

Rural Tourism Challenges in South Africa under COVID-19: Greater Giyani Local Municipality, Limpopo Province

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Abstract

Rural tourism has been recognized as a policy focus in South Africa for at least the past 25 years. Implementation of policy support, however, has lagged with the result of only limited progress of many rural tourism destinations. Changes in consumer travel preferences linked to COVID-19 potentially boost prospects for rural tourism. The aim is to analyse the challenges of maximising opportunities for rural tourism development in South Africa in the COVID-19 environment. The research examines the business challenges that face rural firms in one economically lagging rural area of Limpopo province, namely the Greater Giyani Local Municipality. This economically distressed municipality would be classed as an 'in-between' rural spaces or as 'non-tourism place'. Based on 25 detailed qualitative interviews it is revealed the major challenges facing the growth of rural tourism surround the shortcomings of local government. Tourism business activities – existing, planned and future – are constrained by the infrastructural deficiencies which are experienced by businesses. The failure of local government to address the improvement and basic maintenance of roads, local water supplies or provide street lighting and signage are fundamental issues of concern for stimulating rural tourism in this area.

Keywords: rural tourism; South Africa; local government; infrastructure; business challenges

Introduction

Since 1994 democratic transition there has been a progressive rise of policy concern for tourism development in South Africa's rural areas (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004a; Rogerson & Visser, 2014; Magi & Ndimande, 2014). In the 1996 White Paper on Tourism it was asserted

that “tourism brings development to rural areas... tourism allows people to share in the benefits of tourism development” (Republic of South Africa, 1996: 16). In addition, it was stated that tourism would be a catalyst for rural development and noted as a central objective the application of “tourism to aid the development of rural communities” (Republic of South Africa, 1996: 25). Nevertheless, as Briedenhann and Butts (2001: 18) observed 5 years on “it is evident that whilst policy statements in the National Tourism White Paper are appropriate, implementation and delivery are not forthcoming, leaving expectations unrealized and leading to frustration and disillusionment”. According to Briedenhann (2011: 484) in common with many countries in the Global South, the national government in South Africa viewed tourism as “a panacea to the evils of poverty that bedevil the country’s rural African communities”.

By the mid-2000s it was observed that “the development of rural tourism is of growing importance in the changing rural landscape of post-apartheid South Africa” (Viljoen & Tlabela, 2007: 20). National government’s commitment for support of rural tourism was repeated in several policy documents, such as the Rural Tourism Strategy (2012), the National Heritage and Cultural Strategy (2012) and, most importantly, the (revised) National Tourism Sector Strategy (2017) (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). In addition, tourism has been prioritized as a lead sector for local economic development within Integrated Development Plans of the majority of rural municipalities (Nel & Rogerson, 2016). A decade later, however, the available evidence points to only limited progress made so far in the implementation of measures for the advancement of rural tourism most especially in the country’s economically lagging areas. The minimal progress for advancing rural tourism was lambasted in June 2020 by the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Portfolio of Tourism that the economic potential of tourism in villages “had not been taken seriously” since the government of the African National Congress came into power (Mvumbu, 2020: 1). Specific criticism was directed at the fact that as regards infrastructure capable of igniting rural tourism this was “almost non-existent” (Mvumbu, 2020: 2).

Over 15 years ago the essential challenges that confront the sustainability of rural tourism enterprises in South Africa were set forth by Briedenhann and Wickens (2004a, 2004b). It was pointed out that “the development and management of a rural tourism sector that optimises socio-economic benefits is contingent on the formulation of appropriate tourism policies and plans and the development of effective institutional capacity for their implementation”. Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic introduces a radical change in the environment and opportunities for rural tourism development. Several studies underscore that the pandemic provides new possibilities for developing rural tourism (Buckley, 2020; Craig & Karabas, 2021; Juschten & Hössinger, 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b; Silva, 2021). In many countries an upturn in the fortunes of rural tourist destinations has been observed as a result of changes in consumer travel preferences and of increasing numbers of tourists searching for open-spaces, a nature experience or a safe/low-risk destination in less densely populated areas (Vaishar & Štastná, 2020; De Aldecoa Fuster, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Traanman, 2021). For South Africa signals of an upturn in demand for rural tourism products have emerged out of recent research on COVID-19 impacts on consumer travel preferences (Bama & Nyikana, 2021). As in other parts of the world COVID-19 is generating a shift in the psychographic profile of domestic tourists in South Africa. The perceived physical risk induced by the pandemic leads to an increase in outdoor recreational pursuits with a corresponding upturn in demand for rural tourism products (Matiza & Slabbert, 2021).

Against this background the aim in this paper is to analyse the challenges of maximising opportunities for rural tourism development in South Africa in the COVID-19 environment. The research examines the business challenges that face rural firms in one economically lagging rural area of Limpopo province. In terms of the geographical differentiation of rural

spaces the case study area is of Greater Giyani Local Municipality. This is an economically distressed municipality which would be classified by geographers as an ‘in-between’ rural spaces or as ‘non-tourism place’ (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). The essential character of ‘in-between’ rural spaces are that they are not attractive enough to establish tourism as a self-contained major local sector (Carson, 2018; Carson & Koster, 2019). Importantly, the asset base and development prospects of ‘in-between’ rural spaces contrast to those of both fringe rural spaces or of remote/exotic rural spaces because their limited linkages with and distance from major urban core regions, challenges of transport access and a difficult physical environment which combine to create particular constraints on tourism development (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a).

