

## 'In-Between' Rural Tourism: Rethinking Rural Tourism Spaces for Policy Development in South Africa

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### Abstract

Rural tourism is the focus of major international scholarship. This paper contributes to policy debates about rural tourism in the Global South using the example of South Africa. Specifically, it points to a need for rethinking of rural tourism spaces for policy development in South Africa. Arguably, 'rural spaces' cannot be viewed homogeneously simply as places outside of cities; instead rural tourism spaces must be unpacked and differentiated. The South African case is of special interest in Global South scholarship because national government launched initiatives to prepare an appropriate rural tourism policy. It is argued that a spatially differentiated approach to rural tourism policy is useful and recommends as a starting point drawing upon best practice international research which identifies (at least) three different categories of rural space, namely fringe, exotic/remote and in-between rural spaces. Insight is provided of two examples of 'in-between' rural spaces in South Africa, namely Greater Giyani Local Municipality in Limpopo and Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality in Eastern Cape.

**Keywords:** Rural tourism policy; rural tourism spaces; 'in-between' rural spaces; South Africa

### Introduction

The development of rural tourism policy has been a challenging issue across the international experience (Hall & Jenkins, 1998). During the 1990s Hall and Jenkins (1995) pointed out that policy development for rural tourism tended to be of an *ad hoc* and incremental nature often a result of the lack of quality information to inform policy development as well as the availability of little experience in rural tourism policy formulation and implementation. A decade later Nylander and Hall (2005) reiterated similar sentiments and raised the question of the appropriateness or otherwise of an explicit rural tourism policy or strategy within regional and national tourism development. However, the need for such policy development strengthened during the 2000s particularly in the Global North where as a result of post-productivist transformations rural areas became increasingly perceived "as consumption rather than production places" (Eusébio, Carneiro, Kastenholz, Figueiredo & da Silva., 2017: 197). Across many parts of Europe this transition received support both from the European Union and national governments with tourism assuming a vital function in maintaining the viability and stability of rural localities (Ruiz-Real, Uribe-Toril, Valenciano & Gázquez-Abad, 2020;



Kataya, 2021; Pilving, 2021). In particular, tourism is viewed as a highly significant vehicle for the development for marginal rural zones where “such developments are thought to appeal to a post-modern market seeking ‘unique’ experiences” which arise out of new locally embedded activities and themes (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques & Lima 2012: 207). In rural Australia, Canada, USA and Northern Europe tourism development is one of the most widely used strategies employed by governments for engineering the economic diversification of declining resource-based local economies (Schmallegger & Robinson, 2011).

One of the major issues that plagues the progress of rural tourism policy relates to the nebulous and contested character of rural tourism. The term ‘rural tourism’ has been styled as “a problematic concept” (Saarinen & Lenao, 2014: 365). Although it is not a new concept according to Roberts and Hall (2001: 1) rural tourism is “at best an ambiguous term, and most likely a chimerical concept”. Nevertheless, given its rising importance as a widespread form of tourism activity as well as for academic scholarship (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020; Karali, Das & Roy, 2021; Rosalina, Dupre & Wang, 2021) “it would be logical to assume that there is a commonly accepted definition of rural tourism” (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997: 5). A universal definition of rural tourism “lacks consensus” (Rosalina et al., 2021: 134). Lenao and Saarinen (2015: 204) confirm that there “is no clear agreement for the definition of rural areas or rural tourism”. Indeed, a variety of meanings can be attached to the terminology of rural tourism (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). On occasion, scholarship about rural tourism relies simply “on definitions of what it is not, that is to say, it is not mass tourism and it is not urban tourism” (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020: 3).

The objective in this paper is to augment policy debates about rural tourism in the Global South using the example of South Africa. Specifically, it seeks to contribute towards a rethinking of rural tourism spaces for policy development in South Africa. Our starting point is that rural geographers maintain that ‘rural’ cannot be viewed homogeneously simply as places outside of cities and instead the need is to unpack and differentiate a set of rural tourism spaces (Koster, 2019; Koster & Carson, 2019). The case of South Africa is of particular interest in scholarship about the Global South because it represents a country where encouraging initiatives have been launched by national government to develop appropriate rural tourism policy. The article has two central aims. First, is to illustrate the relevance of a spatially differentiated approach to rural tourism policy by drawing upon best practice international research which identifies (at least) three different categories of rural space. Second, the paper focuses to highlight through two empirical examples the character of rural tourism occurring in what is the most neglected type of rural space, namely what is called “in-between” rural spaces.

Three sections of material are presented. The first provides the existing context and overview of rural tourism policy development in South Africa. The second section turns to conceptual issues around differentiating rural spaces anchored upon an international literature. The third section examines two ‘in-between’ tourism spaces in South Africa, namely Greater Giyani Local Municipality in Limpopo and Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality in Eastern Cape. The paper contributes to the mounting scholarship around tourism and change in the Global South (Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021) as well as towards policy development and debates for rural tourism in South Africa. In terms of methods and sources a range of documentary sources are used to chart and understand rural policy development in South Africa. The discussion of the two local municipalities builds from both documentary material, in the form of local planning documents but most importantly from an analysis of local level tourism data which has been extracted from the IHS Global Insight data base for the period 2002-2020.

## Rural tourism policy development in South Africa

Since democratic transition the issue of promoting rural tourism has been an item of escalating significance on the agenda of South African policy makers. With the new government seeking to redress the legacy of the apartheid past and improve the quality of life of the poor, issues of rural development as a whole came into prominence. In relation to tourism the first statements related to the 1996 *White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa* and *Tourism in GEAR* (Rogerson & Visser, 2004). These documents provided a foundation for new directions in tourism planning that included a commitment that tourism should be used for the greater benefit of rural communities (Viljoen & Tlabela, 2007). The late 1990s emergence of debates on pro-poor tourism and responsible tourism further escalated policy-makers interest and commitments towards the building of tourism in rural areas of South Africa. By the mid-2000s, however, it was evident that only small steps had been taken to shift the balance of rural tourism away from the more prosperous rural regions such as the Western Cape. Viljoen and Tlabela (2007: 20) observed that what is “notable is that although rural tourism initiatives are still in their infancy, there is growing recognition in both the private and public sector that the benefits of tourism should be distributed in a spatially even manner”. These authors also highlighted the overlooking by government of certain types of tourism, most significantly of budget tourism, that “could be beneficial to rural tourism”.

During 2009 the Zuma administration launched the New Growth Path with its ambitious vision of creating five million jobs by 2020 and with a dedicated focus on a new more inclusive, labour-absorbing development path (Department of Economic Development, 2010). The New Growth Path aimed to address the structural ‘problems’ inherent in South Africa’s economy and launch strategies aimed at fighting against poverty, reducing inequality and tackling the challenges of rural development to create decent employment (Rogerson, 2014). The acceleration of rural development was one of the most critical interventions proposed in the New Growth Path as a vehicle to address the structural challenges underpinning both economic and spatial inequalities in the country (Department of Economic Development, 2010). With the introduction of the New Growth Path and a new ministry dedicated to rural development the tourism sector was tasked to create 225 000 jobs by 2020. In a response to a request from The Presidency for strategies linked to rural development the growth of rural tourism became a matter of rising policy concern (Zikalala, 2011).

