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COVID-19 and game park employees' livelihoods in a distressed destination

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the extent to which COVID-19 impacted the livelihoods of game park employees in a destination with ongoing political and economic challenges. Data were collected through interviewing employees revealed employee resilience levels and strategies to save their livelihoods during a crisis. It showcased the weaknesses of organizational social capital nodes in assisting employees during their vulnerable moments. It was found that employees on short-term contracts were the most affected, as they were the first to be laid off. The paper suggests up-skilling game park employees and develops empowerment interventions that help them generate second streams of income. This coping strategy is rarely discussed in the literature of tourism crisis and disaster management.

Introduction

National and Private Game Park employees and the communities within or living closer to game reserves have been subjected to several unique challenges in recent years (Muboko, 2017). These include wildlife-human conflicts (Anagnostou et al., 2020), social inequalities (Musavengane & Simatele, 2016), racial conflict (Musavengane & Siakwah, 2019) and climate change (Dube & Nhamo, 2021). Furthermore, in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), community-based tourism (CBT) projects and parks are further affected by lack of funding (Stone & Stone, 2020), conflicting views with indigenous people (Child et al., 2014), poaching (Van der Merwe et al., 2021), cost-benefit sharing (Muzirambi et al., 2019) and land redistribution (Musavengane, 2019).

Though most parks and CBT projects have adopted an array of resilient approaches to deal with some of these challenges (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020), the emergence of the COVID-19 amplified them and brought about newer problems. The tourism industry, including nature conservancies and parks, became the most affected, suffering a global crash in demand and revenues. They were forced to shut down operations to stop the further spread of COVID-19. The global crash in demand resulted in the loss of revenue, and jobs, thus, threatening the livelihoods of thousands if not millions of people. However, while the immediate impacts of COVID-19 are apparent (Hall et al., 2020; Woyo, 2021), the extent to which it impacted employees at private game parks, especially in distressed destinations such as Zimbabwe, is limited.

Earlier studies argue that the virus's long-term impacts on tourism are yet to be explicit (Filimonau et al., 2020; Jiang & Wen, 2020). However, due to limited travel, tourism organizations are faced with the need to reduce operational capacity. Employees in developed countries were put on furlough schemes, while in developing economies, they were made redundant (Filimonau et al., 2020), thus undermining the viability of organizations, including game parks. This paints a bleak picture for tourism organizations and their employees, especially in distressed destinations. Additionally, the attractiveness of tourism jobs is also negatively affected (Filimonau et al., 2020; Rogerson & Baum, 2020), thus exacerbating existing challenges, including seasonality, zero-hour contracts, and lower salaries. Though research has examined the implications of these organizational responses (Filimonau et al., 2020; Rogerson & Baum, 2020), the focus on game park employees' livelihoods in distressed contexts is limited. Nevertheless, parks are an important element in tourism with the potential to improve residents' quality of life (Ramkissoon et al., 2018, 2013). Consequently, there is a need to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the game parks and employees, especially in distressed destinations.

This paper contributes to the following theoretical and practical contributions. The findings contribute to post-pandemic recovery, organizational resilience, and crisis management literature at a conceptual level. Specifically, the important yet under-research topic of the impacts of employees' livelihoods during the pandemic in a distressed destination is highlighted. At a practical level, park and destination managers can use the study's findings to develop policy responses to crises and design appropriate organizational strategies critical to finding sustainable and resilient solutions to secure employees' livelihoods. This study aims to examine the extent to which COVID-19 impacted the livelihoods of game park employees in a destination with ongoing political and economic challenges.

Literature review

A distressed destination is "is not in a position to repay its creditors and lenders due to continuous political and economic decline" (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020, p. 537). Furthermore, it is characterized by "lower per capita income, unemployment, and industry closures" (Woyo, 2022, p. 1). Past studies acknowledge that tourism is sensitive to these distress factors (Alvarez & Campo, 2014; Woyo, 2018) and is often manifested through low hotel occupancies and tourism income (Woyo, 2022).

