International Journal of Development and Sustainability
ISSN: 2186-8662 - www.isdsnet.com/ijds
Volume 15 Number 4 (2026): Pages 381-396
https://doi.org/10.63212/IJDS24101401

Rural tourism development in South Africa: Evidence from Vhembe District Municipality

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Received: 14 October 2024 | Revised: 17 January 2026 | Accepted: 18 January 2026 | Published: 13 August 2026

Abstract

This study examined rural accommodation within the broader tourism sector in the Vhembe District Municipality (VDM) in Limpopo province of South Africa, with a focus on two distinct villages of Masia and Nkuzana. While South Africa's tourism industry has significantly contributed to the national economy, rural tourism, specifically rural accommodation, remains underexplored. The study draws from the interpretive philosophy that utilises a qualitative approach and a case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled key informants, while document analysis was used to validate the presentation of qualitative findings. The study draws from the Tourism Development Theory to understand rural accommodation and tourism development. The study findings revealed that while national, provincial, and local policies acknowledge the importance of accommodation in rural tourism, these policies have not been effectively implemented to attract tourists to regions like Vhembe and villages such as Masia and Nkuzana. The study underscored the positive socio-economic impacts of rural accommodation development, including job creation and economic stimulation. Despite its merits, the study findings highlighted several challenges, including poor infrastructure, a skills gap, limited access to funding, ineffective policy implementation, community perceptions of poor security, bureaucratic red tape, and the need to balance tourism development with environmental and cultural preservation. To address these challenges, the study recommends improving infrastructure, enhancing skills and training, increasing funding, engaging local communities in decision-making processes, simplifying bureaucratic procedures, and ensuring security.

Keywords: Rural Tourism Development; Rural Accommodation; Rural Economy; Challenges; Opportunities; South Africa

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Cite this article as: Muthige, M.S. and Shava, E. (2026), "Rural tourism development in South Africa: Evidence from Vhembe District Municipality", *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 381-396.

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1. Introduction

South Africa recognises tourism's potential and significant economic contribution (Department of Tourism, 2023, p. 6; National Planning Commission, 2012; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021a). According to the 2023 Tourism Sector Masterplan, the 1996 White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism (hereafter referred to as the 1996 White Paper) affirms South Africa's approach to tourism as one which is "government-led, private sector driven and community-based", and grounded in cooperation and close partnerships between all stakeholders (Department of Tourism, 2023, p. 6). The 1996 White Paper has shaped the country's tourism policy trajectory and sets the tone for advancing rural accommodation and tourism through the following historical context. It succinctly observes the exclusion of communities and groups in the tourism sector.

While South Africa's tourism industry has significantly contributed to the national economy (3.7 per cent to GDP in 2019) (StatsSA, 2023), rural tourism, specifically rural accommodation, remains an underexplored and potentially transformative sector in the country's tourism landscape. Rural areas, such as Masia and Nkuzana villages in the Vhembe district, offer authentic cultural experiences and untouched natural beauty that have the potential to drive sustainable development, alleviate poverty, and preserve cultural traditions. However, despite its promise, the role of the accommodation industry in rural areas remains underexplored. This is because the "extent and standard of infrastructure and services influence the decisions of tourists and the tourism industry, helping to establish overall flows between and within countries" (Thakuri and Nepal, 2018, p. 2).

Studies have noted the untapped potential of rural areas for tourism, as South Africa's attractions have traditionally favoured cities and parks (Ramaano, 2021, 2022, 2023; Rogerson et al., 2022). The dearth of studies negatively affects communities, as this potential is not placed on the national and global agenda, which hinders communities of VDM from benefiting from stakeholder investment and employment creation. Raising awareness of the potential benefits of the tourism and accommodation industry in these rural spaces helps revive and attract investors who are eager to plan and invest, making business sense while enabling local communities to transition from short-term to long-term employment within the tourism and accommodation sector.