The 2011 National Tourism Sector Strategy emphasised that the Department of Tourism would focus on ensuring an improved spatial distribution of tourism (Department of Tourism, 2011). Tourism growth in rural areas would be supported for the greater involvement of rural communities and with “a sustained effort in promoting informed investment in the development of rural tourism products that respond to market needs” (Department of Tourism, 2012a: 10). Officials from the Department of Tourism made clear that at this time the core geographical focus for rural tourism initiatives would be around the former Homelands, the most deprived and poverty stricken areas of South Africa (Zikalala, 2011). For addressing the policy gap on rural tourism and in order to use tourism as a stimulus for rural development, the Department developed two policy documents, namely the Rural Tourism Strategy (Department of Tourism, 2012a) and the National Heritage and Cultural Strategy (Department of Tourism, 2012b). Both were issued in 2012 for the enhancement of rural tourism products and opportunities.

Arguably, the Rural Tourism Strategy must be recognised as South Africa’s most advanced policy statement concerning rural tourism. Its vision was the making of a “developed rural tourism economy” with its mission “to enhance the growth and development of tourism in rural communities, particularly in less visited provinces” (Department of Tourism, 2012a: 20). The strategy was aligned to the broad priorities of the New Growth Path concerning decent

work and the stimulation of vibrant, sustainable rural communities. Recognising the definitional problems surrounding rural tourism it was stated that this form of tourism in South Africa “showcases rural life, arts, culture and heritage thereby benefitting local communities and enabling interaction between tourists and locals for a more enriching experience” (Department of Tourism, 2012a: 16). At the same time rural tourism was viewed as multi-faceted and encompassed “agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure and ecotourism” (Department of Tourism, 2012a: 16).

At the outset it was recognised several constraints existed on rural tourism development, including inadequate funding, the limited involvement of rural communities, and that a number of major tourism attractions in rural areas, including World Heritage sites, were not garnering major benefits and contributing towards poverty alleviation. Opportunities for rural tourism were seen as in ‘untapped rural culture and heritage’, ‘unspoilt natural and rural tranquility’, indigenous knowledge systems, agritourism, sport, volunteer and adventure tourism. With greater political will for the support of tourism and rural development, the strategy sought to galvanize “informed investment in the development of rural tourism projects that respond to market needs” (Department of Tourism, 2012a: 10). It acknowledged that for the implementation of support of rural tourism several development needs required attention including training, raising tourism awareness and infrastructure upgrading, the latter singled out as a particular shortcoming. In addition, it pinpointed the critical role of local government “in providing leadership and the necessary planning to make sure that their communities and local businesses get the most out of tourism” (Department of Tourism, 2012a: 33). Overall, the geographical focus for planning would be concentrated on selected rural nodes which were “aligned to the principles of sustainability and responsible tourism” (Department of Tourism, 2012a: 67).

The second policy document that appeared in 2012 impacting rural tourism concerned the interrelated National Strategy on Heritage and Cultural Tourism which served “to guide and provide strategic direction for the development and promotion of heritage and cultural tourism” (Department of Tourism, 2012b: 10). As shown by van der Merwe (2019) the geography of heritage assets in South Africa is uneven and spans both urban and rural areas. This said, the national policy document indicated that “a substantial number of heritage and cultural resources in South Africa, for tourism product development, are located in semi-urban and rural areas” drawing special attention to the rural location of six World Heritage Sites as well as the culture and heritage resources in Transfrontier Conservation Areas (Department of Tourism, 2012b: 12). The aims of the policy were “to unlock the economic potential of heritage and cultural resources” for tourism and “to raise awareness of the ability of heritage and cultural tourism to contribute to social cohesion (Department of Tourism, 2012b: 10). Several challenges were identified for boosting heritage and cultural tourism, namely poor alignment of heritage and cultural resources into mainstream tourism, under-representation in tourism marketing as well as the value of this segment not being maximised often because of uninformed interpretations at tourist sites which compromised the integrity and authenticity of heritage and cultural tourism products.

Another critical barrier issue – common in other parts of the world – was that the heritage sector was concentrated upon heritage protection with “little commitment to socio-economic opportunities resulting from the uses of heritage resources” (Department of Tourism, 2012b: 29). The policy seeks to address these challenges and thereby unlock opportunities for the diversification of this niche segment of the tourism economy including both tangible assets (buildings, cultural objects, declared heritage sites, geological formations) as well as intangible assets such as oral traditions, cultural festivals and indigenous knowledge systems. Among its recommendations the strategy pointed to the imperative for further development of South



Africa's World Heritage Sites as well as maximising the potential of projects such as the Dinosaur Interpretive Centre in Golden Gate Highlands National Park. South Africa's provinces and local governments were recommended to identify and prioritise heritage and cultural products for tourism development (Department of Tourism, 2012a: 13). The spatial targeting of rural areas for tourism development remained a consistent policy theme. In a response given to a question in the National Council of Provinces the Minister of Tourism reiterated in October 2015 that the Department's approach was "to prioritise spatial nodes that have the potential to stimulate growth of the rural sector in the country" (Ministry of Tourism, 2015b).

By 2017 a rethinking of policy towards rural tourism was under way. There was increasing discussion of the need for geographical targeting of rural tourism in so-called "villages, townships and small 'dorpies'" (VTSD). The policy attention to improve lives in VTSD is an imperative that seems to have originated in North West Province as a component of the province's repositioning and renewal strategy linked to radical transformation (North West Province, 2015). The revised National Tourism Sector Strategy took the position that in "an effort to meaningfully increase local benefits, particularly within host communities living in areas where tourism potential exists, effective business and enterprise development is required" (Department of Tourism, 2017: 37). Based upon learning from the experience of both successful and less successful investments involving community partnerships in rural tourism businesses the NTSS suggested the need for "the grooming of a cadre of tourism entrepreneurs amongst neighbouring communities as opposed to the notion of community tourism which in most cases leads to infighting and subsequent abandonment of great tourism infrastructure invested in communities" (Department of Tourism, 2017: 37). The revised NTSS recommended that the Rural Tourism Strategy "be revisited and updated to provide strong direction on implementation of a rural tourism programme taking into consideration these, and other factors" (Department of Tourism, 2017: 37).

During 2019 there was growing disquiet expressed in parliamentary committees about the slow pace of the implementation of the Rural Tourism Strategy (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2019). In addition, there is continual reinforcement of the disappointments about minimal marketing of rural tourism products as compared to game reserves, well-known heritage sites or Vilakazi Street, Soweto. Greater efforts were needed to focus on villages, townships and small dorpies because of the poverty in these peripheral areas. Suggestions were made that the Department of Tourism should partner with the Department of Arts and Culture together to draw up packages on what was offered in VTSD destinations and so 'make a difference' to people's lives there. By 2020 the argument of the need for greater attention to VTSD destinations was made in relation to supporting transformation of the tourism sector (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2020). Concerning the limited implementation of the 2012 Rural Strategy the Department reiterated the position that "municipalities did not see the benefit of tourism in growing their revenue" (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2019: 24). In addition, for the Department of Tourism even to begin work in villages it was necessary that "other departments had to put basic services like water in place" (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2019).

