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Tourism Recovery and Sustainability Post Pandemic: An Integrated Approach for Kenya's Tourism Hotspots

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the tourism industry, leading to global economic and societal disruptions, and a growing risk of a global recession. This project aimed to investigate the impact of the pandemic on conservation, communities, and businesses in Masai Mara, and identify critical factors for sustainable tourism recovery. Four objectives were explored: (1) awareness of critical factors for tourism recovery and sustainability during and after the pandemic period; (2) socio-economic vulnerabilities of indigenous communities to COVID-19; (3) lessons learned to enhance adaptation and resilience; and (4) the impact of COVID-19 on conservation management of the destination. We used mixed methods, including field observations, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions, to collect data from tourism industry businesses and policymakers in the Masai Mara conservation area. The findings indicated a negative large-scale effect on conservation, tourism business, and communities in the area. The study recommends integrated interventions by both county and national governments, targeting small, medium, and micro enterprises. The persistence of the economic damage to the tourism sector will depend on how both county and national governments handle policy interventions towards the funding of tourism SMMEs, the community livelihood programme, and conservation partnerships to incentivize tourism recovery.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; tourism sustainability; Masai Mara; policy interventions; Kenya



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the tourism world to a standstill, with severe impacts on communities, tourism businesses, and conservation [1]. The full collapse of international tourism has led to the direct loss of jobs and growing risks of a global recession associated with massive direct loss of jobs in the tourism industry [1,2]. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimated international tourist arrivals to decline by 20 to 30% in 2020, translating to a loss of 300 to 450 US\$ billion in international tourism receipts [3]. COVID-19 has caused combined demand and supply shock to the tourism industry, producing large-scale, global, and possibly persistent economic disruption [2,4]. It is already clear that its economic impact will be more severe and more devastating than in the case of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in the period 2002–2003 [5]. Overall, the potential impacts of this crisis are greater than any previously seen in history [5]. Infectious diseases have a great impact on tourism and hotel room occupancies, owing to the industry's reliance on human mobility [6]; e.g., during the outbreak of Ebola, a shock of 53 US\$ billion losses was experienced in West Africa and a 20% drop in Sierra Leone's GDP in 2015 [5,7].

Previous post-war pandemics were far smaller, but reported a significant impact on the tourism sector; e.g., the impact of the SARS outbreak in 2003 on Toronto's tourism economy (especially hoteliers) was a 20% reduction in room occupancy and \$111 million

losses in room revenues for the second quarter of 2003, and a year-to-year comparison saw reductions of 47% to 72% (2002 to 2003), causing an overall revenue loss of \$342.5 million for 4 months in 2003 [8]. The reported impact and number of COVID-19 cases are already eight or nine times larger (worldwide) than the 2003 SARS epidemic, pointing to an upcoming economic recession [5]. Data from SARS, as well as the Spanish Flu from 1918, provide some idea of the economic shocks posed by the COVID-19 outbreak [5]. The economic slowdown from both domestic and international tourists has been evidenced [9]. Many of the nation's hit hardest by COVID-19 are among the ten largest economies in the world in G7 economies; e.g., the U.S., China, Japan, Germany, Britain, France, and Italy, which account for 60% of world supply and demand (GDP) [2]. Chinese tourism is considered one of the world's most viewed, with 10% of global tourists impacted by the coronavirus in one of its busiest seasons when millions were traveling [9]. The decreased tourist numbers have led to declining demand for travel, hotel rooms, gifts, and food consumption, etc. [4,5]. While service-oriented economies will take the larger hits, demand for transportation, restaurants, traveling, tourism, and cinemas has sharply declined [4].

