

Small Rural Tourism Businesses' Experience of the COVID-19 Tourism Relief Fund: A Case of Coffee Bay

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EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 27 April 2024

Revised: 15 July 2024

Accepted: 23 July 2024

Published: 14 August 2024

Copyright:

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DOI: [10.38140/ijrcs-2024.vol6.14](https://doi.org/10.38140/ijrcs-2024.vol6.14)

Abstract: The rapid spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has brought economies around the world to a complete halt. Given the restrictive measures implemented by governments to mitigate the damage caused by the virus, many sectors of the economy have been severely affected, with tourism being one of the hardest hit. This article aims to explore and evaluate the experiences of small tourism businesses operating on the outskirts in relation to the Tourism Relief Fund provided by the South African government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from an interpretive research paradigm, the study adopted a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews to gather data. The resulting data was then analysed using NVivo version 12, which generated a comprehensive observation report. The findings indicated that the South African government made concerted efforts to assist tourism businesses in surviving the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st century. However, the findings also revealed numerous shortcomings that confirmed existing literature, particularly with regard to unconstitutional qualifying criteria. Furthermore, the study found that businesses, especially informal ones

that cater to tourists and provide employment, were frustrated by their ineligibility for the Tourism Relief Fund due to qualifying criteria such as registration. In conclusion, the study recommends that the government and policymakers implement more flexible transformation policies, especially during times of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19, Tourism industry, small tourism businesses, Tourism Relief Fund, economic transformation, vulnerability.

1. Introduction

The dearth of traditional rural economies has led the world to seek alternative economic activities for socioeconomic development and sustainability (Hariram et al., 2023). With this shift in economic focus, the development of tourism in rural areas has provided much-needed relief for rural communities. It has stimulated entrepreneurship and resulted in employment creation, meeting the needs of many (Deže et al., 2023). This has allowed rural communities to sustain themselves without relying on external assistance for their livelihoods (Tabares et al., 2022).

As a result, small businesses, including those in the tourism industry, have flourished. These businesses do not have a standard definition, but they are typically characterised by employing 1 to 50 people (micro: 1 to 4, very small: 5 to 9, and small: 10 to 49) and generating annual turnover between R200,000 and R6 million (South Africa, 1996). Burns (2022) further suggests that small businesses struggle to raise capital or build reserves for times of crisis, and their limited resources often confine them to a single market. Therefore, it is easy to imagine the devastating impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on enterprises in such a delicate environment.

This quaint way of life came under threat with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The emergence of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, has caused the most significant disruption to global movement in history (Tian et al., 2020). Travel has sharply declined (96%) due to restrictions imposed by governments worldwide to curb the spread of this deadly virus

How to cite this article:

Setokoe, T. J. (2024). Small rural tourism businesses' experience of the COVID-19 Tourism Relief Fund: A case of Coffee Bay. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Rural and Community Studies*, 6, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijrcs-2024.vol6.14>

(Gössling et al., 2020; Kabuk et al., 2021). These restrictive measures included the complete or partial closure of borders, destination-specific restrictions, and mandatory self-quarantine for a specified number of days (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2020). Consequently, numerous economic sectors in many countries have faced severe challenges, with tourism and hospitality being among the hardest hit (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020).

UNWTO (2020) paints a gloomy picture, indicating a sharp decline in international travel. According to their report, 900 million travellers were unable to travel, resulting in an estimated loss of \$935 billion in global revenue within the first ten months. This crisis is seen by many as bigger than the economic crisis of 2009. Amidst the chaos that followed the outbreak of the pandemic, the significant decrease in the number of travellers resulted in substantial losses for the industry, with small rural businesses bearing the brunt of the health shock. With such huge losses, the expectation of recovery becomes difficult. Research suggests that it may take more than four years to fully recover, but not without a collective effort from governments, businesses, and communities (Chen & Bashir, 2022).

This collective effort will require the implementation of policies that restore confidence among the travelling community and ensure safe travel (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). Moreover, turning these policies into action requires more than just words. Governments must commit to policies that enable practitioners and stakeholders to effectively respond to challenges caused by shocks like the outbreak of COVID-19 (Chakizwa, 2022). The rural economic ecosystem came to a complete halt, necessitating the undertaking of this study. The aim of this study is to investigate the experience of tourism businesses in relation to COVID-19 and to examine the relief efforts made by the government to support these businesses and the industry.

