

Business Without Boundaries: Reflections from the Public-Private Dialogue on Business Persons' Mobility



The two-day Dialogue on business mobility was not another high-level exchange of ideas sealed behind closed doors. Instead, it was a **workshop to reflect on how East Africans can take Business Further, Faster**, where the promise of freedom of movement in the region was being translated into lived experience. Organised by the East African Community Secretariat under the EU-EAC CORE Programme, the event drew in immigration officials, trade and labour ministry representatives, professional associations and business-owner delegates, all of them bound by one question: *Why does the movement of people continue to face obstacles in a region founded on integration?*

The answer emerged gradually, in panel after roundtable, as speakers emphasised that mobility is not simply a border-gate issue — it is a **system issue**. It touches visas, credentials, digital architecture, regulatory readiness, and the very expectation of what it means to be an East African entrepreneur, professional, or trader. One of the often-repeated statistics captured the gap: while services trade within the region has grown, the number of professionals moving across borders remains underwhelming. That discrepancy framed the conversation: not just “we have the protocol” but “why isn’t the protocol felt?”

Throughout the first day, the theme was problems. Clear, candid, and sometimes uncomfortable. Immigration authorities described how partner states still maintain overlapping, inconsistent rules for business persons. Professional bodies lamented that although Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) exist for fields such as engineering and accountancy, their use remains low and the processes remain opaque.

Traders and service providers detailed moments when “border shock” felt like a barrier — when systems either slowed them down, confused them, or shut them out. The informal sector, especially women traders, repeatedly emerged as a group caught between the formal promise of integration and the informal reality of crossing a border. One speaker described the effect well: for many small-business owners, mobility is not freedom; it is **friction**.

But then the tone shifted. Mid-morning of day two, as the delegate broke out into fireside chats, the moderator asked: What would it take to make mobility feel seamless? The answers came in three linked layers. First: **digital infrastructure** — one-stop digital portals, interoperable immigration systems, recognition tools that reduce duplication. As reported by the EU-EAC CORE Programme, participants drew inspiration from models such as the European “Points of Single Contact”. Second: **harmonised professional recognition** — not just signing agreements, but simplifying the path so that a qualified professional in one member state can walk into another without starting over. Third: **inclusion and awareness** — ensuring that small traders, women, and those in peripheral sectors know their rights and have mechanisms that work. Without this, even the best policy can leave half the region behind.

One of the most tangible outcomes of the dialogue was the **co-creation of an Action Matrix addressing challenges in the movement of business persons**. This included a roadmap of reforms, responsible institutions, timelines and follow-up mechanisms. A digital platform for reporting barriers was presented, and this can be accessed through: <https://str.eac.int/>

Leaving the building, I couldn’t help but reflect: A year ago, integration might have sounded like a distant goal, talked about in protocols and memoranda. At this Dialogue, it sounded like a **project begun**. The next challenge is execution. Will Partner States deliver on the digital systems? Will professional bodies operationalise recognition? Will small cross-border traders see their journeys become easier instead of harder? These are the practical metrics we’ll need to watch.

Three takeaways stand out. First: **conversation matters**, but only when it leads to **co-creation**. The room was full of voices, but the value came when those voices built something together. Second: Integration is **not only for large firms**; we design systems only for multinationals, leaving the everyday person behind. Third: The actual test of the Dialogue will be an **experience shift**. When a Kenyan service provider can work in Uganda without re-applying continuously, when a Ugandan trader crosses a border with a digital clearance rather than a queue — that’s when the policy will have been felt.

If we are serious about East Africa becoming a region of shared prosperity, then mobility cannot remain aspirational. It must become operational. This Dialogue was a bold stride. Now the real work begins.