Due to political instability, which often affects the image of the destination, distressed destinations struggle to attract arrivals, thus affecting tourism performance (Farmaki et al., 2019; Musavengane & Zhou, 2021; Woyo, 2022). For instance, Zimbabwe's competitiveness is negatively affected by its image (Musavengane, 2020; Woyo & Slabbert, 2021). This caused the tourism industry's performance to decline for several years (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020) and is currently worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Woyo, 2021). With growing "political instability and conflict" (Farmaki et al., 2019, p.293), there is a growing focus on studies investigating travel behaviour in distressed contexts (see Farmaki et al., 2019; Woyo & Slabbert, 2020, 2021). Despite this, existing studies in Zimbabwe focused predominantly on travel behaviour (Woyo, 2021; Woyo & Slabbert, 2020) and tourism competitiveness (Woyo & Slabbert, 2021). However, studies investigating the impacts of COVID-19 induced distress on game park employees' livelihoods are limited.

Resilience

Resilience describes the capability to bend, bounce back, and return to normalcy (Folke et al., 2010). It focuses on "the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise" (Magis, 2010, p. 402). Due to COVID-19, people's livelihoods, especially in rural communities, were drastically affected, thus, prompting institutions, groups, and individuals to adapt

and recover. Given the novelty of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus of previous research has been on building resilience after “environmental crises and disasters, e.g. earthquake, storms, floods, and hurricanes” (Sobaih et al., 2021). There is a need for research to investigate organizational resilience and employees’ livelihoods to develop sustainable tourism recovery efforts.

Natural resources are a crucial source of income for rural communities. They have propelled the development of CBNRM projects (Chidakel et al., 2020), intending to empower local people by integrating environmental conservation and livelihood enhancement avenues (Shereni & Saarinen, 2020; Van der Merwe et al., 2021). Though CBNRM projects are affected by poor governance (Musavengane & Siakwah, 2019), exclusion (Mbaiwa, 2018) and limited funding (Stone & Stone, 2020), they have proved to be resilient. Understanding resilient strategies used by game parks during COVID-19 could be critical in saving jobs and sustainably support employees’ and communities’ livelihoods. This is imperative because employees are important stakeholders in developing coordinated resilient strategies in the tourism value chain (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2016; Ramkissoon et al., 2020). Though this takes time, it is necessary for transforming the tourism industry post-COVID-19 (Sharma et al., 2021) and re-employing labour after being made unemployed.

Tourism crises and resilience strategies

Resilience, which is crucial for crisis management (Sharma et al., 2021), requires the cooperation of several stakeholders to generate and implement effective strategies. Though domestic tourism is currently being promoted as a strategy for developing tourism resilience (Sharma et al., 2021), it is an elusive strategy in distressed contexts (Woyo, 2021). Its elusivity is amplified by several pre-COVID-19 challenges, including climate change, natural disasters, global recession, political instability, and terrorism. The continued existence of these challenges explains the growth in studies focusing on crisis management and crisis responses, including epidemics (see Shin et al., 2018; Tew et al., 2008).

Previous tourism research has not successfully investigated organizations’ strategies to protect employees’ livelihoods during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mont et al., 2021). Existing studies focused on sustainability, the vulnerability of protected areas, and opportunities for park management (Smith et al., 2021), marine tourism resilience (King et al., 2021) and conservation of African wildlife (Lindsey et al., 2020). It is imperative to research organizational resilience to life-threatening events like COVID-19 for game parks in distressed destinations as they constitute a significant part of Zimbabwean tourism (Chikuta et al., 2021). Globally, parks enhances society’s well-being, including employees (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2016; Ramkissoon et al., 2020). Thus, understanding the effects of COVID-19 is critical for such an important element of the tourism value chain.

Costs of COVID-19 on game parks and livelihoods of tourism employees

Wildlife tourism contribution globally is estimated at USD120 billion in direct value (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019). The economic contribution of protected areas is greater in developed countries due to funding availability (Chidakel et al., 2021). However, in Southern Africa, it is one of the main economic drivers of economic development (Chikuta et al., 2021; Musavengane & Simatele, 2016; Van der Merwe et al., 2021). Parks provides economic and social benefits, including income for the less educated (Chidakel et al., 2021; Ramkissoon, 2020; Shereni & Saarinen, 2020; Van der Merwe et al., 2021). Through these benefits, communities’ livelihoods have been improved (Smith et al., 2021) and helped reduce poverty and hunger (Siakwah et al., 2020; Woyo, 2020).

