Success Factors for Managing Corporate Social Responsibility Activities at Malea-lea Ecotourism Venture During COVID-19

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Abstract

Ecotourism should conserve the environment, sustain the well-being of the local people, educate and promote cultural understanding. COVID-19 imposed challenges on the tourism sector impeding it from achieving its mandate. However, there has been little attention given to how some aspects of tourism sustained themselves during the pandemic. This is particularly true in developing countries like Lesotho, where businesses were entirely closed to tourists. The Malea-lea lodge, has been promoting the well-being of the local communities through corporate social responsibility. It established the Malea-lea Development Trust to implement and oversee all its corporate social responsibility activities. Though negatively devastated by the pandemic, the Malea-lea lodge through Malea-lea Development Trust was able to meet some of its social responsibility obligations. The purpose of the study was to investigate the critical success factors that helped this ecotourism venture achieve its social obligations despite the impact of the pandemic. Face-to-face interviews with the employees and focused group discussions with some beneficiaries of the Malea-lea Development Trust were held. The main theme that emerged after thematic analysis was labelled success factors, emanating from several categories ranging from monitoring of projects, motivation and sense of satisfaction, independence and collaboration, training and personal skills, to the role of the financial policy.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, COVID-19, ecotourism, Lesotho, Malea-lea

Introduction

The interest in ecotourism and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been growing fast in the last three decades, forcing some scholars to argue that CSR and ecotourism have similar principles (Farrington et al., 2017; Manente et al., 2014; Margaryan, 2022). Ecotourism has been one of the strategies used for community development. It is described as tourism that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, educates and promotes cultural understanding. There are different views regarding ecotourism's contribution to community development. Some scholars (Grosbois & Fennell, 2021), believe that it has a capacity to develop local communities, while others, though acknowledging its contribution, have reservations about its ability to enhance community livelihoods (Kuhn & Deetz, 2009; Margaryan 2022; Mnisi & Ramoroka, 2020; Rhodes & Pullen, 2017). Likewise, CSR describes companies' willingness to incorporate social and environmental issues into their commercial activities to achieve harmonious co-existence with their stakeholders. That is, companies should promote environmentally-friendly, sustainable, transparent and responsible social commitment that goes beyond profit-making and legal obligation to improve community livelihoods (Chilwalo, 2016; Sugion et al., 2015; Tian & Slocum, 2016). To be sustainable,

each company has critical success factors besides simply implementing CSR, especially during critical times characterised by disasters and pandemics.

The world has experienced many disasters and pandemics before COVID-19 with devastating impacts on tourism (Chen et al., 2007; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Mckercher & Chon, 2004; Smart et al., 2021). In Africa, the Ebola pandemic ravaged some countries before the current COVID-19 pandemic (Mizrachi & Fuchs, 2016; Sifolo & Sifolo, 2015). It first emerged in 1976 only to resurface in West Africa in 2014 (Sifolo & Sifolo, 2015; Mizrachi & Fuchs, 2016). The 2014 outbreak hurt the economies of Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone and those which were disease-free, resulting in negative economic growth. The world is currently facing COVID-19 after the first outbreak was reported in China in February 2019 (Cawthorn et al., 2021). Academia is yet to understand the pandemic. However, an emerging body of literature shows that though the tourism sector was severely affected, some institutions and sectors have been resilient to the pandemic due to certain critical success factors (Campos et al., 2021; Fransen et al., 2022; Stansfield et al., 2020). In the case of Lesotho, to our knowledge, there are no academic studies, documenting the experiences and factors that have led to the resilience of some of the ecotourism facilities. This study aimed to investigate the success factors that enabled Malea-lea lodge to meet some of its social responsibility obligations in the face of the pandemic using the Matelile Development Trust (MDT), an organisation entrusted with the CSR initiatives of the lodge. The study sat out to answer the following question: What critical success factors enabled Malea-lea lodge to meet some of its social obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic? The following section presents a literature review on success factors in ecotourism, COVID-19 pandemic and linkages between CSR and ecotourism. Then follows a section on the methodology and context of the study followed by the findings and discussion, and conclusion.

Literature review

Success factors in ecotourism

Managing an ecotourism enterprise is a complex and challenging venture. It involves a full range of issues, including understanding market principles and business fundamentals, building strong, lasting and equitable partnerships with local communities, protecting the environment, and operating in adverse national and local conditions (De Witt et al., 2014; Parker & Khare, 2008; Sharma et al., 2021). To be successful, the entrepreneur should consider factors that could make the enterprise successful. These considerations are considered critical success factors and they may be unique to each enterprise (Baipai et al., 2021). They are the key aspects or areas that must be in place to achieve organisational objectives or enhance the organisation's resilience to challenges.

