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An Assessment of Covid-19 Coping Mechanisms for Safari Operations in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT
Tourism in Zimbabwe is synonymous with the wildlife safari. However, tourism is being put at stake by the recurrent outbreaks of pandemic diseases, including the novel Covid-19 which has brought most world economies to a standstill, safari operations not spared. Empirical studies on the impact of pandemics on wildlife tourism are widely missing in literature. Therefore, this study sought to assess the Covid-19 coping mechanisms and mitigation strategies adopted by safari operations in Zimbabwe. The study adopted a qualitative research methodology through the use of structured interviews and semi structured questionnaires. A thematic approach was used to analyse the data. The findings indicate the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in no-shows by tourists, taking with them the money that safari operators, parks and host communities rely on. The absence of foreign visitors and revenue streams weakened security systems and increased the risk of poaching as there was no funding to pay private security guards. Findings also indicate that the Zimbabwean Safari industry's capacity and resilience to deal with the crisis is currently low. Through the haze of the struggle and income loss, safari operators see an opportunity to rebuild the status quo into something far more self-sustaining, resilient and equitable. The study recommended fiscal and monetary support for the sector to ensure its survival prospects. Safari operators were encouraged to abandon their traditional funding approaches of being small scale, self-funded and specialized industry and start seeking funds on the capital markets. Growth prospects though vertical or lateral integration can also be a good move so as to share costs and join forces in grabbing opportunities.

KEY WORDS
Covid-19, pandemics, safari operations, coping mechanisms

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism in Southern Africa is synonymous with the wildlife safari (Magagula & Costello, 2021; Zhou, 2020). This, however, is being put at stake by the recurrent outbreaks of the pandemics and other crises, including the novel Covid-19 which has, according to UNTWO (2020), brought world economies to a standstill, safari operations not spared. Covid-19 pandemic is driving a global crisis. Governments have responded by restricting human movement, which has reduced economic activity (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2020; McKenzie & Adams, 2020; Lindsey, Allan, Brehony, Dickman, Robson, Begg, & Tyrrell, 2020). These changes may benefit biodiversity conservation in some ways, but in Africa, the perceived net conservation impacts of Covid-19 have been negative (Guevara, 2020). The covid-19 pandemic has reduced sources of funding, resulted in restrictions on the operations of conservation agencies and elevated human threats to nature which are all a huge blow to the nature-reliant safari operations.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Safari operations refer to the provision of overland expeditions, normally taken by vacationers to Africa to explore the scenery, culture, geography and wildlife. Safari operations is linked to the growth of national parks, and its origins can be traced back to the era of big game hunting voyages in South and East Africa during colonial rule (Anderson & Grove, 1987). The unified administrative and political institutions that emerged during the colonial era spawned the preliminary political and socio-economic environment which incited and remained to shape safari tourism. Initially, safari tourism concentrated on consumptive tours through game hunting, but currently such explorations may be dedicated to game viewing, filming, research, and photography. Safaris have advanced over time and have become economic drivers for many Southern African

countries, exceeding traditional industries like farming. Safari experiences consist of guided, mobile, self-drive, walking, hiking, fly-in, elephant back, river boating, primate, horseback, balloon, night game-viewing, photographic and mobile tented journeys. Some safari events are regarded as forms of ecotourism, in which the general public can be educated on the ecosystems and wildlife of indigenous regions (Bristow & Harrison, 2004).

Preliminary efforts to exploit wildlife commercially in Zimbabwe and other African countries focused on meat production. This was based on the assumption that wildlife was better adapted and therefore more productive as compared to domestic livestock, especially in semi-arid environments. As the wildlife trade developed, it became clearer that the economic returns of wildlife lay less in its biological productivity than in the many diverse ways that value could be added to the basic product in the form of services offered to various end users. These services could be added at little environmental cost, and consumers are generally willing to pay well for them. Thus, wildlife exploitation has become an industry with the potential to be both ecologically and economically sustainable hence the birth of the Safari industry. More investors began to perceive the economic prospects of wildlife utilisation for tourism (Child, 2000).

In Zimbabwe, the expansion and development of the industry was facilitated greatly by the introduction of the Parks and Wildlife Act in 1975. Amongst other things, this granted private proprietors the right to utilise the wildlife on their land for their own benefit, including for safari hunting and the capture and trade of animals. The safari industry thrived. In 1960 there were only three game ranches, covering a total area of 350 square kilometres, all producing venison/game meat. In the early 1990s, this had grown to over 216 ranches covering 37,000 square kilometres and involved variously in game-viewing tourism, sport hunting, photographic safaris, trophy hunting, game cropping for venison, and selling live animals, especially in arid regions where it generally proved to be more viable financially and economically than single-species livestock production (Jansen, Child & Bond., 1992). Mandisodza-Chikerema (2018) posits that 26% of Zimbabwe's landmass is exploitable for Safari activities, both consumptive and non-consumptive safari under the jurisdiction of Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZPWMA) and some private enterprises.

According to Frost and Bond (2006), since the inception of the wildlife safari industry in Zimbabwe there have always been challenges hindering the operation of investors in the industry to their full potential. According to Mandisodza-Chikerema (2018) one of the longest standing debates is on competing land-use where, wildlife safari is an alternative land use that must compete with other land uses like livestock, mining and cropping. This makes it worthy for studies to be undertaken on how any global phenomenon of any magnitude is affecting safari operations, with the view to come up with strategies that will aid in the industry's preparedness in risk mitigation if future events.