Strickland-Munro and Moore (2014, p. 3) argue that the need for economic development via tourism is well recognised in South Africa. In Limpopo Province, rural tourism case studies have focused on Kruger National Park and Mapungubwe National Park as they are iconic, with communities living adjacent to them having had opportunities to engage in tourism, but continue to face entrenched economic disadvantages (Strickland-Munro and Moore, 2014, p. 2). The situation is worse in rural villages such as Masia and Nkuzana. Nevertheless, the study argues that the development of accommodation can be a game-changer for rural communities in the Vhembe districts that require deep scholarly exploration. For instance, similar studies from Russia show that rural-type accommodation facilities are an instrument of preserving historical heritage, traditions, folk crafts and trades and have a multifaceted impact on the surrounding area (Provotorina et al., 2020, p. 4). As highlighted by (Strickland-Munro & Moore, 2014, p. 3), the tangible economic impacts of rural tourism, notably employment opportunities, are well documented in the literature. Provotorina et al. (2020, p. 4) expose the social role of rural tourism accommodation development in creating jobs for the population, especially for young people.

Tourism faces multifaceted challenges that hinder its growth and potential impact on local communities such as Masia and Nkuzana villages. The challenges encompass various dimensions, including infrastructure limitations, resource access, and the risk of cultural commodification. Additionally, there is a discrepancy between the allure of rural tourism and the actual number of tourists visiting these areas. The lack of infrastructure and facilities for rural accommodation is a significant barrier, limiting the potential of Masia and Nkuzana villages to attract tourists and provide economic benefits to the local population.

Furthermore, despite the recognition of tourism's potential for rural development in national policies and strategies, including the Rural Tourism Strategy (2012) and the National Tourism Sector Strategy (2017), there is a need to understand how these policies are translated into effective rural tourism development at the community level, particularly with a focus on the significance of rural accommodation. This study answers the following broad questions: What are the challenges and opportunities associated with rural tourism development in Masia and Nkuzana villages in South Africa, particularly in terms of infrastructure limitations and cultural commodification?

2. Theoretical perspectives: Tourism development theory

The theory emerged from David Harrison's work, in which he applied development theory (Sharpley, 2022). It emerged from a broad agreement that tourism is an effective instrument for social and economic development (Fayos Solà et al., 2012). It has evolved into a broad field that encompasses various perspectives on how tourism can be used to promote economic and social development. Harrison (2014, p. 149), cited in Sharpley (2022), argued that "there is a continued need for theoretically informed perspectives on tourism's relationship with development". Milne and Ateljevic (2001, p. 370) used the tourism development theory "to develop a more rigorous understanding of the evolving tourism industry and how it influences local economic development processes. The Tourism Development Theory uses other sub-theories to understand the role of tourism in fostering economic and social development, such as Dependency Theory, Sustainability Theory, Community Based Tourism Theory, De-Growth Theory, and Social Exchange Theory.

Milne and Ateljevic (2001, p. 371) avow that the theory explains how processes of global tourism expansion, uneven development, and, in some cases, retraction play themselves out at the sub-national levels of regions and communities. It is essential to examine how global and local interactions shape development outcomes for individuals, households, communities and regions (Milne and Ateljevic, 2001). These scholars believe that tourism must "be viewed as a transaction process which is at once driven by the global priorities of multi-national corporations, geo-political forces and broader forces of economic change, and the complexities of the local – where residents, visitors, workers, governments and entrepreneurs interact at the industry 'coal-face'" (Milne and Ateljevic, 2001: p. 372).

The Tourism Development Theory has applied dependency as a sub-theory to explain the dynamics between tourism and development. According to Milne and Ateljevic (2001), in the 1970s and 1980s, researchers began delving into the broader implications of tourism development. This perspective highlighted that as a new destination entered the global tourism landscape, there was initially significant local involvement (Milne and Ateljevic, 2001). However, as Milne and Ateljevic (2001) explain, with the growth of visitor numbers and integration into the global tourism system, the local industry became increasingly characterised

by ownership from overseas entities or outside elites. Unfortunately, the significant drawbacks of mass tourism left little room for local control and limited opportunities for achieving more sustainable forms of local development for the communities and areas relying on it (Milne and Ateljevic, 2001). Hence, this theory argues that tourism development benefits developed regions at the expense of developing rural areas.