The article unfolds in two further sections of material. The next section situates the study within the context of rural tourism scholarship and debates in South Africa. The major section analyses the findings from 25 detailed qualitative interviews which were conducted in 2021 with tourism businesses in the Greater Giyani local municipality. Overall, this analysis is a contribution to literature and debates relating to tourism and change in the Global South (Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021). The paper builds upon an expanding scholarship and debates on rural tourism in South Africa, more especially to policy debates around COVID-19 and the development prospects for rural tourism in South Africa (Giddy et al., 2022; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022a, 2022b). The study builds upon local works which have examined adaptive responses to COVID-19 (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Rogerson, 2021) to provide insights into how rural tourism firms in South Africa are seeking to navigate these ‘business as unusual’ uncertain times of the pandemic (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021c).

Rural tourism in South Africa: Research overview

In the immediate years following democratic transition notwithstanding rural tourism’s rising popularity in discourses about national and local development planning only a modest growth could be observed in academic writings on the topic in South Africa (Ndlovu & Rogerson, 2004; Rogerson & Visser, 2004; Nzama, 2010). The growing tempo of policy interest by national government in rural tourism has been a vital trigger for the growth of local scholarship. Over the past 15 years it is evident there has been a growing body of research investigations concerning rural tourism (Magi & Ndimande, 2014; Rogerson & Visser, 2020). Indeed, in relation to the relative paucity of studies in the Global South, the expansion of South African research is notable. Mnguni, Mtapuri and Giampiccoli (2020: 100) pinpoint that in South Africa “rural tourism is a key topic in contemporary discourses and literature”. This is a reflection of the observation made by Briedenhann and Wickens (2004a) that “South Africa has substantial natural and cultural resources on which rural tourism can be developed”. As a whole, the South African experience provides a literature on rural tourism which indicates a greater variation in the rural tourism product than that observed in other countries of sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, research discloses a historical evolutionary pathway of rural tourism which differs somewhat from that observed in other parts of the world (see Lane & Kastenholtz 2015; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021d; Rogerson, 2022).

In relation to international debates concerning rural tourism an important focus in local research has surrounded the challenges of developing rural tourism and of spreading the benefits of a growing tourism economy into poor rural and remote areas. In an influential study Viljoen and Tlabela (2007: 6) stressed that in South Africa “rural tourism is viewed as a means to eliminate poverty and create employment opportunities in rural areas”. The unexploited potential of rural tourism in areas such as the Wild Coast was highlighted with particular challenges for tourism development of small, medium and micro-enterprises (Ndabeni & Rogerson, 2005). The potential of information and communication technologies to boost the

growth potential of rural tourism enterprises in the Wild Coast had been isolated by Bourgooin (2002). In Limpopo Mafunzwaini and Hugo (2005: 252) pointed to the constraint of a “lack of strategic guidelines for rural tourism development” with a challenge being “to reposition and develop the province into one of the best rural tourism destinations in Africa”. The roll out of the planning of tourism routes in the early 2000s as a tool for rural economic development and catalyst for rural tourism was applauded by Briedenhann and Wickens (2004b).

Research on the role of the public sector in tourism points to its perceived importance variously as ‘leader’, ‘strategist’, ‘champion’ and ‘partner’ for advancing rural tourism and the perceived need for public sector support for rural tourism (Briedenhann, 2007). This said, a significant result was that grappling “with the problems of uplifting the quality, viability and communal benefit of rural tourism is seen as a futile exercise if the facilitatory platform of rational policy, planning and support conducive to the sustainability of the sector, is not in place” (Briedenhann, 2007: 584). Improved tourism planning and a meaningful infrastructure for tourism to support rural tourism development were viewed as critical success factors. Most critically local government was identified as “‘the enabler’ of successful rural tourism projects that diversify the local economy and generate employment and entrepreneurial opportunities” (Briedenhann, 2007: 584). For the decade of the 2000s research disclosed, however, “evidence of widespread disenchantment with the efficacy with which this role is fulfilled” (Briedenhann, 2007: 584). A lack of political will to support rural tourism – especially at local government – was an issue identified by Nzama (2010) in research conducted in KwaZulu-Natal.

The nexus of debates around pro-poor tourism and rural tourism has been explored in a number of studies (Ashley et al., 2001; Rogerson, 2006). It is observed that whereas the focus on pro-poor tourism writings in rural tourism largely has been upon large tourism actors and their potential development of sustainable supply chains in rural areas Briedenhann (2011) suggested greater attention be devoted to the cumulative potential of small tourism operators in rural areas to assume a significant role in poverty alleviation. By the mid-2000s, however, it could be observed that “the development of rural tourism is of growing importance in the changing rural landscape of post-apartheid South Africa” (Viljoen & Tlabela, 2007: 20). From the 1990s agritourism or farm tourism became a component of rural restructuring and the diversification of farm livelihoods (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014; Van Zyl & Van der Merwe, 2021). With growing recognition and some government support a burst of product diversification in rural tourism has taken root with the initial development of rural cultural and heritage products which often are community-based products. Briedenhann and Wickens (2004a: 196) observed in the early 2000s that “the most fundamental change that has taken place in rural tourism has been the recognition that African culture and history are valid and sought-after components of South African tourism offerings”. The national policy challenge was to address inequalities in rural tourism as it was clear that the benefits of tourism needed to be more widely distributed (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004b). The local development impacts of the growth of rural tourism have been a major topic for South African researchers (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014). During the early 2000s Gardyne et al. (2005) investigated Ingwe Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal and documented that this marginal local municipality was galvanised by chronically high poverty levels to embark on a pro-poor development intervention for tourism promotion. The continued diversification of rural tourism in South Africa has been boosted both by its increased adoption in local economic development programmes and correspondingly the opening up of several themed route tourism initiatives which have supported the progress of many rural tourism products (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004b; Jacobs et al., 2020).