At the close of the pre-COVID-19 era therefore it is apparent that a fluid situation existed in terms of the directions for rural tourism policy and for rural tourism product development in South Africa. Of paramount importance is to recognise that debates on rural tourism development and policy formulation in South Africa are not taking adequate cognisance of the spatially differentiated nature of rural spaces and the varying opportunities as well as challenges of different rural spaces.

### **Differentiating rural tourism spaces**

In a seminal paper Lane (1994: 9) probed the difficulties of defining rural tourism beyond the geographical observation that it represents “tourism which takes place in the countryside”. Among several definitional challenges are the basic lack of agreement as to what constitutes ‘rural areas’ or of ‘rurality’ and that different kinds of rural tourism have emerged and continue to evolve across different regions (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997; Yachin, 2020; Karali et al., 2021). Location remains the most common denominator and is the most widely applied defining characteristic in all reviews undertaken of rural tourism scholarship (Roberts & Hall, 2001; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020; Rosalina et al., 2021). According to Lane (1994) rural tourism should be located in rural areas, be functionally rural and rural in scale in respect of being anchored upon small-scale enterprises, traditional social structures, ways of life, agrarian economies and natural settings. Lenao and Saarinen (2015: 205) reinforce that preferably “rural tourism should also represent the complex pattern of the rural environment, location, history and economy”. Rosalina et al. (2021: 144) characterize rural tourism as a “fluid phenomenon, evolving with time and place characteristics”. In unpacking rural tourism Lane (1994) suggests the merits of applying the concept of a ‘rural-urban continuum’ in order to differentiate those forms of leisure activities which are specifically rural (such as canoeing, climbing or landscape appreciation), an intermediate category of activities which may be rural- or urban-based (cultural festivals, general heritage, camping), and those which are usually specifically urban-based (such as shopping, city sightseeing, urban heritage).

Drawing upon the European experience Lane (1994: 9) observed that the phenomenon of rural tourism “is a complex multi-faceted activity” and “includes farm-based holidays but also comprises special-interest nature holidays and ecotourism, walking, climbing and riding holidays, adventure, sport and health tourism, hunting and angling, educational travel, art and heritage tourism, and in some areas, ethnic tourism”. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (2020) broadly acknowledges rural tourism as “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing”. This said, because rural areas themselves are multi-faceted, rarely self-contained or free from urban influence, it must be conceded that “a working and reasonably universal definition of the subject is difficult to find” (Lane, 1994: 10). Two decades on, a similar conclusion is reached by Kastenholz et al. (2021: 601) that rural tourism is “not consensual in its definition nor homogeneous in its manifestations or market profile”. In a recent contribution Yachin (2021: 320) maintains that rural tourism “especially, is manifested by small enterprises, who deliver tourism experiences that are rooted in local nature and culture”. Rosalina et al. (2021: 144) characterize rural tourism as a “fluid phenomenon, evolving with time and place characteristics”.

Arguably, in moving forward the debates on rural policy and defining rural spaces recent works produced by rural geographers are significant contributions. Koster (2019) maintains that conventionally ‘rural’ is viewed as places outside of cities but that the record of experience is that there are critical differences in the opportunities and challenges that different rural spaces confront and which often go unrecorded in academic literature or taken on board by government policy formulation. It is evident that there is a need – not least for purposes of policy formulation – to differentiate conceptually between three different rural tourism contexts. At the outset Koster and Carson (2019) maintain that an understanding of tourism issues in rural areas requires acknowledgement of their location in relation to key source markets and accessibility. The first group of rural spaces are fringe. These rural spaces are located proximate to major urban centres with well-established road networks and often with air transport links which provide access to large markets, both domestic and international tourists. Weaver (2005) stresses the distinctiveness of these fringe areas as a tourism space.

The supply of potential tourists from large metropolitan centres offers considerable opportunities for rural communities within the fringe to establish attractions and products such as festivals, events, culinary, wine-based attractions or agritourism for urban visitors (Weaver, 2005). One Australian example of a fringe rural tourism area is the Barossa Valley wine region which is close to Adelaide, the major city of South Australia (Thompson & Prideaux, 2019). Beyond the rural-urban fringe a distance-decay effect functions in terms of the reduced access to metropolitan markets and correspondingly for the reduced potential of rural tourism spaces (Weaver, 2005; Ramsey & Malcolm, 2018; Koster & Carson, 2019).

A second category of remote rural spaces are those which have ‘exotic’ or iconic attractions and are by their very nature situated distant from key markets with challenging transport access. Accordingly, visitors must be willing to commit time, effort and expense to reach these rural spaces in order to overcome their locational disadvantage and often this is through purpose-built airport infrastructure. The air transport linkages facilitate both international as well as domestic tourism. Their geography as a remote location differentiates them from other rural spaces (Carson & Carson, 2019). In common with fringe rural spaces the infrastructure of exotic remote locations is often linked to investments from both local and (especially) national governments and with external private sector investment. One observed feature of these exotic remote rural spaces is that sometimes they exhibit the characteristics of enclavic tourism spaces (Saarinen, 2017). As discussed by Saarinen and Wall-Reinius (2019) tourism enclaves can be marked by power issues with material and symbolic separation from surrounding socio-cultural realities which can produce weak linkages with the local economy and host communities. Tourism occurring in remote and exotic destinations beyond the outer edges of populated peripheries has attracted scholarly attention with the best example in the Global North that of Arctic tourism (Saarinen & Varnajot, 2019).

The third category of rural tourism spaces are those which have attracted the least research attention from tourism scholars. These are the ‘in-between’ rural spaces. In the case of Canada Ramsey and Malcolm (2018: 251) draw attention to the neglect of ‘non-remote rural’ areas. Likewise, Carson (2018) argues that ‘non-tourism places’ in rural areas are particularly under-researched. For lack of better terms Carson (2018) styles these as variously ‘non-tourism places’ as ‘boring’ or ‘in-between’ places that are not attractive enough to establish tourism as a self-contained major local sector and “where the legacies of other economic and political priorities or broader population changes inevitably determine the nature and scale of tourism that is possible in those contexts”. Koster and Carson (2019: 253) pinpoint that although case studies of ‘in-between’ rural places have been undertaken their particular characteristics and special circumstances are not explicitly considered. In the case of Peterborough, rural South Australia, however, Carson, Prideaux, Porter and Vuin (2019) show how the unique distinctiveness of an ‘in-between’ destination created a ‘lock-in’ that constrained the town’s tourism’s prospects.