Despite protected areas being beneficial, employees’ livelihoods are currently threatened by COVID-19 (Hockings et al., 2020). COVID-19 slowed down activities in protected areas in Africa (Spenceley et al., 2021), thus, forcing parks to downsize operations by laying off employees to survive (Filimonau et al., 2020). Given that several households that rely on tourism were

negatively affected, there is a need for a nuanced understanding of the perceived social impact of COVID-19. This understanding is imperative to determine management strategies that promote tourism development and resilience (Ramkissoon, 2020; Salem et al., 2021). With global travel likely to remain restricted for a longer period (Salem et al., 2021), game park managers in Zimbabwe must understand the impacts of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of park employees.

Crises management framework

Several approaches to crises management have been advanced in the literature. At the basic, crises require effective management (Ritchie, 2004). Crises could be managed by applying the “4 Rs”: reduction, readiness, response and recovery (Evans & Elphick, 2005). Furthermore, Fink (1986) also identified four stages: (i) prodromal (warning), (ii) acute (at the height of a crisis), (iii) chronic (aftermath), and (v) resolution. Turner (1976) noted five stages: (i) incubation, (ii) precipitating event, (iii) immediate consequences, (iv) rescue, salvage and the first stage of adjustment, and (v) full cultural adjustment. However, this study adopts Ritchie’s (2004) Crisis Disaster Management Framework in identifying the crisis stages relevant to the COVID-19 and employee management at the game parks. The stages are as follows, modified in the context of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe.

- (i) The pre-event stage – COVID-19 impacted many countries outside Southern Africa before it stuck the region. The stage would mean undertaking environmental scanning in preparation for the looming COVID-19 crisis at the game parks. The World Health Organization and associated Centers for Disease Control (CDCs) shared information on the impact of COVID-19 globally.
- (ii) Having acquired information, game parks will prepare for the prodromal stage by formulating plans and identifying potential issues with the imminent COVID-19 crisis. What may have affected businesses in Africa are the assumptions that the disease would not reach the continent.
- (iii) The emergency stage is when the actual disaster strikes. At this point, what matters is to contain the damage among game park employees and businesses as much as possible. This stage appears to be the first to address the COVID-19 crises in March 2020 across Africa, where lockdown measures were instituted.
- (iv) The intermediate stage is the recovery phase immediately after a crisis has hit. It focuses on restoring services and getting back to the game park business. In terms of COVID-19, this stage kicks off at the relaxation of lockdown measures by the local and national governments.
- (v) The long-term/recovery stage addresses the restoration of the environment and the return to business. This entails permanent measures to reopen the game parks following the health protocols.
- (vi) The resolution stage returns to ‘business-as-usual and allows the organization to reassess its crisis planning strategies.

Stages three to six may be implemented simultaneously under COVID-19 situations in the management of employees at the game parks. However, COVID-19 is evolving and not clearly defined across the world. For example, in Southern Africa, the restrictions differ from country to country and industry to industry.

Methodology

There are 11 national parks and several private game parks, including conservancies in Zimbabwe. We investigated the effects of COVID-19 using a context-specific geographic setting. To achieve this broad goal, data were collected from Antelope Park, a private game established in 1987. The game

park, occupying a land size of 3000 acres, is in Gweru, Zimbabwe's Midlands Province. The park houses several animals, including over 20 mammal species, such as Zebra, Wildebeest, Giraffe, Kudu, Impala, Hartebeest, lions, elephants, and over 190 different bird species. Several of its 85 plus employees are from the local communities, suggesting its impact since 1987 in employment creation.

