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## CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND RESILIENCE OF SMALL TO MEDIUM TOURISM ENTERPRISES IN A DISTRESSED DESTINATION

REGIS MUSAVENGANE,\*†  ERISHER WOYO,‡§  AND WILFREDA CHAWARURA¶ 

\*Department of Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure Sciences, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

†College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, School of Ecological and Human Sustainability,  
Department of Environmental Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

‡Department of Marketing, Retail and Tourism, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

§Tourism Research in Economic Environs & Society (TREES), Potchefstroom, South Africa

¶Department of Accounting Sciences, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

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Distressed destinations have distinctive exogenous factors influencing the survival of small to medium enterprises during and postcrisis. Using COVID-19-induced crisis cases in a distressed nation, this study interrogates the underpinnings for the survival and failure of small and medium tourism enterprises during a crisis. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and a critical instance case study research design where interviews were used to obtain data from small and medium enterprise owners. Responses from participants were analyzed through thematic analysis. From the study, it emerged that the major survival nodes include strong political connections, social capital, lack of policy enforcement, and chaotic currency system and facility conversion to suit the prevailing environment. A framework that gives small and medium enterprises insights and tools to manage their businesses during a severe crisis operating environment is proposed. The article narrows the gap in crisis management and resilience literature of small to medium enterprises in developing countries.

**Key words: COVID-19; Small and medium enterprises; Crisis management;  
Distressed destination**

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### Introduction

Tourism is a “strategic economic sector based on its contributions to the local gross domestic product” (Zhang et al., 2021, p. 1). However, it is vulnerable

to several crises, including natural disasters such as a pandemic, and artificial crises, like the recent war that resulted from the Russia–Ukraine invasion, terrorism, political instability, and health pandemics like Ebola, Severe acute respiratory syndrome

Address correspondence to Regis Musavengane, Department of Hospitality, Tourism & Leisure Sciences, Midlands State University, P. Bag 9055, Gweru, Zimbabwe. E-mail: [regmuss2000@yahoo.com](mailto:regmuss2000@yahoo.com)

(SARS), and COVID-19. A closer look at the recent health pandemic shows that since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, several industries, including tourism, have been crippled (Gössling et al., 2021; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022; Nhamo et al., 2020). Several destinations stopped tourism operations due to lockdown measures and travel bans (Fotiadis et al., 2021). These bans resulted in negative economic multiplier effects, including job losses and customer losses (Wieczorek-Kosmala, 2022). The negative impacts of COVID-19 were felt by large organizations and affected small and medium tourism enterprises (Baum & Hai, 2020; Musavengane, Woyo, & Ndlovu, 2022). However, past research argues for a comprehensive understanding of the pandemic's impacts from a geographical context because nations, regions, and communities were affected and responded differently to COVID-19 impacts (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Musavengane, Leonard, & Mureyani, 2022). Understanding the extent to which COVID-19 affected small and medium tourism enterprises in environments that have long been sieged with economic and social challenges is critical. This understanding is imperative in developing crisis management and resilience strategies that are effective for small and medium enterprises that are critical in supporting livelihoods in several distressed economies in most Sub-Saharan African countries. Distressed economies are often characterized by political instability, economic challenges, corruption, and a lack of relevant infrastructure (Metcalf & Fallon, 2022; Woyo, 2022).

Global literature acknowledges that the importance of small and medium enterprises is realized through employment creation, opening of new markets, and being catalysts for economic growth (Lu et al., 2020; Thorgren & Williams, 2020). Like tourism, small and medium enterprises are also susceptible to crises (Lu et al., 2020). These impacts of crises on small and medium enterprises are often severe due to their general lack of preparedness, higher vulnerability, higher dependence on government and local agencies, and the greater psychological and financial impact on the owners or managers (Ghosal & Ye, 2015). Consequently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most governments, including members of the G20, devised interventions like financial assistance and payment

deferrals to support small and medium enterprises (Gurría, 2020). These interventions were meant to cushion small and medium enterprises.

On the contrary, very little support was provided to small and medium enterprises in developing countries during the pandemic. The lack of support made it more challenging, given that most small and medium enterprises in developing countries operate in the informal sector with limited government funding (Ogunsade & Obembe, 2016). In their document analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on Botswana's nature-based tourism, Ham-bira et al. (2022) reported that when COVID-19 struck, most small, medium, and microenterprises (SMMEs) were not registered with the Local Enterprises Authority (LEA). This situation made it difficult for the Botswana government to ascertain the extent of the intervention needed.

Social capital has been argued to be critical in developing organizational resilience (Wu, 2021). Social capital is often achieved through organizational learning and innovation (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020). However, research investigating the coping strategies of small and medium enterprises during and postpandemic remains scanty (Lu et al., 2020; Moya-Martínez & Del Pozo-Rubio, 2021), specifically from distressed contexts. The focus of previous studies on the impact of crises on small and medium enterprises focused on crises emanating from environmental disasters like floods and earthquakes (Fischer-Smith, 2013), political and financial crises (Soininen et al., 2012; Vermoesen et al., 2013). Insights from these studies may be less applicable to understanding the crisis management responses and strategies employed by small and medium enterprises during a black swan in the form of COVID-19. COVID-19 is "a unique disaster" that "transcends business planning or resilience models" (Thorgren & Williams, 2020, p. 1). Understanding how small and medium enterprises in distressed contexts manage the situation is crucial for enhancing crisis management.

Research on the crisis management of small and medium enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic has largely taken a Western focus (Alonso et al., 2020; Asgary et al., 2020; Moya-Martínez & Del Pozo-Rubio, 2021). Most hospitality literature on crisis management has been framed with large organizations in mind (Dayour et al., 2021), leaving

small and medium enterprises largely underresearched. Furthermore, few papers have focused on small and medium enterprises in a tourism context (Alonso et al., 2020; Booyens et al., 2022; Hambira et al., 2022). Those looking at crisis management of small and medium enterprises from developing countries used more democratic and stable economies such as Ghana (Dayour et al., 2021). We argue in this study that African contexts are largely unexplored, and doing so is critical in expanding crisis management literature.

