

The Economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Business Events Sub-sector in South Africa: Mitigation Strategies and Innovations

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown regulations, which came into being in South Africa on 26 March 2020, has had a major impact on the country's economy and specifically tourism. All sub-sectors of the tourism sector has been adversely affected, with many business events either cancelled or postponed to a later date post the lockdown period. The study aims to examine the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the business events sub-sector in South Africa. Furthermore, the study explores how the business events sub-sector responded to the many challenges associated with the pandemic and offers critical insights into how the business events sub-sector mitigated some of the challenges. The study followed a qualitative approach with purposive sampling being adopted, targeting representatives of the business events associations. The study revealed that the lockdown's economic impact resulted in lost income for organisations due to postponed or cancelled events. The lack of income also placed numerous jobs at risk. However, the business events sub-sector also introduced innovative measures allowing them to pursue some business opportunities, such as virtual events, hybrid events and the upskilling of staff.

Keywords: COVID-19; Business events sub-sector; MICE; industry associations; mitigation strategies

Introduction

When the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (Branswell & Joseph, 2020), countries worldwide put measures in place to protect their citizens and prepare their medical infrastructure for this pandemic. This resulted in many countries closing their borders, thereby restricting international travel, whilst at the same time also restricting domestic travelling. In South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a National State of Disaster, effective from 26 March 2020 (South Africa, 2020). In essence, the implementation of the National State of Disaster put an end to non-essential business activities, such as interprovincial travel and international travelling, resulting in all forms of tourism being curtailed (South Africa, 2020). With no tourists travelling, the national and local economies have been adversely impacted (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020), with both the supply and demand side of tourism being negatively impacted (United Nations World Tourism Organisation,

2020). The Business events sub-sector, which includes meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) normally plays a catalytic role in promoting a range of support services whilst at the same time bringing together an array of tourists. However, the global pandemic has severely restricted travel mobility and tourism businesses.

Recent studies have examined the impact of COVID-19 on the business events sub-sector (Ritichainuwat, Laws, Maunchontham, Tattabaphinanchai, Muttmara, Mouton, Lin, Suksai, 2020; Disimulacion, 2020; Rwigema, 2020; Ho & Sia, 2020), but few have adequately addressed the business events sub-sectors (MICE) survival strategies adopted during the pandemic (Aburumman, 2020). This article will explore some of the adopted strategies to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. Additionally, the article will also explore how business events as a tourism sub-sector has mitigated some of the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the main aim of this article is two-fold. Firstly, to ascertain the economic loss experienced by the business events sub-sector due to the pandemic. Secondly, to examine possible strategies devised by the business events sub-sector in South Africa to mitigate the pandemic's challenges.

Tourism in South Africa

Globally, tourism employs 330 Million people, contributing 10.3% towards the gross domestic product (GDP) (World Travel and Tourism Council-WTTC, 2020). This means that tourism, as an industry plays a vital role in the global economy. Compared to other industries, it is noted that tourism is the third-largest contributor to the GDP after retail and financial services in the world (WTTC, 2020). In South Africa, tourism contributed 7% towards the GDP, and this amounted to approximately USD23.7 Billion whilst more than 1,4 Million jobs are linked to tourism (WTTC, 2020). Given South Africa's declining income derived from the mining sector and its unemployment rate before the lockdown period, tourism's contribution to the economy should not be underestimated. In 2016, the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE), hereafter referred to as the business events sub-sector, generated revenue to the tune of USD720 Billion globally (South African Tourism, 2019). Before 2017, the business events sub-sector contributed USD7.7 Billion to South Africa's GDP (SANCB, 2020). Therefore, the business events sub-sector contributed one-third of the total amount generated by tourism. This demonstrates the importance of the business events sub-sector to South Africa.

Key role of the business events sub-sector

The business events sub-sector comprises a wide range of organisations and companies responsible for delivering meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (abbreviated as MICE) (Joint Meeting Industry Council, 2020). The primary purpose of business events is to create platforms for various economic sectors to trade, interact, partner and exchange knowledge that ultimately will lead to the advancement of the sector and its value chain. Destinations utilise business events to attract tourists and advance their knowledge economy by generating opportunities for investment, export and trade stimulus (International Congress and Convention Association, 2019).