The study adopts a case study approach which has been acknowledged as suitable for participatory studies (Musavengane & Muzeza, 2021), to understand the extent to which COVID-19 impacted the livelihoods of Antelope Game Park employees. Data were initially collected from 13 employees and 2 managers in July 2020. Additional interviews were also done with 6 employees and 2 managers in June 2021. Antelope park management initially provided us with the names of four employees to interview. Additional participants were then sampled using snowball sampling. The criteria for selection included (i) being an employee of Antelope Park, (ii) being directly affected by COVID-19 challenges (iii) knowing the policies of Antelope Park on handling COVID-19 and employee livelihoods. A semi-structured questionnaire was developed based on a comprehensive review of the literature. The interviews were conducted telephonically, lasting approximately 25 minutes. Data were thematically analysed to understand how COVID-19 impacted the organization and employees' livelihoods.

Results

Results are organized and presented in themes that emerged during interviews and their analysis. These themes are explored in their variations and complexities to give sense to the individuals' perspectives and experiences concerning the impacts of COVID-19 on the organization and employees' livelihoods. Lessons are drawn on how to sustain employee livelihoods during a crisis.

Resilience to COVID-19 and future of tourism

Tourism is the hardest hit industry globally, "and the road to a form of recovery is likely to be slow and painful for destinations, businesses and their workforce" (Rogerson & Baum, 2020, p. 788).

Employer experiences and perspectives

The employer is the driver of income for employees. During a crisis, organizations must manage the situation swiftly to ensure survival and to guarantee jobs for their employees. There is no doubt that private game parks like Antelope Park were negatively affected by COVID-19. Consequently, the analysis of the participants' narratives shows that Antelope Park implemented several approaches to safeguard employees' lives, livelihoods and ensure the business's survival. The analysis of the results shows that initially, the park was not prepared, as was the case with most organizations and governments globally. While actions taken to address crises depend on the destination's distinctiveness, the unpreparedness of the park could also be attributed to the distressing challenges obtaining in Zimbabwe (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020). The confusion that characterized early interventions at Antelope Park confirms the prevention stage of Ritchie's 2004 crisis management framework. Based on this, it can be noted that understanding the crisis is imperative for creating effective risk assessment strategies. Antelope Park acknowledged the reality of COVID-19 and developed measures to protect employees while saving the business. A manager at the Antelope Park alluded that:

MGRI: We had to close our operations at the game reserve as COVID-19 has brought to a halt park activity. We had limited information regarding COVID-19 and how to handle it. We sought assistance from the Ministry of Health and Child Care (MOHCC). They were providing us with daily updates, and they visited our premises to advise us.

Antelope Park's closure translated into revenue loss, and several employees were given unpaid leave and rotational work shifts. Rotational shifts meant that employees were working on reduced salaries and contract workers lost their job. Though wildlife tourism was expected to contribute US \$120 billion to GDP, and 12.8 million jobs (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019), COVID-19 halted the inflow of this income to Antelope Park. The analysis of data showed that Antelope Park lost more revenue due to travel restrictions. Due to these impacts, the Park moved into phase 2 of the crisis management framework, which focuses on the prodromal stage. As the pandemic unfolds, the park managers communicated the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 to its employees and stakeholders. This demonstrated that internal and external communication is critical during a crisis to avoid speculations that may worsen the situation. Antelope Park manager explained that:

MGR2: At the onset of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe, we organised meetings and met with the representatives of the workers' board to share with them the challenges the organisation was going through. We notified them of the measures we were going to take as an organisation. At times one has to take a compromising position because the situation was abnormal. These ranged from forced leave to termination of employment for some contract workers. It wasn't easier for both parties, but it was important to discuss with our workers to know the steps to be taken.

The communication was also done to the external stakeholders. Antelope Park issued updates to the public during the early stages of Zimbabwe's lockdown measures (Box 1). The organization's measures included an internal lockdown, informing workers weekly, and providing virtual tours (Box 1).

Box 1. Antelope Park COVID-19 Update – 25 March 2020.

"As our nation prepares for Covid-19, our hearts are with you all, in Zimbabwe and across the globe. We have been so overwhelmed with the support and messages we have received from far and wide – thank you. It has meant the world to us. Regarding the highly contagious nature of Covid-19, we have decided to put Antelope Park into lockdown to protect both our staff and guests. We will remain with our animal caretakers and a few staff. Unlike many businesses, we are in a position to send our staff home with full pay packages for March, and Antelope Park will continue to support them wherever we can and whenever possible. Our staff are without doubt our most important consideration.