Studies have been conducted in different tourism sub-sectors to investigate these factors (De Witt et al., 2014). They have been analysed in hotels using the concept of Yield Management emphasising the role of technology and other factors such as top management commitment, training of employees, communication and interdepartmental cooperation, among others as some of the critical factors that could make Yield Management successful (Hansen & Eringa, 1998). Working on the development and management of guesthouses in South Africa, Van der Westhuizen (2003), identified critical success factors from thirty guesthouse owners that included high-quality standards, sharing positive information, and giving credit where it is due. Concerning ecotourism in national parks in South Africa, it has been documented that Kruger National Park faces competition for tourists emanating from nineteen other national parks managed by SANParks, and competition from the neighbouring

countries of Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe, but it has a potential to be successful. The critical factors that scholars suggest for the management to enhance its competitive edge include improving the quality of service, and ensuring that tourists enjoy a memorable experience through wildlife experiences and interpretation and luxuries (Engelbrecht et al., 2014). De Witt et al. (2014) used factor analysis to determine critical ecotourism factors in national parks. The factors identified included product development, ethical behaviour, local community involvement, policies and environmentally friendly practices. Focusing on tourism destinations, Marias et al. (2017), identified finances, human resources products and customer-related aspects as critical success factors.

The success factors manifest themselves when a community or an enterprise faces challenges and it can manage some of those challenges. The capacity and ability to resist challenges is sometimes referred to as resilience, a concept that has been studied extensively in tourism and other sectors (Dogru et al., 2019; Jones & Wynn, 2018; Ntounis et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2021). Outstanding studies addressing resilience have been carried out in areas such as socio-ecological resilience (Hayes et al., 2019); social resilience (Murphey, 2013); climate resilience (Sheller, 2019) and community resilience (Rendon et al., 2021; Plefferbaum et al., 2015; Pollok et al., 2019). Pfefferbaum et al. (2015) posit that community engagement, skill development and the use of approaches relevant to the local context can enhance community resilience. In the field of tourism, resilience has gained prominence because of the industry's recurrent shocks (Campos et al., 2021).

Many scholars have examined factors and frameworks that could enhance resilience to COVID-19, a concern of this study (Campos et al., 2021; Fransen et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2021; Stansfield et al., 2020). Most of these studies suggest bottom-community initiatives, communication, partnership and skills as factors that could promote community resilience to the pandemic. Examining ecotourism resilience to COVID-19 in Peru, Campos et al. (2021) found that the community ecotourism system had developed sufficient tools to adapt to the temporary effects of the pandemic resulting from its organisational skills. The community had a cohesive social structure, solid cultural identity, and social humour, enabling it to circumvent the effects of the pandemic on ecotourism. Besides, Sharm et al. (2021) adopted a framework showing that government response, technological innovation, consumer and employee confidence and local belongingness as critical success factors promoting tourism resilience to COVID-19. In Southern Africa, studies are emerging that address the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sectors presenting theoretical frameworks and methodologies to understand resilience to the pandemic (Hemmonsbey et al., 2021; Woyo, 2021). Nonetheless, little attention has been given to the success factors for ecotourism enterprises engaged in community development through CSR during disasters and epidemics like COVID-19.

COVID-19 impact on tourism

COVID-19 is one of the most challenging pandemics of its magnitude to several economic sectors, including tourism since World War II (Cawthorn et al., 2021; Van der Merwe et al., 2021). Since its first identification in Wuhan in 2019, it has spread swiftly, affecting all parts of the world with devastating effects. The health sector has been hit hard, pushing it to its limits with consequent rationing of the limited resources or a total collapse in some cases (Emanuel et al., 2020). It became a crisis on its own and concerning measures to contain it (Cawthorn et al., 2021). It did not affect the health sector alone, but other sectors were equally affected including the tourism (Buckley, 2021; Cherkaoui et al., 2020; Hosseini et al., 2021; Van der

Merwe et al., 2021). The pandemic affected tourists' perception impacting negatively on travel as they were concerned about their safety (Samdin et al., 2021). One important aspect of ecotourism concerns the conservation of the natural and wildlife that forms community livelihoods. Consequently, communities that rely on forest resources and wildlife were threatened worldwide as incidents of poaching, wildlife trafficking and forest logging activities increased due to the pandemic and collapse of ecotourism (Buckley, 2021; Cherkaoui et al., 2020;). Though Buckley (2021) observed that though public funding and protection of parks in developed nations continued amidst the pandemic, visitors' numbers were significantly reduced, resulting in both positive and negative impacts on the wildlife and the natural environment. In a few cases, the decline of tourists improved the reproduction of the threatened species. In developing countries where most of the conservation funding comes from various stakeholders including the taxpayer, NGOs and donors, COVID-19 resulted in dwindling of such funds leading to heightened poaching of black and white rhinoceros in Botswana, African elephant, giraffe and gorilla in South Africa and threat to tigers in India (Buckley, 2021). In the same manner, the livelihoods of those who depend on ecotourism were negatively affected due to cancellations of hunting activities (Van der Merwe et al., 2021)