1.1. Research questions

The study aimed to investigate the experiences of small tourism businesses operating in a rural setting in relation to the COVID-19 Tourism Relief Fund. This fund was disbursed by the Department of Tourism in an attempt to assist recipient tourism businesses in mitigating the impact of COVID-19, ensuring their sustainability. Consequently, the study formulated the following research questions:

- What were the levels of awareness and experiences of small tourism businesses regarding the availability of and application for the tourism relief grant during the COVID-19 lockdowns?
- How effective was the Tourism Relief Fund in mitigating the effects of the lockdowns?
- What mechanisms can the government employ to ensure that the constitutional entitlements of small businesses are not compromised during future disasters?

2. Theoretical Framework

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic found the world totally unprepared and brought with it chaos never seen before. This left the world community in a state of vulnerability that did not recognise class or status of any nature. With this kind of disarray, especially in the context of the study, all businesses were negatively impacted by governments' balancing act of saving lives without permanently crippling the economy. Such a state of existence created an uncomfortable equilibrium within the tourism industry, especially in the small business arena. Following extensive reading on the phenomenon, the researcher saw fit to ground the study in a theoretical underpinning led by the vulnerability theory promulgated by Fineman (2008). The theory postulates the inherent nature of vulnerability on the human condition, together with the government's responsibility to respond affirmatively by ensuring that the citizenry has equal access to institutions and relief instruments without prejudice. This is further given credence by Longhurst's (1994) indication of vulnerability extending to services, infrastructure, and institutions, where the government and its citizens face a

real possibility of collapse due to a shock (COVID-19 in this instance) that threatens the citizenry's constitutional entitlements.

The relevance of employing the vulnerability theory in investigating the phenomenon being studied can be seen in the controversy that arose after the South African government announced a Tourism Relief Fund. The fund was intended to alleviate the damage caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. This lends credibility to Kohn's (2014) argument that the government is trying to address past injustices by granting advantages to one group (in this case, previously disadvantaged) over another. This occurred at a time when all tourism businesses were greatly affected by the pandemic, thereby compromising the constitutional entitlements of the other group.

2.1 Overview of literature on COVID-19 relief

In 2019, the world, its economies, and various resources, including the health system, experienced an unprecedented shock as a result of the outbreak of the most severe pandemic in human history (Akrofi & Antwi, 2020). Consequently, governments implemented measures to mitigate the spread of the virus, striving to strike a balance between saving lives and maintaining economic stability (Aharon & Siev, 2021). These efforts necessitated governments worldwide to adopt measures supporting economic sectors and alleviating the adverse effects of the pandemic (Akrofi & Antwi, 2020). As a result, governments have implemented a range of socioeconomic relief interventions to lessen the burden imposed on communities and their livelihoods (Cheteni & Mazenda, 2022; Chen & Qiu, 2020).

Governments of the world went on a whirlwind trying to figure out the best ways to save lives without compromising economies. These were illustrated in how different governments sought to bring relief to their citizens. For example, the Ghanaian government initiated a relief measure that saw the absorption of the cost of electricity during the lockdown periods, with other countries waiving interest rates, placing bans on evictions and disconnection of services, and even allowing delays in payment of utilities (Akrofi & Antwi, 2020; Mylenka, 2020). More illustrations can be articulated with countries such as Madagascar, Uganda, and Rwanda distributing free food to the poor and vulnerable; Lesotho encouraging non-cash payment systems by reducing transaction fees for purchases; and Namibia pledging a relief package of 8 billion Namibian dollars economic stimulus package in support of agriculture, wage subsidy, and health needs (Akrofi & Antwi, 2020). These abrupt but necessary initiatives by governments have brought relief to the citizenry and the economy, but the jury is still out on the real effects of such measures (Akrofi & Antwi, 2020; Dube, 2021).

