

Rural Tourism in South Africa: A Local Economic Development Strategy

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Abstract: This study aims to assess the potential of rural tourism as a strategy for local economic development in three rural villages in the Thulamela Local Municipality, which falls under the Vhembe District Municipality in the Limpopo province of South Africa. Rural tourism is considered a promising industry for rural development and a popular approach to local economic growth. Sustainable rural tourism is recognised as a crucial component of rural development and is particularly important in developing nations, such as South Africa, where substantial rural populations and limited economic activity exist. The study utilised a qualitative research approach, drawing on an exploratory design and interpretive paradigm. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select participants. Focus group discussions were conducted with the participants, and content analysis was used to analyse the collected data. The study indicates that rural tourism could effectively promote local economic growth in the three rural villages by providing residents with employment opportunities, thereby reducing poverty rates in rural areas. However, challenges remain, including the lack of funding to support small tourism businesses and the need for

human capital development in local communities. The study recommends a gradual approach to knowledge and skills development within local communities to support the business aspects of rural tourism development, as well as the provision of funding assistance.

Keywords: Rural tourism, local economic development, community empowerment, sustainable rural tourism, tourism destinations.

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the key industries that can improve and maintain living standards in rural areas. According to Leu (2019), rural communities can generate additional revenue through tourism activities, leading to an improved quality of life. Small tourism businesses that offer unique qualities and added value for their goods and services can support the development of rural areas and enhance their quality of life (Alrawadieh & Alrawadieh, 2018). Local Economic Development (LED) can be undertaken to enhance economic growth and development by exploring and exploiting the potential of various places. The local government plays a role in increasing community welfare by exploring and utilising the existing potential in the region through LED, which is especially important in rural areas dominated by agricultural activities.

The local government and community organisations participate in this process to encourage, stimulate, and maintain business activity and generate jobs (Blakely & Bradshaw, 2002). Given the current global tendencies towards decentralisation and the transformation of governmental systems, LED is frequently advocated as a crucial solution to promote job development and combat poverty (Richards & Hall, 2000). The community is offered the opportunity to participate and take the initiative in identifying and utilising local resources, both natural and human, to build the economic chain.

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Reviving conventional ideas and viewpoints about rural tourism can give the concept of sustainable development a new perspective (Aref & Gill, 2010). By establishing a connection between rural communities and their cultural, historical, ethnic, and geographical roots, rural places have a unique opportunity to attract tourists. Rural tourism can be developed locally with the help of small and medium-sized businesses, even without direct ties to them. However, the value of rural tourism for rural development is assessed not only financially but also in terms of the new jobs it generates, providing a much-needed boost to previously weak economies. Well-developed and targeted rural tourism has the potential to end social isolation, create a new source of income and employment, and play a significant role in the nation's economic recovery. Rural areas can attract people by creating work opportunities, a thriving economy, monetary equality, cultural exchanges, and international relations (Egbali et al., 2010). Furthermore, it has a multiplier effect and provides the neighbourhood with a wide range of advantages, such as the creation of new jobs and a decrease in unemployment (Hadiwijoyo, 2012). However, in some rural areas with potential, rural tourism does not contribute to local economic development, raising the question of why it is not prioritised. Therefore, this study of the nexus between rural tourism and local economic development in Thulamela, a local municipality in Limpopo province, South Africa, sought to examine these challenges.

1.1 Research questions

This study aimed to assess the potential of rural tourism as a strategy for promoting local economic development in three rural villages located in the Thulamela Local Municipality, which falls under the Vhembe District Municipality in the Limpopo province of South Africa. Consequently, the study formulated the following research questions to guide its investigation:

- How do financial and infrastructural challenges impact rural tourism development and local economic growth?
- How do skills development and knowledge affect the success and participation of small business owners in the rural tourism sector?
- What strategies can be implemented to enhance rural tourism and contribute to local economic development in rural areas?