A key focus of rural tourism research in South Africa has been to investigate different niche forms of tourism appearing and growing in rural areas. Studies have included the research

by Ivanovic (2015) on cultural tourism in rural Limpopo and several recent works on geotourism and heritage (Mukwada & Sekhele 2017; Chingombe & Taru, 2018; Chingombe, 2019; du Preez, 2019; Matshusa et al., 2021). Mountain tourism has emerged as a niche in local rural tourism research. In one of the earliest contributions Linde and Grab (2008) examined the challenges of tourism development and management issue for mountain tourism in the Drakensberg. A series of more recent studies have been produced concerning issues of rural mountain tourism in South Africa by Mutana and Mukwada (2017, 2018, 2020a, 2020b). These authors point out the relevance of mountain tourism as a tool for poverty reduction and in particular the possibilities of establishing tourism routes in mountain communities (Mutana & Mukwada, 2018). The Maluti route in the Drakensberg mountains and its sustainability in fragile environments has been the specific focus of empirical investigation revealing contrasting views from local communities, tourism business owners and local government officials (Mutana & Mukwada, 2017, 2018, 2020b).

Arguably, the institution which is central to the success of rural tourism is local government but in South Africa “there is lack of capacity at local government level to assume its responsibilities in the rural tourism space” (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004a: 189). The shortcomings of local government observed in the early 2000s are little improved nearly two decades later. Investigating rural tourism in the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal province Mnguni et al. (2020) point to a host of negative issues surrounding the role of local government. Among the key concerns were the municipality was “unappreciative of rural tourism development”; “lack of appreciation of tourism’s contribution to economic welfare”; “tourism is not prioritised in the local tourism development and planning”; “lack of cooperation across political boundaries is hampering routes”; “inadequate destination marketing by local municipalities”; “lack of business orientation in the local municipalities”; and, above all, “politics and corruption” which permeate municipal decision-making (Mnguni et al., 2020: 101).

Beyond the shortcomings of local government other challenges surround the difficulties of establishing community-based tourism in relation to the dearth of entrepreneurial expertise, management skills, lack of networking and poor or ill-maintained infrastructure to support the viability of rural tourism projects. Arguably, infrastructure development, especially improvement and maintenance of roads, is critical to improving the accessibility of rural tourism products for (especially) drive tourists. Lack of awareness and appreciation of potential local assets to support rural cultural and heritage tourism has been highlighted in KwaZulu-Natal (Nzama, 2010). Another important issue is that the questionable relationship of new rural tourism products to market demand (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004a). As evidenced by the disappointments surrounding the establishment of the Mehlooding Hiking and Horse Trail in the Eastern Cape the success of rural tourism initiatives is threatened when they are supply-led instead of demand-driven, altruistic in motivation instead of anchored on sound business sense (Ndlovu & Rogerson, 2004). This confirms the assessment made by Briedenhann (2009: 379) using a Delphi survey as well as focused interviews that unless rural tourism projects “were financially viable and operated according to business principles, local communities would bear the costs of rural tourism development”. As pointed out recently by Haywood et al. (2020), as an instrumental tool against poverty it is essential that rural tourism products be not only visible but also that they be sustainable.

For remote rural areas of Musina Municipality the evidence is that “the gains of tourism were not drawn into by the local communities” (Ramaano, 2021a: 1). One contributory factor identified once again was the continued poor local implementation of tourism development policies to advance the livelihoods of local communities (Ramaano, 2021b). Unsurprising, therefore, are findings from perception studies that certain rural communities remain sceptical

about the prospects of using local assets of culture and heritage for tourism development (Nkwanyana et al., 2016). Indeed, it is important to recognise that in certain cases opportunities for the development of rural tourism may not have the support of local communities. One excellent illustration is the case of a cultural heritage site which has been documented recently by Mafukata, Khan and Moseki (2021) for rural Limpopo. It is asserted by these authors that rural Limpopo is characterized by several untapped assets for cultural heritage tourism. The burial tombs of the royal houses of the Masingo at Swongozwi in the Soutpansberg are considered to be an important cultural tourism site. This potential is unrealised, however, as a result of local resistance towards tourism development from the royal house. Mafukata et al. (2021: 1272) argue the tombs of Swongozwi are closely guarded and there exists “negative attitudes and unwillingness by the Masingo royalty to open the site for tourism development”. This is considered as a missed opportunity for rural cultural tourism as the opposition to tourism “is encouraged by the cultural significance ascribed to the site by its custodians, amongst which taboos, myths, respect for tradition and fear of the wrath of the ancestors that would result if the Masingo infringed on this ‘holy’ space and traditions” (Mafukata et al., 2021: 1272). The Limpopo example is a cautionary tale about the multiple challenges that surround the potential utilisation of local ‘sacred spaces’ for cultural tourism development.

Finally, in several investigations conducted on the geography of tourism it is shown that with the exception of South Africa’s protected areas for nature-tourism, rural spaces on the whole were not major destinations for tourism development in the pre-COVID era (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019, 2021e). Research on the list of least visited areas of South Africa demonstrates that many remote rural spaces of South Africa are ‘non-tourism spaces’ with their visitor economies almost exclusively reliant on migrants’ visits to friends and relatives (Rogerson, 2017). Attention now turns to examine the rural tourism challenges of one example of such a non-tourism space, namely the Greater Giyani Local Municipality (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a).