Of increased concern is the recurrence of epidemics and pandemics, especially those with no cure or vaccines (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2014, Maphanga & Henama, 2019). Ebola outbreaks of 1976 and 2014-15 in West Africa led to the region losing connectivity to the rest of the continent and loss of tourists to the region and Africa as a whole as some sensitive international travellers shunned Africa as a destination due to fear of contracting the disease. Besides, due to the epidemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) commended termination of flights to Africa and prominent global airline companies cancelled their flights by complying with such recommendation. The Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), a Coronavirus originating respiratory tract disease which has first come out in Saudi Arabia in 2012, has according to Joo, Maskery, Berro, Rotz, Lee and Brown (2019), caused for Korean Republic to incur loss of over two million tourists, and the revenue loss of 2.6 billion dollars. The SARS-CoV2 termed Covid-19 was the worst of all outbreaks (Ozbay, Sariisik, Ceylan & Çakmak 2020; Yang, Zhang & Chen, 2020; Lock, 2020). Tourism stood to be one of the top economic casualties of the Covid-19 outbreak. According to Shingal (2020), global travel limitations, border closures and other contingency measures to control Covid-19 have had an instantaneous undesirable impact on tourism and associated sectors because fewer people were travelling. Given the unprecedented impacts of Covid-19 on tourism and the broader economy, the sector was not likely to recover fully in the foreseeable future, even if the virus is controlled. The prospects for recovery hinge on the duration of the predicament and the time it takes for the travel and tourism sector to rebound. Furthermore, the effects of the Covid-19 outbreak on tourism are likely to be asymmetrical and highly localised within countries, with some destinations disproportionately vulnerable because of their high dependence on the sector (Schleicher, 2020). For example, many Commonwealth small states, including Small Island Developing States (SIDS), depend on global tourism for up to 90 per cent of their exports and for a substantial share of their gross domestic product (GDP).

Basically, for small states, most of which are geographically distant from their chief source markets, restoring air connectivity is fundamental to enabling recovery of safari operations. This will be influenced by border restrictions, commercial viability of airline routes and aviation safety and compliance infrastructure, much of which is outside the control of minor economies (MFAT, 2020). According to Taylor (2020) the impacts of an annihilated nature-based tourism industry will have knock-on effects for rural community

livelihoods as well. In southern African countries, poverty, climate change, fragmentation, habitat loss, degradation, poverty, illegal wildlife trade and other stressors have already stretched conservation budgets thin even before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Responding to Covid-19, African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) established an organisational response to the Covid-19 pandemic wrecking lives and economies across the globe. Recognising its position in amplifying African voices and wildlife, AWF decided to work towards ensuring the conservation successes garnered over the previous years are not lost and that societies build resilience to withstand the pandemic. In the wake of the predicament, AWF launched the Covid-19 Emergency Response, held information gathering sessions for protected area front-runners and allies in the tourism industry whose revenue has been intensely affected, and provided thought leadership through articles and other media outreach. By December 2020, AWF had held one hundred and fifty-three awareness campaigns on wildlife tourism coping tactics to Covid-19 across Africa, distributed 9,608 all-inclusive hygiene kits to communities, paid US$7,367 to wildlife rangers to supplement earnings, and expended US$8,808 on feeding rural communities in Zimbabwe alone. According to the same report, the interventions were not enough to cover for all wildlife tourism sustenance needs during and beyond the pandemic (African Wildlife Foundation, 2020 in Chiawo, Muruthi, & Wasige, 2020).

Wildlife conservation and human-wildlife conflict in vulnerable areas are priority focuses throughout the Covid-19 crisis (Rosselló, Becken, & Santana-Gallego, 2020). These elements' association with job losses, paused or reduced income levels, and inadequate support from income-generating companies put conservation at the vanguard of concerns and expectations for amplified poaching patterns. Bumi Hills Anti-Poaching Unit (BHAPU) reported that since the onset of the lockdowns, they saw a definite rise in the number of snares they tracked (Mpofu, 2020). Globally, approximately 150 rangers die each year protecting parks and wildlife, and the number of rangers who lose their lives was likely to increase as the Covid-19 pandemic took its toll – both in terms of wardens catching the disease and in carrying out their obligations (Thin Green Line Foundation, 2021). The temporary forced sabbatical of tourism worldwide required intensified park ranger presence to monitor wildlife crime in spaces customarily frequented by tourists.

According to Rosselló, Becken, & Santana-Gallego, (2020), the zoonotic origins of Covid-19 is of great concern to the future of safari operations as it is likely to lead to stronger conservation policies, accelerated reduction in wildlife populations as well as a biased perceptions towards forms of tourism that involve interaction with wildlife. Benzeval, Booker, Burton, Crossley, Jäckle, Kumari, and Read, (2020) put forward that some researchers have argued for even stronger conservation measures, arguing that the economic costs of pandemics justify scaling back economic development, since excessive tourism development raises the risk of future pandemics. Rosselló, Becken, & Santana-Gallego, (2020), highlights that these conservation measures supress safari tourism but will in the same manner backfire to conservation efforts hence the need to come up with holistic coping mechanisms that will see both ends flourishing.

Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority raised concerns over the increased need for conservation efforts amid a pandemic that has reduced the revenues of all agents involved (Mudzengi, Gandiwa, Muboko, & Mutanga, 2021). According Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (2020), safari operators were now faced with patrolling the Zambezi Valley, facing poachers, extended patrols, and new challenges from Covid-19. Rangers were required to patrol huge distances while on prolonged patrols fighting bad weather and exposure to disease-causing insects, as they have to keep a closer eye on threatened wildlife with the absence of visitors due to Covid-19.

