

Developing a baseline for a tourism revitalisation strategy tailor made to a local region: The case of the Vaal Triangle region

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35683/jcm21113.158>

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: It is usually found that strategy and policy makers are often unsure of how to start gathering local data and then analysing the information and implementing the findings in a practical and effective manner. Therefore this study aims to develop a baseline for a tourism revitalization strategy for the Vaal Triangle region of South Africa, in an effort to promote tourism development which will ultimately lead to an improvement of LED.

Design/methodology/approach: Following a qualitative approach with the use of semi structured interviews as the primary means of data collection, interviews were conducted with tourism businesses operating in the Vaal Triangle region.

Findings: The main themes are that of safety and security, improved infrastructure, clean environment, enhanced sustainability, improved marketing and awareness, improved linkages and cooperation, creation of an enabling environment, better utilisation of resources, lack of political will, corruption and a change in attitude

Recommendations/value: The main themes were transformed into practical and achievable strategic objectives tailored to the study region. These strategic objectives set out for the baseline for a tourism revitalization strategy, together with their relating local actions, are presented.

Managerial implications: This study could enable other researchers and destination managers to determine a local region's potential in developing tourism and also aid strategy makers in that region to develop strategies that are based on the region's strengths, weaknesses, challenges and potential.

Keywords

Economic development; Local Economic Development; Management strategy; Sustainable development; Tourism

JEL Classification: Z32

1. INTRODUCTION

Achieving or promoting economic development is a goal of every global nation, which ultimately refers to improving the standard of living of all people. This aim has presented governments, development practitioners and researchers with the task of determining how and why development does or does not take place (Todaro & Smith, 2015). As Milne and Ateljevic (2001) point out, the nature of tourism and development is complex and, thus, policymakers need to have a thorough understanding of how the tourism industry, community members, government and tourists interrelate in localities. Good practice shows that to develop a sound local economy, the community's weaknesses, strengths, opportunities and challenges should be analysed in order to understand the structure and nature of the community and ensure that applicable development strategies and policies are implemented (Swinburn *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, the benefit of having a well-designed, all-inclusive tourism strategy will most likely maximize the potential benefits resulting from the development of the tourism industry, and minimize the potentially negative impact it might have on the social and natural environment (Cárdenas-García *et al.*, 2015). According to Andrades and Dimanche (2017), in order for the tourism industry to operate fairly and efficiently, a strategic development framework is quintessential.

Rogerson (2013) stresses that local economic development (LED) strategies can be instrumental in addressing the challenges brought on by globalisation. Furthermore, fragmented and uncoordinated institutional frameworks and strategies in local economies can weaken their economic growth (Swinburn *et al.*, 2006). Hofisi *et al.* (2013) states that there are several strategic challenges facing LED in South Africa, which include a lack of capacity in local government, poor coordination, ineffective policies and strategies and insufficient reliable and detailed local data. Furthermore, because comprehensive local data in South Africa has declined significantly, the implementation of successful tourism and LED strategies have also been hindered because, by knowing the region's potential and challenges, the competitive advantage of that region could be significantly improved (Hofisi *et al.*, 2013; du Plessis *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, it is often found that strategy and policy makers are often unsure of how to start gathering local data, and then analysing the information and implementing the findings in a practical and effective manner. In light of this need, this study aims to develop a baseline for a tourism revitalization strategy for the Vaal Triangle region of South Africa, in an effort to promote tourism development which will ultimately lead to an improvement of LED. The said Vaal Triangle region comprises the two local municipal regions of Emfuleni and Metsimaholo.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The last few years have seen a growing concern surrounding the impact of developmental policies on the environment, especially when addressing sustainable tourism and the industry's economic and environmental impact (Cole & Morgan, 2010; de Bruyn *et al.*, 2018; de Bruyn & Meyer. 2022). For this reason, it is important for both government and business organisations to develop strategies that will promote a region's competitive advantage in a sustainable manner. Research relating to the importance of tourism development is relatively new compared to studies pertaining to other economic indicators, and there are still many governments around the world that do not yet regard tourism as an important economic contributor. This attitude frequently results in a deficiency of empirical research for advising policymakers on the correct tourism policies and strategies to implement (Croes & Vanegas, 2008).