The situation of ‘in-between’ spaces contrasts to those of fringe rural spaces or of remote/exotic rural spaces. Their limited linkages with and distance from major urban core regions, challenges of transport access and often their physical environment introduce a number of constraints on tourism development. Non-remote rural spaces – the in-between spaces – are accessed nearly exclusively by drive tourists and thus look to what is called in North America the “rubber-tire traffic” (Ramsey & Malcolm, 2018: 251). Sometimes these rural spaces are situated ‘on the way’ to other destinations which might be more remote, more iconic and more developed as tourism spaces. In addition, Carson and Koster (2019) view these spaces as sharing distinct characteristics of ‘peripherality’ being disconnected from centres of power and accessible by road networks only. Dependence on road networks alongside the distance-decay effect and issues of accessibility puts in-between places at a competitive disadvantage as

compared to exotic remote destinations which are often accessible by several different forms of transport, most important air access. Koster and Carson (2019) suggest that the relatively low economic and political status of these spaces results in limited prospects of any major infrastructural investments that might enhance their accessibility and market attractiveness.

In the case of Northern Ontario Koster and Main (2019) show how the location in-between spaces far from urban markets and with many intervening opportunities for potential visitors puts a major brake on local tourism prospects. Also based upon research in Canada Ramsey and Malcolm (2018: 251) identify two forms of tourism that occur in these in-between spaces. The first is ‘incidental’ which are tourist stops along the way while travelling to a primary destination, possibly a city or nature reserve. The second are ‘purposeful’ which are to visit tourism attractions in these in between spaces. Often the majority of tourism flows to in-between spaces is of an ‘incidental’ as opposed to a purposeful character. The challenge for tourism development policy is therefore to establish a core of attractions that changes the balance from incidental to purposeful tourism and correspondingly to strengthen the contribution of tourism to the local economy. In documented examples of in-between spaces in the global North local government emerges as a key actor for driving local tourism development and especially to compensate for what is often the lack of higher-level government interest in these rural spaces (Koster & Carson, 2019). For peripheral tourism regions as a whole the institutional environment is viewed as critical (Schmallegger & Robinson, 2011).

### **In-Between rural spaces in South Africa: Two case studies**

The central argument in this analysis is that rural tourism policy development in South Africa would benefit by applying a spatially differentiated approach and, as a starting point, to build upon the concepts of fringe rural spaces, exotic remote rural spaces, and ‘in between’ rural spaces. Existing scholarship on rural tourism in South Africa centres mainly on understanding tourism at either pole of the rurality spectrum. In terms of destinations proximate to the urban fringe there are a number of investigations of the Winelands close to metropolitan Cape Town (Ferreira & Muller, 2013; Ferreira & Hunter, 2017; Ferreira, 2020) and for Gauteng, South Africa’s major metropolitan area, it includes research on tourism in the Magaliesberg region a fringe rural space (Rogerson, 2007; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2009). These studies affirm the importance of location close to metropolitan areas for market opportunities for attracting day and weekend leisure visitors as well as business/conference tourism. In the case of remote or exotic rural spaces among many South African examples would be the Northern Cape and the game reserves of Limpopo, Mpumalanga and Northern KwaZulu-Natal. In these areas with iconic nature tourism assets tourism was a growing element in local economies during the pre-COVID-19 era. Undoubtedly, the least well-documented and understood form of rural tourism space in South Africa is that of ‘in-between’ rural spaces. It is against this backdrop that the following discussion offers an exploration and profile of two cases of in-between rural spaces, namely the Greater Giyani Local Municipality in Limpopo province and the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality in Eastern Cape

#### ***Greater Giyani***

Greater Giyani Municipality is one of five local municipalities that comprise Mopani District Municipality of Limpopo Province. The Greater Giyani municipality is categorised as a Category B4 municipality in terms of the Municipal Structures Act 1998 because it is largely rural with only one semi-urban area being Giyani (Greater Giyani Local Municipality, 2019, 2021a). The settlement of Giyani was founded only during the 1960s apartheid period with its rationale as that of the administrative capital of the Tsonga people (Chekero, 2017). It was the

reception site of forced population removals and the ‘dumping’ of relocated people under apartheid policies (Musehane, 2013). Officially established in 1969 Giyani functioned as the former capital of Gazankulu Bantustan. It was granted the status of an industrial growth point under the apartheid programme for industrial decentralization but failed to attract significant manufacturing investment with the consequence that the town evolved as a service centre for the surrounding regional area. Under apartheid therefore local development planning aligned with the ideology of Homelands development seeking to ensure that local inhabitants should make a living within the area and leave only to be a migrant labourer (van der Waal, 1991). Currently, Giyani is the administrative capital, the largest town and most densely populated settlement in the local municipality. It enjoys “the most employment opportunities as well as the best shopping and recreational facilities” (Mollel & Moyo, 2018: 1). Giyani functions as the commercial heart of the Mopani district but is a poor municipality with most of the local population dependent on social welfare grants as well as remittances received from family members working in other parts of South Africa. During the 2010s decade the recorded unemployment level for the municipality was as much as 47 percent. The economy of the municipality is underpinned by four sectors, namely agriculture, tourism, retail and transport (Greater Giyani Municipality, 2021a: 61). The central goal of the local economic development (LED) strategy of Greater Giyani is to grow the economy through stimulating new employment opportunities and thereby to reduce the high levels of local unemployment. The local Integrated Development Plan asserts as follows: “The striking natural landscape and the major development corridor routes which pass via Giyani and our low crime rate can be a catalyst to serious economic growth” (Greater Giyani Local Municipality, 2021a: 65). This said, core challenges that the Giyani Local Municipality faces include; infrastructure development, lack of business investment attraction and retention strategies, lack of value chain, lack of enforcement of by-laws, budget constraints, lack of municipal property for economic development, distance to the markets. In addition, inadequate and dilapidated infrastructure for water and sanitation are challenges surrounding the poor delivery of basic services and infrastructure development (Greater Giyani Local Municipality, 2019: 62). The 2019/2020 Integrated Development Plan (IDP) noted a number of factors that impact negatively on economic growth in Greater Giyani. These include climatic conditions and diseases (HIV and malaria), shortage of skills, geographical location (distance to markets), poor infrastructure. In addition, the institutional environment for local economic development has been weak. as there is a history of well-documented corrupt practices and maladministration in the local municipality. Greater Giyani was among a list of 87 municipalities classed as “distressed or dysfunctional“ in the 2018 budget vote of the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (2018).

In a recent examination of the prospects for local economic development it was concluded that the sector of agriculture “has the greatest potential for stimulating growth and development in the Municipality” (Mollel & Moyo, 2018: 1). Beyond the central role of agriculture and of agro-processing activities in the local economy there is growing interest in the potential for local tourism. The tourism potential of the area was investigated in the early 2000s by Henkens, Luttk, Tassone, de Groot, Grafakos and Blignaut, (2005) as a joint research study conducted by academics at Wageningen University, The Netherlands and University of Pretoria. The study pointed to the existence of local potential surrounding culture-based tourism including cultural experiences in the villages. In addition, it drew attention to the potential for achieving greater linkages with the Kruger National Park if the existing ranger gate was changed to a tourism gate (Henkens et al., 2005). The potential synergies with Kruger National Park have remained an untapped opportunity for almost 15 years with the prospect that in 2021 the opening of Shangoni gate 40km from Giyani will attract more tourists. (Sadike,

2021). The official municipal IDP views local tourism as enhanced by the area’s striking natural landscape and close proximity to Kruger National Park which puts Greater Giyani “in a good stead to be a tourism destination of choice” (Greater Giyani Municipality, 2021a: 65).

