



Cross-border Mobility and Visa Policies for Digital Nomads

INCIRIA

2025 Volume 1

Research Policy Paper: Cross-border Mobility and Visa Policies for Digital Nomads

Executive Summary

In the wake of digital transformation, an increasing number of professionals are adopting location-independent careers, leading to the rise of the digital nomad movement. As of recent estimates, over 35 million people worldwide identify as digital nomads—a number expected to rise rapidly. This new form of work and lifestyle has presented significant challenges for traditional immigration and visa policies, which were not designed with this mobile workforce in mind.

Cross-border mobility is a core issue that affects digital nomads globally. Existing visa policies, designed for traditional workers, do not accommodate the unique needs of digital nomads who work remotely, travel often, and do not rely on a fixed employer. The absence of dedicated legal frameworks or simplified visa processes makes it difficult for digital nomads to travel and work in various countries with the same ease as traditional workers.

This policy paper aims to explore the challenges faced by digital nomads regarding cross-border mobility, examine the opportunities for reform, and provide actionable policy recommendations to governments and international organizations. By proposing a comprehensive approach to visa policy reform and cross-border mobility solutions, this paper seeks to ensure that digital nomads can move freely and securely across borders, while enjoying legal protections that recognize the nature of their work.

Introduction

Digital nomads are individuals who use technology to perform their job duties while moving freely between locations, typically without being tied to a single geographic location. This modern workforce—comprising remote workers, freelancers, entrepreneurs, and creators—relies

on digital tools to manage their careers, clients, and projects, often working from different countries and continents.

However, despite the rise of digital nomadism, there is a growing disparity between the mobility needs of this workforce and the outdated legal structures in place. Visa policies, tax regulations, and cross-border mobility frameworks are designed to support workers who are rooted in one place, making them unsuitable for digital nomads.

The legal landscape is fragmented, with each country imposing its own set of visa rules and policies, often making it difficult for digital nomads to stay in a country for a prolonged period. This lack of clarity and uniformity not only creates challenges for digital nomads but also limits the economic and cultural benefits these professionals bring to local economies.

Challenges to Cross-border Mobility for Digital Nomads

1. Outdated and Rigid Visa Systems

Traditional visa categories—tourist, business, or work visas—are all typically designed around the concept of a fixed workplace and employer. Digital nomads, however, work remotely, often for multiple clients across different countries. The existing visa categories are not tailored to accommodate the fluidity of location-independent work. This forces digital nomads to either remain on short-term tourist visas or enter into complex work visa applications that are not designed for remote workers.

Additionally, many countries' visa systems focus on labor that physically contributes to a local economy, whereas digital nomads are often viewed as workers who contribute remotely, without direct engagement with the local labor market. As a result, digital nomads are often left in legal limbo, unable to establish long-term residency or access benefits in their host countries.

2. Unclear Pathways for Long-term Stay

Most countries offer visa options that either expire quickly or come with stringent

requirements that make it difficult for digital nomads to stay long-term. A typical tourist visa may allow for stays ranging from 30 days to 90 days, after which a new visa application must be filed. In some cases, tourists are not allowed to renew their visa without leaving the country for a set period, creating significant disruption for digital nomads who wish to remain in one location for longer.

Furthermore, many countries do not offer work permits or long-term residency options that allow remote workers to continue their work without being tethered to a local employer. Digital nomads face the constant challenge of navigating visa renewals or risking being forced to leave their host country due to restrictive visa regulations.

3. **Administrative Barriers and Complex Application Processes**

The application process for work visas and residence permits is often lengthy and complex, involving significant paperwork, interviews, and high fees. For digital nomads, these requirements can be especially difficult, as they are often working for remote clients spread across multiple countries. The difficulty of obtaining the necessary documentation, verifying income, or providing employer sponsorships makes the process both expensive and time-consuming.

4. **Limited Recognition of Remote Work**

Many countries' visa systems and immigration policies have yet to recognize remote work as a legitimate form of employment. As a result, digital nomads are often excluded from existing frameworks and must either apply for visas meant for traditional employees or try to circumvent the system altogether. The lack of recognition leads to confusion, inconsistent enforcement of visa rules, and a lack of tailored solutions that address the mobility needs of remote workers.

