

SADC economic future takes flight – Aviation leaders call for liberalisation of skies

Onerous aviation regulations, stifling visa requirements, and a lack of cross-industry collaboration are hampering the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) economic potential. This was the resounding message from aviation experts at the recent Southern African Industrialisation Forum (SAIF) held in Sandton.



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"We can talk about a free trade area and regional integration, but if people and goods can't move efficiently, it's all just empty promises," asserted Natalia Rosa, SADC Business Council Tourism Alliance lead. "The current state of aviation in SADC is a massive goal for our economies."

Panellists highlighted challenges that airlines, investors, and travellers face within the region:

Regulatory bottlenecks

Fragmented regulations, inconsistent bilateral agreements, and disharmonised licencing requirements (e.g., for pilots) create unnecessary complexity and operational costs for airlines.

Achieving greater connectivity within the SADC aviation industry requires harmonising regulations across countries, explained Dr Namhla Tshetu, Airlink executive manager of corporate services.

She pointed out that while protecting a country's sovereignty is important when regulations are misaligned, it hinders collaboration on regional routes. Overcoming this requires finding common ground, using global standards and most importantly, considering airline perspectives when formulating bilateral agreements or policies that impact operations.

"Without substantial involvement of airlines in drafting aviation rules, suboptimal regulations often emerge that inhibit cross-border operations – whether due to protectionist agendas or simply lack of practical industry input. Rectifying this limited participation will be integral to unlocking connectivity and forging viable, integrated air networks across the SADC region."

Visa restrictions

Onerous visa requirements for many SADC nationals travelling within the region impede tourism, business, and the free movement of labour. Limited visa openness also restricts SADC's competitiveness as a travel and investment destination.

"If Africans cannot travel within Africa themselves freely, everything else that we are saying here is a pipe dream. How is it possible that today as we speak in 2024, up to 45% of African countries need visas to go to each other's country when 23 of these African countries give Americans entry without a visa?" said Aaron Munetsi, CEO of the Airline Association of Southern Africa.

Limited collaboration

Silos often exist between aviation, tourism, and other sectors, hindering effective route development and a cohesive tourism product offering. Collaboration is key to addressing issues around route sustainability and promoting the region internationally.

Effective route development involves more than just launching new routes; it requires collaborating with stakeholders to support the expansion and sustainability of existing routes over time, explained John Howell, CEO and founder of AviaDev Africa. This could mean increasing flight frequency, passenger numbers, or aircraft gauges to continue stimulating demand.

"Airlines like Airlink, for example, with a diverse fleet suited for 'thin routes' have an advantage here, whereas an airline like FlySafair running large 737-800s cannot viably serve some lower-volume regional routes without 5th Freedom Rights. The target for increasing 5th freedom route proportions is from 15% to 30% by 2025, while the goal is leveraging liberalisation to drive economic growth through aviation."

Working in silos is the biggest challenge for the sector, added George Mothema, CEO of the Board of Airline Representatives of South Africa. "Regarding bilateral negotiations, we would like to see the airlines be more involved, as they are a critical player in the sector."

High taxes and fees

Excessive charges, airport taxes, and fuel levies hinder SADC's regional competitiveness, deterring airlines and inflating costs for travellers and businesses.

A key priority of the air access study being conducted by the SADC Secretariat is pursuing affordable aviation taxes and charges.

Currently, prohibitively high airfares are hindering tourism growth across the region. For governments trying to promote their country as an attractive destination, unaffordable flights pose a major barrier limiting visitor volume and spend. Without viable air transportation options, tourism sectors cannot thrive.

Mindset shift

All stakeholders, both governments and industry, need to embrace aviation's interconnectedness with other economic sectors, seeing the bigger picture of regional development. Aviation is not a luxury. It's the economic lifeblood of a modern region and harmonisation is now needed for regulations, open skies to boost competition, and a regional visa scheme to unlock SADC's people's and its markets' full potential.

"We are not a standalone industry. When you see an aircraft, there are thousands of other components that are involved, not only in the actual operation of the aircraft itself but in terms of the service level that goes into that aircraft. It starts with you and I sitting here. Do you know where the journey of the airline starts? It starts when you check out of the hotel," Munetsi added.

Experts and panellists at the forum emphasised the need for comprehensive policy reforms, with the adoption of the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) initiative, public-private partnerships for infrastructure development, and creating a conducive environment for airlines to operate seen as essential steps.

"Collaborative problem-solving is indispensable to tackling the multifaceted challenges in creating world-class aviation infrastructure across SADC," Rosa emphasised. "Our vision is of a truly integrated network where goods and people can move seamlessly across African skies which requires bringing all the critical players to the table: national tourism organisations, regulators, airlines and private sector tourism stakeholders."

"This is something we intend to do in conjunction with AviaDev at its conference in Namibia in June. With the unified backing of political leadership and continued private sector engagement, SADC may finally be poised for take-off."

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