COVID-19 has not been the only pandemic to affect ecotourism and tourism in general (Prayag, 2020). It is preceded by several pandemics of equal impact on the tourism sector. The second half of the 20th century was rocked by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) disease with devastating impacts on economic activities (Mckercher & Chon, 2004; Smart et al., 2021). South-East Asian countries, including China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Vietnam experienced heavy losses due to the waves of the SARS pandemic. The loss has been estimated to run over $20 billion of the Gross National Product (Mizrachi & Fuchs, 2016; Sifolo & Sifolo, 2015). The tourism sector was hit hard as the pandemic led to behavioural changes accompanied by the fear of the pandemic. The national borders were closed leading to an estimated 70% decline in tourism arrivals. SARS swiftly spread to other parts of the world outside of the Asian continent with an equally devastating impact on economies and the tourism sector (Chen et al., 2007; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Mckercher & Chon, 2004; Smart et al., 2021).

The African continent has been shocked by pandemics which negatively impacted the economy and the tourism sector (Novelli et al., 2018; Kongoley, 2015). In the 1970s, the Ebola pandemic ravaged countries in West Africa leading to a dramatic fall in tourism arrivals. Though it was confined to a few countries, other parts of the continent suffered the impact of Ebola emanating from the cancellation of trips due to fear and ignorance about the disease (Maphanga & Henama, 2019). Some studies have suggested a link between tourism and HIV and AIDS (Lu et al., 2020). Tourist destinations are described as the epicentres of demographic and social changes linked to HIV/AIDS risk due to the prevalence of transactional sex, alcohol and substance use. Countries in Africa and tourism companies experienced high costs, which resulted in high HIV and AIDS risk groups that have exerted pressure on the economies and the tourism sector. Currently, COVID-19 is ravaging all the sectors of the economy including the ecotourism sub-sector. The pandemic is reducing the capacity of ecotourism in contributing to community development through CSR and other means.

Ecotourism and CSR linkages
Research linking ecotourism and CSR has been growing for the last three decades (Farrington et al., 2017; Manente et al., 2014). Ecotourism is a concept that builds on the idea of using

tourism to enforce conservation and deepen ideas for sustainability (Stronza et al., 2019). It emerged in the 1980s during the heydays of sustainable development to counteract the challenges of the previous decades imposed by mass tourism (Hwang & Lee, 2019; Stronza et al., 2019). Mass tourism was blamed for its negative social and environmental impacts hence ecotourism was originally planned in a way that it could generate revenue for conservation and community development. Just like the old ideas about tourism, ecotourism was meant to take place in parks but also to enhance the livelihoods of people living in and around parks. Ecotourism presents many benefits to the proximate community as it can support the wildlife and protected area and lead to diversification of livelihoods through combining conservation with development. In addition, ecotourism indirectly contributes to environmental interpretation and ethics, promoting philanthropic opportunities that could be used for conservation and livelihoods diversification (Stronza et al., 2019). Further than that, ecotourism can change host communities' and tourists' mind-sets through education and exposure (Aswita et al., 2020).

Ecotourism is different from other forms of tourism such as nature-based tourism, cultural tourism and mass tourism (Mohd et al., 2020; Tang, 2019). Tang (2019) observes that there are two main categories of tourism which are mass tourism and alternative tourism based on the scale of sustainable points. Mass tourism emphasises the maximization of income above all other issues. Alternative tourism includes several categories which are differentiated from mass tourism. They are nature-based tourism, wildlife tourism, adventure tourism and ecotourism. Though alternative tourism categories are different, they stress sustainable development in their focus (Mohd, et al., 2021). Wildlife and adventure tourism respectively focus on wildlife and adventure while ecotourism is regarded as a specific aspect of nature tourism (Kiper, 2013). Tang (2019) argues that based on different definitions, ecotourism is a unique type of tourism because it is nature-based and natural conservation-oriented. In simple terms, ecotourism is an environmentally-friendly tourism to natural areas, cultural resources and ecological systems. Above all, ecotourism is different from other forms of alternative tourism in that it considers its impact on the local community, enhancing community participation and local residents' well-being. The focus of ecotourism on the well-being of the proximate communities has led some scholars to link it with CSR arguing that their principles are synonymous (Margaryan, 2022).