A strategy is a detailed description of how to achieve specific objectives (Ababio & Meyer, 2012:10). According to Heath (2003:339), regional or local development is the result of strategic decisions on how to effectively utilise the available resources. Research suggests that the aim of such strategies is to improve current assets, develop new capabilities and effectively manage and utilise available resources, all of which determine the extent to which local economies or businesses are competitive and, thus, achieve long term success (du Plessis *et al.*, 2017; Gamble *et al.*, 2011; Hill & Jones, 2008). Due to the ever changing economic, social and natural environment, businesses, local government and policy makers have constantly to adapt their strategies to meet these changes and challenges (Dwyer & Edwards, 2009:321). The strategy-making process combines individual initiatives with planned activities that allow for the maximisation of economic benefits by taking advantage of environmental changes in an economy (Gandellini *et al.*, 2013:7). The term strategy-making does not only encompass the creation of strategies but also their practical implementation (Harrington *et al.*, 2004:16). This latter task is often the main reason why enterprises fail, because strategy formulation is complex and decision makers lack the requisite knowledge and, thus, do not devise clear, achievable goals (du Plessis *et al.*, 2017; Dwyer & Edwards, 2009; Sztando, 2013).

Furthermore, it is imperative that the policies and strategies are based on the specific region's unique characteristics (Heath, 2003; South Africa, 2017). Ababio and Meyer (2012) state that the better local government and policymakers understand the local challenges and opportunities, the better they are able to formulate and implement appropriate strategies and policies. To ensure that the strategies have a uniform direction, a clear policy is required

(Heath, 2002). Heath (2002) defines a policy as a well-defined set of guidelines, objectives, regulations, directives and strategies that provide a framework in which development can take place. The process of implementing policies is described by Dredge and Jenkins (2007) as putting into practice the various ideas and plans for promoting development. An effective strategy requires thorough planning. Planning is a dynamic process that involves visionary thinking, human reasoning and pre-determined programmes developed from recognised informational input (Gandellini *et al.*, 2013). In order for all stakeholders involved in the strategy formation and implementation process to have a shared vision of the end goal, there must be a strategy framework. According to Heath (2002), a strategic framework provides the role-players with an outline of their respective roles and how to achieve the identified objectives through a shared vision for a specific destination.

The implementation of a sustainable strategic framework, which deals with the distribution of supply-side resources and decisions, should lead to destination development (Heath, 2003). Johnson and Scholes (2008) warn that when supply-side decisions are made in respect of a destination without taking customer needs into account, they can lead to strategic drift. Strategic drift occurs when the developed strategy gradually moves away from adequately addressing the changes brought on by the external environment, a process which ultimately leads to a temporary or permanent competitive disadvantage (Johnson & Scholes, 2008). The external environment consists of various factors such as the changing environment, lack of security, changes in demand, inflation, exchange rate fluctuations and political institutions (Keyser, 2009). When organisations or local governments do not keep up to date with gradual changes in the market place and do not appropriately adapt their strategies and make the necessary incremental changes, they will probably only realise their inadequacies when their strategies are so far removed from the current market situation that they will need to consider making radical changes. Dwyer and Edwards (2009) state that strategic drift is common in destinations where policymakers are unable to successfully identify new trends and fail to adapt to these at the correct time.

It is, thus, important for strategists to have a thorough knowledge of an area's opportunities and challenges and to develop strategies that are tailor made to the destination's social, economic and natural characteristics. In accordance with Heath (2000) there are two key rules that govern the organisation of a destination which are that "structure should follow strategy" and "the best organisational structure is the simplest one to get the job done". As a result, the development of a strong local economy requires collaborative processes that allow stakeholders to understand the structure and nature of the local economy, which includes an

on-going assessment of the region's challenges and opportunities (Swinburn *et al.*, 2006). Swinburn *et al.* (2006) point out that LED has to be continuously guided by a strategy that is indicated by good practice. UCLG-ASPAC (2016) writes that across the world communities are increasingly using LED strategies to strengthen the local economic capacity, increase productivity, improve investment and develop the competitiveness of local entrepreneurs, businesses and their workforce. A LED strategy provides a focus for developing local capacity and strengthening its economy.

The possession of adequate local economic data, together with an understanding of the obstacles and opportunities present in a local economy, assist decision makers to formulate effective, achievable LED strategies (Sekhampu, 2010; Ababio & Meyer, 2012; UCLG-ASPAC, 2016). These criteria again highlight the importance of this study. In addition, focussing on LED strategies that aim to uplift local communities and economies, supports the bottom-up approach to management. This method is regarded as the best approach for addressing the challenges that face local communities (Ababio & Meyer, 2012; Crescenzi & Rodriguez-Pose, 2011). Bottom-up policies utilise a local economy's resources and, in so doing, help to realise its economic potential (Pike *et al.*, 2006).

