

Domestic tourism as a recovery strategy in the face of COVID-19: Insights from South Africa



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Orientation: This article drew from an interpretivist research orientation.

Research purpose: This study aimed at contextualising domestic tourism as a strategic tool with which the tourism sector can recover from coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in South Africa.

Motivation for the study: The impact of COVID-19 on the economy, and tourism in particular, has been devastating in South Africa. Given the historical overreliance on international tourism receipts, the importance of domestic tourism was highlighted during the reduced lockdown levels. This study was therefore motivated by the potential of this market to offset some of the losses to international tourism in times of uncertainty.

Research design, approach and method: This study involved a qualitative research design where in-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with purposefully selected key resource stakeholders ($n = 20$) in domestic tourism. These interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed.

Main findings: The study found that the stakeholders were satisfied with how the government initially dealt with the pandemic, although they were very critical of the lack of communication. Additionally, they noted that domestic tourism is an important springboard for recovery in the country but only if effective collaboration between the private and public sectors is enhanced.

Practical/managerial implications: Recommendations are made for more communication amongst stakeholders, which in turn will result in better collaborations and ultimately achieving effective use of domestic tourism as a cornerstone for further development and recovery.

Contribution/value-add: This study makes a modest contribution to tourism research, especially in the face of external shocks such as that of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19); domestic tourism; tourism recovery; resilience; sustainable development.

Introduction

This study contextualised the implications of the unfolding coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on the South African domestic tourism environment in the physical, psychological, socio-economic, financial and environmental spheres between April 2020 and December 2021 (Chang, McAleer & Ramos 2020; Giddy & Rogerson 2021; Lekgau, Harilal & Feni 2021; Lekgau & Tichaawa 2021; Mbatha, Harilal & Tichaawa 2021). The pandemic resulted in an indeterminate negative outlook for the global tourism industry as concerns relating to exposure to the virus led to the introduction of travel and mobility restrictions. These restrictions on tourists' movements served to place the sector in jeopardy with regard to tourism sustainability, travel confidence and employment downturns (Aryal et al. 2022; Bama & Nyikana 2021; Del Chiappa et al. 2021; Lekgau & Tichaawa 2021; Nyikana 2021; Rogerson 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson 2020a; Rogerson et al. 2021). The steep decreases in travel adversely impacted tourists' behaviours and mental well-being within the sector, exacerbating other challenges such as worsened economic and social inequalities (Abbas et al. 2021; Korinith & Ranasinghe 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson 2022; Rogerson & Rogerson 2020b). Although not yet fully understood, these impacts require investigation across a variety of contexts (Bama & Nyikana 2021), particularly from more hard-hit destinations in the world such as South Africa, which serves as the case study for this research.

Tourism has been seen as an industry of considerable benefit to South Africa and has traditionally been relied upon to aggressively promote local economic development through job creation, leading to the upliftment of standards of living within communities (Dlomo & Ezeuduji 2020;

Nengovhela, Tshipala & Nyikana 2017; Nyikana 2021; Nyikana & Sigxashe 2017). The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) estimates 'that international arrivals declined by 20%–30% in 2020, resulting in US \$300–450 billion in tourism receipt losses' (Del Chiappa et al. 2021; UNWTO 2020). During off-peak periods for inbound international tourism, domestic tourism development is a key component of destination management and has previously been identified as such in the context of South Africa (Nengovhela et al. 2017). Given the fact that the actual impact of the pandemic on the global tourism sector is yet to be fully determined (Bama & Nyikana 2021; Jamal & Budke 2020), the need for empirical research which assesses the attitudes of stakeholders in the tourism industry regarding travel and tourism during and beyond the pandemic became critical. Moreover, any recovery strategies that are implemented would likely require comprehensive consultation with multiple stakeholders involved in tourism. This study therefore provides a basis for developing an understanding of the effects of the pandemic on South Africa's domestic tourism market in the context of its dynamic evolution in order to suggest repositioning strategies and innovative approaches to harness the potential of domestic tourism's socio-economic recovery in the country and other similar destinations beyond the pandemic. In this regard, the study is argued from the perspective of promoting domestic tourism in times of uncertainty as a means to offset the costs associated with the limited international arrivals that are experienced in such times.