2. Theoretical framework

The study is based on endogenous and neo-endogenous development theories by Wojtasiewicz (1996). According to this theory, the foundation of endogenous development is the utilisation of local resources and the potential to build local and regional capital within a specific spatial system. It is a comprehensive bottom-up approach to local development. Mieczysław (2020) states that endogenous development encompasses various elements such as material, environmental, financial, economic, human, and cultural resources. The degree of social capital, including the activity of leaders, elites, and institutions within the local society, is a crucial component of development.

The idea of endogenous development emphasises the interdependence of small towns, rural areas, and economic hubs. Over the last thirty years of the twentieth century, endogenous factors have increasingly influenced local development (Martin et al., 2022). However, the development of endogenous potential has often been hindered by a lack of funding, which limits access to new ideas (Mieczysław, 2020). Without the introduction of external, exogenous development factors, local systems cannot fully utilise their resources. The concept of "endogenous development" acknowledges the significance of external variables in maximising the potential of endogenous resources. It is flexible enough to welcome ideas from external sources, relying on collaboration with other parties facilitated by outside funding (Mieczysław, 2020).

The theories are particularly relevant to the rural and local economic development issues discussed in this study. The study emphasises their relevance to rural and local economic development. These theories highlight the pivotal role of utilizing local resources in building strong regional economies.

A central focus of the research is the critical aspect of funding for local economic development, whether sourced locally or internationally. The investigation aims to unravel the complex dynamics between funding sources and their impact on fostering sustainable growth at the grassroots level. By exploring the intersection of these theories with funding considerations, the study seeks to contribute insights that can inform effective strategies for nurturing resilient and thriving local economies.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Local economic development defined

Although LED is not universally defined (Rogerson, 2014; Hristova & Tast, 2015; Rogerson & Nel, 2016), certain characteristics are common to all of them. LED is defined by Zaijjer and Sara (1993, p. 129) as "a process in which local stakeholders and government work together to plan, combine resources, and engage other appropriate partners (such as the private sector) to boost economic activity and create jobs". Hristova and Tast (2015, p. 385) made a similar argument, stating that "Local Economic Development is an effort by local authorities to develop an economy and reduce unemployment by collaborating with the public sector, the business community, and non-governmental organisations". Its goal is to stimulate investments and promote sustained high growth in local communities. Rogerson (2014, p. 204) describes LED as "a local economic planning strategy aimed at optimising local opportunities while protecting itself from global and national forces".

There seems to be a consensus worldwide about Africa's unique role in development and LED policy interventions (Reddy & Wallis, 2012). In Africa, policies developed for other parts of the world often fail to consider the continent's diversity (Reddy & Wallis, 2012). Rodrigue-Pose and Tjimstra (2007) agree with these findings and argue that LED success in Africa is elusive despite South Africa's relatively successful LED program (Rogerson & Nel, 2016; Rogerson, 2019). South Africa's LED planning underwent significant changes after apartheid ended (Rogerson, 2014). LED became mandatory in large metropolitan areas and quickly spread to smaller cities and towns (Rogerson & Nel, 2016). Although numerous policy initiatives and resources have been dedicated to implementing LED programs (Rogerson, 2014), it further deepened urban and rural development disparity. Urban areas experienced faster development, while rural areas struggled to catch up due to the uneven terrain inherited from apartheid (Rogerson, 2014; Rogerson & Nel, 2016). The redefinition of the role of local authorities in South Africa has also garnered international attention, as Ruhanen (2013) indicated. According to Ruhanen (2013), local authorities are now responsible for a broader range of developmental tasks, such as planning and implementing development projects.

LED practice faces several difficulties, from local to national levels of analysis. Researchers have expressed concerns about the use of LED (Ntonzima & Binza, 2011; Hristova & Tast, 2015; Rogerson & Nel, 2016). Ntonzima and Binza (2011) highlight the lack of cooperation and integration among stakeholders as a major concern, stating that the vested interests of various government ministries, financing organisations, and foreign contributors limit the impact of LED initiatives and lead to duplication of effort. They also argue that the roles of federal and local governments need to be clarified to ensure the successful and efficient implementation of LEDs. Additionally, they emphasise the lack of reliable data that local governments can use to inform their decision-making processes regarding LED. Considering that most South African local governments face obstacles in fulfilling their development mandates, such as institutional weaknesses and a lack of resources and expertise, Ruhanen (2013) suggests that expanding the role of local governments in sustainable development is necessary. Distressed municipalities in South Africa encounter obstacles such as institutional weaknesses, capacity issues, a lack of staff for economic growth, and a lack of data for planning and decision-making (Nel & Rogerson, 2016).

