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Western visas a nightmare for African academics

A very senior colleague with whom I had been working on a multi-country research project was over a year ago denied a visa by the same funding government/country, which had let him in on four previous occasions. If granted, this would have been the fifth time he was getting a visa to this country in the last three years, for an academic and research related visit.

On all the four occasions, he was being invited by the same university for the annual consortium meeting. And as a responsible global citizen, he would honour the visa conditions and return home immediately after the meetings even when he had more time on his visa.

This is not an isolated incident, but in fact it is becoming a trend for the so-called developed world to make mobility hard for academics from the 'developing' world, especially from the global south.

Last October, the UK’s Guardian newspaper reported that the World Health Organisation (WHO) expressed dismay about the impact of the United Kingdom government’s immigration policy on international academic co-operation after several foreign scholars were denied visas to attend a conference. The same newspaper had reported the previous year (2017) that 14 African academics were denied visas to an international Africa Studies Conference in the UK. The conference was about Africa and needed these Africans to be present, so denying visas to the key participants was self-defeating. Interestingly, a sizeable number of these visas are fully or co-funded by these same countries that deny African academics visas.

The most given reasons for visa denials are interesting as well. "Not funding enough personal funds." "Don’t look like you’ll return." "Do not have strong family ties back home."

Sadly, these same reasons are also given to people who have previously travelled to these countries and returned home soon after accomplishing their usually short stays, as per the visa conditions. Or when visas are given, they are too short and one entry, even when one gets an invitation spelling out that he/she is in a long-term collaboration that benefits both the host country and the visitor's country and institutions.

To be fair, it is not only Western countries that are behaving this way, but also some Asian and African countries such as even our own South Africa.

To add salt to injury, if I may use that term, visa application is increasingly becoming cumbersome and exploitative. Except for the United States, many western countries are shutting down consular services at their country diplomatic missions preferring regional hubs instead, for example, for Uganda, Nairobi in Kenya. This requires either counterfeting passports plus supporting original documents or travelling to these hubs or both, which often comes with catastrophic financial implications, time wastage, and a few times loss of documents.

The processing times are also unnecessarily long and often disrupting other travel plans of passport holders. Worth mentioning here are the Swiss and some of their sister Schengen countries.

The Swiss stand out because they are the headquarters of important UN offices, especially the World Health Organisation (WHO), meaning that many academics, government and CSO staff or private sector travel there often.

But recently the Swiss government stopped issuing visas in Kampala and instead one has to fly or take a bus to Nairobi, with all the associated costs and inconveniences.

With the world now seen as a global village, there are lots of collaborations in all spheres including the world of academia. With many international collaborations happening around the world, it means that professors or academics are destined to regularly travel, making ease to movement a very critical factor in these engagements.

Sadly, this ease of movement currently only favours academics from the global north. Many simply walk in, pay and enter.

In my opinion, regular African travellers, who go all the way to apply for visas need to be rewarded accordingly with a little bit of ease in accessing them.

What the ‘developed world’ is missing, however, is that the academics whose travel is being made difficult are substantially contributing to the discovery of solutions and innovations to the current global challenges in this supposed global village that we are occupying, making them global citizens.

We are in a global village where epidemics and financial crises — among other challenges — know no borders and require north-south collaborations in research and development. However, this may not be possible, if the global north continues to sow detection, disillusionment, embarrassment, disappointment, humiliation and financial loss among academics from the global south.

In addition, we know that the west is trying to support us to solve our problems of under development, but they make it difficult by limiting travels for their collaborators hence, expensive or time wasting.

While we appreciate the fear that come with global movement, the global north can do better, with all the improved technology now in place.

For example, there is enough data on those academics who have regularly travelled and returned home. In fact, they should be given 10+ years multiple entry visas.

I also find it reasonable to have visa processing hubs in countries — similar to the UNDP co-ordinating role of UN agencies in every country — as opposed to individual western countries having hubs as they have done in Africa.

This will save African academics and other travelling Africans the precious time and financial resources ‘donated’ to the already ‘developed’ world’s informal of non-refundable visa processing fees and related costs.

The time for the global shift is now. African governments must include these issues in their engagements with the west, and not leave it to individuals. We must save costs, time, and reduce unnecessary inconveniences in travel.

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