Various stakeholders and partners

South Africa's business events subsector consists of three segments: the supply side, the decision-makers and the support service providers (Kotze-Nhlapo, 2020). Each of these stakeholders plays a critical role in the bidding process and the execution of business events. In South Africa, four trade and professional associations represent the sector's different segments' interest in the business events value chain. Professional and trade associations are defined as membership organisations representing their stakeholders and industry (Reference

for Business, 2020). Within the South African context, the business events sector's meeting and conferencing segment are represented by the Southern African Association for the Conference Industry (SAACI). SAACI represents more than 1500 meeting professionals in Southern Africa, promoting its sustainability under three themes: learning, growth, and collaboration (SAACI, 2020).

The Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE) is a global trade and professional association representing the incentive travel industry's interest. SITE was formed in 1973 and represents 2500 incentive travel companies in ninety countries around the world. The SITE African chapter has a presence in South Africa (SITE, 2020). The South African exhibition industry is represented by two (2) trade associations, namely the Exhibitions and Events Association of Southern Africa (EXSA) and the Association of African Exhibition Organisers (AAXO). EXSA was established in 1997, and its membership base consists of venues, organisers and suppliers involved in executing both consumer and trade exhibitions (EXSA, 2020). AAXO represents the exhibition organisers in Africa and promotes exhibition organisers' growth and development focusing on governance, skills development, and research (AAXO, 2020). Therefore, the AAXO plays a key role in the development of the exhibitions organisers.

In 2012 South African Tourism established the South Africa National Convention Bureau (SANCB) to become a truly "one-stop" business events support facility for South Africa. (Kotze-Nhlapo, 2020). Convention Bureaus (CB) acts as a facilitator, providing assistance and information to decision-makers and business events planners regarding hosting business events in the geographical region they represent (ICCA, 2019). On a metropolitan and provincial level, the following CB's exist as part of the metropolitan and provincial DMO's. Business events units exist in the Eastern Cape, Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, Free State Province and the Northern Cape Province. These units are not able to provide the full scope of services of a CB. Therefore, they are classified only as business events units (Kotze-Nhlapo, 2020). The SANCB, together with the provincial and metropolitan CB's, business events units and the major convention centres in South Africa, formed the Business Events Coordinating Forum (BECF). The BECF is responsible for the alignment and coordination of South Africa's efforts to secure international meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (Kotze-Nhlapo, 2020).

Existence of the business events sub-sector

As the global economy developed and became commercialised and commodity-driven, the importance of business events grew (Sharma, 2004). Fullard (2020) describes the subsector's primary existence as the global economy's roots supporting its trade and knowledge sharing development. According to ICCA's annual ranking report, South Africa has consistently ranked as Africa and the Middle East's top association conference destination since the country became a democracy in 1994 and its subsequent reintegration into the global economy (ICCA, 2020). Since 1994, South Africa hosted various prestigious international and regional conferences, including the United Nations Climate Change Conference, commonly known as COP17, the 5th Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) Summit and the World Economic Forum. These conferences positioned the country as a premier global business events destination (Marais, 2017). The development of South Africa's business events infrastructure, including convention centres, airports, organisers and support service providers, contributes to its competitive value proposition (Kotze-Nhlapo, 2020). However, South Africa has to contend with a range of barriers that are stifling the growth of the country's business events sector, including cost, brand perception, immigration regulations and safety and security issues (Ngcaweni, 2019). These barriers make it increasingly difficult for the country to

compete with international conference destinations, such as its immediate competitors, including Turkey, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada, Brazil, Germany, Australia and United Arab Emirates (Dubai) (South Africa National Convention Bureau, 2019).

Contribution of the business events sub-sector

Historically the economic contribution of business events focused on the consumption of tourism-related products and services by delegates, including transportation, food and beverages, accommodation and tourism experiences (Joint Meeting Industry Council, 2020). A report published by the Business Events Council of Australia titled the “Beyond Tourism Benefits of Business Events” found this measurement a narrow view of the subsector’s true value proposition (Business Events Council of Australia, 2020). According to the SANCB (2020), South Africa’s business events sub-sector supports on average 252 000 direct and indirect jobs and contributes USD7.7 Billion to South Africa’s GDP. In terms of travel behaviour, approximately 30% of all delegates attending an international business event in South Africa participate in pre-and post-tour activities of an average duration of 3.5 days (SANCB, 2017).

