



**IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO MEETINGS, INCENTIVES, CONFERENCES AND EXHIBITIONS (MICE)
TOURISM IN RWANDA**

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Accepted: August 2, 2020

ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of 2020 COVID-19 engulfed the world halting the daily activities. In a matter of weeks, the pandemic had threatened health and lives of millions of people worldwide. By the last quarter of the month of March 2020 several countries in the world including Rwanda had imposed travel restrictions and lockdown measures to combat COVID-19 pandemic. This led to unprecedented levels of mass commercial flight cancellations and travel restrictions, forcing millions to alter their travel plans. Both international and domestic tourists cancelled bookings in Rwanda and outbound tourism activities were also banned. Airlines had cancelled flights, while hotels were almost completely vacant. Consequently, tour operators were facing huge economic losses and employment cuts in Rwanda. According to the Minister for Trade and Industry, Soraya by July 21st 2020 Rwanda's MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) industry had been hit by a \$48 million (over Rwf45 billion) loss as a result of the global Covid-19 crisis. The purpose of this paper was to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) tourism in Rwanda. The study covered a period of 7 months (December, 2019- July, 2020). The study adopted a descriptive survey design. 36 general managers of hotels offering MICE tourism for a period of three years from 2017-2020 in Kigali Province were targeted. A sample of 34 respondents was determined from this population using purposive sampling technique. Both primary and secondary data was collected. Primary data was collected using the questionnaire while for secondary data the study reviewed journals, historical records, newspaper articles, World Health Organization statistics, government data, and website materials on COVID-19 incidences in tourism. Data analysis was done with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 21. The study findings revealed that 58.8% of the respondents strongly agreed that COVID-19 created conditions and disruptions forcing socio-behavioural changes on societies. In addition, 76.5% of the respondents strongly agreed that MICE consumers in Rwanda had been seriously curtailed by the pandemic. Moreover, 64.7% of the respondents agreed that their hotel expectations of the right to unfettered mobility across national borders has been severely challenged by government responses to COVID-19, 35.3%. Furthermore, a combination of (82.4%) of the respondents agreed that closure of attractions and tourism facilities had negatively affected the MICE tourism. Lastly, 61.8% agreed that virtual events mainly served as a good substitute for recession-prone exhibitors and attendees during COVID-19 while 32.8% strongly agreed. A half of the respondents representing 50% also strongly agreed that travel restrictions on rights to visit friends and family had negatively impacted the MICE tourism. From the review of respondents, the study noted that MICE consumers had not only been affected in Rwanda alone but globally. In general, there was no doubt that the hospitality and tourism sector was operating at a loss. The study concluded that in Rwanda, COVID-19 had adversely impacted MICE tourism.

Based on the study findings the study recommended to the Government of Rwanda to continue imposing measures to combat the pandemic. Since the end of the pandemic was not predetermined there was need to continuously address both on an on-going basis as the pandemic and its effects evolved over time and place and as a retrospect once the new hospitality and tourism in Rwanda to make the sector sustainable during and after the pandemic. Future studies can be carried in other districts of the country. Also, a study on MICE tourism preparedness in responding to the crisis and recovery of their enterprises can be carried out.

Keywords: Meetings, Incentives, Conferences Exhibitions, COVID-19, Tourism

CITATION: Rwigema, P. C. (2020). Impact of Covid-19 pandemic to Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) tourism in Rwanda. *The Strategic Journal of Business & Change Management*, 7(3), 395 – 409.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has led significant disruptions to all forms of economic activities since December 2019 when the first case was reported in Wuhan China (Ayithey *et al.*, 2020). World Health Organization (WHO) declared this COVID-19 as a pandemic. The infection has become a pandemic despite different preventive measures taken by countries and organizations (Brooks *et al.*, 2020).

According to WorldoMetre (2020, July 31, 10:45) the pandemic has been spreading at an increasing rate with more than 17.4 million confirmed cases, and more than 677,162 deaths. Of the confirmed cases over 10.9 million have recovered globally. Africa CDC has reported the number of coronavirus cases across Africa as 912,744 with 559,953 recovered and 19,364 deaths. This is reciprocated in Rwanda where 1,994 confirmed cases of which 1,085 so far have recovered and five deaths reported.

The speedy spread of the virus has caused massive shutdowns in all types of business activities and supply chain disruptions causing global wave effects across all economic sectors that were never predictable. (Karantzavelou, V., 2020, July 17). The global revenues for the first half of 2020 dropped by two thirds on average, compared with the same period last year.

Countries, organizations and individuals have taken many different measures to curb this dangerous situation (ILO, 2020a). World Health Organization has instructed the public to adhere to health measures such as staying home while sick, covering mouth and nose with flexed elbow or tissue when coughing or sneezing, Disposal of used tissue immediately, washing hands often with soap and water and cleaning touched surfaces and objects frequently (World Health Organization, 2020).

