

Beating Odds in Post Pandemic Times: Lessons from World Rally Championship 2021

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Abstract

The Novel Corona virus pandemic has brought unprecedented impacts on different sectors of economies in countries across the globe. Sports tourism being the worst hit. Sports tourism events are important vehicles of development and mostly embedded in the development plans of many countries. They have been associated with promotion of socio-economic well-being to the host communities. Despite the wide spread of the pandemic, most countries are on the road to recoveries by adopting resilient measures to revamp tourism industry from the shocks of the pandemic. Kenya hosted the World Rally Championship in 2021 as a post pandemic measure to promote sports and tourism industries. The purpose of this paper is to bring to the prominence the benefits of hosting this event in Kenya amidst the pandemic to the host community. The paper adopted a qualitative research design where by 12 key sports and tourism stakeholders were interviewed during the event hosting period. The results indicated that despite the pandemic, the event generated both social and economic benefits to the hosts. Key recommendations were made.

Keywords: Sports Tourism, Events, Covid 19, Effects

Background

Sport tourism industry has witnessed a momentous growth and development, as an area of research attention and as socio-economic growth strategy for many countries, globally. (Nyikana & Tichaawa, 2018, Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2018; Hinch & Higham, 2011; Nyikana, 2016; Saayman, 2012; Tichaawa et al., 2018). Nyikana & Tichaawa, 2018 and Tichaawa et al. (2018), assert that sport tourism events, have played a great role in this growth of sport tourism. Getz & Page (2016) add on that, events are fundamental in marketing of host cities. The popularity of sport tourism events is linked to the fact that they leverage substantial benefits for host communities worldwide depending on the duration of hosting, type of event and size of event. Sport tourism has been renowned as an ideal vehicle that leads to employment generation and a tool for enhancing the quality of lives of the host community (Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2018; Nyikana, 2016; Saayman, 2012; Tichaawa et al., 2018). These benefits include, social, economic environmental and cultural (Wanyonyi, Njoroge & Juma 2021). Additionally, Chalip (2014) and Fairley, Lovegrove, & Brown (2016) state that events attract tourists who stay and spend money, before, during and after hosting of events. Sports events also attract investors in host cities who bring in economic benefits to the local thus promoting local economy development. Therefore, the synergies between the hosting of sports tourism events and tourism development for instance increasing tourist arrivals, curbing the seasonality of tourism, employment, boosting of business and increased tax revenue have often been analyzed in extant literature (Meurer & Lins, 2018; Duglio & Beltramo, 2017; Li & Jago, 2013; Khodr 2012).

The Effects of mega events are widely discussed in sports tourism literature (Hinch & Higham, 2011). These mega sports events comprise of cultural events, festivals and international events such as the Olympics and FIFA World Cup. These high-profile events have high attendance of sports tourists thus increasing their role in creation of economic benefits to the locals and

promoting the image of the hosting destination. While mega-events are one off time events in a country, there exist a number of other small-scale sport tourism events which are hosted more oftenly and have become synonymous and influential to the host community's livelihoods. However, these small-scale events have received little research attention such as the marathons and safari rallies. As put forward by Njoroge et al, (2017) small events have been preferred by many reviewers in sports research because mega events have received much criticism on their inability to leverage positive benefits to the host communities especially in the context of the developing nations.

In spite of this, there is limited academic research focus on sports tourism potential to promote socioeconomic well-being to hosts through small scale events. At these levels of sport events, negative effects are minimized, while the tourism development benefits that they bring remains largely under researched (Higham, 1999; Mosko & Poczta, 2018). To date, much of the economic impact research have been based on mega-event impact. (Njoroge et al, 2017). There exists a research gap in relation to the analysis of economic effects of small-scale events from a local context (Kwiatkowski & Oklevic 2017).

