Strategies Africa's tourism requires to manage blow from coronavirus

By Issahaku Adam & Albert N Kimbu   24 Apr 2020

Tourism has become an important economic sector for most African countries in the last two decades. There has been increased investments in product development and enhancement, aggressive marketing, coupled with appropriate business-friendly socio-political reforms.

Africa needs to promote domestic tourism. Joana French/Shutterstock

The World Bank reports that one in 20 jobs in sub-Saharan Africa is in the travel and tourism sector. The United World Tourism Organisation estimated that about 67-million international tourists visited Africa in 2018, generating about $38bn for the continent.

The organisation also estimated an increase of 4.2% in international arrivals for the continent in 2019. And before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic a further increase of between 3% to 5% had been predicted for 2020. Factors driving the growth included favourable economic growth, strong demand for air travel, improvement in digital technologies, and easier visa processes.

Like other sectors, tourism, especially international tourism, is vulnerable to external shocks and crisis. Time and again, events have set back the sector. These have included recessions, safety and security threats including terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and epidemics and pandemics. There's also the problem of negative international media reporting.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic is one such threat – albeit at an entirely new level. African countries should draw from past experience to put together plans to manage the post-Covid-19 void.

Covid-19's impact on tourism

Tourism has been one of the hardest hit sectors since the disease was first detected in Wuhan, China in Dec 2019. The World Travel and Tourism Council has warned that the Covid-19 pandemic could cost up to 50-million jobs worldwide in the travel and tourism industry.

Even when the outbreak is over, it could take up to 10 months for the tourism sector to recover. For emerging destinations like those in Africa, it could take well over a year.

Additionally, the travel body estimates that the 2020 global international tourist arrivals in Africa could decline to between 1% to 3%. This could translate into a loss of $30 to $50 billion in spending by international visitors. The Asia and the Pacific region is expected to be the most affected. But Africa is equally expected to suffer, perhaps even more so.

All over the continent attractions have closed. Hotels are operating at single digit occupancy rates and in some cases have closed down. Countries have closed their airspaces, and food and beverage businesses are mostly closed as a result of social distancing guidelines.

This has resulted in massive lay-offs and workers being furloughed. Governments have also seen a loss of revenue and foreign exchange.

China, the US and Europe are the largest generating markets for Africa's tourism. They are also among the hardest hit by the pandemic. These countries have in place partial and complete lockdowns as well as other travel restrictions. The impact on the tourism sector in Africa is expected to be far reaching and long lasting given that it will take time for them to recover and put their economies back on track.

Resilience and recovery

The tourism sector is resilient and has often overcome crises.

Strategies to cope with crises include preparedness, rapid development and deployment of a response network. It also includes managing mainstream and social media, and introducing measures to promote swift recovery.

These measures provide assurance for early detection and management of the disease, including provision of protective equipment. They should be put in place and properly communicated through well-coordinated and targeted marketing advertisements and campaigns.

This kind of persuasive advertisement was credited with helping to revamp travel to the US some four weeks after the tragic 9/11 events. This is because strategies focus on immediate recovery to get people to resume visiting even if only in small numbers.

This kind of post-crisis marketing should also consider clearing misconceptions about the scale of the pandemic in Africa. This should include the number of infected persons and how these numbers compare to other destinations outside the continent. This will help restore confidence and even project African countries as potential alternative holiday destinations.

In disseminating such messages, both the traditional and non-traditional media could be used including social media, YouTube and other digital platforms. This should be done to complement the usual channels employed in the promotion and marketing of African destinations.

Further, African destinations should provide financial inducements to tourism and related businesses to stay afloat. These should for example include tax incentives and waivers, insurance, bailouts and special businesses support schemes.

Relatedly, education and sensitisation campaigns should be undertaken among residents in tourist districts. These should encourage them to be welcoming to tourists and not to stigmatise tourists from regions severely affected by the pandemic.

Importantly , African countries should focus on increasing their promotion of domestic and intra-African tourism and travel. This will serve as a catalyst for triggering recovery and stimulating growth in the industry.

This has not always been the case, with most destination management and marketing organisations in Africa preferring marketing campaigns targeted at international visitors out of Africa whilst neglecting the purchasing power and potential contributions of the growing African middle-higher income classes to the industry.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Issahaku Adam, senior lecturer, hospitality and tourism management, *University of Cape Coast* and Albert N Kimbu, senior lecturer in hospitality & tourism, *University of Surrey*

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