Covid-19 is the biggest challenge mankind has faced in a very long time. We are making the most difficult decisions we have ever made in our lifetimes – hard, heart-breaking decisions, but very sadly, decisions that we must make. These are not decisions that are being made lightly but decisions made after hours and days of discussions with our incredible staff and on the international advice (freely available to us all) of some of the top scientists in the world. We humbly ask for your understanding during this time. We pray for our staff and their families safety and pray that the situation will improve quickly and that our amazing Antelope Park team will once again be reunited. We love you, our guests, who arrive as strangers and leave as friends. Our prayers and thoughts are with you all over Zimbabwe and across the globe.

We will reassess the situation weekly and update you on any changes to the current situation.

We hope to start sharing some amazing video clips and pictures of Antelope Park for those of you locked in at home – to whet your appetite to return when this is all over, and we can all return to normal, less lonely, less bored and far happier times.

We Zimbabweans are survivors, and we will get through.

Stronger together.

Stay safe, stay healthy.

Our hearts are with you all, in Zimbabwe and across the globe."

Source: Extracted from <https://antelopepark.co.zw/covid-19-update/>

Ritchie (2004) notes that the prodromal stage allows the organization to make plans to contain the situation. Two Park managers highlighted additional measures that were taken:

MGR1: We had to cut down our staff compliment. We gave them cushioning funds as a safety and security measure. We had employees who had tested COVID-19 positive at the early stages of the pandemic, so closing was the only option.

MGR2: Coronavirus has negatively affected not just Antelope Park but the tourism industry at large. Although we have domestic tourists, we rely much on international tourists like most tourism and other non-tourism organisations. At Antelope Park, we are more into live conservation; we have about 76 lions in captivity. We also have elephants and some other animals, and during this lockdown, we are not generating any income, but the company still needs to look after these animals. So, the cost of looking after these animals remains the same. For instance, a lion's needs don't change because we are on lockdown, so you will see that the park injects more money without other activities. The company had to take some measures to ensure its survival.

The analysis of the narratives shows that the organization has to make its employees redundant due to loss of income. Though consistent with past research regarding the impacts of COVID-19 (Filimonau et al., 2020), this finding suggested that the livelihoods of game park employees were further affected given the ongoing pre-COVID-19 economic challenges in Zimbabwe. Therefore, during the pandemic's peak, Antelope Park's responses were shifted towards "*the emergency stage*", the third stage of crisis management (Ritchie, 2004). At this stage: This was summed up as follows:

MGR2: The company helped employees with basic goods for survival. We gave employees from our Antelope Park gardens, including onions, vegetables, carrots, tomatoes, and potatoes. Also, the company gave rations to employees. These include meat, roller meal, sugar, and cooking oil. However, in 2021, we no longer give them regularly, as was the case during the hard lockdown.

While caring for employees, Antelope Park had to continue running to ensure its survival and sustainability. It had to take measures to bring in the income. Given the complications of COVID-19, measures implemented ranged from emergency to intermediate crisis management responses. These measures were monitored and revised constantly. For example, they highlighted that:

MGR2: Since we could not attract tourists during hard lockdowns, we turned our lodge into a COVID-19 centre to host the repatriated volunteers from other countries. This brought a sort of relief to keep us going for a while. This just lasted for the first 5 months, March – July 2020. Ever since the easing of the lockdown, we don't have any repatriated volunteers coming to stay at the lodges.

With the global easing of lockdowns, participant MGR1 notes that the park also started to gradually open its doors to tourists while "adhering to safe-distancing measures including sanitization, educating chefs, tour guides and all employees". This response to restarting business suggest that the park was concerned with the public health of its visitors and employees. Additionally, the park lowered its prices to accommodate more local people. Through this response, the park offered special rates for groups and families of not more than 30 people per visit. Furthermore, the reopening of the park also led to the introduction of a COVID-19 allowance to motivate and cushion the plight of employees. Participant E3 notes that "as a result, almost 90% of the laid-off employees were called back to work". However, most participants' narratives showed that depending on their workstations, most employees resumed work using a rotational basis

Further analysis of data shows that the park offered most of its employees accommodation at the park to reduce further spread of COVID-19, which is consistent with parks literature (Mbaiwa, 2018). These efforts by Antelope Park fit into stages four to six of Ritchie's crisis management framework. COVID-19 seems to have made private game parks realize that they have structurally excluded local people, particularly the poor, from participating in tourism (see Musavengane, 2019).

