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Briefing Paper



Namibia's Tourism Industry

Post-Covid Bounce Back, Gradual Recovery or Transformation?

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Introduction

The worldwide pandemic sparked by SARS-CoV-2 virus – more commonly referred to by the human disease it causes – Covid-19, has devastated the global tourism industry to an unprecedented level. The first cases of the disease were initially detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019. Covid-19 is a highly contagious disease that spreads via contaminated, airborne droplets and can cause severe respiratory symptoms, particularly in elderly people and those suffering from underlying health conditions. The extremely transmissible nature of the disease enabled Covid-19 to spread easily and rapidly across the world, facilitated by a multitude of established and high-volume international transport corridors for goods, services, and people. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern' pertaining to Covid-19 before declaring a worldwide pandemic shortly thereafter on 11 March.¹ The result has been summarised by the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia as follows:

*"The pandemic has resulted in severe social and economic disruption around the world, including the largest global recession since the Great Depression in the 1930s. It has led to widespread supply shortages exacerbated by panic buying, agricultural disruption, and food shortages. The resultant near-global sustained quarantine saw an unprecedented decrease in the emission of pollutants. Numerous educational institutions and public areas have been partially or fully closed, and many events have been cancelled or postponed. Misinformation has circulated through social media and mass media, and political tensions have been exacerbated."*²

This report seeks to provide a broad overview of the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on Namibian tourism and the response of Namibia's tourism industry in mitigating its most harmful effects. Secondly, this paper seeks to survey the current, near and far-future effects of Covid-19 on global tourism relative to regional trends and expectations. This paper will also touch upon wider issues emanating from the Covid-19 public health crisis such as long-term economic forecasts, civil unrest and armed conflict trends. Though not specifically linked to the tourism industry, these issues pose significant consequences for businesses more generally. Moreover, while the travel and tourism industries' outlook remain highly uncertain, there exist various global considerations that Namibia would do well to take heed of. Indeed, while the majority of aspects of these industries are likely to gradually return to pre-pandemic operations, it is not without evidence that some international observers foresee a disruptive transformation around the corner.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic

² Ibid.



Note on Methodology

This paper is primarily based on an extensive though by no means exhaustive literature review of relevant documents and data published after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic with a particular focus on the collection and assessment of publications pertaining to the African continent. In addition, the report makes use of information and opinions gathered from one-to-one interviews with three local tourism representatives; all interviewees have intimate understanding of the industry, its situation, challenges, and prospects. The write-up makes note of where the representatives agree or disagree with regards to trends, priorities and outlook of the Namibian tourism sector. All industry representatives were interviewed during October 2021.

Furthermore, the paper will detail international ideas and future visions of travel and tourism and place these in context with Namibia's considerations – were these are available. This, however, also means that many other aspects and challenges around tourism are beyond the scope of this report.

Finally, while the author has undertaken to source and make use of the most current information surrounding the impact of Covid-19 on the tourism sector as well as prevailing local and global influences; it cannot be ruled out that some data might be dated at the time of publication, given the inherent volatility of the pandemic situation and the difficulties in predicting the onset of new waves and variants of the disease. Therefore, the forthcoming analysis also makes a concerted effort to present medium and long-term forecasts for tourism and adjacent industries.

“The contribution of the travel and tourism sector to global GDP nearly halved from U\$D 9.1 trillion in 2019 to U\$D 4.6 trillion in 2020.”

The Pandemic & its Effects on Global Tourism to Date

In a desperate effort to mitigate against the most harmful effects of the disease and to protect their national health systems from collapse, countries across the globe applied various drastic measures to curtail the spread of Covid-19. Particularly during the earlier stages of the pandemic, governments sought to either contain Covid-19 in isolated clusters or more ideally block it outright from entering their countries' borders and infecting their citizens. Containment measures included quarantines and curfews which, under the most extreme circumstances, sanctioned the closure of workplaces, curtailed the operations of public transport, and banned people from leaving their homes. Now referred to more broadly as 'lockdowns', these measures were initially applied to individual cities and provinces before quickly becoming applicable to whole countries. By April 2020, over half of the world's population was under some form of lockdown.³

Lockdowns coupled with the closure of many national borders also drastically curtailed the free movement of travellers on a global scale. According to CNN, China essentially closed its borders to almost all visitors from March 2020 onwards and only one year later began to relax restrictions for travellers from a selected 23 countries, while the majority of entry requirements remain extensive.⁴ Many other states have imposed similarly stringent restrictions, with entry oftentimes conditional on travellers' nationality, residency and later on, vaccination status. Furthermore, many airports closed most of their operations and airlines were forced to park the majority of their fleets, making drastic cutbacks to their operations as the travel industry all but collapsed. A sizable number of travel companies declared bankruptcy while others only remained afloat by securing government bail-outs. According to Flightradar24 the average number of flights over 7-days plummeted to around 28,000 per day in mid-April 2020. By comparison, at the same time in 2019 the flight tracking service recorded over 111,000 – nearly four times the 2020 number.⁵ Furthermore, according to a United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) report, international tourist arrivals plunged by 74 percent (%) in 2020 compared to the previous year.⁶

According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), a voluntary-based industry forum, the contribution of the travel and tourism sector to global GDP nearly halved from U\$D 9.1 trillion in 2019 to U\$D 4.6 trillion in 2020.⁷ Meanwhile, an earlier estimate by the same organisation cautioned that the sector could endure losses of between 121 and 197 million jobs before the end of 2020.⁸ Having had the time to access the actual impact of the first year of the pandemic throughout 2021, WTTC now asserts that around 62 million jobs were lost in 2020. It is also pertinent to note that spending in the domestic tourism sub-sector decreased by 45% in the same period.⁹

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/china-travel-covid-19/index.html>

⁵ <https://www.flightradar24.com/data/statistics>

⁶ UNCTAD. Covid-19 and Tourism: an update - Assessing the economic consequences. June 2021. 6. <https://unctad.org/webflyer/covid-19-and-tourism-update>

⁷ WTTC. Lessons Learned During Covid-19. August 2021. 8. <https://wtcc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2021/Lessons-Learnt-%20COVID-19.pdf?ver=2021-08-19-095731-037>

⁸ WTTC. To Recovery & Beyond: The future of travel & tourism in the wake of Covid-19. September 2020. 2. <https://wtcc.org/Initiatives/To-Recovery-Beyond>

⁹ <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>

Over 18 months after WHO officially declared Covid-19 a pandemic, many countries began easing their travel restrictions as a result of rising rates of vaccinations amongst their population coupled with the realisation that a national elimination or zero-infection strategy was not viable in the long- run.¹⁰ Many countries and particularly those whose economies are largely reliant on tourism have sought to re-open and revive their respective industries. Thailand, for example, has recently opened its borders to vaccinated tourists from over 60 countries.¹¹ Commenting on these more recent developments, United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili observed that demand for international tourism was strong.¹² Moreover, a web article from UNWTO published at the start of October 2021 stated that resurgent travel confidence:

*“...was underpinned by the reopening of many destinations to international travel, mostly in Europe and the Americas. The relaxation of travel restrictions for vaccinated travellers, coupled with progress made in the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines, contributed to lifting consumer confidence and gradually restoring safe mobility in Europe and other parts of the world.”*¹³

However, enduring restrictions on travel, economic hardships and a confusing plethora of ever- changing national regulations and travel requirements continue to stifle tourism in many regions of the world beyond Europe and North America.¹⁴ UNWTO estimates that the economic losses in the global tourism industry will amount to between USD 1.7 and USD 2.4 trillion in 2021.¹⁵ While compared to data from 2020, these estimates demonstrate a significant decrease in financial losses as a result of Covid-19, they also evidence the fact that the travel and tourism industry continues to faces considerable risks and uncertainties and that a true recovery to the pre-pandemic days remains far off. Indeed, as reported by the UNWTO, tourism experts only expect tourist arrival numbers to return to pre-pandemic levels in 2023 or potentially even later.¹⁶

¹⁰ The Economist. “Leaders: Covid-19’s rocky road.” October 16, 2021.

¹¹ BBC News. “Thailand reopens to vaccinated tourists from over 60 nations.” November 1, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-59115395>

¹² <https://www.unwto.org/news/vaccines-and-reopen-borders-driving-tourism-s-recovery>

¹³ Ibid.

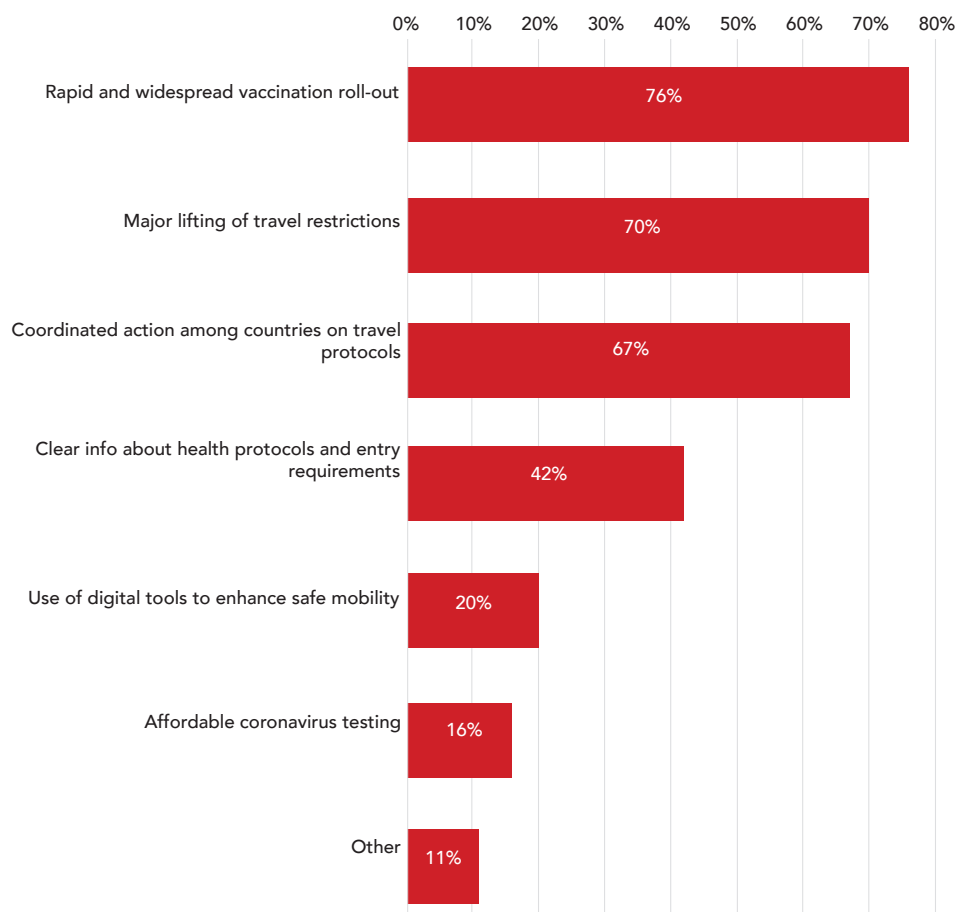
¹⁴ <https://www.worldnomads.com/travel-safety/worldwide/worldwide-travel-alerts#open>

¹⁵ UNCTAD. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid, 10.

The UNWTO had also conducted regular consultations with a group of international tourism experts to gauge perceptions and concerns within the industry. One expert survey from September 2021 underscores among others the importance of quickly increasing vaccination rates worldwide and lifting travel restrictions to enable tourism industry recovery (See Chart 1).¹⁷ Other recently published information from the UNWTO contends that the global rehabilitation of travel and tourism remains uneven and prone to sudden shocks such as the emergence of new virus variants, though nearly 60 % of it Africa experts forecast better or much better industry performances on the continent in 2022 compared to 2021.¹⁸

Chart 1: UNWTO Panel of Tourism Experts "What are the main factors which could contribute to an effective recovery of international tourism?" (% of Responses)¹⁹



¹⁷ <https://monitor.icef.com/2021/10/vaccines-and-border-openings-beginning-to-drive-some-recovery-in-global-tourism/>

¹⁸ UNWTO. World Tourism Barometer. January 2022. 7 & 11. https://webunwto.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2022-01/220118-Barometersmall.pdf?_PBIQdr4u_qM0w56.l0NpfGPzylGu6Md

¹⁹ Data as collected by UNWTO, September 2021. Published: September 4, 2021.

