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Domestic Tourism in Kenya: A Tool for Sustainability amid Global Crisis

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Abstract

Domestic tourism has proven to be an important driver of tourism industry globally. In Kenya, tourism industry is a critical economic pillar. Empirical evidence reveals that domestic tourism accounts for a huge amount of travel and tourism spending. Globally, domestic tourism has equally generated many employment opportunities and contributed to the overall economic growth. While seasonality is a common phenomenon in the travel industry, domestic tourism has been a useful tool to ameliorate the negative impacts of seasonality. The recent global health pandemic (Covid-19) has greatly affected international tourism – a market that many tourism destinations (such as Kenya) depend on. At the height of Covid -19, followed the ban on international flights to Kenya, the country saw a sharp drop in international arrivals (from 1.5 million 2019 to 0.4 million at the end of 2020). This paper seeks to put into perspective the role of domestic tourism amid such crises, in sustaining tourism related businesses in Kenya. A desktop review was adopted to establish how domestic tourism has and is supporting the tourism sector. The review questions included the following: (i) what is the potential of domestic tourism in Kenya. (ii) What are the current trends of domestic tourism in Kenya, (iii) what are the constraints limiting the uptake of tourism in Kenya? Findings of the review revealed that domestic tourism is an important niche market that has played a critical role during Covid-19 pandemic and should never be underestimated. Among the constraints identified were lack of awareness, and price related constraints. Some of the popular trends in domestic tourism in Kenya includes; increase in day trips/excursions, seaside resort tourism, and visit to game parks/reserves and sightseeing. These findings are key in guiding tourism policy development and implementations to focus on domestic tourism.

Key words: *Tourism, Sustainability, Global Crisis, COVID-19*

1. Introduction

Domestic tourism comprises the activities of a resident visitor within the country of reference, either as part of a domestic tourism trip or part of an outbound tourism trip' (IRTS 2008, 2.39). Tourism in an export industry and many countries are more inclined to international tourism (inbound tourism) because of the attractive revenues earned through its exports. Classically, this has led to little emphasis in domestic tourism besides remaining the leading and common form of tourism. Domestic tourism characterises an invaluable tool for economic growth. The current global population featuring an increased middle class presents a niche that can afford to partake in travel and tourism. Empirical findings contend that domestic tourism picks at lower income levels than international tourism. Arguably, many developing countries have reached this threshold and have proven to sustain the growth of domestic travel. Currently, as the domestic tourism significance is growing because of several factors including the present Covid-19 pandemic, industry players are curating attractive packages for domestic tourists.

2. Conceptual Framework

From the conceptual framework in *Figure 1* below, the uptake of domestic tourism can be a tool for sustainability amid global crises such as in the Covid-19 pandemic era where tourism industry and related livelihoods suffered. Through domestic tourism the researcher conceptualizes that there will be sustained tourism receipts (income and revenue) and jobs (tourism dependent livelihoods), during such crisis. However, the researcher conceptualizes that other factors will influence the uptake of domestic tourism including; perception factors (that tourism is for international tourists), marketing (that tourism marketing efforts have been greatly geared towards international tourism), Awareness (that locals/residents are not aware of domestic tourism offers), price constraints (that tourism offers are premium-priced hence unaffordable to locals).

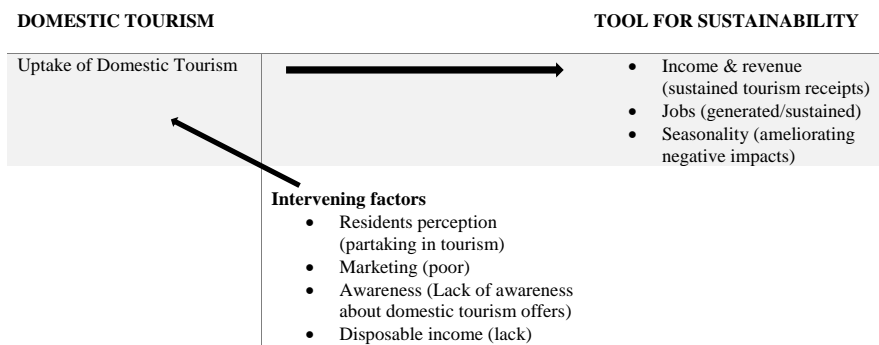


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Source: (Kipchirchir Ronoh, 2022) – Researcher

3. Methodology

This paper is based on a desk review on *domestic tourism as a tool of sustainability amid global crises*. It followed an internet search using the following key phrases; *potential of domestic tourism; current trends of domestic tourism, constraints limiting domestic tourism, and tourism sustainability indicators*. The researcher reviewed journals relevant to the search term and other relevant internet resources.

