

# What innovations would enable the tourism and hospitality industry in Africa to re-build?

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper discusses the outcomes of an exploratory study into the innovations, adaptations, and best practices that the tourism and hospitality sector in Africa should implement in dealing with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic-induced disruptions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper was based on data collected through qualitative approaches by reviewing published academic articles and unpublished documents, including websites, media reports and global public health entities such as the World Health Organization (WHO). Because of the lack of reliable data in some cases, this study is inductive in nature.

**Findings** – The main finding of this research suggests that Africa which is seemingly the least affected in infection and casualty rates has conversely borne the brunt of the negative responses from the global community in travel restrictions and mobility curtailment. Overwhelming trends suggest the domestic tourism market does not have the spending capacity of international visitors who arrive with foreign currency, inevitably main-stream in the form of USD, EURO and GBP, with their spending power estimated at between 1:18 and 1:22. The fragmented, cascaded and sometimes disorganised approach in dealing with policy adoptions and implementation in managing developments around the pandemic further inhibits a compelling approach to continent-wide tourism and hospitality revival.

**Originality/value** – This paper highlights trends, innovations, and adaptations to COVID-19-related revival strategies for Africa and contributes to academic debates on the topic which, in the Global South context is currently under-researched.

**Keywords** African tourism, COVID-19 pandemic, Innovations and adaptations, Best practices, Rebuilding

**Paper type** General review

## Introduction

This paper discusses the outcomes of an exploratory study considering the innovations and adaptations required for Africa's tourism and hospitality sector to be rebuilt in the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic context. The study fits within the broader ambit of adaptation strategies for the tourism and hospitality industry in crisis contexts and

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contributes toward theory around the development of a body of research on crisis and disaster management. Tourism and hospitality remain powerful vehicles for socio-economic growth and development as well as for job creation (Bama and Nyikana, 2021). Africa is a broad continent with 54 countries, and, according to the African Union (AU) is loosely divided into five regions, namely, North African region, West African region, East African region, Central African region, and, the Southern African region, with these regions offering unique and sometimes overlapping tourism and hospitality offerings (Leke *et al.*, 2021).

The extent and reach of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global nature of its spread and the tremendous impact it has had on various aspects of life, including the tourism and hospitality sector have signalled that Africa as a continent which largely relies on tourism as a catalyst across the economy in terms of production and employment creation, and demand for transport, telecommunications and financial services has endured a dramatic shock thereby highlighting the inherent vulnerability of the travel and tourism sector and communities dependent on transnational tourist flows (Leke *et al.*, 2021). Current academic and societal discourse therefore focuses on how the tourism and hospitality sector can respond to the evolving and ongoing crises, and ultimately how tourism and hospitality will recover as socio-economic activities in society, the basis of which form a central objective of this enquiry (Jamal and Budke, 2020). In the COVID-19 context, the current research focuses on the argument that in view of the growing number of disasters, crises and pandemics, their frequency and complexity, there is a dearth of academic, industry and societal consideration within the African context on the theoretical and practical innovations and adaptations that would provide a firm response system to the vulnerabilities presented by these situations. This paper therefore explores and discusses the innovations and adaptations required for rebuilding Africa's tourism and hospitality sector during and post the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Tourism and hospitality in Africa (2019–2021)**