Tourist destinations have been deserted, airlines ground fleets and fired staff, trade fairs and cruises have been cancelled, hotels and casinos have closed all operations [5]. International tourism has been disrupted due to travel restrictions and the reduction of airline flights [5,10]. Suspended domestic and overseas group tours and suspended sales of certain travel products, such as flight tickets and hotel bundle packages, have largely affected the industry [10]. Ref. [10] estimated that, in the tourism sector, demand will contract by 75% and there will be a 10% rise in the unemployment rate. People staying away from work to tend to sick relatives or imposing of quarantine are also causing indirect temporary employment reduction [11]. The global travel industry from airlines to cruise companies, from casinos to hotels is facing reductions in activity of more than 90% [5]. COVID-19 will have ramifications for the global economy and trade, as cross-border travel and tourism accounted for 52.7% of services imports and 14.8% of services exports in 2018 [10]. Preliminary estimates have stated that global airlines might lose around \$113 billion in sales [12]. The air transportation sector has seen a dramatic drop of 85% in demand, an unemployment rate of 20%, and a contraction of 45% in the stock market index [13]. Norwegian Air cancelled 85% of flights and laid off 90% of staff. German tourism giant TUI requested state aid [5]. Many cruise lines have suspended sailing [9], while Airbnb and Uber are already reporting a decline in their activities [11]. Kenya is among the biggest tourism economies in Africa and the tourism sector is among the major contributors to the gross domestic product (GDP), accounting for approximately 10%. It is a major source of employment for the locals, with approximately 10–12% of the labor [14].

Kenya has experienced a steady increase in both local and international tourism from 2015 to 2017, and international visitor arrivals increased to 2,035,400 in 2019 [15], an increase of 1.167% from the previous year [16]. Kenya's travel and tourism revenue in 2019 was a healthy USD 1.61 billion, with 4.956 million bed nights sold compared to 4.489 million in 2018 [14]. The tourism industry has suffered several setbacks in the past from the 1990s tourists' killings, the 1998 embassy bombing, to the 2007 post-election violence, terrors attacks, travel advisories that affected international arrivals, and the current COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-COVID-19, international arrivals were projected to reach 2,100,000 in 2020 to attain the Third Medium Term Plan M2018-2022 [17]. None of the prior mentioned challenges have affected the tourism sector in Kenya and elsewhere more than the COVID-19 pandemic, halting the demand for international travel, significantly affecting the tourism sector in Kenya. This paper examines the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism businesses, communities, and conservation, and explores lessons learned for sustainable adaptation in Kenya's leading conservation area, Masai Mara. The study identifies a shortage in the literature regarding tourism policies necessary for sustainable and resilient recovery post COVID 19 [18]. The study proposes measures at the policy level to enable recovery from the effects of COVID 19. Understanding these impacts is essential

in informing the designing of recovery plans and policy initiatives to support recovery both in the short and long term.

The study was informed by Stakeholder Theory in Sustainable Tourism. Tourism development needs to be sustainably planned and managed if it is to succeed [19–22]. The backing of stakeholders, such as residents, business owners, and community leaders, is one of the most important factors in the success and execution of sustainable tourist development in a community [23]. Stakeholders are defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by” the development of tourism in a particular location [24]. The emphasis on increased stakeholder involvement highlights its capacity to address several identified challenges. The first problem is that decisions regarding tourist development are made by “experts” at the top. The local community frequently feels that decisions made in this way do not represent their interests and perspectives. The second problem is that the system for making choices is seen to have competing interests within it, which leads to judgments that are once more not in line with the interests of the general public [25]. Participation may also result in the avoidance of significant disputes amongst stakeholder groups [26]. Given the relevance of stakeholders in tourism and conservation in the Mara region, we propose a recovery framework that accounts for their specific interests.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Tourism Context of Kenya and Maasai Mara

Kenya is one of the East African countries with tourism as the second-largest source of foreign exchange revenue after agriculture [14,27]. Kenya has a total population of 47,564,296 [15]. The top 10 international tourist arrivals for Kenya in the year 2019 included the U.S., Uganda, Tanzania, the UK, India, China, Germany, France, Italy, and South Africa, in that order [16]. The tourism sector in Kenya largely depends on international arrivals [16]. Kenya has diverse tourism products, including pristine beaches, world-renowned wildlife, indigenous culture, and a hospitable population.