Rural tourism in the Greater Giyani Local Municipality

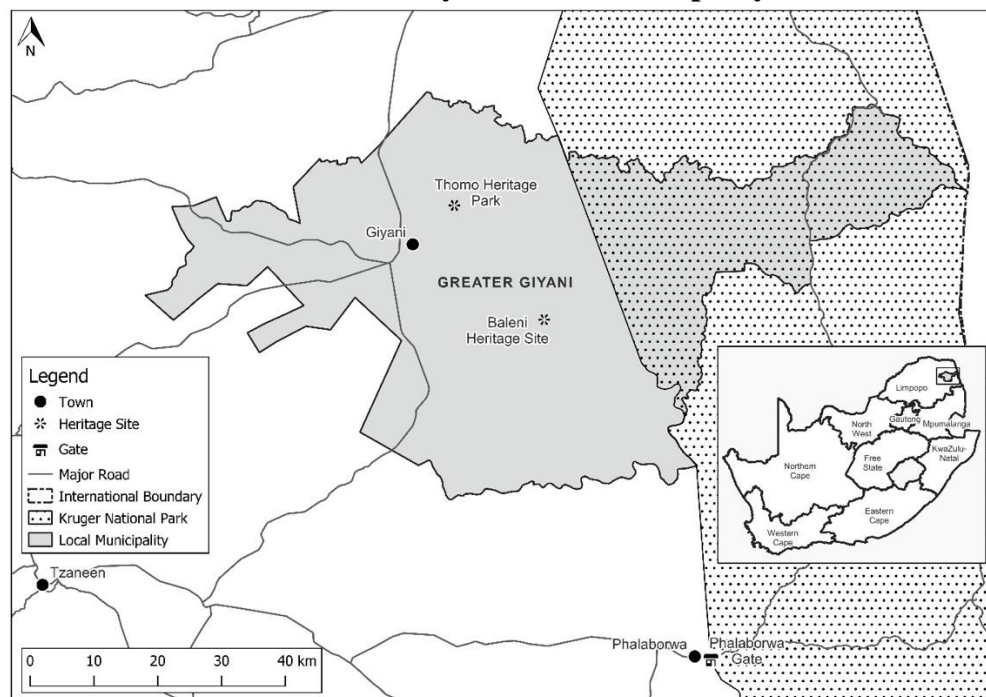


Figure. 1: Location of Greater Giyani (Source: Authors).



This section provides an initial brief discussion of methods and a profile of enterprise respondents. Following this, four further sub-sections of material are given concerning variously local tourism assets, COVID-19 impact and adaptive responses, perception of the role of local government, and business challenges.

Method and profile of sample

For the research 25 interviews were completed in the Greater Giyani municipality of Limpopo province which is geographically close to Kruger National Park (Figure. 1). Issues of concern were respondents' perceptions of the local tourism asset base, the impact of COVID-19 on business operations and adaptive responses, the role of local government, and the challenges facing rural tourism development in this 'in-between' rural space. The selection of the group of interviewees successfully captured the key tourism enterprise stakeholders in this rural local municipality. A qualitative research approach was utilized with a semi-structured interview schedule. Applying thematic content analysis to the interview transcripts the selection of quotations are deemed illustrative of the key empirical patterns that emerged.

Table 1: Profile of Giyani respondents

Code	Type of Business	Years in Operation	Number of Employees	Primary source of income	Operates all year?
G1	Accommodation	12	7	No	Yes
G2	Accommodation	8	6	Yes	Yes
G3	Accommodation	11	16	No	Yes
G4	Accommodation	14 months	5	Yes	Yes
G5	Accommodation	11	8	No	Yes
G6	Accommodation	6	3	No	Yes
G7	Accommodation	19	7	No	Yes
G8	Accommodation	7	5	No	Yes
G9	Accommodation	15	4	Yes	Yes
G10	Accommodation	6	5	No	Yes
G11	Accommodation	8	4	Yes	Yes
G12	Accommodation	9	3	Yes	Yes
G13	Accommodation	8	4	Yes	Yes
G14	Attraction	21	9	Yes	Yes
G15	Accommodation	14	8	Yes	Yes
G16	Attraction: Beads	14	10	Yes	Yes
G17	Accommodation	Less than 1 year	4	Yes	Yes
G18	Events	7	7	No	No
G19	Events	10	11	No	Yes
G20	Accommodation	24	5	No	Yes
G21	Accommodation	17	8	Yes	Yes
G22	Accommodation	1	27	Yes	Yes
G23	Accommodation	21	7	Yes	Yes
G24	Events	8	3	Yes	Yes
G25	Attraction	11	9	Yes	Yes

Source: Authors

A summary of the basic attributes of the surveyed businesses is provided in Table 1. The majority of the interviews – 19 in total - were conducted with accommodation establishments. In addition, three interviews were undertaken with attractions, including the Thomo Heritage Park, and three with businesses that were involved with events. It was observed that the majority of the interviewed businesses were well-established; 22 businesses had been operating for at least 5 years and only three establishments had been in operation for less than two years. Of the cohort of accommodation service establishments 16 of the 19 had been in business for five years. It was observed that one of the most recent additions to the accommodation sector

in Giyani is a boutique hotel with spa that had been in operation for just over one year. It is evident that 20 of the 25 businesses would be classed as micro-tourism businesses as all had less than 10 employees. The largest employer in the sample was a newly established hotel (one year in operation) with 27 employees. The vast majority of the sample (24 of 25) operate their business on a full-time basis.

