

Effects of COVID 19 on Ecotourism in Lesotho: A Thematic Analysis of Challenges, Coping Strategies and Lessons Learned

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Abstract

Ecotourism has received academic recognition since the 1980s appreciating its potential to generate socio-economic benefits to local destinations. However, travel restrictions imposed as a result of COVID-19 have had devastating effects on the sector. The purpose of this exploratory study is to assess the challenges and coping strategies of an ecotourism venture at Malea-lea, Lesotho. Using thematic analysis, the study reports on fifteen qualitative interviews with the management and beneficiaries of Malea-lea Development Trust's corporate social responsibility. Major results are that the Trust is facing financial challenges as a result of restrictions on movement hindering it from achieving its social responsibility obligations, the coping strategies included using skills acquired during HIV and AIDS pandemic to address challenges imposed by COVID-19 and promoting local tourism to fill the void created by lack of international tourists. The implication of the study is that local tourism could be promoted in Lesotho. The study recommends financial and technical support to ecotourism enterprises and proximate communities to circumvent negative impacts of COVID-19. The study contributes to dearth of literature on COVID-19, ecotourism and CSR in Lesotho highlighting that local tourism is possible post COVID-19 and that ecotourism venture could contribute to the livelihoods of local communities.

Keywords: CSR, COVID-19, Ecotourism, Lesotho, Malea-lea

Introduction

A newly form of coronavirus was first noticed in Central China in December 2019 and it has been labelled coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) (Wollina, 2020). Initially, COVID-19 was categorised as an epidemic because it was spreading among many people and communities at the same time. Within a short period of time, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it a pandemic suggesting that it had swiftly spread across the world (Ocheni et al., 2020). The pandemic has had devastating effects on individuals, families and all sectors of the economy (Ocheni et al, 2020; Noorashid & Chin, 2021). The health sector was overwhelmed resulting in total shutdown in some case and the education sector was equally devastated leading to the closure of schools while some switched to online teaching and learning (Ocheni et al, 2020; Tamrat & Teferra, 2020). The pandemic hit hard the tourism sector which mainly depends on local and international travellers because of restrictions on movement (Ocheni et al, 2020; Noorashid & Chin, 2021).

The effects of COVID-19 are more or less similar to earlier forms of pandemics that hit Asian economies resulting in the loss of billions in revenues (Chen et al., 2007; Mckercher & Chon, 2004). Studies showed that the tourism sector in Africa was negatively affected mainly due to perceptions and lack of knowledge about the Ebola and other diseases as international

tourists decided to avoid African destinations (Bali et al., 2016; Sifolo & Sifolo, 2015). While the dynamics of the disease are unfolding, literature is beginning to document coping strategies and lesson learned from the diseases (Noorashid & Chin, 2021). Some of the strategies and lessons are drawn from earlier pandemics and disasters (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Smart et al., 2021). The strategies include an increased sense of hygiene at restaurants, physical exercise, regular temperature checks in schools and improved health services in hospitals (Smart et al, 2021). However, in the case of Lesotho, there are few academic studies on COVID-19 focusing on the challenges, strategies and lessons learned. Hence this study aims to explore the challenges facing the tourism sector imposed by COVID-19 in Lesotho. Using the Matelile Development Trust (MDT), an organization entrusted with the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives of the Malea-lea Lodge, the study set out to answer the following questions: What are the challenges imposed by COVID-19 on the CSR initiatives? What are the coping strategies and what are the lessons learned from the impact of the pandemic?

Literature review

COVID-19 was first reported in China in December 2019 (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). In March 2020, the WHO, declared it as a public health emergency of international concern stating that the number of cases had increased 13 fold, affected countries tripled and more than 118, 000 cases were reported in 114 countries while 4,291 people had lost their lives (Gretzel et al, 2020; Ocheni et al., 2020; Rashid et al, 2020). Today, the spread of the pandemic has researched unprecedented proportions resulting in 208,191, 203 estimated cases and 4, 378, 718 fatalities worldwide (Worldmeters, 2021). Though unlike Ebola with up to 90% fatality rate (Sifolo & Sifolo, 2015), the COVID-19 has a low fatality rate, but it has sent a message of panic affecting the economic and social lives of multitudes all over the world. The tourism sector has suffered the most leading some scholars to closely associate it and other respiratory diseases with this sector. They argue that tourism is the main contributor to the spread of diseases and the main recipient of their consequences (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). The spread of well-known respiratory and other pandemics such as the Spanish flue of 1918-1919, Asian flu (H2N2) of 1957, the Hong Kong flue of 1968, the Severe Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) of 2002-2003, and now COVID-19 have all been associated with tourism and have had a huge negative impact on it (Dayour et al, 2020; Smart et al., 2021).