4. Domestic Tourism Market

4.1 The Potential of Domestic Tourism Market

By the end of 2017, global domestic tourism represented over 70% of global tourism spending which translated to billions of dollars. Some of the countries that rank high for domestic visitor spending include China, USA, Japan, India, Brazil, and Argentina. Particularly for China, such bargains can be attributed to its government efforts in championing for domestic tourism through various policies that has improved accessibility to less visited areas. In 2019, tourism spending and domestic travel for Kenya was \$3.7 billion. Between 2000 and 2019, tourism spending and domestic travel of Kenya grew substantially from \$0.4 to \$3.7 billion going up at an increasing annual rate. While Covid-19 was a shock to tourism industry in Kenya because of the decrease of international arrivals, some industry players that remained afloat attribute their survival to designing products and services for domestic tourism markets.

4.2 Domestic Tourism in Kenya

A study done by M. Ndivo and N. Waudo, (2012) titled '*Examining Kenya's Tourist Destinations' Appeal: the Perspectives of Domestic Tourism Market*' found out that taking holidays was considered by many Kenyans as significant to them. Further findings of their study revealed that most Kenyans were not aware of other touristic destinations other than the popular sun and sand (Kenya's coast). This is in line with the findings of a dissertation on '*Demand Drivers for Urban Domestic Tourism in Kenya*' by Kamau and Njoki (2016) that found out that there was lack of awareness on existing tourist destinations among Kenyans and recommend that Kenyans should be sensitized about available tourism products.

Kwoba, V. (2018) in '*Promoting domestic tourism in Kenya: an assessment of economic significance and opportunities for tourism stakeholders in Nairobi*' identified major opportunities for enhanced domestic tourism in Kenya to include; price incentives, improved transport network, and awareness. Kamau and Njoki (2016) further recommended the need for hotels to create offers and packages for domestic tourism market. While this recommendation was made prior Covid-19 times, there is evidence that hotels are becoming cognizant with the potential of domestic tourism and are offering lower rates to lure domestic tourists. Following Covid 19 outbreak, there have been campaigns to encourage Kenyans to travel not only during specific seasons such as Christmas holidays, but all year round. Hotels have also taken up the challenge by following health guidelines and safety protocols to facilitate tourists to partake in tourism amid the pandemic. These efforts are evident in hotel deals and various tour packages that have been crafted to be budget friendly.

Whitelocks (2021) in *globetrender.com* contend that lower hotel rates due to Covid-19 pandemic has facilitated more domestic tourist to traverse their country (Kenya) and have seen the beauty that the country has to offer for holidaymakers. Awareness creation of other existing tourism offers is therefore important in promoting domestic tourism. According to *businessdailyafrica.com*, '*Domestic tourism is a major driving factor of Kenya's tourism and travel sector, contributing more than half of its GDP*' and should not be limited to the Kenya's Coast, but extended to other regions such Eldoret, Kisumu and Nairobi.

Tourism Principal Secretary (PS) Safina Kwekwe, during 2021 World Tourism Day, contends that '*domestic tourism remains the viable option to revive tourism businesses in the wake of the pandemic that has disrupted businesses all over the world.*'