Masai Mara covers an area of 1672 sq. km and is one of the world’s top tourist attractions and a premier conservation area in Kenya. It is home to the big five and hundreds of animal and bird species. It is a top attraction within the migration path of over 1 million wildebeests, an annual spectacular scene that attracts hundreds of thousands of domestic, regional, and international tourists. Masai Mara is a prime viewing spot of wildebeest migration, resulting in its status as the seventh wonder of the world according to Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). According to the Kenyan Institute of Economic Affairs, in 2011, the reserve received 138,200 international visitors, and the number increased to 146,900 in 2015, marking a 6% increase over 5 years. In recent years, before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that approximately 300,000 domestic and international tourists visited the reserve each year. A peak number of 316,500 visitors was recorded in 2006 when the Reserve’s entrance fees alone generated 5.5 million US dollars. The indigenous community living around the reserve is predominantly the Masai Mara people, whose livelihood is largely dependent on tourism. In 2019, an estimated 1.2 million community members and 13,236 landowners were dependent on tourism [15]. These communities are actively involved in community-based tourism and wildlife protection, safeguarding wildlife habitats while deriving livelihoods from tourism.

Ecosystem health was established through field survey (habitat observation, ecosystem analysis based on observation of vegetation status, land cover, the status of water systems, relative wildlife distribution, the general outlook of numbers without counts, species observed (diversity)). Also, wildlife details were surveyed; e.g., the presence of young animals, patterns of movement, and indications of breeding and relative numbers of females to deduce the ecosystem health. The status of businesses was established based on arrivals, flight landings, and take-offs, tour vehicle traffic, level of operation of lodges. Status at the cultural tourism at the BOMAs involved data on the level of tourism activity, the volume of business, observable vulnerabilities, and adaptation mechanisms.

1. Key informant interviews; interviewing key players, including lodge managers, lodge staff, county government officials, tourism operators, conservancy managers, and protected area managers and community representatives. The same set of questions (Supplementary Materials) were directed to the different categories of respondents.
2. Desktop review on past pandemics and adaptation strategies mechanisms on a global scale to give reference of analysis to the case of Masai Mara. Review of the county integrated development plan (CIDP) to establish linkage, gaps, and options for policy direction on tourism recovery and sustainability.
3. Focus Group Discussion. Involving key stakeholders in the Masai Mara Conservancy. Summary table for the distribution of the FGDs.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The target groups for this study were: community conservancies in the Mara region; tourism operators; the National Government (Kenya Wildlife Service); the Narok County Government; the Masai Mara National Reserve; lodges in the Masai Mara; operators; and the community managed BOMAs (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of stakeholders that formed the sample size in the Masai Mara for both the FGDs and interviews.

Stakeholder Group	Number	Position in the Organization	Interests of the Stakeholder Group
Conservancy managers	9	Manager	Recovery of the ecosystem, adaptation, and new conservation strategies for conservation management.
Narok County Government	4	Manager	Impacts on conservancies, the reserve, the community, and businesses and possible policy interventions for tourism recovery and the sustainability of conservation management
Lodge managers	6	General manager	Tourism recovery and sustainable tourism business management
Reserve Revenue collector	1	Manager	Revenue optimization
Conservancy Management Association	2	Manager	Tourism recovery, sustainable conservation land management, community interest.
Community	3	BOMA owner	Tourism recovery, community livelihoods.
Total		25	

The study adopted a mixed method approach [28] due to the robustness of the study involving both quantitative data and qualitative data through field observations for conservation data, interviews with key stakeholders, and FGDs from small sample populations due to COVID-19 restrictions. Due to the robustness of data from the different data sources due to the mixed methods used, we were able to strengthen and apply the findings even if the sample size was relatively small.

The categories of respondents included in the study were chosen based on their influence on conservation and tourism businesses in the Mara region. The interviewed

respondents were based on convenience; e.g., we interviewed the managers of lodges that were open because most lodges were closed during the 2021 pandemic period. Community numbers were based on the ‘bomas’ that were opened. The participant numbers in the FGDs on 16 July 2021 were smaller due COVID-19 restrictions.

There was also a plenary session involving all the respondents, where recovery data was collected. The recovery data included: the tourism recovery data—what worked, what did not work, the required support framework, and strategies to enhance tourism resilience. The details of the questions used to obtain qualitative data during the interviews and the FGDs are listed in Supplementary Materials.