Leedy and Ormrod, (2005) stressed that lack of systematic experiential research on safari operations irrefutably produces scant strategic direction and policy leadership. Research on safari tourism has concentrated on explaining demand and visitor flows from industrialised countries, with miniscule commitment to developing countries, and even less to illuminating safari tourism in Africa. Limited empirical research has so far focused either on impacts of natural disasters and pandemics or appraisal of coping strategies adopted by various safari operations in destinations in the developing countries. Therefore, this study assessed the coping mechanisms adopted by safari tourism operators in Zimbabwe in light of the extra challenges brought about by the covid-19 pandemic.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The impact of pandemics on safari tourism and coping mechanisms adopted by operators have not been fully assessed (Skarea, Domingo & Malgorzata, 2021). Several studies have investigated the coping strategies for hoteliers, airlines and the tourism industry in general (Zenker & Kock, 2020; Perold, 2020; Aburumman, 2020; Rwigema, 2020; Sigala, 2020). Travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic have hit the nature-based tourism sector across the African continent particularly hard, leaving businesses, communities and individuals without incomes (Kreiner, & Ram, 2020). This means a significant loss of funding for conservation. As Lindsey (2020), Kampel (2020), MFAT (2020) and Skarea *et al*. (2021) describe, the Covid-19 pandemic builds a perfect storm of slashed financing, lesser conservation capability, and amplified threats to fauna and

ecosystems, which collectively, could ultimately lead to the downfall of the entire tourism value chain in countries like Zimbabwe where nature-based tourism is the prime form of tourism. Adopting a qualitative research methodology, this study therefore assessed the covid-19 coping mechanisms for Safari operations in Zimbabwe. Findings help policymakers and practitioners to design policies aimed at capacity building and operational sustainability of the nature based tourism sector as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study assessed the Covid-19 coping mechanisms for Safari operations in Zimbabwe. Specifically the study sought to establish the Covid-19 coping mechanisms in place for Safari operations in Zimbabwe, assess the effectiveness of Covid-19 coping mechanisms adopted by Safari operations in Zimbabwe, and lastly, the study sought to suggest strategies to enhance the ability of safari operators in Zimbabwe to cope with covid-19.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Key concepts in safari tourism and mechanisms to cope with pandemics are reviewed below:

Safari Tourism

Safari, as defined in the Oxford English dictionary, refers to an organised expedition intended for viewing wild animals, which at times may include hunting of wild animals, particularly in Africa. According to WHO (2014) safari is the most common term for wildlife watching tourism. WHO (2014) revealed that the term 'Safari' is a Swahili word for 'journey', which during the colonial era referred to hunting expeditions. However of late, safari basically refers to wildlife watching tourism. Wildlife tourism takes place mainly in protected areas that offers the opportunity to observe and photograph wild animals in their natural habitats. The definitive form of safari involves spotting wildlife from four-wheel drive vehicles and staying in tented safari camps or lodges. Emerging forms of safari tourism include trekking and kayaking. While safari tours and the above-mentioned specific tourism products may represent the most common forms of wildlife related tourism, this study encompasses all kinds of wildlife that may be watched by tourists. The definitions above exclude captive or semi-captive settings of wild animals like zoos. From the above definitions as well one can relate that safari tourism forms the backbone of tourism in Africa, Zimbabwe not spared. Hence the need to be highly alert on how various turbulences impact on the nature based tourism industry so as to safeguard the continent's major tourism resource.

The history of wildlife viewing and safari tourism in Africa can be traced back to the period of big game hunting expeditions in Africa between 1900 and 1945 (Anderson & Grove, 1987). Conservation policies were enacted by colonial governments to protect unique wildlife attractions and species, which were then promoted through organized safari tourism activities (Lusigi, 1978). Tourism was permitted because these areas were designated for the propagation, protection and preservation of objects of aesthetic, geological, prehistoric, archaeological or scientific interest for the general public's benefit and advantage (Lusigi, 1978). These structurally ingrained wildlife conservation policies and tourism development initiatives persisted in Africa during the post-colonial period. These wildlife policies, on the other hand, aided in the growth of Africa's safari industry, which is now worth US$12.4 billion. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (https://unwto.org/country-profile-inbound-tourism), the US$12.4 billion is based on the major safari countries in East and Southern Africa's international tourism receipts in 2018. According UNWTO (2015), wildlife-watching tourism accounts for 80% of total trip sales in Africa.

Common challenges to the operation of safari areas

The exclusion of locals from popular safari tourism activities is spatially limited to a few locations in popular wildlife parks, resulting in very high environmental impacts (Okech & Urmilla, 2009). Few locals who live near or at tourist attractions and facilities benefit from related jobs, even if they are relatively low-wage *(menial)*. The growing popularity of all-inclusive tour packages complicates the equitable distribution of tourism benefits to local residents even more (Okech, 2007).

In addition to the challenges of park and community antagonistic relationships between park management and host communities, Lindsey (2020) cites conservation funding as an issue that has always been a major challenge in African Safari areas. Most African governments leave conservation funding to Safari tourism and donor activities. As a result, during periods of economic downturn, tourism receipts suffer, and conservation initiatives suffer. According to Abdulkadirov, Biryukov and Yudina (2020), the situation has been exacerbated by the onset of Covid-19, which has limited travel to tourism destinations. With conservation at stake, the business of safari operations may suffer, necessitating the need to address the challenges posed by Covid-19 on safari operations, among a slew of others.

Covid-19 impacts on safari tourism

According to Litman (2020), safari operations can be evaluated from the perspectives of the source markets and the destinations. A destination is a collection of activities designed to provide a comprehensive tourism product to the market. Travel restrictions, as well as fear among potential customers following the lifting of restrictions, resulted in a significant loss in Safari revenues. Covid-19 killed millions of people around the world, including employees in the safari tourism industry. Flight cancellations resulted in revenue loss for Safari operators.

This situation is exacerbated in most African countries because African destinations rely more on international tourism receipts than on domestic tourism (Duan & Zhug, 2020). Such a revenue loss resulted in an inability to fund conservation initiatives such as patrols. Patrols were supposed to be taken more seriously now that tourist activities that disrupted poachers' activities were almost non-existent. The disruption of park aesthetic value and increased vulnerability of wildlife in Africa's major safari areas is a significant blow to the tourism industry as a whole. This is because most African countries, including Zimbabwe, rely on nature-based tourism attractions for all other value chain activities. It was therefore necessary to conduct a study to assess the impact of Covid-19 on Safari operations in order to improve their preparedness to deal with the impacts to be carried out. A healthy and functional Safari industry for Zimbabwe would possibly mean a viable tourism industry.

Coping mechanisms to past visitor-ship challenges

Tourism destinations around the world have suffered a variety of setbacks, including the documented September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, global recession, great depression of the 1930s, World War One (WWI) and World War Two (WWII), severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak, Avian flu, H1N1, tsunamis, Ebola outbreak in West Africa, and political and economic turmoil phenomena, all of which have made tourism inoperable (Zhou, 2018).