There is a concerted effort by the global business events sector to quantify the “beyond tourism” benefits and its contribution to the knowledge economy and to present the broader value proposition of the sector to decision-makers (Joint Meeting Industry Council, 2019). According to the SANCB, the macroeconomic benefits that business events contribute to South Africa’s economy currently form part of the consideration for the support provided through the bid support programme that South African Tourism administers (Kotze-Nhlapo, 2020). South Africa’s bid support programme considers the social legacies that the business events sector can generate by showcasing its innovation, products and expertise, creating investment and export opportunities, and the business event’s ability to strengthen South Africa’s knowledge economy.

Consequences of the lockdown

The closure of borders had an immediate and grave effect on tourists’ flow worldwide and into the country; this saw the postponement, cancellation, and movement towards online engagements for business events across South Africa. On 11 March, when the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the virus had spread across 114 countries, and at this point, 85 destinations had issued travel restrictions (Ghebreyesus, 2020). The UNWTO recorded four (4) key categories of travel restrictions, which include and were implemented by various destinations: firstly, some issued full or partial border closures, where tourists were not allowed entry. Secondly, some destinations suspended flights, thereby restricting tourists. Thirdly, differentiated measures where passengers who transited or had travelled from certain countries or regions were not allowed entry. The fourth category were destinations that allowed entry with the condition of self-isolation or quarantine upon arrival. In South Africa, the border was closed for all tourists and access was only allowed for essential travel and necessary cargo, which had to be transported across the border.

On 23 March, the government of South Africa issued a lockdown, effective from 27 March 2020. The lockdown meant that most economic activities, including tourism, would cease with immediate effect. South African civilians were advised to stay home, and in-doors and all non-essential travel would also come to a halt, thus only allowing essential travel. Essential travel would entail the repatriation of South Africans outside of the country to come back to South Africa and repatriation on foreign nationals to their respective countries and medical emergencies. Furthermore, the government disbarred any recreational travel and all public gatherings (Department of Health, 2020).

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic crippled the world economy, such to an extent these effects exceeded that of the 9/11 attacks in the United States of America on 11 September 2001, the 2018 economic crisis, and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) combined (UNWTO: World Tourism Barometer, 2020).

Tourism is a sector that is tied to other sectors, and the negative economic impact incurred in this sector would spread across various sectors; the aviation sector was amongst those sectors that were gravely affected (Nicola, Alsafi, Sohrabi, Kerwan, Al-Jabir, Losifidis, Agha & Agha, 2020) as both demand and supply of the services were interrupted. The aviation sector is a USD7.4 Trillion worth industry, providing the single most global transportation network (ICAO, 2020). The Official Airline Guide (2020) had recorded that the aviation sector will realise a loss of USD880 Billion due to the pandemic in 2020. According to Ghosh (2020), the loss of passenger airlines' income, including cargo airlines, airport managing companies, catering services and aircraft manufacturing companies with passenger traffic, resulted in revenue losses of USD111.8 Billion. According to the International Air Transport Association (2020), the African region was said to have a revenue loss of about USD35 Billion by August 2020, with South Africa being amongst the key affected countries that will be impacted, and its potential loss is estimated at USD5.8 Billion by August 2020, with 287 700 jobs at risk (IATA, 2020).

According to the WTTC (2020) job losses of around 142.6 Million were recorded across the world in tourism, a GDP loss of USD 3.8 Billion. Job losses for Africa reached 12.4 Million by November 2020 in the tourism sector, realising an estimated GDP loss of USD87 Billion. In 2019, global tourism had reached a milestone of 1.5 Billion outbound travel (Oxford Economics, 2021), which was a 3,8% from 2018. Furthermore, global outbound tourism was forecasted to grow by between 3% and 4% in 2020. However, these figures would be significantly revised down due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Between the first quarter of the year to December 2020 international travel was revised downwards to 400 million, the decline matching tourism performance figures of 30 years ago (Oxford Economics, 2021). South Africa, welcomed 10.2 Million international arrivals in 2019, and 2.8 Million in 2020 (Jan to Dec) recording a 73% decline in international arrivals. Domestic trips saw a 40 decline from 28.5 Million down to 17,4 domestic trips. MICE arrivals declined by 78% down to 78 525 (Jan to Mar) on international delegate arrivals (South African Tourism, 2020).

