



# Buffering Deprivation and Vulnerability among Informal Workers in the Covid-19 Context: The Case of the Tourism Sector in Kilimanjaro and Arusha

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## Key Messages

- COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed the tourism business trend and income flows.
- Informal workers employed in this sector, particularly porters and tour guides, were economically, socially and psychologically affected by the pandemic.
- The gender dimension of the sector suggests a lower engagement and representation of female porters and tour guides before and after the pandemic, yet they experience unique challenges.
- Lack of social protection and government support amplified the impact of the pandemic on informal workers in tourism industry.
- There is a need for the government to strengthen involvement and control of the sector through policy, laws and taking advantage of emerging technologies. This includes block chain that will increase transparency between the government and key players of the sector particularly tour operators, porters and tour guides. This will facilitate the operation of the tourism business through reduction of park fees and taxes as well as guarantee the government gets its fair share and control revenue spill.
- The community should strengthen community support groups such as Village Community Banks (VICOBA) and Savings and Credit Societies (SACCOS) to support easy access to capital for informal workers at times of disasters like COVID-19.
- Porters and tour guides need to strengthen their associations, initiate community-based support groups and revolving funds, re-invest and diversify their economic activities and learn the culture of saving.

## Introduction

Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) has affected all spheres of life, disrupting economies and jeopardizing lives and livelihoods. A result of lock downs, which seemed the most effective way of containing the virus and 'flattening' the proverbial curve (Research for Poverty Alleviation [REPOA], 2021), led to a sharp decline in the tourism business worldwide. Tanzania was not exceptional; the

lockdown was translated into a lack of business in the tourism sector, making most people employed in this sector vulnerable. They lost their jobs and means of sustenance due to most of the workers being informal and not covered by any social security arrangement, which could have otherwise mitigated the effect of the pandemic on people employed in this sector. REPOA (2021) reported that informal workers were the most affected population category, making social protection an issue of special attention

(REPOA Brief, 2021). Therefore, this study sought to identify strategies and support mechanisms utilized by informal workers in the tourism sector during the pandemic to sustain their lives and businesses. It also sought to explore the effectiveness of the strategies and support mechanisms used to prevent vulnerability and deprivations as well as mitigate the pandemic's effects.

Further, the study intended to identify appropriate strategies that can be harnessed and adopted to bridge the existing gap and reduce further deprivation and vulnerability. Focusing on the Tanzania tourism northern circuit, the study was conducted in Arusha and Kilimanjaro. Potters and tour guides were selected in the pool of informal tourism workers because the shortages of tourists entail a lack of business compared to taxi drivers, street food sellers, souvenir sellers, artists, and artisans who can still do business with natives. A cross-sectional descriptive design and non-intervention qualitative approach was employed, and 91 respondents were involved in the study. Two methods of data collection: In-depth Interviews (IDI) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were utilized. Qualitative data was then analyzed thematically, summarized, and presented in a narrative format.

## Findings

### Vulnerability of the Tourism Sector: Business Trends Before, during and Post COVID-19.

The findings revealed that the vulnerability of the tourist sector was very evident with the outbreak of COVID-19. Findings affirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed the tourism business trend and income flows. It formidably affected the business at individual, companies and consequently the national economies. The tourism business performance ranged from 75-100 per cent

before the outbreak to almost 0-5 per cent during the peak period of the pandemic. At the time of undertaking the study, business performance was rated at between 25 and 30 per cent, indicating that business is yet to return to how it used to be before the outbreak of COVID-19.

### Real Life Experiences: Effects of COVID-19 on Workers in the Tourism Sector.

Informal workers employed in the tourism sector, who were involved in the study revealed three main categories of the effects of the pandemic; economic, social and psychological. The pandemic results were not similar for all respondents for several reasons. The reasons based on whether or not the individual/household entirely depended on the tourism business as their sole source of income, saving was available for the family to fall back on or there was reliable family support.

The economic effects resulted from lack of business due to lock downs and imposed travel restrictions in different countries, which led to limited tourist inflow in the country. Since tourist companies did not get new bookings and had many cancellations, hotels and companies were closed: closures of businesses are directly translated to reduced earnings which was observed across the companies, tour guides and porters. Following the closure of companies, many porters and tour guides lost their jobs. This is because some companies could not afford to continue paying them and thus, retrenched them. However, a few companies paid their staff half salary or a token allowance to help them sustain themselves. However, most porters and tour guides were promised to be considered for employment when the situation returned to normal because most of their work was on a contract basis.

Consequently, due to lack of income, tour guides and porters could not maintain their membership with their associations thus resulting in a loss of income on the

side of the associations. To buffer the effects of loss of jobs, among other alternatives, porters and tour guides opted for other activities for income generation. Nonetheless, they reported the experience of an inability to earn compared to how it was before COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, families struggled to make ends meet, which signifies deterioration in the quality of life.