The various destinations used various coping mechanisms in response to the visitor-ship challenges posed by each of the risks mentioned. In the Zimbabwean context, the nation's strategy to deal with economic turmoil was an economic recovery regime through dollarization in 2009 (Makochekanwa & Kambarami, 2011), as well as a political transition and the goal of becoming a middle-income country by 2030 (Zhou, 2018). Dollarization helped to stabilize the Zimbabwean dollar, which resulted in restored visitor confidence in visiting the country, resulting in a significant increase in tourism receipts from 2009 onwards.

After the ills brought by the land reform program and the inflationary period, the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority rebranded the destination by launching the *Zimbabwe World of Wonders* brand which has worldwide recognition in mainland Europe, the USA, Latin America Asia and Africa. ZTA's re-engagement with traditional source markets resulted in the establishment of offices in areas like New York in 2011 (Avraham & Ketter, 2017). According to Gitu (2003) and Essner (2003), chronic challenges stifling the development of the tourism sector are concerning because they are bound to stall the overall development process, implying the need for policy regimes. Policy regimes, according to Essner (2003), create enabling environments that either recapitalize tourism operators or improve the destination image, thereby increasing the destination's tourist drawing power. However, it should be noted that the majority of these response mechanisms do not appear to be transferable from one location to another or from one disaster to the next. Thus, while Zimbabwe can learn from previous challenges, the Covid-19 pandemic should be treated as a unique phenomenon, and coping mechanisms should be sought in the Zimbabwean context with greater specificity to the desired industry.

IV. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted the descriptive research design as none of the objectives required statistical data or some form of measurement. A descriptive design is a description of what is happening in a particular field of study involving a number of selected areas (Hughes & Hitchcock, 1995). A qualitative method was adopted where a purposive sample of twelve safari tourism operators and one representative from the Safari Operators Association of Zimbabwe (SOAZ). Data was only collected from fully registered and licensed operators from Chewore, Sapi and Mana Pools National Park safari areas of Zimbabwe. Interviews were conducted with all the thirteen respondents and an inductive data analysis approach through the use of Nvivo was utilised to analyse data.

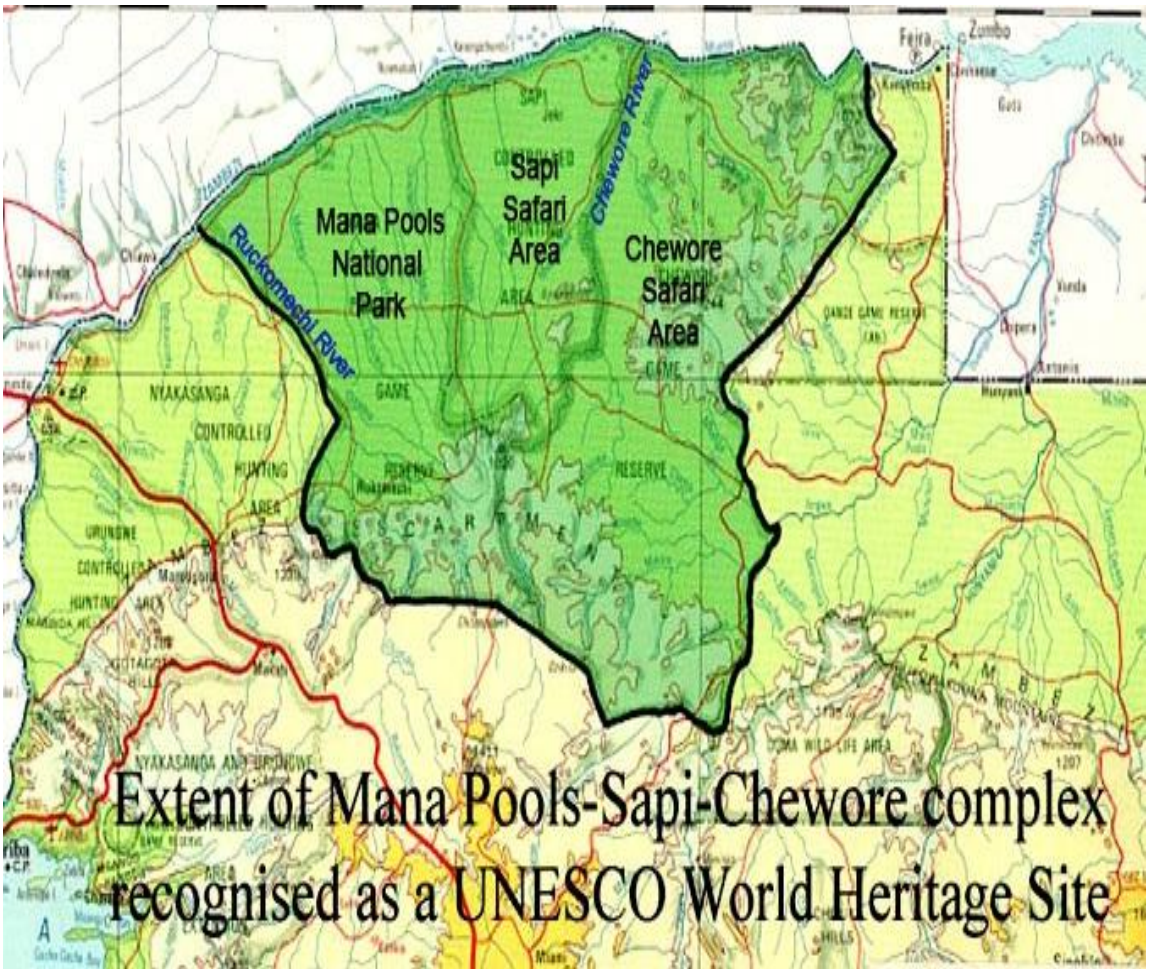

Figure 1: Study Site

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study and discussion of results are presented below:

COVID-19 COPING MECHANISMS ADOPTED BY SAFARI OPERATORS IN ZIMBABWE

The study looked at Covid-19 coping mechanisms for Safari operations at three different levels. The first level is the entity level. This looked at how the various organisations individually responded to the impacts of Covid-19 on their operations. The second level is the industry level where the research sought to unearth joint efforts by Safari operators to deal with the impacts of Covid-19. Then the last level was concerned about how the government, either directly through government policy or through its organ, the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority are coming in to the rescue of the Safari industry from the ills brought by Covid-19.