The current study is a response to the call for further research on the impact of COVID-19 on small and medium enterprises (Dayour et al., 2021) and crisis management (Li et al., 2021). Insights generated from this current study are imperative in assisting governments and policymakers in formulating policies and strategies that enhance crisis management for small and medium enterprises. Using data from small and medium tourism enterprises in a distressed destination, this article provides a unique insight that could be used as a reference for other economies and destinations on the impacts of complex crises and subsequent crisis management techniques. The study contributes to crisis management literature by discussing coping strategies that small and medium enterprises employ in distressed destinations. The proposed crisis management model applies to small and medium enterprises facing complex crises in distressed destinations. In this study, distress in Zimbabwe is showcased by prolonged economic constraints emanating from a seemingly unending political crisis resulting from continual election contestations.

## Literature Review

### *Characterization of Distressed Destinations and Small and Medium Enterprises*

Distressed destinations are generally characterized by ongoing political and economic challenges (Metcalf & Fallon, 2022). These conditions negatively affect the general performance of the economy, specifically the tourism sector (Alvarez & Campo, 2014; Woyo, 2018). If not corrected, the level of distress in the destination is also likely to affect its image (Hapairai et al., 2018; Metcalf & Fallon, 2022; Woyo & Slabbert, 2020). A negative

destination image reduces the destination's competitiveness in attracting visitors, labor, and investments. Further distress challenges include declining tourist arrivals and business vulnerability (Musavengane, Woyo, & Ndlovu, 2022), particularly among small and medium enterprises. While literature acknowledges that small and medium enterprises often face constraints and have a higher rate of bankruptcy (Quintiliani, 2017; Yazdanfar & Öhman, 2018), political instability and economic malaise increase their vulnerability. This is because the poor performance that often characterizes distressed economies causes a downward spiral for the whole economy (Yazdanfar & Öhman, 2020).

In formal and informal business sectors, small and medium enterprises represent 90% of all firms worldwide (Tannenbaum et al., 2020). Though in distress, Zimbabwe's small and medium enterprises are a key contributor to the country's gross domestic product (Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, 2017), especially those from its tourism sector (Musavengane & Zhou, 2021). However, small and medium enterprises, especially in distressed contexts, are at higher risk of failure because of preexisting structural challenges that negatively affect them when facing new external shocks (Asgary et al., 2020), such as COVID-19 (Nan & Park, 2022). Small and medium enterprises are relatively vulnerable during crises due to their weak financial stamina (Doshi et al., 2018; Herbane, 2010) and lack of innovative coping strategies (Fisher et al., 2020). These challenges are more acute in an economy like Zimbabwe, where financial support for small businesses is rare compared to developed nations. Therefore, the challenges could trigger more negative multiplier effects regarding unemployment and disruption to the value chain. Therefore, examining the difficulties faced by such firms and their coping strategies is imperative in extending theoretical knowledge on organizational resilience and crisis management (Li et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021) and the development of strategies that are critical for economic recovery (Asgary et al., 2020).

### *COVID-19: Impacts and Survival Strategies for Tourism Small and Medium Enterprises*

Small and medium enterprises have been defined variedly in the literature. However, engaging in

the construct's evolution and conceptualization is beyond this study's scope. In this study, we define small and medium enterprises based on ownership, number of employees, and assets. We adopt a cocktail of aspects borrowed from several definitions. First, the South African Department of Small Business Development (2019) defines small and medium enterprises as "a separate and distinct business entity, together with its branches or subsidiaries, if any, including cooperative enterprises, managed by one owner or more predominantly carried on in any sector or subsector" (p. 110). Second, the OECD (2005) definition shows that, "small firms are generally those with fewer than 50 employees, while micro-enterprises have at most 10, or in some cases 5, workers" (p. 17). The European Union further stipulated the assets or finance expected for small and medium firms; "the turnover of medium-sized enterprises (50-249 employees) should not exceed EUR 50 million; that of small enterprises (10-49 employees) should not exceed EUR 10 million while that of micro firms (less than ten employees) should not exceed EUR 2 million" (OECD, 2005). In Zimbabwe, the definition is derived from the Small and Medium Enterprises Act (Chapter 24:12). The Act stipulates that the number of permanent employees for micro (up to 5), small (6–30), and medium enterprises (37–75) and an annual turnover of up to US\$30,000 (micro), US\$500,000 (small except mining and construction), and US\$1,000,000 (medium).

Though a crucial part of the broader economy, these firms are constantly faced with several challenges (Kalidas et al., 2020) that were made worse by COVID-19 (Thorgren & Williams, 2020). It is worth mentioning that the interventions implemented by various governments to reduce the spread of the virus are described in the literature as stringent (Khan, 2022). Interventions negatively reduced mobility (Hall et al., 2020), consumer demand (Nhamo et al., 2020; Wassler & Fan, 2021), and disrupted supply chains (Bassett et al., 2021), resulting in firms losing revenue (Kalidas et al., 2020; Nhamo et al., 2020; Tapfuma & Musavengane, 2022). The deteriorating aspects of the global economy due to COVID-19 "posed severe challenges to the survival, liquidity, and solvency of" small and medium enterprises (Khan, 2022, p. 2). However, in more advanced economies,

the situation improved following the launch of vaccines (Li et al., 2021). From a developing economic context, several small and medium business enterprises, especially those that survive in the tourism business, are struggling (Hu et al., 2021; Sobaih et al., 2021; Sucheran, 2022).