Medium to Long-term Impacts of the Pandemic on Africa

Evidence abounds that Africa has seriously suffered from the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of social and economic hardships. It is estimated that the continent has been hit harder by the pandemic than by any other recent crisis, including 2008 global recession and the 2014 Ebola epidemic. Furthermore, experts and international financial institutions have warned that Africa will see a slower economic recovery from the pandemic than the rest of the world. Examples of these warning are discussed below. Besides prolonging already acute levels of human suffering and deprivation, a slow socioeconomic recovery risks increasing instances of political destabilisation and intrastate conflict across the continent as weak and cash-strapped African governments find themselves confronted with poor growth prospects and restive citizens.²⁰

A recently released analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on ten African nations by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) echoes these concerns. The report models macroeconomic dynamics in the near and far future on GDP growth, rates of mortality, aid, and trade, among others, caused by the pandemic on the surveyed states up to 2050. What is immediately evident is that the pandemic has reduced “international flows of trade, aid remittances and foreign direct investment (FDI).”²¹ Concerningly, the report also foresees an ongoing economic downturn for the continent, primarily as a result of problematic government responses to the pandemic:

“The long-term effect of the economic downturn will lead to an erosion of the gains made to human development over the previous decades by increasing mortality, increasing child mortality and pushing more people into poverty.”²²

The report goes on to note that while mostly all of Africa will be affected by the economic downturn emanating from the pandemic, the relative impact will not be uniform across all African countries. In particular, countries with fewer resources and limited governance capacities as well as those countries whose economies are particularly reliant on “trade flows, tourism or remittance” will likely suffer from more prolonged economic hardship.²³ Moreover, some states may face more severe longer-term consequences compared to those who suffered more acutely in the initial stages of the pandemic.²⁴

It should be noted that other expert prognoses have diverged from the bleak outlook of the UNDP report. For example, the African Development Bank Group (ADBG) published a report in late October 2021 which forecasts a significant recovery of economic growth for East Africa, projecting a GDP growth for the Region at 4.1 and 4.9 % for 2021 and 2022 respectively, up from 0.4 % in 2020.²⁵

However, notwithstanding a handful of token positive reports, the majority of projected economic and social outlooks for Africa from various international government agencies and media outlets,²⁶ global financial institutions and think tanks are sobering.

²⁰ Burke Jason. ‘An economic calamity’: Africa faces years of post-Covid instability. The Guardian. August 13, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/13/an-economic-calamity-africa-faces-years-of-post-covid-instability>

²¹ UNDP. Analysing long-term socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 across diverse African contexts. 2021. 6. <https://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/library/reports/analysing-long-term-socio-economic-impacts-of-covid-19-across-di.html>

²² Ibid, 7.

²³ Ibid, 14.

²⁴ Ibid, 7.

²⁵ ADBG. “East Africa’s economic outlook bullish despite Covid-19 setback, African Development Bank report projects.” November 3, 2021. <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/east-africas-economic-outlook-bullish-despite-covid-19-setback-african-development-bank-report-projects-46564>

“Experts and international financial institutions have warned that Africa will see a slower economic recovery from the pandemic than the rest of the world.”

“Increasingly volatile conditions and possibilities for violence and armed conflict to unfold on the continent will undoubtedly serve as a disincentive to international tourists.”

For instance, the German Development Institute (DIE) foresees a long-term rise in conflict potential on the African continent and an acceleration of violent conflicts. The DIE analysis attributes this projected development not to the pandemic itself, but rather to the resulting deterioration of existing challenges such as *“the sharpening of societal divisions, severe disruptions in the education sector and deteriorating socio-economic circumstances.”*²⁷ Possible examples of these challenges include the deferment of elections, disruption of peace-keeping missions and cuts to development aid budgets.²⁸ This situation will likely be further compounded by impediments to or the unavailability of actors, processes and institutions which helped to mitigate against conflicts prior to the onset of Covid-19. Such increasingly volatile conditions and possibilities for violence and armed conflict to unfold on the continent will undoubtedly serve as a disincentive to international tourists.

Experts at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have also echoed many of the themes and issues of the UNCP analysis, in their Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa report. However, the IMF publication focuses on a shorter time-span with forecasts and models looking from 2021 to 2025. The document presents a sobering yet differentiated assessment of economic performance and outlook, noting that in the context of sluggish growth, limited vaccine supply and up-take, high and increasing public debt rates, and political instability, Africa will face extensive risks in reversing the socio-economic devastation brought about by the pandemic.²⁹

Authors of the IMF report also voice specific concerns regarding the fiscal position of many countries in the region, pointing to the fact that in 2020, 17 African states were already classified as being in debt distress or at high risk of falling into this category. Furthermore, the crisis has forced many Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) nations to avail extra money and resources in order to strengthen their health care systems and to procure vaccines, further worsening countries' balance sheets. Consequently, the analysis sees more international financial aid and debt relief as an essential prerequisite for the realisation of SSA post-pandemic recovery.³⁰

In its report, the IMF references Namibia directly and classifies it under *“Other Resource-Intensive Countries”* whereby other resources exclude the production of oil.³¹ Positively, the report projects that countries under this category will see a relatively quick economic rebound. However, SSA states that are classified as *“tourism-dependent”* such as Mauritius, The Gambia and Seychelles – face harder challenges with respect to economic recovery.³²

Thus, to summarise, the prevailing international outlook indicates that Africa will find it especially challenging to recover from the social and economic crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Africa's recovery is expected to be slower than other regions and threatened by growing political and social instability.

²⁶ Kaledzi Isaac. “Analysts forecast grim 2022 economic outlook for Africa.” Deutsche Welle. January 13, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/analysts-forecast-grim-2022-economic-outlook-for-africa/a-60405289>

²⁷ Fiedler Charlotte, Mross Karina & Adeto A. Yonas. Implications of COVID-19 for Conflict in Africa. DIE. December 2021. 1. <https://doi.org/10.23661/bp12.2021>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ IMF. Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa – Navigating a long pandemic. April 2021. V-VI. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/SSA>

³⁰ Ibid, VI.

³¹ Ibid, 22.

³² Ibid, 4.

Covid-19 in Namibia: A Brief Summary

Following President Hage Geingob's declaration of a State of Emergency, Namibia imposed its own national lockdown in March 2020. In an attempt to keep Covid-19 out of the country for as long as possible, the Namibian government suspended all air travel to and from a number of countries severely affected by the pandemic including the majority of Europe,³³ an important region for the Namibian tourism market. Under the State of Emergency, Namibian authorities also imposed regulations aimed at drastically curtailing public freedom of movement and interpersonal interactions in order to reduce the incidence of virus outbreaks throughout the population. These regulations were divided into five different stages, with stage one entailing the most severe restrictions and stage five encompassing only minor limitations.³⁴ Taking into consideration a variety of factors including the total number of cases, deaths, and hospital ICU capacities, the government specified one of the five stages to manage the pandemic in an orderly and predictable manner.

Given the unfeasibility of prolonging the State of Emergency indefinitely, authorities introduced new Covid-19 general regulations under the Public and Environmental Health Act of 2015 in September 2020.³⁵ These regulations remain subject to amendment and are updated on a regular basis in response to pandemic developments. They incorporate many of the same limitations on public life and business operations as those enacted under the State of Emergency.

Namibia recorded its first Corona infection in mid-March 2020; however, the country was able to stave off high infection rates for a considerable time thereafter. Meanwhile, initial local outbreaks of the disease at the central coast and in the capital drew regional lockdowns to isolate these populations from the rest of the country.³⁶ As was the case with many other countries around the world, Namibia began to experience progressively more severe infection waves, putting severe strain on the country's health system, leading to a considerably larger death toll.

The most devastating period of the pandemic to date occurred during Namibia's third wave of Covid-19 infections from approximately June to July 2021 (See Info Box 1).³⁷ The unprecedented rise in daily cases of Covid-19 led to several hospitals experiencing critical oxygen supply and ICU spaces.³⁸ While the Namibian government's initially quick and deliberate response to the pandemic earned praise from outside observers including the WHO³⁹; the third wave laid bare the nation's brittle and fragile health system.

³³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Namibia

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ IPPR. Namibia Quarterly Economic Review: Quarter 1 2021. May 2021. 2.

³⁶ Ibid, 1.

³⁷ See 'Namibia coronavirus stats' sourced from COVID-19 Data Repository by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University. Provided via Google.com. January 20, 2022.

³⁸ Ngatjiheue Charmaine, Petersen Shelleygan & Nambadja Charlotte. "Windhoek faces Covid-19 ICU crisis." The Namibian. May 14, 2021. <https://www.namibian.com.na/211389/archive-read/Windhoek-faces-Covid-19-ICU-crisis>

³⁹ WHO. Namibia praised for its quick and efficient response to COVID-19. June 16, 2020. <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/namibia-praised-for-its-quick-and-efficient-response-to-covid-19>

“The country’s health authorities failed to effectively counter this ‘disinfodemic’, resulting in high levels of vaccine scepticism and confusion among citizens.”⁴²

Indeed, already prior to June 2021, media observers had reported on a lack of preparedness by state authorities to deal with more intense infection waves. Limited oxygen supplies⁴⁰ and a lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health care workers were cited as particular causes for concern.⁴¹ In addition, Namibia had been flooded with an onslaught of false and misleading information surrounding the pandemic, proliferated mostly via social media channels. The country’s health authorities failed to effectively counter this ‘disinfodemic’, resulting in high levels of vaccine scepticism and confusion among citizens.⁴² The country finally received its first coronavirus vaccines in March 2021 and subsequently launched its national vaccination campaign.⁴³ However, widespread vaccine hesitancy, logistical challenges, and supply shortages have seriously slowed the momentum of the vaccination drive.

This lethal combination of factors and the devastating outcomes that followed also attracted international media attention, with one BBC News article summarising the situation of Namibia’s third wave as follows:

“Namibia was unprepared for the third wave, due to a perfect storm of government complacency, misinformation regarding vaccines and a deep case of fatigue with measures to control the spread of the virus. Social media has been flooded with fake posts criticising the safety and efficacy of the vaccines. Those who do want to get a vaccine, do not know if and when it will be available to them because of shortages, and the government has been changing its stance on how it should be distributed.”⁴⁴

Following the end of the third wave, the country has fared slightly better in managing the pandemic. Vaccine supplies have considerably improved with the majority of donations being provided by western nations. In particular, the Netherlands, USA, Germany and Zimbabwe availed significant vaccine stocks to Namibia over the course of the second part of 2021.⁴⁵ The nation has therefore been able to sustain a largely consistent vaccination drive, aside from a brief period at the end of June 2021 when jabs temporarily ran short.⁴⁶ However, vaccine uptake by the public has remained fairly sluggish, arguably as a result of the poor dissemination of public health information and the spread of misinformation in its place (See Info Box 3).

At the beginning of December 2021, Namibia experienced another spike in cases with the fourth wave of infections being driven by a new virus variant named Omicron. Although cases climbed rapidly leading to an increase in hospitalisations, the Namibian government refrained from re-imposing severe curbs on people’s freedom of movement and social interactions.⁴⁷ The fourth wave peaked at the end of December 2021 and case numbers have fallen quickly since then.