Despite the opportunities offered by TDT in advancing community interests, it has its limitations as it places the community at the periphery of accepting involuntary development patterns offered by investors. In this sense, communities may lose the sense of ownership or direction to foster their development as they may want to tap into the opportunities leveraged by tourism and the accommodation industry, while ignoring other vital social and economic strategies they can utilise to earn a living and sustain livelihoods. Although more emphasis has been placed on the potential viability of accommodation and tourism industries in the rural areas of VDM, there is a need to examine other forms of development in which investors can channel funding to promote local economic development and uplift the standards and livelihoods of the rural people.

2.1. Economic development and employment

Tourism is a well-established engine for economic growth and job creation worldwide (Christie et al., 2013: 1, 8). This holds even in Africa, where tourism has experienced remarkable growth in recent decades (Chin et al., 2018, p. 116). This growth promises to enhance the livelihoods of local communities and contribute significantly to national economies.

However, despite its undeniable potential, rural tourism in Africa faces significant challenges. African destinations compete fiercely with tourist attractions in Asia and South America, and simply possessing beautiful natural landscapes and friendly people is no longer enough (Christie et al., 2013, p. 2). Some African countries remain hesitant to embrace tourism due to concerns about environmental degradation, the influence of foreign investment, and the lack of concrete data on the economic and social benefits (Christie et al., 2013, p. 2).

This scepticism hinders efforts to address the challenges of rural decline. Studies have explored various strategies, such as improving infrastructure, consolidating rural land holdings, and restructuring settlement patterns (Lia et al., 2019, p. 138). However, the debate on ensuring the sustainable profitability of rural tourism destinations continues (Chin et al., 2018, p. 116). Moreover, by acknowledging the potential of rural tourism and overcoming these challenges, African nations can unlock a powerful economic development tool. Christie et al. (2013: xi) emphasise that Africa has yet to fully recognise tourism's potential to strengthen and expand its economies. Thus, by embracing sustainable development practices and fostering a welcoming environment for tourism, African nations can harness the power of rural tourism to create a brighter future for their communities and economies.

3. Methodology

This study predominantly follows a qualitative case study approach within an interpretivist philosophy to investigate rural accommodation and tourism in two selected villages in the Vhembe district. This case study design helps to investigate rural accommodation and tourism in the Masia and Nkuzana villages of the VDM in South Africa. Creswell (2003, p. 18) defines a qualitative research approach as one in which the researcher

often makes knowledge claims based primarily on a constructivist perspective, which is based on multiple meanings of individual experiences that are socially created. A purposive sampling method aligned with the ontological and epistemological perspectives was used to select participants and documents relevant to the study's interpretive philosophy and qualitative approach. Babbie (2010, p. 193) affirm that purposive sampling involves the selection of a sample based on the knowledge of a population, its elements, and the purpose of the study.

In this study, participants were purposively selected from five participants from the Department of Tourism at the national government, two participants from the Limpopo provincial government, three from the VDM, ten accommodation owners, and five tourism association members. These participants had a deep knowledge of rural tourism and accommodation within the Masia and Nkuzana Villages under the Vhembe District Municipality. The participants from the above categories were coded as Participants 1-9 to enhance the flow of thematic presentation of data. The paper utilised data from only eight participants. Thematic analysis was used to present the findings based on the study objectives. The study received ethical clearance from the Regensys Business School research ethics committee and gatekeepers' permission from study participants in the Vhembe District Municipality.

4. Findings and discussion

This section discusses the study results emanating from interviews.

4.1. Poor infrastructure and lack of basic amenities

All twenty key informants agreed that poor infrastructure is the major challenge facing rural accommodation development for tourists and the marketing of rural South Africa as a viable tourist destination. Poor infrastructure, such as roads and decent accommodation that meet the requirements expected by would-be visitors, is a major challenge in rural South Africa, which makes it less attractive compared to other tourist destinations in the country. Basic amenities such as electricity and water supply are also limited, making developing and maintaining tourist facilities difficult. Participant 4 stated:

> *"The infrastructure in the Vhembe District is not fully developed to be conducive for the accommodation industry in the area, as the roads are not properly developed, with potholes a major issue. The roads are also not properly lit, which makes night driving dangerous. In addition, the public transportation system is poor and unreliable, all of which limits movement."*

Similarly, Participant 3 echoed that while the main roads are decent, the government needs to develop roads that branch into the community and its outskirts, which are currently non-existent. Participant 8 lamented the lack of electricity as a major drawback, especially with the current load-shedding issues, as most rural accommodations do not have the financial capacity for alternatives such as solar energy or generators, which are expensive to acquire, run and maintain. Participant 1 added that after tourist sites and the activities an area offers, proper accommodation is the biggest advantage any tourist destination can have. However, for

Vhembe, most buildings are dilapidated, and the lack of maintenance makes them inadequate, unfit, and unattractive for tourists.