Interventions to ensure business survival in most emerging countries have not gone beyond the simplistic promotion of domestic tourism as funding is unavailable (Matiza & Slabbert, 2022; Woyo, 2021a). Through this strategy, governments provide incentives that promote local tourism to support the tourism business (Hu et al., 2021; Pham et al., 2021). However, a study by Booyens et al. (2022) demonstrated that government support to aid the recovery of small enterprises has been inadequate. Some efforts normally pursued in promoting tourism development in low-income countries include tax exemptions, custom duty waivers, and reduced prices for local tourists (Woyo, 2021b). These aspects of enhancing tourism development are argued in this article as being less effective during the pandemic because most destinations, especially in Africa, are experiencing low tourism arrivals. This is contrary to the reported increase in consumer confidence among hospitality firms in more advanced tourist destinations that managed to have more of their local population vaccinated, such as the UK (Li et al., 2021).

Small and medium tourism enterprises have endured restrictions during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Keogh-Brown & Smith, 2008; Khan, 2022). However, not all economies were negatively affected (Khan, 2022). Pre-COVID-19 literature on crisis management and organizational resilience during such pandemics provides useful insights and guidance. However, we argue that it is limited in application, given the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic (Khan, 2022; Li et al., 2021; Pham et al., 2022) and the challenges that small and medium enterprises face in distressed contexts. Furthermore, the experiences of small and medium tourism enterprises in previous pandemics may not be relevant to the unique challenges of COVID-19 (Barro et al., 2020). The uniqueness of the pandemic and the lived realities that small and medium tourism enterprises in distressed contexts face requires research to explore the microlevel effects of how these firms navigated the pandemic in a generally unsupportive business environment.

### *Social Capital and Domestic Tourism*

The survival of small and medium tourism businesses mainly depends on business linkages. Social capital enables firms to access critical resources such as finances, innovation, and market information (Lee & Hallak, 2020). Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 248). The social capital concept hinges on trust, solidarity, fairness, networks, social inclusion and cohesion, communication, and empowerment (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020). Small and medium tourism enterprises with poor social capital tend to be pessimistic about business outlook and performance (Zhou et al., 2007). In their study, Lee and Hallak (2020) observed that weak social capital causes small and medium enterprises to lack access to financial resources. Strong social capital increases linkages with possible financiers for small and medium enterprises (Zhou et al., 2007).

Furthermore, having a strong social media presence enables small and medium enterprises to market and communicate with their target customer, thus increasing trustworthiness and loyalty (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). Due to technological advancement, small and medium enterprises can build strong social capital through online platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook (Lee & Hallak, 2020). A study by Fischer and Reuber (2011) revealed how entrepreneurs can use Twitter to gain new insights into the resources available to them and how to set marketing or organizational goals. Wang et al. (2016) also found that the retweets within the entrepreneurial network greatly promote regional business linkages. Therefore, entrepreneurs’ adoption of social media requires technical knowledge and interest (Matikiti et al., 2018).

### *Organizational Resilience and Innovation*

The business world recognizes resilience as a strategy to catapult organizations from a crisis (Musavengane & Kloppers, 2020). It is linked with the ability of the organization to adapt to the changing environment to avoid devastating outcomes (Supardi et al., 2020). Hence Magis (2010) defined

resilience as the capability of individuals or systems (i.e., families, groups, and communities) to cope successfully in the face of significant adversity and risk. Resilience is integral to the reconstruction post-COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism value chain (Stone et al., 2022). It should hinge on technological advancement, local tourism, government assistance, and consumer and employee confidence (Sharma et al., 2021). These measures can position tourism as a global force characterized by sustainability, ecological action, society’s welfare and participation of local communities (Sharma et al., 2021).

Organizational learning is critical in establishing disaster-resilient tourism enterprises (Bhaskara & Filimonau, 2021). Furthermore, organizations and communities with stronger social capital tend to be more resilient than those with less (Musavengane & Simatele, 2017). McGehee and Andrereck (2015) emphasized the importance of social capital in organizations and lack of it limits organizational learning, thereby exposing the tourism industry to future catastrophic events. Established tourism companies have plans and procedures for disaster management, while small operators rely on ad hoc approaches and experience handling disasters (Bhaskara & Filimonau, 2021). However, a multigroup analysis on the impact of COVID-19 by Sobaih et al. (2021) showed that enterprise type significantly affects the results, where restaurant owner-managers were found to be more resilient than their hotel counterparts. Hence, it is important to understand the resilience of small and medium tourism enterprises to a crisis in distressed destinations.

In union with resilience is the concept of innovation. Innovation entails having ideas and developing new strategies and products (Khonje et al., 2020). Innovation enables small tourism firms to handle market and resource uncertainties; however, the ability to handle uncertainties depends on how much the firm depends on tourism (Verreynne et al., 2019). It has been observed that innovations by tourism small and medium enterprises result in survival and business growth (Martínez-Román et al., 2015).

### Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by two crisis management theories: resilience (Folke et al., 2010) and

contingency (Weill & Olson, 1989) theories. The fluid nature of COVID-19 and its impacts on small to medium enterprises necessitated using the two theories. The resilience theory augments business continuity planning, making businesses resistant to failure (Magis, 2010). A business continuity plan is equated to crisis management plans as they set out the anticipated emergencies, disruptions, and possible actions to return to normalcy in the organization. Coping or overcoming exogenous challenges requires effective and efficient adaptive management approaches (Hasselman, 2017, p. 36; Musavengane & Woyo, 2022). Thus, it is imperative to understand how small and medium tourism enterprises in distressed contexts coped with the exogenous challenges of COVID-19. Because adaptation is a response to changes in exogenous factors, learning by doing is a crucial element of adaptive management (Islam et al., 2018). Learning by doing helps tourism managers and other stakeholders effectively deal with changes posed by exogenous factors such as COVID-19. However, these aspects remain less studied in distressed contexts.

