

Africa, the Silenced Giant: But What If MIGRATION Could Change That?



By Lessina-Mariah Mulenga

Let's be honest.

If you're African, you know the wise man is often silenced at a funeral. It's not that he doesn't know what to say. It's that his voice is too quiet next to the man who bought the coffin, paid for the food, and is now directing the program. His wisdom gets overshadowed by wealth, presence replaced with power.

And Africa? Well, we know where we stand in that metaphor.

But what if we already had the answer? What if Africa has held the key — but just didn't know how to turn it?

Let's talk about the **AU Protocol on Free Movement**.

Now wait — before you close this screen and say, “*Not another AU Protocol debate...*”

Just give me a minute.

Because what if I told you this protocol — in its current form — is a **dead document**? What if I told you that maybe... **we need to not necessarily throw it away, but just flip one thing and start over?**

Before I explain why I believe that, let's first talk about **what the AU Protocol on Free Movement is, where we are**, and most importantly... **what it could be** — *if we flipped just one thing.*

What the AU Protocol on Free Movement Actually Is

The AU Protocol on Free Movement was adopted in 2018 with a big ambition: To make it possible for Africans to **move, stay, work, and build businesses across the continent**, regardless of their passport.

Essentially, it asked: *Why are we strangers to each other on our own continent?*

It laid out three core rights:

1. **Right of Entry** – Visa-free access to other AU countries for up to 90 days.
2. **Right of Residence** – Permission to live in another African state if certain legal conditions are met.
3. **Right of Establishment** – The ability to start a business or profession in another AU country.

Sounds like freedom, right?

It was designed to be rolled out gradually, beginning with **visa-free entry**, then **residency**, and eventually **the right to establish businesses or work**.

The goal? A more **integrated, mobile, and economically united** Africa.

What It Could Be If Fully Implemented

For decades, African nations have sought a path to deeper economic integration, shared prosperity, and continental unity. The dream of a borderless Africa has often been framed in political or cultural terms. But what if we shifted the lens? What if migration — or more precisely, the freer movement of people — is not just mindless human wandering, but an untapped economic engine?

In a world restructured by globalisation, regions that have embraced the strategic value of mobility are thriving. And Africa, with its youthful population and intra-continental trade potential, has everything to gain.

The European Union offers a compelling case study. Through the Schengen Agreement and broader free movement policies, EU citizens can live, work, and invest across member states with minimal friction. *The results?*

- A €106 billion boost to GDP (2017 estimates) linked to internal mobility
- Up to 6% drops in unemployment in key economies due to the filling of labour shortages
- Millions of cross-border workers contributing to local industries and public systems
- Enhanced innovation and business creation, with over 40% of Fortune 500 founders being immigrants

This isn't just about ease of travel. It's about unlocking productivity, diversifying skills, expanding consumer markets, and deepening trade.

Closer to home, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) has pioneered Africa's longest-standing free movement protocol. Since 1979, citizens of ECOWAS States have had the right to enter, reside, and establish businesses across borders within the region.

The effects?

- Stronger intra-regional trade and remittances
- A growing informal labour exchange system
- More integrated border communities

If the protocol was actually implemented, it could:

- **Unlock Africa's labour force** by filling urgent skills gaps across borders
- **Facilitate intra-African trade** under AfCFTA through people movement, not just goods
- **Enable investment migration**, startup expansion, and entrepreneurship
- **Strengthen cross-border industries** like agriculture, healthcare, logistics, and ICT
- **Ease diaspora reintegration**, opening channels for talent and capital to return home

In short? It could be the infrastructure that powers **all other infrastructure**.

Because economies don't move unless **people do**.

Now, you may be asking — isn't that what AfCFTA is already doing?

Let's clear that up.

AfCFTA (African Continental Free Trade Area) is a powerful game-changer — but it focuses on the **movement of goods, services, and capital**, not full person-to-person mobility.

It does make allowances for businesspeople to travel temporarily for trade-related purposes. But AfCFTA does **not guarantee the right to reside, work, or build a business** in another country. It opens trade — not doors.

That's where the **AU Protocol on Free Movement** fills the gap. It's the missing half of the strategy.