CSR is similar to ecotourism in a number of important aspects. Like ecotourism, CSR is a business policy that encourages firms to integrate social and environmental concerns in their mission, vision, strategies and operations (Margaryan, 2022). Hence, studies have been conducted that link ecotourism ventures to CSR (Bickford et al., 2017; Grosbois & Fennell, 2021; Wright, 2007). These studies argue that CSR in ecotourism and other companies exhibit similar principles. For Ecotourism facilities that practise CSR, it is argued that they are able to address both issues of conservation and community development. Research conducted in the area of CSR in ecotourism has come up with themes such as conservation, preserving socio-cultural heritage, sharing profits with local people and encouraging visitors to get involved (Grosbois & Fennell, 2021). Though Wright (2007) observed that for a long time the business world has been emphasizing the environmental aspect of CSR in reporting to the neglect of other dimensions of corporate reporting, recently, there has been a move toward including social issues in CSR reporting which draws parallels between ecotourism and CSR connected through its fourth ethical or quadruple bottom line (Margaryan, 2022; Wight, 2007).

The concept of triple bottom line emerged within the literature on companies' environmental reporting and concern from consumers expecting a shift in value creation from pure economic benefits to social and environmental considerations (Birkel & Müller, 2021; Elkington, 1998). The triple bottom line is explained as a system in which companies effectively communicate with stakeholders about economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social justice (Birkel & Müller, 2021; Wheeler & Elkington, 2001). The triple bottom line is a management principle that aims to create long-term shareholder value by taking opportunities and managing business risks. It focuses on profit-making but alongside the concerns of the environment and the people, leading to what has been commonly known as a 'win-win' situation (Bush, 2020; Stronza et al., 2019; Wight, 2007). Though studies have indicated that the tourism sector was the least developed in terms of CSR initiatives, it has been recently recognised that within the tourism sector, big companies such as airlines, hotel chains and cruises are the pioneers of CSR. Similarly, tour operators were identified as the weakest link in sustainable tourism, but through initiatives such as Tour Operators' Initiatives, they are beginning to adhere to the 'Triple Bottom Line' of business leading to customer satisfaction, environmental protection and a positive contribution to development (Kim et al., 2020). CSR has been linked to ecotourism through Social License to operate (Bickford et al., 2017), suggesting that business operators in ecotourism must work together to uphold their values and local values and traditions, behaving ethically and respecting the consequences of their actions. Thus ecotourism and CSR should not only meet the demands of their clients but give back and promote societal and cultural development and sustainability as is the case in ecotourism (Bickford et al, 2017).

Different perspectives attest that ecotourism and CSR share similar attributes concerning the ecosystem and community livelihoods (Chirenje, 2017; Mbaiwa & Hambira, 2019; Snyman, 2019). Both ecotourism and CSR could improve the ecosystem and local community livelihoods through infrastructure development, income generation projects and the creation of markets for local produce (Zeng &Wang, 2019). Nonetheless, there is a sombre perspective that ecotourism and CSR could hardly achieve their stated goals because ecotourism has the capacity to exclude marginalised members of the community creating what has been known as enclave tourism (Mbaiwa & Hambira, 2019). Besides, ecotourism has been blamed for destroying the socio-economic and natural environment through the overharvesting of natural resources (Cusack et al., 2021). Similarly, ecotourism and CSR are criticised that they lead to what is known as 'greenwashing' and 'social-washing' suggesting that companies use eco-labels to attract consumers and other stakeholders as a marketing strategy without necessarily changing business practices toward sustainability (English, 2002; Tippett, Yttredal & Strand, 2020).

Just like in ecotourism, critical success factors in the field of CSR have been studied (Bosch-Badia et al., 2017; Jerono; 2018; Sangle, 2010). The literature has established that there is a positive correlation between CSR and financial performance, suggesting that companies that practice CSR are at the same time financial stable. In the public sector, it has been established that some of the critical success factors for CSR are the ability to manage stakeholder groups, the ability to evaluate the benefits of CSR and top management support (Sangle, 2010). In the textile industry, especially within the Chinese context, literature shows that the critical success factors for CSR include the impacts of governmental regulation and support in the implementation of CSR in general. The tax waiver scheme is regarded as the most important government policy providing incentives for CSR implementation (Li et al.,

2020) while some studies point to the motivation of staff as an essential success factor for CSR projects (Bosch-Badia et al., 2017; Jerono, 2018). Some studies have identified several factors that could lead to the successful implementation of CSR that include strategic partnership, management systems and employees' commitment and motivation (Testa et al., 2018) and skills and experience of the staff that implement CSR (Acquier et al., 2011; Agudelo et al., 2019). These success factors apply to ecotourism as well.