With the contingency theory, contextual factors define the approaches or strategies organizations are to adopt (Weill & Olson, 1989). Exogenous factors like COVID-19 require situational approaches that produce positive results. Romero-Silva et al. (2018) noted that developing certain “good fit” approaches to doing business will produce better performance output when contextual factors are considered. The notion of “fit” is central in contingency theory as it suggests that some organizational practices are suited for a particular environment while others are not (Romero-Silva et al., 2018). Studies investigating the “fit” notion considered three conceptualizations: selection, interaction, and system approaches (Sousa & Voss, 2008). The concept adopted in this article is the selection approach. The approach does not consider performance issues; it only investigates certain contextual factors and specific organizational practices (Romero-Silva et al., 2018). In the context of this study, the focus was to consider COVID-19 (contextual factor) and the practice of small to medium tourism enterprises. The approach assumes that management selects the logical approaches that fit the situation based on certain contextual factors.

The interaction and systems approach considers the performance issues that will not be of greater effect in this current study.

## Methodology

### *Study Site*

The study’s objective was to establish the impacts of COVID-19 based on the experiences of owners of small and medium tourism enterprises and the coping strategies they deployed in a distressed context. The study adopted a qualitative research approach. In sustainable tourism, qualitative studies have been highly used to obtain in-depth data to understand complex phenomena (Musavengane & Muzeza, 2021). Data were collected between April and June 2021 in Zimbabwe’s three major cities (Harare, Gweru, and Victoria Falls) to understand the impact of COVID-19 on tourism entrepreneurs. Harare was selected because it is the capital city and attracts business tourists, while Gweru was selected due to its national geographical centrality. Victoria Falls was selected because of its popularity with local and international tourists. The tourism business is generally higher in all three cities, with several small and medium indigenous tourism entrepreneurs. The cities also have different economic dynamics and are exposed to different socioenvironmental factors, making them an interesting context for an in-depth understanding of the phenomena.

### *Study Design and Sample*

A case study approach was adopted as it provides “real-life engagements” (Musavengane & Muzeza, 2021, p. 477). Specifically, a critical instance case study was deemed suitable for the study as COVID-19 is a unique pandemic that has affected organizations and destinations differently. The case study enhanced our understanding of the coping strategies that small and medium tourism enterprises adopted. A purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting information-rich study participants, as their experiences contributed to understanding the impacts of COVID-19 (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling was based on satisfying the following inclusion criteria for participants

and organizations: (i) sole or partnership ownership, (ii) less than 20 employees, (iii) in the tourism and hospitality business for less than 10 years, and (iv) turnover of less than US\$500,000 for small and medium enterprises, respectively. The final sample included 12 participants from lodges (5 in Harare, 3 in Gweru, and 4 in Victoria Falls), 5 participants from restaurants (2 in Harare, 1 in Gweru, 2 in Victoria Falls), 6 participants from events organizations (3 in Harare, 1 in Gweru, 2 in Victoria Falls), and 6 participants from tour and safari operators (1 in Harare, 1 in Gweru, and 4 in Victoria Falls). A total of 29 interviews were conducted with the owners of these establishments.

### *Interview Instruments and Measures*

A semistructured and open-ended interview guide (in English) informed by a comprehensive literature review was used to collect data. Open-ended questions allowed the respondents to provide in-depth responses to the questions. Furthermore, questions were also developed using the situational analysis approach (SAP). SAP entailed studying current affairs on COVID-19 ranging from international tourism reports such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization and World Health Organization to national organizations such as the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare and the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority. The instrument was pilot tested among academics in Zimbabwe, and modifications regarding the wording of certain questions were made accordingly. The guide collected data on general organizational questions and the extent to which COVID-19 impacted the organization. The last section focused on survival strategies, interventions, and plans.

### *Procedure and Data Analysis*

Participants were contacted via email and telephone using an interview protocol and provided a slot for an online or in-person interview. Both English and Shona (native language) were used to collect data as the respondents and interviewer were comfortable using both. The interviewer was conversant with both languages and translation, and there was no need to translate as either language would be used to emphasize a point or rephrase a

question, thereby strengthening the quality of the data. Restrictions concerning intercity travel in Zimbabwe necessitated online interviews. With the consent of the participants, all interviews were recorded. Interviews were held face-to-face while observing COVID-19 guidelines, while some interviews were done virtually using Zoom and WhatsApp. Each interview lasted between 35 and 45 min. Naturalized transcription was adopted to record the data. The whole sentences were captured with as much detail as possible. Cameron (2001) regarded this as a transcription representing the “real world.” Thus, the authors wrote all the sentences on a hard-cover notebook before typing in Microsoft word (in vivo coding). This helped to present the data in a natural, objective, and accurate manner. Oliver et al. (2005) suggested that the conversation was captured in the transcription structure and in the discourse representation itself.