Employees' experiences and perceptions

The study also examined the experiences of the employees at Antelope Park. Their experiences and perceptions are analysed in the following sub-headings.

Loss of primary source of income

Employee's narratives show that Antelope Park was negatively impacted by zero tourism during the lockdown. It lost tourism income that it depends on for survival. COVID-19 compounded the ongoing political crisis affecting tourism performance in Zimbabwe (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020). One employee at Antelope Park noted that:

E1: What happened is just before the initial lockdown of Zimbabwe was announced, the company wanted cost-cutting measures, so each department had to come up with a cost-cutting measure. After that, we volunteered to work for one month in one month out.

COVID-19 negatively impacted the game park. This is a tremendous blow for Zimbabwean tourism which relies on wildlife as its key tourist attraction for the international market and provides thousands of jobs to locals (Chikuta et al., 2021). Pre-COVID-19, Zimbabwean tourism positively contributed to GDP despite the political-induced economic challenges (Woyo, 2021). COVID-19 effects were severe to the extent that the park could no longer provide accommodation and food to its employees. Participant E3 emphasized that Antelope Park retrenched some staff due to zero cashflows and increasing operating costs. Narratives show that though the park attempted to preserve employees' livelihoods, it was not sufficient for all due to dwindling funds. One of the employees noted that:

E3: I was just privileged to be one of the skeleton staff, the staff that stayed around during the whole lockdown period to look after the animals. So, everyone who was on duty at that time was receiving their salary in full. However, some employees were on contract, like the fixed-term contract, like two months, those have been immediately terminated as the company could not afford to pay their salaries. We also have some permanent staff sent home during the lockdown period because the company could not employ everyone. So, for those permanent staff in the first month, they were given half salary, but in the second month, they were not given anything because the company could not afford to pay all employees. Also, the cost of running a company without generating income is why the company decided to put the permanent staff at home on unpaid leave until further notice.

Nevertheless, not all Antelope Park employees believed that the company had tried to save their jobs, as signified by the response below:

E9: From my perspective, they could have done better because it's a big company. They have the resources. They could have done something like, for example, giving us 50% of our salaries rather than neglecting us, yet they may want us to come to work.

The other four employees echoed similar sentiments as E9. This points to a lack of job security and may act as a "motivator" to have a small or side enterprise that one can rely on apart from work salary to ensure survival. For example, an employee in her late-20s said:

E7: This COVID-19 pandemic has taught me not to rely on one source of income. Look at me now, I am suffering. As we relied on Antelope Park contracts, I do not know where I will get the money to fend, my family. This COVID-19 has opened my eyes big time.

When asked whether they were willing to return to work when all is fine most of the employees indicated that they might not, as summed up with the following excerpts:

E4: Given an option I would not want. The amount of work you put in and the remuneration do not tally, and there is little room for growth. The kind of setup is that the company's owner micro-managed the business to make growth impossible.

E8: Ah, no, because there is no job security. We sign contracts every 2 months. So, you can wake up jobless. I need to find another job to find money to do my projects.

Nevertheless, follow-up interviews in June 2021 show that employees are grateful to have been called back to work, suggesting the importance of building a resilient tourism industry for a struggling economy like Zimbabwe.

Social networking and relations at the workplace

Studies show that strong social networks are important in attaining common goals and solving problems collectively (Musavengane & Simatele, 2017). When asked, almost all park employees highlighted that they had good working relations and would share and help each other during challenging times before COVID-19. This signifies the existence of strong social networks among employees 'within the organization. This finding adds value to the deprivation theory (Jahoda et al., 1933), which states that work has manifest (intended results such as salary) and latent consequences (unintended results such as time structure, social contacts, status, and identity). Losing a job means losing both manifest and latent benefits associated with a "job" (Karsavuran, 2021).