Covid 19 Pandemic and Sports Tourism

Tourism industry is highly vulnerable to phenomena like earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, floods and disease (Hall, 2010; Butler, 2017; Lenggogeni et al., 2019; Ritchie and Jang, 2019, Hemmonsby, Tichaawa & Knott 2021). The COVID-19 outbreak brought the entire globe to halt. The disease originated from Wuhan city, China in 2019 and has had an impact in all parts of the world (Włoch, 2020). The COVID-19 virus has destabilized all sectors of the economies, tourism being the worst hit. Countries have been forced to put in place restrictive measures, for contain the disease (Rio-Chanona, Penny, Pichler, Lanfond & Farmer (2020). The pandemic brought a huge shock since the SARS outbreak, global financial crisis and the 9/11 terrorism attack (Zenker & Kock 2020; Cheer, 2020). The pandemic has resulted to a turmoil across the global economies with severe effects in all the sectors.

According to WHO (2020), COVID-19 had infected more than 60 million people and caused death of over 1 million- worldwide by November 2020 (WHO, 2020; Malra, 2021). Many nations closed down all their international borders for tourists. This resulted in total postponing of also domestic tourism as strict restrictions were imposed such as lock downs and curfews. Even though some destinations have started to open up for travelers slowly, many are afraid of international travelers. But the long-term closing of borders of countries have impacted adversely the global tourism industry and vast number of job losses (Malra2021).

The sports sector wasn't exempted from these restrictions. Ratten (2020) reports that the sport tourism sector has been affected by the Covid 19 pandemic in a way that has never happened before. All sporting activities were suspended indefinitely in many countries (Hammami, Harrabi, Mohr, Krstrup, 2020). Major events attract many attendees and have been associated with the rapid spread of a disease such as a close physical contact between sport participants and close proximity between fans can fasten the spread of the virus (Memish, Steffen, White, Dar, Azhar, Sharma, & Zumla, 2020).

The pandemic has been an economic blow to many countries through the postponement or cancellation of sport events especially in emerging countries' contexts. The Tokyo Olympics was postponed until 2021, World Championships, and World Cups for were cancelled or postponed and the calendars for most major sports have been severely disrupted with no clear indication yet of how

or when this will be resolved. According to UNWTO report (2020), tourism industry estimated a loss of approximately 1.1 billion international tourist arrivals, with a loss of US\$ 910 to 1.1 trillion export revenues and 100-120 million jobs due to the wider spread of the novel coronavirus. Similarly in Kenya, the pandemic led to postponing of mega events like the annual Magical Kenya Golf championships, WRC Championships, IAAF U20 Championships among others. It's beyond doubt that sports events have initially been associated with providing positive socio-economic effects to the hosts (Nyikana & Tichaawa, 2018) but preventive actions by the different nations had hit hard the sports tourism's ability to provide socio economic well-being as a way of promoting sustainable sports tourism. The virtual events and social distancing have imposed negative impacts on the livelihood of people and host economies. However, there are rays of hope as the country has opened up the sports sector and allowing the hosting of sports events but with strict adherence to masking, social distancing and promoting vaccination programs among the sports participants. This shows some great light at the end of the tunnel as sports events hosting will continue boosting the worst hit tourism businesses to be back on their feet and adjust with the new normal era.

Sports Tourism Events Hosted Post Covid in Kenya.

Despite the grip of the pandemic, Kenya has successfully hosted the following international events:

Magical Kenya Golf Championships

The Magical Kenya Open in the season 2021 was hosted in Nairobi city early this year. It's part of the Elite European Tours golf championships. The event attracted over 156 golfers with over 30 countries represented. The events were broadcasted to over 490 million viewer both locally and internationally.

KipKeino Classics continental tour

It's a track and field event named after a famous athlete Kipchoge Keino. It is part of the inaugural World Athletics Continental Tour recognized by IAAF. It was initiated in 2020. The event was held in Kasarani stadium in Nairobi and attracted both local and international athletics.

Rhino Charge:

This is an annual event competition that works towards conservation and protection of the nature.

IAAF U20 Championships

This championship was held this year after it was postponed by a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic at the Moi International Sports Centre, Kasarani, in Nairobi County. It was held in strict adherence to the covid 19 protocols. It attracted more than 900 athletes from 114 countries.