The business events sub-sector was considerably affected compared to other purposes if travel. TenTimes (2020), an online platform that collects information for over 300 000 general events and business events globally, recorded 562 business events that were scheduled to take place between April 2020 and December 2020; 357 (64%) of these were conferences and 205 (36%) tradeshows, which were either postponed, cancelled or pivoted, that is, became virtual (online) events. When borders opened for leisure travel, large and organised gatherings were still prohibited in order to curtail the further spread of the COVID-19 virus. This further handicapped the business events sub-sector and translated to revenue losses for host countries, organisers and the related value chain within business events. The negative effect persists as countries battle various variants of COVID-19, procuring vaccines for the population while embedding strategies on inoculations to achieve herd immunity to facilitate the resumption of travel for all purposes.

Economic impact on the events sub-sector

According to the Events Industry Council and Oxford Economics (n.d.) cited by South African Tourism (2017), business events are a key economic contributor, with a contribution (direct spend) of about USD1.5 Trillion to the global gross domestic product. Furthermore, business events attract over 1,5 Billion participants from more than 180 countries (Events Industry

Council, 2018). A survey conducted by SAACI in March 2020, which involved 167 respondents across all nine provinces in South Africa and included the spectrum of events related organisations, indicated that USD49.8 Million was lost due to cancellations for March 2020 to June 2020 (SAACI, 2020). This study further highlighted that 3338 full-time employees' jobs were at risk, from a total of 4429 full-time employees (SAACI, 2020). This means that 75.4% of the full-time employees' jobs were likely to be lost. In addition, the survey also indicated that the potential gross salaries/wages to be lost amounted to USD3.5 Million (SAACI, 2020). This loss in income would have far-reaching implications for the business events sub-sector, and the potential loss taxes that would have been generated for the economy is equally disconcerting. Tourism is a key sector in South Africa and sustains 750 000 direct jobs and 1.5 Million indirect jobs (Department of Tourism, 2020). These jobs are across all sub-sectors of tourism, and it represents a substantive number of jobs in the South African context. The survey involved 1610 respondents across all nine provinces in South Africa, and it included all sub-sectors of the tourism sector, including MICE. For this study's purpose, the focus is on the MICE sub-sector, which is referred to as the business events sub-sector in this article and generally accepted by those who work in the sub-sector.

With the South African economy forecasted to contract by more than 6.4%, as highlighted by the Minister of Finance, Tito Mboweni (Sguazzin & Njini, 2020), it is anticipated that the tourism sector, like the other sectors in South Africa, will shed jobs. A survey conducted in April 2020 indicated that 11% of the tourism businesses in South Africa made some or all of their staff redundant (Department of Tourism, 2020, April). The exact number of staff who lost their jobs is not known at this stage, but if there were 11% redundancies among those tourism businesses that were surveyed, it would translate into substantial job losses up until April 2020, which could take years to be created again. South Africa would have hosted 40 international business events in 2020 that received support through South Africa's Bid Support Programme (BSP) administered by the South African National Convention. These events would have attracted a total of 16 833 delegates to the country. Furthermore, these events included conferences and exhibitions, with the average delegate spend per day of USD427. These secured events would have generated more than USD 32 Million for South Africa's economy in 2020. The multiplier used for calculating this figure is based on the following:

$$\text{Delegates} \times \text{Events days} \times \text{Spend per delegate per day}$$

The income that was to be generated from the BSP events represents a sizeable proportion of potential income, which would have been generated for the South African economy. In addition, only four events were cancelled, and three events were hosted on digital platforms thus far (South African National Convention Bureau, 2020). Vaccination programs are currently being rolled out in several countries, including South Africa's tourism source markets, like the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Germany (Hills, 2021; Sample, 2021; Jordans, 2021). South Africa's vaccination program commenced on 18 February 2021 (Pheto, Patrick & Njilo, 2021), and there is a likelihood that fewer events may be cancelled once herd immunity is obtained in host countries.

Methodology

In order to corroborate, or support, aims of the study, it was deemed necessary also to conduct interviews. It was decided that the best way to manage face-to-face interviews during the pandemic, and given the fact that the participants were spread across the country, was to conduct email interviewing. In this instance, a Consent Form was emailed to each participant,

plus a few open-ended questions. Greeff (2020) believes that given the pandemic, emailed interviewing is an acceptable form of collecting data, as qualitative researchers need to resort to appropriate methods of collecting data. Participants were identified based on their direct involvement in the business events sub-sector.