Though some of the pandemics could be avoided, COVID-19 has been spreading through the world without discriminating against any nation resulting in huge socio-economic challenges. The challenges are falling Gross National Product, loss of jobs and income-generating activities; and mounting urban and rural poverty (Hambira, 2021; Ocheni et al., 2020; Van der Merwe et al, 2021). Global unemployment figures have significantly increased since the start of the pandemic resulting in an estimated 100-120 million loss of jobs which endangers livelihoods especially in the rural areas where tourism creates most jobs (Dayour et al., 2020; Hillis et al, 2020). According to van der Merwe et al. (2021), COVID 19 has had a devastating economic impact on the private wildlife industry in South Africa resulting in 35.55% loss of employment, 32.55 reductions in wages and 21.37% of employees had to take unpaid leave while 18.51% were laid off country-wide. Some studies show that the impacts of COVID-19 are different in many respects from the earlier pandemics. It is argued that it has a global reach, has unprecedented economic impacts, and causes serious damage on tourism and hospitality with no prior magnitude and having the potential to modify the whole tourism sector (Kowalczyk-Anoil et al, 2021). There is an emerging scholarship arguing that COVID-19 spurs the state of corruption hindering efforts to deal with the pandemic and its consequences (Mantzaris, Pillay, 2020; Maulani et al, 2020; Mlambo & Masuku, 2020) while others have documented a surge in violence which is equated to the COVID-19 pandemic itself perpetrated

on women and children (Dlamini, 2021; Rodriguez-Jimenez et al, 2021). Some studies have focused on its negative impacts on education leading to the closure of schools and consequently compromising the future of school children and students (Dawadi, Giri, & Simkhada, 2020; Tamrat & Teferra, 2020; van Schalkwyk, 2020). The pandemic occurred during the farming season in some Sub-Saharan countries threatening food security and achievement of Sustainable Millennium Development Goals (Ayanlade & Radeny, 2020; Nchanji & Lutomia, 2021). It further negatively impacted household income threatening food security especially for countries without or limited social protection networks (Arndt et al, 2020).

To cope with the effects of COVID-19, several measures were implemented at the national, regional and individual levels, most of which were sanctioned by the WHO protocols. WHO recommends social distancing and wearing nose masks. At the national level, countries instituted restrictions on movements, closure of national boarder and suspension of economic activities as well as financial support to halt the collapse of economies (Gretzel, et al., 2020; Kowalczyk-Aniol et al, 2021; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Smart et al., 2021). National governments further implemented measures and provide relief packages to keep businesses afloat. They include developing and invoking existing national disaster management Acts and policies, tax exemptions and direct financial assistance (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Kowalczyk-Aniol et al., 2021; Noorashid & Chin, 2021). However, some studies have pointed out that such measures were not sufficient and for some reason, many types of tourism businesses have been excluded (Kowalczyk-Aniol et al., 2021). Just like the national government, tourism and hospitality facilities have tried many measures to cope with the effects of COVID-19. They include precautionary measures meant to curb the spread of the pandemic and those that keep the business going (Dayour et al., 2020). The precaution measures implemented in almost all facilities are temperature checks before entry to facilities, hand washing, educative posters, wearing of nose masks and using alcohol-based sanitizers. Tourism and other sectors devised measures to keeping business going. As Dayour et al., (2020) argue, in Ghana coping strategies could be grouped into marketing, alternative services, seeking government support and cost reduction. For instance, some businesses diversify their activities to areas that are more resilient to the effects of COVID-19. They switched to issuing birth certificates and passports which have been processed online. Concerning marketing, some businesses use social media such as Whatsup and Facebook to inform potential customers about the business and available products. Cost-cutting measures reported in all sectors include lay-offs, termination of casual workers and contract staff, reduced remunerations, keeping skeletal employees, engaging employees without salaries for some time, compulsory annual leaves and total shutdown (Dayour et al., 2020).

COVID-19 is a pandemic that is still ravaging the world today presenting its different variants, devastating economies and spreading fear worldwide. Many tourist facilities are facing imminent closure as room occupancy fell from over three quarters to just under a quarter following cancellations and rescheduling of vacations (Dayour et al., 2020). However, several lessons are beginning to emerge and some studies have begun to document them. They show that COVID-19 leads to the closure of international and regional bother affecting the movement of people, thus the border closure and restrictions on large gatherings affect the tourism sector with some sectors running from over-tourism to no tourism. It further leads to a shortage of basic items such as food and medicines (Dayour et al., 2020). While some tourist facilities find themselves helpless to deal with the situation thinking that it is the purview of the government (Dayour et al., 2020), some have learned to deal with the shortage of tourists. They have resorted to innovation and use of modern technology leading to ‘onsite closure to online openness’ Agostino et al, (2020: 365). This means that some tourists’ institutions such as

museums and galleries have opted for online access to culture and knowledge using social media (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Kowalczyk-Aniol et al, 2021;).

