

Unlocking Africa's Aviation Potential Through Regional Connectivity and Integration

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Mitchell Aghatise¹ | 21 September 2026

The Problem Became Personal

1. Before turning to continental policy, I should begin with the immediate reason this subject has become personal. I ought, all things being equal, to have been in Sal, Cape Verde today, ready to deliver this paper. I am genuinely gutted that I am not there. The irony is difficult to miss: the very subject I was asked to address is the same problem that prevented me from travelling. That problem is interconnectivity.
2. The most direct-looking option was to travel through Morocco. It involved a gruelling layover, however, and the dates eventually available did not match the period I needed. Europe then appeared operationally easier, but an intervening trip meant that I had already surrendered my passport for a European visa. A recently available Lagos-Dakar option (then onward to Sal) seemed promising, yet Dakar did not solve the journey. I would still have had to make my own way to Cape Verde on a separate, non-daily flight. Busy professionals know how one unavoidable intervening commitment can turn an apparently workable itinerary into an impossibility.
3. The decisive uncertainty was further compounded by (seeing as my international passport was unavailable) whether my ECOWAS travel document would get me into Senegal for the onward trip to Cape Verde. I understood that Senegal might not recognise the document in the circumstances; a friend had encountered the same practical difficulty. I do not present that personal experience as a definitive statement of Senegalese law. I present it as evidence of an operational failure: an African citizen should not have to gamble a professional journey on whether a regional identity document will be accepted at a transit airport when the rule is not clear, harmonised and reliably implemented. That is the point at which identity, immigration and connectivity meet.
4. In that sense, the problem became a gift dressed up as a problem. It supplied the best possible example of the contrast this paper explores. While trying to pass the time, I watched an online creator document a seven-day itinerary touching the Vatican, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Austria, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Portugal and Brazil, using trains, cars, aircraft and even walking. I do not use that video as a statistical source. It was simply a vivid reminder that dense, integrated transport systems convert distance into opportunity. Africa should be able to do the same within Africa.

Connectivity is Economic Infrastructure

5. This experience should not be dismissed as a bad itinerary or a speaker's inconvenience. It is a small, concrete example of a larger economic problem. If I cannot get in and out of Cape Verde without a chain of fragile connections, how easily can an investor travel, a lawyer close a transaction, a technician service equipment, a student attend a programme, a doctor reach a patient, or a high-value consignment reach a market? The loss, I posit, is the investment that does not happen, the contract signed elsewhere, the perishable goods that are not moved, the tourism booking that is abandoned, and the professional relationship that never matures.

¹ Mitchell Aghatise is a Managing Counsel in the Lagos offices of Olaniwun Ajayi LP.

6. Aviation is particularly important to the AfCFTA because air transport carries the people, time-sensitive goods and services that make a trade agreement real. Roads and rail remain indispensable, but the geography of Africa, its island economies and the long distances between commercial centres mean that aviation is not a luxury layer placed on top of development. It is part of the basic infrastructure of a functioning continental market. The World Bank describes air transport as a driver of growth that integrates economies, supports trade and tourism, and requires investment not only in aircraft but also in policy, safety, infrastructure, institutions and skills².
7. The conference theme speaks of resilience, sustainable development, military and security stability, and economic stability. Connectivity sits underneath each of those goals. A connected region can move emergency personnel, medical supplies and humanitarian assistance. It can diversify supply chains and reduce dependence on a single external hub. It can support regional diplomacy and security cooperation. It can also make tourism and business less vulnerable to a disruption in one route. The economic case is therefore strong, but the resilience case is equally strong.

From Commitments to Implementation

8. Once connectivity is understood as infrastructure, the next question is why a continent with substantial policy ambition still produces journeys that fail at the first connection. Africa has not lacked legal commitments. The Single African Air Transport Market, or SAATM, was designed to create a unified air transport market and promote connectivity between African capitals.³ The Yamoussoukro Decision already established the legal direction: liberalise market access, permit greater traffic rights, encourage fair competition and move away from protection that keeps fares high and traffic low. The World Bank's work on Open Skies for Africa makes the point clearly: liberalisation can improve safety, lower fares and increase traffic when accompanied by credible oversight and competition⁴.
9. The problem, in the view of this author, is that legal commitment is being mistaken for operational completion. We have overflogged SAATM as a slogan. What is now required is implementation capital and measurable delivery. A passenger does not experience a treaty; a passenger experiences a route, a fare, a departure time, an identity check, an airport transfer, a payment system and a safe arrival. The implementation gap is where AfCFTA will either become a lived market or remain an institutional aspiration.
10. The point about identity documents deserves a comparator. The European Union is useful not because Africa should copy its institutional history wholesale, but because it shows what a trusted mobility regime feels like in practice. An EU national can generally travel across the 27 EU countries, and the wider associated area, with a valid passport or national identity card; internal border checks are ordinarily absent, subject to safeguards and temporary controls.⁵ Africa requires its own solution, but the principle is transferable: a trusted identity document, a predictable legal regime and interoperable systems can turn a collection of states into a usable travel area. A regional citizen should not be treated as an entirely foreign passenger at every African airport when the journey falls within an agreed mobility zone.