There has been a recent plethora of literature relating to the effects of COVID-19 on economic sectors and communities around the world. These have seen data aimed at providing an understanding of how governments carried out what has been considered an unavoidable trade-off between disease control outcomes and the economic effects of the pandemic (Cheteni & Mazenda, 2022). Such research has shown the gross undermining of economies and economic sectors (in both developed and developing) by the pandemic, irrespective of social or political standing, thereby threatening the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020).

With the measures put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19, tourism as an economic sector was one of the worst affected. This is evident in the social nature of the sector, which came to a complete halt due to the demand for social distancing that ensued, leading to the closure of borders and other ports of entry as countries battled to contain the spread of the disease (Dube, 2021). This did not make things any easier for a sector that has been apportioned blame for the spread of the deadly disease (Lew, Cheer, Haywood, Brouder & Salazar, 2020).

The effects of measures put in place have had an adverse effect on the tourism sector in many ways including, but not limited to, a decrease in viable businesses and employment, especially in tourism-dependent rural areas. The pandemic has been seen to cripple tourism with far-reaching implications on business viability, employment, and job security for many in rural communities (Dube et al., 2020). This is evidenced in studies undertaken by researchers such as Jain, Budlender, Zizzamia and Bassier (2020) and Ranchhod and Daniels (2020), indicating a sharp decline (18%) in employment in a two-month period (February to April 2020). These losses were found to be disproportionately concentrated in already disadvantaged spheres of the labour market that, including women, manual workers, and low-income earners around the world, particularly in South Africa (Casale & Posel, 2020). In South Africa, such levels of vulnerability have included women (irrespective of ethnicity), native Africans, the youth, and the less educated groups (Casale & Posel, 2020; Köhler & Bhorat, 2020). These are the direct result of the effects of COVID-19 on tourism businesses that employ the aforementioned groups in rural areas. Such catastrophic consequences prompted governments to take urgent action with the aim of ensuring that the sector will be revived once the COVID-19 dust settles.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a public health crisis, leading governments to implement measures to ensure that tourism businesses could continue operating with minimal disruption (Bartik, 2020). The interruptions faced by these businesses were primarily caused by tourists' perceptions of the virus's spread risk, which necessitated changes in their operations due to shifts in mobility patterns and consumer demand (Korinth, 2020; Kowalska & Niezgoda, 2020; Neuburger & Egger, 2020; Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2020; Godovykh et al., 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). These changes prompted tourism businesses to adapt quickly and adopt more resilient approaches as they prioritised addressing industry and global challenges (Verma & Gustafsson, 2020).

Meanwhile, governments recognised the seriousness of the measures implemented to contain the spread and sought to strike a delicate balance between preserving lives and sustaining the economy. In the tourism and hospitality sector, initiatives emerged that fostered collaboration between the government and private sector, particularly within South Africa's lodging industry. For instance, a program was launched to expand the role of lodging properties beyond serving tourists, resulting in hotels being repurposed as quarantine sites for repatriating South Africans, including individuals who had been working at sea or returning from overseas (Thomas & Laesser, 2020; Gibbings, 2020). These initiatives enabled the Department of Health to secure venues for mandatory 14-day quarantines for returning citizens (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Additionally, the government introduced the Tourism Relief Fund to provide assistance to the tourism and hospitality sector in mitigating the pandemic's impact on their viability.

2.2 Tourism Relief Fund in South Africa

The devastation caused by COVID-19 necessitated many governments to undertake measures aimed at bringing relief to businesses. This saw the South African government bring to the fore a ZAR200 million relief scheme that allowed Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) operating within the tourism sector to apply for and receive a once-off grant capped at ZAR50,000 (Department of Tourism, 2020a; Laesser, 2020; Rogerson et al., 2021). This relief instrument was put in place to remedy the devastation experienced by the businesses, the sector, and the economy, creating an environment that is fertile for sectoral recovery that is sustainable and inclusive of emerging post-COVID-19 (Rogerson et al., 2021).