Some studies show that countries and institutions draw lessons from the previous pandemics and disasters (Hillis et al., 2020). Some African countries that were devastated by the effects of HIV and AIDS, and Ebola learned that effective communication, decentralization of services and tests and treatment could restore the tourist sector to normality (Hillis et al., 2020). Similarly, WHO, based on previous experiences recommends an almost similar approach of effective communication, ‘test, treat and isolate’ to deal with COVID-19. At the regional level, some scholars maintain that COVID-19 has taught regional stakeholders to consider the crisis period as a learning curve concerning the existing nature of tourism. It helps regions and nations to reconsider existing mass tourism policies to make them consistent with sustainable development goals (Kowalczyk-Aniol et al., 2021). Other studies have emphasized skill development as an important lesson that could reduce redundancy and retain employees in the long run (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021).

There are different perspectives about ecotourism and its ability to enhance the livelihoods of proximate communities. The first argument is that ecotourism plays an important role in enhancing the livelihoods of rural communities (Chirenje, 2017; Snyman, 2017; Teshome et al, 2020; Zeng & Wang, 2019). It is argued that when ecotourism ventures engage in CSR, they improve the lives of disadvantaged groups in the society like women, orphans and people living with terminal disease (Zeng & Wang, 2019). Ecotourism play an important role in improve the infrastructure generating additional income from the main or side jobs (Teshome et al., 2020) and that it offers highest salaries in formal employment, creates market for local produce and enable commercial agriculture to improve income-generating activities while it protects, preserve and manages the natural environment (Chirenje, 2017). The second line of the argument shows that ecotourism is not without critics (Cusack et al,2021; English, 2002; Mbaiwa & Hambira, 2019; Wilcox, 2015). Some of these scholars argue that ecotourism itself is a confusing concepts that lures unsuspecting tourists into thinking that they will enjoy eco-friendly visits while in actual fact is a form of green-washing (English, 2002). Some studies conducted in Southern Africa and other parts of the world have demonstrated that ecotourism has a capacity to exclude vulnerable groups like the poor, children and sole woman travellers (Mbaiwa & Hambira, 2019). Besides, some studies show that ecotourism leads to destruction of the socio-economic and natural environment that it is supposed to preserves disadvantaging the local communities through overharvesting of fishery resources among others (Cusack et al., 2021).

Tourism is a growing sector in Lesotho contributing to the socio-economic development of the country. In 2013, travel and tourism contributed nearly 4.4% to the GDP and it was projected to increase to 6.1% by 2024. In the same year it was estimated to employ 25, 000 people, constituting 4.6% of total national employment (Yiu, Saner, & Lee, 2015). The majority of tourists come from outside the country, South Africa contributing about 90% of them (Ministry of Tourism, 2019; Yiu, Saner & Lee, 2015). Like other countries in the world, Lesotho has been hit hard by the effects of COVID-19. However, the pandemic has not been studied focusing on the impacts, coping strategies and lessons learned. There is a limited literature focusing of ecotourism in this countries (see Mearns, 2012; Mohasi, 1999). Much of what is written is documented in newspapers and reports belonging to the government and international institutions working in the country. Besides, some tourist facilities have documented the impact and coping strategies of the pandemic on their websites, Facebook pages, and Whatsup. It is, however, clear that the pandemic has a serious impact on the tourism sector. Some facilities such Mpilo Hotel and Oxbow Lodge closed business while others have operated without visitors (Lesotho Times, 2021; Theko, 2021). Facilities that remain opened

implement coping measures. They seek government support, implement precautionary measures and try to keep business going and wait for it to return to normality (Malea-lea Lodge, 2021). Though lessons learned have not been formally documented, anecdotal reports show that tourist facilities learned that relying on international tourism poses danger to business during disasters. They have learned that the pandemic has led to a shortage of goods especially food. As a result, they have decided to look inwards to support most of their activities (Malea-lea Lodge, 2021).

The present study contributes to the dearth of scholarship on the interface between tourism and COVID-19 in Lesotho focusing on the impact of the pandemic on Malea-lea community heavily dependent on ecotourism and international tourists. Though almost similar studies have been conducted in other countries focusing on the impact and adaptation of business to COVID-19 (Rogerson et al, 2021), no studies have explored this terrain in Lesotho. The extant scholarship in Lesotho focuses on the potential contribution of tourism to socio-economic development (Bob et al, 2020; Yiu, Saner & Lee, 2015), its vulnerability to natural disasters (Stockigt et al, 2019), community participation (Thetsane, 2019), and as a livelihood strategy (Makwindi & Ndlovu, 2021). To our knowledge, the only study which focused on COVID-19 was conducted by Mukurunge et al, (2020) which explored mainly how Lesotho handled information during the pandemic. Therefore, it seems in Lesotho COVID-19 has not yet received adequate academic attention.