⁴⁰Kaminzi Matty. “Katutura hospital runs low on oxygen.” The Namibian. December 16, 2020. <https://www.namibian.com.na/207208/archive-read/Katutura-hospital-runs-low-on-oxygen>

⁴¹Nakale Albertina. “Over 150 medical students withdraw from hospitals.” New Era. August 20, 2020. <https://neweralive.na/posts/over-150-medical-students-withdraw-from-hospitals>

⁴²Namibia Fact Check. “COMMENT: Health Communication – Confusing messaging misinforms.” June 18, 2021. <https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/news-item/comment-health-communication-confusing-messaging- misinforms/>

⁴³Xinhua. “Feature: Namibia kicks off COVID-19 vaccination with Chinese donated vaccine.” March 20, 2021. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2021-03/20/c_139822516.htm

⁴⁴Granville Samantha. “Covid in Namibia: ‘Fifteen of my relatives have died’.” BBC News. July 15, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57748119>

⁴⁵Siririka Paheja. “Enough doses in stock – Shangula.” New Era. September 15, 2021. <https://neweralive.na/posts/enough-doses-in-stock-shangula>

⁴⁶⁴⁶ Nhongo Kaula and Sguazzin Antony. “In Worst-Hit African Nation, Covid Vaccines Halted and Hospitals Hit Capacity.” Bloomberg. June 29, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-29/in-worst-hit- african-nation-virus-shots-halt-and-hospitals-fill>

⁴⁷Beukes Jemima. “Omicron: Hospitalisation numbers on the rise.” Namibian Sun. December 21, 2021. <https://www.namibiansun.com/news/omicron-hospitalisation-numbers-on-the-rise2021-12-21/>

The 'End' of the Pandemic & The New-Normal

Scientists predict that Covid-19 will eventually become endemic, that is a disease that circulates and is prevalent across the world but does not cause excessive strain to national health care systems. Current examples of endemic diseases include influenza and measles which still cause infections and deaths but in numbers not at all comparable to the worldwide coronavirus waves of 2020 and 2021. As the world population's immunity to the virus increases either through infection or vaccination, Covid-19 will eventually run out of hosts. New vaccines and better treatment options will further reduce the health risks associated with the disease. However, Covid-19 will not become endemic overnight, not least because large swaths of the global population, specifically in poorer countries, remain unvaccinated. As such, it is possible that new variants could still cause considerable harm.⁴⁸

Consequently, it is crucial that private businesses, public institutions, and individual citizens consider carefully how to plan, structure, and pursue a road to recovery. It is also important to consider that the pandemic has invariably led to new social-economic trends or otherwise accelerated emerging ones, with the clearest example being the increasing digitalisation of the workplace and the education sector. Not all of these developing trends will necessarily prevail in the long run. Yet, it is extremely unlikely that society can 'turn back the clock' to the pre-pandemic world and neither is this necessarily desirable. Indeed, one small silver lining of the global coronavirus crisis has been the provision of newfound opportunities to many enterprises, governments, and people to re-evaluate their operations, policy priorities, and the way they live their lives. This can and has led to a range of positive changes and developments:

*"It is worth notching up some of the benefits that come with today's predictable unpredictability. Many people like to work from home. Remote services can be cheaper and more accessible. The rapid dissemination of technology could bring unimagined advances in medicine and the mitigation of global warming."*⁴⁹

It is crucial for Namibia's travel and tourism industry to recognize these developing trends and amend or update their operations accordingly. Indeed, as the world moves forward after the worst days of the Covid-19 pandemic, hard to predict trends are bound to take shape. As such, tourism businesses would do well to prepare for further shocks and adjustments in the years to come.

"The pandemic has invariably led to new social-economic trends or otherwise accelerated emerging ones, with the clearest example being the increasing digitalisation of the workplace and the education sector."

⁴⁸ The Economist. "Briefing: How the world learns to live with covid-19." October 16, 2021. <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2021/10/16/how-the-world-learns-to-live-with-covid-19>

⁴⁹ The Economist. "Leaders: The new normal is already here. Get used to it." December 18, 2021. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/12/18/the-new-normal-is-already-here-get-used-to-it>



Info Box 1. The Pandemic's Death Toll: Africa's Hidden Cost

Throughout 2020, Namibia and the African continent at large experienced comparatively far fewer cases and deaths associated with Covid-19 than many other regions of the world. While puzzling to many observers, scientists have since pointed to a number of factors which in combination likely account for the continent's relatively mild experience of the pandemic, including Africa's youthful demographic, warm climate, and the quick lockdown measures imposed by African governments when the disease first began to spread.⁵⁰ However, the continent's resilience against Covid-19 proved to be short lived as by early 2021, numerous African healthcare systems were becoming overwhelmed while campaigners and African leaders decried "*vaccine nationalism*" and urged the prioritisation of vaccines for Africa's crucial health workers.⁵¹

African countries, including Namibia, were also arguably lulled into a false sense of security by their relatively low official case numbers and death rate statistics. In fact, there exists significant evidence that many countries considerably undercounted their actual number of infections and mortalities associated with the virus. Findings from a global model of Covid-19-related mortality per country developed by The Economist found that in the case of many countries, reported deaths not linked to the coronavirus far exceeded the average mortality rates expected per year prior to the pandemic. Accounting for these 'excess deaths' significantly increases the toll of Covid-related deaths for many African nations. As of the end of January 2022, 5.6 million people were officially estimated to have died from Covid-19 around the globe. However, the model utilised by The Economist estimates that the true figure is likely to have been between 12.3 and 23.3 million people. Moreover, Africa has the widest margin of error of all of the world's regions with an estimated minimum of 1.1 million Covid-10-related deaths compared to official figures of approximately 236,000. In the case of Namibia, the official coronavirus death toll of 3,914 is placed between 6,000 and 15,000 using The Economist model.⁵²

It is possible that both official state estimates and alternative model offered by The Economist contain errors. However, the notion that Africa has failed to capture the vast majority of its Covid-19 infections and deaths has also been echoed by the WHO, which estimates that only one out of seven infections are being detected on the continent.⁵³ This information goes some way in speaking to the true degree of human suffering and devastation caused by the pandemic in Africa which is not captured in dry economic or official mortality figures.

⁵⁰ Soy Anne. "Coronavirus in Africa: Five reasons why Covid-19 has been less deadly than elsewhere." BBC News. October 8, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54418613>

⁵¹ Burke Jason. "African nations fear more Covid deaths before vaccination begins." The Guardian. February 4, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/04/african-nations-fear-more-covid-deaths-before-vaccination-begins>

⁵² The Economist. Graphic detail: The pandemic's true death toll. Updated January 25, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/coronavirus-excess-deaths-estimates>

⁵³ Moeti Matshidiso. The Under-estimated Toll of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the African Continent. In Insights from the IIAG – COVID-19 in Africa: A challenging road to recovery. Mo Ibrahim Foundation. n. d. 17. <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/about-us/our-research>

Covid-19: Impact on Tourism and Industry Responses

The devastating impact of Covid-19 on Namibia's economic and social fabric cannot be underestimated. However, it should also be acknowledged that the coronavirus crisis arose on the back of an economic downturn and creeping depression that had been evident since the end of 2016 in Namibia,⁵⁴ with tourism being one of the few consistently well-performing sectors left as a result.⁵⁵ It is therefore not easy to disaggregate Covid-19's effect on the general economic malaise present in Namibia before the onset of the disease. For example, the government has stated that the majority of job losses that occurred in 2020 and 2021 were predominantly a result of difficult economic circumstances rather than pandemic itself; though this assertion has been disputed by some analysts.⁵⁶ According to government estimates, the country saw a staggering contraction of eight percent of its GDP in 2020.⁵⁷ While the government had hoped for a strong economic recovery the following year, this did not materialise. Instead, Namibia has seen only marginal economic improvement, with the economy forecast to grow by just one and a half percent of its GDP in 2022 according to the Bank of Namibia (BoN).⁵⁸

The majority of industries comprising the Namibian economy saw negative growth in 2020 with transport and storage, manufacturing, mining, and finance among those most acutely affected. The worst impacted sector was the hospitality industry which contracted by over 30 %.⁵⁹ As a result of the health land and air entry points were closed to the vast majority of travellers and other types of traffic, with only minimal exceptions being made for the transport of essential goods. Airports throughout the country were closed to tourist and business travellers for roughly five months from end of March to August 2020.⁶⁰ The country's main airport, Hosea Kutako International Airport (HKIA), operated only as an emergency diversion designation and for cargo flights.⁶¹ With their core market of regional and international travellers having disappeared practically overnight, Namibian tourism and hospitality operators were plunged into a sudden and prolonged crisis.

⁵⁴ IPPR. Namibia Quarterly Economic Review: Quarter 1 2021. May 2021. 1. <https://ippr.org.na/publication/namibia-qer-quarter-1-2021/>

⁵⁵ BoN. Annual Report 2020: 30 years anniversary celebration. March 30, 2021. 214. <https://www.bon.com.na/getattachment/7923760d-1805-4265-906a-b424abafdef8/.aspx>

⁵⁶ Petersen Shelleygan. "Over 1 000 jobs cut in six months." The Namibian. August 6, 2021. <https://www.namibian.com.na/213877/archive-read/Over-1-000-jobs-cut-in-six-months>

⁵⁷ IPPR. Namibia Quarterly Economic Review: Quarter 1 2021.

⁵⁸ IPPR. Namibia Quarterly Economic Review: Quarter 4 2021. January 5, 2022. 12. <https://ippr.org.na/publication/namibia-qer-quarter-4-2021/>

⁵⁹ IPPR. Namibia Quarterly Economic Review: Quarter 3 2021. October 15, 2021. 11. <https://ippr.org.na/publication/namibia-qer-quarter-3-2021/>

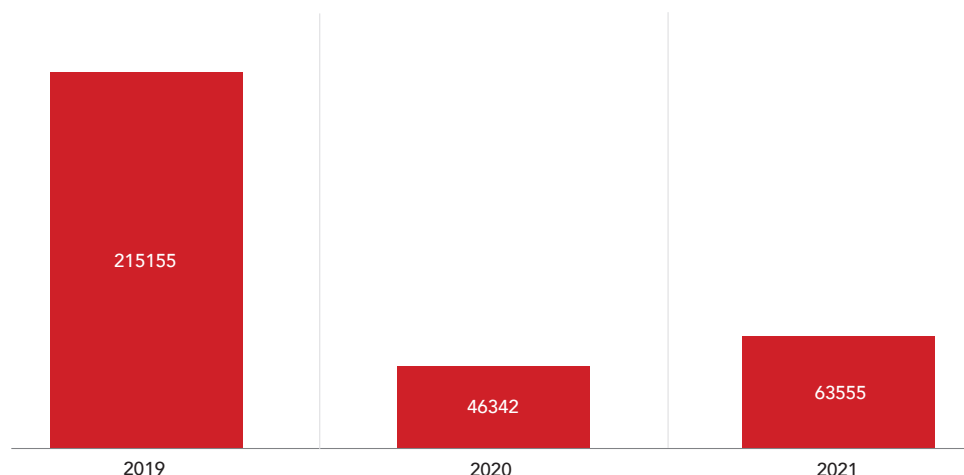
⁶⁰ IPPR. Namibia Quarterly Economic Review: Quarter 4 2020. February 2, 2021. <https://ippr.org.na/publication/namibia-qer-quarter-4-2020/>

⁶¹ Smit Ellanie. "NAC closes most airports." Namibian Sun. March 31, 2020. <https://www.namibiansun.com/news/nac-closes-most-airports2020-03-31/>

“There exists a lack of dependable, current, and quantitative data on the Namibian tourism sector.”

According to research conducted by Simonis Storm Securities (SSS) a Namibian stockbroker, the number of international arrivals at HIKA fell by nearly 80 % in 2020 compared to 2019 arrival numbers (See Chart 2). This translated into a monthly average of 5,296 international arrivals at HIKA in 2021 in comparison to 17,930 for 2019.⁶²

Chart 2: Total International Arrivals at Hosea Kutako International Airport Namibia per year⁶³



As is the cases with many other themes and issues surrounding Namibia, there exists a lack of dependable, current, and quantitative data on the Namibian tourism sector. Available Information is oftentimes patchy and figures for the same activities regularly contradict one another. For example, international arrival numbers for Namibian airports published by BoN differ from those cited by SSS, although this difference is admittedly minor.⁶⁴ Following recent efforts from both the public and private sectors, the situation regarding access to information in this regard has somewhat improved. The Hospitality Association of Namibia (HAN) now regularly collects and publishes bed occupancy rates from its members, while the government has initiated a number of Tourism Satellite Accounts (TSA) – detailed surveys that seek to quantify tourism overall contribution to the economy. However, information and monitoring shortfalls still remain.⁶⁵

Be that as it may, various organisations have sought to source and collate data on the pandemic’s wider socioeconomic consequences, with both BoN⁶⁶ and UNDP Namibia having conducted surveys.⁶⁷ Though not comprehensive, this data provides a good basis upon which to quantify the damage caused by Covid-19 on the tourism and travel industry.

⁶² Simonis Storm Securities. Hospitality Statistics: Room for double digit growth. December 2021. 2.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ BoN. Annual Report 2020: 30 years anniversary celebration. 215.

⁶⁵ Sherbourne Robin. Guide to the Namibian Economy 2017. IPPR. October 2016. 346 – 8.