The literature review reveals a gap in understanding LED due to varied definitions, emphasizing collaboration for economic growth. Challenges specific to Africa, notably South Africa, include

persistent urban-rural development disparities and the changing role of local authorities. The hurdles in LED implementation, such as stakeholder cooperation issues, institutional weaknesses, and data deficiencies, indicate a crucial gap in effective strategies. This highlights the need to clarify roles, strengthen local government capacity, and adopt nuanced approaches for sustainable LED practices in South Africa, thereby pointing to a significant gap in the current understanding and implementation of LED in the region.

3.2. Rural tourism

Rural development is a key approach to promoting endogenous socioeconomic growth. It aims to improve the socioeconomic conditions of individuals and enhance their quality of life, allowing them to develop personal and social skills (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). Rural tourism is seen as an important aspect of rural development (Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011). Paresishvili et al. (2017) highlight that rural tourism involves two key groups of people: the local residents (hosts) and the visitors (guests). Rural tourism is increasingly recognised as a viable solution to enhance economic sustainability in marginalised areas and contribute to social regeneration and improved quality of life for rural communities (Munien et al., 2018).

Tourism serves as a powerful tool for small businesses, job creation, and improving the standard of living in developing nations like South Africa (Ezeuduji, 2015a; Ezeuduji, 2017; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Strydom et al., 2018). By actively participating in the development and management of tourism within their communities, these communities have the opportunity to benefit from extraordinary opportunities (Strydom et al., 2018, p. 7; Ezeuduji, 2017). Research is crucial in assessing the potential resources and skills for such opportunities (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Sanagustin-Fons et al., 2018; Temelkov & Gulev, 2019; Zhou, 2018).

Nsukwini and Bob (2016) emphasise the importance of identifying the resources in rural areas that attract visitors and encourage them to spend money on activities and experiences related to the rural lifestyle. Zhou (2018) notes that rural tourism can encompass a range of activities often centred around cultural and natural resources. The success of rural tourism largely relies on the unique natural and cultural resources of each region, with people being the main driving force (Sanagustin-Fons et al., 2018). Promoting the necessary skills and knowledge for rural development is crucial in establishing rural tourism as a successful business endeavour (Ezeuduji, 2015b). The ability of community members to participate in conservation programs and tourism activities is influenced by enabling factors, such as knowledge and competence, awareness, access to information, and financial support (Sanagustin-Fons et al., 2018). When tourism encourages social, cultural, environmental, and economic changes, and when tourist activities maintain a close relationship with local communities, the local community recognises the importance of tourism (Richards & Hall, 2000). The relationship between community involvement, the expansion of rural tourism, support for multifunctional agriculture, and the well-being of locals are interconnected. If rural residents observe a noticeable improvement in their quality of life, they are more inclined to support the development of tourism (Petrović et al., 2017).

Binns and Nel (2001) noted that tourism is one of the factors influencing the global economy. In South Africa, tourism is a crucial industry for economic development (Rogerson, 2013a). One of the main strengths of tourism is its ability to connect with other economic sectors. Therefore, local economic development strategies should include tourism (Meyer & Meyer, 2015). By maximising the ties between tourism and industries such as retail, agriculture, transportation, and construction, the local multiplier impact can be strengthened, leading to stronger economic growth and employment prospects. Rural tourism can also catalyse new commercial ventures, partnerships, and networks that supplement established ventures like agriculture (Zhou, 2018). To fully utilise and promote the existing tourism assets, it is important to recognise that tourism contributes to employment, income, and overall economic growth (Martins et al., 2017; Meyer & Meyer, 2015). In South Africa, tourism

has been used as a strategy for rural development, with the belief that it can lead to robust local economic development (Binns & Nel, 2001; Rogerson, 2013a). Kgote and Kotze (2013) acknowledge that tourism is a global instrument for promoting economic growth by generating jobs and fostering development, particularly in regions with abundant tourist attractions.