In contemporary times, the tourism and hospitality sector in Africa has been growing exponentially. Undoubtedly, tourism is recognised as a key feature in the development of African economies over the past few decades (Monnier, 2021). In 2018, Africa was the second-fastest growing tourism region globally and contributed 8.5% of the gross domestic product (GDP) equating to USD 194 billion (Atta, 2019) and contributed USD 24.3 billion (6.7%) to the total employment (Jumia, 2019). Additionally, the continent attracted 67 million international tourists in the same period. Apart from international tourists, domestic visitors also reported the highest visitors' expenditure at 56% compared to international visitors at 44%. The expenditure was accumulated majorly from leisure tourists and only 29% was from business tourists (Jumia, 2019). In 2019, tourism contributed almost 7% of the GDP in Africa (Monnier, 2021), making it one of the sectors driving economic growth. The top ten ranked countries for travel and tourism in 2019 were Mauritius, South Africa, Seychelles, Morocco, Namibia, Kenya, Tunisia, Cape Verde, Botswana and Tanzania (Jumia, 2019). In addition, Morocco (12.93 million) and South Africa (10.23 million) were ranked as the top African countries with the most international tourist arrivals (Statistica, 2020). Regionally, Central (45%), West (29%) and East (28%) Africa received the most domestic tourists, respectively, in 2019. The most preferred amenities by these domestic tourists were restaurants at 26% followed by the lounge at 17%, breakfast and swimming pool at 16%, Internet at 12%, the air conditioner at 10%, airport transfer and business centre at less than 5% (Jumia, 2019). Furthermore, various international brands in the accommodation sector that are based in Africa such as Accor, Marriott International, Radisson Hotel Group, Hilton, InterContinental Hotels Group, Best Western Hotels & Resorts, Meliá Hotels & Resorts, Hyatt International, Rotana Hotels, and Mangalis Hotel Group were recognised as top ten brands in 2019 based on the number of existing hotels and rooms (Jumia, 2019). The sector is recorded to have employed more than 24 million people in 2019. Continued growth was predicted until

the sector encountered COVID-19, a pandemic which erupted towards the tail end of 2019, with its rapacious effects being reflected on the tourism and hospitality sector on the global, but specifically the African ecosystem during the first quarter of the year 2020 (Bama and Nyikana, 2021). Consequently, there has been an unprecedented crisis within the sector.

Although all tourist destinations strongly feel the impact from the pandemic-related crisis, not all have the same vulnerabilities or capacity to recover. With the COVID-19 pandemic fully entrenched on the continent since early 2020, Africa lost approximately USD 55 billion in travel and tourism revenues (Monnier, 2021). The unprecedented loss of revenue and employment due to pandemic-induced lockdown restrictions resulted in the halting of many business operations with companies having to downsize and, in some cases, closing operations (Richardson, 2020). Consequently, an estimated of 12.4 million employment opportunities were lost in Africa due to the pandemic (Statistica, 2020). In some countries, only essential services businesses were allowed to operate, and, tourism and hospitality, considered by most countries as non-essential services, and a potential super spreader of the virus were suspended. As such, the sector was one of the hardest-hit by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic since it relies on the movement of people, a phenomenon that strategies put in place to flatten the COVID-19 curve such as community lockdowns, social distancing, stay-at-home orders, travel and mobility restrictions did not allow. Africa, a regional destination that significantly relies on inbound travel, suffered the most as the domestic market could not sustainably propel the industry due to vast challenges across many countries on the continent (Monnier, 2021). With tourism demand completely grounded because of tourists' inability to travel, hotels, airlines and ground operators such as tour operators and travel agents were all grounded. With so many livelihoods dependent on the tourism and hospitality sector on the continent, the ripple effects of the pandemic were further entrenched and stretched into 2021. However, as the restrictions were lifted piecemeal, other factors such as tourists changing needs and travel preferences, vaccination and quarantine requirements and sundry travel bans began to dictate demand (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021). Although the sector has had the resilience in past situations to bounce admirably back from such shocks, it is debatable that the sector could begin to recover from the current crisis given the global nature of the crisis and the constant changing evolution and outlook as well as the uneven global progress with the management of the crisis. The management of this crisis has shone a spotlight on crisis management in the sector, as well as resilience building, highlighting the fact that the recovery and revival of the sector needs to be firmly modelled around the concept of resilience (Leke *et al.*, 2021).