4.2. Lack of funding

Another drawback is the lack of funding from relevant sectors to develop rural accommodation. Despite the existence of government policies on the promotion of tourism in rural South Africa, not much has been done to finance the development of these areas to achieve the goals and vision of these policies. All interviewees pointed out that financing for the development, marketing and maintenance of tourism infrastructure in rural areas is severely lacking, especially compared to other tourist destinations. Therefore, operators within the rural tourism and accommodation sector often must depend on themselves due to limited government funding. Participant 7 aptly captured the situation by stating that;

> *"A major challenge faced by South African villages when it comes to developing rural accommodation is securing funding, which is a critical aspect towards developing and expanding tourist accommodation in our villages. Securing funding for developing accommodations can be difficult, and small businesses and community initiatives alone often struggle to access capital. Investing in competitive infrastructure, such as hotels, lodges, campgrounds, and guesthouses, is expensive and demands financial resources that have not been easily accessible. As it stands, support from the government is lacking, which is ultimately hindering the growth of tourism in these areas. More support should thus be given by local authorities to construct proper accommodation facilities, which will automatically market these areas as attractive destinations."*

While market access is difficult due to established players, there is also limited funding for marketing rural areas as tourist destinations compared to other areas. Participant 5 added that it is difficult to spread the word regarding rural tourism and rural accommodation because there is not much money to run rural accommodation businesses, let alone to advertise effectively. While locals may be aware of the attractiveness of these areas as tourist destinations, getting the word out to the external market is difficult, as this requires money for marketing purposes. This is also compounded by issues concerning the lack of decent telecommunications. Rural and remote areas generally have issues with network connections, which makes marketing even harder. Commenting on the importance of the Internet in marketing, Participant 9 stated that;

> *"The lack of proper internet facilities has been a major let-down in marketing rural tourism and accommodation in South Africa. The Internet has become one of the biggest marketing tools in the world of business, and most remote areas do not have a sound Internet connection or even decent network reception, which makes it difficult to market these destinations. The internet is a basic, if not major, requirement for tourists and having no internet or a poor internet connection automatically disqualifies any accommodation for prospective customers. Therefore, the government should prioritise improving network and internet connection in rural South Africa if we are to realise the full potential of these areas as viable tourist destinations."*

The lack of proper and reliable telecommunications systems in rural South Africa is a drawback to the development of rural accommodation. Most of these areas have poor network reception, which sometimes makes it difficult to make calls, let alone connect to the internet. This is a major disadvantage as the internet has become an important aspect of everyday life, and tourists would no doubt want to always be connected. Local businesses would also stand to benefit from online marketing in promoting their businesses; hence, the relevant authorities must prioritise the improvement of connectivity in these areas.

4.3. Lack of qualified personnel

The participants also listed qualified human resources as a major challenge in promoting rural tourism and accommodation in the district. For example, Participant 4 argued that education is not a priority in most rural areas, which are home to most of the country's illiterate population. Another added that most young people leave the rural areas for greener pastures as soon as they finish school, resulting in limited human resources. Due to this brain drain, rural areas often lack the expertise to effectively run and market their tourist businesses to a wider audience. According to Participant 8, there are generally limited skills and training in hospitality, tourism management and entrepreneurship in rural tourism. Participant 3 remarked that:

> *"The lack of skills and capacity is a major hindrance as "…effective management of lodgings requires capacity building and training for local populations, and this covers marketing, financial management, and hospitality abilities."*

This lack of skills affects the growth of tourism businesses. They sometimes rely on short-term hired staff, which does not create sustainability.

