updated to address developments.

Bazivamo added: "The Secretariat needs to form an EAC Hotel classification pool to assess hotels in all EAC Partner States rather than local assessors to work at local level. The outcome would be more credible. Qualified assessors should be part of this regional pool."

The oversight report follows an on-site assessment of selected hotels in Partner States by the EALA committee.

The EAC Treaty states that Partner States shall establish a common code of practice and travel operators, standardise hotel classification and have to be professional standards of agents in the bloc's tourism and travel industry.

Partner States are also obliged to develop a regional strategy for tourism promotion whereby individual efforts are reinforced by regional action.

In 2009, the EAC came up with common criteria to classify hotels, lodges and restaurants in Partner States.

Meanwhile, MP Musaura Tiperu (Uganda) said: "There is need for more information and data on tourism to ensure visitors benefit from many tourism products as possible."

Tourism is a leading driver of economic growth in the bloc. In the past four years, tourism revenues doubled in Rwanda, having contributed 9.2 per cent to the country's GDP.

Tourism is also a key economic sector in Kenya, contributing about 10 per cent to the GDP and earning about KShs 84.6 billion in 2015.

It employs about 195,000 people in the modern wage sector and about 500,000 in the informal sector, accounting for about nine per cent of total employment.

"Tourism also has a huge multiplier effect and stimulates growth in other sectors such as agriculture, transportation and construction due to its dependence on these other sectors," Bazivamo said.

In Uganda, the sector brings in almost 10 per cent of the GDP and has emerged as a top foreign exchange earner. It contributes more than $1 billion to the Ugandan economy, representing 26 per cent of exports. In 2013, tourism directly created 500,000 jobs and indirectly supported 400,000 jobs in Uganda.

In Tanzania, the sector contributed more than 27 per cent of the total GDP between 2005 and 2014. It also helped increase the number of international visitor arrivals from 562,807 in 2004 to 1,371,182 in 2015 with the total earnings from tourist activities increasing from $74.6 million in 2004 to $190.1 million in 2015.

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