The administration and qualification criteria of the Tourism Relief Fund (TRF) brought into question the parity that was needed due to the nature of the pandemic, as it saw no race, class, or size of business. This led to a decision by the government to administer the fund in line with the country's economic transformation objectives, which has been considered controversial (Rogerson et al., 2021). The criteria used legislature that gives preference to enterprises that met requirements prescribed by

the Tourism Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Codes of Good Practices, which were originally geared towards supporting Black-owned survivalist tourism small, medium, or micro-enterprises (SMMEs), but had shortcomings given the devastation that COVID-19 left in its wake (Cronje, 2020). This strategy can be attributed to the African National Congress (ANC) government's aim to build an inclusive economy free from racial and gender patterns of ownership, control, and participation in the economy that were present prior to the establishment of a democratic governance dispensation in 1994 (Albertyn, 2021). This, in practice, came with an Act that included provisions such as codes of good practice, transformation charters, and scorecards to quantify race and gender objectives (Ngcobo & Ladzani, 2016).

Although the funding was presented as a relief effort against the devastation caused by the pandemic, its alignment with policies that were formulated and promulgated at a time when a crisis like COVID-19 could not have been anticipated left certain parts of the citizenry in the cold (Abrahams, 2019). This can be attributed to the Gazetted distribution criteria that preferred allocating the funds to specific beneficiaries, mainly previously disadvantaged individuals, including women, youth, and people with disabilities (Kubayi-Ngubane, 2020), leaving certain sectors of the population out in the cold.

The criterion for beneficiation of the Tourism Relief Fund did not go without challenge as litigation was brought against the government by AfriForum in the North Gauteng High Court in Pretoria, arguing that there was no need to use "race as a benchmark" for relief. It was seen as a racist dispensation of relief funding that essentially excluded businesses from the minority (white-owned) businesses. The challenge was viewed by a court of law in favor of the Department of Tourism, stating that limited funding requires priority to be afforded to previously disadvantaged communities (Khumalo, 2020). The challenge came to an abrupt halt as the court accepted the Department of Tourism's view of prioritising applicants from previously disadvantaged communities due to funding limitations (Khumalo, 2020). The loss of the case by AfriForum in court saw AfriForum team up with Trade Union Solidarity to appeal the court decision and took the Department of Tourism to the Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA) in September 2021. They won their appeal, and the Minister of Tourism and the Department of Tourism were ordered to remove the criteria for funding purposes. The minister had argued that she was bound to include the B-BBEE level of applicants as one of the criteria for relief under the B-BBEE Tourism Sector Code, but the Supreme Court of Appeal found that the minister was mistaken as relief grants administered under the Disaster Management Act could not be viewed as grants in support of B-BBEE. The SCA said, "Her inclusion of the B-BBEE status level of applicants for assistance as a criterion for eligibility for grants from the fund was therefore invalid" (Minister of Tourism and Others v AfriForum NPC and Another, 2022). The court did not, however, rule that the R200 million already distributed to small businesses should be recovered, noting that neither Solidarity nor AfriForum has asked for the recovery of the already distributed funds.

What followed the court challenges were scenes that were overwhelming, with applications coming from a myriad of tourism establishments in desperate need of relief from the catastrophe caused by COVID-19 (Department of Tourism, 2020b). The challenges of administering the Tourism Relief Fund did not just end with what is mentioned above, as the problems were further compounded by a myriad of small businesses (which in principle met the qualifying criteria) that were not able to receive assistance due to their registration statuses (Department of Tourism, 2020a). These include but are not limited to formal registration of the businesses, tax clearance issues, and the availability of business accounts (Coolidge & Ilic, 2009; Department of Tourism, 2020a). This is true of the nature of tourism, as many businesses that operate within the sector are informal and exist for the purpose of sustenance (Biggs et al., 2012), which is something that the outbreak has exposed as a serious flaw in the tourism space (Monterrubio, 2022).

3. Research Methodology

This study was undertaken in Coffee Bay, a rural economy based on tourism, situated on the Wild Coast of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The area stretches along the northern coastline of the Eastern Cape province, from the Mtamvuna River in the north to the Great Kei River in the south, known for its untamed natural beauty (South African Tourism, 2024). The area's economy relies on tourism, which drives various small businesses and has a positive multiplier effect. Tourism plays a significant role in creating entrepreneurial opportunities and employment for the local community. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has halted the activities of businesses in the area that depend on tourism for their livelihoods and development.