Analysis of the content from the FGDs and interviews were organized into themes and ranked by the level of importance depending on the number of mentions across the groups, and were then used to develop the results table. The level of importance of the factors to the tourism recovery process was established by ranking as High, Medium, or Low, depending on the number of stakeholder groups that mentioned them (Table 2). All the factors mentioned across multiple groups were considered critical for recovery and were used to develop the schematic diagram of the COVID-19 Tourism Recovery Wheel (Figure 1). We categorized the qualitative data from the FGDs into different themes and they were used for the triangulation of the information from the interviews. Factors mentioned across all the groups with key strategic outcomes for conservation communities and businesses were prioritized in terms of policy recommendations. The outputs were organized into impact, lessons learned, adaptations, and policy recommendations.

Table 2. Summary of issues assessed, critical factors, and the level of importance of the issues assessed in the planning for tourism recovery in the Maasai Mara National Reserve in the short term.

Issue Assessed	Summary of Critical Factors	Level of Importance in Planning for Recovery in the Short Term
Impacts of the pandemic	Reduced tourism activity, conservation threats, loss of employment, loss of property and idle assets, extra investment in compliance with COVID-19 protocols, and vulnerability of the local community.	High
Lessons learned	Need for a regeneration period, sustained community livelihoods, efficient resource use, diversification of products, multi-level relationships, exploring new markets and maintaining stable ones, partnerships and collaborations.	High
Adapting to new trends	Strategic price variation, exploring domestic and regional tourism markets, diversifying products, continuing COVID-19 support framework, implementing sustainable initiatives, stakeholder collaboration and partnership.	Medium
Policy and strategy related factors for recovery	Policy guideline on tourism in the ecosystem, review of park fees and vehicle passes to operators, strategic marketing of Masai Mara, strategy on holistic Narok County tourism development and marketing.	Medium
Emerging issues for policy consideration	Proper legislation on tourism development, joint patrols between conservancies and national reserve, policy on research-based conservation, contingency budgeting for lodges, tour operators and the BOMAS, strategy for long-term collaboration with local media, diversifying the community’s economic activities.	Low



Figure 1. The tourism recovery wheel: critical factors and policy considerations for the recovery of conservation, tourism businesses, and community resilience.

3. Results

3.1. Impact of COVID-19 on Conservation

The indications of improved ecosystem health with stable ecosystem status demonstrated quality habitat for wildlife. Abundant grass and vegetation cover for grazers and browsers, a large number of wildlife populations observed in the field, especially elephants, buffalos, giraffes, zebras. Large herds of buffalos with calves were observed. Lions were observed mating and one was observed with a cub. Wildebeest migration was within the expected time. High diversity (different species observed at close intervals during the drive) and abundance of animal populations. However, there were fears from the conservation managers and the rangers that the shortage of finances towards conservation, the delayed payment of leases for conservation, and the vulnerability of the local community could compromise wildlife security; e.g., the continued vulnerability of the community due to delayed payment of land rates could subject them to sell land under conservation to meet their basic needs, including food and school fees for the education of their children. Another fear emanated from reduced finances leading to poaching activities, as witnessed from an interview with one of the conservation managers:

“Reduced finances from tourism compromised wildlife security due to increased poaching activities.”

3.2. Impact of COVID-19 on Communities

COVID-19 motivated multi-level relationships, partnerships, and collaborations to support communities with food resources during the pandemic. Multi-level relationships, partnerships, and collaborations supported communities during the pandemic. Community projects, e.g., schools, dispensaries, and education programs, were halted. Communities lacked basic resources, such as food, due to a lack of funding from the lease for the conservation programme, which was delayed. Furthermore, funding for conservation projects was delayed or stopped, negatively affecting community conservation initiatives; e.g., the payment of land rates. The socio-economic vulnerabilities of the community increased, as indicated by one of BOMAs owners interviewed:

“Teenage pregnancy, early marriages, and school dropouts increased as a result of closure of tourism businesses and loss of property.”

Market day closures stopped the sale of beads. The Moran dance and entertainment were stopped. There were unpaid or reduced land leases. The loss of a market for selling beadwork largely affected the livelihoods of the community. People lost jobs; workers in the lodges went without pay or took pay cuts. Some facilities immediately released staff after the COVID-19 hit. There was food insecurity among the locals and they became dependent on food donations. Beadwork has huge potential for communities and to empower women, with an estimated return of USD-20 in the low season to USD 400 per day. There were also fears of lost gains in terms of sustainable approaches to local livelihoods; e.g., a return to charcoal burning and poaching that could likely compromise the conservation attitude of the local community.