4.4. Safety and security

The study found that ensuring the safety and security of tourists in rural areas is a challenge. The view was shared by Participant 7, who alluded that:

> *Many tourists, especially external ones, view their security as their top priority, and this is usually not a problem in urban areas where there are luxury 5-star hotels that provide extensive security. However, for rural accommodation, this level of security can be difficult to provide, as most of these areas are remote and have limited security, especially in the case of homestays. Limited security opens these accommodations to crime, putting tourists at risk and making these areas hugely unattractive.*

Other participants revealed that rural areas are also perceived to be unsafe, as it is difficult to get help in the case of emergencies. They corroborated that, as a result, in most cases, tourists would prefer to stay at luxury accommodations in established areas where they feel safe, even if visiting rural destinations. This ultimately disadvantages rural accommodations and rural entrepreneurs, as they cannot compete with the competition from established tourist destinations and established accommodations.

4.5. Remoteness of locations

The study's findings revealed that sometimes, the remoteness of these areas makes them less attractive to tourists. This is compounded by poor roads, which make travelling very difficult. For example, Participant 2 stated that:

> *"Villages may be difficult to access, making it hard to attract tourists and transport them to rural areas. These remote areas also lack important aspects of tourism such as restaurants, shopping malls, entertainment options, and nightlife, which makes them unattractive. These areas are also more likely than not to have poor telecommunications facilities."*

The above finding shows the dilemma associated with a remote rural village in Vhembe, which deters tourism development. Besides visiting tourist sites, the researcher observed that visitors may also want to unwind at the end of the day by engaging in familiar activities, such as dining out or enjoying a night out. The absence of these facilities makes it difficult, and hence it becomes a challenge to attract tourists.

4.6. Environmental and cultural sensitivity

South Africa has a rich cultural history, making it an ideal destination for cultural tourism, a form of tourism that attracts tourists who want to experience local culture first-hand. Its rich flora and fauna also make it a popular destination. These features, however, make tourism challenging as there is a need to balance tourism with environmental and cultural preservation. The influx of tourists can create environmental problems, such as resource depletion, wildlife disturbance, environmental pollution, and many other impacts that make tourism unsustainable in the long run. According to Participant 5,

> "*Local communities are custodians of cultural heritage resources and hence should have a say in how tourism in their area is conducted. This also includes environmental issues, which can negatively affect their quality of life."*

Participant 7 added that tourism requires the delicate balancing act of protecting the biodiversity of the environment and, at the same time, providing tourists with a good experience. Participant 11 further noted that;

> *"Rural South Africa is home to many different tribes, and some of them still hold on to ancient beliefs that view tourists or outsiders as an intrusion, which they do not want to be associated with. Some areas are culturally sensitive and would not be welcoming of today's diverse and inclusive cultures for fear of dilution of their beliefs. These areas also lag in development in the name of cultural preservation, which makes these areas closed off for tourism and, by association, rural accommodation."*

Based on the responses made by the participants interviewed, balancing tourism development with environmental and cultural preservation is another challenge identified by participants. Rural tourism

activities in such areas would require that tourists respect the socio-cultural value systems of the host community and the environment if tourism is to become sustainable.

4.7. Local buy-in

Local buy-in is important for the success of rural tourism and rural accommodation. Locals need to know they can benefit from whatever is happening in their community, which helps businesses flourish. For instance, Participant 3 argued that:

> "*Rural areas are still governed by traditional chiefs who are dictators of what is best for their communities and not able to understand the transformation that villages need to undergo for development, creation of employment and tourist attraction opportunities."*

If communities are not involved or consulted, this hampers tourism development as locals can become hostile to visitors, which creates problems for entrepreneurs in the area. This can lead to issues such as crimes against tourists, which ultimately make a destination unattractive. This view is supported by Chambwe and Saayman (2024:12), who affirm that businesses gain support for tourism in their areas by having members of the local community as owners and partners of tourism ventures, which, among other things, reduces crime rates, enables tourists to appreciate local culture, promotes environmental conservation, and fosters community pride."