World Rally Championships

After a 19-year absence, Kenya got the privilege of hosting the WRC, with thousands of fans attending the famous Safari Rally. It is dubbed as one of the toughest races worldwide and one of its kind in the African soil. It is supported by FIA and WRC. It entails 18 stages of rough dirt roads covering the forests and savannah. The event was hosted starting from Kasarani in Nairobi city and the climax of it was in Naivasha, a town on the outskirts of Nairobi. It attracted participants, sponsors and fans from all over the world. The event was carried out in strict adherence to Covid 19 protocols.

Socio-Economic Benefits of Sports Tourism Events to the Host Community

Host community's participation in tourism activities in a destination is often linked to sustainable tourism development (Jigang & Jiuxia, 2007; Xu et al., 2019). Tosun (2006) elaborates that host community involvement in tourism enhances the achievement of sustainable tourism as a way of fostering inclusion and sharing of benefits derived from the sector. This enables the community to develop and improve their livelihoods (Xu, et al., 2019). Roberts (2011) adds that the main significance of community participation in tourism development is that the host group that is greatly affected by tourism activities should have a decisive voice in the manner in which the sector evolves within their locality and also external stakeholders being incapable to judge the preferences of hosts effectively.

Community involvement in tourism activities is a way of maximizing on the socio-economic benefits and also their participation allows for needs of the hosts to be put into consideration during the planning, management and supervision of tourism (Jigang & Jiuxia, 2007). The aforementioned approach to tourism planning and development has been legalized by the Brundtland Report of 1987 and the Local Agenda 21 (Roberts, 2011). Furthermore, Job and Paesler (2013) opine that one of the most significant way of poverty-reduction tourism is through host community participation tourism activities.

The rapid growth of sports tourism events has led to the development of a niche sector in the global economy that is becoming a priority of many countries (Saayman, & Saayman 2012; Getz 2013; Walker, Kaplanidou, Gibson, Thapa, Geldenhuys, & Coetzee, 2013; Nyikana, Tichaawa, & Swart, 2014, Tichaawa & Bob, 2015). Developing nations Developing countries have pursued the development of sports tourism as a socio-economic tool for enhancing local economies Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011; Gratton, Raciti, Getz & Andersson, 2015; Tichaawa, Swart & Bob, 2018). This particular drive has been witnessed in Africa whereby many countries are using sports tourism as an economic and social strategic tool (Tichaawa et al., 2018). In Africa, sport tourism is seen as a way of fast-track economic development (Bob & Swart, 2010; Nyikana, et al., 2014; Tichaawa, et al., 2018). This is in relation to that existing literature points on sport tourism being a very powerful and ideal means to achieve in the short-term, socio-economic gains from both sport and tourism, that otherwise would have been achieved in the long-term (Nyikana, 2016). However, despite the growing popularity of sport tourism in the continent, specific research on the phenomenon is still largely missing (Bob & Swart, 2010; Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2018; Tichaawa, 2016).

Methodology

The study was conducted in Naivasha town between 22-29th June 2021 during the event. This paper adopted a qualitative research design. Interviews were conducted to key industry stakeholders in sports events planning and hosting. A total of 12 participants were interviewed using purposive sampling technique. The stakeholders had a specific background experience in sports tourism events hosting, promotion and management. They included: Event sponsors, transport operators, Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, volunteers, hoteliers, fans and Ministry of Sports. Each interviewee had thirty minutes session with the interviewer. All the 12 interviews were recorded and analyzed. Data analysis was done using content analysis.

Results

Participant quotes were used to show their responses in order to protect the respondents. A number was assigned to each respondent to create anonymity. The following table 1 shows the benefits of hosting WRC and the key recommendations that governments can put in place to revamp sports tourism activities post pandemic.

