

# Exploring obstacles towards tourism growth for poverty alleviation and job creation in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg

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## Abstract

Alexandra Township is one of the most populated and poorest townships in Johannesburg. It is surrounded by the country's most affluent and prosperous suburbs such as Wendywood, Kelvin, and Sandton. Unlike the Soweto Township, which emerged as a well-known township destination in post-apartheid South Africa, township tourism is a recent phenomenon in Alexandra. Government only recognized the Alexandra's tourism potential in early 2000. The South African government has invested in Alexandra township which has witnessed major improvements, including the development of new infrastructure, shopping centre, recreational parks, a casino, theatres, heritage sites, bed and breakfast facilities, the growth of small businesses and improved environmental awareness and culturally-related activities, to name a few. As township tourism is a growing focus of government as an economic growth strategy and tool for development, Alexandra is becoming a tourism destination in its own right. However, the township is still faced with tourism growth challenges as township residents are not able to fully exploit and benefit from its tourism potential. Through empirical work and semi-structured interviews conducted with residents, government and civil society generally, this paper sheds light into challenges facing tourism growth in Alexandra. Results indicate that there is growing concern that tourism-related developments are occurring at a very slow pace. Unfortunately, since democracy the township continues to remain underdeveloped, with its tourism industry limited. Alexandra exhibits high crime rates, lack of understanding and knowledge for tourism, slow growth of tourism businesses, lack of government support and lack of tourism facilities and activities.

**Keywords:** township tourism, Alexandra Township; poverty alleviation; job creation, Johannesburg



Source:<http://2summers.net/wpcontent/uploads/2011/10/alex-and-sandton.jpg>

## **Introduction**

The tourism industry continues to be a driving force for economic growth and development in South Africa (Rogerson and Visser, 2004). Although studies show that the industry is still dominated by a few rich countries, South Africa is among the developing countries in the South which enjoys the benefits that comes from tourism. Over the past 20 years, there has been a rise in slum (i.e. township) tourism, with South Africa witnessing a fair amount of growth in township tourism with Soweto in Johannesburg and Langa in Cape Town as leading township tourism destinations. Although Soweto and Langa are the well-known destinations, in the past fifteen years, the South African government identified Alexandra Township as having great tourism potential, and called for urgent re-development of the area to contribute to poverty alleviation and job creation (Rogerson, 2004). Since 2001, Alexandra has experienced some major improvements which have included the development of new infrastructure, a shopping centre, casino, theatres, heritage sites, bed and breakfasts, development of small medium and micro-enterprises (SMMEs), and improved environmental awareness and culturally-related activities (Mabotja, 2012). However, though the township have shown tourism potential, there are still constrains that hinder the growth of the industry to contribute to poverty alleviation and job creation.

The township is one of the most populated and poorest township in South Africa situated in Johannesburg. Statistics conducted in 2012 revealed that the population of the township was 750,000 compared to a figure of 170 000 in 2001. Within Johannesburg, Alexandra is surrounded by the country's most affluent and prosperous suburbs such as Wendywood, Kelvin, and Sandton. In 1912, the township achieved full free rights for its black population as it was not affected by the demolition which took place during the

Apartheid regime throughout the country (Agupusi, 2007). The township is under the municipality of Johannesburg, a wealthiest city and largest commercial centre and vital economic driver of the country. Although the township is surrounded by wealthy suburbs, the life and living standards of Alexandra residents continue to be poor in post-apartheid South Africa. Alexandra is characterized by high rates of poverty, unemployment, hunger, crime, economic inequality, lack of education, and a large number of unskilled people (Nieftagodien, 2013). In addition, poor housing is still a challenge. The number of informal dwellings is estimated to be over 20 000. Across the area, over 7000 families live in illegal backyard dwellings (Agupusi, 2007). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the main obstacles to the growth of tourism in the township of Alexandra via empirical findings and made recommendations.