Because while you can click and ship across continents these days, let's not forget:

- Infrastructure still needs on-site engineers
- Farms need agricultural experts to train local growers
- Clinics need nurses and specialists who can serve in communities
- Innovation thrives where people share space, not just screens

Technology lets goods move fast. But **people still build economies**.

In short: **AfCFTA unlocks the trade lanes. The Free Movement Protocol empowers the traders.**

Together, they're not redundant — they're a REVOLUTION.

So, Where Are We Now?

Here's the hard truth:

- Only **4 countries** have ratified the protocol — we need **15** for it to take effect.

- **32 countries** have signed it, which in diplomacy means, “We like the idea... but not today.”
- There’s **no digital migration system** yet in place to make any of it real.

And behind the signatures and seals lie deeper fears:

- “What if one country floods another with economic migrants?”
- “What if conflict spills over from fragile neighbours?”
- “What if richer countries carry all the weight?”

All valid questions. All fair fears. But none without solutions.

A Thought Worth Flipping the Script

Even a blind man can see that the **AU Protocol on Free Movement**, in its current form, might never leave the shelf.

Why hasn’t it taken off yet?

Let’s call it what it is:

- **Sovereignty nerves** – Some leaders fear that free movement means losing control over who crosses their borders.
- **Uneven economies** – Prosperous countries worry about being overwhelmed; less developed ones fear losing talent.
- **Digital gaps** – Unlike the EU, Africa lacks a shared biometric system to track and secure migration in real-time.
- **Security concerns** – Civil unrest and porous borders raise flags around crime, trafficking, and social instability.

- **Legal inconsistencies** – Different countries have different laws. Aligning them isn't easy.
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While we can argue all the challenges, let's speak plain truths here: **as long as we remain poor, we remain silenced.**

Remember the African funeral? Even if the poor man has a better plan, his voice doesn't carry. He isn't feeding the mourners.

But what if a simple flip in the African Union Protocol on Free Movement could help Africa claim its place in the world as an equal, respected, and dignified partner?

While the AU protocol on free movement plans on a roll out phase starting with the **right of entry**, followed by **residence**, and eventually **establishment**,

ECOWAS chose the opposite path. **They started with the right of establishment** — and they made it work. This meant, *Lets Talk Business first, how does your free movement benefit my pocket?*

The AU could adopt a similar strategy. The Right of Entry cannot be rolled out alone, but alongside the Right of Establishment.

If movement across Africa wasn't about wandering **but about Investments, Innovation and Building**, the AU Protocol would most likely be embraced.

Imagine a system where Africans didn't just move — they moved **for a purpose**:

- To invest . To Trade . To start businesses . To innovate . To upskill and transfer knowledge

And what if only this category was afforded free movement as envisaged under the AU Protocol?

Purpose-driven mobility.

ECOWAS rolled out its free movement policy starting with skilled professionals and investors. The idea? **Add value first. Move second.**

And here's where it gets real:

- Each African country can publish a list of **critical skills gaps** that need to be filled.
- Governments can clearly define their **priority investment sectors**.
- The creation of a database on migration for businesses and investments and skills.
- Immigration and investment authorities can be empowered to ensure that **only those meeting these criteria benefit from free cross-border access**.

Free movement becomes a channel for:

- **Intra-African foreign direct investment (FDI)**
- **Skills mobility where it's needed most**
- **Research and innovation partnerships that drive industrial growth**

Migration becomes about value addition, not border drama.

And maybe — just maybe — this approach would make countries more willing to ratify the protocol. Because now, it's not just about “open borders.” It's about **open doors for builders, business and economic development.**

Final Thoughts

For generations, Africans have watched their potential boxed in — by colonial borders, economic ceilings, and inherited limitations.

Even today, our best minds often move *away*, not *across*; our brightest ideas bloom in exile.

We have the vision. We have the talent.

But we are still too often seated at the back of the table of our own development — not because we lack ideas, but because we lack mobility, infrastructure, and voice.

So yes, this Protocol is about visas and policies —

But more than that, it's a blueprint for Dignity.

It's a declaration that Africa is no longer waiting to be invited into the future.

We are building it.

#LessinaMariahGuides #ForTheAfricanDream #AUProtocol

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