4.8. Bureaucratic red tape

The participants revealed that challenges, including stringent policy and regulatory frameworks, make it difficult for small businesses in rural accommodation to operate. According to Participant 9,

> "*There are many bureaucratic red tape complexities that come with establishing a business, and these are often overwhelming for rural entrepreneurs who are already besieged with other challenges, such as limited finances."*

Participant 11 added that bureaucratic delays were a real cause for concern for players in the tourism sector, a problem that has the potential to cripple businesses. He pointed out issues such as difficulties in acquiring land for rural accommodation development and delays in the issuance of licenses that can dishearten the entrepreneur. He also urged the government to make it less stringent for rural tourism operators to conduct their businesses. Therefore, navigating these complex policies and regulations to develop and operate rural tourism initiatives can prove difficult for most entrepreneurs. It usually results in rural accommodation business endeavours dying in their infancy.

While the Vhembe District has much to offer as a viable and competitive tourism destination, its attractiveness is severely hindered by the challenges. All participants agreed that the government must provide better infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, and water supply, and a reliable transportation system. Improvement in this regard would be a huge step towards ensuring growth within tourism for the Vhembe District. There is also a need to promote and improve community buy-in so that local communities understand that their support would benefit them. Addressing these challenges can help unlock the potential of rural

tourism in South African villages, ultimately leading to economic development, job creation and cultural exchange.

4.9. Opportunities to enhance tourism in Masia and Nkuzana villages

The researcher observed that Masia and Nkuzana villages are rich in land and heritage, and investment in proper infrastructure in these villages can significantly contribute to the tourism industry. These observations concurred with Participant 2's views that linked current developments by one of the luminaries and visionaries from the area. For example, one of the prominent businesspeople and entrepreneurs, Dr Michael Nkuna, who is building a smart city called Nkuna Kraal right in the middle of these two villages, with two phases of this city currently operational. However, several participants encouraged the government to develop proper road infrastructure leading into the village, electrify villages to provide a stable water supply, and invest in programs that will promote the cultural diversity the villages offer. Their view seemed to concur that by ensuring the development of basic infrastructure and the provision of basic amenities, rural tourism and accommodation growth will become more attainable.

The study revealed that rural accommodations often struggle with marketing and visibility. Therefore, effective strategies to reach potential tourists can help Masia and Nkuzana villages attract more tourists. It was highlighted that there is a need to keep up with tourist preference trends as they evolve. As Participant 1 stated, "The world of tourism is ever-changing; thus, Masia and Nkuzana village's accommodations must adapt to changing demands, such as eco-tourism and agro tourism." Participants all agreed that Masia and Nkuzana villages have great potential to attract more tourists and enhance their rural tourism and recommended taking these opportunities towards that goal.

4.10. Improving visibility for cultural heritage

The study revealed that showcasing traditional practices, music, dance, and art to offer authentic cultural experiences is a great opportunity for growing tourism in Vhembe. Participant 2 argued that since Nkuzana is dominated by *Tsonga*-speaking people, they can offer unique cultural experiences to tourists, such as the teaching of the local *Shibelane* dance and other activities, such as the village walk and mountain hiking, among others. In addition, such activities can create jobs and allow community members to take charge of responsible tourism. Participant 5 added,

> "*Cultural activities for tourists, such as crafts and arts, can be available throughout the year. There are many talented artists and musicians in the area, and this presents an opportunity for them to earn a living without the disadvantage of seasonal breaks."*

Cultural festivals in line with the above assertions are key in attracting tourists and local people in the process, drawing attention to rural accommodation, which could play a pivotal role in revenue generation.

4.11. Infrastructure development

The study's findings indicated that investing in upgrading roads, accommodation facilities, and amenities can enhance the tourist experience. As Participant 9 demonstrated:

> *"Improving and maintaining road networks in Vhembe is probably one of the best decisions the government can make. Currently, roads in many villages are not fully tarred and are a hazard. Improving in this regard will open so many opportunities that will see tourism in the district growing."*

The study findings emphasised that by exploring these opportunities, Masia and Nkuzana villages can enhance their appeal, leading to job creation and economic development for the local community.

4.12. Environmental and cultural preservation in rural tourism

Environmental and cultural preservation have become important elements in the tourism discourse. As tourism expands, there is a need to protect the environment so that visitors can continue to enjoy visits to their preferred destinations. Ensuring that rural tourism development remains sustainable requires a thoughtful and inclusive approach. Therefore, there is a need for concerted efforts by all stakeholders involved, such as local government, the private sector, local communities and the tourists themselves, to ensure that tourism respects and preserves the environment and the local culture.

