

# REPOA Brief



## Buffering Deprivation and Vulnerability among Informal Workers in the Tourism Sector in Kilimanjaro and Arusha

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### Key Messages

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted business and income flows among porters and tour guides employed informally in tourism.

Female workers in the informal tourism industry experienced unique challenges as a result of the pandemic.

A lack of social protection and government support amplified the impact of the pandemic on informal workers in tourism industry.

### Introduction

The COVID-19 has affected all spheres of life, disrupting economies and jeopardising lives and livelihoods. The immediate public health response measures involving social distancing and societal lockdowns (in some areas but not Tanzania), (REPOA, 2021), led to a sharp decline in the tourism business worldwide.

Tanzania was not an exception; the lockdown 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. Therefore, this study sought to identify strategies and support mechanisms utilised 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 and 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 to them compared to taxi drivers, street food sellers, souvenir sellers, artists, and artisans who can still do business with the natives.

A cross-sectional descriptive design and non-intervention qualitative approach was employed, and 100 respondents were involved in the study. Two methods of data collection: In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), were utilised. Qualitative data was then analysed thematically, summarised, and presented in a narrative format.

## Findings

### **Vulnerability of the Tourism Sector: Business Trends before, during and post COVID-19.**

The vulnerability of the tourist sector was very evident with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of field data affirmed that the pandemic significantly changed the tourism business trend and income flows. The pandemic affected business at individual, companies and consequently the national economy. The rate of tourists received by companies involved in the study was perceived to range from 75-100% before the outbreak to almost 0%-5% during the peak period of the pandemic. At the time of undertaking the study in 2022, business performance measured through the number of tourists received had reached at between 25 and 30 per cent indicating that the business was yet to return to the pre COVID-19 levels

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

There were three effects of the pandemic on informal workers in tourism: economic, social, and psychological. The effects of the pandemic also varied among respondents for several reasons, including whether the individual/household entirely depended on the tourism business as their sole source of income, or whether respondents had savings to fall back on or whether there was reliable family support.

The economic effects resulted from lack of business due to lockdowns 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 directly translated to reduced earnings observed across the companies, tour guides and porters. Following the closure of companies, many porters and tour guides lost their jobs, and some companies could not afford to continue paying them and had to retrench them. Just a few companies paid their staff half salaries or a token allowance to help them sustain themselves. However, most porters and tour guides were just promised to be considered for employment when the situation returned to normal because they were

merely employed as casual labourers. Thus, they were being only engaged at times of need and left to fend for themselves when no need existed.

Consequently, due to a lack of income, tour guides and porters could not maintain their membership with their associations, resulting in a loss of income for the associations as well. To buffer the effects of loss of jobs, among other alternatives, porters and tour guides opted for alternative activities for income generation. Nonetheless, they reported lower earnings from these activities relative to tourism-related activities. Families struggled to make ends meet and reported deterioration in the quality of life.

Findings further confirmed that the pandemic led to various social problems and changes in social status, relationships and lifestyle. The results indicate that the pandemic contributed significantly to marriage breakdown of people engaged in the tourism industry, mainly because of inadequate financial capability to take care of families. Several men were claimed to have abandoned their families. The marriages that survived owed much to the social support received from their peers. Relationships amongst peers were also reported to have been affected. That is, because of limited financial abilities, many tour guides and porters lost confidence in interacting well with their peers as it used to be before. Porters and tour guides also reported a reduction in social status: that is, they were compelled to lead a life of relatively lower class compared to the period before the pandemic, consequently changing their lifestyle

The psychological effects reported amongst porters and tour guides due to COVID-19 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. Low levels of respect, negative perception and even abusive statements from the community were also experienced, thus causing trauma.

### **Gender- Effects of COVID-19 among informal workers in tourism**

Men constitute the overwhelming majority in the tourism sector. There is a significant gender gap among tour guides and porters. For instance, even before the pandemic, out of the 2,000 tour guides registered by the Kilimanjaro

Guides Association (KGA), only 20 were females; out of the 8,000 porters registered by Tanzania Porters Association by 2022, only 200 were female. Similarly, Tanzania Tour Guides Association (TTGA) had registered 1,200 members, among whom only 23 were females. Thus even prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, women were generally in a marginal position in this sector. That is because the nature of the activities are viewed as more male-oriented; women are considered suitable in other parts of the tourism value chain, especially in food vending and selling of different cultural items including wood sculptures, souvenir bags, and clothes.

During the pandemic, both men and women tour guides and porters were affected by the closure of business and lost employment and income. Further, these imbalances continued even after the easing of COVID-19 related restrictions as men continued to enjoy more privileges than women, and higher chances of re-employment.

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

Many porters and tour guides did not get any support from the Government, their families, community, or associations; instead, they had to devise their own 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 used strategy was to either revert to the earlier activities before engaging in tourism or finding alternative business or employment.

These forms of work included working as motorcyclists and tricyclic 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 opening shops, pubs, saloons and car-wash services. The second common strategy was to engage 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 included:

- 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.

Tour guides and Porter's associations did the following to support porters and tour guides:

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

Findings have revealed that there was no direct financial support from the government to operators of this sector due to resource constraints and that the tourist industry forms one of its sources of revenue. Despite the above, it was appreciated and expressed that the government did the following.

- i) Trained porters and tour guides in protecting themselves from COVID-19 infection.
- ii) 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, that depended on the need and abilities of the respective companies.

Experiences from tour guides and porters' associations indicate the lack of formal support arrangements during the period of disasters such as COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, they had a contributory account through which members are supported in burials, but this could not help to mitigate the economic and social impacts of the pandemic.

The community also did not support tour guides and porters due to various factors, including the fact that every community member was affected in much the same way. Also, the community believed that porters and tour guides were earning a substantial amount of money from the sector and were expected to have savings.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

The study established that no effective support systems helped tour guides and porters to buffer the effects of COVID-19 pandemic. The government, tour operators, tour associations, tour guides and porters in the tourism sector could learn from this experience, to understand the sector's volatility and prepare in case of likely pandemics in the future. Apart from the direct financial support that might not be feasible to due to budgetary constraints, the government can ensure adherence to decent work and employment standards for the employees in the sector. The study further recommends the following: associations, tour guides and porters in the tourism sector could learn from this experience, to understand the sector's volatility and prepare in case of likely pandemics in the future. Apart from the direct financial support that might not be feasible to due to budgetary constraints, the government can ensure adherence to decent work and employment standards for the employees in the sector. 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, reduce revenue spills, and make it easy to regulate employment conditions, including possible indicative payment rates for freelancers, tour guides, and porters; and mandatory requirement for some social security schemes.
- ii) The community should strengthen community support groups such as Village Community Banks (VICOBAs) and Savings and Credit Societies (SACCOS) to be able 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 revolving funds. They should re-invest their earned incomes to diversify their economic activities and learn the culture of saving for the unforeseen shocks

## References

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