Findings confirmed that, the pandemic led to various social problems and changes in social status, relationships and lifestyle. The results indicate that, the pandemic significantly contributed to marriage breakdown of people engaged in the tourism industry. That is, due to lack of financial capability to take care of families a number of men were reported to opt for family abandonment. Few marriages that survived owed much to the social support received from their peers.

Relationships amongst peers were also reported to be affected. That is to say, inability in earning money, many tour guides and porters lost confidence in interacting well with their peers as it used to be before. As a result, outings to various places or recreational areas such as bars and pubs and meeting with a friend because they had no money to offer others' drinks and food staffs. Porters and tour guides also reported a reduction in social status: that is, they were compelled to lead lives of relatively lower-class people compared to the period before the pandemic, hence a change in lifestyle.

The psychological effects were also reported amongst porters and tour guides as a result of COVID-19, which include feelings of shame, shock, panic, trauma, lack of confidence and low self-esteem. It also led to the isolation of some porters and tour guides from the general community due to low levels of respect, negative perception and even abusive statements from the community.

### Gender-Based Dimensions of the Effects.

Based on gender perspective, men constitute the overwhelming majority in this business sector. There is a significant gender gap between tour guides and porters. For instance, even before the pandemic outbreak, out of 2,000 tour guides registered by Kilimanjaro Guides Association (KGA), only 20 were females. Another example is found in 8,000 porters registered by Tanzania Porters Association by 2022, whereby only 200 of them were females. Similarly, Tanzania Tour Guides Association (TTGA) registered 1200 members among whom only 23 were females.

This representation of women in the sector shows that women are generally in a marginal position in the industry. The low presentation of women in this sector is viewed on the basis of the difficulties in getting jobs because the job's activities are viewed as more male-oriented. Instead, women are found in other parts of the tourism value chain especially –food vending and selling different cultural items such as wood sculptures, bags, and clothes. During the pandemic, both men and women tour guides and porters were affected by the closure of the business and lost employment and income. However, the difference occurred when the company resumed business because men still occupied a more privileged status than women, and they were more likely to get back their jobs than women.

### COVID-19 Mitigation Strategies: Survival Mechanisms Adopted.

Based on the understanding that there were no formal social security mechanisms for informal sector operators, it was of great interest to understand the survival mechanisms used by tour guides and porters to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and manage life. As revealed in this study, majority of porters and tour guides did not get any support from the government, their family, community, or associations; instead, they had to devise

their survival mechanisms. Only two (2) participants said they obtained support from their family members and one from his wife, and the other three said they received support from the tourists they previously served from abroad. For the majority, the most commonly used strategy was to either revert to the previous activities before engaging in this sector or find alternative business or employment. These forms of work included: becoming motorcyclists and tricyclists as well as bus drivers, taxi drivers, regional or long route safari (lorry) drivers; selling second-hand goods; becoming middlemen; being employed in hotels and restaurants as service providers and working at construction sites as a casual labourer as well as opening shops, pubs, saloons and car-wash services. The second common strategy was to engage themselves in agricultural activities such as farming, coffee harvesting and cultivation of beans, potatoes, rice, maize, sunflower and vegetable gardens, to mention just a few. Other mentioned strategies include:

- i) The selling of assets and properties;
- ii) Changing Lifestyle;
- iii) Relocating to affordable housing;
- iv) Using their savings;
- v) Borrowing money from family, friends, banks or tourists that they previously served to initiate new business.

Owners and operators, on the other hand, did the following to support tour guides and porters:

- i. Redefining contracts in consultation with their employees, including paying them a certain amount of money as an allowance to sustain life during that hard time.
- ii. Advocating for different service providers, including the government, through various ministries and financial institutions to provide relief for most payments/levies.

- iii. Communicating and negotiating with financial institutions on behalf of their members so that they can temporarily suspend loan repayment without any conditions until the time for business resumption.

Tour guides and Porters' associations also did the following to support porters and tour guides:

- i. Lowering subscription fees and, at times, paying on behalf of porters and tour guides their membership fees.
- ii. Providing entrepreneurship training and first aid training so as to support them in venturing into other income-generating activities.
- iii. Linking the tour guides to opportunities that emerged as some organizations wanted to hire service providers such as car drivers.

The findings revealed that the government did not offer direct financial support to operators of this sector due to resources constraints rather the tourist industry formed one of its sources of revenue. Despite the experience of the above situation, it was appreciated and expressed that the government did the following.

- i. It trained porters and tour guides in protecting themselves from COVID-19 infection.
- ii. It exempted some dormant companies from paying interest on their loans and license fees.