The Malea-lea lodge case study

This study was conducted at Malea-lea Lodge situated in the area of Matelile approximately 60km south of Maseru, the capital city of Lesotho. The community in the area depends on agricultural activities supplemented by vibrant ecotourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2019). The history of the present vibrant ecotourism activities at Malea-lea lodge can be traced back to a local store in the area of Matelile, (Mearns, 2012; Mohasi, 1999). The government of Lesotho through the Lesotho National Tourism Office realized in 1973 that a manager of Frasers store in the area owned a lodge at the place called Ha Qaba. He had three horses that were used for trekking to entertain visitors. The activity grew over time culminating in the formation of a Farmer's Community Pony Trekking association in 1988 (Mohasi, 1999). It is reported that the Qaba lodge was later overwhelmed by the number of tourists during peak seasons resulting in another local trader, Mr Jones, venturing into the business of accommodating tourists in his premises. His lodge was bigger hence accommodated more tourists. Mr Jones established the Malea-lea Pony Owner's Association in 1991 which offered pony trekking services for the lodge (Mohasi, 1999). Following the establishment of the Farmer's Community Pony trekking association at Malea-lea, most activities decline at Ha Qaba resulting in benefits accruing to the Malea-lea community. The initial major attraction to the area was the pony trekking that was managed and controlled through an informal agreement between the Pony-trekking Association and the Malea-lea Lodge. The treks could be taken as a short day or overnight trek traversing through the Lesotho highlands via places of interest such as Ribaneng, Ketane and Maletsunyane Falls (Mearns, 2012; Mohasi, 1999). Besides, pony trekking, the lodge engages in many ecotourism activities that include among other protection of the environment, history and culture. The activities at the lodge have since grown to accommodate more and more community-based ecotourism ventures that include a village tour, village homestay, Sangoma/traditional herbalist appointment, visit 'Musi's reclamation donga- a Revolutionary Conservation in Action, Pony treks, hiking and mountain bikes (Malea-lea Lodge, 2021; The Lesotho Review, 2018).

The Malea-lea Lodge and the adjacent community have since become inter-reliant (Mearns, 2012) and the success of the lodge has directly affected the well-being of the local



community. As a result of the close relationship, the Malea-lea Lodge established the Malea-lea Development Trust (MDT) whose main objective is to “promote and support community empowerment and community participation for the advancement of the quality of life for the members of the Malea-lea Community” (MDT, 2021:5). MDT was registered in 2002 with the Law office under the deeds office. It was established as a result of tourists’ interest in improving the livelihoods of people. Tourists used to work directly with members of the community and the lodge would receive donations on behalf of the community but later the lodge realized that more tourists were contributing to the community and decided to establish the Trust to handle the funds (MDT Director, June 2021). MDT is therefore an entity that manages CSR initiatives of the Lodge and is currently focused on five priority areas on which all projects within the Malea-lea community are implemented. They are education, infrastructure development, health and well-being; income generation and self-sufficiency projects (MDT, 2021; Mearns, 2012).

Methodology and process

A qualitative exploratory study design was used to explore the perceptions of the management and beneficiaries of Malea-lea Development Trust (MDT) concerning the challenges facing the implementation of CSR initiatives. Using purposive sampling techniques, the management of Malea-lea Lodge, MDT’s employees and the beneficiaries of some of the MDT CSR projects were selected. 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-one 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 jobs.

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

Besides, seven focus group discussions were conducted with a maximum of seven members per group with beneficiaries of the CSR initiatives. Table 2 presents the focus group discussions showing the groups, their focus areas and the number of participants in the discussion.

Table 2: Focus group discussions

Group number	Name of Group	Focus of the group	No participants
Group 1	Pony hiking	Horse trekking	7
Group 2	Hiking group	Hiking expedition	7
Group 3	Support group	HIV and AIDS	14
Group 4	Men’s only	All issues relating to men	7
Group 5	Keyhole garden	Home vegetable gardens	7

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 group discussions respectively.



A rapport was built with the participants especially the chief (traditional leader), management of the lodge and MDT who in turn approved access to the rest of the staff and beneficiaries. The research purpose and authors' information were fully disclosed then consent was secured for face to face individual in-depth interviews, group discussions and audio recording. The language convenient to the participants was used. The interviews and discussion were transcribed and translated to the English language before data analysis.

The study adhered to issues of rigour to ensure reliability and validity as they apply to qualitative studies. The credibility of the study was maintained through triangulation that led to a collection of data from multiple sources, at different times and on many sites (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The trustworthiness of findings in qualitative research is normally assured through dependability (Cohen et al, 2011; Yin, 2003). The researchers increased dependability by taking cognizance of how data were collected, how categories were formed, and how decisions were reached throughout the entire study inquiry (Ghafouri & Afoghi, 2016). In this study, the setting and context of the Malea-lea Lodge and its MDT CSR projects were provided as detailed in the section labelled – The Malea-lea lodge case to achieve transferability (Mandal, 2018). The study achieved conformability through the assessment of the accuracy, relevance and meaning of the data through engaging other experts in the department of Development studies specializing in rural development and CSR to check the data (Mandal, 2018).

