WORKING PAPER

ASSEMBLY — 37TH SESSION

ECONOMIC COMMISSION

Agenda Item 52: Facilitation

eVISAS: A PRESSING NEED FOR GLOBAL STANDARDS, SPECIFICATIONS AND INTEROPERABILITY

(Presented by the World Tourism Organization)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), under the umbrella of its S.A.F.E. strategy – *Security and Facilitation Enhancement*, has been examining the case for eVisas. The eVisa system, when robustly applied by States, has demonstrated considerable advantages from the perspectives of both security and facilitation. The concept is already being implemented by a few States and is under consideration by an increasing number of others, but in the absence of global standards, specifications and interoperability there is a danger of fragmentation and security gaps.

Action: The Assembly is invited to agree that ICAO should explore with international partners the development of global standards, specifications and interoperability for eVisas as a matter of priority.

Strategic Objectives:	This working paper relates to ICAO Strategic Objective B, Security.
Financial implications:	Development of a Public Private Partnership and use of existing mechanisms such as ICAO's Technical Advisory Group on Machine Readable Travel Documents could minimize seeding resources and there could be revenue generating potential from an eVisa operation processing fee.
References:	A37-WP/72

1.   **INTRODUCTION**

1.1   At the 35th Session of the ICAO Assembly, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) announced the launch of its *S.A.F.E.* strategy – *Security and Facilitation Enhancement*, which takes a systems approach: to facilitation, safety and security; to air transport and tourism; and to rich and poor countries (A35-WP/107 Revised, http://www.icao.int/icao/en/assembl/a35/wp/wp107r_en.pdf). At the 36th Session UNWTO reported on the experience with implementation of aviation-related safety, security and facilitation (A36-WP/127, http://www.icao.int/icao/en/assembl/a36/wp/wp127_en.pdf).

1.2   The process has continued during the present triennium and a number of improvements have been noted. At the same time there remains a need to take greater account of:

- reflecting tourism requirements in the historically focussed aviation approaches – including land border crossings, cruise ships, large hotels, major events and key tourism sites;
- the importance of using common technical languages and interoperable systems in tourism and aviation;
- the pressing case for parallel enhancements in security and facilitation;
- the pressing need for further harmonization globally, in particular to reduce unnecessarily irritating and inconsistently confusing security measures (such as permitted contents of cabin baggage, removal of laptops for surveillance, removal of jackets, shoes and belts, etc.); and
- the critical shortfalls in poor countries of the necessary technologies, human skill and finance.

1.3   UNWTO continues vigorously to support ICAO's work on aviation safety, security and facilitation. Close and positive liaison is maintained through active participation by UNWTO at meetings (notably the annual ICAO Symposia on Machine Readable Travel Documents, Biometrics and Security Standards) and ongoing consultations with the ICAO Secretariat.

1.4   In this context, UNWTO would like to express its particular appreciation for the prompt action taken following an intervention on the impact of the volcanic ash cloud in Europe by the UNWTO Observer to ICAO at an informal meeting of the Council on 19 April this year. The ICAO Secretariat proposed to the ICAO Facilitation Panel meeting the following week to strengthen the Annex 9 — *Facilitation* provisions regarding special treatment regarding visas in case of *force majeure* – these proposals were further supplemented by the Panel and, following initial consideration by the Air Transport Committee, were included in the Recommendations for changes to Standards and Recommended Practices transmitted to ICAO States and relevant international organizations inviting their comments.

1.5   In promoting ICAO's Machine Readable Travel Document (MRTD) programme, UNWTO fosters the rapid introduction of ePassports as an added security measure, urging governments to move rapidly and cohesively. UNWTO has been cultivating the concept of eVisas for some years and believes that the need for global standardization and interoperability through ICAO is becoming urgent. The remainder of this paper focuses on this subject.

2.   **THE EVISA CONCEPT**

2.1   An electronic visa, or eVisa, is a paperless substitute for a traditional visa, one which can be obtained from a government administration by a traveller directly online through an internet portal or through a travel agent or participating airline at the time of making a travel reservation. The first eVisa was introduced by Australia in 1996, driven by the coming need generated by the Sydney 2000 Olympics to process large volumes of visa applications during a short and specific time period. The Australian eVisa system (as part of a broader concept known as the Electronic Travel Authority) has been a continuing success and has been followed by the introduction of similar systems by a few other States[1], with many more having it under consideration. There has also been a case in one other country of breakdown in the process due to lack of implementation specifications and poor inter-agency cooperation.

2.2   The eVisa offers first and foremost increased security, along with a streamlined and lower cost issuance process by States. It is particularly beneficial for States that have a limited number of visa-issuing missions abroad and for travellers who have no such mission in their home country.