All the tourism enterprises were owned by Black South Africans, a finding which confirms a pattern of their dominant ownership of tourism establishments in the former Homeland areas (Rogerson & Sixaba, 2021). When asked to state the reasons for starting a business in the Greater Giyani Municipality all respondents saw a window of opportunity in the tourism industry. Common responses were “*I saw an opportunity*” and “*I needed to generate extra income*”. For 15 of the sample of 25 respondents the tourism business was the primary source of household income. Typical responses were: “*This business is my one and only source of income*” (G2) and “*This is my bread and butter...my only source of income*” (G13). For 10 of the respondents, however, tourism was part of a broader household income diversification strategy and not the primary source of income. One guest house owner stated “*I have two buses and a taxi that operate on a daily basis*” (G6) while a lodge owner highlighted that “*We have other businesses...I also have a farm*” (G8). Such responses indicate that for a considerable segment of tourism businesses in Giyani the tourism component is a means to supplement other livelihood activities in the region.

Results and discussion

Tourism and assets of the local municipality

For the majority of the accommodation respondents Giyani was perceived overwhelmingly as a destination for corporate travel and business tourism destination rather than as a leisure hub. This is a reflection of the fact that Giyani is the largest town in the municipality and the administrative capital for Mopani District in Limpopo. One lodge operator stated as follows: “*Since we started to run this guesthouse, we have realised that most of our guests come here for work purposes* (G8). Another lodge which had been functioning for 17 years offered similar views: “*To do business. That is the number one, which is our main business is business*” (G21). It was elaborated that many of the lodge’s clients were often either contractors working at the local shopping mall or business which was associated with the local soccer matches and stadium: “*We’re fully booked with SABC [South African Broadcasting Corporation], the broadcasting guys with their broadcasting vans and trucks*” (G21). Other respondents drew attention to business generated by the opening of new mines close to Giyani. The hosting of conferences and events – including political events - was seen as another significant element for local business tourism. The lodge operator stated “*I would say in the past three months we’ve seen a huge amount of revenue coming from conferences*”. (G21). Another focus for Giyani accommodation services has been linked to the hosting of delegates at political rallies with one lodge drawing attention for example to business derived from election-related meetings. To support the further development of business tourism it was evident a significant portion of the accommodation establishments have established conferencing facilities which range from large board rooms to small meeting rooms.

Beyond business tourism with Giyani’s location relatively close to Kruger National Park, many respondents highlighted leisure opportunities in the area. It was observed, for example, that “*People mainly come to Giyani for work and they sometimes use this area as a by-pass to Kruger National Park*” (G13) and that “*Over the holidays, people would come and spend time in Giyani on their way to Kruger National Park* (G12). These findings point to Giyani as functioning as an ‘in-between’ location or transit stop for many tourists on their way to the national park. Indeed, the opportunity for stops along the route to the Kruger National

Park had served as reasons for the establishments of certain accommodation businesses. Only a handful of respondents perceived Giyani as a destination with significant assets for the development of leisure tourism. The general viewpoint was summarised by one respondent: *“Giyani is not much of a tourism place. Maybe I can say Giyani is used as a gate to Kruger but all in all Giyani doesn’t have attractions for tourists”* (G18).

The tourism assets usually mentioned focused on local culture and heritage. An accommodation establishment operator expressed the viewpoint that: *“Some of our major attractions are Thomo Heritage Park where tourists can get to learn about the local culture and history”* (G8). The importance of culture was reiterated in other responses: *“A lot of people come to Giyani to learn about the Shangaan culture”* (G7). Host communities in the Greater Giyani district still practice traditional ways, and the traits that distinguish them serve to create a rural tourism experience for visitors to the municipality. Such assertions are corroborated by the following statements:

Well, one of the major attractions in this area, besides the Kruger National Park, is that we also have a heritage site that people can visit if they want to learn about the history of the Tsonga people. (G2)

We’ve got some dance groups, a couple of traditional artists, some local artists... we often host cultural activities. (G16)

Around this area, we have Baleni, a heritage site where old ladies manufacture salt in an indigenous way. They collect the salty sand from the river and extract the salt from there. It’s a long process, but in the end, they produce nice salt...the soft fine salt. There are also ladies who manufacture beads and also do some beadwork in the area, as well as clay pottery (G3)

The most significant locations around culture and heritage assets in Giyani that were discussed by interviewees related to the Thomo Heritage Park and the Baleni Heritage Park (Figure 1). Other potential leisure assets related to the attractions of artisanal local pottery, beadmaking, local artists and wood-carving, traditional natural salt and iron-making, and the hot springs at Baleni. The deepening of the culture and heritage products assets by the addition of museums and further activities such as story-telling was viewed as useful.

Finally, the role of visiting friends and relatives tourism was acknowledged by at least one respondent who indicated that many tourists in the Greater Giyani district are celebrating important life stages with visits for family-related reasons: *“People just enjoy coming to Giyani for events like weddings, funerals and everything”* (G3). This shows an awareness that visiting friends and family is perceived as a notable segment of tourism in the region. Indeed, in terms of purpose of travel to Giyani, visits from friends and relatives is overwhelmingly the most significant in terms of numbers of trips (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a).