Research context and methodology
The study context
A research context is important in ecotourism studies because the broader social, economic and political contexts help us understand the sector's underlying vulnerability, the impact of a crisis, and explain how and why certain factors become critical (Ritchie, 2009). Lesotho is one of the smallest countries in Southern Africa surrounded by the Republic of South Africa. Lesotho has few natural resources, poor soil quality and relies heavily on foreign assistance (Braun & Mclees, 2011; Nqosa et al., 2019). The government of Lesotho earmarked tourism as one of the sectors that could promote socio-economic development (The Lesotho Review, 2018). The tourism sector has been one of the fastest-growing sectors in the country. In 2013, it worth USD252 million comprising 7% of the country's economy and it was projected to grow by 4.4% between 2013 and 2022 (World Economic Forum, 2013). In addition, tourism has been employing over 34, 000 Basotho representing 6% of the total workforce (Nqosa et al., 2019; World Economic Forum, 2013; Yiu et al., 2015). Lesotho has developed a several policy documents, including the Lesotho Tourism Policy and the Lesotho Tourism Master Plan to promote tourism in the country (Manwa, 2012).

Challenges facing Lesotho tourism are that it relies heavily on international tourists, few tourist products that are at the same time seasonal and it faces competition from neighbouring South Africa, the hub of tourism (The Lesotho Review, 2018). Besides, several other challenges negatively impact the sector including lack of tourism-related infrastructure, low private sector investment due to limited incentives, and limited expertise, which hinders the implementation of activities under biodiversity, cultural preservation and environmental concerns (NSDP, 2018). In academia, different tourism avenues have not been explored in this country as emphasis has always been on nature tourism (Stockigt et al., 2018). Snow tourism is the major tourism product for the country though it is vulnerable to climate variation and weather (Stockigt et al., 2018). Studies conducted in Lesotho have not yet linked ecotourism with CSR nor COVID-19 (Lekaota, 2016; Monaheng, 2016; Thatsane, 2019) hence, to our knowledge there are no studies that are focusing on the success factors for ecotourism in promoting socio-economic conditions of the locals during COVID-19. Nqosa et al. (2019) conducted a study identifying key success factors in marketing tourism establishments in Lesotho but the study linked tourism with neither CSR nor COVID-19 understandably because the study was carried out during the initial stages of the pandemic.

Malea-lea lodge continued to implement CSR initiatives during the pandemic, though there is no research undertaken to investigate factors that made it successful during the critical time of the pandemic. The lodge's history dates back to the 1970s when a local store Matelile established a lodge with three horses for trekking (Mearns, 2012). The activity grew rapidly, resulting in the formation of the Farmers' Community Pony Trekking Association in 1999. The number of tourists and activities overwhelmed the lodge, leading to another businessperson establishing the Malea-lea Pony Owners' Association at the Malea-lea lodge (MDT, 2021;

Mearns, 2012). Since then, the local community and the lodge have become inter-reliant as the lodge's success has directly benefited the local community. The relationship resulted in the establishment of Malea-lea Development Trust whose main objective is to promote and support the community through CSR (MDT, 2021). The lodge and the community have been engaged in various ecotourism ventures and CSR activities. The ecotourism activities at the lodge include, 'Musi's reclamation donga, a Revolutionary Conservation, village homestay, Sangoma/traditional herbalist visit, pony treks and mountain hiking (The Lesotho Review, 2018) while the CSR projects include the education, infrastructure development, health and well-being; income generation and self-sufficient projects (Mearns, 2012; MDT, 2021). However, the challenge has been that the lodge, just like the whole tourism sector in Lesotho, depends on international tourism affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The methods

The study used purposive sampling techniques to investigate the success factors relating to the implementation of CSR initiatives. The Malea-lea Lodge management, MDT employees and beneficiaries were selected for the study. The study spanned over six months from January to June 2021, almost a year since the advent of COVID-19. The sample size of fifty-eight participants was decided upon reaching data saturation that produced sufficient in-depth information. Nine employees of the MDT and Malea-lea lodge were interviewed face-to-face. Table 1 presents an overview of the participants in the one-to-one interviews concerning their age, gender, education and position at work.