Covid-19 coping mechanisms adopted at organisational level

Findings indicate that Safari Operators implemented coping mechanisms meant to improve the operational efficiency of their organisations through cutting down or completely eliminating some costs. Key strategies employed over and above the World Health Organisation prescription to vaccinate, sanitise, wear face mask and practice social distancing or decongesting workplaces are:

Sales promotions

In a bid to boost revenue inflows, the majority of Safari Operators came up with tailor made domestic tourism promotions, which are cheaper that the traditional tours. This was meant to attract the domestic market to engage in Safari tourism activities in the face of Covid-19 that had partially closed the international market. Despite resumption of some international flights, the Safari Operators Association of Zimbabwe (SOAZ) representative commented that:

The only form of international travel that is open is business travel. Travel for safari tourism will not resume any time soon as safari travellers are safety conscious. The situation is so terrible but it calls for our safari operators to come up with vibrant domestic strategies from the organisational level up to the industry

structures. Most operators have already made positive strides but some still do not have well documented domestic strategies but are rather implementing it haphazardly.

This is in support of the Zimbabwe National Tourism Recovery Plan (2020) which aims to build a strong domestic tourism policy, fostering the culture of travelling among Zimbabweans. Domestic tourism helps in addressing leakages in foreign currency, thus correcting the country's balance of payment (Kabote, Mamimine & Muranda, 2017). Domestic tourists are encouraged payment in instalments so as to make tourism packages more affordable, whilst ensuring constant cash inflows for operators. Domestic tourists were also affected by Covid-19 in the same manner as Safari Operators through loss of income and loss of jobs. This meant that domestic tourists could not afford to travel as well just like their international counterparts. These findings concur with Dupeyras, Haxton and Stacey (2020) who intimated that pricing was the major marketing tool which Indian tourism operators had to manipulate so as to stimulate domestic tourism demand.

One manager from a huge Safari Operator pointed out that their organisation launched a *'pay-now visit later'* promotion to their seasoned markets. They pledged to make the following guarantees:

- *Price guarantee – they guarantee to honour the price of each activity as shown on the quotation once payment is made. So even if prices rise in the near future, the booking will not be affected*.
- *Regulatory fees and taxes guarantee – an increase in parks fees and taxes will be the operator's burden if there happen to be any.*
- *Exchange rate fluctuations – customers will not feel a pinch from possible movements of international exchange rates. The initial quotation will not need any top up*.

This is just to motivate tourists to plan ahead for their future travel to Zimbabwe, giving surety to travellers that they can start their trip cycle early with enhanced financial security. The Safari Operator benefits from the cash injections and at the same time maintain relationships with customers during the hard times. This also gives enthusiasm to the international traveller that soon they will have a seamless experience of Zimbabwe's wilderness safaris. This strategy is informed by Rogers (1983)'s Protection Motivation Model, where the organisations guarantee visitor security and financial security in order to influence travellers to book for holidays during and after the pandemic. Findings of the study also concur with Cahill (2020) who observed that in Belgium, a task force was set up with the mandate to draft promotional strategies meant to maintain contact with source markets in preparation for the resumption of the tourism industry.

Covid-19 created a new playground for tourism players where after the pandemic the whole tourism market would have evolved into new dynamics which call for operators to seek an understanding of new tourism trends (Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2020). According to Cahill (2020), the new dynamics call for a number of marketing tools to be put in place so as to gain a fair share of the market. In the face of reduced income, McGee, Thomas and Wilson (2010) prescribed penetration pricing in order to boost demand. However, the sales promotion strategy by Safari Operators as a coping mechanism to the covid-19 pandemic seems not to have yielded any positive results as yet.

Making payment plans with responsible authorities

Some Safari Operators indicated that they negotiated for Covid-19 payment breaks with either financial institutions or regulatory authorities such as Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, Zimbabwe Tourism Authority and National Social Security Authority in 2020. This was meant to reduce the cost burden on their organisations during the peak of the Covid-19 induced decline. Blanchard, Philippon and Pisani-Ferry (2020) concluded that tax incentives help in improving the viability of firms and avoid costly defaults during recessionary periods such as the one induced by the Covid-19 pandemic to Safari operations across the globe. However, it has been noted that although this alleviates operators' financial challenges in the short term, the loan and tax obligations will eventually have to be paid.

Statutory financial obligations constitute the greatest percentage of expenses for Safari operators. They have to comply with taxes collected by local authorities, Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, Zimbabwe Tourism Authority and Environmental Management Authority among others. It is therefore arguable that during the business temporary recession posed by Covid-19, it was prudent to negotiate for either tax rebates or tax breaks instead of payment plans so as to lessen the burden of cash-flow challenges. Renegotiating payment terms when an operator fails to honour the previous payment terms attracts heavy fines (Hitt, Hoskisson, Ireland & Hoskisson, 2021). Eliminating such tax obligations would be the desirable strategy during a pandemic induced cash-flow crisis.

Reducing work hours for workers

Most Safari Operators resorted to keeping all personnel employed during the pandemic. However, working hours were reduced by between 25 and 50 percent. That was done through putting a rotation schedule to ensure all employees can report for work. This resulted in reduced income for the employees as they were only paid for the hours they reported for duty. The strategy ensured that all employees earned a living but

obviously below the normal standard of living experienced during normal times. These findings concur with Armitage and Nellus (2020) who posit that the pandemic has weighed in heavily on all facets of world economies, creating unprecedented challenges for organisations and employees alike.