The digitally recorded data from the interviews and focus group discussion were transcribed into a word document. The Atlas.ti version 8.0 was used to organize and develop initial codes and categories based on the research questions of the study. The study employed thematic, instead of content analysis (Patton & Cochran 2002). The thematic analysis emphasises, pinpoints, identifies and records patterns or themes within the data (Kleinmans, 2018; Vaismoradi et al, 2013). Patton and Cochran (2002) and Vaismoradi et al (2013) clarify that with thematic analysis, all the data is inspected to spot the common issues that recur and identify the main themes that summarise all the views that have been collected. The thematic analysis involves a 'bottom-up approach where the lowest level consists of descriptive codes that are 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 of them (Vaismoradi et al 2013). In line with Nowell et al, (2017), the study followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research to ensure transparency that details the methods used to achieve the findings. A combination of shorter quotes within the narrative and longer block quotes were included in the reports and all the quotes were given a unique identifier to demonstrate that variegated participants were represented across the results.

Results and discussion

After grouping the codes into categories, the following themes emerged: the impact of COVID-19 and coping strategies; lesson learned; and new opportunities created by COVID-19 at Malea-lea Development Trust. Table 3 presents a summary of the themes and categories under each theme followed by a detailed description and explanation.

Table 3 Themes and categories

Impact of COVID	Lesson learned	New opportunities and coping strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of motivation and seriousness • Lack of international tourists • Corrupt practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliance on international tourism is not sustainable • Closed borders lead to food insecurity and shortage of essential items 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to start new businesses • Mobilising local resources • Renewed commitment



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of loss and pessimism • Surged gender-based violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of technology • Multiskilling is necessary • Importance of hygiene 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilise local tourists
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Impact of COVID-19, coping strategies

When asked to describe the impact of COVID-19 on the Malea-lea Development Trust and its CSR initiatives, the participants presented the impacts and coping strategies. They showed that though CSR projects at MDT were already facing challenges, COVID-19 intensified some of them. Lack of motivation and seriousness among the beneficiaries was one of the common categories that emerged during data analysis posing challenges on implementing some CSR projects. MDT's CSR projects were designed to enhance computer skills for teachers and students in the Matelile community. Despite enthusiasm exhibited by some students, especially primary children, the findings revealed that teachers were far less motivated before COVID-19, as the quote below show:

...the challenge is that the people (teachers) the training is intended for were not interested in learning computers. When COVID-19 came they began to show interest but the challenge is that there are few computers and it is hard to conduct computer lessons within the parameters of the set protocol. Had they showed interest before COVID-19 we could not be facing the current problems. They cannot all come at the same time. Nonetheless, we have decided to divide them into two groups, come at different days and make sure that they sanitise according to the government's regulations (P5).

This suggests that due to COVID-19, teachers were aware that they could not operate without computer literacy hence renewed need for the skills created pressure on the part of the trainers and threatening the set COVID protocols.

Education is a long-term program that needs commitment and hard work on the part of beneficiaries. The participants, on the other hand, complained that some students lacked seriousness with their studies and dismally failed their grades. The participants reported that schoolchildren were committed to their study while they were in primary schools but when they moved to secondary and high schools such commitment dropped and COVID-19 exacerbated this challenge. As a result of the pandemic, all schools were closed for some months and when they reopened many students did not return to schools. Participant 1 explained that as a result of COVID-19, school dropout in secondary school was unusually high. He explained that before the advent of COVID-19, MDT was sponsoring over seventy students but during the study, less than thirty students were back in school. This situation is documented in the literature that COVID-19 is challenging the education sector (Tamrat & Teferra, 2020; Van Schalkwyk, 2020). The common phrase that was used by most of the participants to describe the situation was 'it is a disaster' suggesting that a dropout of school of over 50% was unprecedented especially for students support through MDT's CSR. This suggested that ordinary students in the area were worse hit. Most participants believed that it would be hard to achieve the objectives of the CSR project relating to education in the study area. To circumvent this challenge, MDT was in a campaign to sensitize the community about the pandemic to encourage children to go back to school while waiting for the situation to return to normal.

Besides, challenges were facing CSR projects in health before COVID-19 that intensified during the pandemic. Men, in particular, were less motivated to join support groups for HIV and AIDS hence not motivated to take their medication properly. All the participants

in the focus group (women support group) were concerned about the lack of motivation, especially among men:

You can see we are all women in this group except one man. He has been with us for over a year, others refused to join hence our work is hard when we have to deal with men in the villages (P4FG2).

It was difficult to enrol men in CSR projects related to COVID-19 because they were not part of the village support groups. It was not easy to sensitize them about COVID-19 hence they were worse hit by the effects of the pandemic. Participant 4 explained that when they noticed that men were less motivated in most projects, MDT decided to form a “Men’s-Only Group”. However, the group was too small comprising of only eleven members. It was clear that without men, attempts to deal with COVID-19 were less effective resulting in the spread of false information about COVID-19. According to the management of the MDT, men's behaviour would delay the war against COVID-19 leading to a prolonged period of pandemic with dire consequences on the CSR initiatives, as the quote below show:

Some men do not believe that COVID-19 exists. To them, it is just the flu that could be treated with traditional medicines. When you talk about the COVID-19 vaccine, they say everyone who gets the jab will be dead in five years. We feel more effort should be taken to put men on board on all initiatives. When we discuss COVID-19 tension get so high that they nearly fight (P1FG4).