According to World Travel and Tourism Council, (2019) tourism is a crucial pillar for economic growth supporting an estimated 330 million jobs, 1 in 10 jobs around the world and contributing 10.3% of global GDP in 2019. United Nations World Tourism Organization (2020), notes that the international tourism has indicated continuous growth for the tenth consecutive year reporting 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals in 2019 and estimated 1.8 billion of international tourist arrivals by 2030. Of great benefit has been the Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions (MICE) industry which is an important and growing segment of the tourism industry with a great potential. The industry consists of multi-sectors of hospitality services, including lodging, food and beverage, catering, convention service, convention facility supply, transportation, tourism, retail, and entertainment and thus bears great importance for

the local economy of a destination (Yang & Gu, 2012).

According to Chinazzi et al., (2020) the consequences of the pandemic has seen the shutdown of hospitality and tourism operations of many countries have been virtually and international travel (and, in some countries, domestic travel as well) has all but ceased. In addition, Cao, *et al.*, (2020) notes that the right to travel and to enjoy the services of hospitality and tourism operators has been constrained in a way unprecedented except in times of the world wars of the twentieth century.

Baum, and Nguyen (2020) indicates that governments all over the world have applied the public health justification within the Siracusa Principles (1984) to take action through the use of emergency powers like the COVID-19. As Sheller (2020) articulates so clearly, the global health pandemic has impacted the way people live, including entitlement to personal mobility through access to travel both locally and further afield and to be tourists, something increasingly taken for granted as a right in many societies. In constraining physical mobilities in response to this pandemic, governments have enacted laws and regulations that would have been unthinkable in most countries prior to the current emergency. At a social level, the notion of “social distancing” has entered the common lexicon (Long, 2020), a notion that is the very antithesis of expectations of the experience of MICE tourism. Therefore, World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2020) estimates more than 50 million jobs in the travel and tourism sector could be at risk globally.

According to (Umar, R., 2020), global Smith Travel Research (STR), United States hotel industry has had an unprecedented impact due to COVID-19. The travel restrictions and social distancing policies have had a dramatic effect on the industry. According to (GlobalData, 2020) hotel occupancy in the US has dropped to 53% and revenue per available room has declined by 32.5% for the week ending March 14).

According to (Tatiana Rokou 2020), the Centre for Exhibition Industry Research (CEIR) reports that growth of the exhibition industry plunged during the first quarter of 2020 as 72.6% of events originally scheduled for the second half of March were cancelled. The remaining 27.4% of events were postponed and some of those events may eventually be cancelled as well. Due to many cancellations, the CEIR Total Index, a measure of exhibition industry performance, registered a record 15.1% decline from a year ago compared to a modest 0.3% year-over-year gain of inflation-adjusted Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

According to the report by United Nations World Tourism Organization, (2020) European Union tourism industry is estimated to be losing around €1 billion in revenue per month as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19. In Particular popular tourist destinations, hotels have been deserted and restaurants, bars, tourist attractions, theme parks and museums closed. Trade fairs, congresses and cultural events have been cancelled or postponed. According to (Josh Burrows, 2020), sporting events, such as the Euro 2020 football championship and the Olympic Games, have been postponed until 2021. Ski resorts have ended the winter season early. According to (Gene Sloan 2020), major cruise companies have halted operations; cruise ships stranded at the sea, as more and more ports have temporarily refused them entry. Various countries have reintroduced border controls or banned certain travellers from entering their territory, leaving them struggling to return home (IATA, 2020).

Since early February 2020, more than fifty airline companies suspended or limited flights to China and several countries including Italy, Australia, Russia, and the USA, and also imposed government-issued travel restrictions (Chinazzi *et al.*, 2020). Nearly about 75% of travellers of Luxury Travel agency suspended their tickets for Southeast Asian countries which were to be departed by February and March (Ekstein, 2020). Many holiday destinations in Southeast Asia regions like Beijing,

Shanghai, Xi'an, Chengdu, in China along with various destinations in Malaysia and Singapore had been booked by the global tourists, which were cancelled and rebooked for other destinations like Southern Africa, Maldives, and Australia (Briefing & Associates, 2020).

In Italy, almost 90% percent of hotel and travel agency bookings for March 2020 cancelled in Rome and up to 80% in Sicily (Federazione Italiana del Turismo, 2020). As numerous coronavirus cases in other European countries are traced back to Italy, travel warnings for eleven more Italian towns that have been on lockdown have been issued. The impact is also hurting areas of Italy barely touched by the virus. Italy's tourism federation announced that damage to the tourism sector is estimated at 200 million for the first quarter of the year (Mangiapane, 2020).