This study aimed to explore the potential of domestic tourism as a strategic tool from which the tourism sector can recover from COVID-19 in South Africa. In doing so, the following section considers current trends identified in the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for tourism generally, as well as within the specific context of South Africa. The subsequent section then explains the study's qualitative methodological framework, and thereafter, a thematic presentation of the study's findings is provided and discussed, based on an in-depth analysis of the data. Finally, the study's implications are outlined, before the study concludes with final remarks and recommendations for future research.

Literature review

The coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic and tourism in context

Extant research on tourism has long recognised that, as a human activity-based endeavour, tourism is not immune to adverse occurrences and unexpected issues such as earthquakes, bushfires, volcanic explosions, tsunamis or floods, terror activities and global events such as pandemics (Giddy & Rogerson 2021; Ritchie & Jang 2019; Rogerson & Rogerson 2020b). Coronavirus disease 2019 is generally understood to have emanated from the Chinese city of Wuhan, and within a short period of time, owing to its nature and speed of spread, it was declared a pandemic by the World

Health Organization (WHO) (Arbulú et al. 2021; Ducharme 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson 2020a, 2021a; WHO 2020). The recognition of COVID-19 as a global pandemic jolted most countries and governments to begin implementing strategies aimed at curbing the spread such as border closures, travel bans, the prohibition of large gatherings, the suspension and cancellation of crowd-prone or 'super-spreader' events and the implementation of national lockdowns (Chang et al. 2020; Ducharme 2020; Gössling, Scott & Hall 2020; Hall, Scott & Gössling 2020; Jamal & Budke 2020; Joubert 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson 2021a; Rogerson et al. 2021; Volgger, Taplin & Aepli 2021). These measures posed serious challenges to global tourism activity, with notable losses observed in global tourism receipts.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) considers 'COVID-19 a defining global health crisis of contemporary times, and the greatest challenge since the end of World War 2' (UNDP 2020). For Craven et al. (2020), the pandemic is the 'first humanitarian challenge on a global scale', which, according to Rogerson and Rogerson (2020a), has effects that far surpass those of the 2008 financial crisis. For tourism specifically, COVID-19 'has been one of the most impactful and tragic pandemics of modern times' (Assaf & Scuderi 2020). Therefore, Rogerson and Rogerson (2021b) asserted that understanding the behaviour of the tourism industry during and after moments of crisis is critical for the planning of destination recovery. Furthermore, current discussions and debates are largely situated around strategic and policy issues in the areas of resilience, transformation, ramifications, adaptation, impact and recovery of the domestic tourism sector (Bartis, Hufkie & Moraladi 2021; Gössling & Schweiggart 2022; Kwok & Koh 2021; Martín-González et al. 2021). By way of definition, Acha-Anyi (2018) defined domestic tourism as all tourism activities of a resident in a particular country travelling to destinations within said country of residence. It is the authors' hope that the current enquiry provides the context for South Africa's repositioning and recovery from the ramifications of the pandemic. Arguably, as one of the hardest-hit economies (Bama & Nyikana 2021), South Africa will need well-planned strategic directions in the face of and beyond COVID-19, and this study aims to address this gap in part.

South Africa's management of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic

Following the announcement on 05 March 2020 that South Africa had registered its first official case of the COVID-19 virus, and the subsequent 'declaration of the state of disaster by President Cyril Ramaphosa on 15 March 2020' (Bama & Nyikana 2021), a range of measures were put into place, as in other places globally, to mitigate the risk of the spread of COVID-19, 'including travel bans to high risk countries, the prohibition of gatherings of over one hundred people, and the cancellations of large gatherings and celebrations' (Gössling & Schweiggart 2022; Wendell 2020). The anxiety that had consumed the country was seeing no end as cases continued to mount, prompting the declaration of a country-

wide lockdown between 26 March 2020 and 16 April 2020 and subsequently extended to 30 April 2020 (Cilliers 2020; Haffajee 2020; Mahlati 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson 2020a). The continuation of the global proliferation of the virus saw the National Command Council (NCC) on the coronavirus insist on more measures to contain the spread; therefore, the president extended the lockdown indefinitely on 24 April 2021, although this was accompanied by the implementation of a risk-adjusted strategy for the resumption of economic activities through different alert levels (Alert Levels 1–5) with adjusted regulations. Tourism had been identified as a ‘nonessential service’ and was therefore only allowed to resume operations under Alert Level 2 (Giddy & Rogerson 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson 2020a). This long-term planning response to the pandemic had at its core a governance framework based on the different levels of alert which adapted to the epidemiological threats linked to the outbreak (Rogerson & Rogerson 2022, 2020a), as presented in Table 1.