Across the world, tourism has been acknowledged as a potential driver of economic development and growth, especially in developing economies (Ramkissoon, 2020; Jones & Munday, 2001). However, the industry is particularly susceptible to the external environment due to its multidimensional nature. Dwyer and Edwards (2009) state that the ability of the tourism industry to develop successfully depends upon its capacity to recognise and adapt to the various challenges and external factors in the market. As a result, destinations where tourism is a key development indicator need a regulatory framework that enables ethical and efficient tourism activities to take place (Andrades & Dimanche, 2017). Research by Hong (2009) confirms that for a destination to benefit from its strengths and competitive advantages, it needs to have a feasible strategy in place. Moreover, the strategies and policies in a local region influence not only the competitiveness and sustainability of the region, but also its tourist potential (WTTC, 2015). Adding to the complexity of tourism and its role in LED, is the fact that tourism is interlinked with a multitude of other economic industries in a particular region, therefore, it cannot be focussed on in isolation from other industries and the current economic trends (Dwyer & Edwards, 2009). Heath (2002) and Crouch (2007) add that frequently destinations do not have clear tourism development goals and lack coordination between private, public and tourism stakeholders. It is imperative that both strategy and policy makers within a destination develop a strategy that encompasses the views, objectives,

opportunities and challenges of the entire community (Shirazi & Som, 2011; du Plessis *et al.*, 2017; Font *et al.* 2021). Thus, both these groups should consider the environmental, economic and social factors of a destination in order to provide benefits to both the supply and demand side of a local economy, to ensure the long-term sustainable growth and development of tourism (Gilkison, 1999; Dwyer & Edwards, 2009).

For a destination to successfully develop through LED and tourism strategies there should be a continuous assessment of the destination's capabilities and resources, as well as the current market trends and external factors (Heath, 2002; Ramkissoon, 2020). This evaluation should form part of the destination's on-going strategic management system. The significance of having effective and efficient tourism strategy and management systems further lies in the notion that, although the private tourism industry can successfully attract visitors, it is not able to diminish entirely the possible negative effects that result from tourism development (Rogerson, 2013). Rogerson (2013) further points out that successful tourism and LED strategies should focus on improving the linkages between the tourism industry and the other economic industries, promoting local sourcing and seeking complementarities and synergies in the local region. Consequently, it is almost impossible to accurately and effectively develop strategies and development plans aimed at evolving the tourism industry, to aid in economic development, without gaining in-depth information on the challenges and opportunities faced by tourism businesses in a particular region. As Phi *et al.* (2014) and Rangus *et al.* (2017) point out, understanding stakeholders' perceptions can aid in the development of tourism and could subsequently be integrated into development strategies. Furthermore, researchers assert that consultation with stakeholders in the tourism region is a necessity for ensuring sustainable tourism development (Hardy & Pearson, 2018). In local regions small and medium businesses are regarded as an important stimulus for tourism development because they act as a powerful instrument in invigorating economic activity (Khokhobaia, 2019). Moreover, Modica (2016) writes that ultimately the monitoring of tourism in a local economy is seen as a stakeholder-driven process. In essence, having an achievable, effective, sustainable tourism strategy could aid in relieving poverty due to tourism's labour intensity coupled with the numerous benefits it could bring to local economies (du Plessis *et al.*, 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study area

As mentioned, the study area was the Vaal Triangle region which comprises the two local municipal regions of Emfuleni and Metsimaholo. Both municipalities are located alongside the banks of the Vaal River and the region was chosen due to its geographical location and the region's various opportunities for tourism and economic development.

3.2 Research design

In order to develop a baseline for a tourism revitalisation strategy that is tailor-made to the specific region, the study follows a qualitative approach with the use of semi structured interviews as the primary means of data collection. Owing to this, the study is more suited towards the realism paradigm. Generally, methods such as semi-structured or unstructured interviews, statistical analysis or case studies are used in the realism paradigm (Krauss, 2005). Quintessentially paradigms should not be viewed as fixed, invariable entities that curb movement within the different aspects of a research project (Shannon-Baker, 2016). This method of using semi structured interviews was chosen due to the notion that they are flexible, versatile and allow the participants to express their individual opinions (Kallio *et al.*, 2016).

In this study, the interview schedule, described as the list of questions a researcher intends to ask in the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), consisted of nine open-ended questions structured specifically to gain the maximum information possible regarding the perceived challenges faced by tourism operators, the support they need and the opportunities they see in developing the local tourism industry and how these will contribute to LED. The interviews were conducted with tourism businesses operating in the Vaal Triangle region, and the participants were drawn from hotels, restaurants, guesthouses, the casino, function venues and a range of the other tourism activities available in the region. Participants were contacted beforehand to gain their consent and inform them of the research study and its objective, where after a date and time convenient to their schedule was agreed upon and the interviews were conducted telephonically. They were advised that the questionnaires did not include inquiries relating to personal issues (e.g. name, address, identity number), which might link them to the specific interview. With the consent of the participants the interviews were recorded for later in-depth analysis. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that the audio recording of an interview ensures that everything said during the interview is preserved for later analysis. Transcribing the interviews has the benefit of allowing researchers to familiarise themselves with the data, as well as adding analytic memos as they move along (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The reporting of the discussions followed after the researcher has transcribed, read and re-read the information gained from the interviews. In order to determine and classify the themes emanating from the collected data, a recursive method was employed. A recursive method can be described as the process of summarising all the information acquired during the interview (Oun & Bach, 2014).