### **Adaptations and best practices in the African tourism and hospitality industry in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic**

Even before reporting of the first case in Africa, ministers of health held an emergency meeting, the outcome of which was the declaration of the Joint Africa Continental Strategy on COVID-19 which was anchored on collaboration and solidarity (Leke *et al.*, 2021). According to the World Tourism and Travel Council report, pre-pandemic projections reflected that the travel and tourism sector employs 24.6 million people on the African continent and accounts for 3.7% of the continent's GDP (WTTC, 2021). These figures have almost all been placed at heightened risk. To alleviate this, the continent is impinged upon to establish adaptations and best practices to facilitate the management of the pandemic in its current context. Africa is not new to health pandemics, with examples such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the Ebola virus having ravaged the continent at different periods in recent times. However, the difference with COVID-19 is with the scale and extent of its spread and the impacts it has had on the socio-economic fabric of the tourism and hospitality ecosystem of the continent. This requires an equal breadth of concertedness from continental players and partners to design

adaptations that will project the continent towards rebuilding the sector. As such policymakers must continue to support businesses within the tourism and hospitality sector that have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, there is a requirement for the adaptation of products and services within the tourism and hospitality sector in Africa. During the early stages of the pandemic, and with very stringent regulations in place in most countries, the need for the institution of innovative and creative strategies to deal with ever-changing and uncertain times was essential. For example, in the case of Kenya, the earliest policy response to the pandemic was the *National 2019 Novel Coronavirus Contingency (Readiness and Early Response)*, released in January 2020, which sought to initiate adaptations that could prevent the spread of the virus into Kenya, but open borders were maintained. Even with the policy instrument in place, it took pressure from the courts to force the government to suspend flights from China on February 28th, 2020. Existing enquiry suggests therefore that the African approach to combatting the virus needs to be anchored in collaboration and solidarity around public health systems. Successes that have been highlighted in this regard include the Partnership to Accelerate COVID-19 Testing (PACT), launched by the African Union Commission (AUC) and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) in April 2020, which enabled Africa, initially shoved aside when global demand for diagnostics rose, to increase the number of countries with testing capacity from 2 to 43 in 3 months, procure more than 90 million test kits and train thousands of health workers (Leke *et al.*, 2021). The new public health order however requires more predictable long-term funding, joint priority setting and stronger mechanisms to manage the allocation of funds.

Large parts of the global community have had the advantage of relying on captive domestic and regional audiences. But in Africa, domestic tourism has been overlooked for a long time. The tourism and hospitality sector needs to be oriented towards more diversified markets so that there is greater resilience in future. However, all is not lost for Africa's hard-pressed tourism and hospitality sector as some countries are already setting a plan in place to entice domestic tourists. South Africa, which welcomed ten million international tourists in 2019, made local tourism in 2020 a focus of its recovery plan. In addition, Rwanda, with advisory support is developing a recovery strategy that includes developing local and regional markets. Meanwhile in Kenya, entry fees to all game parks and reserves have been cut for one year to attract more local tourists (Leke *et al.*, 2021). This is demonstration that around the continent domestic tourism is gaining recognition as an alternative form of tourism.

### **Innovations to rebuild the African tourism and hospitality industry between 2022 and 2030**

Across the continent, one very glaring realisation has been greater calls for promotion of regional and transnational travel which should provide opportunities to deal with the decline in international travel brought about by the ongoing travel bans and mobility restrictions that are sometimes imposed on countries from Africa by international destinations. The proliferation of these restrictions has meant that the continent paints a bleak picture of a potential economic recession, one which if it is to be averted demands concerted on sufficient policy responses, access to sufficient and affordable financing and strengthened policies for job creation within the tourism and hospitality sector, as with all other sectors.