Participants concurred that to make tourism sustainable, there is a need to balance the need to continue tourist industry operations and the duty to preserve the environment and cultural heritage. Several participants also agreed that local buy-in is an important aspect of tourism. The local community should always be consulted in any decision made concerning tourism policies.

Other participants added that emphasis should be placed on promoting cultural events within the tourism space that highlight heritage historical sites and their importance. For example, Participant 9 stressed that,

> *"The Farm Group has organised many cultural events/evenings. Matsila used to have a Cultural Heritage Festival**;** Vhembe organises the Marula Festival and numerous information-sharing sessions whose main aim is to preserve and promote local culture."*

Such initiatives should be encouraged as they play a huge role in preserving traditional cultures, which are constantly under attack in modern society. Participant 6 added,

> *"By adopting a comprehensive and inclusive approach, rural tourism development can respect and preserve the cultural heritage and environment of South African villages while generating economic benefits and promoting sustainable development."*

Several participants concurred that relevant authorities should regularly conduct assessments to identify potential cultural impacts and develop mitigation strategies. Tourists and local communities should be educated about the importance of preserving cultural heritage and the environment. Suppose there is an opportunity for the sales of arts and crafts. In that case, this will add to the sustainability of this industry in Limpopo villages and encourage more people to become involved. An important aspect of preservation is to protect and conserve physical and cultural heritage sites, traditional buildings, monuments, and historical artefacts. Most participants agreed that one way of doing this would be to man the areas physically, fence them off and not allow visitors to touch artefacts to prevent them from being damaged. Participant 11 shared the view that these cultural sites can be preserved through storytelling, craftsmanship, and music so that visitors

realise their importance and significance and understand why they must be preserved. Cultural sensitivity training should also become part of the tourist experience. Tourists, tour operators, and local service providers can be educated on cultural sensitivity and responsible tourism practices.

5. Discussion of findings

The poor infrastructure and lack of basic amenities were noted as challenges affecting the viability and growth of the tourism and accommodation industry. In South Africa, rural spaces' poor infrastructure development is experienced in rural municipalities due to institutional issues affecting the leadership of rural municipalities. This can be related to corruption, poor government, poor financial management, and the absence of internal control mechanisms that help curb corruption when it comes to municipal funds. The study of Jacobs, Du Preez, and Fairer-Wessel (2020, p.89) affirms that good roads and connectivity between attractions significantly improve rural tourism in South Africa. The author's view is that good transportation infrastructure is vital in enhancing tourist destination appeal and visitor experience. The study findings reflected that the Vhembe District has poor infrastructural development that inhibits the viability of the accommodation industry. The roads are not adequately developed, and potholes are discouraging potential investors who are wary about their vehicles or goods getting damaged.

Worsening the situation are the unreliable transport systems, which may deter the movement of employees and people to attractive tourist destinations. These observations were confirmed in a study conducted by Ramaano (2024), who adds that poor roads are hindering the attractiveness of Vhembe as a tourist destination, as “the road systems in many villages in Vhembe are unbearable and compromise tourism prosperity within the local enterprises and further disrupts the influx of tourists. This assertion indicates the dangers poor infrastructural development may bring to the accommodation and tourism industry in South African rural municipalities. In another study, Jacobs et al. (2020) argue that disregarding rural infrastructure transcends mere policy oversight and triggers social injustices. These views confirm the findings as poor roads and dilapidated infrastructure in Masia and Nkuzana villages discourage rural tourism and the development of the accommodation industry. In this case, rural municipalities may foster alternative fundraising strategies that help improve both physical and digital infrastructural development for sustainable growth and nation-building. While the National Development Plan Vision 2030 earmarks tourism as a viable and strategic avenue for regenerating employment and attaining economic growth, problems experienced in rural municipalities are a setback to this desire. Further, these views dispute the Community-Based Theory, which targets the development of local communities using economic mechanisms such as accommodation and tourism, among other rural development activities.