For this particular study, non-probability sampling, specifically purposive (judgmental or expert) sampling, were adopted. The participants were handpicked based on specific criteria or a purpose (Altinay, Paraskevas & Jang, 2016; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015), such as their knowledge, expertise and the participants being representatives of key business events associations in South Africa, as well as being willing and accessible. In total, five representatives were selected, and they included the chairperson of these industry associations or the chief executive officer (if there was such an appointment) of these associations listed hereafter. All five representatives were interviewed. They were all representatives of the various associations who are active in the business events sub-sector in South Africa, such as the Southern African Association of Conferencing Industries (SAACI), Exhibitions and Events Association of Southern Africa (EXSA), the Association of African Exhibition Organisers (AAXO), the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE) and the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA). These representatives provided critical insights about the sub-sector in its entirety and how the pandemic affected their particular segment. Being the chairperson, or chief executive officer of the respective industry associations, the participants had a bird's eye view of all the issues, including how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their members' involvement in the business events sub-sector and the entire value chain. Their participation was entirely voluntary, and no participant was coerced into participating.

The interviews were asynchronous online interviews. In other words, the researchers and participants were not able to be online simultaneously due to time constraints and other priorities. Consequently, a range of questions was formulated based on the study's aim and emailed to the purposefully selected participants. The participants were able to respond to the questions in their own time, and once completed, they emailed their responses to the researchers. The information received from the respondents were already in print format and did not require transcribing. This enabled the researchers to conduct a thematic analysis based on the responses from the participants. However, before analysing the data, the following steps were followed. First, the data were organised, by gathering the printed responses and notes. Secondly, the data was reviewed a few times to obtain a sense of what it contained. Thirdly, codes were created to assist the researchers to make any connections and identify recurring themes. Fourthly, these themes were then presented in an integrated manner. In this instance, a deductive approach was used as the researchers were aware of possible participant responses already, having done a literature review (Bunard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwich, 2008).

Results

The results from the interviews conducted with business events association representatives highlighted the following themes: loss of employment, mitigation strategies and innovative measures. These themes were derived from analysing the interviews.

Loss of employment

As the economic situation worsened for some organisations in the business events sub-sector, staff and job losses' retrenchments became a reality. This due to the business events sub-sector not generating any income due to the closure of international borders, tourists not being able to travel to attend events and these events being postponed. This loss of income during the lockdown period negatively impacted the entire value chain of the business events sub-sector.

In some instances, businesses that were operating in the business events sub-sector also closed down. However, it is not known precisely how many organisations in the business events sub-sector closed down or were moth-balled during the pandemic. Reducing the business expenditure took the form of minimising the staff costs through retrenchments, introducing pay cuts and negotiating reduced rentals with landlords and accessing.

Mitigations strategies

To survive the severe economic conditions brought about by the pandemic, several mitigation strategies were adopted. This relates to the participants reporting on salary reductions of employees in the business events sub-sector during the pandemic. In this instance, it is not known what proportion of the businesses involved in this sub-sector resorted to salary reductions, but based on feedback from other studies, salary reductions were reported by more than 50% of the organisations in this sub-sector (Department of Tourism, 2020, April and July Report).

Another mitigation strategy reported by the participants involved employers placing employees on furlough (leave), with the hope that the business environment will improve and “normal” operations will resume in the near future. In this case, these employers would recall their employees when operations becomes normal. According to the Department of Tourism (2020, April and July) survey, for the business events sub-sector, 27% of businesses operating in the business events sub-sector placed their employees on furlough.

When reference is made to tourism businesses placing staff on furlough, it should be noted that it is interpreted as “leave”, as the term “furlough” does not appear in the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997. The notion of placing staff on leave is a direct result of a pandemic as the employee cannot perform his/her normal operational activities, and as a consequence, the employer is unable to generate an income. The net result of this is that the organisation cannot remunerate employees. In this regard, the employer may place the employees on leave. If the employee has built up leave benefits over the years, the employee can access those leave benefits and receive payment. If an employee has accrued no leave benefits, then it is likely to be unpaid leave. The employer may also reduce the wages (salary) of the employee. If an employer reduces the wages of an employee or wishes to place an employee on leave, it must be preceded by a legal process, or it is done with the employee's consent.