Table 1: The Malea-lea sample for face-to-face interviewed participants

Participants	Job description	Age	Sex	Education
P1	Management	56-60	M	Masters
P2	Finance	36-40	F	Diploma
P3	Fieldwork	36-40	F	Senior secondary
P4	Fieldwork	46-50	M	Senior secondary
P5	Computer	26-30	M	Diploma
P6	Teaching	40-45	F	Junior secondary
P7	Management lodge	41-45	M	Diploma
P8	Management lodge	46-50	M	Senior secondary
P9	Social work	41-45	F	Senior secondary

In addition, six focus group discussions were conducted with a maximum of seven members per group with beneficiaries of the CSR initiatives. The groups were the pony trekking, hiking group, HIV and AIDS support group, men's only group, and keyhole garden group labelled FG1 to FG5, respectively. The support group was divided into two groups because the available number of participants was bigger than all other groups. For confidentiality, the individual participants were labelled P1, P2 and so on, while participants from the focused group discussion were labelled P1FG1, P4FG2 to represent individual participants in one-to-one interviews and members in different focus groups discussions, respectively.

Rapport was built with the participants, especially the chief (traditional leader), the lodge and MDT management, who in turn approved access to the rest of the staff and beneficiaries. The study adhered to several ethical considerations, including full disclosure of the study purpose, seeking participant's consent, and assuring them confidentiality and the right to exist without due consequences. A language convenient to the participants was used. Before data analysis, the interviews and discussion were audio-recorded and later transcribed and translated verbatim to English.

The study rigour was ensured as it relates to qualitative data analysis comprising reliability and validity. Triangulation was used to safeguard the study's credibility, resulting in multiple sources of data and data collected at different times and at different sites (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The trustworthiness of qualitative research findings are normally secured through dependability (Cohen et al., 2011; Yin, 2003). The researchers increased dependability by taking cognisance of how data were collected, how categories were formed, and how decisions were reached throughout the entire study inquiry (Ghafouri & Afoghi, 2016). The study setting and context were provided in detail to achieve transferability (Mandal, 2018). Conformability was achieved by assessing the accuracy, relevance and meaning of the data by engaging other experts in the department of development studies specialising in rural development and CSR to check the data (Mandal, 2018).

The digitally recorded data were transcribed into a word document. The Atlas.ti version 8.0 was used to organise and develop initial codes and categories based on the study's research questions. The study used thematic, instead of content analysis (Patton & Cochran 2002). The thematic analysis emphasises, pinpoints, identifies and records patterns or themes within the data (Kleinhans, 2018; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Patton and Cochran (2002) and Vaismoradi et al. (2013) clarify that with thematic analysis, all the data are inspected to spot recurring common issues and identify the main themes that summarise all the views collected. The thematic analysis involves a 'bottom-up approach where the lowest level consists of descriptive codes applied directly to data. The second level involves gathering similar codes into more conceptual categories. The categories are then summarised into a limited number of interpretive themes, usually 3-5 (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In line with Nowell et al. (2017), the study followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research to ensure transparency in detailing the methods used to achieve the findings. A combination of shorter quotes within the narrative and longer block quotes were included to report the findings. All the quotes were given a unique identifier to demonstrate that variegated participants were represented across the findings.

Findings and discussion

The success factors emerged as the main theme during data analysis. The study identified several categories that supported the theme. The first category was that monitoring projects had a positive effect on the success of the MDT projects during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants on the one-on-interview confirmed that the projects were monitored at all stages, which resulted in positive results. Participant 3 explained:

> The MDT uses two field workers to monitor the projects from implementation to the final stage. Again we have a social worker who goes out to the community to monitor the beneficiaries of the HIV and AIDS programme, ensuring that they properly take medication. MDT used the same strategy to make other projects a success. The environmental project, the youth project and education projects are subjected to constant monitoring at all times and stages. I work with a men's only group and I am always with them to ensure that the projects on tree planting and soil erosion prevention become a success. Monitoring them throughout the day has made them successful (P3).

The hiking club at MDT faced many challenges during COVID-19 because there were no visitors. Some club members had to start their clubs to work with local tourists. The MDT extended its CSR to the newly formed clubs. The focus group discussion with

hiking club members confirmed that the support and monitoring from MDT before and during COVID-19 made their venture successful despite the impact of the pandemic.

> Before COVID-19, MDT monitored our activities to ensure that we provide quality service to the tourists, the community and our members. During the pandemic, MDT supported us with equipment and continued to monitor our activities, this time working with local tourists (P1FG2).

Similarly, the management at Malea-lea lodge and MDT acknowledged that monitoring projects were essential to maintain quality standards.

> The pandemic will pass and tourists will return. Maintaining high standards will hasten our recovery following the pandemic. MDT is sometimes overwhelmed by the number of tourists hence extending our help to independent groups through monitoring will expand tourism activities in this area (P1).

These findings are consistent with the literature reviewed that monitoring CSR projects and other factors are essential and lead to positive results (Testa, Boiral, & Hera-Saizarbioria, 2018). All the CSR projects were declared successful by both the management and beneficiaries, suggesting that monitoring is an important success factor during disasters and pandemics.