The strategy to reduce working hours has different impacts to different employees. , On one hand, the principle of accepting what is generally acceptable given the current situation will make the employees soldier on, appreciating that the organisation is acting in a reasonable manner. Such employees value their employers' efforts in ensuring that employees at least have something to put on the table. On the other hand, however some employees would even be demotivated and may get to the extreme of leaving the organisation (Freud, 1962). One Safari Operator indicated that their key Tour Guide left their organisation and started some better paying business due to the strategy of reduced working hours and reduced income.

Losing key employees is a great challenge in the tourism industry. As stipulated in Dube, Nhamo and Chikodzi (2020) and Dupeyras, Haxton and Stacey (2020), tourism unlike any other industry, is characterised with high contact between clients and service persons. That high contact level creates an attachment or strong bond between tourists and one service person who is key. Patronage to an operator's service could be high only because of one employee who exhibits high skill levels when they deliver on their duties. Termination of contracts by such key employees affect business in the long-run as some tourists may shun that Safari operation because that one amazingly dedicated employee is no longer there.

Changing the base currency for payment of employees' salaries

Two representatives of Safari Operating Organisations indicated that prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, a portion of employees' salaries was paid in United States Dollars, a practice that was scrapped during the pandemic. Operators did not just translate the same salaries to Zimbabwean dollars at bank rate, but management decided to adopt National Employment Council (NEC) rates which are far lower than what the employees used to be paid. This concurs with Armitage and Nellus (2020) who suggested that re-engineering employee contracts and spelling out terms that could keep both the employees and the organisations going was one useful strategy to help organisations conquer the impacts of Covid-19. This strategy has the impact of reducing operating costs while at the same time still complying with the national employment laws on employee remuneration. However, observations indicated the employees' wellbeing was negatively affected as they could no longer afford what they used to buy.

Laying off workers

Findings from the study indicate that most Safari Operators resorted to layoffs in the case of contract employees as opposed to termination. This could be captured in the following sentiments

A manager at one operator commented:

The only way out was to lay off all contract workers.

An administrator with one Safari Operator indicated that:

We could not keep all the workers. Some had to leave the organisation, no two ways. Six contracts were terminated immaturely so as to manage the salary bill. When the situation gets better, we are going to give them preference when we sign new employment contracts.

A Professional Hunter with another Safari Operator reiterated:

There was no work, so it was unreasonable to keep paying people who are doing nothing. They will come back if business resumes.

Findings concur with Kim, Haider, Wu and Dou (2020)'s view that layoffs would cut operating costs for the operation while at the same time giving hope to the employees that they will be rehired once everything gets back to normal. That act of giving hope of re-engagement on the contract workers was preferred as opposed to termination because, termination in most cases would demand that the employees would be entitled to termination benefits which were not readily available during the temporary financial recession, unless otherwise stated in the employment contract. Further, layoffs allow operational flexibility while at the same time giving the operation an opportunity not to let go experienced staff through maintaining the employment relationship even though there is not enough work as a result of low tourist visits. These sentiments concur with Abdulkadirov, Biryukov and Yudina (2020) and Goel, Kamble, Tyagi, Ganesh, Mamuwala and San (2021) who all prescribed employee lay-offs as a bit ethical in the face of Covid-19 in Finland. The argument is that lay-offs gave the affected employees a legal right to be considered first when the same position previously held arises in the organisation.

Covid-19 Coping Mechanisms Spearheaded at Industry Level

The study found out that there has been a series of Zoom meetings attended by Safari operators, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Safari Operators Association of Zimbabwe (SOAZ) representation and all interested parties across the divide. However, all respondents strongly felt that the ethos of all the meetings was

not on solving the financial downturn at organisational level but conservation initiatives took precedence. Further, some operators felt that the big hunting Safari Operators and NGOs dominated the meetings. From the meetings it was agreed that there should be a sustainability fund which all operators should contribute to so as to support conservation in times of crises. Jiang, Ritchie and Verreynne (2021) posit that industry and commerce should now consider investment in business contingency fund insurance and business innovation fund in order to improve resilience to the shocks of disasters of any magnitude. The fund is not yet operational though, as most operators are not yet capable to inject anything into the fund. Further, a standing constitution was yet to be developed during the time of the study.

The SOAZ representative indicated that there is a lack of coordination among the industry members trying to solve problems brought by the pandemic. Such a lack of cooperation, according to most operators detracts everyone's overall effectiveness.

In a statement the SOAZ representative reiterated that:

"…basically, all Safari Operators and governing bodies like local authorities and the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority are pulling in the same direction, but they are not pulling together,"

It is therefore the role of the association of the Safari operators to find means through which they can bring together the various individual efforts to work toward a common goal of overall industry sustainability. These findings on the situation in Zimbabwe's Safari industry differs from similar industries in Iceland where there was a Safari industry online virtual tours site set by the industry for its players (Nhamo, Dube & Chikodzi, 2020). It showcased attractions throughout the country and packages for the various operators in order to wet appetites and keep postponed tours fresh in people's minds. The Finland Safari Industry Association launched the *"100 Reasons to Travel in Wild Finland,"* campaign in which various Safari operators were involved and contribute funding (Abdulkadirov, Biryukov & Yudina, 2020).

The difference in industry preparedness to take joint efforts in mitigating the impacts of Covid-19 could be a result of the countries' levels of economic development. Safari operators in Zimbabwe have been operating in a volatile economic environment prior to the onset of the pandemic. It was observed that the financial position of Safari Operators was already weak before the pandemic, hence a short notice to establish a fund during the covid-19 pandemic was not successful.