Some businesses in South Africa that were not operational as a result of the lockdown period were also able to access relief funding from the Department of Labour, specifically the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), to support the payment, or partial payment of their employees from March to June 2020 (Laubscher, 2020). This relief funding was known as the Temporary Employee Relief Scheme (TERS). However, the Deputy Minister of the Department of Employment and Labour, Boitumelo Moloi, confirmed that on 21 July 2020 that the TERS benefit has been extended until 15 August 2020 (Southern & East African Tourism Update, 2020).

The above-mentioned mitigation strategies were common across all the respondents and in line with previous studies. What can be inferred from this is that the business events sub-sector (including the other sub-sectors of tourism) almost had a collective strategy to mitigate issues related to the pandemic. This collective response is possibly attributed to the fact that the business events sub-sector is highly organised, and the various associations (AAXO, EXSA, SITE and SAACI) place a premium on communicating with their members and ensuring that there is a measure of compliance and uniformity in how organisations that are members of the associations deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, some organisations reduced expenditure by negotiating with landlords to reduce rental fees. Other organisations sought payment holidays, which may have brought some relief, but in the long run, it may potentially cause hardship as the interest would have compounded on outstanding loans or debt. The participants also indicated other mitigating strategies, such as hosting webinars, which may have generated some income.

Innovative measures

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the organisations that are part of the business events sub-sector remained resilient and introduced innovative measures. Therefore, the pandemic may also have provided some opportunities. Some of the primary innovative measures that organisations in the business events sub-sector pivoted to were using virtual (online) and hybrid (blended) events. Virtual (online) events allow the event to be hosted on an electronic platform, with delegates accessing the event using technology without physically travelling to the event (Congrex, 2020). Hybrid (blended) events are a combination of live and virtual elements, where some representatives may be present at a physical location, and the delegates attend the event virtually using technology (Congrex, 2020).

Other innovative measures reported by the participants from the representatives of business events sub-sector also referred to some organisations using the opportunity to expand and build on their digital platforms to generate revenue. This enabled those businesses to pivot using digital platforms, which meant they could host events online or host hybrid events. The hybrid events allowed these businesses to adhere to the lockdown regulations by hosting the maximum of delegates and offering them virtual attendance. However, it should be noted that not all the organisations in the business events sub-sector could implement this strategy. According to the Department of Tourism (2020, April), some organisations in the business events sub-sector also utilised the pandemic to upskill and train their staff. This is likely to have happened only after April 2020, when some of the lockdown measures were lifted.

Conclusion

This article focused on the economic impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the business events sub-sector in South Africa. It highlighted the revenue that the business events sub-sector had lost due to the lockdown. It was previously stated that cancelled events in 2020 would have generated USD48.9 Million (SAACI, 2020). In addition, these cancelled events resulted in salary losses of USD3.5 Million (SAACI, 2020). The interviews confirmed that job losses were a significant challenge for the business events sub-sector. According to the SANCB (2020), 40 events that were supported by the Bid Support Programme, would have generated USD 32 Million. Therefore, it seems that close to USD50 Million was lost since the end of March 2020 as a result of the pandemic. The article further highlighted the mitigation strategies adopted by organisations in the business events sub-sector were uniform across the various associations. These mitigation strategies ranged from salary cuts, placing staff on leave, applying for TERS funding, and reducing expenditure, such as rental fees.

Some of the organisations in the business events-sub-sector also proved resilient and were able to innovate. These innovations included expanding their digital platforms to host virtual and hybrid events and upskilling their staff. Having reflected on the past ten months and taking into account the challenges experienced, the following recommendations ought to be considered with the hosting of future events and potential crises that may arise. Firstly, the business events sub-sector should endeavour to build sustainable businesses going forward based on responsible tourism practices. This will facilitate greener businesses, which should lessen the impact on the environment and reduce the carbon footprint. In fact, it may be an

opportune time for this segment to devise and implement guidelines as to how these business may become greener, given that international delegates contribute significantly to airline emissions. Secondly, the business events sub-sector need allow for hybrid events from the conception to planning and implementation, as some delegates are likely to have developed a preference for hybrid events and considering that the pandemic may have impacted their bottom line. Thirdly, greater collaboration between the various industry associations involved in the business events sub-sector and the government needs to be fostered. This will ensure that communication channels are built and maintained to grow the business events sub-sector sustainably. Finally, more targeted research ought to be conducted in the business events sub-sector to determine how many businesses are still operational post-COVID-19 and how many full-time and part-time employees are linked to this segment.

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