According to Lee-Peng *et al.*, (2020) Malaysia had a total of approximately 170,084 hotel room bookings during the period 11th January 2020, but until 16th March 2020 had been cancelled, which caused a loss of revenue amounting to 68,190,364 Malaysian ringgits. The loss was directly attributable to the outbreak of COVID-19. In addition, the author predicts that the local hotel sector had been projected to lose 3.3billion Malaysian ringgits in revenue by June 2020, as a result of Movement Control Order (MCO) which has been extended to 12 May 2020.

The prospects of Africa's tourism industry are very strong as compared to other regions in the world. It was projected to increase between 3 % to 5% in 2020. However, with the ongoing restrictions, hotels are laying off workers and travel agencies are closing in many African countries, a negative growth is likely to be expected. The overall impact of Covid19 on the economies of top tourist countries is much higher than that all African economies (UNCTAD, 2020). In 2019 tourism industry contributed to more than 10 percent of GDP of the following countries: Seychelles, Cape Verde, Mauritius, Gambia, Tunisia, Madagascar, Lesotho, Rwanda, Botswana, Egypt, Tanzania, Comoros and

Senegal in 2019. In these countries, economic growth is expected to drop on average to a value of -3.3% in 2020 whereas in Seychelles, Cape Verde, Mauritius and the Gambia, the impact shall be much felt at least -7% in 2020 (World Bank, 2020).

Kenya's tourism industry registered improved performance in 2019 mainly attributed to growth in aviation, investor confidence and withdrawal of travel advisories. Tourism earnings increased by 3.9% from KES 157.4bn in 2018 to KES 163.6bn in 2019 while the number of international arrivals increased by 1.2% from 2m arrivals in 2018 to 2.1m arrivals in 2019 (AfDB, 2020). As such the sector contributed to about 8.8% of Kenya's GDP in the same period and over 1.1m jobs to the Kenyan economy. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leisure and conference tourism, both external and domestic face possible collapse owing to travel restrictions which has completely stopped international tourist arrivals, while social distancing measures have affected domestic tourism and conferencing. Given the tourism sector's strong linkages with the wider economy, reduced tourist arrivals impede consumption of various goods and services and the incomes of workers in related sectors

The government of In Rwanda has identified the tourism sector as one of the mainstays of the economy (RDB, 2017). Report by Rwanda Hoteliers' Association, (2020) indicates that there is an average of 7,000 hospitality establishments (including hotels, restaurants, bars and accommodations facilities) across the country which employs over 84,000 workers. In particular MICE Tourism and the hospitality sector currently account for about 142,000 jobs. However, due to COVID-19 which was reported in March 2020 this year, Hotels in Rwanda have reported losses amounting to over Rwf13 billion since February due to coronavirus outbreak (Rwanda Hoteliers' Association, 2020).

The latest update from Rwanda Convention Bureau estimated a loss worth around USD 25 Million from international conferences and events cancelled or

postponed due to COVID-19 and this may increase as more events are likely to be cancelled or postponed to future dates. In Rwanda the government recently announced the postponement of Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) which was expected to have a huge impact in terms of forex and spillovers to the economy this year. The impact is also evident in external trade as both exports and imports have declined since travel restrictions were put in place, thus commodity prices for Rwanda's minerals and agricultural products plummeted.

Rwanda Automobile Club (RAC) postponed the 2020 Mountain Gorilla Rally until further notice as the country and the world in general continue to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic. The event which was scheduled for May 2020 saw the sponsors lose a lot of capital they had already invested towards the event.

Evaluation of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic to MICE tourism in Rwanda is therefore integral to clearly understand and determine the extent of the impact of the pandemic and be able to develop relevant recommendations that can guide the creation of suitable strategies contributing to the recovery process and transformation of the sector.

Statement of the Problem

According to UNWTO (2020) estimates COVID-19 pandemic has caused a 22% fall in international tourist arrivals during the first quarter of 2020 globally. According to (UNWTO, 2020), the United Nations specialized agency notes that the crisis could lead to an annual decline of between 60% and 80% when compared with 2019 figures. This places millions of livelihoods at risk and threatens to roll back progress made in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

For example, in Rwanda the MICE tourism has been hardly hit. According (Bertrand Byishimo, 2020), the hospitality businesses in Rwanda has lost about Rwf13.6 billion, tour operators Rwf20 billion, travel agencies Rwf152 million and conference and events Rwf1 billion by March 2020.

According to Frank Gisha Mugisha, the Director General of the Rwanda Chamber of Tourism at the Private Sector Federation (PSF), the COVID-19 outbreak has happened at a time of the year when the tourism industry recorded its highest earnings since the tourism sector does not really get more clients in the other quarters than in the first one. Just to mention the tourism and hospitality sector, which is also saddled with combined debts of Rwf87.7 billion, is seeking a financial stimulus of Rwf7.1 billion to save the battered businesses.