⁶⁶ Mbazuvara Brian, Kaune Jaungura, Phillipus Christian & Ntomwa Metilda. BoN Discussion Note: the impact of covid-19 pandemic on the tourism industry. BoN. n. d. <https://www.bon.com.na/getattachment/6f39bebb-768b-4649-98b0-2e815c007f13/.aspx>

⁶⁷ Smit Ellanie. “Massive decline in tourism arrivals.” Windhoek Express. August 12, 2021. <https://www.we.com.na/news/massive-decline-in-tourism-arrivals2021-08-12>

An initial assessment report from the United Nations System (UNS), referencing information from the Namibian Statistics Agency (NSA), states that:

*“The tourism sector has suffered a catastrophic blow, with about 96.5% of businesses being adversely affected due to border closure, quarantine restrictions and fears surrounding virus contraction during travel. A particularly hard-hit sub-sector are the conservancies and the wildlife economy, which represent a considerable 20.3% of employment in the tourism sector.”*⁶⁸

The UNS report also cites sources which estimate that the total income losses for the tourism industry may have reached N\$ 2 billion in 2020. In addition, the report raises particular concerns around the vulnerability of tourism-dependent businesses in communal conservancies, which are crucial for local employment opportunities and environmental protection. Indeed, conservancies have little capacity to raise money when confronted with financial difficulties.⁶⁹

More recent evidence indicates that the financial and human resource costs of the pandemic-induced economic crisis have been more severe than initially predicted. Based on industry growth data, the BoN reports that the “travel and passenger transportation services” – which includes expenditures by travellers on accommodation, meals, and local transport services – lost around N\$ 3.2 billion in foreign currency earnings in 2020 alone. By comparison, these industry sub-sectors together accounted for earnings of N\$ 5.1 billion in 2019.⁷⁰

While complete economic data for 2021 is not yet publicly available, it is clear that the second year of the pandemic did not lead to the scale of recovery that the industry was hoping for. The Quarterly Economic Update for the fourth quarter 2021, published by SSS in January, showed signs of positive GDP growth for the hotels and restaurants for quarter two and three of 2021. Meanwhile, the occupancy rate, an indicator that tracks the number of beds and rooms sold to clients by accommodation establishments, edged upwards reaching a monthly average of 24 % for 2021 – a considerable improvement from 16 % in 2020. However, these relative improvements remain a far cry from pre-pandemic years where 50 % occupancy rates were the standard (See Chart 3).⁷¹

⁶⁸ UNS. Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of Covid-19 in Namibia. October 2020. 14. <https://www.na.undp.org/content/namibia/en/home/library/the-socio-economic-impact-assessment-of-covid-19-in-namibia.html>

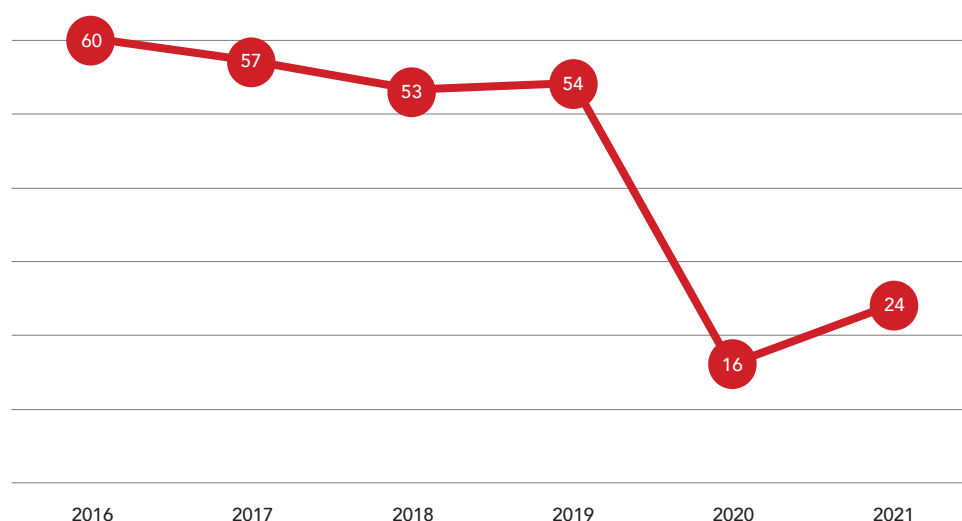
⁶⁹ Ibid, 32.

⁷⁰ Mbazuvara Brian, et. al. BoN Discussion Note: the impact of covid-19 pandemic on the tourism industry. 3-4.

⁷¹ SSS. Quarterly Economic Update 4Q2021. January 2022. 16.

“Almost two years after the pandemic first began, hospitality businesses and tour operators continue to be faced with low demand and severe uncertainties in terms of future operations and revenue generation.”

Chart 3: Average Monthly Hospitality Occupancy Rates per year for Namibia (in %)⁷²



The detection of the Omicron coronavirus variant caused further damage to the tourism industry at the end of the fourth economic quarter in 2021. Almost two years after the pandemic first began, hospitality businesses and tour operators continue to be faced with low demand and severe uncertainties in terms of future operations and revenue generation. A case in point for Namibia was the December festive season which usually attracts a host of local, regional and international visitors to Erongo's coastal area. Business representatives from Swakopmund and Walvis Bay noted that there were significantly less tourists over the Christmas holiday season than in previous years. In fact, the occupancy rate stood at only a third of all available beds in the region, considerably below the pre-pandemic norm. The abrupt imposition of travel restrictions by many Western countries on Southern Africa as well as the low spending capacity and thriftiness of local visitors were also blamed for the situation.⁷³

Information from the aforementioned sectoral surveys conducted by BoN and UNDP speak to the severity of the economic impact felt by the tourism industry in 2020 beyond stark yet shallow GDP growth and occupancy figures. The central bank gathered responses from 55 tourism businesses towards the end of 2020, asking a range of questions around business performance in the pandemic period. While the sample was small it included information from large enterprises, defined as having an annual turnover of more than N\$ 10 million, which accounted for more than a quarter of total respondents. Financial losses and operational constraints were evident across the board. For example, 84 % of respondents stated that their respective enterprise had seen its revenue decreased by over 50 % during the crisis. Furthermore, 33 % of surveyed businesses stated that they had to fall back on cash reserves and savings while a further 45 % reported that they were forced to borrow money to sustain their operations.⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Hartman Adam & Leuschner Erwin. "Weniger Urlauber, weniger Geld." December 24, 2021. <https://www.az.com.na/lokales/weniger-urlauber-weniger-geld2021-12-24>

⁷⁴ Mbazuvara Brian, et. al. BoN Discussion Note: the impact of covid-19 pandemic on the tourism industry. 6-7.

Tourism businesses surveyed by BoN also mentioned a number of ongoing challenges that they grapple with in addition to a general lack of demand. Most prominent of these challenges were the inability to retain staff, struggles to repay loans, and an inability to pay suppliers.⁷⁵ At the time of writing, the UNDP report had not yet been released in full. However, media coverage of the report's presentation in August 2021 cited drastic revenue decreases and operational difficulties in the tourism industry similar to those reported in the BoN survey. While data collection was completed slightly later than the BoN survey, the UNDP was able to query a larger number of businesses, reportedly gathering information from 485 enterprises with over 90 % constituting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and micro enterprises. It was also reported that just over a third of respondents were considering business closures at some stage, though the exact considerations that could lead to these outcomes were not stated.⁷⁶

Of particular concern was the high number of UNDP survey respondents who saw government assistance towards tourism enterprises as lacking:

*"... Government intervention has been overall deemed inadequate and insufficient by 60% of businesses, with 75% of them having not received any assistance at all. Quite noticeably, 67% of the respondents claim a lack of government awareness towards the needs of private sector entities."*⁷⁷

The government imposition of lockdowns to curtail the spread of Covid-19 severely reduced Namibian businesses' capacity to operate and trade in products and services. Given the inherent unpredictability of the pandemic, many operators took drastic measures to save their businesses from collapse. Over two years after the onset of the coronavirus crisis, hindsight has shown that those business owners who reacted swiftly and took firm action in reducing operational costs and managing risks in the earlier stages of the pandemic stood the best chance of surviving the economic adversities that followed.

A considerable proportion of Namibia's tourism and hospitality industry is comprised of SMEs, most of which are operated by a single establishment or small tour operator.⁷⁸ SMEs have also been especially hard-hit by the coronavirus crisis due to their smaller size, meaning they often have less access to monetary reserves and credit compared to bigger firms as well as those smaller businesses belonging to a large holding company. Indeed, those tourism operators and hospitality enterprises constituting parts of bigger holding companies with interest in other sectors – such as Ohlthaver & List (O&L) which owns O&L Leisure⁷⁹ – have often been able to weather the financial storm caused by the pandemic by relying on their parent companies for financial support.

Many tourism businesses were also forced to cut down on staff salaries by limiting working hours and imposing pay cuts. According to the BoN survey, 87 % of respondents had reduced staff salaries.⁸⁰ In the same vein, the UNDP found that almost 80 % of surveyed businesses had cut back on staff working hours.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Ibid, 9.

⁷⁶ Smit Ellanie. "Tourism: 35% of businesses foresee closure." Namibian Sun. August 16, 2021. <https://www.namibiansun.com/news/tourism-35-of-businesses-foresee-closure-2021-08-16>

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Mbazuvara Brian, et. al. BoN Discussion Note: the impact of covid-19 pandemic on the tourism industry. 5.

⁷⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ohlthaver_%26_List

⁸⁰ Ibid, 8.

⁸¹ Smit Ellanie. "Tourism: 35% of businesses foresee closure." Namibian Sun.

“The Ministry of Labour, Industrial Relations and Employment Creation in January 2022 indicated that the country had lost 15,442 jobs since the start of the pandemic.”

According to the BoN survey, of those enterprises which moved to cut salaries, 49 % reduced the amount staff were being paid to between 26 and 50 % of their pre-Covid- 19 pay cheques.⁸² In another survey conducted by the Namibian Employers’ Federation (NEF) in 2020, it was found that out of some 517 private businesses, 39 % had instituted salary cuts.⁸³ Arguably the worst residual effect of Covid-19 restrictions on Namibia’s tourism and travel industry has been the loss of jobs. Having suffered severe and unforeseen income losses for much of 2020 and 2021, many Namibian tourism operators had to lay off their staff to guarantee business survival. The Namibian government initially sought to prohibit retrenchments from May to July 2020 using powers provided under the State of Emergency proclamation. However, this ban was successfully challenged in court by the NEF and a number of employers and was subsequently set aside.⁸⁴ Figures released by the Ministry of Labour, Industrial Relations and Employment Creation in January 2022 indicated that the country had lost 15,442 jobs since the start of the pandemic. Most of these losses were from the travel, tourism, hospitality, and catering sector which accounted for some 4,300 lost positions. However, government statistics are only able to survey trends related to formal employment. Given the predominance of the informal sector in the Namibian economy, labour experts have estimated that the true number of jobs lost as a result of Covid-19 fares much worse than government statistics are able to capture.⁸⁵

The government took swift action to support the private sector as well as various low-income groups by putting together an economic stimulus and relief package which was announced in April 2020.⁸⁶ Among others forms of relief, businesses could apply for wage subsidies and a tax-back loan schemes while Namibian financial authorities also pledged to speed up VAT refunds. However, survey data from BoN indicates that in practice, these measures supported only a modest number of tourism businesses. Indeed, just 24 % of respondents stated that they had been able to benefit from the government’s support package while a further 35 % had their applications rejected and 33 % were classified as ineligible.⁸⁷ In light of the government’s own poor financial position, the Ministry of Finance had little leeway to provide businesses with more generous economic support.

The industry itself has also sought to take steps towards revitalising the tourism sector with mixed results. For example, with the disappearance of the international tourism market, the Namibian tourism industry sought to stimulate domestic and regional markets instead.⁸⁸ In coordination with the government, private sector stakeholders developed the Tourism Revival Initiative (TRI) protocol with hopes of re-opening the borders and relaunching tourism in a responsible manner. After some initial setbacks, Namibian border entry requirements were relaxed, and the TRI was launched at the start of September 2020.⁸⁹

⁸² Mbazuvara Brian, et. al. BoN Discussion Note: the impact of covid-19 pandemic on the tourism industry. 7.

⁸³ IPPR. Namibia Quarterly Economic Review: Quarter 4 2020. February 2, 2021. 6.