South Africa is recognised as a nation with a wealth of tourist resources (Tshipala et al., 2014). Kumar (2019) argues that rural tourism is vital in relieving stress, especially for city dwellers. Paresishvili, Kvaratskhelia, and Mirzaeva (2017) argue that rural tourism utilises natural, cultural, historical, and other resources, as well as the peculiarities of rural settlements, to develop tourism products. Lane and Kastenholz (2015) state that rural tourism contributes to the socioeconomic development of rural settlements by providing jobs in the service sector and keeping residents in the area. Major cultural attractions are also key to boosting revenue in rural tourism (Rahmani et al., 2013). The growth of rural tourism can serve as a catalyst for rural conversion and the creation of small businesses, resulting in an inflow of funds and liquidity for societies (Kumar, 2019). Tourism has been rapidly growing recently (Martins et al., 2017) due to its seamless integration with other sectors through forward and backward linkages (Meyer & Meyer, 2015). According to Spencer and Zembani (2011), the public sector should take the lead in developing the tourist industry. These authors also emphasised that the private sector dominates sport, recreation, and tourism in South Africa. Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate tourism development into local economic planning whenever possible. According to Spencer and Zembani (2011), public-private partnerships are necessary to fully realise the potential of the tourism industry, and it is the government's responsibility to foster the conditions for these partnerships. Thus, it is preferable to include tourism in local economic development strategies as it can generate income, taxes, hard currency, and jobs. However, it can also have detrimental social effects, such as pollution and the erosion of culture. Therefore, it is important to consider more sustainable approaches to tourism planning, administration, and development, given the potential drawbacks.

One surprising finding concerning tourism is that areas with tourism developments sometimes experience poverty, as is the case in the Nandoni area in the Limpopo province, where a dam is used for tourist activities (Manavhela & Spencer, 2012). Despite this finding, both developing and industrialised nations have utilised tourism as a development strategy. It has also been employed in poverty-reduction efforts in countries including South Africa, Botswana, and Mozambique (Giampiccoli & Mtapur, 2022; Rogerson, 2013b). Tourism, when used as a tool for community development, has been incorporated into national development plans, such as local economic development plans in South Africa. The government, especially the local government, is considered a catalyst for the growth of local economies through tourism, not only in South Africa. Based on a case study in the Philippines, Milos and Bulilan (2021) observed that local government units should perform both political and entrepreneurial tasks in tourism development. They also emphasised the vital role of government participation in ensuring that tourism benefits the local population. The case study exemplifies the integration of governance, coordination, and tourism-related industries by local government. This perspective supports the earlier assertion by Patton (1985) that tourism can be used to strengthen local economies by generating spending income and utilising local resources.

Rural tourism has the potential to enhance the local economic development of rural areas by utilising their available resources. The reviewed literature emphasises the power of tourism in promoting small businesses, creating jobs, and improving the standard of living in developing countries. However, certain rural areas with untapped tourism potential struggle to grow their local economy. Recognising the importance of tourism in terms of employment, income, and overall economic growth, it has been employed as a strategy for rural development in South Africa.

3. Study Area

Thulamela local municipality is located at the eastern tip of the Vhembe district municipality in Limpopo province, South Africa. It is situated at approximately 22° 45' 24.24" south and 30° 35' 53.36" east longitude (see Figure 1 below). Thulamela is home to approximately 47.7% of the Vhembe district's population, with 54.9% females and 45.1% males. The majority of the population in Thulamela consists of Venda and Tsonga communities (Statistics South Africa, 2021).