The pandemic disrupted Rwandan economy just like it did to other economies of the world. According to the Minister for Trade and Industry, Soraya Hakuziyaremye by July 21st Rwanda's MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) industry has been hit by a \$48 million (over Rwf45 billion) loss as a result of the global Covid-19 crisis. To mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the economy, the Government of Rwanda has rolled out a number of temporary policies, including setting fixed prices on food items to stabilize food prices, monetary and fiscal measures such as tax relief, establishment of a recovery fund to support hard hit sectors of trade, manufacturing, tourism and hospitality.

The government has also established a comprehensive Economic recovery plan May 2020-December, 2021 (MINECOFIN, 2020). MICE sector's best chances for survival in the short and medium term lie in the domestic tourism. The Government of Rwanda has rolled out the Economic Recovery Fund to support businesses in the sectors hit hardest by the pandemic so they can survive, resume work/production and safeguard employment. The targeted sectors are those highly impacted by the restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of the virus, and exposed to consumer discretionary spending, and those with global supply chains that are being disrupted.

In tourism sector, Pay As You Earn Tax (PAYE) was waived for a period of three months from April to June 2020 for employees of companies operating in

the tourism and hotel sector who earn up to 150,000 Rwandan francs net salary.

At the same time, some countries are taking tentative steps towards re-opening their economies for social and business activity. Tellingly, hospitality businesses are frequently in the category which can expect to re-open last. How the hospitality industry will survive and revive in a post COVID-19 world remains an unknown and it will be important to revisit this theme in the future. Hence, the need for the study on assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the MICE tourism in Rwanda.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic on MICE Tourism

According to Huang, *et al.*, (2020) the mortality rate among the admitted patients to hospitals of the new coronavirus is estimated at 15%. The impact of the outbreak on tourism may be direct or indirect since it depends on behaviours of the virus and each country's response to mitigate its spread (Wired, 2020). This implies further that the proportions and persistence of the economic damage due to the novel coronavirus will depend on the government measures to handle the situation (Grey Ellis, 2020). On the shady side, it could turn into a global economic crisis and the long-lasting effect of globalization. On the other hand, it could be the time when policy practitioners manage a collective crisis response (Jamal & Budke, 2020).

Wang and Ritchie (2010) argued that the hotel industry particularly demands effective crisis management, as the sector is one of the most sensitive to the crises like terrorist attacks, SARS epidemic, bird flu, and global financial crisis of the years 2008–2009 investigated by the mentioned authors or the COVID-19 pandemic considered in this paper.

Basing on the study by Lee *et al.*, (2012) caution should be taken globally as the COVID-19 outbreak stems from international apprehension of a

previous global catastrophe such as the Spanish Influenza pandemic at the end of the second decade of 20th century. This is seen in Mexico where in March 2009, unknown influenza appeared and had negative impact to the tourism sector (Neumann *et al.*, 2009). Subsequently, the United States CDC (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention) identified the virus as a new strain of Influenza A H1N1 (Jennings *et al.*, 2009) now known as 2009 H1N1.

According to March and Woodside (2012) demand for MICE capacity is uncertain and highly seasonal and convention and exhibition facilities, like hotel rooms, are perishable. The author argues that the demand of the MICE industry is usually affected by seasons, holidays, and weather conditions. Further, fluctuations in the economy and competition from rivalling destinations always cause uncertain markets to a MICE destination. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the MICE industry to a standstill causing the most severe disruption of the global economy since World War II (World Bank, 2020).

Tourism industry is also facing similar challenges. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) latest estimate, there has an expected fall of between 20-30% that could translate into a decline in international tourism receipts (exports) of between US\$300-450 billion, almost one third of the US\$ 1.5 trillion generated in 2019. Taking into consideration the past market trends, it shows that between five- and seven-years' worth of growth would be lost because of Coronavirus. The unprecedented introduction of travel restrictions across the world, the international tourist arrivals will fall by 20% to 30% in 2020 when compared with 2019 figures.

Millions of jobs in the industry are at risk of being lost as around 80% of all tourism businesses are small-and-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The Hotel and Hospitality Industry would lose 20% of its turnover and this percentage can be as high as 40% to 60% for countries like Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand (where the sector represents around 20%

of the employment). The top tourism destinations in the World are France with around 89 million tourist arrivals per annum, Spain with around 83 million; USA (80 million), China (63 millions), Italy (62 millions), Turkey (46 millions), Mexico (41 millions), Germany (39 millions), Thailand (38 millions), and United Kingdom (36 millions). Tourism together with travel support one in 10 jobs (319 million) in the world and generating 10.4% of world GDP. The lock down in these countries shows how deep the impact of Covid19 has been on tourism industry in the world.