⁸⁴ Weidlich Brigitte. Namibian Economics to the Point – June 2020. Gondwana Collection Namibia. June 30, 2020. <https://namibian.org/news/economics/economics-june>

⁸⁵ Petersen Shelleygan. “Pandemic retrenchment toll stands at 15 442.” The Namibian. January 25, 2022. 1-2. <https://www.namibian.com.na/6217343/archive-read/Pandemic-retrenchment-toll-stands-at-15-442>

⁸⁶ IPPR. Namibia Quarterly Economic Review: Quarter 2 2020. July 2020. 6. <https://ippr.org.na/publication/namibia-qer-quarter-2-2020/>

⁸⁷ Mbazuvara Brian, et. al. BoN Discussion Note: the impact of covid-19 pandemic on the tourism industry. 9.

⁸⁸ Interview with Paetzold, Gitta. Hospitality Association of Namibia. Windhoek, October 19, 2021.

⁸⁹ Windhoek Observer. “Tourism revival measures announced.” August 26, 2020. <https://www.observer24.com.na/tourism-revival-measures-announced/>

Namibian Tourism: Industry Trends & Developments

Over the past several years, Namibia's tourism industry has been compelled to adjust, not only as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic but also on account of shifting consumer demands and broader international developments, many of which cannot always be easily anticipated and catered to. For example, China has regularly been touted by the Namibian government as a potentially lucrative tourism market for Namibia to tap into. However, the pandemic has resulted in the tightening of travel requirements by China such that many international flight routes have been restricted and Chinese citizens continue to be advised to remain within the country's borders.⁹⁰

By and large, however, the Namibian industry has coped well with the ebbs and flows of international travel and tourism trends, as testified by the routinely positive economic performances of hotels and restaurants captured by government statistics. Notably, industry growth trends have continued to grow from strength to strength in spite of the pandemic and there appear to be hardly any new and untoward international tourism trends on the horizon for which the country needs to prepare for. Instead, representatives from both the tourism industry and the government have identified several components to drive business adaptation efforts including a shift towards small tour groups and self-drive tours, increased emphasis on hygiene and pandemic-conforming travel, meeting demands for more exclusivity and personalised services as well as the digitalization of certain services. This list of industry adaptations, while no means exhaustive, will now be discussed in more detail below.

- Small Tour Groups and Self-Drive Tours

This growing trend was highlighted by Gitta Paetzold, CEO of the Hospitality Association of Namibia (HAN). 'Self-drive' tours refer to travel itineraries that are planned and booked with the help of a local tourism booking agent or tour operator; however, the client drives the tour route himself using a rental vehicle. According to Paetzold, such offers have become increasingly more popular with international tourists since the onset of the pandemic. By contrast the sale of 'package tours', whereby tourists book spaces on a set-tour that usually involves groups of 20, 30, or more persons, travelling across the country in a bus with a local guide and driver – is increasingly falling out of favour. While some clients do still prefer to travel with a dedicated driver and guide, they are opting to do so in much smaller groups.⁹¹ These trends first identified by Paetzold have also been confirmed by Nathaly Ahrens, Chairperson of the Tour and Safari Association of Namibia (TASA).⁹²

- Emphasis on Hygiene and Pandemic-Conforming Travel

Ahrens states that international visitors are now more pointed in seeking to limit their contact with other tourists and industry staff. For example, clients prefer to stick with one tour guide throughout their trips and will avoid sharing tables with other tour groups during mealtimes.⁹³ Paetzold has echoed this observation, noting that tourists prefer to be insulated in their own 'travel bubble'.⁹⁴ This trend is clearly related to the Covid-19 pandemic but may also be attributed to more people becoming hygiene-conscious and placing more emphasis on cleanliness and health.

⁹⁰Yuan Shawn. "China doubles down on COVID-zero strategy." Al Jazeera. October 27. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/27/china-doubles-down-on-covid-zero-strategy>

⁹¹ Interview with Paetzold, Gitta. Hospitality Association of Namibia. Windhoek, October 19, 2021.

⁹² Interview with Ahrens, Nathaly. Tour and Safari Association of Namibia. Windhoek, October 22, 2021.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Interview with Paetzold, Gitta.

“Tourists now especially appreciate and value that personalised experience offered by many local tourist establishments and tour operators.”¹⁰¹

Indeed, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental organisation mostly comprised of developed western nations, notes that: “*safety and hygiene have become key factors to select destinations and tourism activities*”. Furthermore, in a report on rebuilding the tourism industry, the OECD foresees that a likely industry development will be increased focus on “*safety protocols and contactless tourism experiences*.”⁹⁵ Furthermore, the WTTC lists “*health and hygiene*” as one of the key lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic for the travel and tourism sector. The WTTC also observes that consumers in the Asian-Pacific region in particular are increasingly prioritizing health considerations in their holiday destination selection process. Thus, health and hygiene measures such as extra sanitizers are increasingly being seen as essential provisions for customers rather than optional.⁹⁶

Echoing these aforesaid international projections, the Namibia Tourism Board’s (NTB) CEO, Digu //Naobeb, noted that Namibian tourist establishments must improve their health and safety protocols to ensure that the industry stays up to date with global developments.⁹⁷ NTB is a government regulator and coordination agency for the Namibian tourism sector.⁹⁸

- Demand for More Exclusivity and Personalised Service

As with rising demands for self-drive tours, there exist growing customer demands for personalised and exclusive tourist services and products. According to TASA Chairperson Nathaly Ahrens, tourists with an interest in Namibia as a travel destination want a unique tour experience, tailored to their own idiosyncratic preferences, and needs.⁹⁹ This requires a deep understanding of Namibia’s diverse tourism landscape, attractions and services, a detailed and highly personalised tour itinerary as well as personable and direct interactions between clients and tour operations. As such, many Namibian tours are regarded as highly exclusive given the level of organisation involved in their planning and operation. According to Ahrens, tourists are more than willing to pay the premiums for such exclusivity, making the Namibian industry highly competitive in this regard.¹⁰⁰ In a similar vein, Paetzold has observed that the Covid-19 crisis had underlined the importance of human interactions in our daily lives. Consequently, tourists now especially appreciate and value that personalised experience offered by many local tourist establishments and tour operators.¹⁰¹

- Digitalization of Certain Services

On a global scale, the pandemic has accelerated the use of digital technology in all spheres of life. As a recent WTTC report observes:

“Technology will continue to play an important role as a key enabler for a safe and seamless traveller experience. It will be important for governments to invest in the digital infrastructure of emerging destinations and remote areas, as well as to enhance digital skills within local communities.”¹⁰²

NTB CEO //Naobeb also regards increased digitalisation of the travel and tourism industry as a crucial component to revitalise the sector going forward.¹⁰³ Interestingly, some private industry representatives have been more sceptical regarding the push towards digital technology and services. For example, Paetzold was outright in her belief that digitalisation should not be a priority.

⁹⁵ OECD. Rebuilding tourism for the future: COVID-19 policy responses and recovery. December 14, 2020. 6. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/rebuilding-tourism-for-the-future-covid-19-policy-responses-and-recovery-bced9859/>

⁹⁶ WTTC. Lessons Learned During Covid-19. August 2021. 7.

⁹⁷ Interview with //Naobeb, Digu. Namibia Tourism Board. Via Zoom. October 26, 2021.

⁹⁸ <https://namibiatourism.com.na/page/about-us>

⁹⁹ Interview with Ahrens, Nathaly.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Paetzold, Gitta.

¹⁰² WTTC. Investing in Travel & Tourism. September 2021. 6. <https://wtcc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2021/Investing%20in%20Travel%20and%20Tourism%20100921.pdf?ver=2021-09-16-112521-367>

¹⁰³ Interview with //Naobeb, Digu.

She did however note that booking systems would benefit from improved digitalisation.¹⁰⁴ Ahrens also voiced scepticism regarding digitalisation, noting that many international online booking sites such as www.booking.com had, to her knowledge, seen a huge drop in demand. In her view this was also underscored by the demand for more personalised services mentioned above wherein clients prefer personal interactions with a live agent who can gather information, book a tour, address possible issues, and so forth; as opposed to dealing with an automated online system.¹⁰⁵ Both Ahrens and //Naobeb did however agree that digital marketing of Namibia as a desirable tourism destination needs improvement. As summarised by the International Trade Administration, a US government agency dedicated to improving the global business environment:

*“Operators will increasingly need information technology solutions that will allow them to better control costs and understand their customers’ demands. While there are some larger tour operators and lodging companies providing state of the art information technology solutions, the Namibian tourism market is still highly fragmented with many small operators. Most small operators only have a limited internet presence. Companies that can provide cost effective internet-based marketing and booking solutions could find willing customers in Namibia.”*¹⁰⁶

A comprehensive stock-taking exercise of the digitalisation and the use of digital technology within the industry is beyond the scope of this report. However, there are indications that the travel and tourism industry is increasingly focusing its efforts on investing in digital infrastructure and services as far as operators are able to in the current strained economic climate. For example, Gondwana Holdings Limited, one of the largest Namibian tourism companies in the country, designated digitalisation as one of two “strategic enablers” for its business in 2019 and went on to establish its own digital strategy.¹⁰⁷ Gondwana’s 2020 report places even more emphasis on digital capacity- building and application as well as Information Technology (IT). Consequently, the company has continued to invest in and expand its IT capacities, online presence, e-commerce, online marketing, and staff competencies throughout the course of the pandemic. Indeed, Gondwana’s Value Creation Report 2020 argues that it makes strategic sense to make online bookings easier for clients and to improve services and products by analysing customer data and preferences in order to cut costs.¹⁰⁸

It is clear that online marketing has contributed greatly to boosting the tourism industry both prior to and in the aftermath of the pandemic and that it will continue to play an important role in promoting Namibia as a preferred tourist destination. In addition, social media channels have also added significantly to the country’s charm as an attractive travel location.¹⁰⁹ As observed in an online article posted by the travel industry news website Skift:

*“The desert terrain is compelling for those whose Instagram feeds are filled with more traditional safari photos and want something differentiated as they travel. In fact, the rise of social media has undoubtedly been a contributing factor in Namibia’s popularity.”*¹¹⁰

The utility of digitalisation and information technology does however come with a caveat; besides requiring considerable technical and human resources, it also needs skilful handling. As cautioned by Paetzold, social media in particular is a fickle medium which can both enhance but also damage businesses’ reputations.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Paetzold, Gitta.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Ahrens, Nathaly.

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/namibia-travel-and-tourism>

¹⁰⁷ Gondwana. Namibia, our Inspiration: Value Creation Report. March 11, 2020. 22 & 8.

¹⁰⁸ Gondwana. Value Creation Report 2020. March 30, 2021. 25 & 34.

¹⁰⁹ <https://skift.com/2019/08/06/namibia-lures-new-travelers-seeking-desert-solitude/>

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Interview with Paetzold, Gitta.

Risk & Opportunities: How Namibia's Tourism Recovery Measures up with Global Trends

Namibia arguably possesses an inherent advantage with respect to encouraging and perhaps even driving the global tourism industry towards becoming a more sustainable and inclusive economic sector. A number of the trends identified by international institutions as having arisen or accelerated as a result of Covid-19 restrictions pertain to the tourism attractions, products, and services that Namibia has to offer. However, other developments suggest that the country might not be a desirable international travel destination for all. Several of these developments and their potential impacts on Namibia's tourism recovery outlook are briefly sketched out below:

1. Nature & Rural-based Trips

One trend clearly imbued by the Covid-19 pandemic is the growing interest by prospective travellers for nature-based 'outdoor' tours.¹¹² This speaks to the emergence of an increasingly health-conscious tourist preferring to invest in nature-based travel as opposed to visiting crowded cities and indoor attractions. Another trend that also benefits "secondary destinations" is the increasing number of tourists opting to visit lesser-known areas.¹¹³ Namibia's primary attractions are its natural resources ranging from majestic desert dunes to magnificent natural inland landscapes, abundant wildlife, and clear, starlit night skies. While hardly unknown, the country doesn't boast the brand recognition of European cities such as Venice or Australia's Great Barrier Reef, and thus could arguably be classified as a secondary destination. Furthermore, with appropriate planning and advice from local tour operators, visitors to Namibia have the option of exploring many interesting and remote corners by themselves, thus limiting the social interactions that are currently out of favour with many travellers. Thus, the country's geology, sparsely populated demographic make-up, and novelty will be to the Namibian tourism industry's advantage with the slow revival of international leisure travel.