Thulamela is categorised as a 'category B' local municipality due to its small towns, communal land tenure, and village system. Around 90% of the population resides in tribal or rural areas, living in scattered dwelling groups that are typical of the former 'homelands' (Statistics South Africa, 2022). The municipality is known for its abundant natural resources, including sacred lakes, sacred caves, tea estates, a national park, wildlife, tropical farms, waterfalls, and lush forests. These natural attractions contribute to making Thulamela a popular tourist destination (Thulamela Municipality, 2021/2022). The presence of lakes, waterfalls, and parks has greatly boosted tourism activities in the area, making Thulamela municipality and its residents a top choice for visitors in the Vhembe district municipality.



Figure 1: Map of Thulamela local municipality (Municipalities of South Africa, 2024)

4. Research Design and Methods

In pursuit of its research goal, which places a significant emphasis on exploratory and interpretative research, this study investigates the potential of rural tourism as a driver for local economic development in three rural villages within the Thulamela Local Municipality, situated in the Vhembe District Municipality of South Africa's Limpopo province. The utilisation of a qualitative research approach aligns with the study's objectives, as it allows for a comprehensive exploration (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010) of the complexities surrounding rural tourism, financial and infrastructural challenges, and the role of skills development and knowledge in the success of small businesses in this sector. The interpretive paradigm becomes particularly relevant in capturing the subjective experiences and perspectives of the stakeholders involved (Thanh & Thanh, 2015), providing a deeper understanding of the multifaceted dynamics at play. Within the qualitative framework, the exploratory design enables an in-depth investigation (Mason et al., 2010) into the strategies that can enhance rural tourism and contribute significantly to local economic development in rural areas.

The study employed a purposive sampling approach, which is a non-probability sampling technique. Focus groups were used as a method of data collection, with twelve (12) participants selected. This number aligns with Maree's (2016) recommendation that focus groups should consist of between five (5) and twelve (12) participants due to the challenges of moderating larger groups. Johnson and Christensen (2004) also suggest that focus groups typically contain between 6 and 12 individuals, while Langford et al. (2002) and Ochieng et al. (2018) recommend a range of 6 to 10 participants. Manju and Gundumogula (2020) also recommend between 6 and 9 focus group members. All of these authors support Maree's (2016) view that groups with more than 12 participants limit each person's opportunity to share insights and observations.

The focus group participants were selected from three villages (Tshifudi, Tshikonelo, and Malamulele) in the Thulamela local municipality under the Vhembe District Municipality. These villages were chosen due to an increase in tourism activities in the area. The participants were tourism small business owners, specifically from twelve (12) lodges and recreational parks in these villages. The inclusion criteria required that the businesses had been operational for a minimum of 6 years. Out of a sample of twenty tourism small businesses, only twelve met this criterion. Once consent was obtained from the participants, the information gathered during the focus group discussions was recorded on audiotape, and verbatim transcripts were created for data analysis. The verbatim transcripts were manually analysed using the content analysis approach, considering the manageable amount of information, and coding was used to generate themes from the study data.

In terms of ethical guidelines, all participants in the study completed an informed consent form, ensuring that they were fully aware of their decision to participate. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were carefully maintained, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The researchers also assured that anonymity would be maintained when disseminating and publishing the research findings.

5. Presentation of Results and Discussion

Data collection was conducted through focus group discussions with small business owners in the tourism industry. Their responses and excerpts have been labelled as [TSBO]. This section presents the findings and discusses the three themes that emerged from the focus groups: rural tourism resources, tourism knowledge and capabilities, and rural tourism strategies. The discussion is supported by verbatim statements from the focus group data collection process.