The study used an in-depth exploratory examination to evaluate the effectiveness of the South African government's Tourism Relief Fund intervention on small tourism businesses operating in rural areas. The researchers employed a qualitative research methodology, conducting semi-structured interviews using non-probability purposive sampling techniques to gather the necessary data. This approach allowed the researchers to engage with respondents who would provide valuable insights for the study.

Although this approach has the potential for bias, it was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon under study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). This aligns with the study's research question and enables an examination of the complexities surrounding the development of tourism in rural areas in order to empower local entrepreneurship and build sustainable livelihoods for the community. The study subscribes to the interpretivist philosophy, acknowledging the subjectivity of the phenomenon since those affected by the pandemic (in this case, small businesses) experienced it differently (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). This subjective understanding of the multifaceted dynamics was evident in the selection of businesses catering to tourists in the area, including accommodation establishments, tourist guides, tourist activity leaders, and food vendors. The sample size was limited to 13 respondents, as data saturation was reached and no new information could be obtained from additional respondents (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

The interviews focused on the effectiveness of relief funding for small businesses operating in rural areas, specifically in Coffee Bay. They also explored related matters such as the application process, challenges faced during the application, and the dissemination of information (both in terms of queries and feedback). Face-to-face interviews were conducted, with varying durations ranging from 13 to 20 minutes, to gather the data needed to address the study's main research question. After data collection, transcription and analysis were performed using NVivo version 12, facilitating a content analysis and resulting in an observation report that presented the findings and subsequent discussion. Ethical integrity was ensured by obtaining verbal consent from respondents prior to the interviews, providing them with the right to withdraw at any time, and guaranteeing confidentiality by not requesting or recording any personal details of the respondents.

4. Presentation of Results

The study investigates the effectiveness of the government's intervention in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on rural tourism businesses operating in Coffee Bay in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The collected data and subsequent analysis provided insights into the efforts of the South African government to mitigate the effects of the worst disaster ever experienced by the tourism sector. This research generated two major themes and subthemes (presented in brackets) derived from the narratives obtained from the interviews. These themes include the businesses' awareness of the funding (perception of corruption, lack of resources to apply) and the businesses' eligibility criteria for funding (complete exclusion of informal tourism businesses).

4.1 Theme 1: Awareness of the Tourism Relief Fund by businesses

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it an array of restrictions. This saw governments around the world implementing measures aimed at preserving lives while protecting economies. Such measures were followed by governments making funding available to cushion businesses against the effects of the worst crisis to ever befall the world economy. This was supported by narratives presented by respondents in a consistent manner:

"I was not aware of the fund which was established by the government for companies in the tourism industry. I only became aware of it after the applications were closed by one of my friends who applied and received the funding. I do not believe that the government created enough awareness about this funding". Respondent 7.

"The hard lockdown I will never forget it 26 March, and I think it was the 1st of April or the 2nd of April the president announced that you can apply now for tourism with the grants, So I became aware of the funding through watching the news on television and I decided to apply". Respondent 1.

"I was aware of the funding immediately after it was announced. I however knew that even if I apply, I will not get the funding because I am a White person, and the funding was earmarked for Black people based on the criteria for one to apply and to be used to evaluate the success of the application". Respondent 4.

"I only became aware of the funding through a fellow tourist guide residing in the area. Unfortunately, the deadline had already passed". Respondent 10.

The findings provide an indication of a challenged information dissemination system. This is evidenced by the respondents' varying levels of awareness regarding the government's relief initiatives for tourism businesses. Such variations support Mistilis and Sheldon's (2006) emphasis on the need for governments to establish crisis information mechanisms that effectively communicate information to tourism stakeholders, regardless of their size, BBBEE status, or operational location (urban or rural). The authors' assertions align with a suggestion made by Faulkner and Vikolov (2002) that emphasises the importance of clear communication in disseminating information, particularly regarding eligibility requirements for funding and similar relief instruments. However, despite the wide dissemination of funding availability, the findings present an incomplete picture due to the challenges often faced by small rural tourism businesses. This is further supported by Ponder's (2022) acknowledgement of an existing gap in the application and understanding (capacity) of rural businesses in terms of facilities and skills needed to access and comprehend information. This gap includes the government's inadequacies in providing support systems that ensure consistent, recurring, and easily accessible information platforms for rural areas (Pilemalm, Lindgren & Ramsell, 2016).