Table 1: Benefits and Recommendations for sports tourism events

Benefits of hosting WRC	Recommendations on Strengthening the Sports Tourism Sector post-pandemic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases cultural exchange • Increases interest in sports tourism events • Improves the reputation of host destination • Enhanced media coverage • Enhanced senses of belonging • Promotion of cultural events • Provided an opportunity for host visitor interaction • Enhanced the self-esteem and recognition among community • Enhanced social cohesion in the community • Provides motivation for conservation of both natural and cultural sites • Increased chances of exposing the hosts globally • Promotes image of hosting community • Promotes host identity in a destination • Built a reputable picture of host country • Increased trade for local community • Increased sporting facilities • Attracting of investors during and after events • Increased community development investments • Accelerated community growth • Long term promotional benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hosting of hybrid events • Community engagements in sports tourism • Need for risk mitigation plan in sports tourism sector • Need for product diversification • Mobilizing mass vaccination programs • Marketing domestic tourism • counties to transform their tourism and health sectors to be able to survive crisis • Putting in place future intervention and resiliency measures for similar pandemic and other risks. • Invest in niche tourism products • Need for rebranding of destinations post covid 19

Socio-economic benefits of World Rally Championship

From the hosting of WRC event in Kenya a number of key benefits were highlighted by the respondents as follows:

“Since COVID hit the country, most hotels have been recording low bookings. All

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hotels in Naivasha were fully booked to accommodate over 2,500 rally participants, management and Government officials. R10

Emphasizing this point, a respondent articulated the unique nature of sports events to local businesses as:

“Accommodation of that many people was a challenge as there was a high turnout of attendees than expected. Some opted for hotels as far as Eldoret town and Nairobi.

R2

“The number of travelers to Naivasha and Nairobi increased two weeks prior to the events hosting. The public transports and taxis were overwhelmed with bookings during the period. The transport to major tourist attractions in Nakuru County also increased during the period. It was a great opportunity to operate to full capacity since the limit was put on the number of customers because of covid 19.” R7

In relation to how the event promoted tourism activities in the Rift valley circuit. The respondents had this to say:

Domestic and international visitors into Naivasha wasn't just for WRC. The championship was like a magnet to hook them to other tourism products in the region. We are going to Naivasha, but we can still visit the Hells Gate National Park, Lake Nakuru National Park, Lake Elementaita, among other attractions in the rift valley like for a week or so. It's about leveraging on those opportunities created by an event like WRC. The event is here to attract the fans to our beautiful country that is well endowed with natural and cultural attractions

“Traffic snurls were however witnessed during the event hosting for hours along Nakuru-Nairobi highway because of high influx of visitors into the town.” R2

“The Safari rally has brought some good fortunes. This has influenced a lot of social-economic benefits in the world gripped by the Covid-19”.

“I am personally delighted. I have had a good sporting treat and impressed by a team from people of diverse background working together. I am proud of this great work outfit and wish you all the best”

They said the Kenya Government will assist the Safari Rally organizers to achieve the desired goals, adding that the Government has been the biggest sponsor of the Safari since 2018 when Kenya started an ambitious goal to return the iconic motor event to the WRC after 19 years.

“For 19 years we have not been in the WRC there were other people working out there. We have had trainers particularly from Motorsport UK who have transferred knowledge to our local technical officials,” R8.

“We have made several friends and want to have more and we are looking forward to working with all of you from the Government.” R4

“The event was fantastic with all the laid down Covid procedures being taken into consideration. Over 1,200 safety marshals. Were deployed to ensure strict adherence to the protocols.” R1

“Proper infrastructure was put in place in Naivasha to promote future hosting of the events. The local organizers in collaboration with the county and the ministry of sports made plan to provide space and infrastructure where competing teams will put up their own structures like garages and offices. Some roads were renovated in preparation for the event.” R11

“The event attracted the local small businesses who were able to sell their merchandise during the event. It brought together the locals who developed pride in

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the event through their spectatorship. Interacting with other people from other countries created a sense of belonging and cultural interactions among them. The event was breathtaking and magnificent it defined the beauty of Kenya globally.” R5

The event has placed Kenya on a global scale and showed its dedication in hosting of the events after 19 years. The event came handy as the country is trying to recovery its economy from the Covid 19 pandemic. This will help the already struggling business revamp their operations.

In relation on the environmental, implication of the WRC Championships, *“the event created great sustainability initiatives through WRC greening program. 19 million trees were planted. There was strict observance to ecological degradation by ensuring that the rally doesn't affect the ecological system and the fauna in the region that is surrounded by a variety of parks and conservancies.”*

Furthermore, the stakeholders in national and county government mentioned the value of sports events on the branding of the host city or town and the value it creates that enhances strengthening of stays and more spending on the auxiliary services thus promoting the local economy.