The respondents offered several suggestions on how Giyani might expand leisure visitor flows. A requirement for more facilities for the entertainment of tourists was highlighted by many respondents with comparisons often drawn with other towns offering a greater range of leisure activities. A typical response was as follows: *“The area needs more tourist sites to accommodate different age groups because currently there is not much to do and instead people go to Tzaneen for recreational activities”* (G6). Another respondent bemoaned *“more needs to be done to make Giyani a tourist hub”* (G13). The need to diversify the range of local offerings beyond culture and heritage was expressed frequently (G9). One suggestion was the possibility of reviving and restocking a local nature reserve that no longer was functioning as well as for developing a local river for fishing. The issue of establishing local entertainment attractions for the youth market was pointed out as essential: *“Currently we have only a few activities in Giyani and the youth is not really into culture, so if we can get more activities they would not see the need to go to other destinations”* (G10).

COVID-19 and adaptive responses

The study respondents were asked to describe the state of their business before and since COVID-19. There was a consensus amongst respondents that in the pre-pandemic period their business performance had been ‘great’, ‘sustainable’ or ‘flourishing’ but since had experienced a massive downturn and a need for adaptive responses. For some respondents the pandemic caused a shift into a new sector with some stating that they had turned to farming in order to gain an income (and be able to pay their staff) since the pandemic. Adaptive responses in this regard include:

I have added farming to my services, if I happen to accommodate domestic tourist, I also sell some of my produce from the farm, however it is not possible to do so with international tourists...instead I just take them to the farm for the experience (G9)

We are incorporating agritourism, agriculture is big here. So we can generate an extra income. Since there is no lockdown in agriculture, we have decided to do this farmwork, and do lunch orders (G25)

It is important to note that the above statements were offered by tourism enterprises that had tourism as their primary income and of necessity had diversified into other sectors as a means to stay afloat with their business and closure of tourism activities during the early phase of the pandemic in 2020.

In common with findings from other studies on crisis management the enterprises changed and adapted their offerings in the COVID-19 environment (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Rogerson, 2021; Booyens et al., 2022). Most respondents focused on implementing the COVID-19 safety protocols such as the regular sanitising of rooms, the requirement of masks before entry, and restrictions on the number of people permitted in the establishments.

We socially isolate our visitors by placing them in their en suites, fogging the area once a week, and ensuring that they sanitise and wear masks (G13)

We had to change from buffet breakfast to à la carte...and to ensure that the rooms are sanitised every day, when guests leave, we fog the rooms (G11)

We had to reduce the number of people we could accommodate in order to adhere to the COVID 19 regulations (G9)

In terms of adapting to COVID-19 some respondents indicated that they had converted and re-purposed their conferencing facilities into family rooms in order to generate income (G10). One establishment that opened only in early 2021 indicated that the pandemic’s onset caused them to rethink their facilities to account for COVID-19 considerations on social distancing and gatherings (G22).

Increased marketing and discounting was a widespread response by local businesses especially for groups as well as individuals: ‘We have increased the number of discounts and packages we are offering in order to attract more guests’ (G13). In addition to group discounts, the respondents affirmed a shift to online marketing. COVID-19 fast-tracked the adoption of technology, thereby necessitating tourism businesses, even those in rural areas, to adapt to the digital environment: “Given the current trends in tourism, the focus on 4IR. Currently we are just focusing on marketing our business online” (G9). The importance of expanded marketing was seen as essential for the market of business tourism: “Because most of our clients were corporate travellers, we had to focus on online marketing to remind our clients that we are open as some establishments have closed down” (G8). The increased usage of social media marketing was in evidence: “Yes, with digital marketing we will reach more people” (G16) and “I am just marketing through Facebook. Through, social media, and people are aware of my business and interested to visit because our business is on the road to Kruger” (G19). A shift by accommodation service establishments to online booking platforms was observed: “we had

to resort to online marketing, for example we have registered our establishment with bookings.com, Trivago, TripIt and Flapp travel to increase our visibility online” (G6).

Overall, adaptive responses by many of these rural tourism businesses to the COVID-19 challenges surrounded keeping up with the technological (or digital) trends within the tourism industry:

COVID has really opened my eyes and has proven that by using technology tourists are now going to save a lot of money, so it is up to us to make sure that our services are improved so that we can position our business as the best in the region through excellent customer service (G15)

COVID 19 has presented an opportunity for people to rethink their business strategies, for me it has really taught me the importance of using technology, so instead of printing pamphlets like we use to, we are now using digital marketing (G10)

So we like to offer online performances to our customers, sell product (t-shirts) to our customers. We have established our brand ‘Tsonga-self’ which recently launched earlier this year. (G16)

The COVID-19 pandemic thus underlines the benefits of technology to Giyani tourism businesses for the provision of useful and cost-effective marketing solutions.

The role of local government

The majority of respondents were highly critical of the activities and role of local government. Overall, most respondents perceived that local government failed to fulfil its service obligations with the consequence of constraining tourism development in Giyani and the operations of tourism business owners.

Issues around the quality and lack of maintenance of infrastructure were flagged by the majority of interviewees as constraints on local tourism development. One accommodation provider expressed the view that: *“Infrastructure is the biggest problem; in fact, I can say it is the biggest stumbling block. The Phalaborwa-Giyani road is full of potholes. It is a disgrace”* (G1). Similar sentiments were common: *“Our roads are really bad and there is no distinction between tarred roads and gravel in some areas. Our municipality is really failing us because our guests become reluctant to return to Giyani because of the bad roads”* (G2). Likewise: *“The government is not helping us with infrastructure because they do not want to attend to the roads”* (G9). Poor signage is a further challenge for tourism development: *“The biggest challenge is infrastructure. When our guests arrive in Giyani and they lose their GPS signal they cannot easily get to us because we still don’t have signage because of financial constraints”* (G3). Poor availability of water and lack of provision of street lighting (even in the middle of the town) were added municipal failings. Limited or poor quality maintenance was another issue raised in respect of infrastructure: *“Quality costs... I think our municipality buys cheap material so they can keep the rest of the money for themselves”* (G6). The financial losses imposed on local tourism businesses from the failure of local government to maintain basic infrastructure were noted by one accommodation provider: *“I have lost a lot of business due to lack of infrastructure. I had people who were willing to rent for five years but they changed their mind as soon as they came because of the potholes”* (G7)

In reviewing the role of the local government in the Greater Giyani, the majority of respondents confirmed the lack of assistance from local government for tourism businesses and also raised issues of municipal mismanagement.