With conducting the interviews, a point of saturation was reached with the 10th interview, when no more new information emerged. A sample of 10 was deemed sufficient because this number lies within the parameters of up to 50, as is suggested by researchers such as Mason (2010) and Niccolai *et al.* (2016). Validity in this study was achieved through recording and transcribing the interviews, because, as Ryan *et al.* (2009) suggest, this process helps in ensuring the validity of a study. Regarding the reliability of the study, Kapur (2018) claims that the reliability of a research study implies that the data that has been collected is reliable, trustworthy and dependable.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The utilisation of semi-structured interviews allowed for the use of open-ended questions which have the benefit of not constraining individual responses (Creswell, 2012) while, simultaneously, ensuring standardisation as the same questions were posed to all the participants. This practice was implemented in an attempt to better understand tourism and its role in the local economy of the Vaal Triangle region and, subsequently, to develop a baseline for a tourism revitalisation strategy that is tailor made to the specific region. The results from the interviews and the subsequent emerging themes are discussed in the subsequent section.

Following the analysis of the interviews with key tourism stakeholders in the Vaal Triangle region, prominent themes started to arise from each of the posed questions. The main themes are that of safety and security, improved infrastructure, clean environment, enhanced sustainability, improved marketing and awareness, improved linkages and cooperation, creation of an enabling environment, better utilisation of resources, lack of political will, corruption and a change in attitude. The overwhelming response from participants regarding the role of local government as stakeholders in the development of tourism in the region, points towards a clear lack of trust. The stakeholders highlighted that the local government is responsible for ensuring the effective functioning of the regions' infrastructure, ensuring the safety and security of residents and visitors, creating an enabling environment and ensuring the sustainability of the region. It was mentioned, however, throughout the interviews that the local government of the Vaal Triangle region is not adequately fulfilling its role and that local

stakeholders (businesses and community members) are tasked with taking responsibility for tourism development.

With regard to the infrastructure that is needed, as well as the requirements from the local government to ensure the effective development of the region, the majority of the respondents pointed towards the improvement of roads, electricity supply, water management and cleanliness within the area. Khokhobaia (2019) asserts that low levels of infrastructure development are a major impediment in strategic development plans within local economic development. Hardy and Pearson (2018) found in their study of a region in Australia that adequate infrastructure is a key factor in development.

Another theme emanating from stakeholder's requirements from local government is the improvement of the sustainability of the environment. Respondents pointed out the issues of pollution, especially in the case of the Vaal River. The Vaal River is regarded as one of the region's major drawing points in terms of tourism development, therefore, the maintenance and sustainability thereof is paramount. Michniewicz-Ankiersztajn *et al.* (2018) write that it is necessary to ensure the effective communication of sustainable practices between local government, businesses and the community. This coloration will, in turn, ensure that all parties are aware of their part in ensuring the sustainability of the region and shift towards communicative action (Rist *et al.*, 2007).

The Safety and Security factor within the region remains a huge concern for both residents and visitors, with the respondents mentioning throughout the interviews that crime hinders development in the region, particularly the tourism industry. These high crime rates diminish the attractiveness of both the country and its local regions such as the Vaal Triangle, for both visitors and investors, which not only negatively impacts tourism, but LED and economic growth as well. Lozano-Oyola *et al.* (2012) writes that if regions are to truly benefit from the economic benefits of tourism, the effectiveness of the security services have to be improved. The creation of an enabling environment to aid the development of the region is another key requirement discussed by the tourism stakeholders. According to the WEF (2019) South Africa's competitiveness rankings were negatively impacted by the deteriorating business environment. This fact is concerning, because according to the Christian Aid (2014) the creation of an enabling environment is a prerequisite for income generation, economic growth and reducing poverty. A few of the study respondents also proposed the need for educating the public on the importance and benefits of tourism. This fact is supported by researchers such as Mill (2010) who write that it is important that everyone in a community is aware of the numerous benefits that the tourism industry brings and could bring to the local economy.

Khokhobaia (2019) also asserts the importance of transferring knowledge to the community regarding the various aspects of tourism as well as the economic benefits derived from sustainable tourism.