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, South Africa was already considered one of the most unequal societies in the world, and the pandemic all but compounded those existing inequalities along the traditional lines of race, gender, occupation, earnings and location (Rogerson & Rogerson 2022; Spaull et al. 2020). As tourism was categorised as a nonessential service and was consequently only allowed to resume operations under Level 2 of the risk-adjusted framework (Rogerson & Rogerson 2020b), given that for the most part between February 2021 and June 2022, South Africa had been operating under the Alert Level 1 according to the then national strategy, domestic tourism had resumed with few restrictions and with the observation of strict safety protocols. Despite its resumption, however, the domestic tourism sector continued to experience watershed moments of unprecedented casualties (Higgins-Desboiles 2020). At the time when the COVID-19 restrictions were still in force (the COVID-19-related regulations have been lifted since June 2022), the roll-out of vaccinations did little to change the prevailing conditions, especially in the context of South Africa being red-listed by some of its main source markets, such as the United Kingdom (UK) (Daniel 2021), meaning that the country continued to experience international travel suspensions and bans which further exacerbated the already crippling effects of the pandemic. This further alerted

South African Tourism (SAT) officials to the limits that a domestic tourism-focused recovery strategy would have, given the existing issues linked to the affordability of leisure products in the face of a deep-seated challenge, as many tourism products are targeted at international tourists and are therefore too expensive for most of the domestic tourism market (Bama & Nyikana 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson 2021b; Rogerson et al. 2021). Additionally, although the domestic tourism facilities had been gradually opening and offering local specials to incentivise domestic travel, such incentives were hardly offered in the context of the socio-economic strain caused by mass job losses within the sector (Rogerson & Rogerson 2021b). As such, this study hinged on exploring the extent to which the domestic tourism market could adapt to the changing landscape of tourism within the context of COVID-19, considering the strategic underpinnings for adaptation and dealing with extreme events of the same or similar nature in the future.

South Africa, domestic tourism and coronavirus disease 2019 in context

South Africa has implemented several policies, strategies and regulatory frameworks that guide the growth and development of domestic tourism in the country. These frameworks include the 1996 White Paper, which is the first national policy postapartheid that included strategic goals to develop the domestic tourism market in South Africa; the National Tourism Sector Strategy (NTSS) that focuses on developing a competitive domestic tourism market that contributes to the growing economy; and the Tourism Capacity Development and Promotion Support policy, among other strategies (Department of Tourism n.d.a). These policies and frameworks specifically focus on marketing and branding domestic tourism destinations in South Africa that are internationally recognised. In addition, these strategies sought to increase the domestic market's contribution to the growing economy and to increase information provision in the country, thus boosting the contributions of the domestic tourism market while offsetting any losses from the international market in off-peak periods or times of uncertainty. Furthermore, prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, South African domestic tourism strategies advocated for affordable access

TABLE 1: South Africa's risk-adjusted strategy or framework for phasing out coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdowns.

Alert level	Defining features	Implementation period	Measures
Level 5	High virus spread and/or low health system readiness	27 March 2020 for 3 weeks but later extended to 30 April 2020	Full lockdown
Level 4	Moderate to high virus spread with low to moderate health system readiness	30 April 2020 – 30 May 2020	High restrictions
Level 3	Moderate virus spread, with moderate health system readiness	31 May 2020 – 16 August 2020	Moderate restrictions
Level 2	Moderate virus spread with high health system readiness	17 August 2020 – 31 January 2021	Moderate to low restrictions
Level 1	Low virus spread with high health system readiness.	28 February 2021 – 25 July 2021	Low restrictions
Level 3	Moderate virus spread, with moderate health system readiness	26 July 2021 – 12 September 2021	Moderate restrictions
Level 2	Moderate virus spread with high health system readiness	13 September 2021 – 30 September 2021	Moderate to low restrictions
Level 1	Low virus spread with high health system readiness	01 October 2021 – 04 April 2022	Low restrictions
None†	Low virus spread with high health system readiness	04 April 2022 – 22 June 2022	Low restrictions

Source: Adapted from Rogerson, C.M. & Rogerson, J.M., 2020a, 'COVID-19 tourism impacts in South Africa: Government and industry responses', *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites* 31(3), 1083–1091. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.31321-544>

†, National Health Act: Regulations: Surveillance and control of notifiable medical conditions: Amendment.