Rural tourism in terms of local culture and heritage has been pinpointed as offering development potential across much of Limpopo (Mafunzwaini & Hugo, 2005). In the municipality’s local economic development strategy issued for 2014-2016 it was stated that “the focus of Greater Giyani should be on cultural tourism with the ‘Shangaan’ brand as marketing tool” (Greater Giyani Municipality, 2014: 35). Notable potential cultural attractions were listed as the Baleni Camp, the Greater Giyani Jewellery Project and a heritage park. Giyani is included on one of the Open Africa route tourism initiatives, the Rixile Route, which includes a focus on cultural heritage attractions. The official municipal website portrays Giyani as in many ways still resembling “a friendly traditional village” with the people of Giyani known for “colourful folklore, which includes two recorded folktales, along with 1900 proverbs” (Greater Giyani Local Municipality, 2021b). Giyani is also viewed as rich in assets of cultural history, with royal families dating as far back as 1822 (Greater Giyani Local Municipality, 2021b). In addition, it is stated that the “municipality has potential for tourism and conservation development due to the existing natural heritage sites through the area (disused mines, abandoned farming schemes and processing of natural products such as Mopani worms and Marula fruit)” (Greater Giyani Municipality, 2019: 63). It is estimated that there are 700 tourist beds distributed amongst 50 bed and breakfast, lodges and a hotel in the municipality of which 70% are in or close proximity to Giyani. The Department of Water and Sanitation has concluded plans to maximize the use of the two dams as potential tourist attraction centres for water sports such as boating and fishing (Greater Giyani Municipality, 2021a: 66).

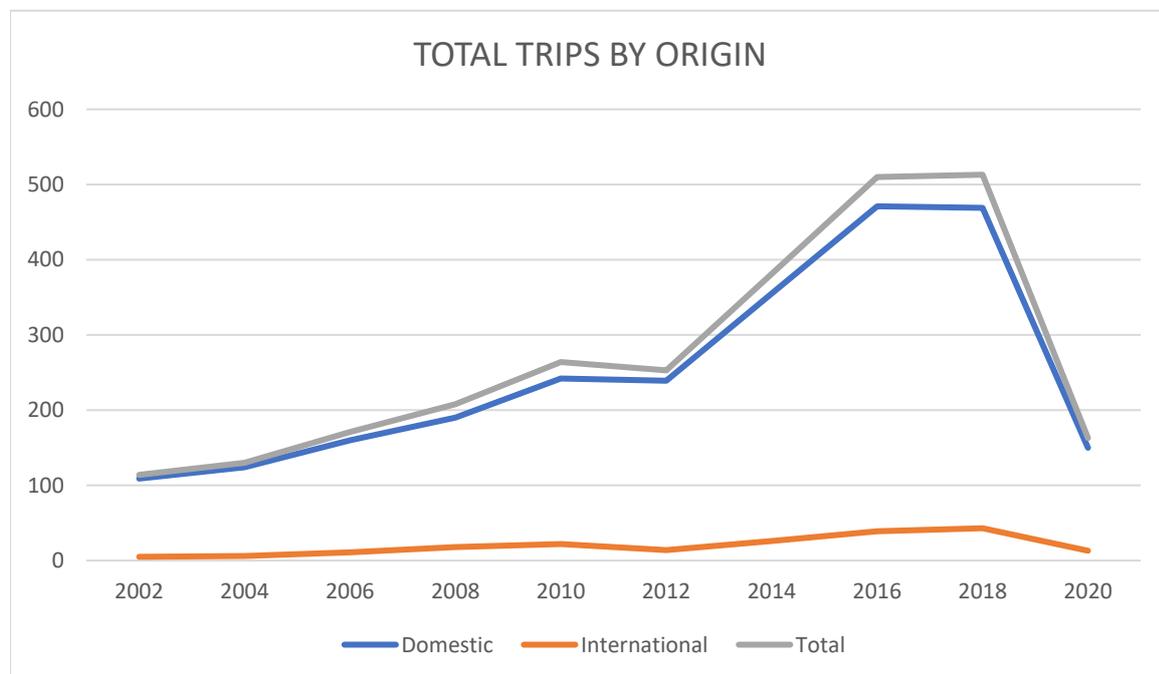


Figure 1: Greater Giyani Municipality: Total Trips by Origin 2002-2020 (Source: Authors based on IHS Global Insight data)

Tourism trends in the local municipality can be tracked using statistics extracted from the IHS Global Insight data base for the period 2002-2020. The key finding that emerges from the

analysis of the IHS Global Insight data is of the limited role of the tourism industry across the municipality. During a period marked by a considerable expansion as a whole of the tourism economy for South Africa the performance of the local tourism sector of Greater Giyani has been weak. Figure 1 shows the pattern of total trips and Figure 2 the breakdown in terms of purpose of travel. Although the number of total tourist trips recorded to Greater Giyani expanded from 114 000 in 2002 to reach a peak of 500 000 by 2018 the key cause of this growth was domestic trips for visiting friends and relatives. In Giyani this is to a large extent a reflection of lack of local employment opportunities which has caused a historical pattern of migrancy to search for work opportunities outside the Municipality. Throughout the period under investigation domestic trips accounted for between 76 and 90 percent of the origin of all tourism trips. The numbers of international trips is less than 20 000 until 2010 with a small upturn with the highest number of international trips recorded for 2018. Although no information is available on the country origins of visitors it is likely that the vast proportion of these international visits were VFR trips from surrounding African states especially Zimbabwe as Giyani is close to the border and has attracted a community of Zimbabweans (Chekero, 2017).

In reviewing the Giyani tourism data the most striking finding is the minimal leisure base for tourism development. Recorded numbers of leisure visitors first exceeded 10 000 in 2010 the year of the hosting of the FIFA World Cup. A small upturn occurred in the period 2014-2018. As the administrative capital for the local area Giyani receives a steady flow of small numbers of business travellers. Across all forms of tourism, the COVID-19 has impacted severely the local tourism economy with downturns recorded most dramatically for domestic trips and for purpose trips for visiting friends and relatives. These trends are shown on Figure 2.