2. Health & Hygiene

Health and hygiene have become serious considerations for today's tourists in light of the devastating effects of the global pandemic. Consumers increasingly expect the following of scrupulous hygiene measures as well as clear, government-sanctioned health and safety standards which are properly implemented.¹¹⁴ As such, industry stakeholders including HAN and NTB have been proactive in coming together in 2020 to develop the 'Namibian Tourism Safety Protocols' a toolkit guiding enterprises in setting up a safe environment for visiting tourists.¹¹⁵

¹¹² UNWTO. World Tourism Barometer. January 2022. 16.

¹¹³ WTTC. Trending in Travel: Emerging consumer trends in Travel & Tourism in 2021 and beyond. November 2021. 12 - 3. https://wttc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2021/Trending_In_Travel- Emerging_Consumer_Trends-231121.pdf?ver=2021-11-23-101035-507

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 18.

¹¹⁵ Paetzold Gitta. "Hospitality Association Welcomes Relaxed Travel Measures." Namibian Economist. October 23, 2020. <https://economist.com.na/56774/speak-your-mind/hospitality-association-welcomes-relaxed-travel-measures/>

Another health consideration that may sway prospective tourists' decision to visit Namibia are national coronavirus vaccination rates. Low vaccination rates make individual countries and their domestic economies vulnerable to the incidence of further infection waves and variant mutations.¹¹⁶ Potential visitors could therefore be discouraged from travelling to Namibia due to its limited Covid-19 immunization numbers. Indeed, Namibia's vaccination campaign has stagnated with only around 15 % of the population having received two vaccinations to date.¹¹⁷ According to Paetzold, this is a major concern for the industry alongside inadequate communications with foreign travel agencies and tourist boards regarding government regulations for tourists.¹¹⁸ These concerns were also shared in by TASA's Ahrens (See Info Box 3). Furthermore, Ahrens also spoke to the industry's frustration with the government's inability to designate one focal point for proper communications about Covid-19 travel regulations. Instead, it appears that neither the Ministry of Tourism and Environment (MET), the Ministry of Health and Social Services (MoHSS), nor the NTB wanted to take responsibility for leaving industry stakeholders, foreign travel agencies, and prospective visitors without access to an authoritative and centralised source of information and guidance in this regard.¹¹⁹

3. Sustainable & Responsible Travel

This trend has been long running globally, and in the past Namibia was well placed to respond to it. Not only does this trend overlap with others mentioned above but it also makes sense from a business point of view. Protecting the environment and running inclusive, people-orientated operations intertwined with the wellbeing of local communities is the best and arguably only long-term solution for achieving a sustainable tourism and travel industry in all respects. The concept of sustainable tourism that has been embraced in one form or another for many years by numerous local tourist operators.¹²⁰

However, in more recent times with increasingly stark projections from the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)¹²¹ and a marked increase in the incidence of extreme weather and natural disasters among other things, public awareness of the necessity of environmental conservation and protection has drastically increased.

In addition to growing consciousness surrounding the protection of natural ecosystems, many people are beginning to re-think their consumerist and individualistic lifestyles, with many seeking ways to live more sustainable and meaningful lives. As tourists, many of these individuals are intent on *"creating a positive impact on local communities, increasingly searching for authenticity."*¹²² There is a strong argument to be made that this 'trend' will eventually have to become normative to the travel and tourism sector if the planet's natural ecosystems are to be protected while the industry continues to grow.

"In addition to growing consciousness surrounding the protection of natural ecosystems, many people are beginning to re-think their consumerist and individualistic lifestyles, with many seeking ways to live more sustainable and meaningful lives."

¹¹⁶ Mo Ibrahim Foundation. Challenge Zero: No real recovery with only 6.8% of Africa's population fully vaccinated. In Insights from the IIAG – COVID-19 in Africa: A challenging road to recovery. n. d. 12.

¹¹⁷ See 'Covid-19 Namibia Overview' sourced from COVID-19 Data Repository by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University. Provided via Google.com. April 8, 2022.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Paetzold, Gitta.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Ahrens, Nathaly.

¹²⁰ See for example: <https://ecoawards-namibia.org/about-us>

¹²¹ McGrath Matt. "Climate change: IPCC report warns of 'irreversible' impacts of global warming." BBC Online. February 28, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-60525591>

¹²² UNWTO. World Tourism Barometer. January 2022. 16.

“International projections that foresee a gradual and increasingly strong recovery of international travel, particularly in the high-end segment,¹²⁹ represents a most welcome outlook for Namibia.”

4. Longer Stays & Higher Spending

Another trend engendered by the Covid-19 pandemic is the growing willingness by more travellers to spend more time and money at one location or per trip. This speaks to the “*pent-up demand*” for more travel brought about by border closures, travel restrictions and other regulations associated with national lockdowns.¹²³ It likely also indicates that once people are on holiday, they want to take full advantage of it. Furthermore, there is an increased willingness amongst travellers to combine business and leisure travel by taking more so-called “*workcations*” trips. Travellers have also demonstrated increased flexibility with shorter booking windows and increased demands for flexible rebooking and cancellation options. While the latter trend will be difficult to cater to in the long-term due to heightened cost considerations,¹²⁴ Namibia should stand to benefit from these trends more broadly given that the vastness of the country lends itself better to longer trips. However, it is unlikely that Namibia would be an attractive option for ‘*workcation*’ travels given its limited internet connections and associated expenses.

Moreover, the trend in the direction of longer vacation stays also dovetails with the desire by more tourists to connect more closer with communities and to travel more sustainably. According to WTTC information, 70 % of leisure travellers from advanced economies including the USA, UK and Japan are planning to spend more money on their holidays in 2022. This is projected however to taper-off in the long-term.¹²⁵

5. Local & Regional Travel

Covid-19 has also impacted where people travel, if and when they can, with many people opting for trips within their own home countries or regions as opposed to more far afield overseas destinations. This is partially the result of pandemic-related restrictions. Travellers now face considerably less risks and potential inconveniences where a planned domestic or neighbouring country trip has to be cancelled or postponed, as opposed to when the same thing occurs while abroad in a foreign country and travellers are forced to contend with the prospects of having to quarantine so far away from home. Preferences for domestic travel may also be driven by economic constraint; with so many people having lost income and employment over the course of the pandemic lockdowns, many will understandably prefer cheaper destinations closer to home.¹²⁶

From the perspective of the Namibian tourism sector, domestic and regional travellers were a lifeline during 2020 and 2021. Indeed, since the pandemic broke in early 2020, hospitality establishments, conservation parks, lodges and tour operators have sought to provide tailored products to attract more local visitors. The Namibia Wildlife Resort (NWR), for example, offered special room discount rates to locals from May-September 2020. At the same time, however, the domestic market is simply too small to sustain the industry long-term.¹²⁷ As noted by Paetzold, while support from the local market boosted the morale and cash flow of businesses, they cannot really do without international visitors.¹²⁸ As such, international projections that foresee a gradual and increasingly strong recovery of international travel, particularly in the high-end segment,¹²⁹ represents a most welcome outlook for Namibia.

¹²³ WTTC. Trending in Travel: Emerging consumer trends in Travel & Tourism in 2021 and beyond. November 2021. 10.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 10 - 1.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 22.

¹²⁶ WTTC. To Recovery & Beyond: The future of travel & tourism in the wake of Covid-19. September 2020. 10.

¹²⁷ Namene, John-Colin. “Pressure increases on tourism.” The Namibian. June 24, 2021. <https://www.namibian.com.na/212573/archive-read/Pressure-increases-on-tourism>

¹²⁸ Interview with Paetzold, Gitta.

¹²⁹ WTTC. Trending in Travel: Emerging consumer trends in Travel & Tourism in 2021 and beyond. November 2021. 22.

While the country is also a long-distance destination for its core markets in Europe and the USA, placing emphasis on trends one and three should hopefully compensate for this potential drawback.

Besides uncertain figures surrounding job losses, sobering respondent survey results, and broad financial indicators, quantifying the losses that the travel and tourism industry has incurred is challenging without further and in-depth data, which, as previously stated, are not currently available. Nevertheless, even without access to such data, it is evident that the sector has been hit especially hard due to the number of business operations that have been scaled down or closed altogether. Still, the industry appears to be cautiously optimistic despite only recording an occupancy rate of 18.5% in January 2022 and other prevailing issues. For example, following expressions of concern by industry operators with continued impediments to international tourists' ease of entry to Namibia such as the requirement of negative PCR test not older than 72 hours, the Hospitality Association lobbied the government to drop this requirement for fully vaccinated travellers.¹³⁰ Consequently, the government heeded the industry's request by dropping the PCR test requirement on entry for fully vaccinated visitors on March 15 2022.¹³¹

Moreover, recent anecdotal information suggests that Namibian tour operators still face significant hurdles including poor communication around the use and management of the trusted travel system,¹³² an online Covid-19 testing verification system developed by the African Union (AU) and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention for travellers. Having been launched by the Namibian authorities in November 2021, the online platform was subsequently made compulsory for all travellers in January of this year.¹³³

On a positive note, those local tourist enterprises that have managed to weather the storm of the Covid-19 pandemic so far should now be in a good position to reap benefits from the gradual recovery of the industry. The demise of old businesses could also offer space and impetus for young entrepreneurs and external investors to enter the tourism sector and inject it with novel and dynamic ideas which will pay-off in the long-term. Of course, these silver linings will be of little comfort to those owners and staff that have seen their businesses go under in the past two years.

¹³⁰ Dlamini, Matthew. "Recovery looms for struggling hospitality sector." The Namibian. March 1, 2022. <https://www.namibian.com.na/110432/read/Recovery-looms-for-struggling-hospitality-sector>

¹³¹ Reuters. "Masks, PCR tests no longer needed in Namibia as COVID cases fall." March 15, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/masks-pcr-tests-no-longer-needed-namibia-covid-cases-fall-2022-03-15/>

¹³² Personal Communication – Anonymous: Namibian tour operator. March 1, 2022.

¹³³ The Namibian. "Trusted Travel System active from Saturday." January 14, 2022. <https://www.namibian.com.na/6217046/archive-read/Trusted-Travel-System-active-from-Saturday>



Info Box 2. Tourism Recovery in Africa – Where are the Ideas?

This research project was unable to uncover much information from neighbouring countries or other African states in terms of new ideas and concepts to boost the recovery of both national and regional tourism industries. Indeed, most literature appears to focus on describing and quantifying the devastation wrought by Covid-19 on said industries, while neglecting to provide any post-pandemic proposals or initiatives to assist businesses and governments in their recovery efforts.

A recent research paper from Botswana notes that, like Namibia, the country has sought to promote domestic tourism to cushion the blow of the pandemic on the international tourism sector. The authors note that while this represented a commendable initiative, the local market is too small to sustain the industry in the long-term. Furthermore, such a market transition would entail a drastic shift from a *'high-value low-volume'* to a *'low-cost high-volume'* policy by the government, which could negatively impact conservation. Notwithstanding this conundrum, the paper advocates diversifying Botswana's tourism offerings by providing more non-nature-based products to cater to domestic travellers, as well as for community organisations and SMEs to diversify their portfolios and build more resilience.¹³⁴ However, the authors did not make clear what these strategies would realistically entail.

Another paper authored by Delphine Kessy of the Augustine University of Tanzania provides a slightly more in-depth exploration of the recovery options for the local tourism sector, based in part on responses from an industry survey. All survey respondents were reportedly aware of the *'Tourism Standard Operating Procedures'*¹³⁵ introduced in June 2020 which prescribed measures that the Tanzanian tourism industry was obliged to undertake to avoid coronavirus infections amongst tourists and service providers alike.¹³⁶ However, the majority of survey respondents felt that a return to pre-pandemic travel and tourism conditions was highly unlikely with 78 % feeling that more effort should have been undertaken in the past to stimulate a domestic tourist market.¹³⁷

In terms of rebuilding the tourism sector, respondents proffered several possibilities including a focus on safety and security, marketing, and the maintenance of tourist attractions, and reducing government taxes to support the sector's economic recovery. However, the author argues that a better strategy to revive tourism in Tanzania would be to focus on *"good security mixed with good customer service"* while also taking steps to diversify the industry's offerings.¹³⁸ Noting that prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, Tanzania was hosting an increasing number of travellers from India and China, the author also postulates that these past connections could be used as a jump-off point to cultivate markets for local exports, looking specifically towards creating linkages to floriculture.¹³⁹ All in all, however, both papers are limited by their failures to reflect and analyse recent trends in the global tourism industry (See: Risk & Opportunities section) and how they could impact the tourism sectors of both Botswana and Tanzania respectively.