to the domestic tourism market, especially for low-income households (Department of Tourism n.d.b), in order to contribute to the economy. The strategies further ensured that there was an even distribution of tourism resources across the country. Moreover, even though South Africa has not had to deal with a health pandemic in the last few decades, the South African domestic tourism market has previously survived several economic recessions such as the 2008 recession and the 2019 economic recession (Aryal et al. 2022; Rogerson 2013; Rogerson 2019; Scholtz, Kruger & Saayman 2013). This illustrates that with suitable resilience and recovery strategies in place, the country should be able to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of the global pandemic, the Department of Tourism and SAT formulated and implemented different strategic plans and regulatory frameworks that focus on the recovery of the domestic tourism market post-COVID-19. For instance, the Strategic Plan 2020–2021 and the Tourism Sector Recovery Plan provide measures that can be implemented to revitalise the domestic tourism market (Department of Tourism 2020; SAT 2021a). In fact, UNWTO (2020) stated that domestic tourism can be used as an indicator of tourism growth or decline during the tourism recovery process. According to the recovery reports by SAT (2021a), the domestic tourism market is showing signs of recovery; for instance, the market experienced a peak in domestic trips taken from July 2020. SAT (2021b) reported that there were 17 million domestic trips taken in 2020, which is a 40% decrease from 2019. Given the existing policy contribution to tourism and socio-economic growth pre-COVID-19, this study argues that strategically incorporating previous lessons and broadening collaborations will contribute to an enhanced understanding of recovery and resilience within the context of the changing landscape of tourism in the face of COVID-19 in South Africa.

Despite the domestic tourism market experiencing major declines in the number of trips taken in 2019, and even though domestic tourism was only allowed to be operational at Alert Level 1 of the risk-adjusted strategy, the domestic tourism market generated R53.1 billion (South African rands) total revenue in 2020, which is an increase of 21.0% from 2019 (SAT 2021b), a period during which very limited tourism activity was permitted. Thus, domestic tourism experienced a 102% increase in the average spending of tourists in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (SAT 2021a). These figures highlight that even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the domestic tourism market was making progress towards recovery, demonstrating its capacity to adapt to global changes and uncertainties of this nature. The next section presents the methodology that was followed for this study.

Research methods and design

This article draws from an interpretivist paradigm aimed at providing meaning from the perspectives of the participants

involved in the social phenomenon by adopting a qualitative approach to data collection. According to Fink (2014), 'a research design describes the way in which the study's subjects and participants are organised and more importantly, how their behaviour is measured within the study'. In this regard, a qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate for achieving the study's objective of exploring and contextualising the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on South Africa's tourism sector and mapping out a way forward based on these impacts from the perspective of key stakeholders in tourism in the country. Given that COVID-19 is a social event that posed disruption to social orders and systems, the qualitative approach was seen as the best way to capture and understand the feelings of stakeholders regarding its implication on tourism in South Africa. As argued by Teti, Schatz and Liebenberg (2020), the qualitative method is useful in explaining, addressing and planning for future external shocks linked to pandemics, in any case. They further suggested that the adoption of a qualitative research approach enables the researchers to gain insights into a current situation as it unfolds and evolves, while also gaining critical lessons for future effective management of similar situations.

The interviews were conducted between April 2020 and December 2021, during which times South Africa was experiencing some of the most severe mobility restrictions to tourism operations. The study employed a purposive sampling approach for the interviews whereby in-depth interviews were conducted (telephonically and virtually on the Zoom application [Zoom Video Communications, Inc., San Jose, California, United States]) with stakeholders, purposefully chosen based on their knowledge, experience, interest and involvement in the tourism and hospitality sector within South Africa. In total, 20 stakeholders with a credible presence within the South African domestic tourism environment were interviewed, with representatives from each province. Whilst a total of 30 stakeholders had been initially targeted based on the types of positions identified, saturation was reached at interview 14. However, given the nature of the study (looking at views from a wide geographical spread across the country), the researchers continued until interview 20, after which the main research questions for the study had been answered.