Key Recommendations on Strengthening the Sports Tourism Sector Amidst the Pandemic

The covid 19 has left significant disruptions in the global economy. Tourism is a great pillar of the Kenyan tourism contributing 10% to the Gross Domestic Product. Major destinations have suffered a contraction in revenues as a result of the pandemic especially the local communities whose livelihoods are directly derived from tourism benefits. The following are the key recommendations on rebuilding the sports tourism sector from the respondents.

The sector should support product diversification. A high dependency on one tourism product could increase vulnerability when a crisis occurs. Niche tourism products like sports tourism should be explored. This will boost resilience and mitigate the cost of crisis shocks

Additionally with the emergence of vaccines in the country, *“Mobilization of citizens on the uptake of the vaccine will improve on the mobility and restoration of confidence in international tourism.*

While the international tourism remains the hardest hit, *“Boosting the domestic tourism market is more ideal in order to cushion the adverse effects of the virus. Sports tourism events has a great potential of enhancing domestic tourism, whenever they are hosted.*

Counties need to formulate sound policies to be able to build more resilient tourism sector, *“counties need to invest in transforming their tourism and health sectors so that they can survive future crises.” “There is a need to come up with post-COVID-19 reviews of sports tourism and putting in place alternative future intervention and resilience measures for similar pandemics and other risks.”* This will help revamp the once most promising sector renown for enhancing the livelihoods of the hosts.

Discussion

The COVID 19 pandemic is a unique disaster of the century and crisis that have previously impacted the tourism sector (Hall et al, 2020, Sigala, 2020). The postponement of the event in 2020 due to the novel COVID 19 pandemic had great implication on tourism, hotels and other auxiliaries that rely on tourism. They were greatly affected by the differed demand from the event. However, the decisions to host the event in 2020 came as a great relief when the country as it battles the third

wave of the Covid-19. Kenya is at a road to recovery from the grip of the pandemic.

First and foremost, the sports events are not only considered as a vehicle of enhancing sustainable development but also a tool for enhancing the image of the host country. The event contributed to 4 billion for the period of time it was hosted in the country. (Standard newspaper, 2020). Many research works have analyzed on the economic outcomes of hosting sports tourism on the host cities (Tinaz & Knott 2021). Hemmonsebey, Tichaawa and Knott (2021) affirm that sports tourism has a potential of providing development opportunity in emerging nations in form of social, economic, cultural and technology enhancements. Kenya's quests to host this event was motivated by the need to promote the society and stimulate its economy as noted by Tinaz and Knott (2021).

In this post pandemic era its evident that sports tourism has risen unwaveringly making many governments in developing countries to be proactive in reopening sports events with strict adherence to Covid protocols. This has given many counties an opportunity of developing their sports infrastructure in order to attract sports events hosting.

Conclusion

Substantial economic benefits, which tourism scholars refer to as the as pre-legacy, have been accrued for many years before COVID 19. It is possible, when tourists' confidence returns and international travel opens up, that Kenya's aggressive tourism development strategy will regain its momentum. The benefits of small-scale tourism development in the short and long-term are undeniable. WRC being hosted amidst the third wave of the virus is worth an applause for leveraging positive benefits to the hosts in both Naivasha and Nairobi counties. Therefore, countries should come up with proactive policies to revamp sports tourism as a post covid strategy of boosting the tourism sector. This will boost, the domestic tourism market, decrease seasonality and help in diversification of tourism products in the country. Furthermore, this will help in building up a more adaptive, resilient and a sustainable sports tourism sector.

Limitations of the study

While the current study was limited to the benefits of hosting sports tourism events post pandemic, there is need for future studies in the field of small-scale events, effects of crises in sports tourism events and how technology can be incorporated in hosting hybrid events post pandemic. Additionally, the study looked at a small-scale event using a qualitative data approach, future studies ought to adopt quantitative or mixed research approach basing them on a hall mark events.

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