The reviewed literature shows that motivation plays an important role in CSR projects and that motivated staff works together to achieve a common goal (Bosch-Badia et al., 2017; Jerono, 2018; Testa et al., 2018). This study revealed that motivation and sense of satisfaction among the beneficiaries and members of the MDT were considered part of the success factors for the CSR projects during the pandemic. The participants felt motivated by personal achievement and the motivation they received from MDT, which urged them to work harder as expressed by one of the participants. 'I can happily say the trust's mandate is successful because we used to get funding from abroad before COVID-19. We are satisfied that the management is very supportive to the staff which helps us to achieve satisfying outcomes (Participant 2). The sense of personal satisfaction that motivates the staff to work harder for the CSR initiatives was expressed by the participants who believed that it helped them during the hard times of the pandemic. One of the problems with HIV and AIDS, is the stigma attached to it. 'We are motivated to have managed to reduce the stigma and the situation has improved for the beneficiaries of the health project' (P2FG3). The staff motivation while dealing with HIV and AIDS kept momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic itself. The area covered by MDT did not have high cases of COVID-19 resulting from the initiatives that the project staff and beneficiaries did to curb the spread of the disease. One of the respondents confirmed their motivation thus:

> If we were able to deal with the stigma attached to HIV and AIDS, we thought from the beginning that we would deal with COVID-19. It is hard, but we managed to distribute face masks to the community, we taught them about the disease and the project is going very well (FG3).

The same sentiments were expressed by participant 5 from the one-to-one interviews who expressed personal satisfaction in raising funds for HIV and AIDS pandemic which motivated him to be willing and eager to raise funds to address the COVID-19 pandemic. The sense of motivation and personal satisfaction urged him to exceed the target as he stated that:

I can say we have been successful because our target was to raise five hundred thousand (M5000 00) for COVID-19, but we ended up raising about 1.3 million. We used the money to buy food parcels, training and stipends for the volunteer who conducted training at the lodge and two villages. We supplied business entities in this area and the chief's offices with sanitisers.' (P5).

The CSR projects at MDT were deemed successful during the pandemic because the participants felt that how the MDT worked with the staff and beneficiaries contributed. They felt that they could work independently and in collaboration with the MDT. Some of the activities run by the lodge under MDT were shifted to the beneficiaries, but the MDT continued to work in collaboration with the beneficiaries. One respondent explained the working relationships in this way: 'The lodge used to run the hiking activities, but it recently shifted them to the Trust. The hiking guides benefit from these activities because the arrangement is that they get 65% from the money generated while the Trust keeps only 35% for the management of the CSR activities.' (P5).

The funds that MDT kept were used to manage CSR activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, other groups of beneficiaries felt that the CSR activities were able to continue during the pandemic because of the collaboration between MDT and other stakeholders because one respondent said: 'The lodge does not have horses. When tourists need them, the community provide them to the lodge. The lodge has allowed the community to run the pony trekking activities while the lodge is mainly the source of tourists.' (P4FG1). Maintaining the collaboration meant that horses were readily available from the community waiting for the return of international tourists. The collaboration meant that it was easy for the lodge to work with the local community to deal with the effects of COVID-19.

The education CSR project was able to run during a hard time of COVID-19 because of the working relations with the schools and MDT. They were allowed to be independent, but MDT would work with them whenever needed. The schools were closed during the pandemic but when they opened, some schools assisted by MDT were facing challenges resulting in a lack of funds to remunerate teachers. However, participants explained that they successfully continued teaching children because the MDT sourced funds to keep teaching and learning continuing. Members from the health CSR project shared the same views explaining that when times were favourable they worked independently from the MDT but during COVID-19 and other disasters, MDT would collaborate with the groups. These findings suggest that there was smooth communication between the MDT and the beneficiaries leading to the sharing of relevant information for both parties, something that has been recommended in the literature about CSR and ecotourism (Hansen & Eringa, 1998; Sharma et al., 2021).

The data revealed that MDT success to continue enhancing rural livelihoods during the COVID-19 pandemic depended on staff and beneficiary training, experiences and personal attributes of each staff member. These factors have been documented in the literature that education and skills contribute to achieving CSR objectives and goals and that in ecotourism education is critical (Aswita et al., 2020; De Witt et al., 2014; Pfefferbaum et al., 2015). Participant 4, for instance, explained that before he joined the MDT, he was a livestock and crop farmer working with rural communities. According to him, it was easy to work with agriculture-related projects at MDT because of the training and personal experiences acquired elsewhere. He stated that:

I have worked with rural communities for a long time. I have worked with this Trust since 2013 and that is why I have developed skills to handle challenges and overcome

them. Another factor is that I am a farmer myself and being a farmer came in handy in the implementation of these projects because they are in line with what farming is about. I am a very good listener, so that gives me the chance to make informed decisions (P4).