Employers (owners and operators of tourist companies) retrenched many employees except a few who were given half pay and/or a token of allowance on humanitarian grounds at times of dire need. However, this attempt of paying depended on the needs and abilities of the company.

Such experiences from tour guides and porters' associations indicate lack of formal support arrangements at the period of disasters like COVID-19. Instead, they had a contributory account through which members were supported in burials that could not help to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 Per se.

The community also did not support tour guides and porters due to various factors. One of the reasons is that every community member was affected in one way or another. Another reason is that the community believed that porters and tour guides were earning a substantial amount of money from the sector and hence should have savings.

#### Lessons Learnt from COVID – 19.

Despite the effects of the pandemic, it was expressed that porters and tour guides have got the following lessons;

- i) A culture of saving and reducing unnecessary expenditure;
- ii) A practice of protecting the business capital;
- iii) The importance of diversification and creating resilience against disasters;
- iv) The importance of insurance in the informal sector;
- v) The importance of disaster preparedness;
- vi) The importance of unity and having a solid and vibrant associations that will look after the interest of porters and tour guides.

#### Discussion

Evidence abounds that tourism is a vital economic sector in Tanzania. Apart from its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and foreign exchange receipt in the country, the industry creates direct and indirect jobs for low and unskilled workers, making it an essential driver of economic growth and the fight against poverty (Kinyondo & Pelizzo, 2015).

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the corresponding measures of lockdown and ban of international flights have adversely affected this sector, as was projected by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020). Apart from leading to the decline of the GDP, empirical and sector-specific findings from this study have proven that the impact of COVID-19 is witnessed in the society in a way that employees of this sector have been not only economically vulnerable but also socially affected and psychologically distressed. It was established that COVID-19 had created an unimaginable life strain on the population group that is globally and nationally under-represented in the social protection coverage. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2017), only 29 per cent of the global population enjoys access to comprehensive social protection, while the remaining, which is 71 per cent, are either partially or not covered. In addition to being under-financed and fragmented, existing social protection systems focus on people employed in the formal while excluding the majority that depends on the informal economy (Alfers et al., 2017).

Lack of social security and social protection coverage coupled with contractual forms of employment, lack of culture of saving, and lack of support from community members have left tour guides and porters with no option rather than either rational actors by devising alternative means of survival or letting themselves perish.

A state of panic that was created by the pandemic was managed differently by the tour guides, porters and operators. In understanding that there was no reliable form of social support in their communities and that the pandemic has hit almost everyone and it is likely to continue to mutate and cause havoc, the majority of tour guides and porters demonstrated a high level of resilience. As discussed in the previous section, they became

innovative and devised various strategies to make a living.

Despite their efforts to buffer the effects of the pandemic through various strategies, a lot of strategies still need to be done by tour guides and porters and the government as well. Such strategies will improve the business and work environment so as to make the business more reliable for those engaged in it. Goodwill by the government to control, regulate business operations and boost the sector is required. The operators of tourist companies are also required to help porters and tour guides work and earn the incomes deserved and so that they can be able to settle and deal with future uncertainties to some extent.

### **Conclusion & Recommendation**

The study established that no effective support systems helped operators in the tourism industry particularly porters and tour guides engaged in the study to buffer the effects of COVID-19. There are a lot to learn from the pandemic and getting ready for anything else of the exact nature or worse. The government, tour operators, tour associations, tour guides and porters in the tourism sector should understand the sector's volatility and prepare safe environment in case another pandemic is experienced in the future. Apart from the direct financial support that might not be forthcoming in disasters like this, the government can still help through ensuring proper control and monitoring of the sector. It can assure adherence to decent work and employment standards to the employees. boost and ease operations and business through various mechanisms such as a reduction in park fees. The study further recommends the following:

- i) The government should strengthen control of the sector, particularly its operators, to ensure that all porters and tour guides are fully registered. This will increase transparency in the

industry and reduce revenue spills. Further, the government can ease tourism business operation by reducing park fees and taxes at times of disasters to create relief for operators and customers. It can also invest in the education of tour guides and porters, set indicative/ ceiling payment rates for freelancers, tour guides, and porters as well as set a law that mandates the sector to ensure all operators are enrolled in social security schemes and supervise the bank sector to ease loan conditions to operators like guides and porters (because most of these do not have collaterals).

- ii) The community should strengthen community support groups such as Village Community Banks (VICOBA) and Servings and Credit Societies (SACCOS) to help people in moments of hardship without being subjected to complicated and bureaucratic requirements for obtaining loans.
- iii) Porters and Tour Guides are recommended to strengthen their associations, Initiate community-based support and revolve funds. Re-invest and diversify their economic activities and learn the culture of saving can also assist if they will be properly utilized.

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