World Travel and Tourism Council have warned that the COVID-19 pandemic could cut 50 million jobs worldwide in the travel and tourism industry, and Asia is expected to be the worst affected. When the outbreak shall be over, it could take up to ten months for the industry to recover (World Economic Forum, 2020). This impact would depend on how long the epidemic lasts and could still be exacerbated by recent restrictive measures, such as those taken by the U.S. administration on travel to Europe (World Travels and Tourism Council, 2020). According to chief executive of WTTC, the coronavirus is a big threat to the tourism industry that could shrink the travel sector by up to 25% in 2020 (BBC, 2020b).

According to World Economic Forum, (2020) China the tourism industry currently accounts for 10% of global GDP. However, China being the first country that has been hit by the coronavirus tourism is impacted negatively (Ayittei *et al.*, 2020). In the Mainland China about 70,000 theatres closed down, the majority of airlines cancelled or cancelling flight to and from China, impacting tourism (CNN, 2020).

The news that the virus had spread to Italy and to other countries in Europe has caused considerable anxiety for tourists, potential tourists and the wider tourism industry. Research from the Global Business Travel Association (2020) shows widespread business meeting cancellations and postponements taking place worldwide. The International Air Transport Association (IATA, 2020) has predicted that the coronavirus shall reduce

global airline revenue by \$29.3 billion in 2020, arising from a contraction in global air demand. While this is the first such contraction since the global financial crisis of 2008 to 2009, it needs to be recognized that virtually 95% of this projected loss will be for Asia/Pacific carriers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit almost all African countries and appears poised to worsen dramatically. The disruption of the world economy through global value chains, the abrupt falls in commodity prices and fiscal revenues and the enforcement of travel and social restrictions in many African countries are the main causes of the negative growth. Exports and imports of African countries are projected to drop by at least 35% from the level reached in 2019. Thus, the loss in value is estimated at around 270 billion US dollars. To fight against the spread of the pandemic and medical treatment will lead to an increase of public spending in Africa estimated to at least 130 billion.

Tourism, an important sector for economies of many countries in Africa, will be heavily affected by COVID-19 with the introduction of travel restrictions, closing of borders and social distancing. IATA estimates the economic contribution of the air transport industry in Africa at US\$ 55.8 billion dollars, supporting 6.2 million jobs and contributing 2.6% of GDP. These restrictions affect international airlines including African giants Ethiopian Airlines, Egyptair, Kenya Airways, South African Airways, etc. The initial effects will result to partial unemployment of airlines staff and equipment. However, in normal times, airlines transport around 35% of world trade, and each job in air transport supports 24 others in the travel and tourism value chain, which creates around 70 million jobs (IATA, 2020).

Egypt has also experienced a notable decline in tourists over since February 2020, after the outbreak of the coronavirus. After the announcement of the first infection of coronavirus in Egypt, and about 200 cases as of the mid-March, many hotel reservations have been cancelled and

tourists can barely visit tourism sites (Al-Monitor, 2020).

Overview of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Rwanda

Rwanda prior COVID-19

Rwanda has had its share of high-level alert since 2018 with the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) at its doorstep on the Democratic Republic of Congo side. For a country with limited resources facing a potential epidemic at that time, Rwanda quickly realized it could only rely on an effective coordinated and multi-sectoral approach. When faced with COVID-19, a crisis committee of key Ministries involved in the response was nominated, and chaired by the Prime Minister. The committee put in place a COVID-19 Joint Task Force (JTF) on 9th March 2020 to coordinate the implementation of a preparedness and response plan just in time for the first case. The Government of Rwanda has demonstrated high-level leadership and taken swift action to tackle the risks associated with the ongoing pandemic and bend the curve on COVID-19. The effort to contain the potential spread of COVID-19 is led by the Office of the Prime Minister under the National Epidemic Preparedness & Response Committee (NEPRCC), in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Local Government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Rwanda amid COVID-19

On 14 March 2020, Rwanda reported the country's first case of COVID-19. Three months into the pandemic, Rwanda counts over one thousand cases. Close to half of those cases have recovered and none has shown signs of relapse. Five have passed but all remaining active cases are in treatment centres in stable condition.

The declaration of the outbreak was followed by a series of preventive measures such as the mandatory quarantine for all travellers coming into the country, compulsory wearing of face masks, hand washing and practice of physical distancing. Several campaigns were organized including risk communication and awareness campaigns, #GumaMuRugo – a call to stay home and save lives- which made a buzz thanks to the Rwanda National

Police, the Health Sector and local authorities' efforts and innovations in community awareness, misinformation as they encouraged citizens to respect safety measures in the entire country.