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<https://www.worldbank.org/ext/en/topic/transport/air-transport>
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/transport/publication/open-skies-for-africa>
ibid
https://europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/travel/entry-exit/eu-citizen/index_en.htm

A Financing Architecture for Movement

11. The implementation gap is also a financing gap. Before proposing a funding mechanism, it is important to distinguish private operation, public support and state ownership.
12. Generally speaking, a private airline will ordinarily deploy aircraft where demand and yield justify it; a state may nevertheless regard a route as strategically valuable because it connects an island, opens tourism, supports regional trade or provides resilience. That is why governments have often created or recapitalised national airlines.
13. In principle, a state-owned carrier can provide patient capital, preserve strategic routes and anchor a hub. In practice, ownership can also invite political appointments, non-commercial routes, weak procurement, accumulated debt and repeated bailouts.
14. The issue, therefore, is not whether the state has a role. It does. The issue is the instrument and the discipline attached to it. As this paper sees it, public finance should deliberately buy connectivity outcomes, not simply place a flag on an aircraft. Afreximbank and the African Development Bank are already doing important work, and the AfDB announced an Africa-wide aviation financing platform in March 2026, including pilot transactions for fleet renewal and aviation infrastructure.⁶ That may be the opening salvo for a coordinated and transparent financing architecture.
15. This paper proposes, if we intend to be serious about interconnectivity: an African Connectivity and Fleet Renewal Facility, jointly anchored by the AfDB and Afreximbank, with policy alignment from the AfCFTA Secretariat and technical participation from the African Civil Aviation Commission. It should have a ring-fenced mandate and five windows, to wit:
 - 15.1.the first would provide guarantees, leases and soft loans for appropriately sized aircraft;
 - 15.2.the second would support route development on strategically important but initially thin routes;
 - 15.3.the third would fund airports, ground-handling systems, digital immigration and cargo facilities;
 - 15.4.the fourth would finance regional maintenance, repair and overhaul, training and parts pools;
 - 15.5.the fifth would support payment, data and safety interoperability.
16. The facility could be funded by assessed or voluntary contributions from participating states, development finance, institutional investors, a modest aviation connectivity charge and, where politically acceptable, a transparent levy on private-jet activity.
17. The last proposal (levy on private jet activity) is not proposed as a punishment for private aviation, but a way to direct a portion of premium mobility wealth toward widening ordinary regional mobility. As the author sees it, soft money could purchase specific public benefits: a reliable route, a minimum frequency, a maximum interruption rate, a cargo connection, an interline arrangement or an airport capability. Support could be competitively tendered where possible and should expire when the route becomes commercially viable. A fund that supports reliable, measurable connections can change the market.
18. In terms of deployment, every beneficiary airline should meet minimum conditions: an independent board; audited financial statements; a credible business plan; stress tests for fuel, currency, maintenance and load-factor shocks; a transparent procurement policy; an acceptable safety-management system; private or shareholder capital at risk; data reporting; and a clear path to commercial sustainability. Support should contain performance triggers, step-down schedules, clawbacks and termination rights. This money should be patient, but it should not be blind.