Most participants were concerned about the surge in violence resulting from the effects of COVID-19. “Children are at home where they go unsupervised which leads to child marriages, rape and abuse. Men are frustrated and stay home with partners and we deal with increased cases of Gender-Based Violence” (P7FG3). This observation is consistent with the literature that men are reluctant to participate in projects especially projects that relate to issues affecting gender (Connell, 2005; Cornwall et al, 2011). Some scholars have paralleled gender based violence to COVID-19 for being so widespread since the advent of the pandemic (Dlamini, 2021; Rodriquez-Jimenez et al., 2021). MDT encountered many challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic which negatively affected the CSR projects. The loss of international tourists created many challenges which have been reported in the literature. They have forced tourist facilities to react in a different way resulting in loss of revenue, lay-offs, and working without pay in some cases (Dayour et al., 2020), as participant 7 said:

We do not have electricity here, everything depend on solar energy but our batteries need service and new installations which we cannot afford. We had to lay off the staff and currently we operate with only two staff members who only come when we have visitors. This suggests that their pay is significantly reduced (P7).

Participants 1 and 7 concurred that all other projects were struggling as a result of financial problems due to the lack of international tourists who contribute to financing most CSR projects. The only project which was least affected was the health project supporting HIV and AIDS patients with food parcels because it had a regular sponsor. According to them, the challenge was that it was hard to get food parcels because of the closure of the border posts. However, COVID-19 worsened the situation because the borders were closed for an extended time hence food parcels and other items sourced from South Africa could not reach the beneficiaries. The MDT had begun to rethink new approaches to tourism planning to source

local tourism to complement international tourism that they have been relying on for so long. “We are beginning to turn to local tourists, we encourage them to visit the lodge, and to support our initiative (CSR initiatives) we give them discounted prices and information about their safety” (P7). The findings are consistent with other studies that during COVID-19, businesses and individuals encountered financial challenges (Bali et al, 2016; Rogerson et al, 2021; Sifolo & Sifolo, 2015). In the same manner, the coping strategies included among others retrenchments, reduced working hours, repurposing of the facilities and reduction of salaries (Rogerson et al, 2021) and transforming the whole idea about tourism (Gretzel, et al., 2020).

COVID-19 led to restrictions on movements locally and internationally affecting the beneficiaries of the CSR projects and increasing the number of vulnerable people in the community. Participant 7 noted that some beneficiaries and members of the community recruited undeserving children to receive benefits, taking space for vulnerable children in the village. In the same manner, some participants in the focus group discussion with the HIV and AIDS support group were complaining that some beneficiaries were enrolling some people who were not deserving any help from the health programs. Participant 2 mentioned:

We used to help some beneficiaries who were too old to enrol into different programs and we allowed our support group members to collect benefits on their behalf but later we realised that people who did not deserve any help were getting benefits. COVID-19 has increased the burden of the CSR projects making it hard to achieve the objectives of the project. We have since stopped the practice of letting people collect food parcels and other items for others and we have started sourcing help from local farmers and sponsors (P2).

Corrupt practices have not been unique to MDT and its CSR projects as examples of corruption related to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic abounds in the literature (Mantzaris & Pillay, 2020; Maulani et al, 2020; Mlambo & Masuku, 2020). But what is clear is that COVID-19 has increased the burden of vulnerability.

All the participants expressed a feeling of loss and hopelessness induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. They felt that it had hurt their production, jobs and income-generating activities. “COVID-19, has cost me my job. I am now helping my mother in the shop and she does not pay me” (P1FG2). The sense of hopelessness and desperation left young people in the community in disarray. “My colleagues have since left to search for employment in Maseru while others have gone to South Africa for the same purpose. Some have gone as far as Kimberly” P2FG2. Almost similar feelings were expressed in other groups.

We were twenty-two tour guides in all but for now, we have fewer than ten hiking guides who remain in these villages. Others have left because of desperation. They have gone to look for jobs in other places including Kimberly in South Africa. COVID is worse than HIV and AIDS because during the AIDS pandemic we did not run away from the community in a quest to find employment elsewhere (P4FG2).

The management of the lodge expressed the same sentiments that employees were affected by the COVID-19 explaining that before COVID, the lodge had over 26 staff members but as a result of the pandemic, most of them were laid off while others were given unpaid leaves. However, he stated that for those who were still working, conditions were not conducive for them to work. Participant 7 elaborated:

Given the nature of the sector, we get paid only when we have visitors but for almost a year now we did not have visitors. Occasionally, we get few local visitors. This means that we get paid only when we have visitors. The future of all our staff is bleak, we

don't know when the situation will return to normality. Remember tourism is a sensitive sector and slow to recover from shocks (P7).