Digital transformation is arguably Africa's biggest opportunity arising from the crisis, as the pandemic has created an opportunity for acceleration in digitisation as the continent has continued to lag the rest of the world in this area. COVID-19 is proving to be a catalyst in the travel and tourism sector's quest for innovation and the integration of new technologies. Amid stay-at-home orders, digital adoption and consumption are on the rise, with consumers now expecting contactless technologies, among others, as an essential prerequisite for a safe and seamless travel experience. The COVID-19 pandemic transformed how people interact

with each other, receive medical care, spend leisure time and conduct many transactions of daily life. These changes have accelerated the migration to digital technologies at a stunning rate. The necessity to adopt remote modes of work will contribute to this acceleration especially in the areas of digital transformation, the accelerated adoption of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the scaling up of investments in areas of physical and technological infrastructure. As digitisation and innovation offer tremendous opportunities for the travel and hospitality industry on the continent, which should be embraced, precautions are needed to make sure employees and local communities are not left behind. Consequently, commensurate training needs to be boosted in order to equip the workforce with both basic and advanced digital skills.

The ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the significance of having a mutually beneficial collaborative relationship between the health and safety sector and the tourism and hospitality sector. In contemporary times, the African tourism and hospitality sector has oftentimes overlooked health and safety requirements which have always been a necessity, even though the sector is sufficiently laden with these protocols from both a regional and individual country perspective. The critical challenge has mostly arisen around fragmented implementation. Going forward, personal experiences, the fear of being stuck in another country and concerns for physical distancing will guide consumer behaviour in the short- to mid-term. Businesses will have to continue to collaborate even more closely with their extended value chains, especially employees and suppliers, to ensure readiness and implement like-minded protocols. In this context, trust between travellers and employees, businesses and suppliers, and visitors and local communities will be a leading engine in the recovery of the tourism and hospitality industry. Additionally, Africa's health and safety sector have more work to be done as most of their health and safety infrastructure relies more on importing of required supplies from more established geographies or continents. For instance, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic starkly highlighted some of these challenges, especially in the instance of vaccine procurement and roll out. Rife were voices that cried foul considering issues around vaccine nationalism, noting that as wealthy nations continue hoarding vaccines, new dangerous COVID-19 variants will continue emerging. This could be a serious threat to the tourism and hospitality sector, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic era where health and safety is now part of the considerations in the traveller's decision-making process.

The call for Africa to begin efforts towards the manufacture of vaccines for the continent has gradually been heeded, and efforts are now in place with German biotechnology company BioNTech announcing that it will be building a vaccine manufacturing facility in Rwanda, to be followed by a second in Senegal, being seen as a game changer (Leke *et al.*, 2021). With only 60 million of the total population of 1.22 billion, equivalent to 5%, having been fully vaccinated by the end of September 2021, there is a shortfall of many tens of millions of doses in the market and this announcement is a tell-tale sign that once the manufacturing gets underway, the shortage will be overcome in due course. For equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines in Africa, a good strategy will be to improve on approaches that have already worked on the continent such as South Africa's approach to HIV/AIDS campaigns have shown in the past. Additionally, addressing the challenge of universal accessibility of vaccines for low-income countries will require collaboration among governments, the private sector and global health agencies. Vaccine hesitancy further poses a potential threat to the achievements of vaccination programmes in Africa. In this regard, efforts at the incorporation of the voices of all stakeholder groups is suggested, as this would ensure effective and accurate communication and foster perception shifts around vaccine uptake, which in a nutshell would foster more trust in the easing of travel restrictions within the region and lay the framework for the revival of the tourism and hospitality industry. Consequently, African governments should continue organising effective vaccine awareness campaigns and community engagement to combat vaccine misinformation and hesitancy.

While COVID-19 has exacerbated the economic strain of the region in relation to the tourism and hospitality sector, it is not in anyway responsible for all the socio-economic challenges faced by the continent. The COVID-19 pandemic is shrouded in uncertainty and vulnerabilities, suggesting that creativity is key to rebuilding the tourism and hospitality sector. The sector should not have to wait for post-pandemic conditions as there is no suggestion of such, given the increasing variant mutations being experienced. Consequently, the tourism and hospitality industry have a mandate to continue finding more creative avenues to create offerings that can be consumed during the pandemic period, and, in so doing, the tourism and hospitality industry could be resuscitated despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. Additionally, facilities and measures that enable people to travel should be developed or modified to enable both domestic and regional travel.

