

Airline operators kick against open skies for Africa

By [Chinedu Eze](#)

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Airline Operators of Nigeria (AON) have kicked against the plan to deregulate the African airspace as an endorsement of Yamoussoukro Decision, which was agreed on by African states in Yamoussoukro, Cote'Ivoire in 1988.



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The open sky for Africa allows easy entry and exit of African airlines to the airspace of each country without immigration hindrances in order to enhance connectivity and trade among African countries, but since the policy was ratified in 1999, it has not been fully embraced by African states.

Nigerian airlines which rejected the policy said they were not carried along in the discussions leading to the endorsement of the implementation of the policy, and alleged that if embraced, it would shortchange the industry.

"No level playing field"

The airlines also argued that there is no level playing field where Nigeria can compete with other African carriers, which still enjoy some protectionism, lower interest rate on loans and waivers on import duty for aircraft and spares.

Speaking during a sensitisation workshop on the implementation of Single Africa Air Transport Market (SAATM), the President of AON, Captain Nogie Meggison, said before taking decisions, Nigeria's technical team should have been

carried along so that they could deliberate on how the policies would benefit Nigeria.

"We must put Nigeria first. If we open the skies, what advantages does Nigeria stand to gain? The domestic airlines are not comfortable with the policy. Do we have visas to travel around Africa before we open the skies? Are the taxes in Nigeria and that of other countries uniform?" Meggison queried.

He said in order to discourage competition, some African states particularly target Nigerian airlines and charge them outrageous levies when they operate to those countries, including charging as much as \$5,000 as landing fee, while Nigeria charges them about \$200.

He recalled that when Air Peace wanted to operate to Abidjan, they charged it \$5,000 per landing.

"Are they opening the sky on a level playing ground? African airlines easily access foreign exchange, but Nigerian airlines don't. Rwanda Air is government owned. I borrow money at 28% interest rate, while other African airlines borrow money at two percent interest rate. As a result of policies on ground, over 50 airlines have gone under in Nigeria. Let us first address our own issues before implementing the open skies policy," Meggison said.

However, the Minister of State for Aviation, Senator Hadi Sirika, who was represented by the managing director of the Nigerian Airspace Management Agency (NAMA), Fola Akinkuotu, said Nigeria is committed to the full implementation of the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM), which would be inaugurated next Friday in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

"Africa must leverage on the immense potential offered"

According to him, Africa must leverage on the immense potential offered by SAATM and the Yamoussoukro decision to enhance traffic connectivity and significant growth in passengers volumes over the next few years.

He said: "We must all therefore strive to commit to the full implementation and operationalisation of SAATM; we need to leap forward so as to become an effective global competitor in aviation.

"In this regard, Nigeria being one of the pioneer member states signatories to YD, is one of the 23 states that have so far made solemn commitment to the implementation of SAATM by 2018."

Also, the director-general of the NCAA, Muhtar Usman, said the importance of SAATM to African aviation cannot be over-emphasised.

"Thus, it is imperative that we organise this sensitisation workshop to intensify awareness campaign among the critical stakeholders on the impact as well as benefits of SAATM on the industry and national economy," he said.

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