Participants in the pony trekker's focus group discussion expressed the same feeling of hopelessness resulting from the loss of income. They explained that since the beginning of COVID-19 which had run for almost two years, they had had less than five touring expeditions. "I have been able to have one tour for the last two years. Foreign tourists are not coming because of the restrictions. I was lucky to get local tourists. Some of our members have never had tourists this time around."(P4FG1)

The participants explained that dealing with the situation they formed new groups that no longer relied on international tourists resulting in mobilizing local tourists. "*We have decided to encourage local tourists to visit the lodge or just engage straight with us in our pony trekking activities*" (P1FG1)

One of the categories which were prominent about COVID-19 was the loss of production resulting in a feeling of hopelessness. Almost all the participants engaged in vegetable production using keyhole gardening complained that though they were able to produce vegetables for the whole year for many years and able to sell and give to their poorer neighbours, the advent of COVID-19 had negatively affected their morale and enthusiasm to produce as explained in the statement below:

It is not easy to produce like in the past years due to COVID-19 but we have to because of shortage of food and other items. We are very discouraged with this whole thing because we do not know what it is and how long it will last. It affected our mental capacity, hence the lack of enthusiasm to do our work as farmers (P7FG5).

Most of the participants demonstrated that the lockdown and stringent protocols associated with COVID-19 harmed the morale to work imposing a sense of hopelessness and fear. This concurs with the observation made about other respiratory diseases and pandemics that they induce social, economic and psychological impact on the affected communities (Chen et al, 2007) The findings are consistent with the emerging literature on COVID-19 and that of previous pandemics such as Ebola resulting in unemployment (Joao, 2021; Mizrachi and Fuchs 2016; Rogerson et al. 2021) and instigating a sense of fear and hopelessness (Chen et al., 2007).

Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic

The MDT and its beneficiaries revealed that they had learned several lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. They had learned that they depended entirely on foreign tourism and that over-reliance on international tourism could not sustain the community projects. The observation concurred with sentiments expressed by Bob et al (2020) and Stockigt et al (2019) that Lesotho is focused on international tourism at the expense of domestic tourism. On the part of MDT which depends on the Malea-lea lodge for most of the projects, COVID-19 led to restrictions on domestic and international travels resulting in a shortage of visitors hence some projects were suspended. Besides, MDT had learned that there is a need for multiskilling to reduce running costs because as the literature shows it would be easy to operate with reduced staff (Gretzel, et al., 2020). "Out of the 26 staff compliment, the lodge is operating with less than five employees. They have to do all other tasks which were done by the laid-off staff ranging from bookings, cleaning of rooms and other activities" (P8). In addition, all the participants appreciated the importance of using modern technology which kept some tourist's activities going. "We used to depend on our website to attract tourists and advertise our project. COVID-

19 has taught us to expand the use of modern technology in the form of Facebook, Whatsapp and local media such as Television to attract especially local tourists” (P1).

The participants learned that the closure of borders led to food insecurity and a shortage of other items. MDT could not continue to support beneficiaries with food parcels though they had a regular international sponsor because such items would be sourced from South Africa (Ayanlade & Radeny, 2020; Nchanji & Lutomia, 2021). Besides, the number of vulnerable people in the community of Matelile had increased jeopardizing MDT’s effort to reduce hunger and vulnerability. Unlike other countries like South Africa (Arndt, et al., 2020), Lesotho has limited social protection networks compromising food security for many community members.

Studies have shown the importance of hygiene in keeping the tourism sector going and fast-tracking a return to normality (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Smart et al, 2021). At MDT the participants had learned that hygiene would reduce the risk of infection and activities would return to pre-COVID times if a large part of the community practice hygiene and other protocols recommended by WHO. “MDT has been raising funds to sensitise the community about COVID-19. We distribute sanitizers and face masks to the chiefs, local councillors and retailer shops in the community. We hold training workshops on hygiene for the community (P5).

New opportunities and coping strategies at MDT

Although COVID-19 negatively impacted production, community's jobs and income-generating opportunities, it has also brought a change of the mind-set to the local people resulting in self-employment and empowerment. Beneficiaries of the CSR projects at MDT began to use the skills and resources acquired before COVID-19 to deal with its effects which were consistent with the literature that the tourism sector has reached a learning curve (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Kowalczyk-Aniol et al. 2021). The twp quotes below explains:

We are a group of 4 males, we have opted to continue with guiding local tourists to sustain our lives, with the salary I was getting before COVID-19 I was able to buy all the necessary equipment for touring like camping tents, camping chairs and a sleeping bag, so I can say we are beginning to be self-employed now (P3FG2).

Similarly, the pony owners decided to continue their business with the local tourists to sustain their lives. We as horse owners have come together and agreed to continue with the local tours independently because we need the income, but so far we have only got one tour from local people. However, we are still hopeful that with proper advertising we will get more local tourists (P1FG1).

The participants especially those who were working for the MDT and Malea-lea lodge expressed a sense of empowerment because the owner and manager of the lodge was outside of the country hence management of the activities were solely their responsibility. “Because of COVID-19 the owner of the lodge is in Cape Town. We are responsible for all activities at the lodge’ (P7). These participants show that unlike in the past when they used to rely on the groups initiated by the Lodge and MDT, COVID-19 presented new thinking resulting in employing strategies that focus on local tourism. The findings suggest a re-think about tourism, something other scholars call “transformative thinking” (Gretzel, et al., 2020).