The fourth question posed to the study respondents sought to ascertain what they regard as the main problems that the local government of the Vaal Triangle region face in order to develop the local region. Various respondents said that the local government lacks the political will to develop the Vaal Triangle region, a situation which is exacerbated by the misallocation of funds. A lack of political will in developing local economies have been cited as one of the main reasons for the failure of sustainable development (Smith, 2012). It would seem that the one of the main problems faced by the local government as indicated by the study participants is corruption. Corruption ties in with the creation of an enabling environment and good governance, and according to Kukutschka (2017), a lack of political will is often associated with corruption. Furthermore, a study by Ovcharov *et al.* (2015) determined that high levels of political instability and corruption negatively affects the tourism competitiveness of Russia on the global market. Respondents also mentioned that the tourism industry is still overlooked in its potential for stimulating economic development, and WEF (2019) pointed towards the general tendency of governments failing to prioritise the tourism industry. A study respondent further pointed towards the lack of knowledge regarding where and how to start with the development of the Vaal Triangle region because there is insufficient local data available.

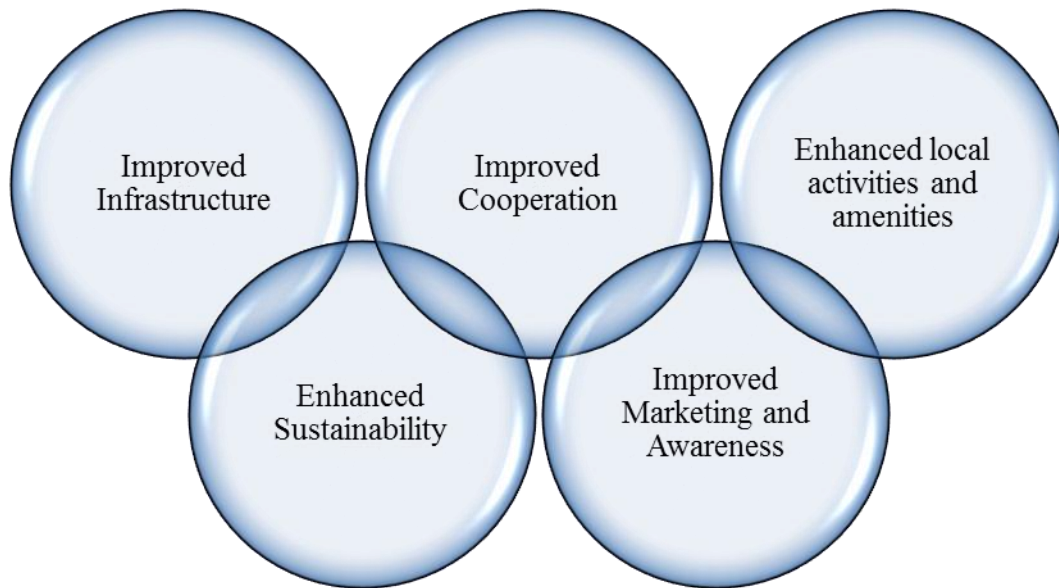
The next question posed to the participating stakeholders was aimed at determining their perception of what the community's role, if any, should be in developing the tourism industry and, in so doing, growing the local economy. All of the respondents were of the opinion that the community should be actively involved in developing tourism in the Vaal Triangle region and various respondents further suggested that the community should take a leading role in this development process. Khokhobaia (2019) states that the involvement of the local community can be a key determinant of its welfare

The next two questions posed to the study respondents asked whether they believe the Vaal Triangle region is in need of a tourism revitalisation strategy, and if so, what they think this strategy should include, as well as how they would propose to improve tourism strategies and practises in the Vaal Triangle region. All of the respondents stated that the Vaal Triangle region needs a revitalisation strategy to not only improve tourism, but the standard of living and local conditions within the region. Here, the majority of the responses build upon the issues arising from the previous questions. Additionally, respondents stated that cooperation and coordination amongst stakeholders needs to be improved through collaborative thinking and

working towards common goals. Several respondents stated that the Vaal Triangle and its various amenities should be marketed on a wider platform and that the current marketing strategy needs to be improved if tourism is to develop. The respondents were also asked what additional tourism activities they feel could be developed in the Vaal Triangle region. Once again some of the respondents stated that the focus should not be on creating new features, but rather on improving and developing the current ones. Nonetheless, several of the respondents indicated that the Vaal River is not utilised to its full potential, and that there is a need for introducing more water activities, together with amenities and events for the whole family. It was also suggested that more recreational areas should be established next to the Vaal River that will provide opportunities for people to exercise, have picnics and relax next to the river, while stressing that ensuring the safety and security of visitors should be of the utmost importance. The last question posed to the respondents were deemed to be a “free zone” during which they were free to add any comments or feelings that might not have been touched upon during the interview. Respondents reiterated the importance of improving the region’s failing infrastructure, revitalising the Vaal River, upgrading the existing amenities and ensuring that the significant of improving the marketing strategies is not overlooked. Several of the respondents mentioned that they would like to see more support and accountability from the local government in order to create a more enabling environment for developing the region. Respondents expressed their concern that current government regulations are restricting business development and deterring potential investors. It is evident also from these results that the Vaal Triangle region does have the potential for development and that tourism stakeholder’s share a strong desire to improve the industry that will simultaneously enhance the economy of the Vaal Triangle region and, thus, the standard of living of its inhabitants.