2.3   The eVisa concept has been reviewed in UNWTO in the context of the S.A.F.E. strategy and an eTourism for Development Programme for potential incorporation in UNWTO initiatives to help increase the competitiveness of Africa as a travel destination. A key finding was that many countries would like to introduce eVisa systems, but the cost is high for a standalone system, a major issue particularly for developing countries. Amongst groupings in Africa interested in a "community" approach to eVisas are CEMAC, ECOWAS, SADC and UEMOA; in Asia, ASEAN has included eVisas as an action in its strategic plan; in Europe, the EC has recently launched a study on the extent to which travel applications could be used to enhance the Schengen visa and travel to EU States; there is reportedly interest in community eVisas in South American States and there may well be similar group interest in other regions. There is a need for a globally interoperable central system that can be shared by many countries, individually or jointly.

2.4   Currently there exist neither global standards nor specifications for eVisas, nor a focal point agency internationally for implementation and maintenance. The ICAO New Technologies Working Group has been working on an outline of the technical specifications of an eVisa and modalities for its issuance, but the results have yet to be published. States with limited technical capacity tend to launch a tender and select a winning proposal without any standard process to follow or test of robustness (although the ICAO Secretariat, with limited resources, is attempting to monitor specific cases).

2.5   Clearly ICAO should be the focal point agency. ICAO has had standard ICAO/ISO specifications for two types of machine-readable visas for well over 15 years; these can be incorporated in basic Machine Readable Passports and eMRPs and are widely implemented by States using their own issuing systems. ICAO has been understandably reluctant to proceed with an eVisa initiative in the past given the need to focus on implementation of MRPs. With the 1 April 2010 target date being largely successful, UNWTO feels that the time is now ripe to move forward on eVisas. An intervention by UNWTO in this regard at the MRTD Symposium last year was enthusiastically received. The security benefits alone of eVisas dictate a need for early action, but the facilitation benefits are also considerable, and there is danger of increasing lack of interoperability as additional States move forward with developing individual eVisa systems.

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[1] Known for Armenia, Bahrain, Nigeria, under development for Oman. The United States Electronic System for Travel Authorization of the US Visa Waiver System is effectively another type of eVisa. The United States is also developing a pilot programme that would provide for visa interviews by video conference; the United Kingdom has reportedly just started a trial of a similar system to clear passengers remotely for immigration and customs purposes that could easily be adapted for visa applications.

2.6   Preliminary discussions have taken place with the tourism community and with the ICAO Secretariat, and it is evident that, while interest is high, resource limitations may be critical to both development and implementation. The purposes of the present paper are to ascertain interest in exploring resourcing options as well as in the concept itself, and to seek to kickstart development. Input from the ICAO Secretariat was fundamental to preparation of the paper and is gratefully acknowledged.

3.   **IMPLEMENTATION STRUCTURE**

3.1   An eVisa programme could be adjusted to the needs and risk profile of an individual State (or group of States). In its simplest form it would be limited to an internet-based eVisa issuing system through which the details of applicants would be checked against a border intelligence watchlist. It could be extended to a real-time secure system between border control agencies, border checkpoints, airlines, surface transport and criminal intelligence applications. One option would be for ICAO to host a central eVisa data server and provide services to client States, similar to the functioning of the Public Key Directory (PKD). Ultimately, a biometric component could be integrated to ensure the security of the system (cf biometric ePassports).

3.2   ICAO does a remarkable job on aviation security and facilitation, of which the MRTD Programme forms just one part, but has limited resources. Hence prioritization is critical and with regard to MRTDs is understandably focused at present on identity management issues, strengthening the security and integrity of breeder documents, and the issuance of ePassports, as well as capacity-building. At the same time, the case for eVisas is compelling, and delay in development of standards, specifications and global interoperability of e-Visas could result in fragmentation and security gaps as well as potentially compromise ICAO's leadership on MRTDs.

3.3   A way forward to avoid disturbing existing priorities while minimizing ICAO's resource requirements might be through a Public Private Partnership (PPP) structure, comprising interested individual government administrations, ICAO, other relevant UN and international organizations (including the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee) and private sector suppliers including SITA (which developed the eVisas for Australia and Bahrain) and Entrust (which has also been involved in such work). INTERPOL has already expressed interest in participating in such a PPP and OCSE would be another obvious candidate. UNWTO, whose main contribution would be in the form of outreach and advocacy, might itself possibly participate depending on the sourcing and business case – like ICAO, UNWTO has no specific resources for such a project. The investment required to develop and operate an eVisa system might be offset, or even exceeded, by revenue generated from an eVisa operation processing fee.

4.   **CONCLUSION**

4.1   UNWTO believes that the case for global standards, specifications and interoperability of e-Visas is increasingly strong from the perspectives of both security and facilitation. Furthermore, as many States move forward individually the prospect of fragmentation, inconsistency and potential weakness in specifications and processes is rising. The time is ripe for ICAO action and this needs to be soon. Subject to endorsement in principle by the ICAO Assembly, a developmental framework and business plan could be presented at the next MRTD Symposium, 1to 4 November 2010, with a view to further sourcing interest and funding options, with the subject to be taken up at the next meeting of the Technical Advisory Group on MRTDs in April 2011.

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