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<https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/afdb-unveils-africa-wide-aviation-financing-platform-turn-growth-sustainable-profit-91376>

Right Sized Aircraft and Local Capability

19. The next question is what that money should buy. Africa must stop treating fleet size as a proxy for aviation strength. Many regional routes require frequency and reliability more than a large aircraft. KLM Cityhopper is a useful outside example because it operates as KLM's regional arm, using smaller Embraer aircraft to connect European destinations into the wider Schiphol network.⁷ This model is not proposed as one to copy mechanically nor as evidence that Europe and Africa face identical conditions. Its value is the design principle: the right-sized regional aircraft, used frequently and connected to a wider network, can be the "*Toyota Corolla*" of the skies.
20. A 70-, 100- or 150-seat aircraft may make more economic sense than a wide-body aircraft flying an occasional service with weak load factors. Fleet decisions should be based on route economics, runway capability, cargo mix, fuel use, maintenance support and the needs of the communities served. The point is not simply to buy smaller planes. It is to match aircraft, frequency and network design to the market that is actually being created.
21. Aircraft acquisition is only the visible part of aviation capability. Africa spends scarce foreign exchange when aircraft, engines, components and specialist expertise must routinely travel abroad for maintenance. Regional MRO hubs, shared parts pools, accredited training schools and technical partnerships would retain more value on the continent and improve resilience. The objective is to establish a network of specialised centres that serve multiple markets and are held to the same safety standards on the continent.
22. After hardware comes people. Aviation schools should teach actual operational competence: aircraft maintenance, avionics, air traffic management, airport operations, safety management, aviation law, data systems and commercial route planning. A regional talent pipeline reduces dependence on expensive expatriate expertise and allows knowledge transfer to compound. ASECNA already demonstrates that African cooperation in air navigation, meteorology, engineering, airport management and training is possible⁸. The next step is to widen and modernise that cooperation across language, regulatory and commercial boundaries.

Travel Identity and Payment Interoperability

23. My ill-fated Dakar expedition also shows that an aircraft route is not a complete route. The practical question was whether my ECOWAS travel document would be accepted by Senegal so that I could take the onward journey to Cape Verde. That uncertainty was such that, if the document was not recognised, the route failed at the transit point before the separate Dakar-Sal flight even became relevant. The personal experience therefore points to a general legal and administrative requirement: Africa needs a published, trusted and interoperable travel identity regime.
24. Eligible citizens should be able to use an approved national identity card or regional travel document for agreed intra-African routes, with the acceptance rules visible to airlines, border authorities and passengers before a ticket is purchased. The system should be supported by advance passenger information, passenger name record safeguards, biometric verification where lawful, and risk-based screening.
25. Further, intra-African flights may not be domestic flights in the strict constitutional sense, but they should be treated as a distinct regional mobility category. That category should attract harmonised

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<https://careers.klm.com/en/subsidiary/klm-cityhopper/>
<https://www.asecna.aero/index.php/fr/>

documentation, proportionate charges, predictable transit rules and simplified connections. A traveller should not be forced to behave as though every intra-African leg were an unrelated intercontinental journey. The goal is not to abolish legitimate immigration control, but to stop multiplying friction where a common African interest has already been agreed.

26. Once identity and route systems are predictable, payments should follow the same logic. PAPSS enables cross-border payments in which the originator pays in local currency and the beneficiary receives local currency, reducing foreign-exchange friction and transaction cost⁹. PAPSS cannot eliminate every hard-currency requirement in aviation, particularly for leases, fuel, insurance and internationally priced equipment. It can, however, support eligible ticketing, airport, ground-handling, accommodation and supplier payments. Airlines and airports should be encouraged, and eventually required where feasible, to integrate local-currency settlement into their regional operating systems.

State Participation and Airline Ownership

27. The debate now returns to the role of the state. The state may be a shareholder, financier, regulator, airport owner, route underwriter or some combination of these. Those functions should be separated analytically, because public participation does not require that every government operate a national airline. The question is what form of participation best delivers safe, reliable and commercially defensible connectivity.
28. Within Africa, Ethiopian Airlines is an important example for a different reason. It is state-owned, but it has also been commercially disciplined, professionally managed and strategically networked. Reuters reported revenue of about \$7.6 billion, approximately 19 million passengers and a fleet of more than 150 aircraft for the 2024-25 year.¹⁰ That performance shows that public ownership is not automatically incompatible with success. It does not show that a large national airline can simply be copied everywhere. The relevant conditions are sound governance, commercial management, safety discipline, network logic, access to capital and protection from arbitrary political interference.
29. One successful carrier, however, does not resolve the wider governance problem. Africa's history of failed or distressed national and private carriers supplies the counter lesson. An airline can be politically celebrated and commercially unsound at the same time. Government-backed finance can create moral hazard, protect poor management, crowd out better operators and leave taxpayers with debt and abandoned aircraft. Route decisions can be made for prestige rather than demand. Safety oversight can be compromised if the regulator is not institutionally independent. That is why my proposal is not a return to unconditional state-owned airline bailouts. It is disciplined public support for connectivity, available to well-governed public or private operators.