These interviews were conducted based on an interview schedule designed with a focus on determining the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the domestic tourism industry and the strategies that can be used to engender resilience and kick-start the industry post-COVID-19 and after the restrictions have been lifted. The study also focused on the ideas of stakeholders about how domestic tourism could be leveraged in order to offset some of the implications imposed by the pandemic on international tourism into the country. On average, each interview was approximately 45 min long. A thematic analysis was undertaken, whereby responses were analysed and categorised into themes that offered meaning and context in the reporting of the qualitative results. Thus, the

contents of each interview were analysed and categorised into themes using the constant comparative method. Through this process, each interview was individually analysed, identifying codes that were then unified with others, ultimately resulting in the identification of four central themes around which the responses were centred. As far as possible, the researchers searched for emerging patterns from the data and avoided forcing preconceived ideas of what the data should say. The researchers acknowledge the bias that could be associated with this, as inevitably the themes would be influenced by the background and experience of the researchers. The four themes found were as follows: impacts of COVID-19 on tourism, role of domestic tourism in recovery, government response to COVID-19 and perceptions of future planning for external shocks. These themes were sourced from all the interview transcripts, and where contradictions within a theme were observed, such a contradiction is presented alongside the other views. The collated findings will be elaborated upon in terms of the thematic annotations, and discussions will further consider the potential implications of the responses below. To protect the identities of those who participated in the research, codes are used for the participants ranging from Participant 1 (P01) to Participant 20 (P20). As far as possible, varied direct quotations are provided (from as many of those interviewed as possible), but in many instances, the best response that captures the sentiments of those interviewed is provided.

Results

Perceived impacts of coronavirus disease 2019 on domestic tourism in South Africa

The findings of this study established that the participants unanimously agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had brought about very crippling effects on the domestic tourism sector. Closing down the entire tourism sector and its related value chains, as well as suspending and banning travel, was detrimental to the domestic tourism sector. In addition, domestic tourism activities could hardly be boosted in a climate where job losses were rife, leading to unemployment and the loss of disposable income. To this end, one of the participants highlighted that:

'[F]or a country where the unemployment rate keeps rising and where there is a high dependency on social relief programmes from government, COVID-19 simply highlights that unless the lives of the local people significantly change in terms of earning disposable income to travel around their country, it may not change much.' (P01)

For a country that had experienced a rating downgrade prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, further restrictions on economic activity, especially within the tourism sector, would engender very negative socio-economic outcomes. To bolster this point of view, and in agreement with the crippling effects endured by the sector, another respondent stated that:

'[T]he domestic tourism market was [*already*] on a steady decline before COVID-19 pandemic struck as the country had been [*placed*] on junk status before COVID-19 and Standard and Poor

[S&P] has further reported that it will keep it there. This directly affected various markets and the domestic tourism market was already on the decline.' (P10)

Another respondent indicated that:

'[T]he locals are struggling already to visit some of our top attractions because effectively, they have been priced out of them. It is a tricky one to then say we will rely on them to kick-start things, but realistically, they are the immediate hope.' (P03)

This notion revealed a pessimistic view of the domestic tourism market, particularly from the viewpoint of this market attempting to offset losses because of the suspension of international tourism activities. In this regard, the key informants felt that prior to the pandemic, the domestic market was already thin, owing to issues such as the declining economy in the country, currency downgrades and an overall lack of disposable income, which all meant that there were limited tourism-related engagements from them anyway. The major reliance of most tourism and tourism-related businesses on the international tourism market is a key factor because, while the decline in international demand pointed to an expectation of increased domestic demand, this was not realised 'as a consequence of the wider impacts of COVID-19 on the South African economy and correspondingly, of reduced discretionary expenditure' (Rogerson 2021). To this end, the complex linkage between international and domestic tourism was highlighted by one of the participants, who noted that the impacts had been felt at:

'[A]ll levels because each sector is tightly linked and co-dependent [*on the other*] for a [*complete*] tourism experience. The international market drops a large link in the system [*in terms of*] flights, restaurants, tour guides, etc.' (P05)

In relation to the potential of domestic tourism being able to offset the losses because of the suspension of international tourism, one of the participants noted that the domestic tourism market could not be expected to offset such losses in South Africa because:

'[T]he disposable income gap between the two is far too large; and even if business travel remains and increases [*within the domestic scene*], SA is not in a position to catch up [*make up for the revenue losses and socio-economic contribution*] considering the [*current level of the*] economy.' (P02)

This position was further supported by one of the key resource persons, who noted that:

'[I]nternational tourism contributes an immense ratio to the GDP [*gross domestic product*] of the country, [*compared to domestic tourism*] and I think the domestic tourism market cannot match such contributions.' (P03)

Additionally, a key resource person categorically expressed that domestic tourism had no chance of offsetting the losses of international tourism in the following comment:

'The domestic market cannot compete with the spending capacity of the international visitors. Internationally, visitors arrive with foreign currency, inevitably mainstream in the form of USD,

EURO and GBP. Their spending power is 1:18 to 1:22. Traditionally, MICE [*meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions*] visitors would spend an average of R2500.00 per day. The exception is the I in MICE which spends up to \$4500.00 per 6-night stay. This varies greatly depending in industry, origin and budget but it is known that incentive travel yield per passenger is very high, compared to conference or exhibition delegates.’ (P06)

For South Africa, such feedback simply highlights a grim reality – what was already a bad situation before the outbreak of the pandemic has only gotten worse. With the pandemic’s constant and dynamic evolution and the need for the imposition of further restrictions, especially given current challenges in vaccine roll-outs (linked to vaccine hesitancy), the domino effect seems to have been profoundly felt throughout the domestic tourism sector and constitutes an antecedent to potential domestic tourism promotion in the context of recovery strategies (Rogerson & Rogerson 2021). Another area in which the impacts of the pandemic are significant is in job losses and heightened unemployment. The need for the mandating of restrictions such as lockdowns, bans on the sale of alcohol and cigarettes (albeit at different times and varying extents), the implementation of curfews and other forms of limitations on the fluidity of movement and interactions has meant that most of the sectors within the tourism value chain have had to shut down operations. In this light, one of the participants asserted that:

‘Tourist attractions, intermediaries, [*the*] transportation sector, restaurants and entertainment areas/amenities most employees are losing their part-time jobs in these sectors within the tourism industry while the permanent employees are losing a certain percentage on the wages or salaries as companies are unable to pay full salaries due to no income or revenue. These sectors are retrenching people which is increasing the high unemployment rate in the country.’ (P04)

Reflections on the role of domestic tourism in South Africa’s tourism recovery

The promotion of domestic tourism emerged as one of the most significant points of focus for the key resource persons in this study. In this regard, a cross-section of the participants found a favourable intention to travel after lockdown restrictions. One of the participants stipulated that:

‘[A]s soon as lockdown restrictions are lessened, people are going to visit family and friends and undertake business trips [*locally*] owing to them not having been travelling which has impacted on their work because of the restrictions they had to adhere to during the lockdown.’ (P19)

With the data collection happening during the height of the lockdowns between 2020 and 2021, current trends are reflective of this position and offer an indication that the lifting of domestic travel restrictions and other mobility restrictions has provided the opportunity for tourism activities to resume, albeit at lesser levels than at the outset of the pandemic. The focus, however, going forward needs to be on the reactivation and recovery processes of domestic tourism. Another one of the participants stated that once travel is permitted, the:

‘[F]ocus on domestic overnight tourism: visiting friends and relatives; leisure trips and the attendance of funerals will in the main resume.’ (P07)

This sentiment was further backed by another key informant (P09), who suggested that there would definitely be a busy travel environment beyond the restrictions, based on the feelings of people. Relatedly, the interviewee argued that some may have been quite frustrated with being stuck inside during the restrictions. The interviewee expressed this sentiment as follows:

‘Domestic tourism, especially visiting friends and relatives, is quite strong and performs well in South Africa. Once restrictions are lifted, it is clear that people will immediately travel. But this is based on whether there is a wave of fear given how uncertain the pandemic has proven to be. There could also be an eagerness to catch a break from the mundane lockdown restrictions.’ (P09)

Another of the key resource persons concurred that current mobility restrictions (at the time of collecting data – this has subsequently changed) and protocols could motivate future domestic travel once restrictions were lifted by indicating that:

‘[E]ven though South Africans will have a great deal less money to spend on holidays, local and domestic travel may increase as a result of reduced international travel. Yet, domestic tourists who took local holidays may now not be able to do so, financially. That said, many people are burning for a weekend away, so no doubt, domestic travel will thrive in certain markets and regions. Personally, I doubt COVID-19 will have much impact on domestic travel decisions. It’s probably safer going away on a self-catering weekend than sending your kids to school. And – yes, I think there will be a greater appreciation of getting away than the weekends away that were taken for granted.’ (P20)

Such reflections are positive indicators for the recovering tourism sector, and these sentiments might have been reflected in the volume of domestic and interprovincial travel that was witnessed during the adjusted risk Alert Level 2 and subsequent Alert Level 1 lockdown period in the country. In any case, the participants also felt that the lockdown and travel restrictions, coupled with the fear of crowded areas, may trigger domestic trips to the less frequently visited areas in the peripheries of the urban centres, which could play an important role in growing the domestic tourism market and leveraging tourism far more effectively than previous times. Other participants were, however, circumspect in their responses, with one of the participants asserting that even though they expect domestic travel to resume, this will also be:

‘[D]ependent on how people perceive the pandemic. By and large, the lesser lockdown restrictions have allowed for business travel so they have time to get comfortable with this and find ways into future business tourism. Financials will impact this move greatly.’ (P10)

Panache (2020) noted that the Tourism Business Council South Africa (TBCSA) had introduced promotional tourism campaigns aimed at introducing quality products and service

packages at reasonable prices to the domestic market, while the government was considering the introduction of a two-tier pricing system where domestic tourists would be able to explore the local tourism offerings at discounted rates enabling niche markets such as heritage tourism, festivals and local events to (re)emerge. Bama & Nyikana (2021), however, warned that intention to travel should not be viewed as a barometer for future travel, as there are other constraints such as perceptions of risk associated with the COVID-19 virus spread, limited disposable income and other variables which should also be considered to ensure domestic tourism uptake. Given that travel intention is often influenced by relations between countries as well as mass media rhetoric, the promotion of domestic tourism seems to provide the only starting point for the resilience and recovery of the sector in the short term. Notwithstanding, the global nature of the COVID-19 crisis has caused a domino effect that has profoundly affected the entire industry at the systemic level. 'Combating these effects can no longer be done through individual, local measures but rather, a systemic approach is needed in order to better manage the crisis' (Vărzaru, Bocean & Cazacu 2021). Given that this study was initiated during the initial stages of the pandemic, current trends in terms of the evolution of the pandemic, the emergence of different variants such as the delta and omicron variants and vaccine roll-out require concerted effort and adaptation. Tourism's recovery, and the scenario for both domestic and global tourism flows, will mirror the future course of the pandemic, as has been evident in South Africa through the different periods of the emergence of new waves and new variants. Therefore, the government's role cannot be underestimated in the efforts towards achieving resilience in the sector.

Perceptions of the government's response to coronavirus disease 2019 and planning for future external shocks

The tourism sector's vulnerability to external shocks such as political instability, environmental disasters, social, economic and health risks make the COVID-19 pandemic, although unprecedented in nature, no different in terms of its potential impacts on the sector. The pandemic has had governments at all levels operating in a context of radical uncertainty, and such fluidity has required the South African government to play a pivotal role in stabilising impending threats and steering the tourism sector back onto the path of recovery and growth. Asked whether the government was exercising the requisite role in protecting the tourism sector, participants gave varying feedback. One of the participants stated that:

'[R]egional and national governments need to collaborate and work as a unit in order to validate and ratify health protocols as proposed "by the industry, for the industry." They are, after all, the experts in this field and fully comprehend WHO, DoH and NEDLAC requirements. Wasting time [applying for permits before carrying out certain categories of activities is time-consuming and, in the COVID-19 context, burdensome] pushing all the approvals through municipalities is unproductive and detrimental to livelihoods.' (P13)

In addition, another respondent from the conferencing sector noted that:

'[A]ll protocols (Airlift, events, hotels, hospitality) have been drafted by experts in the industry with foundations on WHO and Department of Health guidelines. SA should follow the lead of countries like Kenya, who had their proposed protocols approved by their Ministry of Health, UNWTO and WHO in a short space of time. This decision should be passed swiftly by the Command Centre and should override any local and regional government by-laws as it is a universal process. Investigate where spikes of infections currently come from and isolate those areas, rather than entire cities and provinces. Allow regional leisure travel to resume without delay as recent miscommunications and conflicting messages from government cost operations more to open, just to be closed again. They need to give a date for the resumption of international travel into the country, with the necessary guidelines and conditions. In the case of business events, there is better control and management because all the delegates register, so the tracking of these people becomes easier. Business events by their nature are more prepared with crisis management when compared to other types of tourism. Events up to 500 delegates can easily be managed and should be allowed swiftly.' (P07)

Yet another of the key informants indicated that the government had not fulfilled its mandate in arresting the crises by stating that:

'Government made a valiant effort but it was clear from the start that government does not understand the essence and impact of tourism in the broader economy. Private sector financial relief was on the table in a short period of time but the application processes and distribution of funds remain questionable. Government funding opportunities via the Unemployment Insurance Fund [UIF] and Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme [TERS] remain messy and highly insufficient, especially being only available from April to June 2020 while the lockdown was predicted until December 2020 [and beyond] on a domestic level and February 2021 for international travel.' (P08)