5.1 Theme 1: Rural tourism resources

This section presents the results of the study on the availability and lack of rural tourism resources in the villages of the study area. These results are connected to the first research question, which examines how financial and infrastructural challenges impact rural tourism development and local economic development. The participants were asked about the tourism attributes in the study area and what they believed could attract tourists, as well as the challenges they faced in this regard. Tourism small business owners identified the natural and cultural attributes that could serve as the foundation for tourism development. These included natural and cultural resources such as Domba, Tshikona, Tshigombela, Muchongolo, Makhwaya, and Xitzaitzai, which they considered to be very important tools for entertaining and attracting tourists to their area. The participants emphasised the significance of preserving and enhancing these resources, as they form the basis of their tourist attractions. In addition, the participants mentioned some resources that were lacking and posed barriers to rural tourism. They identified financial resources and physical resources, such as infrastructure, as the main challenges limiting local economic development in their areas. This aligns with Komppula's (2014) claim that it is important to recognise the obstacles to rural tourism when a community organises itself for tourist activities. This understanding can contribute to the effective development of tourist policies for individuals, communities, and organisations (Komppula, 2014).

Small business owners in the tourism industry reported difficulties accessing funds intended to support their expansion and maintenance operations. They explained that the area had a high unemployment rate and stated that with financial support, they could potentially increase the number of jobs available and employ more members of the community. Some of their responses are highlighted below:

(TSBO1) Most people in our communities are not working due to lack of employment owing to the rurality of our area. However, if we can get financial support from our government, it can help us grow our businesses and create employment for our people. This will help them to put food on the table for their families.

(TSBO10) It is a struggle to get financial support from our business to fund the operations of our businesses. Governments do not provide financial assistance, particularly to start-up businesses, because they also require guarantees that we are not able to provide as a security for the funding. There is also a lot of red tape in the funding application process. Many of us here raised our own capital to start our businesses and many times, application of bank loans is not successful because we get to be seen as risky lenders.

(TSBO4) Currently, we are challenged with a lack of marketing for our businesses. We are only relying on social media and word of mouth but if we can get financial assistance, we can have websites that will give us more exposure, and this will result in more visitors. The more visitors we have, the more money we shall have and the more employment opportunities we can create for members of our communities.

The findings indicate that financial resources can significantly promote local economic growth in these areas and increase employment opportunities. This suggests that funding could assist these companies in expanding and becoming self-sustaining, which may result in the creation of more job prospects. These findings support the assertion made by Radović et al. (2020) that a lack of financial resources is a significant barrier to the growth of sustainable rural tourism. Khodadadi (2016) further confirms these findings by emphasising the need for long-term financial and technical support for tourism to serve as a viable strategy for regional economic growth and rural development. Munien et al. (2018: 65) also support these claims by stating that rural tourism is increasingly being recognised as a viable solution to enhance the economic sustainability of marginalised areas, as well as to promote social regeneration and improve the quality of life for rural communities. In developing nations like South Africa, tourism serves as a powerful tool for small businesses, job creation, and improving the standard of living in local communities (Ezeuduji, 2015a; Ezeuduji, 2017; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Strydom et al., 2018). However, challenges such as the lack of physical resources, including accessible roads and lodging options, persist in many rural areas. Jovanovic and Ivana (2016) assert that various services are essential infrastructure requirements for the tourism industry to operate effectively and enhance visitor satisfaction. The tourism small business owners in these three villages expressed dissatisfaction with the poor accessibility and condition of the roads, as reflected in their narratives below:

(TSBO2) We lack access to basic infrastructure; for instance, our roads consist predominantly of gravel exiting the main tarred road entering our villages; they often deteriorate rapidly, especially in the summer season when it rains, and this is the period when our businesses receive more visitors. This disrupts transport services and access to our businesses.

(TSBO7) Our roads are very bad, even the main ones that are tarred, they have lots of potholes and are never maintained.

(TSBO12) In terms of physical resources, I can say that our area is not easily accessible due to the poor quality of roads, most of our guests are complaining about the state of our roads which have many potholes that threaten the safety of the cars of our guests and pose a

potential accident risk as well. We have been complaining about the state of our road to our councillors and our municipality with no help.

According to the information provided, it is necessary to prioritise infrastructure development in the research area to support local economic growth in rural tourism. The accessibility of a place for tourists can be enhanced through road infrastructure. The growth of the tourism industry is closely linked to and dependent on the development of the available infrastructure (Dalimunthe et al., 2020). Improving existing infrastructure and infrastructure systems can contribute to the growth of the tourism industry.