Government's Initiatives to Help Safari Operators Cope with the Impacts of the Pandemic

The study employed document analysis so as to augment the responses from questionnaires and interviews to gain insights into government's initiatives. Document analysis indicated that most Safari Operators were either unaware of the various government's initiatives and interventions meant to resuscitate the tourism industry. Some operators feel that government initiatives are inadequate or not genuine. According to the Ministry of Environment, Climate Tourism and Hospitality Industry (2020), the government announced that;

- *"The government has already put in place a Tourism Support Facility to ensure financial support for the sector. The financial support provided will enable the sector to refurbish, modernise and expand its facilities in line with international standards. Furthermore, Government will continue to avail investment incentives designed to attract more investments in the Tourism sector.*"

The government also pledged;

- *Government Guarantee Facility of ZWL500 000 000.00*
- *ZWL100 000 000.00 Tourism Revolving Fund; 80% of which is targeted at Small to Medium players in the Tourism Sector to ensure inclusivity and quicken the revival of the Sector;*
- *Waiver of Value Added Tax on Domestic Tourism*
- *Expeditious liquidation of debt owed to Tourism Operators by various Government Institutions to help ease liquidity.*

However, the question on how far implementation of the growth strategy has gone still remains as most Safari Operators were not even aware of the contents of the National Tourism Recovery Strategy, which could also be attributable to mere ignorance especially on small operators.

The study also found that the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, through initiatives like Youth in Tourism and Women in Tourism, is working closely with financial institutions to seek funding for bankable tourism related business plans. However, the issue of collateral security still remains a challenge in developing countries where no investors have a culture of guaranteeing incubated ideas with financial institutions (Gorton & Ordonez, 2014). Government interventions in Zimbabwe have therefore not been very effective in shielding the Safari tourism sector from the devastating impacts of the covid-19 pandemic.

EFFECTIVENESS OF COVID-19 COPING MECHANISMS ADOPTED BY SAFARI OPERATORS IN CHEWORE, SAPI AND MANA POOLS NATIONAL PARK

This section presents the respondents' views on the effectiveness of Covid-19 coping mechanism adopted by Safari operations in the study area since the onset of the pandemic.

Organisational level coping mechanisms

Most of the respondents feel that temporary deferments of statutory financial obligations only worked in the short term because all the payments had to be done in the future. In the case of financial institutions, the situation becomes even worse because moratorium payment breaks on bank loans meant that full loan repayment stopped for an agreed period. Once the moratorium lapses, loan repayment instalments increased because in most cases the loan still had to be repaid in full during the agreed time frame. In another scenario where the borrower was given an option to pay interest only for an agreed time in 2020, the monthly payments were only less during that specific period. However because they were not paying any capital during the period, the loan balances did not reduce, they still had to pay the loan plus another interest known as the ***deferred payments interest,*** thus increasing the cost of borrowing altogether.

This study revealed that all the strategies adopted at entity level are bandage type of strategies only meant to sustain the Safari industry in the short term but not improving on resilience, cash flows and overall operational efficiency as most operators admitted that their operations were still way below break-even. Such finding concur with Abdulkadirov, Biryukov and Yudina (2020) who observed that all interventions made in Finland in response to the covid-19 pandemic did not have the virility to take the tourism industry into the unforeseen future, operating under crisis conditions. Broader and more encompassing strategies should thus be put in place for Safari operations to develop resilience to both Covid-19 and future pandemics.

Effectiveness of government initiatives

The ZWL$ 100 000 000.00 tourism revolving fund translates to slightly above a million United States dollars which is literally the base currency for most transactions in Zimbabwe when converted at bank rate. Respondents opined that the allocation of around USD1.2 million for the entire tourism industry with its breath is not enough for any meaningful development. Further, a waiver on VAT on domestic tourism will not help much for Safari operators, because as alluded by the SOAZ representative, over 90% of wildlife safari receipts are from internationals thus making the tax waiver insignificant as a crisis management strategy aimed at helping Safari operators.

In the case of financing from financial institutions, an Operations Manager with one of the Safari Operators had to say:

"*The problem with financiers in Zimbabwe is that you have to prove that you have a positive financial net worthy for you to be legible to get the loan*"

In this regard, the operator was referring to the fact that banks are mainly concerned about the borrower's ability to repay the loan hence they are thorough on financial statements, mainly the cash flow statements and the statement of the business' net worthy so as to establish collateral. This concurs with Gorton and Ordonez (2014) who claimed that the issue of collateral security hinders innovation in developing countries. The problem with the specialised safari industry (especially small operators who are not into multiple activities like lodging, hunting and trekking under one name) is the fact that they do not have collateral security. The camping materials and moveable properties like the safari vehicles they solely own are not regarded as collateral when seeking funding. Furthermore, the covid-19 induced extension of the off-peak season which started with the onset of the rainy season in 2019 meant that there was a high possibility of negative balances on Safari operators' cash flow statements, thus making it difficult for them to access funds from banks.

STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE THE ABILITY OF SAFARI OPERATORS IN ZIMBABWE TO COPE WITH COVID-19

The following are strategies to enhance the ability of safari operators in Zimbabwe to cope with covid-19.

Creating a contactless or less contact experience

The study found out that the recovery of the Safari industry was anticipated to be long and winding. This was according to most operators a result of the fact that there was no cure availed up to the time this study was completed. Instead new variants of the Coronavirus that were believed to be more resistant were being discovered in Zimbabwe. Given the fact that the Safari industry was trying to boost operations amid a raging pandemic, many operators believed that there was need to make concerted effort to put in place measures that would ensure extensive customer and employee safety so as to rebuild confidence in the travellers in Zimbabwe's Safari industry. This concurs with Chua, Al-Ansi, Lee and Han (2020) who suggested that for any destination to successfully launch a recovery plan, there is need to establish visitor buy-in and confidence in the destination's protective systems.

This strategy is informed by psycho-social theory (Freud, 1962) that aims to understand the relationship that exists between the demand and the supply side of tourism in trying to rebuild a resilient Safari industry. In understanding that, there was a general consensus among the operators that there was need to take Information and Communication Technologies to a higher level in Zimbabwe and develop a contactless safari experience. This would mean that all the stakeholders in the tourism value chain, from airline booking, check in, hotel

booking, hotel check in, ordering and service acquisition up to safari booking and experience should all see a complete revolution by reducing human contact areas. This will however require a heft investment by both government and individual Safari operators in ICT development (Summit-Bonnici, 2010), an area which according to Chua, Al-Ansi, Lee and Han (2020), most African countries are still lagging.