Responses from participants were analyzed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was opted for in this COVID-19 and SMMEs study as it is a useful analytical procedure for examining diverse perspectives of different research participants, highlighting areas of agreement and disagreement and generating unanticipated insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis helps with a well-structured approach to handling data and producing a clear and organized final report (Nowell et al., 2017). The transcripts from the interviews were analyzed, and data were recorded to derive key issues. The data were analyzed inductively, whereby the text was read line by line and codes were assigned to paragraphs and segments. The main themes that emerged are human resource shocks, financial and administrative shocks, social shocks, resilience strategies, contingency measures, and the future. The major results of the focused coding analysis on the impact of COVID-19 and the resilience of small to medium tourism enterprises in the three cities are shown in Figure 1. The first step towards having focused codes was open coding transcripts by reading them line-by-line. Open coding was done for three rounds to establish commonalities and develop themes. Focused coding started with collapsing or narrowing down themes through notes compiled during open coding. The second step involved merging seemingly related themes. After that, a final list of codes with



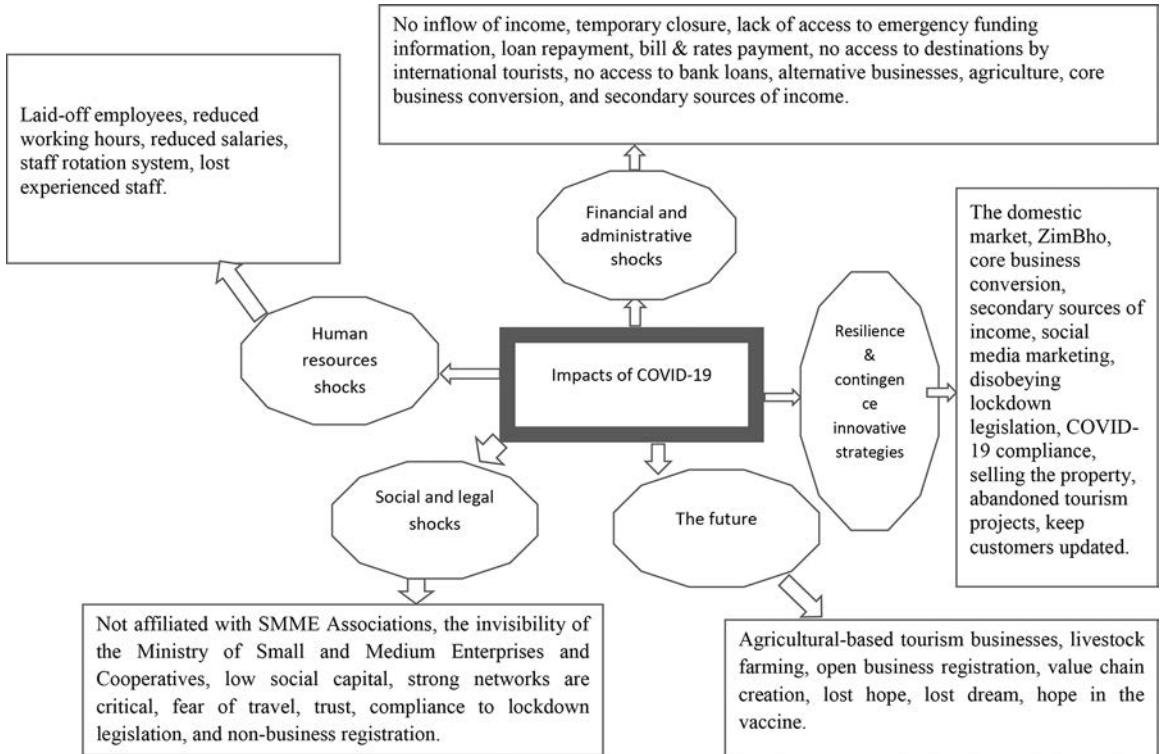


Figure 1. Major categories of the impact of COVID-19 and resilience of small to medium tourism enterprises.

definitions that spell out what the code means was established. Finally, we recoded the dataset using the final list of codes.

Each superordinate has between 5 and 10 subcategories (see Fig. 1). What emerged to be the dominant category most frequently cited by respondents during interviewing were financial and administrative shocks, which must be viewed in multilayered perspectives than what is already in the literature. Here the participants' language reflected descriptions, assumptions, and reports about how COVID-19 disrupted the organization's operations. A closer look at the superordinate categories was done to rank the subordinate categories based on the frequency of mention during the interviewing process. The descriptive codes were drawn from subordinate categories and were based on the effects of COVID-19 on the small and medium tourism enterprises and the effects of the survival strategies. The researchers then assigned each unit of data its unique code. Naturally, a pattern emerged because of repetition and consistencies in the frequency of mentions

of specific issues about COVID-19 in small and medium tourism enterprises. Similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation are the main characteristics that inform coding patterns. The phrases and keycodes (see outer blocks of Fig. 1) were then integrated to develop a theme (inside blocks of Fig. 1), an outcome of coding.

## Results and Discussions

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 small to medium enterprises and the resilient strategies they employ. Lessons are drawn on how to survive during a turbulent period. The magnitude of the effects of COVID-19 varies from one organization to another depending on the location, type of business and innovative strategies and political party affiliations.

### *Human Resource Shocks*

Tourism recovery is projected to remain sluggish and slower, affecting destinations, businesses, especially small and medium tourism enterprises, and their employees (Rogerson & Baum, 2020). Tourism is generally a labour-intensive sector (Baum & Hai, 2020) and the most affected by COVID-19. The small and medium tourism enterprises that participated in the study had between six (6) to nineteen (19) employees, and their workforce was affected by COVID-19. Tour Operators in Victoria Falls had to lay off all staff due to limited or no cashflows to fund the operations. One of the tour operators and lodge operator in Victoria Falls and Harare, respectively, highlighted that:

At the beginning of the pandemic, we were supplementing our employee's salaries with savings, and it got to a point where we exhausted all the money. Our business was new, we started in 2018, and it was promising. (SMME 7)

We maintained a small fraction of staff to concentrate on the new target market [essential workers]. That was the only way to get income. (SMME 21)

The above sentiments agree with the contingency theory, which states that managers learn by doing when exposed to exogenous factors (Islam et al., 2018). Based on the participants' narratives, the analysis showed that dynamics concerning the effects of COVID-19 on employees differed from city to city. Small and medium tourism enterprises in Harare and Gweru employed survival strategies like offering half-pay, rotational work schedule-based pay, and diversification to safeguard jobs. Their resilience to COVID-19 was also enhanced due to their struggles when operating in a distressed economy like Zimbabwe. The owner of a leisure lodge in Harare noted that:

At the pandemic's beginning, we gave our employees half salaries during the total lockdown. After easing the lockdown, workers were placed on a rotational schedule to ensure everyone got something. Even with low bookings, we managed to pay them salaries from other businesses not tourism-related we operate. Our economy has been in chaos for a long time now, which has taught us to have multiple income streams. So, when COVID-19 hit us, we had to rely on other

businesses that could operate. As an entrepreneur, I must be active in those small businesses with opportunities. (SMME 3)

Small and medium enterprises in Gweru were also affected. One of the Guesthouse owners shared an interesting experience that shows the economic challenges in distressed destinations:

When the lockdown started, things were bad. At first, we were on half salaries which were eventually reduced to one-third of the salary until there was no salary for workers. Some had to look for work elsewhere to feed their families; others became conductors at Zimbabwe United Passenger Company. Uuum, I am told that employees had challenges in terms of rentals and food. Unfortunately, there is nothing we can do without any source of revenue. Our local currency is something not to talk about as everything is rated using United States Dollars. (SMME 2)

The redundancy of employees was motivated by the loss of income. It is imperative to note that in Zimbabwe, the prices of most goods and services, while denominated in the local currency, are pegged at the prevailing rate of the US dollar. With employees struggling to pay rentals denominated in hard currency, the chances of building the resilience of small and medium enterprises through domestic tourism are slim. Though the findings could be consistent with previous research (Filimonau et al., 2020), the preparedness of some small and medium enterprises is largely explained because of the distressing conditions operating before COVID-19. As suggested in Figure 2, effective crisis management and building organizational resilience among small and medium enterprises for post-COVID-19 require responding to current and previous operating challenges in a destination.

### *Financial and Administrative Shocks*

The financial and administrative challenges emerged as the second theme in this study. All 29 participants indicated that they were negatively affected. Likewise, a tour operator mentioned:

COVID-19 hit us financially and administratively. It also hit us operationally because there was no income, and I had to lay off everyone. I just remained myself. We got to a point where we had

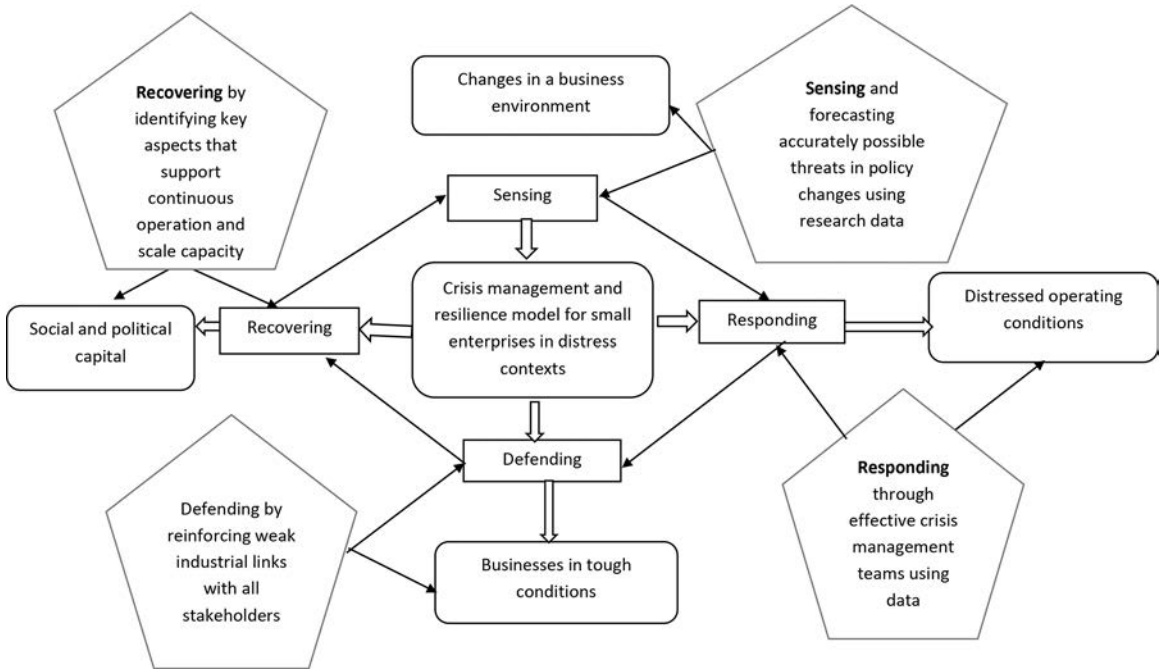


Figure 2. Distressed destinations small and medium enterprises resilience model.

no money; we even had to sell 80% of our fleet. Our fleet is gone. We sold it on trying alternative projects like the one in accommodation. We had to let go of our tour vans. It has been bad. In short, COVID-19 hit and crippled us, disabled us, and left us on stretchers. We need to recuperate. We are in a bad state. (SMME 7)

The quote echoes the notion of resilience by Magis (2010) on the need to bounce back after a crisis. The investment in new accommodation projects signals hope, even among distressed businesses. Restaurants in Harare had to flip the situation by doing corporate food deliveries. The following excerpt sums this up:

COVID-19 affected us badly; we have bills, rates, and rent to pay. We tried to obtain bank loans to no avail. Sit-in was prohibited, so what we had to do when the lockdown was eased a bit was to do take-away foods to get a small amount of income. We also did corporate deliveries; we had to look for a business to stay afloat or operate at a breakeven point. (SMME 13)