The narrative above indicates that the government's message regarding the availability of relief funding for tourism businesses was indeed disseminated. This may lead people to believe that the availability of information translates into the ability and willingness to apply. However, interviews with certain respondents provided insights that contradict this apparent conventional wisdom. These insights are presented in the following sub-themes.

4.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Perceptions of corruption within the government

Interviews conducted with respondents about their awareness of the availability of funding for small businesses revealed that people expressed their awareness with a discontented voice of distrust in the intentions of the current government. Narratives on the subject indicated a lack of faith in the transparency of government-led initiatives due to numerous reported cases of corruption by government officials. As a result, respondents chose not to apply for the funding. This is supported by the dialogue of the respondents, which states the following:

“The announcement of the availability of funding was made in the news. People were hopeful, but for me, the empty promises of the government over the years discouraged me from even applying”
Respondent 3.

“Why apply for something you know you are not going to get? This government is corrupt. Much as my reserves and savings were not enough, I just didn’t want to place my hopes on a government that does not see me to be a full citizen of a country in which I pay taxes”. Respondent 4.

“I knew very well about the Tourism Relief Fund, but not knowing anyone in the corridors of government is useless. We have become accustomed the modus operandi of government officials, which we can agree is neither ethical nor legal”. Respondent 12.

The findings indict the trust that the citizenry (respondents, in particular) has in the current government. They indicate a generally negative perception of the government's methods in terms of service delivery. The speeches support the claims made by Neshkova and Kalesnikaite (2019) and Melgar, Rossi, and Smith (2010) regarding the culture of distrust created by the perceived lack of integrity within the government. This is further fueled by a series of scandals in which government officials were found to be in violation of the law, including the improper awarding of tenders, such as the Gauteng province's personal protective equipment tender worth R113.2 million. These incidents involved government officials blatantly disregarding rules governing competitive bidding processes and other procurement requirements (SAnews, 2024).

4.1.2 Sub-theme 2: Lack of resources to apply

The chaos that followed the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to restrictions that brought life in all spheres to a complete halt. The findings revealed a problem with the Tourism Relief Fund, which failed to consider whether businesses serving tourists in the Wild Coast were aware of the availability of funding. This section of the small business community fell through the cracks due to a lack of resources and capacity, including registration of the businesses, access to enabling resources such as the internet for online applications, and basic computer literacy skills needed to be considered. The above narrative is personified through the following statements:

“I was aware of the availability of the funding made available by the government during COVID-19. My business operated in the vicinity of a big tourist facility. The money that I made through my small business fed my family and the families of those who worked for me at the time. When COVID-19 came, and the government implemented the lockdown, I was left with nothing. Next thing we heard on the news, was the multi-million fund set aside for tourism businesses. To our surprise, some of us didn’t qualify because we were not registered businesses, leaving us to depend on the R350 the government promised, which to many didn’t even come”. Respondent 8.

“The wisdom behind the government expecting micro businesses in rural areas to have facilities to undertake online applications is (was) beyond me. I am a retired labourer who worked in a factory for most of my life with a small business that sells crafts in Coffee Bay. I don’t know the first thing about computers let alone this internet thing, and yet I’m expected to be compliant with online applications, when not even these children who normally do things like this for me had closed their business, and restrictions did not allow us to movement to seek help. Ramaphosa and his people must explain”. Respondent 5.

The findings above paint a gloomy picture that indicates a serious shortcoming in conducting business for rural enterprises. These disparities can be considered barriers to doing business for rural enterprises in the age of information. The findings appear to support assertions made by Raisanen and Tuovinen (2020) that indicate the challenges often faced by rural businesses to be the quality and availability of digital infrastructure and services. These are often attributed to the remoteness of rural

areas and the associated cost of installation and development of digital infrastructure in the periphery (Townsend, Sathiaseelan, Fairhurst & Wallace, 2013).