The challenges mentioned above, supported by the literature review, also align with the theory utilised in this study. The endogenous and exogenous development theory emphasises the importance of building local and regional capital within a specific spatial system by utilising local resources and endogenous potential. This theory represents a comprehensive, bottom-up approach to local development. According to Mieczyslaw (2020), endogenous development encompasses various aspects such as material, environmental, financial, economic, human, and cultural resources. Participants in the study expressed their concerns regarding a lack of funding and essential resources necessary for local economic development. The theory also suggests that a lack of funding hinders local development, particularly in rural areas (Martin et al., 2022).

5.2 Theme 2: Rural tourism knowledge and capabilities

The second theme identified pertains to the significance of tourism knowledge among residents and their ability to participate in tourism activities in their area. These findings are connected to the second research question, "How do skills development and knowledge impact the success and participation of small business owners in the rural tourism sector?" The growth of skills is crucial for the South African tourism industry (Marais et al., 2017) for two main reasons. Firstly, skill development ensures the inclusion and participation of previously marginalised groups in society, allowing them to benefit from the sector. Additionally, it is essential for individuals providing services to be well-educated and capable of creating lasting first impressions due to the unique nature of the tourism sector, where service production and consumption occur simultaneously (Marais et al., 2017). The small business owners in the tourism sector unanimously agreed that they possess the necessary skills to run and manage their businesses successfully independently, although they believe that acquiring additional business skills could enhance the success of their ventures. Some of the statements they made are highlighted below:

(TSBO3) My viewpoint is that many residents lack knowledge or do not have the proper education to operate businesses successfully. This poses a challenge since running a successful business venture requires that one has some form of business education to ensure that they can manage the business operations successfully.

(TSBO11) Although we hold no formal business qualifications, generally, I think we are running and managing our businesses successfully. We do acknowledge that we still require certain business skills to make us successful businesspeople.

(TSBO9) I would say that we are hustlers, and we learn on the job and use our past experiences from where we worked before we opened our businesses. It is also important that we acknowledge that formal business qualifications are important in running a successful business venture and this is something we would like to do in the future.

(TSBO5) Our wish is that we can be assisted to gain business skills through short courses, both accredited and non-accredited. I know that the Small Enterprise Development Agency (Seda) offers five days of training programmes to small businesses like ours, five days per programme. These kinds of training can help us a great deal in ensuring the success of our businesses.

The responses from the participants above align with the opinions of Razzaq et al. (2013), who believe that a lack of community awareness and knowledge about tourism are the main obstacles to local residents actively participating in the growth and development of tourism. These findings are also supported by previous studies that have shown how residents' lack of awareness and information hinders community involvement in tourism development (Cheng et al., 2019). These results are also in line with the views of Rasoolimanesh et al. (2019), who argue that local residents need to stay updated with news and information about tourism development. They also emphasise the importance of residents having a deep understanding of tourism management, their community, and how they can get involved in the tourism development process. These findings are summarised by the study conducted by Rasoolimanesh et al. (2018), which suggests that the absence of understanding and skills is a major constraint on rural tourism's ability to contribute to the local economy. The authors further reveal that local residents lack knowledge and skills in identifying tourism opportunities, marketing, and running a business, which hampers rural tourism's potential to stimulate local economic development. Participants also highlighted the need for collaboration with Seda, and this idea is also supported by the endogenous and exogenous development theory, which emphasises that local residents should be open to welcoming new ideas from external sources and be willing to collaborate with other parties.

5.3 Theme 3: Rural tourism strategies

The third theme explores strategies for enhancing rural tourism's contribution to local economic development. It addresses the research question, "What strategies can be implemented to promote rural tourism's impact on local economic development in rural areas?" This theme offers strategic approaches for developing rural tourism in the communities surrounding the research area. One strategy discussed is training and development, which is seen as playing a crucial role in the study's area. The theme highlights the importance of training and development as a strategy for ensuring business success and sustainability in rural tourism. The participants in the study, including tourism small business owners, emphasised the significance of training and development strategies in promoting the development of rural areas through tourism. This sentiment is supported by the following statements from the participants:

(TSBO6) Training can go a long way in helping us improve our knowledge of tourism and grow and sustain our businesses.