3.3. Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism Businesses

Lodges and tour operators were not able to meet their financial obligations to employees, suppliers, and finance regulatory agencies. There was a reduced number of tourism businesses, with full closures between April to November 2020. Some lodges were open, including Ololonana, Kichwa Tembo, and Mara Serena, which received guests. There was low-scale maintenance due to reduced funding for infrastructure development from tourism returns. A gradual return to the lodges and to tour operations was recognized. Vessels were observed in the reserve, giving indications of building up tourism activities; e.g., tour vans, air balloons, flight landings, guest arrivals at the lodges visited, and reported room occupancies that were projected to reach 75% in the third quarter of 2021. A mix of readiness and anxiety due to the trend of COVID-19 with possible impromptu lockdowns that could change the trend of bookings based on experience was evidenced. Lodge businesses projected an increase in lodge occupancies to an average of 75%. There was extra investment in compliance to the COVID-19 protocols and safety preparedness at lodges, airstrip landings, and at community cultural tourism sites, which was attributed to the safety of the guests to enhance safety and tourist confidence; e.g., luggage UV sterilization and sanitization procedures at the lodges. This was in addition to safety handling procedures during dining; e.g., the use of polythene paper gloves at food handling points. Adherence and observation of COVID-19 protocols and safety preparedness at the lodges, airstrip landings, and at the community cultural tourism sites were emphasized. The study established a growing interest in domestic and regional tourists among the lodge owners and tour operators. Domestic and regional tourism markets, diversifying tourism products, and the formation of partnerships had a medium level of importance in tourism recovery, according to the stakeholders. Considering the impacts of the pandemic and lessons learned in the implementation plan for recovery were considered to be of high importance (Table 2).

3.4. Lessons Learned

Designated conservation regeneration times could promote habitat regeneration after an active tourism period. A need to accelerate vaccinations at the destination to enhance

the confidence of tourists was recognized. Any uncertainty was due to the overdependence on tourism by communities in Masai Mara, and the need for alternative economic models for communities there. Key community projects, e.g., schools, dispensaries, and education programs, could be supported through multi-level partnerships other than CSR and conservation philanthropy. Tourism-dependent conservation is a threat to the sustainability of community conservancy models. The potential of domestic and regional tourism markets to sustain destinations and businesses, in 2020 and the first half of 2021 budgets of lodges and tour businesses, was possessed by domestic and regional tourists. Emerging international and stable markets, e.g., Mexico, have emerged as a new market, while the U.S. has remained a stable market. Tourists from America have shown confidence in the destination and there remains a stable international market. It is expected that many other international markets will continue to emerge. The importance of loyalty programs; loyal travelers were the first to return and those who kept their bookings, prompting the need to enhance loyalty programs to enhance the rate of travel uptake. Cost management and efficient resource use have drawn interest from the managers of lodges. The role of innovation and technology in tourism practice, e.g., social media marketing and the use of digital platforms in marketing, has risen. Insurance, contingency, and emergency funds are needed to support staff salaries in case of future pandemics. Insurance of community BOMAS, which are key facilities for cultural tourism to secure the livelihoods of the tourism-dependent communities. Training for staff versatility in the tourism sector to be able to cope with fast pandemic/calamity-induced changes at the workplace. Diversification of community economic activities beyond tourism to support the community in case tourism is affected at the community level to avoid overdependence on tourism. There is a need for accelerated vaccinations to boost traveler confidence (Table 1).