To demonstrate how the government might have improved the conditions of employees within the tourism and hospitality sector, a key informant from the hospitality sector noted that:

'[T]he bigger picture was completely missed in terms of casual and freelance workers. The F&B [food and beverage] industry, which is highly tourism related, employing vast numbers of casual workers paid by the hour and often relying on tips, were left destitute on 27 March 2020 [and ongoing]. These workers do not pay UIF [Unemployment Insurance Fund] and as a result, do not qualify for any UIF or TERS [Temporary Employer/Employer Relief Scheme] relief funding. The only sector amongst casual and freelance workers that has been recognised are tourist guides, yet their miniscule relief fund remains in question to date. Government should enable employers of casual and freelance workers to provide an affidavit to prove employment and provide financial relief as a matter of urgency.' (P01)

Given the circumstances, the key resource person therefore advocated for the:

'[L]ifting [of] regulations, in order to monitor demand, ensuring hygienic practices are implemented and made public knowledge. Keeping to standards already set of what to expect in SA.' (P01)

Such feedback supports the general rhetoric of mainstream media, which suggests that a substantial number of restaurants within the sector have been forced to shut down consequent to the effects of the curfews and mobility restrictions (Rogerson & Baum 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson 2021a). Essentially, the findings showed that there are nuances regarding the experiences of the pandemic and its impacts, as well as the direction going forward. Closely tied to this notion is the fact that there seems to be a lack of trust in the government and the decisions they have taken about the pandemic from the private sector. Moving towards tourism recovery and resilience in future external shocks, such a mistrust cannot be repeated. Despite this, much positive feedback was observed in terms of which the domestic tourism market is seen as an option to explore in times of uncertainty, although suggestions were made that this market be grown and made to be as attractive as possible.

Conclusion and discussion

The focal thrust of this study was to determine strategic options for South Africa's domestic tourism in the wake of the ruins of the sector because of the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, the study proposes the need for the building of stronger frameworks of collaboration between the public and private sectors in the country. This would assist in ensuring that any inequalities could be tackled collectively by all relevant stakeholders while at the same time helping to build a more resilient, inclusive and sustainable domestic tourism sector. This would be possible through clear and concerted recovery plans and focused domestic tourism marketing campaigns directed towards stimulating the demand for domestic tourism products. Nyikana, Tichaawa and Kimbu (2021) asserted that the domestic tourism market can be used to fast-track tourism growth and the recovery process in the face of COVID-19 and other unexpected events. This is because the domestic market tends to be consistent and reliable and as such easily assists in forming a bedrock from which bigger aims can be achieved.

In addition, the study emphasises the need for continuous conversations between stakeholders in the tourism industry. In this regard, the authors recommend that effective public and private collaborations be formed such that tourism businesses can reach out to the government outside of times of crises. Rather, regular conversations should be had that seek to provide real-time feedback and advice on ready-to-implement solutions to existing challenges in the sector. The outcomes of this study have provided insights for policy and managerial recommendations to policymakers and other stakeholders within the tourism sector. Additionally, the study found that there was a scarcity of consultation between key stakeholder groups, making it therefore imperative to set up a framework to guide how the communication between the different stakeholder groups involved in, and impacted by, the pandemic should be managed more broadly.

As a result of the study being conducted in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, a key issue that was not considered

as part of the scope of the research entailed discussion on vaccination strategies and how that would impact the restarting of domestic tourism. Relating to issues around vaccine hesitancy, a recommendation for further enquiry with the inclusion of all stakeholder groups is suggested, as this would ensure effective communication and foster perception shifts around vaccine uptake where necessary. Be that as it may, the study findings reveal a greater need to strategically plan for the domestic tourism market. In this regard, this market is seen as a key focus area for South Africa and other similar destinations to offset the negative impacts experienced by the sector in the face of macro-environmental issues like the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors acknowledge that the study was conducted in the early stages of the pandemic, and since then much has changed and many other similar studies have been conducted. However, the insights offered herein are still deemed important when looking at a comprehensive strategy for domestic tourism development for the country.

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Authors' contributions

Both authors equally worked on all sections of the article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

This article draws upon qualitative interviews with selected key stakeholders in the domestic tourism landscape of South Africa. Such interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. The transcripts are available from the corresponding author, S.N., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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