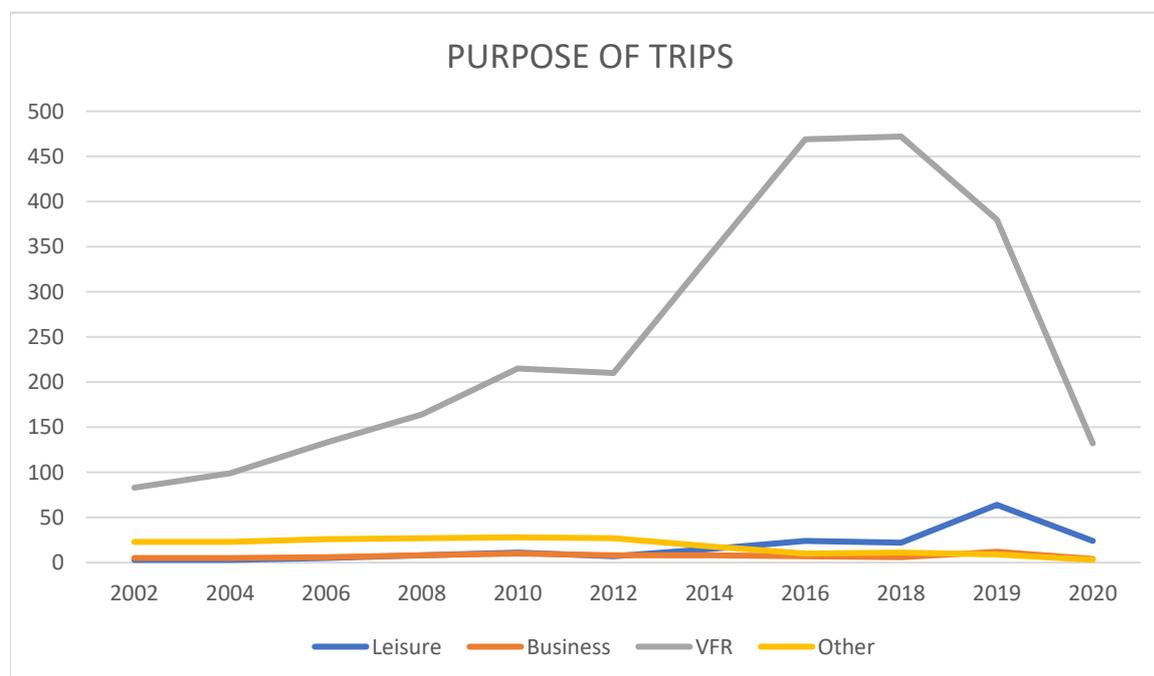


Figure 2: Greater Giyani Municipality: Purpose of Trips 2002-2020 (Source: Authors based on IHS Global Insight data).

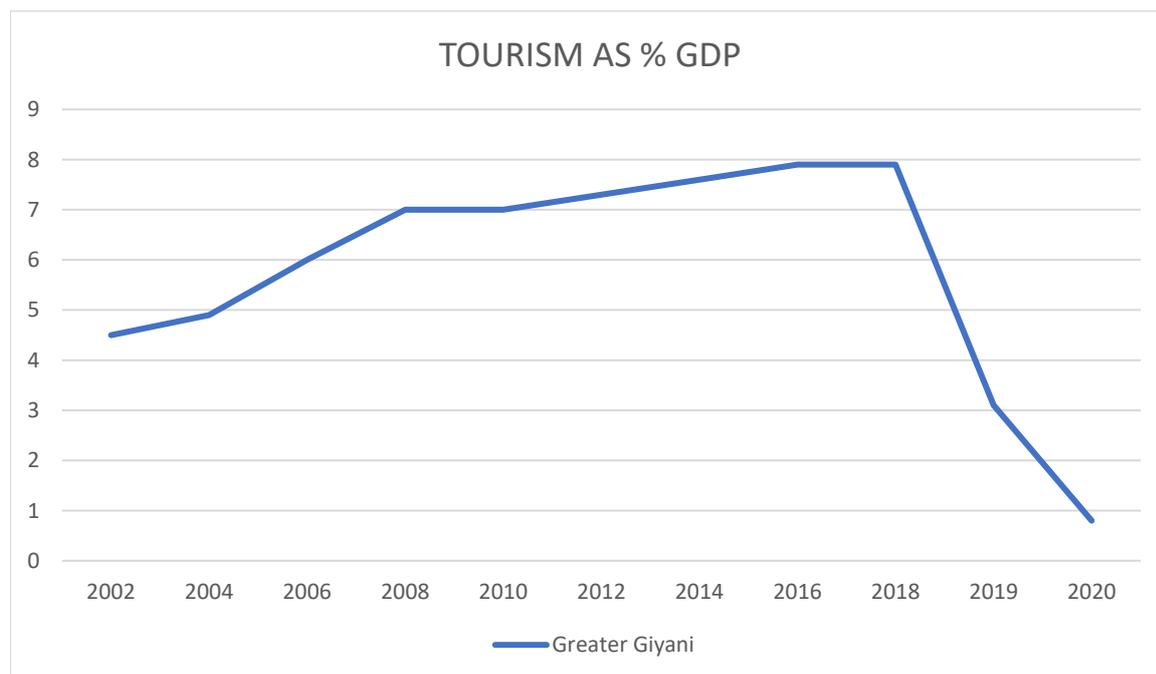


Figure 3: Greater Giyani Municipality: Tourism Contribution to Local GDP 2002-2020 (Source: Authors based on IHS Global Insight data)

The net impact of tourism spend in the Greater Giyani municipality as a proportion of local GDP is revealed on Fig. 3. Accompanying the escalating numbers of VFR trips especially from 2006 the contribution of tourism increased which is perhaps a reflection of the underdevelopment of other sectors and general weakness of the local economy as a whole. By 2016 this had reached over 7.5% of local GDP with a boost in leisure travel which is evident from 2014. The devastation of the pandemic for tourism’s contribution to the local economy is revealed by indicators on Table 1 and most strikingly by the fact that by 2020 tourism contributed an estimated less than 1 percent of local GDP.

Table 1: COVID-19 impact on tourism economy of Greater Gyani Local Municipality

Indicator	2019	2020
Total Trips	466 416	163 433
Leisure Trips	64 697	24 171
Business Trips	12 137	3 760
VFR Trips	380 624	132 264
Other Trips	8 958	3 239
Domestic Trips	425 989	149 987
International Trips	40 427	13 446
Total Tourism Spend (R'000 current prices)	586 214	160 492
Tourism Spend as % Local GDP	3.1	0.8

Source: Authors extracted from IHS Global Insight data

### ***Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality***

Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality is part of the Amathole District Municipality and is a category B municipality in the Eastern Cape and established by the amalgamation of Nkonkobe and Nxuba Local Municipalities on 3 August 2016. It is described as a “countryside municipality that includes the imposing and majestic mountain range of the Winterberg” (Main, 2021). The municipality covers an area of 6 357 square kilometres with the main towns being Adelaide, Alice, Bedford, Fort Beaufort, Hogsback, Middeldrift and Seymour. This small town and rural municipality comprises territory part of which was formerly in the Ciskei Bantustan.

In common with the situation in Greater Giyani the municipality endures an unwelcome reputation for poor governance which has impacted all spheres of service delivery and local economic development (Zegethwa, Thakhathi & Oyelana, 2019). The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (2019) identifies Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality as a distressed and dysfunctional local municipality. According to the Financial and Fiscal Commission (2020: 2) this means at its broadest level that it “is therefore characterised by the failure to deliver expected outcomes and comply with key processes”. The municipality is named also in the 2019-2020 report of the audit outcomes of the State of Local Government produced by the Auditor General of South Africa (2020a). It is listed as a municipality “that disclosed significant doubt in their financial statements as to whether they will be able to continue operations in the near future” (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2020a: 19). This means effectively that the municipality does not have sufficient revenue to cover expenditures and that they owe more money than they have which means reliance on national government equitable share funding to continue operations. In addition, the Auditor-General of South Africa (2020b) points to a catalogue of financial funds mismanagement practices with allocated national funds being handled “in ways that are contrary to the prescripts and recognised accounting disciplines”.