3.5. Critical Factors for Recovery

Enhanced vaccination rates, by promoting vaccine availability and access to COVID-19 testing, was identified as critical for recovery. A strong land tenure system to protect land under conservation; e.g., policy on land use ownership to limit sub-division was considered critical to protect community land under conservation. Collaboration between reserve and community conservancies to establish synergies for conservation, while maintaining the partnership with local media for marketing the conservation area to the domestic market. Maintaining lease payments was established to be critical to sustaining community livelihoods. The need to expand infrastructure (airports and road access) was also determined to be critical. Work with local media to market domestic tourism. Re-building a strong customer base through marketing, attractive rate strategies, service excellence, and loyalty programs. Re-inventing the community economic model from the overdependence on tourism and rethinking funding sources for community projects; e.g., health care and education. It was suggested that these basic projects be prioritized in the county development agenda. Continuing the COVID-19 support framework for park fees, vehicle passes, and license fee waivers was proposed to ensure businesses thrive, having paid for the whole year 2020 without the business in more than half of the year. Sustainable initiatives to fund tourism, Small, Micro, and Medium Enterprises (SMMEs) to incentivize the locally owned business to recovery. Motivating and re-building strong customer confidence for return travelers through loyalty programs was observed to be critical. Stakeholder collaboration and partnerships to promote capacity building of industry players in terms of emerging skills and an awareness of emerging issues could largely motivate recovery. The need to review product offers and pricing to respond to local and changing market needs. Operators are considering a long-term plan to fix the debate on developing favorable products and pricing for the domestic market (Figure 1).

4. Discussion

4.1. Sustainable Approaches to Recovery

Economic consequences of pandemics can be devastating and long-lasting; e.g., Liberia's GDP declined by 8% from 2013 to 2014 [5]. The COVID-19 pandemic is the first global pandemic on such an unprecedented scale broadcasted in real time [11]. A range of policy responses will be required both in the short term [29] to enhance tourist arrivals and for expenditures to grow at a rate that is faster than the historical growth trend, a "catch-up" period to achieve full recovery. During the 9/11 crisis, many countries lowered their regulatory barriers to international visitors; e.g., Singapore, which has visa waiver agreements with well over 150 countries worldwide, saw its international travel quickly recover from the external impact and then surpass its pre-9/11 peak [29]. Approaches could include developing a recovery framework with standards for business continuity, pandemic adaptation plans [30] and laying out a strategy for the mitigation of the underlying drivers of disease emergence for conservation consideration [31].

There is a growing interest in domestic and regional tourist markets that sustained tourism businesses when the international tourists were not able to travel in the larger part of 2020; e.g., [32,33]. The majority of the 2020 travelers were local guests, pointing to the need to grow tourism from within, largely informed by the needs of the local-regional market before considering the international market [32]. Effective product and service pricing for the local and regional markets are seen to be critical. Lodges lowered the rates for local markets and are considering defining the market rate for the segment. The importance of partnerships for recovery has been highlighted in engaging the travel trade to take quick action [34]. Partnering in terms of promotional fares and short-term low prices were used to encourage travel following the outbreak of SARS in South East Asia [35] and after the Bali bombings [36]. Discounts and promotional fares were also successful in tourism recovery in Canada after a devastating forest fire [37]. Loyal visitors are most likely to respond to post-disaster marketing messages and are likely to be among the first visitors to return [38,39]. This informs the need to promote loyalty programs at the destination. Ref. [35] proposed that businesses should consider displaying 'Welcome Back' messages, to thank their customers for returning and to maintain the goodwill of repeat visitors. This highlights the importance of relationship marketing to aid in the recovery process. The industry is encouraged to focus on market research [34] and communications, which are needed to restore confidence in a destination before the commencement of recovery marketing. The extra investment by lodges in hygiene and safety protocols is intended to build the confidence of tourists to the destination. These policies will help destinations remain resilient by changing pricing tactics and diversifying tourism offerings. They will also work to lessen social inequality that exists in the existing global political economy of tourism [33]. Similarly, these approaches may aid in mitigating the spread of neo- or post-colonial tourism experiences [40].

Although the effects of COVID-19 are anticipated to last for some time [9], countries must make more of an effort to globally loosen travel restrictions and take away obstacles that visa applicants experience [41]. Easing travel restrictions to virus-free travelers would help breathe new life into the tourism and service industries [11]. Government fiscal policy on the support of Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) in tourism will be necessary. Engaging with governments and regulators as part of a recovery strategy for fiscal and financial support; e.g., in the aftermath of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, the Thai government offered businesses loans, grants, and equity sharing deals to speed up recovery and reconstruction [7]. The governmental plan to enhance the vaccination rate will build the confidence of travelers; e.g., American tourist numbers were mentioned by lodge managers as the highest number of travelers in Masai Mara, attributed to the high vaccination rate in the U.S. Therefore, it is advised that the government promote vaccine availability and access to COVID-19 testing. The current COVID-19 testing initiatives and compliance supplies have been observed to not be working. Targeted vaccination drives

at key tourist destinations for staff working at lodges and in tour operations, as well as country-wide vaccination uptake, could largely promote tourist confidence.