## **Development of the township tourism in Alexandra**

Township tourism is a very recent phenomena in South Africa, as studies reveal that the concept of township tourism began after the transition to democracy. According to Booyens (2010) township tourism in post-apartheid South Africa was hugely influenced by the first non-racial elections, which marked South Africa as a democratic country. It had brought both cultural and economic independence for the black majority. Across the country, Soweto and Langa had long been known as tourism brands. However, the tourism potential in Alexandra was only recognised at a later stage. It was in 2001 when the government officially put emphasis on growing township tourism in Alexandra (Kaplan, 2004). Considerable work has been done, as the area has been attracting numbers of both local and international tourists who visit the Johannesburg city. Most of the tourism-related development activities began along with the introduction of the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP), which was to develop the township into a suburb. "The

ARP was announced by President Thabo Mbeki in 2001, a R1.2 billion project to renew the vibrant but ramshackle township” (Davie, 2008). The Gauteng Tourism Authority (GTA) is responsible for the tourism development project in the area. The GTA joined the ARP to combine their efforts in developing a range of heritage and tourism development initiatives in Alexandra (Davie, 2008). The GTA also formed the Alexandra Tourism Development Project (ATDP) to help develop and market the township as a tourism brand. So much has been done since the ATDP converged with the APR. In March 2007, Mbhazima Shilowa, the former Gauteng Premier, extended the ARP duration into a ten-year long project to be concluded in March 2010. As a result a new budget was set, and by that time the ARP amounted to 1.9 billion. These projects have contributed in developing the township of Alexandra. For instance, the township had become easily accessible because of newly built tarred roads and bridges, connecting the area with the city and other places (Mabotja, 2012). Today Alexandra has improved as a result of the APR and ATDP, and though still problems remaining. As Dlamini (2009) also noted, “step by step Alexandra is changing, with the efforts of Johannesburg City to develop the township’s tourism, while also providing housing and basic infrastructure to residents”.

Despite these efforts, the ARP and ATDP has had challenges which delayed or rather disturbed the completion of the tourism growth project. These include the mismanagement of state funds and ongoing corruption (Dlamini, 2009). Although township tourism was introduced back in 2001, the tourism industry in the township is still in its early growth phases. In 2004, for instance, the tourism industry in “Alexandra had only eight registered SMMEs operating as tour guides, six transport operators, and eleven SMMEs involved in an array of cultural tourism activities”. This figures have not changed that much, as there recent statistics show that there are currently

eleven tour guides, five bed and breakfasts, and five taverns (Moolman, 2014). Thus, even today the number of locally owned small businesses in the township has not been increasing as hoped by the local government. Petesch (2013) argued that their impact on the local economy and job creation is minimal. According to Agupusi (2007) there is a lack of policy that deals adequately with semi-formal and informal business sectors. There is also the fear of crime which inhibits tourism promotion” (Rogerson, 2004). According to Nieftagodien (2013) heritage and tourism development also remains undeveloped and poorly co-ordinated. Despite these noted problems there is limited empirical evidence to show exactly what the obstacles to tourism growth in Alexandra are. These are addressed below.

## **Methodology**

To assist in understanding the tourism-related challenges facing in Alexandra, the study used a qualitative research methodology. Semi-structured interviews with key informants was conducted between August to October 2014 by the second author. One telephonic interview was conducted with a respondent from the local Alexandra area due to time constraints of the informant. Interviews were conducted in Alexandra with civil society, the private sector (i.e. tourism- business operators, including street traders), local government officials, and the local tourism officers. Eighteen interviews were conducted although only selective interviews are reported in this paper. All respondents agreed to be quoted, unless otherwise stated in results. A grounded theory approach was used to analysis the data collected and identify key themes discussed below. Four themes are reported on below.

## **Findings**

### **High crime rates and drugs**

Throughout the interviews residents noted the problem of high crime impacting on

tourism development in the township. As Jeffrey Mulaudzi (SMME owner and tour guide in Alexandra, Interview 4 August 2014) stated, *“Alexandra had long been faced by the challenge of crime and drug dealing, making it hard to develop and market the area as a tourism brand”*. However, Kerry In Irvin (local government official in Alexandra, Interview 12 October 2014) argued that *“the high crime rates had decreased in Alexandra”* and that the drop in crime rates began when the national and provincial government became more involved and committed in the crime matters in Alexandra following the xenophobia incident of 2008. On the other hand Torris Skhosana (street vendor and resident in Alexandra, Interview 12 October 2014) argued that *“the township is still affected by violence and crime-related activities, and most of criminal reported cases include theft or robbery, hijacking, rape, shop-lifting, and even murder cases are occasionally reported”*.