Regarding the physical environment, the landscape and topography is mainly flat except in the northern Hogsback Region which has peaks of 1700-2000m above sea level. Most of Raymond Mhlaba is characterised as an “undisturbed and untouched environment, therefore the biodiversity in the area is very rich” (Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality, 2020: 42). Agriculture is a leading sector in local economic development (Main, 2021). Nevertheless, in the local IDP tourism also is viewed as “one of the key sectors of economic growth” for Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality (Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality, 2020: 39). This is because the locality is “renowned for its rich heritage and history” (Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality, 2020: 39). It is the location for the University of Fort Hare, Lovedale college, the Historical Adelaide Gymnasium High School and Healdtown with a historical mission station. In addition, the municipal area contains several tourism routes. Despite the potential assets for tourism development it is acknowledged that this “rich history and heritage, however, is not yet exploited” (Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality, 2020: 39). The Hogsback area is the most popular leisure tourism focus in the municipality and since 2001 has hosted a winter festival ‘Christmas in July’ as a means to address seasonality issues (Mekuto & Tseane-Gumbi, 2017).

Tourism receives little discussion in academic investigations of the small towns and rural areas of Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality (Xuza, 2005; Ntema, 2021). One exception is research on South Africa’s ‘least visited spaces’ for 2015 which identified the former Nxuba Local Municipality (centred around the towns of Adelaide and Bedford) as one of the ‘non-tourism’ spaces in the country. It was among the lowest ranked 30 municipalities in relation to a series of indicators concerning total tourism spend, total tourism trips and total bednights. (Rogerson, 2017). A profile of local tourism development for the period 2006-2020 can be charted from an analysis of data extracted which is from the IHS Global Insight data base; for the period 2006-2016 the data for the former Nxuba and Nkonkobe local municipalities is combined. The analysis reveals a tourism economy that manifests an overall steady decline since 2010. As is shown on Figure 4 the local tourism economy is overwhelmingly dominated by domestic tourists and, with the exception of the upturn in trips recorded for 2019, the tourism sector shows a constant decline in visitor trips. International tourism is almost non-existent in the area which records only an average of 5000 trips on an annual basis throughout the period 2006-2020.

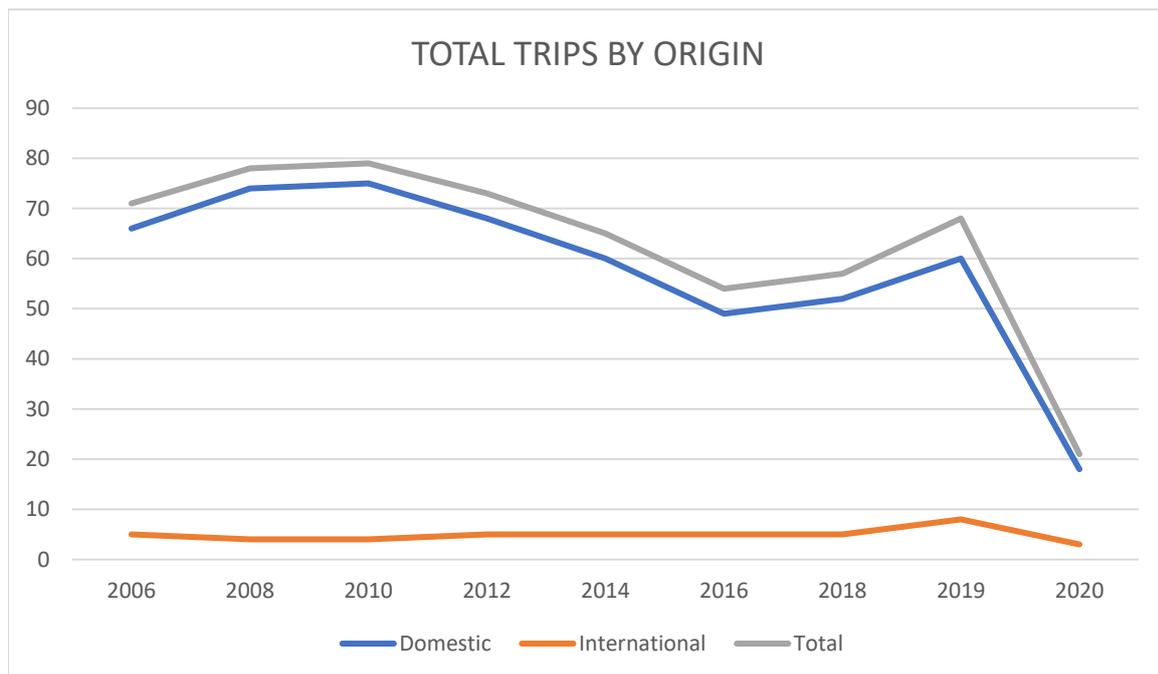


Figure 4: Raymond Mhlaba Municipality: Total Trips by Origin 2006-2020 (Source: Authors based on IHS Global Insight data).

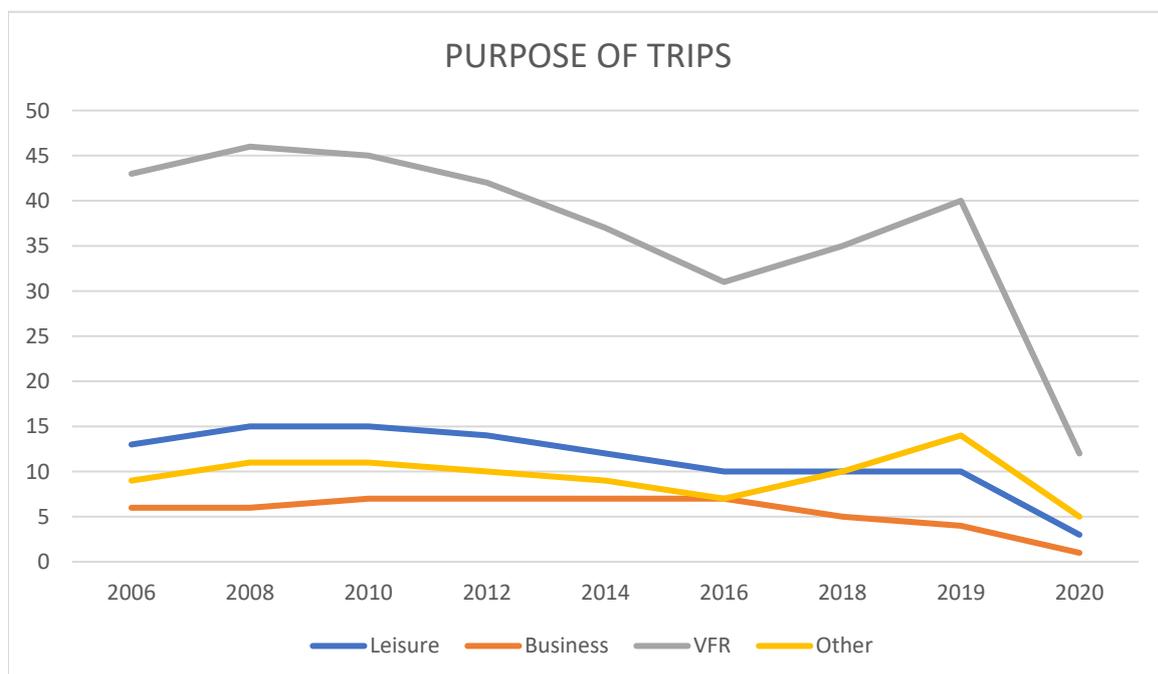


Figure 5: Raymond Mhlaba Municipality: Purpose of Trips 2006-2020 (Source: Authors based on IHS Global Insight data).