4.2. Policy Initiatives to Support Recovery

As a lesson from history, many of the economic problems from the 1970s oil shock came from the inflation sparked by inappropriate macroeconomics policy responses, not just the actual oil shortage; this can be linked to COVID-19. The size and persistence of the economic damage will depend on how governments handle policy interventions. Monetary policy action should be intended to support small- and medium-sized businesses, which are most exposed to liquidity [13]. There is a need for a coordinated policy response to the impacts of COVID-19 [5]. Managing economic recession due to COVID-19 will be dependent on the success of government policies to alleviate liquidity problems of the SMMEs and to secure jobs for the citizens [5]. In the face of real and financial stress in the pandemic period, the role of governments is critical both at the county and national government levels. The shock is not only felt in terms of demand management, but it is multi-faceted and will require monetary, fiscal, and health policy responses [29]. The government fiscal policy should be comprehensive to care for SMMEs [42,43]. An emerging conservation issue is to assess the role of wildlife diversity not only in terms of the number of species (or their abundance), but also in terms of the capacity to mitigate and reduce emerging infectious diseases (EID) and zoonosis [31]. Proper legislation to integrate community livelihoods and tourism development while diversifying the economic venture of the communities will be in order. A policy guideline to promote partnerships for ecosystem-wide management between protected areas and outside protected areas to create synergies between conservancies and the reserve. A strategy on holistic Narok County Tourism development and marketing would be appropriate.

4.3. Practical Applications of the Study and Its Results

The findings of the study may be used to build a sustainable tourism management strategy for the Mara, which might be expanded to other tourist hotspots in Kenya and throughout East Africa. The findings can influence community, tourism, and conservation practitioners, as well as best practices in terms of stakeholder engagement techniques. The findings can help the county and the national government develop policies to promote the resurgence of the tourism sector. The findings on the tourism recovery wheel (Figure 1) may be used by the county government of Narok and the national government of Kenya to determine the important areas in which to encourage tourism recovery, creating a framework for tourism management processes in the post-pandemic era.

4.4. Limitations of the Study

Due to COVID-19 constraints during the pandemic era, the study was constrained by a small sample size. Given the unpredictable transition between tourism's closure and opening caused by COVID-19 incidents, data collection took place over a brief period of time. By combining data from several sources, utilizing a mixed-method approach, and dispersing the sample size among various stakeholder groups, we were able to overcome these constraints. Stakeholders were also selected from a larger geographic area inside the Mara region.

5. Conclusions

The pandemic has had a negative impact on tourism businesses, community livelihoods, and conservation in Masai Mara. The loss of employment due to the closure of tourism businesses increased the socio-economic vulnerabilities of the local community. To support conservation, stakeholders must collaborate in terms of sustainable financing through community-based conservation programs. Domestic and regional tourism markets should be explored to diversify the tourism market for Masai Mara. Recovery initiatives and sustainable funding for SMMEs are essential for tourism recovery. Critical factors for

recovery in the short term include: addressing the impact of the pandemic, including loss of property, conservation threats, loss of employment, sustaining community livelihood programs, diversification of tourism products, exploring new tourism markets, multi-level partnerships and collaborations, domestic and regional tourism markets, a strong policy guideline to harmonize tourism, conservation, and community livelihoods. In the future, we recommend that policies that support long-term growth emphasize the tourism business-community livelihood nexus.

6. Recommendations

We recommend the implementation of sustainable initiatives to fund SMMEs, and explore the potential of domestic and regional tourism markets. This will help stabilize the local economy and support the foundation for tourism growth. We also propose diversifying tourism products and creating all-year-round products by exploring new markets while maintaining stable ones. Additionally, a strategic price variation plan could be considered to control tourism traffic to support ecosystem regeneration in the Mara. Lastly, we suggest implementing policies and strategies to support conservation efforts, reviewing park fees and vehicle passes, and engaging in strategic marketing of Masai Mara as a destination. Furthermore, it is important to consider diversifying the community's economic activities beyond tourism to reduce vulnerability.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su15097291/s1>.

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