Local government will support those small businesses, they call them ‘small businesses’, which were long established that’s where the money goes. So that it gets channelled to come back to their pocket (G19).

We are on our own. I even had to ask my husband to pave the road leading to the lodge because it was full of potholes and that was affecting my business. Nothing was being done, maybe if they could be passionate about this tourism thing, maybe things would be different...but besides that ...we are really on our own. I guess they help where they can; I just don't think it's enough (G3)

I noticed that we are not getting the support that we should be getting from the local municipality. The local municipality is the authority that should help and pick up each one in this area. But because of the problems of corruption where some individuals are being given services most of the time, so it's really not helping. (G2).

Several respondents reflected also on differences in how local government used to support tourism businesses and facilities in the past:

The local government is a big problem. They are no longer helping us in any way. Back in the day they used to take us to Tourism Indaba on a rotational basis, they would sponsor our transport, accommodation and meals for us to go and experience what we are also offering to other people, by doing that I personally got the opportunity to learn and benchmark my business... But now, things are different I think the majority just lacks vision (G9)

So, for example, Giyani had a functional library and a recreation centre, you know, the army had a functional Rehab Centre, had functional pools, had functional tennis courts, and so on and so forth. The politicians decided to neglect and not maintain over the years. Now, because there wasn't any maintenance of different things, it's going to be a problem to get them to a point where they become attractions for people to look at and go to because even if you go to Phalaborwa, or someone says, 'Oh, we are in Giyani come here', the first thing that person will ask is, 'What am I going to drink? And the dining?' Why can't the government just maintain the existing structures? (G22)

Finally, the question of traditional land ownership is a specific issue from certain responses. Indeed, in certain parts of Giyani, frustrations exist concerning land rights and their impact on services. These frustrations are expressed in the following statements:

The local government is a huge stumbling block ...I sometimes feel like these politicians want to see us suffer. For example, when I started this business, I was always questioned about my rights to occupy this area, little did they know that here in Giyani, things are done differently ...the chief is the one who makes decisions when it comes to land rights (G10)

To be honest, Giyani is not 100% owned by municipalities. It is [the] municipalities and the chiefs. So when the local municipality wants to build something, permission needs to be granted by the chief... this is a big challenge. (G4)

The role of traditional land ownership issues emerges therefore as a particular constraint on tourism development in Giyani that needs to be managed appropriately by local government. Overall, however, it is apparent that the majority of tourism business owners in Giyani perceive the local municipality in a highly negative way. The essential concerns centre around a cluster of issues mainly about infrastructure, lack of road maintenance, lack of engagement with the problems of tourism businesses and broad questions of governance and corruption.

Business challenges

The core business challenges highlighted by enterprises related to their difficult operating environment which was conditioned by the weaknesses of local government. Infrastructural shortcomings were widely cited once again by the cohort of respondents.

The biggest problem is lack of infrastructure, and although we are located in town, we still don't have streetlights, the roads are terrible (G12)

This is really a painful topic as I have lost a lot of business due to lack of infrastructure, I had people who were willing to rent out the place for 5 years because they were pleased with

the facility, but they changed their minds as soon as they came, because of the potholes and even though you try to reach out to the municipality, it seems as if you want to tell them how they should spend their budget. It's really complicated (G22)

Further, the respondents explained the issue that the poor condition of roads in and around the Greater Giyani limited accessibility to key attractions and several of the accommodation service establishments:

Currently, the biggest problem lies with the marketing of our businesses and infrastructure. But I think infrastructure is the most important one because it doesn't help people can't access the places. The potholes in the area are really a problem. (G6)

Accessing some of the attractions around Giyani is one of the greatest challenges, especially the ones located on the outskirts. You really need a bakkie since the roads are really bad. This has also been one of the main challenges when it comes to sustaining our business, as we are slowly losing customers and COVID just made things worse (G10)

Accordingly, while the marketing and greater exposure of Giyani's tourism offerings, is identified as a challenge, the interviewees maintained that this greater exposure would be relatively ineffective should tourists not be able to reach the accommodations and attractions. Indeed, two of the area's core attractions, the Thomo Heritage Park and the Baleni Heritage Site are situated on the periphery of Giyani town and require sturdy vehicles to reach them. In highlighting other major challenges existing in the Greater Giyani Municipality, the vast majority of respondents flagged the implications of poor service delivery for their business development. The negative impact on their establishments was widely expressed:

I should think because people don't like to visit an area when road conditions are bad, shortage of water, and you can't visit a place where there's not a sufficient supply of water? Those two are key. (G18)

There seems to be issues with lack of infrastructure and adequate water and sanitation. Obviously, for us as business owners, the first thing that you would do is to invest in a borehole, but what about our employees who reside in the villages? This has really created a lot of challenges because hygiene is everything in this industry and the pandemic just made things worse. (G11)