Figure 5 demonstrates that within the category of domestic tourism the greatest share of trips is accounted for by visits from friends and relatives. This is a consequence of migration histories which is typical of former Homeland rural areas with a high proportion of split or geographically stretched households. The sector of leisure travel has only limited representation in the local municipality and exhibits a trend of stagnation and decline during the pre-COVID-19 period. Business travel is of minimal significance and in the period 2016 to

2019 the category of ‘other’ travel, mainly accounted for by trips for religious or health, exceeds even the numbers of trips for either business and leisure travel.

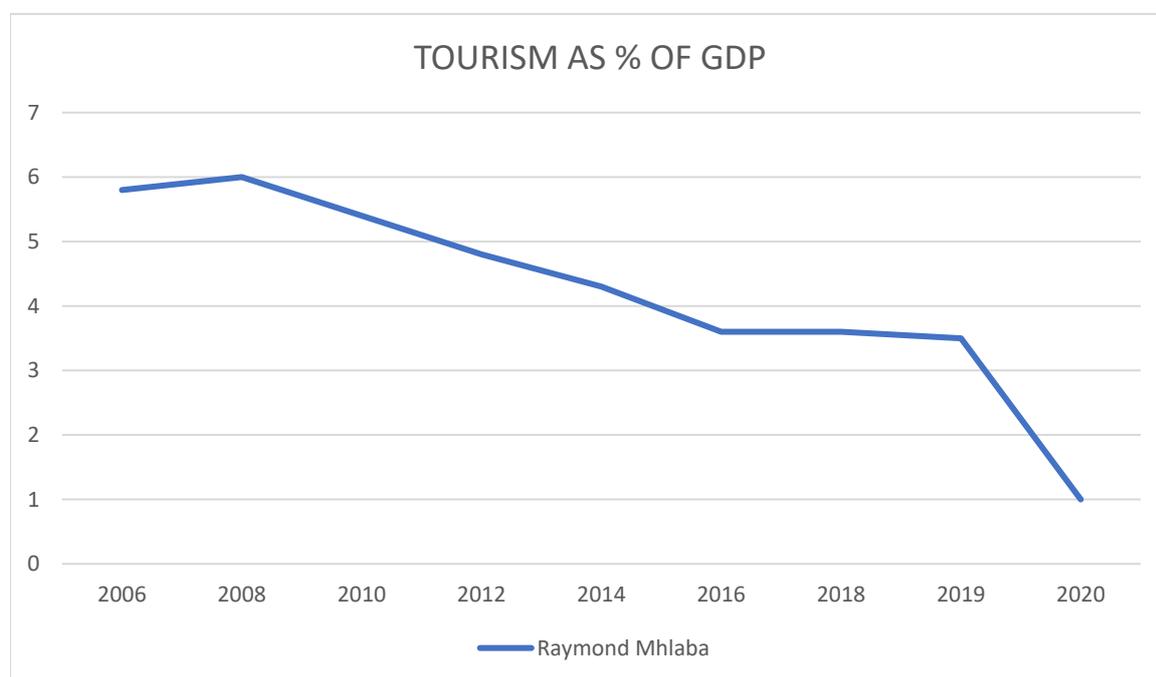


Figure 6: Raymond Mhlaba Municipality: Tourism Contribution to Local GDP 2006-2020 (Source: Authors based on IHS Global Insight data).

The emasculated state of the tourism sector is demonstrated most clearly in the data concerning tourism spend as a proportion of local GDP. This is shown on Figure 6 and points to a constant decline in the contribution of tourism to local economic development in the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality. For this rural municipality with its basket of heritage and natural assets for tourism development, the performance of tourism is unpromising as a potential sector for employment creation and poverty alleviation.

Table 2: COVID-19 impact on tourism economy of Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality

Indicator	2019	2020
Total Trips	68 430	20 452
Leisure Trips	9 592	2 640
Business Trips	4 404	1 058
VFR Trips	40 256	11 693
Other Trips	14 178	5 062
Domestic Trips	60 470	17 800
International Trips	7 960	2 652
Total Tourism Spend (R'000 current prices)	232 837	65 398
Tourism Spend as % Local GDP	3.5	1.0

Source: Authors extracted from IHS Global Insight data

Table 2 summarises the ramifications of COVID-19 for local tourism. Its negative effects are shown in total trips decline from 68 000 to 20 000, leisure trips down from 9500 to 2600 and net contribution of tourism to the local economy diminished from 3.5 per cent to 1 per cent. Arguably, whilst Raymond Mhlaba does not fall into the group of tourism-dependent local economies (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021), these negative COVID-19 impacts on the tourism economy are concerning as they are locally impactful.

## Conclusion

Rural tourism is galvanising a growing international scholarship (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020; Karali et al., 2021; Rosalina et al., 2021). This paper has made essentially two contributions to debates about tourism and change in the Global South and to policy development for rural tourism in South Africa. First, the paper underscores the geographical variations in relation to the character and challenges facing rural tourism in the Global South. It explores the neglected and overlooked category of ‘in-between’ rural spaces. From the South African cases it is revealed that these areas have minimal leisure tourism bases and a tourism economy which is anchored upon visits from friends and relatives, a pattern which signals their local history of out-migration. In addition, it shows the unpromising state of local government as a driver for local tourism, a situation that should be read in the context of the Global North experiences of ‘in-between’ rural spaces that require critical developmental interventions by local government.

The second contribution of this paper is of pointing to the considerable value of incorporating a spatially differentiated approach within South African rural policy and strategies. The analysis points to the utility of differentiating between the groups of (1) fringe rural spaces with market opportunities originating in close by metropolitan areas; (2) remote or exotic rural spaces with iconic tourism assets; and, (3) the ‘in-between’ rural spaces which this paper has sought to shine light upon their developmental issues. Arguably, a greater research focus is merited upon understanding the development trajectory and challenges of these ‘in-between’ rural spaces in South Africa most especially with mounting discussions about the targeting of rural tourism in South African “villages, townships and small ‘dorpies’”. With the COVID-19 impacts in these neglected rural spaces the findings underscore the imperative for stimulating a recovery in tourism into these areas for promoting local economic development. As final comment they point to the imperative for rethinking a policy framework for rural tourism revival which is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy and instead acknowledges the nuances and challenges of markedly *different* kinds of rural tourism spaces.

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