The availability of digital infrastructure, or lack thereof, is further compounded by a narrative indicating a lack of capacity to undertake business operations using technology-based resources. Such a narrative appears to be congruent with findings of scholars that include, but are not limited to, Malecki (2013); Alam, Erdiaw-Kwasie, Shahiduzzaman, and Ryan (2018); Salemink, Strijker & Bosworth (2017), and Raisanen and Tuovinen (2020). These scholars collectively bring to the forefront an important aspect of the digitalisation of business operations: capacity. They indicate that, inclusive of the need for digital infrastructure, there is an even more important need for the capacity to utilise the very technologies and innovations, something that was chronicled to be a shortcoming by the respondents.

4.2 Theme 2: The businesses' qualifying criterion in relation to funding

The announcement of the availability and criteria for qualification for the awarding of funding in 2020 brought both relief and dissatisfaction from a range of tourism businesses in the country. The criteria were formulated according to the country's development policies, which were largely exclusionary to parts of the population that were equally affected by the pandemic. As a result, respondents strongly criticised the effectiveness of the Tourism Relief Fund in providing relief to small businesses. This raised the question of where the balance between transformation and justice should be drawn. The inadequacy was described in the following manner:

"No, we didn't see anything of that. The only thing we could claim is the unemployment insurance fund (UIF) which we pay for, government relief fund had a requirement to meet that was aligned with black economic empowerment (BEE) and I am a White person and I run my business alone as I do not have black people who own shares and are part of the decision making, so my company did not meet the requirements to apply for this tourism relief funding". Participant 4.

"Government must be fair in their support, and it should not favour only certain criteria. All businesses contribute to the economy and therefore should be eligible for support. In addition, funds allocated for businesses must not be consumed for other purposes by government officials whether it be for personal or official use. They are not even legal businesses, but they get money, and we are legal and pay taxes and everything we didn't get anything because I'm not, according to their will how we should look. That's rubbish, I'm a legal citizen, I pay my taxes, I do everything legally, I've got my permits, I do my permits, I do everything according to the law, I must be like a citizen, they can't cut me off when there are relief funds and say hey you don't qualify, you are too white for me". Participant 11.

The findings revealed a highly emotional narrative that questioned the qualification criteria. The government's commitment to regulate the qualification and distribution of relief funding for the country's transformation policies, which were largely established before the world faced its worst humanitarian crisis (Kubayi-Ngubane, 2020; Rogerson et al., 2021), was called into question. The findings also aligned with a significant body of literature from various scholars, indicating a lack of fairness in making BBBEE one of the main criteria for application. This resulted in specific groups, particularly the previously disadvantaged, receiving benefits and relief, while leaving much of the tourism business community without the much-needed support (Khumalo, 2020; Abrahams, 2019; Rogerson et al., 2021).

The narrative described above was not the only expression of dissatisfaction among the respondents. Additional viewpoints emerged, leading to the formulation of the following sub-theme.

4.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Exclusion of informal tourism businesses

The controversy surrounding the criteria for benefiting from the Tourism Relief Fund revealed a neglect that was not adequately considered when formulating the application requirements for funding. The respondents strongly criticised the effectiveness of the Tourism Relief Fund, describing it as unjust:

“The business I operate is wholly dependent on tourists visiting the Coffee Bay. The lockdown hit my business hard. But more painful was the realisation of the availability of funding that I could not apply for because my business was considered informal and without proper documentation. This was a bitter pill to swallow because I am a street vendor selling food to tourist and pay VAT on the items, I procure to prepare the food I sell and every other thing I buy for myself and my family. And when it came to relief in the time of COVID-19. I was not good enough because I did not have a piece of paper. In addition, I also employ 2 people who were also left without an income”. Respondent 2

“The informal businesses were the most heavily affected because they usually relied (and still do) on tourists that are coming through to Coffee Bay, which not only placed a limitation their ability to not just access the fund, but also Unemployment Insurance Fund benefits. This is simply because they were not registered businesses, which disables them from being able to apply for relief funding mechanisms that were made available by government and law.” Participant 6.