There is no doubt that crime has impacted on tourism growth in Alexandra. As Thabo Maposi (SMME operator/ owner in Alexandra, Interview 18 August 2014) stated, *“With no doubts, violence and crime has created a bad image for the city of Johannesburg (of which Alexandra destination is situated), for the country and beyond, as the city is viewed as a most dangerous place in the world”*. In addition, Papi Mbuli (tour guide in Alexandra, Interview 4 August 2014) mentioned that *“as a result of fear and concern over safety, the international tourists who visit the area often refuse to experience the township through walking tours, but instead they always prefer cycling or being driven around”*. With this perspectives, it is clear that Alexandra is a difficult area to promote and market as a tourist destination to the travellers.

### **Lack of understanding and knowledge of tourism**

There has been major progress done in ensuring and increasing the levels of

community participation in the tourism sector around Alexandra. However residents still lacked skills on how to run and promote tourism operations. According to Richel Pasha (tourism information officer in Alexandra, Interview, 8 October 2014) *“the lack of skills, understanding, and knowledge for tourism within the area is still an important obstacle preventing the local people from fully participating in all tourism and other related developments that often take place in their area”*. It was argued by many residents that it is only a very limited number of local people that are taken every year for training via the Alexandra Tourism Training Programme and the Youth in Hospitality Training Programme. According to a Gauteng Tourism government management official, *“there are more than 200 of local residents who receive tourism and hospitality training through these programmes”* (M. Ngwenya, Interview 14 September 2014), although these are not enough considering the population in Alexandra as was noted by residents.

According to Oupa Mkomo (street vendor and resident in Alexandra, Interview 4 October 2014), *“such training is not accessible to all the people in need, as there are many hundreds of people who apply but end-up being left aside because of short of funds”*. Vusi Dladla (bar and restaurant owner in Alexandra, Interview 22 August 2014) also noted that *“there is growing concern over the issue of corruption and mismanagement of government developmental funds, which cause the misuse of state funds that appointed to help small businesses in the area”*. In addition, Zanele Nkabinde (Bed and Breakfast assistant manager in Alexandra, Interview 4 October 2014) stated that *“...[the] training programme...does not come free, as a certain amount of money is required as a registration fee and not every poor resident can afford it, though it is also accessible to a number of people”*. Thus, Alexandra still faces the problem of skill shortage and lack of understanding, especially for tourism. There is still a need to educate local people

on how to take advantage of tourism, develop small businesses, and increase pro-poor benefits.

### **Slow growth of SMMEs and lack of government support**

The slow development of SMMEs and limited government's support is a challenge for businesses in Alexandra. According to E. Hlapa (management stuff at GTA in Johannesburg, Interview 15 September 2014), *"the culture of entrepreneurship and development of black enterprises in the township of Alexandra is still in early growing stages due to a discouragement of black entrepreneurship by government in the apartheid era"*. The tourism industry in Alexandra is dominated by a growing number of informal and semi-formal small businesses which are all locally-owned and managed. However, N. Johnson (township tourism researcher at GTA in Johannesburg, Interview 14 September 2014) noted that *"almost all the SMMEs around the township operate at [a] survivalist level, with owners being unable to promote or market their products and services due to limited capital"*. For example, Michell Mhlongo (tour guide in Alexandra, Interview 9 August 2014) mentioned that *"the lack of capital is a major challenge for purchasing the necessary equipment, including computers, bicycles for cycling, and mini-buses for touring the tourists around the township area"*.

Many SMMEs operators blame the government for not assisting them, arguing that the state neglect them while encouraging them to register their SMMEs. Many people in general argued that there was limited business service providers to assist in instilling a culture of entrepreneurship among residents. However, Jabu Makhanye (restaurant assistant manager in Alexandra, Interview 8 October 2014) stressed that *"the local residents of Alexandra, particularly the small business owners, do not come-out in their huge numbers (as was expected) to seek such free provided assistance with regards*

*to their SMMEs' development"*. She also noted that it is their responsibility, as community residents and business operators, to get-up and find help from government offices. Nevertheless, although the government is convinced that it is doing a good task in assisting SMMEs in the area, the local people have lost faith in the state, especially the SMMEs owners who still struggle to maintain and grow their enterprises.

### **Lack of tourism facilities and tourist activities**

Although there has been much tourism development in Alexandra, there is still much to be done in order to improve the product menu for Alexandra to become a competitive tourism destination. For example, it was uncovered that the township has one cinema with more attractions needed to be built. Richel Pasha (tourism information officer in Alexandra, Interview, 8 October 2014) argued that *"such limited number of tourist attractions and activities within the township result in low tourist pulling power, and this means that the destination's offerings do not motivate as much people...to visit the area"*. With limited tourism growth this would result in limited tourism contribution to the local economic growth, social development and, cultural empowerment, and support for environmental conservation.