A Continental Operating Model

30. Even a well-financed airline will fail to integrate Africa if each carrier operates as an isolated national project. The route map must therefore be designed around a network, not a collection of national flags. Africa should enable multistop itineraries, interline agreements, codeshares and common passenger-protection rules so that a passenger can buy one journey across several African carriers. A West African traveller should be able to move through a hub without collecting a new visa, rechecking baggage unnecessarily or discovering that the next leg operates only once a week. A practical target

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<https://paps.com/>
<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopian-airlines-annual-revenue-rises-it-draws-more-passengers-adds-routes-2025-08-05/>

would be that any African capital or major commercial centre is reachable from another within 48 hours, with a transparent plan to improve the weakest links. This is a benchmark for service design.

31. A second, less visible layer is the airspace through which those journeys pass. Overflight and airport charges are part of the same problem. Harmonisation should not mean underfunding air navigation services. It should mean transparent, cost-based and predictable charges, published in a common format, with incentives for routes that advance agreed continental connectivity. ASECNA's technical experience can be built upon, while a more inclusive pan-African architecture addresses different legal traditions and language communities.
32. The reason this matters to the host country is especially clear. Cape Verde is an island economy with strong tourism potential and is therefore sensitive to the difference between a direct, reliable connection and a journey that requires several uncoordinated tickets. Better West African and Atlantic connectivity could make Cape Verde more than a destination reached from outside the continent; it could become a bridge between West Africa, the Lusophone world, Brazil and wider markets. The same principle applies elsewhere: connectivity turns geographic position into economic value only when the route actually works for passengers and cargo.

An Implementable Bargain

33. The preceding sections move from one failed journey to the layers of a functioning continental market: law, identity, aircraft, finance, airspace, skills and governance. The following compact bargain captures the policy balance. Each proposal has a clear upside, but each also creates a risk that must be dealt with in the design rather than discovered after public money has been spent.

Reform	Likely gain	Main risk	Required safeguard
Aircraft and route finance	Reliable links and lower entry barriers	Public money keeps an unviable airline alive	Competitive route contracts, private capital, sunset clauses and repayment tests
Identity and operating systems	Predictable regional mobility and smoother transfers	Security gaps or inconsistent rules	Trusted documents, advance passenger data, published acceptance rules and PAPSS where feasible
Local capability and public facility	Lower foreign-exchange leakage, stronger skills and a durable AfCFTA pipeline	Under-used facilities, weak standards or political allocation	Demand studies, accredited schools, independent safety oversight, audited results and clawbacks

34. Six immediate commitments turn the diagnosis into a programme. First, adopt a five-year African connectivity plan with a public route map, priority city pairs and a 48-hour access benchmark. Second, capitalise the proposed facility and publish its eligibility rules. Third, agree a regional identity and transit protocol for participating states, including a single public database of accepted documents. Fourth, mandate interline and through-ticketing pilots on priority corridors. Fifth, fund at least a small number of regional MRO and training centres on a demand-led basis. Sixth, require annual public reporting on safety, reliability, fares, passenger numbers, cargo, subsidies and route survival.

35. At this point, the legal profession has a practical role in making the bargain durable. Lawyers can help convert political commitments into bankable route-development contracts, transparent public-private partnerships, enforceable passenger rights, investment protections, competition safeguards, data-governance rules and independent dispute-resolution mechanisms. The question is not simply whether an airline is allowed to fly. It is whether the legal and financial architecture gives that airline a fair chance to fly safely, reliably and commercially.

Conclusion

36. My absence from Cape Verde is a small personal inconvenience compared with the continental cost of poor connectivity. Yet it makes the point more sharply. If a professional with a legitimate regional identity, a willing host and a clear reason to travel cannot reliably complete a West African journey, then Africa has not yet built the market that its treaties describe.
37. We do not need every country to own a giant airline. We need a system in which airlines can obtain appropriate aircraft, passengers can move on trusted identities, payments can settle locally, airports and airspace can operate on predictable terms, skills and maintenance can be built at home, and public capital is tied to measurable connectivity. We need governments to treat aviation as economic infrastructure and development finance institutions to treat routes as productive assets when the public benefit is clear.
38. The choice before us is therefore practical. We can continue to celebrate SAATM, AfCFTA and free movement as aspirations, or we can fund the aircraft, systems, people and rules that make them real. The first option preserves the language of integration. The second creates integration. Africa should choose the second.