Despite these innovations regarding the road to rebuilding the tourism and hospitality industry between 2022 and 2030, it is also pivotal to note that these innovations rely on good and transparent governance to be effectively implemented. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that reliance on individual national mechanisms, legislation and strategies is insufficient. Governments should therefore strengthen their bilateral and multilateral relations for the tourism and hospitality sector to be revived. Good and transparent governance does not only pertain to effective and efficient policy implementation, however, but also stretches to the accountability on the utilisation of the resources and elimination of corruption. This is a significant component, which if dealt with could drive growth in the tourism and hospitality sector in the region to unprecedented levels during and post the pandemic era.

### **Conclusion**

As this paper has highlighted, the number of natural- and human-influenced disasters and crises is on the increase. For the African tourism and hospitality industry which has previously experienced the ripple effects of other global disasters, COVID-19 has proven to be the most debilitating. Although disasters are always going to be different in nature and extent of their impacts, the necessity of contingency planning cannot be overemphasised as it provides the basis for response actions and guides the processes pre-pandemic, during and post-pandemic actions. It has also highlighted the need for better preparation and more efficient contingency planning to include both the observations of the warning signs and the implementation of effective post-disaster strategies to help overcome the negative effects that can occur. The disruptions with travel plans forewarned the tourism and travel industry that there was a “problem” and in some manner, the needs to establish early warning signals to the rest of the industry of a pending disaster.

In addition, the importance of a perception shift regarding domestic tourism in Africa through continuous conversations by stakeholders in the industry is emphasised, with a recommendation made for effective public and private partnerships whereby tourism businesses reach out to government not only when faced with challenges, but also to offer ready-to-implement solutions, highlighting the need for continuous engagements across the sector. Continental structures such as the African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Southern African Development Community (SADEC), Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) and others need to have more robust engagements that could provide insights for policy and managerial recommendations to policymakers and other stakeholders within the tourism sector. Additionally, the study suggests increased consultation between key stakeholder groups, such as the African Tourism Board (ATB) and other organisations, making it therefore imperative to set up a framework to guide how the communication between the different stakeholders’ groups involved in, and impacted on by, the pandemic should be managed more broadly.



The tourism and hospitality industry is not only vital to established economies, but also to emerging economies such as those found within the African continent, as it employs a considerable number of employees. It is, however, often considered to be a luxury spend, resulting in it being an expense that is “cut” first. It also appears to be an industry that is not able to recover quickly due to the disastrous effects of COVID-19 lingering for longer. The tourism and hospitality industry tends to be more reactive than proactive, and a concerted focus therefore needs to be invested in getting the tourism and hospitality operators to learn to live with COVID-19 as it is not possible to wait for the post-COVID-19 period before rebuilding the sector. The industry needs to make the necessary changes to continue doing business. Each disaster will be different, have different effects on the community, employees and stakeholders but a pre-, during- and post-disaster plan; needs to be considered for the rapid recovery of businesses, regions and industry.

Furthermore, the study proposes the need for building of stronger frameworks of collaboration between the public and private sectors such that inequalities and vulnerabilities could be tackled collectively while building a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable domestic tourism sector through clear and concerted recovery plans and focused regional tourism marketing campaigns directed towards stimulating demand for Africa’s tourism products. In this regard, there is a need for coordination between different levels of government, as well as public–private partnerships and networks, in governing tourism, to prevent potential conflicts of strategy across agencies, sectors and scales in regulating interconnected flows. This way, governance arrangements can become more integrated and adaptive, considerate of interactions and trade-offs.

Finally, in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this study’s outcomes to the extant research that seeks to promote the accelerated process of innovation and sustainability in line with goals 9 and 12 which is propose innovation and responsible consumption and production as the industry was forced to adapt to new ways of providing services and ensuring sustainability. Africa should continue to explore partnership avenues to accomplish these SDGs (United Nations, 2015).

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