At the Heart of the pandemic

Close to 2000 members from across sectors are working in different areas of interventions including principally Epidemiology that deals with surveillance, contact tracing, lab testing and case management including psychological support. Other important supporting areas of intervention are risk communication and community engagement and planning logistics.

Similar structures were established in all 30 Districts under the leadership of Mayors. Rapid Response Teams (RRTs) were activated at District levels reporting on daily activities to the central level. In addition, 2000 different professionals worked to support the COVID-19 Joint Task Force.

A multi-sectoral approach was used at the creation of the task force, hence the fact that it is composed of members from different sectors: Public, local government, security organs, private sector, civil society and development partners.

Active surveillance, contact tracing and containment measures for isolating suspected cases and treating confirmed cases continue to be implemented. The Joint Task Force proceeds by case finding, quarantine, decontamination and isolation for treatment.

The Government of Rwanda set up several isolation sites and 2 treatment centres during the preparedness phase. Currently 10 Treatment centres have been set up to offer treatment to confirmed COVID19 cases. 2 Treatment centres are in the Capital City, 2 are in the Eastern Province while 6 are in Western Provinces.

The new normal

In line with the progressive lift of the lockdown, since 4 May 2020, Public and private transport resumed. In the entire country, authorities repeated reminders to observe the following

measures: Wash hands; Wear a face-mask; Practice physical distancing; Be home by 9 pm as curfew is still applicable; Resume work with staff not exceeding 50%; Provide masks for all employees while at work.

Markets and shops remain open provided people continue respect preventive measures. Transactions are mainly cashless, and Wash stations and hand sanitizers are compulsory in all public spaces.

On 4th July, the Ministry of infrastructure announced that airports will reopen for all flights on 1 August 2020. Passengers will be required to show proof of COVID-19 Polymerase Chain Reaction test (PCR) taken within 72 hours of arrival. Passengers entering Rwanda will also be required to take a second mandatory test within 24hours and other prevention measures will be put in place.

METHODOLOGY

In this quantitative research, the study adopted a descriptive survey design where the main focus was on a sample of 34 hotels operating and offering MICE tourism for a period of three years from 2017-2020 in Kigali province (See Appendix 1). Thirty-four general managers were purposively selected to provide the data. Detailed data was collected

whereby both primary and secondary data was collected. Primary data was collected using the questionnaire while for secondary data the study reviewed journals, historical records, newspaper articles, World Health Organization statistics, governmental data, and website materials on COVID-19 incidences in tourism. Data processing and analysis was done with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 21. Tables and figures were used to present the analyzed data. Correlation analysis and regression analysis was used to show the relationship and the significance of the relationship between the variables. Correlation and linear regression were used to analyze the data with F-test being applied to the test hypothesis at 5% level of significance. Content analysis was used for the qualitative data. The data was presented using tables, graphs and charts.

RESULTS

The study investigated the impact of COVID-19 on the consumption of tourism industry and its MICE sub-sector in Rwanda. Respondents were given the questionnaire and requested to give their Responses. Their findings were recorded as follows:

Table 1: Statements on impact of COVID-19 on MICE tourism in Rwanda

Statements on impact of COVID-19	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
COVID-19 has created conditions that impact on the lives forcing socio-behavioural changes on societies	3 (8.8%)	11 (32.4%)	20 (58.8%)
MICE consumers in Rwanda have been seriously curtailed by the pandemic	0 (0%)	8 (23.5%)	26 (76.5%)
Our hotel expectations of the right to unfettered mobility across national borders has been severely challenged by government responses to COVID-19	0 (0%)	22 (64.7%)	12 (35.3%)
Closure of attractions and tourism facilities has negatively affected the MICE tourism	6 (17.6%)	14 (41.2%)	14 (41.2%)
Closure of national borders, has curtailed movement reducing and totally eliminating MICE consumers	3 (8.8%)	10 (29.4%)	21 (61.8%)
Confinement to place of residence and penalties for non-compliance has reduced the MICE tourism in our hotel	0 (0%)	7 (20.6%)	27 (79.4%)
Virtual events mainly serve as a good substitute for recession-prone exhibitors and attendees during COVID-19	0 (0%)	21 (61.8%)	13 (38.2%)
Restrictions on rights to visit friends and family has negatively impacted the MICE tourism	6 (17.6%)	11 (32.4%)	17 (50.0%)

Initially, 58.8% of the respondents strongly agreed that COVID-19 has created conditions that impact on the lives forcing socio-behavioural changes on societies, 32.4% just agreed while 8.8% were neutral with the statement. This is evident when the Ministry of Local Governments announced the lockdown On June 25, of Kamabuye, Zuba, Nyenyeri, and Rugano villages in Kicukiro district, and Kadobogo and Gisenga villages in Nyarugenge district. The lockdown lasted for at least 15 days.