This baseline is based on the information gathered from the tourism stakeholders regarding the potential of the area, together with the challenges they face in developing tourism, as well as the support they need. For the purpose of this study, five prominent, reoccurring themes are used in forming the baseline for a tourism revitalization strategy. These themes are illustrated in Figure 1.

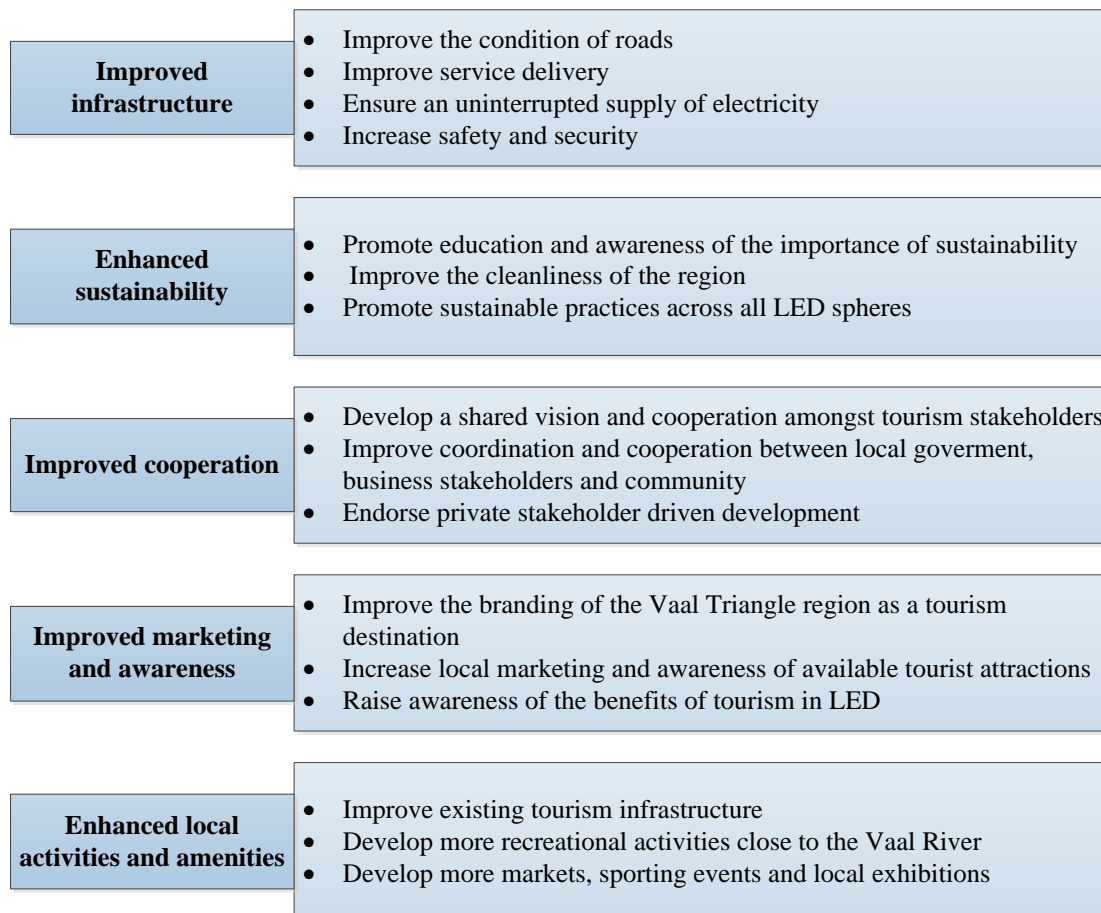
Figure 1: The five most prominent themes forming the baseline for a tourism revitalisation strategy



Source: Author's own compilation

Figure 1 reveals that the five most prominent themes emanating from the interviews are improved infrastructure, enhanced sustainability, improved cooperation, improved marketing and awareness and enhanced local activities and amenities. As Figure 1 suggests, these themes are interlinked and thus improvement thereof requires combining facets from each theme. The next step involves transforming these themes into practical and achievable strategic objectives tailored to the study region. Objectives form the framework of any LED strategy and define the priorities for development (in this scenario tourism and LED), which ultimately forms the basis upon which local actions are created (UN-HABITAT & EPI, 2005). The strategic objectives set out for the baseline for a tourism revitalization strategy, together with their relating local actions, are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 2: The strategic objectives for a baseline for a tourism revitalization strategy and the relating local actions