According to Vusi Dladla (bar and restaurant owner in Alexandra, Interview 22 August 2014), *"the provision of more tourist activities in Alexandra can encourage the visitors to increase their length of holidaying by opting for more overnight stays, which would increase their expenditures on the local tourism-related products and services."* At the moment the township is far behind Soweto in terms of its tourism facilities and attractions, as Soweto currently enjoys a large number of domestic and international tourists who pursue longer overnight stays and repeat visits.

A majority of residents in Alexandra noted that the township has a very limited number of accommodation service providers. According to Zanele Nkabinde (Bed and Breakfast assistant manager in Alexandra, Interview 4 October 2014), *“there are five bed and breakfasts (with no single hotel) around the township.”* Nkabinde also noted that the existing bed and breakfast establishments often suffer from low occupancies because a majority of international tourists who visit Alexandra always undertake day-visits, instead of overnight stay - *“in cases where they [tourists] opt to spend more than a day, they choose places such as the Sandton suburb where most of the luxurious hotels are situated”*. According to this perspective it can be noted that the few existing tourism Bed and Breakfast facilities that offer accommodation in Alexandra do not provide services that satisfy the needs of the high spending tourists. Thus, *“there is a need to develop more hotels, and the market needs to be well researched as to find out on which of the product offerings are mostly in need and desired by the international tourists who visit the township”*, noted Busi Mndebele (Bed and Breakfast manager in Alexandra, Interview 27 August 2014). Thus, poor tourism growth has also impacted on job creation for tourism in the township.

According to Ngwenya (Interview 14 September 2014) *“the [tourism] industry in Alexandra had been able only to provide...four hundred employment opportunities”*. Lack in tourism demand is also a challenge which is faced by the local tourist guides, as their businesses heavily depend on the number of tourists coming to the township. According to Kerryn Irvin (local government official in Alexandra, Interview 12 October 2014), *“With such limited job opportunities in Alexandra, many people (including the youth) opt to leave the township and seek better opportunities in other neighbouring suburbs.”* Thus, the tourism industry in the area had not been able to contribute to poverty alleviation and job creation as was anticipated by the

government, though some slow developments are visible.

## Conclusion

Considering the work already done with regards to township tourism development in Alexandra, it is important to note that the area is indeed improving and becoming a tourist destination. However, there is growing concern that tourism-related developments occur at a very slow pace or not at all. Unfortunately, the township continues in the new democracy to remain underdeveloped, with its tourism industry remaining limited. Alexandra still has high levels of unemployment, poverty and lack of tourism-related skills. In other words, the ARP and ATDP have not fully achieved its tourism development goals in Alexandra as a lot is still to be addressed.

Empirical results indicated a number of challenges being faced in Alexandra hindering tourism growth. Such challenges include high crime rates, lack of understanding and knowledge for tourism, slow growth of SMMEs and lack of government support and lack of tourism facilities and activities.

It is high priority that government, the private sector and residents of Alexandra work collectively to address these problems in order to emerge as one of the leading township destinations in South Africa. The development of township tourism in Alexandra is part of the government's national strategy to respond to the lack of skills, high unemployment and poverty level across the area so it is best to heed the recommendations made below.

- The government needs to step-up more and work with the Alexandra community in fighting the issue of crime, as to restore the township's good image.
- Provision of tourism-related training for more residents is crucial in empowering Alexandra and can reduce the high unemployment levels. A five year plan

must be formulated that will train fifteen percent of residents a year. This needs to be followed up with support for residents by government to update knowledge and skills.

- It is crucial to ensure that people in the township are involved in the tourism economy and benefit in various ways from the local industry. As such a tourism committee composed of government, the private sector and residents must be formulated to monitor progress and discuss tourism development matters on a regular basis.
- There is a need from government to develop a convenient policies that better deals with small enterprises so they contribute to the local economy. This should involve removing red-tape so it is easier for residents to set up tourism businesses. Government support for tourism businesses is urgently needed.
- There is a need for business service providers and the SMMEs' development agencies to assist in instilling a culture of entrepreneurship among the residents and also provide continued support.

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