Various participants explained that COVID-19 presented an opportunity to test their skills in the use of modern technology leading to a sense of empowerment. In the past, only one person was assigned for all the bookings. We used to wait for visitors to confirm their booking but now we have changed. We work together as a team. Every staff member is

responsible for all the bookings. We all communicate with our visitors and we currently follow up with our visitors to confirm their bookings (P8).

Besides, the data showed that the lodge and MDT had changed the strategy of relying on international tourists. It was currently mobilising local tourists using different strategies enabling the employees to use modern technology. “The lodge is currently using different media platforms to advertise such as the internet, Facebook, Whatsapp and local radio stations” (P7). In the same manner, participants from the focused group discussions expressed a feeling of being empowered in the use of modern technology. “We have our own hiking group. We have our own Whatsapp and Facebook platforms where we advertise our group (P1FG2). Some participants expressed gratitude that COVID-19 has enabled them to sharpen their skills in resource mobilization and partnering with big local companies:

Concerning the education project, especially the computer training aspect, MDT is busy sourcing funds and partnerships with local companies. So far we have signed an agreement with one mobile telephone Company in the country (the name withheld). They are going to donate twenty computers, provide a building for the computers, training workshops and free data for five years (P5).

As the literature has shown, the new thinking and approach necessitate the use of modern technology, creativity and multiskilling of the employees to handle different aspects of the business (Gretzel, et al., 2020). One of the categories that emerged during data analysis was that COVID-19 had led to renewed commitment among the beneficiaries. It gave them a new impetus to deal with the pandemic itself and HIV/AIDS which were already ravaging the community. Beneficiaries of the education program who were all along hesitant to enrol in the computer training showed renewed enthusiasm as a result of the pandemic. Teachers and school children began to value the computer training offered by MDT. They explained that because of their previous experiences with HIV/AIDS, they were motivated to deal with COVID-19.

I can say we have been successful because our target was to raise five hundred thousand (M500 000) for COVID-19 but we ended up raising about 1.3 million and we used that money for food parcels, training and stipends for volunteers who conducted COVID-19 training in the villages. We supplied businesses and the chief’s offices with sanitizers (P5).

As the findings show, the participants were mobilising local resources and forming new groups to deal with the effects of COVID-19 on tourism. The findings are consistent with the emerging literature on tourism, COVID19 and the impact of pandemics such as SARS and Ebola where it is reported that the sector responded in different ways including mobilising local resources (Chen et al. 2007; Maphanga & Henama, 2019; Mckercher & Chon, 2004; Mizrachi & Fuchs 2016;). Besides, the findings demonstrate that COVID-19 has affected different sectors (Arndt, et al., 2020; Ayanlade & Radeny, 2020; Mantzaris & Pillay, 2020) and participants were struggling to deal with its effects using skills acquired earlier (Dawadi et al, 2020; Maulani et al, 2020; Tamrat & Teferra, 2020; Van Schalkwyk, 2020).

Conclusion

COVID-19 has devastated the tourism sector making it harder for it to achieve some of its obligations. The objective of this study was to understand how an ecotourism-dependent community in Matelile, Lesotho has been affected by COVID-19, how it has been coping and

what lessons it has learned from the experiences. The findings show that COVID-19 has had negative impacts on the CSR initiatives meant to improve the livelihoods of the local community. It increased the level of vulnerability that existed before the advent of the pandemic. It affected the health and education projects at Matelile Development Trust leading to an increased burden on health projects triggered by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The community experienced a sense of fear and pessimism not knowing what the pandemic is and when it will end affecting the morale to produce. The pandemic led to a high level of desperation encouraging beneficiaries to engage in corrupt practices. The implication is that in Lesotho, tourism institutions and communities are less prepared for disasters and pandemics suggesting that the sector and the communities should be better prepared for such events.

The coping strategies included a change in community's mind-set that resulted in a feeling of empowerment. The beneficiaries managed to create employment for themselves and others. They began to mobilise local tourism which had been neglected before the advent of COVID-19. Besides, the study revealed that there were many lessons learned from the pandemic consisting of the recognition on the part of MDT and beneficiaries that over-reliance on international tourism was not sustainable and that the pandemic has led to food insecurity and a surge in gender-based violence. The implications drawn from the coping strategies and lessons learned are that local tourism should be promoted to avoid over dependence on international tourism. The activities and enthusiasm of the participants imply that local tourism could easily grow in Lesotho. The use of social media suggests that local tourists could easily be lured to local ecotourism sites. It is therefore, recommended that the government of Lesotho should help ecotourism institutions and proximate communities with financial and technical support to minimise the negative effects of disasters and pandemics. This could involve training for disaster preparedness and financial support to improve ecotourism sites to sustain local communities.

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