4.3 Trends in Domestic Tourism in Kenya

There has been increase in the number of day trips/excursions offers by many local tour companies offering urban tours and get always for various experiences (urban adventure) into the city (ies) and its environs. This is evident in various travel search engines (tripadvisor.com, viator.com, etc.) that present various offers (by various local tour companies) including few hours, half day to full day excursions to various attractions such as Elephant Orphanage, Giraffe Centre in Nairobi, Nairobi National Park Safari, Hell's Gate and Lake Naivasha Guided Tours, Karen Blixen Museum excursions among others. These offers have been crafted for domestic tourists. A probable strategy that many tour and travel companies have put in place to stay afloat amid Covid-19 pandemic. Seaside resort tourism has also become popular among Kenyans. Tourism facilities along the Kenyan coast reported that domestic travellers and tourists have dominated their bed occupancy, especially during Covid-19 times. Some hotels report that there has been an upsurge in domestic tourist and travellers' bookings for the weekend (weekenders). Specifically, the hotels reported that these bookings were made for short periods (Thursdays - Sundays) and involved domestic tourists moving from upcountry to the coast. With this trend, most hotels have designed offers targeting domestic tourists. Traditional national parks have also recorded a high number of domestic tourists amid Covid-19 pandemic. An article by *George Sayagie* in *allafrica.com* reveals that Kenya's tourism sector is picking as Kenyans flocks Maasai Mara Game reserve to witness the migration of the wildebeest. Despite Covid-19, lodges and camps in Maasai Mara experienced a surge in domestic tourists, an indication that domestic tourism is gradually growing. Generally, sightseeing tourism by locals to national parks, reserves, landscapes, and even historic and cultural areas has increased. Notably, group tours are also on the rise.

4.4 Constraints to Domestic Tourism in Kenya

Before the present pandemic, Kenya's tourism offers were tailored for international tourists. Most packages featured premium prizes (hotel prizes were high; safari packages were equally high). These prices were not friendly for local tourists/travellers. While the tourism industry has been severely hit by the Covid-19 crisis, Kenyan government has initiated campaigns to encourage domestic tourism to support the economy. Many hospitality businesses are offering attractive discounts to spur domestic tourism and many locals are finally having an opportunity to experience Kenya's famed attractions. Coupled with these initiatives, the launch of affordable Standard Gauge Railways (SGR) has created further demand for domestic tourism. Awareness creation is also an important factor in the uptake of domestic tourism.

Various studies done in Kenya revealed that many Kenyans did not partake in tourism because they were not aware of various tourism offers (Kwoba, V. (2018), Kamau and Njoki (2016), M. Ndivo and N. Waudu, (2012)). This revelation is a product of poor marketing and awareness creation efforts. This scenario is changing and currently various tourism and travel companies have launched advertisement campaigns (evident in various search engines) towards tourism offerings particularly crafted for local tourists. The increase in cellular internet connectivity and coverage has facilitated information reach.

A study that investigated '*Factors Influencing Domestic Tourism for Urban and Semi urban Populations around National Park, Kenya*' by Okello, M., Kenana, L. and Kieti, D., (2012) reveal the role of perception in the uptake of domestic tourism. Findings of their study revealed that, other than the lack of disposable income, many locals perceived that visit to the parks were meant for foreign travellers and tourist. This could be another probable reason for the slow uptake of domestic tourism. While some of the locals might still hold on to this perception, many industry players depended on domestic tourists amid Covid-19 where international arrivals remained few.

5. Recommending Policies to Tap into Domestic Tourism

With the slow but gradual growth of domestic tourism in Kenya, innovative marketing efforts will contribute greatly in realizing an accelerated growth. Together with marketing efforts, incentives such as attractive price packages for the domestic market should be availed. A mix of various marketing channels is equally important in expanding market reach. Integration of social media and internet marketing is a milestone in reaching the growing middle-class in Kenya. Sustained marketing campaigns targeting Kenyans, particularly leisure travellers will increase the volume of domestic tourism. Infrastructural investments to emerging destinations will also open many new destinations for domestic tourists. With the aforementioned recommendations, there is need for continuous research to understand the needs of the domestic tourists.

6. Conclusion

Domestic tourism has proven to be an important niche during Covid-19 pandemic and has sustained tourism sector. While empirical evidences have shown that many destinations have focused on international tourism, this review reveals that domestic tourism can be employed as sustainability tool, both in the foreseeable and in the unforeseeable future. Countries like China and

USA among others' domestic visitor spending reveals a market opportunity (domestic tourism) that should not be underestimated. This revelation is imperative in guiding tourism policy to equally integrating domestic tourism into development flagship programs.

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