Respondents who were laid off due to COVID-19 when they were asked whether they are still benefiting from their strong social networks, several participants noted that none was functional:

E11: Aaaarh no, our links ends at work. Out here everyone takes care of himself.

E8: It is each man for himself now. Though we talk with each other, there is no support we are benefitting from the network.

From these sentiments, strong social capital at the workplace does not entirely translate to strong relations during crises. In times of challenges, employees should rely heavily on the social network they created during good times. COVID-19 revealed that social capital networks at the private game parks need to be widened and strengthened. This is critical in providing solace to employees during crises. Through bonding social capital and multifunctional ties, employees will build a strong defence against poverty (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

Fear and stigmatization

COVID-19 struck humankind unknowingly, thereby causing fear among the people. Employees at Antelope Park were subjected to stigmatization, fear, and discrimination due to COVID-19. This is consistent with past studies (Mejia et al., 2021; Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020). Frontline staff at the park were instilled with fear and stigma, as summed below:

E12: For us in the front office, it was difficult because we handled all nationalities coming in, so other employees would stigmatize you, especially if you handled Chinese guests.

The fear also affected family member who had to take care of park employees that tested positive. This constrained relations between the families, given that physical touch, was frowned upon. However, a sense of protection through preventive measures that were implemented dispelled fear and stigmatization. For example, a senior employee at the park noted that:

E3: In terms of being trained for this pandemic COVID-19, we are being trained, and we have also employed a nurse who is helping everyone at the organisation. After lockdown, employees are allowed to go to their families. When they come back, they must be tested. We have basic training on how to wash our hands, how the virus spreads, the proper protective clothing against the virus, the masks and many more.

Domestic tourism – the hope?

Re-setting and re-envisioning the future of tourism is inevitable in the current settings (Rogerson & Baum, 2020). COVID-19 led to the disappearance of international travel, which Zimbabwe heavily relied on (Musavengane, 2019; Woyo, 2021). When asked about possible intervention measures to boost tourist arrivals at Antelope Park, two of the employees highlighted that:

E2: Let me first give you the background of our organisation. The thing is that Antelope Park is under a group of companies called African Impact. Its main works are lion projects and have several community volunteers from abroad. In Africa, the organisation has subsidiaries in South Africa and Kenya. These subsidiaries mainly

bring their clients to Antelope Park here in Zimbabwe. It is a business supported by other businesses. International tourist supports their major business model. Our domestic clients are not that much. They normally come in groups either as schools or corporates.

E6: Our prices are a bit higher for people to visit us at Antelope Park. If we are to reduce prices and market our products, we may get more people to visit. What I am not sure of is whether people are willing to travel due to COVID-19 and hardship. It is a challenge, but we can try.

Consistent with past studies (Woyo, 2018; Woyo & Slabbert, 2021), the findings show that the pricing framework for Zimbabwean tourism needs to be revised. With higher prices, the effectiveness of domestic tourism as a post-pandemic recovery strategy is elusive. Restarting tourism with higher prices for a domestic market with limited income is difficult (Woyo, 2021). It could also affect the park's biodiversity as private owners could contemplate changing land use (Van der Merwe et al., 2021). The Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) is on a drive to market Zimbabwe to local people using famous personalities. ZTA named the initiative ZimBho which is described as:

"ZimBho" is motivated by the street lingo "Bho", a slang word casually used in everyday language, meaning "good" or showing common understanding. Celebrating the different offerings in our tourism together makes us as Zimbabweans have that common agreement that because of its rich and diverse tourism offerings, Zimbabwe is "Bho", #ZimBho. and should be explored, i.e. #vakatsha. "Bho" has evolved from just being "Bho" to "Bho zvekuti" meaning very good, and the latest being "Bholato" which again is a slang way of saying very good. ZimBho also resonates with one saying I am Zimbabwean – I am Zimbo – I am ZimBho, we connect with our motherland in a special way, and we pride ourselves in it, #iZimYami! And we will explore #vakatsha! (<https://www.zimbabwetourism.net/zimbho-2-2/>)