¹³⁴ Stone Lesego Senyana, Mogomotsi Patricia Kefilwe and Mogomotsi Goemeone. The Impacts of Covid-19 on Nature-based Tourism in Botswana: Implications for Community Development. In *Tourism Review International*. June 2021. Vol. 25, 273 – 5. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349056993>

¹³⁵ Kessy Delphine. The Future of Tourism: Post Pandemic Tourism in Tanzania. In *The Eastern African Journal of Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism*. Vol. 08, No. 1, Article 5. August 2021. 45.

¹³⁶ Ngowi Deus. "Tanzania: Tourism Standard Operating Procedures Launched." *All Africa*. June 11, 2020. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202006110477.html>

¹³⁷ Kessy Delphine. 44.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 45 – 6.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 46 – 7.

Conversely, one opinion piece written by Paul Bannister and Michael Spicer, both directors at the Tourism and Investment Promotion Agencies of Cape Town and the Western Cape, do directly refer to international trends. In an article published in the Daily Maverick in August 2021, Bannister and Spicer lament that South Africa's government was neglecting its duties to the industry even prior to the pandemic, failing, among other things, to introduce a working E-visa system or to address criminal elements targeting visitors at tourism sites. In turn, the authors offer concrete suggestions for how to swiftly kick-start the industry and to generate desperately needed employment by introducing a special work visa to attract travellers perusing 'workcation' destinations. Finally, Bannister and Spicer address the crucial global theme of environmental protection and sustainability, calling on South Africa's Minister of Tourism, Lindiwe Sisulu to take this issue to heart:

*"One of the few positive elements to emerge from the Covid lockdown has been the opportunity to reflect upon broader societal issues such as the natural environment and phenomena such as climate change. The minister could encourage the entire tourism value chain to work together to agree, and then to effectively implement an environmental best- practice protocol, plus an environmental offset scheme, to try to reduce the carbon footprint of global tourism. Perhaps our new tourism minister could become one of the champions for the protection and, where possible, the replanting of the world's vital temperate and equatorial forests?"*¹⁴⁰



¹⁴⁰ Bannister Paul & Spicer Michael. "Lindiwe Sisulu must grasp the nettle and embrace tourism as the 'new gold' that can inject fresh life into the economy." Daily Maverick. August 24, 2021. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-08-24-lindiwe-sisulu-must-grasp-the-nettle-and-embrace-tourism-as-the-new-gold-that-can-inject-fresh-life-into-the-economy/>

“The industry must be able to identify and respond to broader developments that go beyond simple changes in consumer preferences.”

Industry Transformation: More than Trends?

What would a transformation of the global tourism and travel industry look like in practice? To understand what such a fundamental shift would take, it is first necessary to roughly define and distinguish between trends specific to the industry itself versus broader international developments. Industry changes can be defined as noticeable trends typically reflective of growing consumer preferences and destination-specific adjustments. Market data and surveys are particularly adept at mapping such trends and ensuring that the industry remains competitive while *‘giving the client what they want’* and avoiding investments in undesirable products and services. Previously discussed examples of such trends include the demand for more rigorous hygiene measures by travellers, the growing demand for digitalised services and – specifically in the case of Namibia – client preferences for *‘self-drive’* tours.

Secondly, and perhaps more critically the long-term, the industry must be able to identify and respond to broader developments that go beyond simple changes in consumer preferences. These developments are diffuse in nature and may originate from structural shifts in public attitudes and cultures. They become especially pronounced and enduring once they have been integrated as part of the overall *‘travel culture’*. For example, over the course of the past decade, it has become the accepted norm for hotels and other accommodation establishments in the USA and Europe to request guests to reuse their bathroom towels. While this might cynically be interpreted as a purely a cost-saving measure, it is presented as a small but important measure to reduce pressures on the environment and to conserve its finite resources.¹⁴¹ Another larger development in the travel sector is the increased level of security screening at airports as well as limitations on carry-on goods, though this has been less an outcome of consumer demands than a response to the rise in international terrorism and specifically the terrorist attacks in the USA on 9/11.

It should be noted that the differences between a trend or a wider development can be difficult to pin down and short-term trends can also morph into more permanent accepted practices. Similarly – what really constitutes transformational is debatable. Suffice to state that the description and examples above are neither exhaustive nor necessarily authoritative.

Arguably, the majority of transformative changes originate from wider developments in societies and are often not industry specific. For example, the *‘workcation’* phenomenon would not have materialised without rapid advancements in digital technology as well as the cultural shift in the nature of employment towards more short-term and freelance contracts and work-from-home schemes. Transformation is also more profoundly disruptive in nature and requiring of more than just a handful of adjustments in the way a given industry operates.

¹⁴¹ Rogers Reese. “Reusing Hotel Towels: Essential Answer.” Stanford Magazine. September/October 2010. <https://stanfordmag.org/contents/reusing-hotel-towels-essential-answer>

According to Greg Richards, an academic from Tilburg University in the Netherlands, the transformation of the travel and tourism industry is a necessary measure to ensure the evolution of tourists from merely passive observers and consumers of foreign cultures to more engaged and conscious visitors:

*"We need to ensure that the experience of the pandemic is truly transformational – that we have a different experience of tourism when it returns, and that tourism has a positive effect on both people and places."*¹⁴²

Richards criticises the majority of pre-pandemic travel experiences as *"relatively passive, shallow and individualised"*.¹⁴³ In the same vein, the OECD has noted that while international tourism made positive contributions in terms of job creation and economic growth, it was also responsible for much of the social disruption and environmental degradation that transpired at many popular tourist destinations. Consequently, the OECD calls for an active re-thinking of the tourism industry's core structure, objectives, and operations so as to rebuild tourism as a more sustainable, inclusive, and greener sector.¹⁴⁴ The WTTC has also echoed these sentiments in a September 2020 report in which it urges enterprises to *"rethink prevailing business models"* and to work with local communities in order to bring about meaningful changes for future generations. The report also emphasises the need to practice environmental sustainability in a holistic manner, noting that good corporate governance, nature conservation, wildlife protection, fostering a multi-skilled workforce and collaborating with local communities are necessary components for future businesses strategy considerations.¹⁴⁵

For its part, the UNWTO likewise calls for the *"responsible recovery"* of the tourism industry from the global pandemic, tying economic recovery plans to the realisation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change. It also recommends that government and other stakeholder recovery efforts should ground their actions in six core themes including public health, social inclusion, biodiversity conservation, climate action, circular economy and governance and finance.¹⁴⁶ Thus, at its core, the overarching vision advanced by various stakeholders within the industry is for the sector to transform into a sustainable, inclusive and environmentally conscious sector providing of meaningful and positive changes as well as tangible benefits to both tourists and the local communities they visit.

"The OECD calls for an active re-thinking of the tourism industry's core structure, objectives, and operations so as to rebuild tourism as a more sustainable, inclusive, and greener sector."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Richards Greg. "Transforming tourism in a post-Covid world." Vita Magazine. May 2021. 62.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ OECD. Managing tourism development for sustainable and inclusive recovery. January 2021. 5. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/b062f603-en>

¹⁴⁵ WTTC. To Recovery & Beyond: The future of travel & tourism in the wake of Covid-19. 2, 24 & 8.

¹⁴⁶ UNWTO. One Planet Vision for a Responsible Recovery of the Tourism Sector. 2020. n. p. <https://www.unwto.org/covid-19-oneplanet-responsible-recovery-initiatives>



Info Box 3. Failure to Communicate

Within the context of constrained state capacities and financial limitations, the Namibian government has managed the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting socioeconomic fallout reasonably well. At the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the state was quick to impose a national lockdown and put in place various relief measures for businesses and citizens. For example, the government distributed a once-off Emergency Income Grant (EIG) targeting the unemployed and those active in the informal sector.¹⁴⁷ However, the government was less successful in implementing a clear, uniform, and authoritative national communications strategy to guide the population through the pandemic by issuing verified information about the coronavirus, infection prevention, treatment, and vaccination in order to effectively combat competing fake-news narratives.¹⁴⁸

Instead, the government's lacklustre, uncoordinated, and poorly resourced public information campaigns were unable to stem the tide of disinformation and many citizens struggled to gain access to basic information such as the location of their nearest vaccination sites. This, coupled with the state's failure to launch a well-designed, nationwide multimedia campaign to promote Covid-19 vaccinations to date, has undoubtedly contributed to the stagnating vaccination numbers and widespread vaccination hesitancy amongst the general public.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, even compared to neighbouring African countries, Namibia performs poorly in the proportion of its population that have so far been vaccinated (See Graph 1).

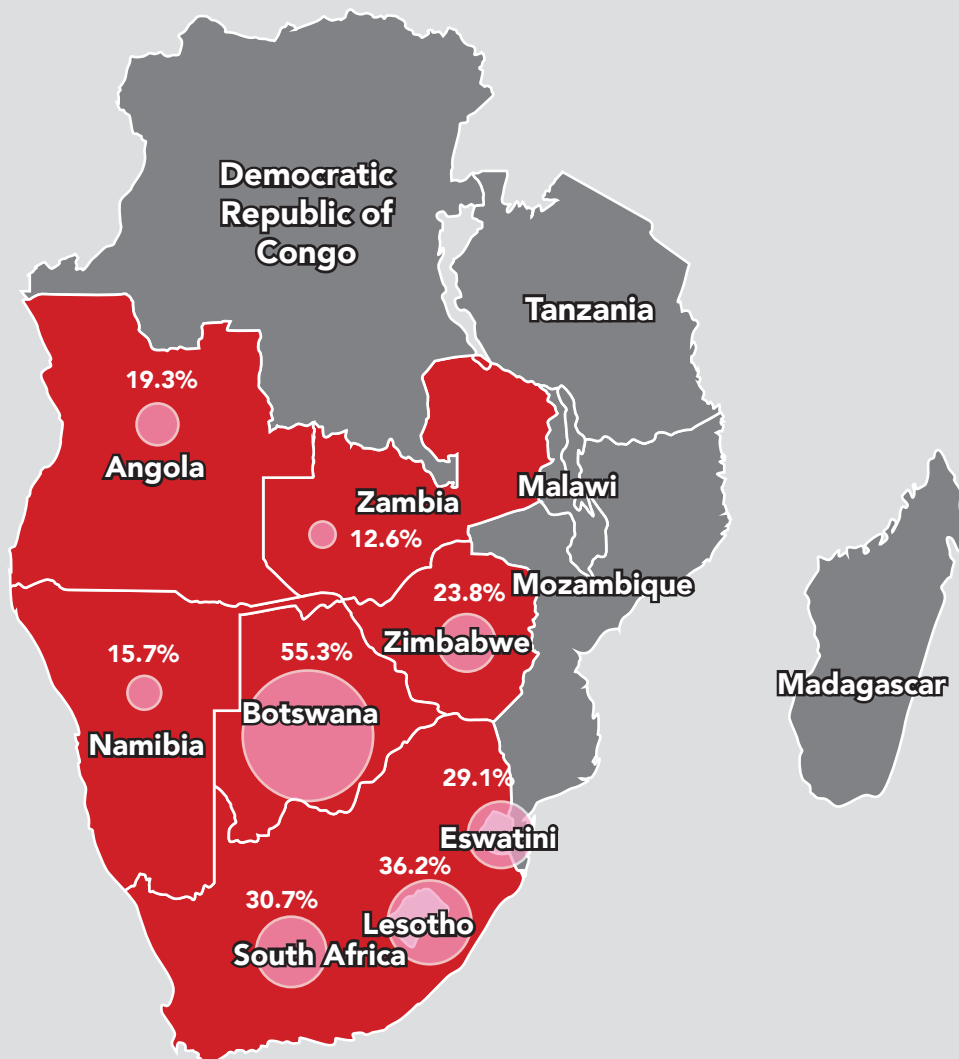


¹⁴⁷ IPPR. Giving The Can Another Kick - But How Long Is The Road? Namibia's National Budget 2020/21. June 2020. 2. <https://ippr.org.na/publication/analysis-2020-21-national-budget/>

¹⁴⁸ Namibia Fact Check. "COMMENT: Health Communication – Confusing messaging misinforms." June 18, 2021. <https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/news-item/comment-health-communication-confusing-messaging- misinforms/>

¹⁴⁹ New Era. "Editorial - Govt should remedy vaccines communication." June 18, 2021. <https://neweralive.na/posts/editorial-govt-should-remedy-vaccines-communication>

Graphic 1: Vaccination Rates by Southern African Country (% of Total Population Fully Vaccinated/As of 8 April 2022)¹⁵⁰



The tourism and travel industry had also suffered as a result of these government oversights (See Risk & Opportunities). Low vaccination rates amongst the local population serve as a disincentive for potential overseas visitors and confusion around coronavirus regulations at immigration points has resulted in tourists facing delays or even being refused entry to Namibia.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Sourced from Google News <https://news.google.com/covid19/map?hl=en-NA&mid=%2Fm%2F05bmq&gl=NA&ceid=NA%3Aen&state=3>

¹⁵¹ Interview with Ahrens, Nathaly.