5. **Lack of International Coordination**

The absence of global standards for digital nomad visas or mobility solutions creates a fragmented approach to cross-border mobility. With each country establishing its own policies and regulations, digital nomads must navigate a complex maze of legal requirements and documentation. This lack of international coordination not only burdens digital nomads but also complicates the establishment of broader frameworks for supporting location-independent workers globally.

Opportunities for Reform and Improvement

1. Introduction of Digital Nomad Visas

A growing number of countries are recognizing the potential economic and cultural benefits of attracting digital nomads. Countries like Estonia, Barbados, the UAE, and Georgia have already implemented digital nomad visa programs, allowing remote workers to live and work for extended periods without being tied to a local employer. These visas offer flexibility, transparency, and long-term stays, typically ranging from 6 months to 2 years, with options for renewal. By creating a clear path for remote workers to live and work abroad, these programs can help foster innovation, entrepreneurship, and cross-cultural collaboration.

2. Simplification of Visa and Work Permit Processes

Governments can simplify the visa application process by offering online platforms for visa applications, reducing the administrative burden on both the nomads and the governments. Simplified documentation requirements, clearer processes, and faster approval times will make it easier for digital nomads to move between countries and contribute to local economies without facing bureaucratic hurdles.

3. Development of Multilateral Agreements

Countries can foster global mobility for digital nomads by entering into multilateral agreements or treaties that facilitate the free movement of remote workers across borders. For example, countries could create mutual recognition agreements for remote work, allowing digital nomads to move freely between countries that recognize each other's remote work status. This would help create consistency across different jurisdictions and simplify the visa process for digital nomads.

4. Promotion of Digital Nomad Ecosystems

Governments should support the development of ecosystems that encourage the growth of the digital nomad sector. This can include creating co-working spaces, digital nomad hubs, and local communities that provide nomads with the resources and support they need to thrive. These ecosystems can attract digital nomads to countries, contributing to local economies and fostering innovation.

5. **Global Recognition of Remote Work Status**

INCIRIA advocates for the recognition of remote work as a legitimate form of employment in international immigration law. This would allow digital nomads to apply for work visas or residence permits based on their professional status, without being required to establish employment with a local company. This recognition could be facilitated through digital identity systems, blockchain technologies, or multilateral agreements.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Implement Digital Nomad Visa Programs**

Governments should introduce or expand digital nomad visa programs that allow remote workers to stay in the country for extended periods (e.g., 6 months to 2 years) without requiring local employment. These visas should offer flexibility, ease of application, and clear guidelines on work, income, and taxation requirements.

2. **Simplify and Streamline Visa Application Processes**

Governments should reduce bureaucratic barriers for digital nomads by offering online visa applications, lowering application fees, and simplifying the documentation process. Standardized documentation requirements should be adopted to allow for easier movement across countries.

3. **Establish Bilateral and Multilateral Agreements**

Countries should enter into agreements that recognize the digital nomad status of workers from other countries, allowing for easier mobility and collaboration between nations. These agreements could also help streamline the visa application process, making it easier for nomads to travel and work across borders.

4. **Foster Cross-border Collaboration and Ecosystems**

Governments and private sectors should collaborate to build digital nomad ecosystems, including co-working spaces, professional networking hubs, and cultural exchange programs. These ecosystems would provide infrastructure and resources that make it easier for digital nomads to live, work, and collaborate in foreign countries.

5. **Promote the Recognition of Remote Work in International Law**

A comprehensive international framework should be developed to recognize remote work as a legitimate and legal form of employment. This would make it easier for digital nomads to access work visas, legal protections, and social benefits while living in foreign countries.

Conclusion

Cross-border mobility remains a critical challenge for digital nomads who seek to live and work anywhere in the world. Governments and international organizations must address this challenge by creating legal frameworks and visa policies that specifically cater to the needs of location-independent professionals. By establishing digital nomad visas, simplifying visa processes, and fostering international cooperation, countries can support the global movement of digital nomads while benefiting from their contributions to local economies.

INCIRIA is committed to advocating for policy reforms that empower digital nomads to navigate the world without legal or bureaucratic barriers. A cohesive, well-coordinated global framework will allow digital nomads to thrive, collaborate, and contribute to a more connected, innovative, and inclusive global society.