Source: Author's own compilation

With the action plans for improving the condition of the roads, improving service delivery and ensuring the uninterrupted supply of electricity, as illustrated in Figure 2, the local government has to be committed to and involved in achieving these objectives because they fall within the core of their responsibilities. However, it is advised that the private sector should be involved because a partnership between the local government and the private sector could aid in the improvement of the Vaal Triangle region's infrastructure. With the establishment of a private-public partnership it might be possible to initiate cost-recovery programmes aimed at improving the current infrastructure of the Vaal Triangle region with the aid of the private sector. It should also be highlighted in these action plans that the improvement of local infrastructure could be seen as a return on investment, due to the notion that business development and tourism development would generate further income and, thus, investment which could be used for the improvement of local conditions.

With regard to safety and security, the local police force would have to be encouraged to work more closely with the private sector and community in the Vaal Triangle region. Drawing from previous successful initiatives, tourism organisations in the United Kingdom established an internal emergency response system, which not only supports of one another in the event of an emergency, but also contributes to keeping the public adequately informed about potential threats and how to respond to these (OECD, 2020). A similar response unit might prove beneficial to tourism and other private businesses in the Vaal Triangle region. The second objective as pointed out is to enhance the sustainability of the region. Tourism growth must balance economic development with cultural, social and environment goals in an effort to ensure long term operations. Firstly, as the action plan in Figure 2 suggests, it is necessary to promote education and awareness of the importance of sustainability in the Vaal Triangle region. It is suggested that a sustainability committee presents regular information sessions at both primary and secondary schools, which inform children of the importance of sustainability and how they are able to contribute to a more sustainable future. Furthermore, this committee that should consist of suitably informed local and industry leaders who could empower and educate the local communities regarding their role in promoting and implementing sustainable practices. The members of the 'informed' communities would ultimately help to ensure a cleaner environment. In addition to these measures, it is also advisable for the private sector to work with the local government in increasing the cleanliness of the region. The sustainability committee could inform the local government as to where and how to ensure the regular cleaning and maintenance of the environment, especially the Vaal River and its immediate surrounds.

With promoting sustainable practices across all LED spheres, the sustainability committee could implement programmes that assist local businesses in the Vaal Triangle region. Assistance could be in the form of educating business stakeholders on why they should implement more sustainable measures, as well as looking at ways in which they could systematically implement more sustainable practices within their individual business. There should be a focus on educating these business stakeholders to not view sustainability as a mere cost, but rather as an opportunity for innovation and becoming an industry leader.

The next objective that could be included in a revitalization strategy is to improve the cooperation and coordination amongst all stakeholders within the Vaal Triangle region. It is recommended that a main tourism and LED forum be established which incorporates members who have a shared vision from all spheres of the local economy. The sustainability committee recommended in the previous paragraph could form a division of this forum.

Drawing from international experience, the tourism organisation of Denmark developed a tourism strategy based on the input of tourism stakeholders from the private sector (OECD, 2020). Furthermore, New Zealand's tourism strategy was developed and overseen by a Strategy Group who comprised stakeholders from both the tourism industry and general private sector (OECD, 2020). These scenarios could be applied to the Vaal Triangle region, whereby local government could cooperate with the local tourism industry and enable these stakeholders to drive the development of a tourism strategy and, correspondingly, implement and oversee these strategies. Going further, with the establishment of a tourism and LED forum, this body could advise and direct local government spending in tourism related areas to ensure that money is effectively invested. The establishment of a forum that incorporates all sectors and spheres of an economy has the added advantage that not only are all agendas aligned, but members are able to share their experiences, opportunities, challenges and, even more importantly, solutions, to ultimately ensure the long-term sustainable development of the Vaal Triangle region. An international example of this knowledge sharing is seen in the Spanish Tourism Plan, Turismo 2020, whereby private and public sector representatives are brought together to share their research, knowledge and experience (OECD, 2020). The sharing of knowledge amongst stakeholders in a region increases the innovation of the region and also ensures more collaborative and resource efficient approaches to the development of tourism and LED.

The fourth objective recommended for this baseline potentially leading to a revitalization strategy is the improvement of marketing and awareness. As UN-HABITAT and EPI (2005) point out, strategies aimed at improving the marketing and branding of regions combine various actions, such as upgrading existing marketing initiatives, publications and knowledge management. It was pointed out that many people are unaware of all that the Vaal Triangle region has to offer tourists. From these results it could also be assumed that the current marketing and branding of the Vaal Triangle region are not only limited but fragmented too. McCamley *et al.* (2012) state that the marketing of tourism in destinations should be goal orientated and cohesive. The OECD (2020) writes that in many countries the largest component of the tourism support budget issued by governing authorities is geared towards marketing, which shows the importance of actively marketing regions. Denmark implemented the general initiative, namely "Branding Denmark Initiative" which incorporates all stakeholders in an effort to improve coherence in marketing and, therefore, leads to more coordinated and effective marketing aimed at increasing awareness of the tourism market (OECD, 2020).