“The lockdown didn't do small businesses any favours. Running a business that provides activities that include horseback riding, hiking, and canoeing saw my income come to a standstill. The ripple effects of the outbreak and subsequent restrictions meant that people that were in my employ would go without an income. And given that we are a small business that exists for purpose of sustenance, registration of the company had never been a priority, a lesson learnt in blood”. Respondent 13.

“I have been operating my tourism business for many years, but when it came to applying for funding I was told that my business is not properly registered as not registered as a tourism concern, but a general trading concern. When I tried to explain that I use the business for different businesses that I run, I was told that I do not qualify without any further explanation”. Respondent 9.

In addition to disparities in qualification for funding indicated in the previous section, the findings revealed further exclusionary undertakings in the qualifying criteria for relief funding. This confirms claims made by the Department of Tourism (2020a) regarding the overwhelming impact on the funding instrument following a court ruling that invalidated the BBBEE status criterion. The ruling not only resulted in registered tourism businesses being excluded, but also a great number of informal businesses that not only serve tourists but also employ a multitude of people in the area (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022). This was also cited as an injustice to the informal economy, which greatly contributes to the economy of the country and helps alleviate unemployment (Masimba, Rajah & Mutema, 2021). Additionally, the findings also support Coolidge and Ilic's (2009) argument regarding the importance of proper registration of businesses, including but not limited to tax compliance and business bank accounts, as illustrated by the narration provided by respondent 9 above.

5. Conclusion Remarks, Limitations and Recommendations

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic brought chaos never seen before. The interruptions caused by the pandemic drove governments to undertake preventative measures aimed primarily at curbing the spread of the disease. Although these measures were critical for the survival of humanity, they were not friendly to the maintenance and sustainability of livelihoods, which threatened humanity to the core.

With an array of negative impacts presented by the pandemic, governments went into overdrive to ensure a balance between two critical aspects of human life: health and economy. This led the South African government to come up with a relief stimulus package that provided the tourism industry with a relief fund totaling R200 million. The aim was to assist small tourism businesses cushion the blow dealt by the pandemic. However, this noble undertaking by the government came with conditions that divided the tourism industry. Stakeholders were up in arms over what constituted eligibility. Consequently, the fund and its eligibility criteria were designed to fulfill the country's transformation imperatives (BBBEE), with little consideration for the population that did not fall within the government's objectives of past injustices. This led to an outcry as the reality on the ground was that the pandemic affected not just the previously disadvantaged, but all small businesses, regardless of their status within the government's transformation agenda.

The findings revealed not only the disparities associated with the narrative presented above, but also the gross neglect of the informal business sector that served tourists and employed many. This limitation presented an opportunity for further studies related to the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the informal trade and the experiences of informal tourism traders in relation to government support during Covid-19. These traders were afforded little consideration during a time when constitutional liberties and entitlements were needed by all.

Finally, the study intends to claim no authority on the relief funding and experiences of tourism businesses but is intent on investigating the manner in which parity of access can be ensured in a time where all and sundry were negatively affected by the pandemic without prejudice. Not only was this realisation of a shortcoming in the knowledge economy, but it afforded the study an opportunity to recommend to government and policymakers the importance of flexibility in matters that bring into question the validity of policies promulgated during times of plenty. The study further recommends that collaborative and concerted efforts be made to drive small businesses to attain minimum compliance for operation, as this will minimise challenges articulated in the findings. This will require that the Department of Trade, Industry, and Competition, through its Companies and Intellectual Property Commission, undertake to capacitate small businesses in Coffee Bay with the compliance requirements of operating a business. Tangible progression on the matter can be made practical through deliberate undertakings by government ministries responsible for economic development to bring to the people (in the form of roadshows and information dissemination that is accessible to all) initiatives such as the Township and Rural Entrepreneurship Programme under the auspices of the Department of Small Business Development. This extends further to amendments to transformation policies of that country in order to allow for deviation in times of crisis so as not to infringe on the constitutional liberties and entitlements of South African citizens due to status (including but not limited to BBBEE and recognition in terms of the Companies Act).

6. Declarations

Funding: This research did not receive any external funding.

Acknowledgement: The author acknowledges the respondents who participated in turning an idea into a study aimed at contributing to knowledge.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data availability: All relevant data are included in the article. However, more information is available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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