The lack of funding for rural tourism development in South Africa is well documented. In their study, Musakwa and Odhiambo (2022) revealed that the sustainability of rural tourism projects is affected by limited funding, which saw some projects fail before they even took off. This assertion is common across entrepreneurship ventures in South Africa, as the lack of access to business funding affects the development and growth of small businesses. Most rural municipalities in South Africa rely on the equitable revenue they acquire from the National government to fund developmental operations in the local government space. This funding, in most cases, cannot be enough to support rural development activities such as the establishment of rural accommodation and promoting existing and upcoming tourism-related activities. This leaves rural

municipalities such as Vhembe prone to underdevelopment as investors are not interested in pouring their funding into municipalities where they do not envisage positive returns.

The lack of qualified personnel constrains the growth of the tourism and accommodation industry in Vhembe District in Limpopo. The sustainability of the rural accommodation and tourism industry in South Africa relies on the ability of investors to attract skilled experts to run their businesses. Due to the geographical remoteness of many accommodation industries, skilled workers are often reluctant to work there, which creates a huge gap in terms of finance, human resources and managerial experience, which is much needed to drive development and grow business in the tourism and accommodation industry. The study findings confirm this plight as accommodation owner in Masia and Nkuzana villages lament the absence of skilled human resources expertise, among others, to transform and grow their business. While skills shortage is a national plight, various local municipalities in South Africa are struggling to attract skilled expertise due to poor working conditions and unattractive remuneration.

Research indicates that a lack of skills, limited financing, markets, and an unfavourable economic environment are among the many reasons why rural accommodation and tourism industries often fail. A study by Nhamo and Nhamo (2019) asserts that skill acquisition is a challenge in the tourism and accommodation industry due to brain drain and low education levels in rural municipalities. There is a need, as suggested by Amoah & Amoah (2019), to ensure that youth (males and females) acquire the relevant skills that are required to work in the tourism and accommodation industry. Changing the mindset of youth towards tourism can be another way of attracting them to explore the growing tourism and accommodation industry.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The analysis of study findings revealed many challenges affecting rural tourism development in the Vhembe District. The poor infrastructure, financial constraints, safety and security concerns, and lack of political and bureaucratic red tape, among others, affect the development of the tourism and accommodation industry in Masia and Nkuzana Villages. The review further noted that by addressing some of these issues, chances are high that tourism development in rural spaces can be improved, which is the desire of the National Development Plan Vision 2030 in South Africa to create sustainable communities. The study highlighted that several challenges need to be addressed for sustainable rural accommodation and tourism. The study showed that challenges such as poor infrastructure, skills gap, access to funding, ineffective implementation of government policies, community perception of poor security, bureaucratic red tape affect the development of tourism through rural accommodation. Furthermore, the study concluded that a strategic policy framework that incorporates the safety of rural residents, preserves culture, and enhances rural internet connectivity, among other key imperatives, must be developed to address all these unique challenges in a way that responds to the characteristics of rural areas such as Masia and Nkuzana villages.

Based on the study conclusions, the government and stakeholders may help address the lack of community buy-in in rural accommodation and tourism development. Local government should take a pivotal role in raising awareness in local communities on the significance of rural accommodation as a source of livelihood. Respondents revealed that rural communities are often not consulted on tourism-related issues in their areas. Most rural areas in South Africa are dominated by traditional leaders, such as chiefs, who make decisions for the whole community without proper consultation. Such a flawed approach makes implementing policies

difficult since local buy-in is essential for the success of any policy. The study also recommends that the government address the historical and cross-sectoral problem of bureaucratic red tape to ease the establishment of rural accommodation businesses, which involves many complexities. These are often overwhelming for rural entrepreneurs already besieged with other challenges, such as limited finances**,** resulting in many rural accommodation business initiatives dying in their infancy. Finally, the researchers recommend balancing tourism development with environmental and cultural preservation. As the study revealed, tourism requires the delicate balancing act of protecting the biodiversity of the environment and the local cultural heritage while providing tourists with a good experience. The researchers acknowledge that doing so is complex and requires collaborative efforts among all concerned stakeholders. Future research may tap into the use of modern technologies to improve visibility and market rural tourism and accommodation as key avenues for employment generation and improve household income for the local rural people in South Africa.

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