

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



Tourists walk up the Virunga National Park in northern Rwanda. File.

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. Burundi 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.

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

Bazivamo, however, noted there are challenges here and there, especially from the Kenyan side.

"Some [Kenyan] tourists are not yet aware of the existence of the common tourist visa. Moreover, non-inclusion 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."

The three countries implemented the single tourist visa using the principle of variable ge-

ometry, which refers to the flexibility in the process of implementing projects and programmes in the integration process and the possible progression of the activities in co-operation 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 in funding the hotel classification programme as it facilitates them in marketing their businesses; regional restaurants should be included in the exercise; while the Secretariat 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 new developments.

Bazivamo added: "The Secretariat needs to form an EAC pool of assessors 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-spot assessment of selected hotels in Partner States by the EALA committee.

The EAC Treaty states that Partner States shall establish a common code of private and public tour and travel operators, standardise hotel classifications and harmonise 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 Nusura Tiperu (Uganda) said: "There is need for more information and data on tourism to ensure visitors benefit from as 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, the lawmaker said pointing to an increase from \$201.7 in 2010 to \$318.8 in 2015.

Tourism remains the leading foreign exchange earner for 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 the country KShs 84.6 billion in 2015.

It employs about 250,000 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, handicraft and construction due to its dependence on those other sectors," Tiperu 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 to more than 17 per cent of the total GDP between 2009 and 2014. It also helped increase the number of international visitor arrivals from 582,807 in 2004 to 1,137,182 in 2015 with the total earnings from tourist activities increasing from \$746.2 million in 2004 to \$1,901.10 million in 2015.

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Done at Kigali, on 30/08/ 2016


Rutuku Richard
Corporate Services Division Manager