(TSBO8) If we can be assisted with strings of training and educational lessons, this can go a long way in encouraging new entrants to tourism and surely, this will also help existing businesses.

(TSBO11) If our local municipality can help us with training on business management, it will go a long way in helping us manage our businesses correctly and in our financial management, which is the lifeblood of the business.

(TSBO9) My business is registered with the small enterprise development agency (Seda), and I tried my best to find out how they can assist my business to grow. I also ask to be included in the training they do so that I can learn the best methods to run and manage my business.

(TSBO10) The little knowledge that we have about running businesses, acquired through on-the-job training and previous work experiences, can be enhanced by training and as such, we will be able to see the value of tourism development and how it can benefit the community.

The aforementioned remark supports the suggestion made by Bauer et al. (2012) that local people should be prepared to participate in tourism, be aware of potential consequences, and know how to handle them right from the beginning. This implies that providing regular education and training for owners and managers of small tourism businesses is necessary to enhance their understanding,

awareness, and ability to manage tourism enterprises. This is also a crucial point discussed by Ezeuduji (2015b) on how to improve the performance of rural tourist services in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings of the study conducted by Purnomo et al. (2020) indicate that developing human resources and training local community members are strategies that should be employed to promote tourism and strengthen the role of village communities in managing their potential. In addition, the quality of the available workforce, their adaptability to changing customer needs, and their ability to address social issues such as poverty all contribute to the production and provision of a competitive tourism product and service (Kimbu et al., 2019).

6. Limitations, Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

With only twelve participants, the sample size is limited. However, data saturation was reached among them. Using probability sampling, rather than non-probability sampling, would likely yield more representative results for the wider prospective South African rural tourism destination market. Therefore, it can be concluded that rural tourism can be a strategy for local economic development. It can help create much-needed jobs and foster innovation and small business creation and development. One strategy to achieve this is to develop public-private partnerships, which are necessary for fully realising the tourism industry's potential. It is the government's responsibility to foster the conditions necessary for these partnerships to be forged. In addition to developing tourism strategies, governments and the tourism industry can work together in various ways and on different types of activities. The government will eventually have to rely on the private sector to provide tourist services, which are provided by stakeholders such as investors, developers, accommodation companies, attractions, tour operators, and more. A successful partnership requires government agencies, tourism offices, and local community representatives to work together. Through this partnership, small tourism businesses will receive the necessary support for their development and survival. Furthermore, public-private partnerships can contribute financing, management expertise, technology, and other resources to support the development of small tourism businesses in rural areas. It is important to note that different strategies to support small tourism businesses will vary and have different pillars. For example, tourism enterprise skills development will require financial and non-financial support, and tourism enterprise product development will require financial support, and tourism market access improvement will require a good partnership with the provincial destination marketing public entity.

It can be argued that small business owners and managers in the study area believe that rural tourism can contribute to local economic development. They see the potential for their businesses to grow and be sustainable if they receive support from their local municipality and provincial government. These owners and managers require business management skills, financial support to establish websites for their businesses, and proper road maintenance for accessibility. By addressing these needs, their businesses can become successful, leading to economic development, employment creation, and poverty alleviation in their communities. To support employment creation through tourism small businesses, the local municipality should assist with infrastructure development to ensure access. Furthermore, residents interested in starting tourism small businesses should be educated on how to obtain small business funding. The study recommends that the local municipality, in collaboration with the Small Enterprise Development Agency (Seda), provide training, funding advice, and website development support for these businesses. Additionally, future research could explore the conditions of available resources and areas for improvement in order to promote rural tourism in the study area. Understanding the motivations for rural tourism and segmenting the market based on push and pull forces would also be valuable. By tailoring rural tourism activities to meet the needs of tourists, its appeal can be enhanced. Furthermore, conducting similar studies in other rural areas of South Africa would yield comparative insights.

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