Similarly, the director of the MDT was a person whose highest qualification was a master's degree in agriculture. In addition, he had worked for many years with the government and both local and international Non-Governmental Organisations operating in Lesotho. He explained that CSR projects at the MDT were up and running due to the skills and experience he acquired in the past. The challenges imposed by COVID-19, according to him, did not severely affect the CSR projects because of his knowledge and skills.

Several other participants confirmed that training and personal experience were responsible for the Malea-lea lodge success to meet CSR obligations. The Malea-lea lodge through MDT supported the health, education, environmental and other projects despite the challenges imposed by COVID-19. These projects continued because participants felt that their experiences and training from MDT made things possible. Notwithstanding food shortage in the area, the MDT beneficiaries continued to receive food parcels. One of the participants maintained that before COVID-19, they were trained to source funds. Consequently, the education project continued to impart computer skills during COVID-19 which were necessary for students and teachers in the area as a result of teaching and learning which took place online. Participant 5 said:

 The training and the skills that I acquired working at MDT has helped a lot. During COVID-19, I managed to source funds and one telephone company in the country has entered into a memorandum of understanding, leading to the building of a computer room furnished with twenty computers and free Wi-Fi for a year.

He explained that the health project providing food parcels to people with HIV and AIDS continued during the pandemic because they managed to secure a steady sponsor. When COVID-19 came, the MDT worked with its skilled and experienced staff and managed to incorporate more HIV and AIDS victims and vulnerable groups affected by the effects of COVID-19. Due to border closure it was difficult to sources food items from the Republic of South Africa

The effectiveness of a policy was the last category identified supporting the success factor theme. The literature identifies government policy as a critical success factor for ecotourism (Sangle, 2010; Li et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2021). The participants contented that most of the CSR projects were successful before the COVID pandemic and they continued to be successful during the pandemic because of the policy that MDT put in place. The narratives showed that in the past, most CSR projects were failing. 'People would come to request assistance and when they were provided with water tanks, for instance, such tanks would be abandoned after a short time. This happened with many other projects given to the community.' Participant (P4) explained. As a result, the management developed a policy that for projects to be supported, the beneficiaries should contribute 50% towards the implementation of the project. '… The project owner takes care of 50%, we followed this strategy to ensure that beneficiaries stay committed to the project and reduce the dependency mentality.' Stated participant 5 (P5). As a result, during the pandemic, the beneficiaries of the different CSR projects continued to work on their projects realising that they would lose what they had invested. A member of the keyhole garden group explained that things were challenging because they were not accessing seeds as it was a case before the COVID-19. However, she explained that they persisted in their projects to avoid losing the entire investment. This

information suggested that the community had been empowered working with MDT. Besides persisting during the pandemic, some beneficiaries had diversified into other activities such as pony trekking, hiking and selling second-hand clothes.

Conclusion and recommendations

The importance of ecotourism and corporate social responsibility in community development has been discussed in the literature. However, it has been stated that tourism and ecotourism are sensitive to shocks and disasters, requiring some resilient measures to be put in place. The findings of this study have revealed some of the success factors that could enhance CSR in ecotourism. The study has revealed that community development is undertaken at Malea-lea lodge through a corporate social responsibility managed by Matelile Development Trust (MDT). Despite the shocks imposed by disasters and pandemics such as drought, HIV and AIDS, and COVID-19, MDT has met some of its social obligations. According to the findings, some of the success factors are the skills and experiences that the staff and the beneficiaries possessed, the working relations epitomised by good communication, a spirit of motivation, independence and collaboration, and above all the role of fiscal policy adopted at MDT.

Nonetheless, it has been argued that few studies have directly linked the two aspects: ecotourism and corporate social responsibility. In the case of Lesotho, no studies, to our knowledge had addressed ecotourism as it relates to community development through CSR. Few studies have been conducted to address other issues of participation and available tourism products without necessarily addressing how ecotourism could directly contribute to community well-being and become resilient to shocks and disasters.

Therefore, this study is one of its kind that links ecotourism, CSR, and community development in Lesotho contributing to improvements of the dearth of literature in this area. Therefore, it is recommended that tourism enterprises in Lesotho should engage in corporate social responsibility activities because the Malea-lea lodge through the MDT has demonstrated that implementing CSR in ecotourism benefits the local community. The community acquire skills and experience that could be used to address community issues and concerns during shocks, disasters and epidemics.

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