Therefore, it might be suggested that a 'central media page' be created, which actively promotes the Vaal Triangle with its various amenities. This page needs to be continuously updated and attract all tourism stakeholders in the region, regardless of their size of operation. The idea behind a central media page is to ensure the coordination amongst stakeholders and make it easier for potential visitors to gain more information on what the region has to offer. However, this page should not only be aimed at attracting new visitors, but also inform the local community (domestic tourism) on the various cultural, social and environmental resources at their disposal. In accordance with Dwyer and Edwards (2009) destinations are more likely to lose their competitiveness when they do not invest in information technology and fail to incorporate the internet in promoting their services and products. By more effectively utilising new technologies and what the internet has to offer, the Vaal Triangle region could use tools such as emails, blog marketing, publications and news groups, to raise awareness of the amenities and events taking place. These methods could also be used in raising awareness on the importance and benefits of tourism in local economies, as well as the significance of ensuring sustainability and how to incorporate conservation measures into everyday life.

Enhancing local activities and amenities in the Vaal Triangle region is the last objective in the baseline for a tourism revitalization strategy. From the interviews it became clear that there is potential for developing more tourism-related activities and certain suggestions came to light. Numerous stakeholders mentioned that the region is rich in various cultural and historic assets that are currently not utilised and that many of the local residents have no knowledge of these assets. Therefore, a campaign, driven by private stakeholders, could be started to restore historical and cultural assets that would contribute to the unique brand of the Vaal Triangle region. Thereafter, information points and local tours could be developed to share these resources, which would not only contribute to tourism development but could lead to the creation of more jobs. With tourism stakeholders and other businesses in the Vaal Triangle region working together, more recreational areas could be developed along the banks of the Vaal River. The key to this development would be cooperation in order to ensure the safety and security of the visitors, as well as ensuring the areas remain clean. In addition, it could be beneficial to host a local monthly market, at which only locally sourced products are sold, ranging from farm products, food, handmade crafts and art exhibitions. This market would be open to vendors of all ages and specialities, giving local producers a chance to earn an income. Local shows and events could be held on a monthly basis that, in addition to generating funds which could be used to maintain the Vaal River and its surrounding environment, would raise public awareness of the importance of sustainability.

Further focus should be aimed at hosting more agricultural shows, sporting events and even engineering expos because the Vaal Triangle region houses manufacturing giants such as ArchelorMittal and SASOL. Due to tourism's strong linkages, as indicated by Slabbert and Grobler (2011), partnerships with various other private stakeholders could lead to skills development, income generation as well as raising awareness of the region's various attributes. An example of a destination that has implemented several successful initiatives aimed at utilising its natural and cultural resources is the State of Michoacán in Mexico. In this instance, a joint effort between business stakeholders and the local community has resulted in the implementation of programmes that restore local monuments and sites as well as investing in the creation of new marketplaces (OECD, 2020). This practice has not only increased the availability of festivals and local events, but greatly contributes to the regions' individuality and branding, creating a unique experience for visitors. Therefore, implementing the suggested agricultural, sporting and engineering events could contribute to the image and tourism development of the Vaal Triangle region.

Following the identification of potential strategic objectives and their relevant action plans for a potential revitalisation strategy for the Vaal Triangle region, the next step would require a forum or association aimed at tourism development and LED in the region, to establish a budget and timeline for implementing these objectives and action plans. Therefore, as the potential strategic objectives and their relevant action plans have been presented above in forming the baseline for a tourism revitalisation strategy for the Vaal Triangle region, this study's objective has been achieved.

5. CONCLUSION

The multifaceted nature of the tourism industry makes it rather unique and presents strategy and policy makers with the challenge of sustainably developing the industry to its full potential within their specific regions. Therefore this study could enable other researchers and destination managers to determine a local region's potential in developing tourism and also aid strategy makers in that region to develop strategies that are based on the region's strengths, weaknesses, challenges and potential. Moreover, policy and strategy makers in local regions might be unsure of how to develop tourism strategies in order to contribute to LED, thus, the baseline for a tourism revitalisation strategy that emanated from this study could act as an information source and reference point for such a practice. As with the majority of studies, this study does have its limitations. The methods employed in this study were regarded as the most suitable and generalizable for the study's aim which was to enable other researchers and policy makers to apply the same methods in conducting their regional

analyses to implement appropriate and comprehensive development strategies. As a result, future studies could make use of larger sample sizes and also look at comparisons between regions or include longitudinal studies to test and analyse the improvement of interventions made.

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