While this quote is in line with the contingency theory (Islam et al., 2018), it also highlights the

contingency strategy that mirrors Zimbabwe, which is generally referred to as the *kukiya-kiya strategy*, which means multiple forms of “making do” (Jones, 2010; Kabonga, 2020). The only difference between how contingency is viewed in literature and how contingency is viewed in distressed destinations like Zimbabwe is that, in the latter, it means even breaking the laws. Several of these restaurants doing corporate deliveries were doing so against the law, and some were doing so because they had connections with the political elite, thus further embedding corruption and favoritism. The *kukiya-kiya* contingency was also manifested by aligning business operations to what was deemed “essential services” per COVID-19 regulations. A leisure lodge owner in Harare said:

If the government tells you that those essential service providers are the only ones allowed to work, you must be essential to be in business. Our government will never give us anything, so my family and employees will die of hunger. I will not let that happen. So, we focused on supplying accommodation services to essential workers in the government, medical field, and non-governmental organizations, getting connected with people that

matter, and making things happen. This worked well for us than we thought. (SMME 11)

Getting connected with people that matter was established using a follow-up question. It was established that the family had political backing and gained “special” favors, and law enforcement officers could not stop them from operating. Thus, firms that have allegiance to the ruling Zimbabwe African Union-Patriotic Front were more able to navigate the challenges of COVID-19 compared to those without political backing.

The government of Zimbabwe set aside US\$500million to support tourism recovery during the pandemic. When nothing materializes, governments of distressed destinations often make “cosmetic” policies as part of their response to crises. Several participants mentioned that they never received COVID-19 financial support for tourism recovery. The participants noted that there was no accurate information as to how they could access the funds, and they said:

I am not sure, but I know that the government announced funding of 500 million as seen on the news, but no further information we received from responsible offices. (SMME 5)

The promised funds never got through to us as anticipated. Till now, we do not know anything about the funds. Our licenses are paid up, but we know nothing about this funding. (SMME 14)

That is a difficult question; things you watch on TV and no formal communication are difficult to follow up on. (SMME 16)

If you know someone, it is easy to access the money. But, if you remain on the terraces, you will lose out. (SMME 25)

Several participants questioned the government’s sincerity in ensuring tourism resilience through the promised financial support. As presented in Figure 2, this article argues that effective recovery requires the enthusiastic participation of various stakeholders, including the government. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted in a distressed destination like Zimbabwe, where it was found that lack of trust affected business confidence during the political and currency crises

of 2008 (Jones, 2010; Kabonga, 2020). These circumstances consolidate the continued rise of the *kukiya-kiya* contingency among firms in distressed economies (Jones, 2010; Kabonga, 2020). *Kukiya-kiya* is a Shona vernacular lingo loosely translated as “making do,” similar to *kungwavha-ngwavha*. The financial impact of COVID-19 in distressed destinations is explained at two levels. Firstly, the general loss of income level is similar globally. Secondly, it is explained through the leakages promoted by having a situation where one currency is used to sell goods and services, and the other currency is used to procure inputs for operations (the local Zimbabwe dollar vs. the US dollar). Earnings in Zimbabwe are received in local currency, but purchases of several goods and services are made in US currency.

### *Social and Legal Shocks*

Business is not conducted in a vacuum. Several stakeholders are involved, such as society, competitors, and customers. The study revealed that participants socially linked to other small and medium enterprise owners in the industry are more resilient during a crisis. Some participants reported that they shared ideas with their business counterparts, who helped them navigate a way out of the uncertain future. Others noted their association with the “correct” political members or parties as beneficial during turbulent times. Such an association is termed structural social capital in the seminal work of Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998). In the current study, the pertinent aspects of social capital emerged: political association, family association, association with persons with access to the US currency, and business association. When ranked, political association emerged topped the list, followed by access to people with money (US dollars), thus confirming earlier findings (Musavengane & Klopers, 2020). One of the restaurant owners said:

Our close business partners in high political offices told us that we had to change our modus of operation to fit into the ‘essential’ working class. That is how we managed to survive. (SMME 11)

Investing in social capital (business, family, or political) is a critical organizational resilient

strategy to survive a crisis in distressed contexts. Social capital investment provides small and medium enterprises with tangible returns that enhance their financial standing and organizational resilience. Furthermore, they can deal with the bureaucracy of registration and information access. Crisis management requires strong social networking and effective communication to assist victims in getting out of danger (Ritchie, 2004). Social networking in distressed destinations means political connection and is a source of survival. While responses to the study were mixed, the participants argued that a dominant trait to survive crises in distressed destinations is the correct political affiliation. Such a practice is enhanced by the general lack of communication between the state and enterprises. Such circumstances open doors to structural exclusion and organized and “acceptable” systemized corruption through partisan favors.

### *Resilience, Contingency, and Innovative Strategies*

Small and medium tourism enterprises took several contingent measures to ensure survival and organizational resilience. These measures include the pursuance of the domestic market, core business conversion, using secondary sources of income, employing social media marketing, disobeying lockdown legislation, complying with COVID-19 regulations, divesting tourism projects, and keeping customers updated. Firstly, the study found that several lodges turned their lodges into COVID-19 quarantine centers, especially those with political and social connections. This allowed them to generate income to meet salaries and operations expenditures. Most enterprises that benefitted from this survival strategy were based in Harare. They benefitted due to their proximity to the political elite, and more business generally happens in the capital of any destination. This is summed by one guest lodge owner who said:

You must know whom to play with and how to behave. (SMME 26)

Upon easing the lockdowns, some small and medium tourism enterprises took advantage of the ZimBho—a national marketing drive conducted by the national tourism organization to stimulate

domestic tourism demand through famous personalities and street lingo. ZimBho is loosely interpreted as meaning something like “Zimbabwe is good.” In taking advantage of this, small and medium enterprises used #ZimBho as part of their social media marketing to domestic tourists. The owner of a conferencing, events, and accommodation said that:

We were driven to promote our products and services, especially through social media platforms. Our reservations and marketing team worked from home during hard lockdowns, so we resorted to creating more online content so that people would be aware of our products when businesses reopen. Digital marketing is the way to go because most travelling people are on online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. We had to use local lingo hashtags such as #ZimBho! (SMME 5)

The above sentiment is consistent with past research that argued that exogenous factors influence the use of social media marketing (Matikiti et al., 2018). COVID-19 seems to have pushed reluctant social media marketing users to adopt it. The firm owners have a significant role in motivating their employees to adopt new technologies. Furthermore, the study found that other enterprises had to divest their tourism businesses and move to a sector that was “deemed an essential service,” such as agriculture. A Safari operator in Victoria Falls noted this and said, “they sold some of their assets and invested in agriculture where income was guaranteed.” This is consistent with earlier findings that the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism would result in people changing to other economic sectors (van der Merwe et al., 2021). The divestiture of tourism ventures to agriculture could also be since agriculture has generally been funded well since 2000, perhaps as a way of saying the land reform was a success.

### Conclusion

Despite the importance of understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism, the focus has predominantly been on developed contexts and large firms, leaving distressed destinations largely unexplored. Understanding the impacts of COVID-19 requires context-specific situations to establish effective crisis response options (Musavengane,

Leonard, & Mureyani, 2022; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020). COVID-19 is deemed a complex pandemic, so no universal crisis response strategies (Li et al., 2021) support the need for further context-specific investigations. Therefore, the current study was designed to respond to these issues and fill an important literature gap by establishing how COVID-19 impacted small and medium enterprises and their resilient strategies in distressed contexts. Past literature that measured the impacts of pandemics (Keogh-Brown & Smith, 2008) and natural disasters (Wedawatta & Ingirige, 2012) was considered in this study. The present study demonstrates that the resilience of small and medium enterprises is largely driven by the *kukiya-kiya* strategy, which has been around for a long time due to existing structural political and economic crises (Jones, 2010). The strategy demonstrates that the political connection of some businesses with those in power raises issues of exclusion of other businesses. This attracts corruption and unfair treatment of some business entities over others. Other studies in Zimbabwe show that these challenges are universal across other economic sectors, such as mining (Nkomo, 2022). The patronage of politics or top-down state dominance in the exercise of power shapes corruption, making the operating environment unfriendly for businesses. Thus, firms in distressed contexts' resilience to challenges before the pandemic helped them prepare for eventualities. Thus, firms that are more agile in navigating a challenging operating environment were, thus, more resilient during the pandemic.

### Implications

The current study contributes to the postpandemic recovery and organizational resilience literature (Sharma et al., 2021) by examining context-specific crisis response strategies employed by small and medium enterprises in distressed destinations. Given the notion of *kukiya-kiya* ("making do"), which has been witnessed since 2000 (Jones, 2010), evidence in this study showed that the resilience levels of small and medium enterprises in distressed destinations are generally higher. This could be due to small and medium enterprises being used to unfriendly operating environments for longer. Small and medium enterprises are thus perfecting

their *kukiya-kiya* strategy to develop resilience when conducting business in unstable operating environments that have defined Zimbabwe over the past two decades (Woyo & Slabbert, 2020).

Small and medium tourism enterprises, especially in Southern Africa, face all manner of harsh business conditions as they are forced to compete with multinational companies that dominate the industry with the help of political elites. While small and medium enterprises could have been more familiar with operating in unfriendly business environments before the COVID-19 era, the Zimbabwean case presents a unique unstable environment from the mere domination of multinationals in the operating environment (Jones, 2010). The operating environment in Zimbabwe has been uncertain for more than two decades (Nkomo, 2022). There are probably very few countries where top-down state dominance and coercion resulted in people losing money, as in Zimbabwe. This has led small and medium enterprises to build agility and resiliency to perform effectively in unfriendly environments (McCann et al., 2009), such as the one Zimbabwe has been experiencing in the last two decades.

Our proposed framework in Figure 2 gives small and medium enterprises insights and tools to manage their businesses amid any crisis and build long-term organizational resilience that transcends the pandemic, given the harshness of their operating environment. Identifying assets and resources that support firms' continued operation is critical in resource-constrained settings often found in distressed destinations. Enablers such as political connections and conversion of facilities to suit the prevailing demands sensing such firms would require recovering the effects of the pandemic and being resilient.

Defending the industry would require reinforcing weak industrial links and the cooperation of various stakeholders, including government and destination management organizations. This can be achieved by enhancing stakeholders' trust, inclusivity, and openness. Furthermore, for small and medium enterprises to succeed in these contexts, they need strong sensing and forecasting elements. These are crucial in predicting the business environment, especially the threat of inconsistent policies in such countries. Lastly, our model advocates for the need to set up effective crisis management teams through the

involvement of stakeholders. This will help reduce aspects of disobedience that were found as a “recovery strategy” as it is costly in the long term (Jones, 2010). Furthermore, these insights could help governments and policymakers formulate policies and strategies to support these firms.

### Limitations and Further Research

The impacts of COVID-19 on small and medium enterprises, especially in distressed contexts, will be an evolving research area until travel confidence is up to 2019 levels. This article is limited by collecting data from very few small and medium enterprises, which does not translate into the generalization of findings. A more detailed econometric analysis of the impacts of COVID-19 could use tourism subsectors to improve insights and analysis. Furthermore, given the complexity of the pandemic, future research should make comparative studies on crisis responses of various distressed destinations in Africa and other continents.

### ORCID

Regis Musavengane: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5276-7911>  
 Erisher Woyo: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0776-6645>  
 Wilfreda Chawarura: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0170-8003>

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