In addition, 76.5% of the respondents strongly agreed that MICE consumers in Rwanda have been seriously curtailed by the pandemic, 23.5% just agreed while none were neutral with the statement. National borders in Rwanda have, effectively, been closed to most travellers including leisure, business and MICE tourists. With East Africa community countries closed their borders completely to non-nationals and non-residents. This has seen the Heads of State Summit holding a meeting on 12th May 2020 chaired by H.E President Paul Kagame that adopted a harmonized system for certification and sharing of COVID19 results with a lot of emphasis cross-border challenges including those related to clearance processes at borders during the pandemic.

Moreover, 64.7% of the respondents agreed that their hotel expectations of the right to unfettered mobility across national borders has been severely challenged by government responses to COVID-19, 35.3% just strongly agreed while none were neutral with the statement. This is however going to be a matter of the past as the Ministry of Infrastructure (Mininfra) on, July 4th announced that Rwanda will reopen airport operations for scheduled commercial flights on August 1. "Rwanda's airports will reopen for scheduled commercial flight operations on August 1, 2020. To ensure the safety and health of passengers, crews and staff, airport operations will adhere to guidelines developed by the Ministry of Health and recommendations of the ICAO Council on Aviation Recovery Task Force. This in turn will affect the MICE tourism positively.

Furthermore, a combination of 82.4% of the respondents agreed that closure of attractions and tourism facilities has negatively affected the MICE tourism while 17.6% were neutral with the statement. IMF reviewed downwards the country's economic outlook, with real GDP now expected to shrink to 5.1 per cent in 2020, down from 10.1 per cent registered in 2019.

International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved \$109.4 million to be drawn under the Rapid Credit Facility (RCF) as Rwanda's economic managers are under pressure to craft new measures to restore productivity needed to support growth. The lockdown to contain COVID-19 sent shockwaves to Rwanda since the country largely depends on the service sector which contributed 49 per cent of GDP in the third quarter of 2019 according to the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) (IMF, 2020).

On closure of national borders, has curtailed movement reducing and totally eliminating MICE consumers majority (82.4%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 29.4% agreed while 8.8 were neutral with the statement. Confinement to place of residence and penalties for non-compliance has reduced the MICE tourism in our hotel with (79.4%) as majority indicated while a simple minority of 21.6% just agreed. After joining the Commonwealth, over a decade ago, Rwanda was set to host the highly anticipated Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2020 (CHOGM) in the capital city of Kigali, last June, but the event was postponed due to the pandemic.

Lastly, majority (61.8%) agreed that virtual events mainly serve as a good substitute for recession-prone exhibitors and attendees during COVID-19 while 32.8% strongly agreed. A half of the respondents representing 50% strongly agreed that restrictions on rights to visit friends and family has negatively impacted the MICE tourism, 32.4% just agreed while 17.6% were neutral with the statement. A major consequence of the COVID-19 crisis in the area of travel and tourism was the impact on the area of consumer protection.

Consumer rights can be considered as a human right that is the joint responsibility of government, businesses and other relevant social organizations, underpinned by the United Nations' Guidelines for Consumer Protection that were agreed in 1985 and updated in 1999 and 2015. Every year on April 7, majority of Rwandese visits genocide memorial site in the capital, Kigali, where they lay a wreath for the more than a million genocide victims against the Tutsi. But this year, 26 years after the genocide against the Tutsi, they could not visit due the lockdown because of corona virus pandemic.

Way forward on MICE tourism

According to Rwanda Convention Bureau Rwanda was scheduled to host 147 events in 2020, so far at least 20 conferences, initially scheduled for March and April were postponed, denying the country approximately \$8 million in revenues compared to projected revenue target of \$88 million in 2020. A number of events have been postponed or cancelled following a government directive as precautionary measure. They include the Great Lakes Investment and Trade Conference 2020, which was scheduled for March 17-20 and the Cybertech Africa slated for March 11-13. This is a clear proof of how the MICE industry has been strongly affected by the disruptive effects of COVID-19.

Rwanda as a country has invested heavily on Information Communication and Technology. Virtual and hybrid events emerge as two additional options to consider in the face of disruption. Therefore, number of meetings and conferences have been redesigned as virtual events and this format is probably the best alternative in these challenging times. In the aftermath of COVID-19 budgets will become tighter, incorporating technologies that allow for video conferencing and virtual meetings are increasingly seen by most organizers as a cost-effective option when holding MICE events. Virtual events mainly serve as a good substitute for recession-prone exhibitors and attendees. Use of social media has become so commonly used in marketing for almost every type

of products and services in the MICE tourism in Rwanda.