One of the impacts of the significant decline in travel consequent upon the pandemic has been the lack of operational cash flow for businesses with ramifications for staffing. Typically, it was observed by accommodation providers: *'Finance has been the biggest challenge. As a result, I had to employ my staff on a temporary basis'* (G15) and *"Most of our staff members are now employed on a temporary basis because we only call them when we have guests"*. Similar impacts were evidenced in attractions: *'Finance has been the biggest challenge as we couldn't afford to pay our tour guides'* (G13). A further implication of the downturn was pointed out as: *"Another challenge is that you'll find that staff cannot come to work because they don't have transport money"* (G11). It was evident that for many enterprises the lack of cash flow and staffing issues compromised the service quality of establishments: *"Funding is a problem currently. Since this is my only source of income, it is really tough having to share the little income that comes in with the rest of the staff. As a result, I end up compromising on quality so I can have less staff on duty, just so we can share the income"* (G3). Labour regulations were cited as a further constraint for business operations with restrictions by national labour laws limiting their ability to bring back workers to their establishment. A manager of a heritage centre explained as follows: *"For us the challenge is that we don't have funding for operations and the Department of Labour does not want us to have people we are not paying minimum wages... so that limits us"*.

COVID-19 restrictions functioned as a further brake on business development. Of particular concern was regulations that restricted the numbers of people at gatherings which had severe impacts for events and conferencing:

The main problem now is a shortage of work. Because of COVID, everything dropped. Government restrictions don't encourage events. (G17)

The most serious issue is that we have facilities that are not being used as a result of COVID-19 protocols, such as our conference rooms. We have also recently expanded our establishment, adding more rooms, but due to COVID-19 that project has come to a halt, and I am unable to complete it due to financial constraints (G5).

Our conference facility is no longer working which really created a gap in terms of income, because we used it to host events ...also the COVID-19 regulations are straining us (G9).

Finally, most respondents observed the further challenges that compliance to COVID-19 safety protocols imposed additional expenses for their business:

Finance is the biggest challenge, as the pandemic has just come with its own expenses such as sanitisers, and fogging sprays (G3)

Now we must include extra things on the shopping list such as sanitiser. It used to be the cheapest thing in the shops, but currently, it ranks amongst the most expensive cleaning detergents (G9)

The bookings have gone down there seems to be more expenditures, the pandemic came with its own expenses...I mean there is no way that you would not buy the fog spray and sanitisers...these things that one must have. Another thing is that because we also have mosquitos in the area, I have to constantly hire people to come and do pest control. It is just a lot of money going out and little money coming in (G8)

Notwithstanding the difficult business environment, it was recorded that since the pandemic only one local tourism business – a conferencing centre – closed down operations; the remainder of the Giyani tourism economy appeared to be surviving the COVID-19 environment. This said, as a whole the tourism businesses in Giyani have been negatively impacted both by the need to adapt their operations to COVID-19 protocols as well as wider issues relating to infrastructural shortcomings and structural problems surrounding inefficiency in the service provisions by local government.

Conclusion

Rural tourism has been acknowledged as a policy focus in South Africa for at least the past 25 years. Nevertheless, as has been pointed out by several observers, implementation of support measures has been limited with the consequence that the contribution of rural tourism has been limited to addressing the issues of spatial inequality and the uneven geographical spread of tourism in the country (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004a; Rogerson & Nel, 2016; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a). The COVID-19 pandemic seemingly offers potential new opportunities for rural tourism destinations and encourages a re-evaluation of the prospects for rural tourism in South Africa. This research has addressed the development challenges of rural tourism in a local municipality which would be described as an “in-between” rural space.

In the case of Giyani, the discussion highlights the pre-eminence of the market of business tourism for local accommodation providers. Although the local area has a wealth of cultural and heritage assets currently Giyani is not a destination for leisure tourism and records only a small stream of such visitors. The impact of the pandemic for reducing business travel in South Africa as a whole is therefore a major threat to the local tourism economy. It was observed that local businesses have undertaken a range of adaptive responses as coping mechanisms. These included the diversification of their business operations out of tourism into

agriculture as well as undertaking a range of adaptations to shore up the survival possibility of the existing tourism operations. The latter involved changing business practices for improved health and safety of visitors in line with COVID-19 protocols, re-purposing of properties, and the embrace of new digital technologies in order to promote the marketing of businesses. In terms of future prospects and opportunities for rural tourism, the respondents pointed to new developments occurring in and around Giyani which provide potential new business opportunities. Three issues were identified, namely the opening of a new gate into Kruger National Park, the re-opening (or discovery) of mining opportunities, and announcements of the potential establishment of a branch campus of Tshwane University of Technology in the town.

Beyond COVID-19 issues it must be concluded that the major challenges facing the growth of rural tourism surround the chronic shortcomings of local government. Tourism business activities – existing, planned and future – are constrained by the infrastructural deficiencies which are experienced by these businesses. The failure of local government to address the improvement and basic maintenance of roads, local water supplies or provide street lighting and signage are fundamental issues of concern for stimulating rural tourism in this area. The local tourism businesses highlighted a number of interventions and support needs from government, such as financial support, improved marketing and enhancing the operations of the local Tourism Information Centre. Arguably, such potentially useful support measures can only be impactful if undertaken in parallel with or following addressing the infrastructural shortcomings which are as a result of the inadequate performance of local government. This finding points to the need for greater coordination between government departments in terms of supporting tourism development in South Africa. The policy imperative is to overcome the ‘silo mentality’ and foster the conditions for an improved business environment for all rural businesses, including those engaged in rural tourism.

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