More external cash injection

Findings of the study indicated that most Safari operations were now in a debt backdrop. Trying to raise funds from internal means would not yield any meaningful results given the high cash demand for them to kick start operational activities like marketing and revitalisation of facilities. Respondents suggested more viable cash injection avenues like trading in stocks and bonds on the stock markets. However, most operators felt that such a move would mean a complete shift in the way most Safari operators do business in Zimbabwe, from financial reporting to desisting from the habit of the hand to mouth type of operation towards more formalised cash flow management systems. Venturing into capital markets has the advantage that the operators would get the finance they need at a reasonable cost (Dube, Nhamo & Chikodzi, 2021). At the same time it would allow them to invest excess cash in stocks and bonds in a business upsurge, for resale when they are in crisis hence improving their resilience to future pandemics. Trading on capital markets is however a riskier alternative that has greater potential for financial gains hence worth exploring.

Strategic alliances

The research study observed that the pandemic increased the need for research and development within the Safari industry. Research helps operators stay ahead of changes likely to be initiated by the various dynamics affecting the industry and inculcate the culture of innovation among operators. All respondents indicated that very few Safari operators in Zimbabwe have the capacity to fund their own research and development initiatives, especially now during the pandemic when budgets are overstretched. Over fifty per cent of the Safari Operators suggested that players should enter into strategic alliances with partners within the tourism value chain. Strategic partnerships can also be entered into with research institutions such as universities, training institutions and technology transfer players. However, a few respondents were sceptic about the effectiveness of strategic allowances, for instance;

One sceptical safari guide said:

We need to be partnering as Safari operators in order to share funds and ideas on how to win the Covid-19 battle. However, I haven't seen any partnership that has worked in Zimbabwe so far, especially with these independent small hunters. The big corporates can do, but not our small operators. No! They can't. It won't last.

Such a sentiment by one safari operator could be a result of prevalent mismanagement practices by small operators, especially in areas of finance, ethics and corporate governance in general. As alluded by Rao (2015), organisations with no clear strategic intent will always find it difficult to pull resources in strategic alliances. Hence, if the bulk of safari operators are operating in a haphazard manner it may be difficult for them to form standing partnerships. Therefore, for the strategy to work, there is need to foster strategic leadership first among Safari Operators in Zimbabwe.

Close cooperation with the academia

Most Safari operators admitted that they lack skills and knowledge on how to manage under such harsh conditions availed by such a global pandemic like Covid-19. They had no point of reference since the management theories they have since anchored on had no reference to such a high level of turbulence they have been exposed to by the pandemic.

One manager complained that:

In my life, my experiences at work and all the books I read, none ever prepared me for managing in such an environment with high uncertainty. I think more theory has to be developed.

Another manager at another struggling Safari Operations Company said:

I think I have to be retrained. Schools of business management need to be furnished with more books, different from what we used to read, syllabi must change.

The SOAZ representative admitted that:

Theory and practice must change and be aligned to management under turbulence. More and more research is needed at the moment. Every decision should be informed by research and must be proactive.

These findings concur with the tenets of the chaos theory which posits that a slight change in one aspect of the organisation operations will significantly change the way things used to be done. This calls for academic institutions to research into more frameworks for pandemics management that are more suited to Safari operations in developing countries like Zimbabwe. Safari Operators should be more open to researchers and share their experiences so that researchers can find solutions to problems bedevilling the sector. Kaushal and Srivastava (2021) shared the same experiences in India and proved that cooperation between industry and academia can go a long way in coping with the impacts of Covid-19 pandemic.

Sector specific financial aid within the tourism industry

There was a general consensus among Safari Operators that the tourism industry is too broad and defining what constitutes tourism business is so complex. Allocating one huge figure from the treasury meant for tourism development and recovery does not make sense. Most operators felt that the Ministry of Environment, Climate, Tourism and Hospitality Industry should make specific and separate allocations of the government funds to various sub-sectors like lodging, boats and cruise then safari for instance. Safari Operators believe this to be the only means through which the government can effectively intervene to save the various sub-sectors of the tourism sector. Some also believe that separate and specific allocations will improve access to the government funds by Safari Operators and other tourism players.

The SOAZ representative reiterated that:

There should be an allocation specifically meant for Safari operators from government. As long as the Safari Operators are under the tourism umbrella, the funds will never be enough and highly inaccessible. We are a specialist sub-sector of the tourism industry, with unique characteristics which have to be considered when defining terms of payment. For instance, hunts are active mostly for four months, the remaining months there is almost zero business for pure hunters. Financiers should consider that as well when availing loans.

These findings concur with Cahill (2020) who prescribed that governments should come up with specific funding initiatives for various tourism operators. In a research carried out in Belgium, Cahill (2020) argued that a focused funding scheme helps the government to effectively reach out to all businesses in need of funding. The government of Zimbabwe must profile the various business sectors under tourism and come up with a sector by sector fund within the tourism industry.

VI. Conclusion

The foregoing indicates that Safari Operators were in dire financial constraints as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most Safari Operators resorted to cost cutting as a covid-19 response mechanism of choice. This study concludes that other covid-19 coping mechanisms have dismally failed to provide any reprieve to Safari Operators as they battle the debilitating impacts of the pandemic. The Safari Operators are in need of specific sector interventions, otherwise; with the pandemic still raging on, the only hope is full vaccination of travellers and host communities. When that is going to happen, it remains everyone's guess.

Limitations of the Study

The major limitation experienced in this study was the monumental challenge in collecting data. Data was collected in the midst of a national lockdown. The nature of the study could not permit online data collection. However, efforts were made to secure the travel permits and permissions to collect data. Challenges were also encountered in accessing the Sapi, Chewore and Mana Pools Safari areas as these areas are highly inaccessible.

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