Interview responses on MICE tourism in Rwanda

Interviews were conducted among the respondents from different hotels under the study. Some of their views and responses were:

Manager A: *When the City of Kigali announced a suspension of entertainment events and exhibitions, we were forced to send all my employees on unpaid leave for six months. This is because we had invested a lot in the hotel and we had debts to clear with the bank.*

Manager B: *We were to host Africa in Colours event that was slated for March 26-28. Under the measures put by the government we have lost not only finances but also postponing makes it costlier and even harder to get the targeted audience. In general, we had already spent up to \$60,000 for the event before it was cancelled.*

Manager C: *We organised and high-level conferences like the 4th Gender Summit in March 2019, which most African leaders attended and hard-pressed in closing the gender gap in Africa. Our hotel was to benefit from the biggest share where among the 2,000 delegates the head of states spent in our hotel". Cancellation of the event meant a total loss to the MICE subsector in Rwanda.*

Manager D: *Our hotel had partnered with ICLEI Africa in organising the 2020 edition of the Climate Change Africa Summit which was scheduled to take place from 13 to 17 September 2020 in Kigali, Rwanda. Postponing the event due to the health crisis linked to Covid-19 has made our financial projections to be affected.*

Manager E: *We were very happy knowing that Rwanda was set to host the highly anticipated Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2020 (CHOGM) in the capital city of Kigali, last June, but the event was postponed due to the pandemic. From the government estimation the prestigious conference would have generated over \$700 million. The country's forecast had put*

delegates' expenditure alone at around \$80 million, as the event was expected to attract about 10,000 delegates, including 52 heads of states. We invested a lot to ensure we get the share of delegates spending in our hotel. Postponement of the event has given us more time to prepare and come next year when the event will take place, we will be ready to get the share.

Manager F: *Our hotel was disappointed to get a message from the Bishop of Gikongoro district that there will be no annual pilgrimage on the Solemnity of Assumption, celebrated on August 15, 2020 at Kibeho. The faithful, unable to go to their own worship places, were invited to follow the message of this Solemnity through different media. This will affect our hotel because most people who had booked from outside were supposed to spend in our hotel; indeed, our hotel was going to have 100% occupancy since March.*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the review of respondents, the study noted that MICE consumers had not only been affected in Rwanda alone but globally in general. There was no doubt that the hospitality and tourism experiences are running at a loss. The study concluded that in Rwanda, COVID-19 had adversely impacted MICE tourism. Furthermore, travel restrictions in Rwanda had led to the cancellation of all commercial air travels. It was clear that both domestic and international tourists cancelled their bookings due to the pandemic. For that reason, tourism related businesses were losing their revenue, and employees were losing their jobs. In this situation, special stimulus package from the government was necessary for the travel and tourism industry to survive the current situation and revive after the pandemic. The study also concluded that hospitality and tourism would undoubtedly re-emerge from the effects of the pandemic over an extended timeframe and at varying speeds in Rwanda.

In conclusion the Government of Rwanda prioritized the recovery of the MICE tourism in Economic Recovery Plan covering the period May

2020 – December 2021. In particular there were different priorities but the ones related to MICE tourism were priority 4 on supporting businesses and protecting jobs and priority 5 on ensuring a Coordinated Multi-sectoral response of Government to quick start and boost economic activity.

As of today, it is too early to assess whether these measures will be effective, a number of observations and recommendations can be drawn.

Firstly, the Government of Rwanda should continue strengthening measures to combat the pandemic. Since the end of the pandemic is not predetermined and its effects evolve over time and place and as a retrospect once the new hospitality and tourism in Rwanda in order to make the sector sustainable during and after the pandemic, there is a need to continuously address both on an on-going basis as the pandemic.

Secondly, these interventions need to be regularly monitored in order to enable sound empowering strategies for MICE tourism operators in particular hotels employees who are negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Thirdly, MICE tourism operators need to show strong creative, innovation and resilience skills as to put in place innovative solutions to rebuild a sustainable tourism industry.

Finally, it is paramount for policy makers in the tourism sector to use the COVID-19 outbreak to improve crisis management strategies and strengthen international and domestic tourism co-ordination mechanisms rethinking on a more sustainable and resilient tourism system and to respond united to any future shocks.

Area of further studies

The study focussed on Kigali province MICE tourism. Future studies can be carried in other districts of the country. Also, a study on MICE tourism preparedness in responding to the crisis and recovery of their enterprises can be carried out.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the contribution of **Hon. Ambassador Fatuma Ndangiza** for her comments on the draft of the manuscript. The author also

acknowledges the anonymous key informants in the MICE Industry in Rwanda for providing information requested.

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