



Policy Brief: Improving Visa Policies for African Innovators in International Cooperation Projects

Untransparent and unfair visa policies are undermining international cooperation efforts by restricting access to key opportunities, particularly for African innovators. These policies disproportionately affect women, especially young women, creating systemic barriers to participation and collaboration.



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Visa Policy Challenges in Europe–Africa Cooperation

The Global Innovation Gathering e.V. (GiG) has a decade of experience hosting members from around the world at a Berlin-based event, re:publica. Every year, some speakers face rejected visa applications without proper explanation, particularly young women, while others encounter severe difficulties throughout the visa application process. Over the past three years, GiG was one of 9 consortium members implementing the Horizon 2020-funded project mAkE, a program designed to foster collaboration and innovation between African and European makers. However, the same obstacles repeatedly emerged during the project's lifespan, with participants struggling to obtain visas to attend key events and co-creation programs.

These challenges were not just individual setbacks. They directly hindered the project's outcomes, preventing critical collaboration opportunities and undermining the objectives of EU-funded development programs. This policy brief is aimed at EU policymakers and encourages them to address the contradiction between the EU's support for cross-continental cooperation and the restrictive visa practices of its member states.



Lessons Learned from the mAkE Project:

The Impact of Visa Obstacles on Cooperation

The mAkE project aimed to establish sustainable economic relations between makerspaces engaged in distributed manufacturing and innovation. Its activities included co-creation workshops, venture-building programs, and events where African and European makers could network, showcase their work, and develop partnerships. One of the key activities was the Maker-in-Residency (MiR) Program, designed to create synergies by bringing together innovators working on hardware solutions and supporting them in advancing their projects to market readiness. However, throughout the project, visa challenges consistently obstructed participation. These challenges can be grouped into three key areas:

1. Limited Access to Visa Appointments and Long Wait Times

In many countries, applicants experienced extreme difficulty securing visa appointments within a reasonable timeframe. Appointments for Schengen visas were often controlled by private third-party entities that charged fees, exacerbating the financial burden for applicants. Some applicants had to wait months, missing short- and mid-term opportunities like conferences and fundraising events, which typically require flexible planning. For example, a maker from Cameroon missed three major events over the course of the project due to the inability to secure timely appointments or have their visas issued on time, despite submitting complete documentation.

2. Prolonged Processing Times

Even when applicants secured appointments and submitted their applications months before the planned travel dates, processing times were often excessively long. This caused significant delays in project activities and missed opportunities for cross-border collaboration. For instance, a Nigerian maker was unable to join the MiR program because their visa approval process extended beyond the program's start date, despite their early application and the submission of all required materials. The prolonged process undermined the project's ability to bring together diverse perspectives and expertise.

3. Lack of Transparency and Unexplained Rejections

Applicants frequently faced visa rejections without adequate justification or detailed explanations. Many of these rejections occurred even when applicants provided the necessary documentation and the project staff directly communicated with embassies to verify the purpose of travel. Alarming, women applicants seemed to be disproportionately affected by visa denials. Efforts to appeal these decisions were often unsuccessful, as applicants and project team members could not obtain responses from embassies or receive guidance through official channels. This lack of transparency created frustration and resulted in significant financial losses and missed opportunities.

The consequences of these visa challenges have been substantial: Both applicants and the project incurred significant costs related to securing appointments, navigating lengthy application processes, and addressing rejected applications. The time spent on these issues diverted attention from core project objectives. Further, many African makers could not attend key events and engage in collaborative activities that were essential to building sustainable economic and creative partnerships. The delays caused by visa-related obstacles hindered the timely implementation of the project, reducing its overall effectiveness and the long-term development benefits it aimed to deliver. **By limiting access to critical collaboration opportunities, restrictive visa policies directly counteract the EU's goals of fostering international cooperation and sustainable development.**



Policy Recommendations

To address these issues and enable future cooperation projects to thrive, we recommend the following policy improvements:



Implement Transparent Systems for Visa Appointment Distribution:

Visa appointment systems should be transparent and directly managed by embassies or consulates, without the involvement of third-party entities charging additional fees. Applicants should have equal access to appointments through a fair and publicly accessible system.



Ensure Clear and Digital Visa Application Processes:

Visa application procedures should be streamlined and digitized, allowing applicants to submit all necessary documentation online. The system should include application tracking features so applicants can monitor the status of their applications and plan accordingly.



Provide Transparency Regarding Rejected Applications:

Visa denials should be accompanied by explanations specifying the reasons for rejection and any missing documentation or errors. This would enable applicants to address issues in future applications and improve the overall trust in the system.



Address Gender Disparities in Visa Processing:

Given the disproportionate rejection rates among women, EU member states should conduct a gender-based review of visa policies and processing practices. This aligns with the principles of feminist foreign policy, which seek to address systemic gender inequities and promote inclusion.



Incorporate Feminist Foreign Policy Values:

Visa policies should reflect the EU's commitment to feminist foreign policy by promoting inclusivity, transparency, and fairness in decision-making. Embassies should receive training on these values and be held accountable for ensuring that visa applicants are treated equitably.



Facilitate Visa Support for EU-Funded Programs:

A special streamlined visa pathway should be established for participants in EU-funded programs, recognizing the strategic importance of their participation. This could involve pre-approved lists or expedited processing for applicants directly involved in development cooperation projects.

By addressing these challenges, EU policymakers can ensure that visa policies no longer hinder international cooperation but instead act as enablers of global innovation and development partnerships.

MAKE

The make consortium is committed to continuing its work with makerspaces in Africa and Europe as well as with different Right to Repair and digital sustainability and promoting projects at the intersection of the Right to Repair and distributed manufacturing. Consortium members are continuing to develop relevant infrastructure and knowledge, for example the Internet of Production Alliance is currently designing a new standard for open electronics design-data, that will focus on design information and documentation of electronics components, assemblies and sub-assemblies.



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