Conclusion and implications

This paper examined the impact of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of game park employees in a distressed destination. Results show that COVID-19 disrupted the private game park's business model and the employees' livelihoods. The results align with past studies that noted that global health crises affect communities' livelihoods through loss of income (Ritchie, 2008). The impacts are severe for Zimbabwe, given its reliance on international tourists. The organization implemented several strategies aimed at sustaining the business and protecting employees' livelihoods. This study contributes to crisis management during COVID-19 literature by examining how COVID-19 impacted employees' livelihoods in a distressed context. It responds to the need for research to understand tourism resilience and help managers transform the industry during and after COVID-19 (Sharma et al., 2021). Thus, this study offers relevant insights into managing game parks and protecting employees' livelihoods in a distressed destination.

This paper contributes to the post-pandemic recovery and organizational resilience literature (Sharma et al., 2021) by discussing context-specific strategies and responses using a unique tourist destination. The strategies employed by Antelope Park shows the need for private game parks in Zimbabwe and similar contexts to create new(er) business models that could help the tourism industry emerge from the negative impacts of COVID-19. Efforts, however, must be made to ensure that the industry is sustainable and transformational for a new normal (Sharma et al., 2021; Woyo, 2021). Secondly, this study presents new insights from a destination in distress (Woyo, 2022). It provides a significant addition to post-COVID-19 recovery, resilience, and protected areas literature currently by more stable African destinations like South Africa (Van der Merwe et al., 2021). Understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on private game parks and its multiplier effect on employees' livelihoods is critical for park managers, given that wildlife tourism is an important part of Zimbabwean tourism (Chikuta et al., 2021; Woyo, 2018).

The study's findings offer park managers several implications for post-COVID-19 recovery. First, bonding networking is weak, and there is a need for expanding the social circles beyond the work boundaries. This could help employees with getting safety nets during crises like COVID-19. Park managers also need to invest in safety nets to cushion employees when there is zero or low tourism demand. Achieving this is critical in promoting collaborative management, local community empowerment, and poverty reduction (Musavengane & Simatele, 2016). Secondly, as have been alluded to in past studies on Zimbabwe's pricing (Woyo, 2018; Woyo & Slabbert, 2021, 2020), this study also recommends revising the pricing framework, offering discounts and incentives to the domestic market. This is critical in attracting domestic tourists with little income to finance leisure travel (Woyo, 2021). Matching regional prices charged in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa could also help build a sustainable flow of income that could help protect tourism jobs and the livelihoods of local communities.

Thirdly, there is a need for stimulating demand local demand to avoid circumstances where private game parks could alter land use to generate alternative sources of income. Alternative sources of income could include crop and animal husbandry (Van der Merwe et al., 2021). Pricing adjustment is important in protecting the biodiversity of private game parks and an industry that contributes greatly to GDP in most developing countries, including Zimbabwe. Fourthly, since the emergence of informal markets as a response to the ongoing economic challenges in Zimbabwe, game park employees may consider improving their entrepreneurship skills (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020). As they call it in Zimbabwe, having "side hustles" may be a great option for employees. Conversations on how private parks can promote their employee's side hustles are important in creating tourism resilience. Finally, there is a need for mutual understanding between the employer and employee. This is critical given the lack of permanent job contracts and the retrenchments during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sharma et al., 2021).

This study is not without limitations. First, we followed a qualitative approach, and thus, findings may not be generalized as interviews do not have statistical significance. Therefore, large scale quantitative studies are needed to estimate the effects of COVID-19 on organizations and employees' livelihoods. Secondly, Zimbabwe being a distressed destination, findings in terms of effects on livelihoods may differ. Future research could overcome this limitation by covering different countries, perhaps those that are politically stable. Thirdly, this study focused on the effects on game park employees' livelihoods without separating whether they are permanently employed or on a contractual basis. Future studies could compare the effects of COVID-19 on permanent employees with those on a contractual basis and generate insights that could help organizations improve their resilience levels. It will be interesting for future studies to establish the impact of the ZimBho initiative in promoting domestic tourism.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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