“Environmental sustainability is regularly present in the rhetoric of political leaders, in practice the government has repeatedly supported and sanctioned destructive resource extraction projects and controversial mineral explorations.”

The Future: Bounce Back, Gradual Recovery or Transformation?

For many Namibian tourism businesses, the notion of advocating for the global transformation of the industry might initially sound far-fetched. While representatives interviewed during this paper's research period were to some extent aware of this impending global shift – //Naobeb from NTB emphasised the importance of tourism businesses improving their health and safety measures, for example ¹⁵² – interviewees made no mention of other key themes currently being grappled with by various international observers and institutions such as the UNWTO and WTTC. It could of course be argued that the international shift towards more 'outdoors' holiday destinations is less relevant to the Namibian context where nature is already centred as the primary feature of the country's tourism market. However, the fact that the Namibian tourism industry, and African tourism sectors more generally, have chosen to focus most of their energies on merely surviving rather than engaging in pertinent discussions surrounding the future prospects for international tourism is worrisome (See Info Box 2).

To be sure, representatives from HAN and TASA did make specific references to the local industry's impressive abilities to offer individualised and attentive services to clients. These pre-existing capacities are consistent with the broader international trend of tourists seeking out more responsible, socially-aware and authentic travel experiences. When queried, interviewees also agreed that the issue of environmental sustainability and greening the industry was important and that environmental protection and conservation initiatives had already been identified as focus areas for tourist excursions for some time in Namibia. NTB's //Naobeb also pointed out that revenue from tourism activities were beneficial to sustainable enterprises and environmental sustainability.¹⁵³ Meanwhile, Paetzold emphasised that HAN has actively lobbied their members since at least 1998 to green their operations, not only to protect the environment but also as a sound cost-saving measure.¹⁵⁴ However, Paetzold was also quick to point out that such ambitious and transformational initiatives spearheaded by the private sector were unlikely to succeed without similar commitments and support from government.¹⁵⁵

Furthermore, Ahrens from TASA acknowledged that the tourism industry must do more with regards to environmental sustainability and that TASA members were very much concerned about the government's ambiguity surrounding environmental protection laws and responsibilities. While environmental sustainability is regularly present in the rhetoric of political leaders, in practice the government has repeatedly supported and sanctioned destructive resource extraction projects and controversial mineral explorations. The most current example of this pattern is the controversial oil exploration work currently being conducted by the Canadian oil company ReCon Africa in the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA),¹⁵⁶ which has drawn international media attention and condemnation.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Interview with //Naobeb, Digu.

¹⁵³ Interview with //Naobeb, Digu.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Paetzold, Gitta.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Ahrens, Nathaly.

¹⁵⁷ Barbee Jeffrey and Neme Laurel. "Canadian oil company illegally bulldozes protected land in Namibia." The Namibian. March 10, 2022. Original article published by National Geographic. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/canadian-oil-company-illegally-bulldozes-protected-land-in-africa>

While the representative from NTB acknowledged that Namibia relied on mining and similar activities for much needed employment opportunities and revenue, it was also emphasised that such projects should not be rushed and must always adhere to laws and other regulations governing primary resource exploitation.¹⁵⁸

HAN and NTB interviewees both agreed that the Namibian government should put in place some form of national strategy or policy framework to guide and promote environmental sustainability and green tourism operations. Unfortunately, however, the government's recently drafted *Namibia's Tourism Sector Recovery Plan* forgoes any discussion of global travel and tourism developments and their likely long-term impact on the future of the industry. Instead, the plan primarily focuses on standard fare issues such as the improvement of existing marketing and the cultivation of new markets.¹⁵⁹ This is very unfortunate and will likely result in a lost opportunity for the Namibian government to contribute to the important discussions currently being had within various international forums on the pending transformation of global tourism. On the other hand, government finances remain very limited in the medium term and it may therefore be more sensible to prioritise the passage of policies that can better capacitate the private sector in order to attract more investment into the country.¹⁶⁰

“Government’s recently drafted *Namibia’s Tourism Sector Recovery Plan* forgoes any discussion of global travel and tourism developments and their likely long-term impact on the future of the industry.”

¹⁵⁸ Interview with //Naobeb, Digu.

¹⁵⁹ GRN. Namibia's Tourism Sector Recovery Plan 2022-2024. MET. November 2021. Draft.

¹⁶⁰ IMF. Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa – Navigating a long pandemic. April 2021. 12 - 3.



Info Box 4. Empowerment in the Tourism Industry

The encouragement of more diversity and inclusivity in the ranks of employers and employees comprising the tourism sector represents an important government initiative. A more equitable economy is crucial for the realisation of broad-based socio-economic development and inclusion, particularly given Namibia's historical occupation by the racially discriminatory and severely exploitative apartheid government of South Africa. The travel and tourism sector is labour intensive and offers considerable scope for entrepreneurship and the fostering of new enterprises with low barriers to entry. As such, the term 'transformation' in the Namibian context seems to be more closely associated with local empowerment goals, rather than the global shift towards a more environmentally sustainable industry, as has been outlined in this paper.

The government has supported this empowerment drive using a range of policy, legislative and fiscal instruments over the past few decades. For example, one of the three strategic objectives outlined in the National Strategy on Sustainable Heritage Tourism Development and Employment Creation Opportunities at Community Level launched in April 2021, calls for the tourism sector to take a more active role in furthering social inclusion.¹⁶¹

In practice, however, some industry players have been accused of paying lip-service to the government's objective of fostering greater empowerment for local communities through the tourism industry. Some observers opine that the old, entrenched powers present within the industry are especially resistant to such changes as well as the adoption of any new ideas advocated by young reformists. In a recent newspaper opinion piece, NWR's Managing Director Dr. Matthias Ngwangwama has criticised this tension between traditionalists and reformists as unproductive and instead advocated for an *"open, honest and transparent dialogue"* between industry stakeholders in order to kick-start much-needed reforms and growth.¹⁶² Consequently, some private sector associations and individual companies have publicly committed themselves to creating a more enabling environment for inclusivity and diversity in the tourism industry.¹⁶³ Indeed, according to Manfred Goldbeck of Gondwana Collections, *"more diversity and black business ownership and representation at leadership level"* is crucial to moving the industry forward.¹⁶⁴

An assessment of the current status of these transformational efforts within the Namibian travel and tourism sector, as envisioned by both government and industry representatives, goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is fairly apparent that one of the biggest impediments to the fostering of greater dialogue and clarity around these important issues is a lack of quality and easily accessible data. For example, detailed and up-to-date information on employment and ownership statistics within the sector is essentially non-existent. Without such information, it will be hard to conduct a meaningful dialogue based on evidence rather than hearsay. This is something that industry stakeholders will need to address in the future.

¹⁶¹ UNESCO. "Official Launch of The National Strategy on 'Sustainable Heritage Tourism Development and Employment Creation Opportunities at Community Level in Namibia'". April 3, 2021. <https://en.unesco.org/news/official-launch-national-strategy-sustainable-heritage-tourism-development-and-employment>

¹⁶² Ngwangwama Matthias. "Opinion: The two worlds of Namibian tourism." New Era. February 4, 2022. <https://neweralive.na/posts/opinion-the-two-worlds-of-namibian-tourism>

¹⁶³ Sherbourne, 350.

¹⁶⁴ USB. "Namibia: Sustainable tourism development through leadership." University of Stellenbosch Business School. April 29, 2019. <https://usb-ed.com/blog/namibia-sustainable-tourism-development-through-leadership/>

Conclusion

To be clear, neither the Namibian government nor the country's private sector are in any way obligated to follow guidance around travel and tourism emanating from international organisations and institutions. At the same time, the absence of any level of candid discussion or reflection on increasingly observable international trends and industry developments seems negligent, not least because Namibia is a country whose pristine natural environments and the people inhabiting them are projected to suffer sooner and more severely from the effects of global climate change and their damaging consequences for local tourism industries.¹⁶⁵

The local tourism and travel sectors, government and other stakeholders can and do wield the power to influence the development and future direction of tourism in Namibia. While the pandemic has devastated the industry – Covid-19 is offering an opportunity to re-think and possibly re-align existing and planned tourism operations to be fundamental environmentally sustainable and community centred.

The personal preferences of travellers alone do not dictate what products and services the industry is permitted to develop and promote. Indeed, people themselves don't often know what they really want until they have seen and experienced it. Therefore, Namibia is well placed to take advantage of the international drive towards more sustainable and conscious travel choices and shape this impending transformation to their advantage in order to improve competitiveness.

Recommendations:

1. Stakeholders in the travel and tourism industry including private enterprises, regulators, community associations and industry associations should engage in an open, sophisticated, in-depth discussion about the near and far future of the sector. It is crucial that this discussion considers not only local issues and trends validated by data, but also global developments and guidance from leading international tourism organisations. In the same vein, discussions on progress and barriers to transforming industry into an equitable and diverse sector should resume based on solid, evidence-based information.

2. The ambiguities and contradictions that are evident in the government's pursuit of resource extraction projects such as oil and gas exploration while at the same time presenting Namibia as a global leader in environmentalism and sustainability is disingenuous and smacks of deliberate greenwashing, particularly when there is evidence that Namibia's environmental protection laws around resource exploration and exploitation are being violated. This issue risks damaging the country's reputation as an environmentally conscious paradise and needs to be addressed forthwith in a deliberate and transparent manner.

3. After years of economic recession followed by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, government finds itself with high debts and in a difficult financial position; leaving little space for monetary support for the industry and tourism infrastructure. Regulators should therefore prioritise helpful measures and policies that require limited finances. Easing visa requirements and pandemic restrictions for travellers – especially those who are fully vaccinated – would be a commendable first step. Long running issues hampering tourism such as poor immigration services should also be tackled with renewed vigour.

4. Stakeholders in the industry and particularly government need to address the many communication failures around the management of Covid-19, pandemic regulations and sharing of up-to-date and timely information with the private sector. In future public health emergencies, it would be particularly advisable for authorities to include private sector representatives on relevant government advisory boards.

5. Namibia's tourism enterprises, regulators as well as the wider public have the ability to influence and shape the country's travel and tourism future successfully. An early and wholehearted commitment by all stakeholders to realise the international transformative vision of the industry would give Namibia a head-start, and signal its intention for a more progressive, sustainable and socially responsible tourism sector. Furthermore, using its own experiences of greening tourism operations and balancing development with environmental protection as a basis; the country could establish a best-practice model of transformation.

“Namibia is well placed to take advantage of the international drive towards more sustainable and conscious travel choices.”

¹⁶⁵ See: Rimmert, Dietrich. Weak Policies & Conflicting Visions: Drought, water shortages and climate change in Namibia. IPPR. March 2020. <https://ippr.org.na/publication/drought-water-shortages-climate-change-in-namibia/>

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Notes

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About the Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF)

Present in more than 60 countries world-wide, the Hanns Seidel Foundation Namibia (HSF) is a German non-profit organisation promoting democracy, good governance and the rule of law across the African continent. Cooperating with its Namibian partners, such as IPPR, HSF also seeks to contribute to sustainable development by strengthening peace, human security and environmental protection.

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The Institute for Public Policy Research was established in 2001 as a not-for-profit organisation with a mission to deliver independent, analytical, critical yet constructive research on social, political and economic issues that affect development in Namibia.

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