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Route Tourism Planning, Local Impacts and Challenges: Stakeholder Perspectives from the Panorama Route, South Africa

Abstract. The growth of route tourism initiatives is a worldwide phenomenon. South Africa is a major focus for route tourism planning as part of broader place-based development initiatives. This paper examines the perceptions of key route tourism stakeholders concerning the planning, local impacts and challenges of the Panorama Route, which is located in South Africa's Mpumalanga province. The analysis is based on insights from 63 qualitative interviews conducted in 2022 with representatives from the government and private sector. In addition to some common themes, differences between different categories of stakeholder could be observed. In many respects, government (both provincial and local) was viewed as the 'problem' rather than the provider of solutions. The uneven geographical impacts of the route were also highlighted. Different stakeholder perspectives revealed during the interviews show the complexities associated with route tourism planning.

Keywords: route tourism, planning tourism routes, local development impacts, stakeholder perspectives, Panorama Route, South Africa

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1. Introduction

As a result of a broader global shift away from centrally-driven approaches to economic development led by national governments, post-apartheid South Africa has seen a growing number of local or 'place-based' development strategies initiated by sub-national tiers of government (Pike, Rodriguez-Pose & Tomaney, 2015; Rogerson, 2014). According to the South African National Constitution, all local authorities in the country are mandated to implement Local Economic Development (LED)

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strategies which, in the majority of cases, are characterised by a pro-poor agenda (Venter, 2020). Over the past 25 years, most South African local governments have tried, with different measures of success, to implement LED by promoting tourism as a form of strategic intervention, especially for small towns and remote rural areas (Butler & Rogerson, 2016; Donaldson, 2018, 2021; Nel & Rogerson, 2016; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014, 2019, 2021). As demonstrated by Kokt and Hattingh (2019), the South African experience regarding local economic development and tourism has been influential beyond the country's borders with many of its planning concepts and frameworks monitored closely by other countries in the region of Southern Africa for the purpose of policy learning.

One theme that has attracted attention is the establishment and promotion of tourism routes as a vehicle for tourism-led local development. Within sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa has the largest number of route tourism initiatives (Donaldson, 2018; Rogerson, 2009). The country has the longest history of route tourism planning, which goes back to the early 1970s, when the private sector established the first wine routes in the Cape Winelands (Ferreira, 2020). After the democratic transition, followed by the growth of the tourism sector as a whole, several other routes have been consolidated or launched by the private sector (Lourens, 2007; Rogerson, 2007). The public sector has also become engaged in route tourism planning as part of LED strategies for many small towns and rural areas, which has triggered a burst of new route tourism initiatives (Donaldson, 2018). These route tourism initiatives have been focused on various themes such as arts and crafts, food and drink, culture and heritage, and most recently lighthouses and stargazing.

A significant body of research has accumulated on themed tourism routes in South Africa, documenting various issues associated with route planning, the nature of visitors and segmentation, and the ramifications of various routes for small town and rural local development (Lourens, 2007; McLaren & Heath, 2013; Mutana & Mukwada, 2020; Rogerson, 2004; Rogerson & Visser, 2020; Van Wyk-Jacobs, 2018). The objective of this article is to contribute to this literature by analysing perceptions of key route tourism stakeholders concerning the recent planning and local impacts of the Panorama Route which is located in South Africa's Mpumalanga province. The article consists of three main parts: first the study is placed in the broader context of international scholarship on route tourism. This is followed by information about the region of interest and a description of the research method. The third part includes findings from 63 qualitative interviews conducted in 2022 with route tourism stakeholders about their views concerning the planning, workings and impacts of this major route tourism initiative.

2. Route Tourism – International Context

Tourism routes are circuits, corridors or spatial networks that connect a range of natural or cultural attractions (Meyer, 2004; Stoffelen, 2022). Such routes “have been indispensable to travel and tourism over the centuries, helping to form the basis of mobility patterns of the past and present” (Timothy & Boyd, 2015, p. 1). Indeed, for decades “routes have formed the basis of travel mobility patterns, contributing to recreational activities, a plethora of travel plans, and tourism progress worldwide” (Anuar & Marzuki, 2022, p. 320). According to Denstadli & Jacobsen (2011), the modern phase of route development dates from “the first decades of the twentieth century, with the growth of pleasure motoring and car-based tourism” (p. 781). MacLeod (2017, p. 423) notes that “routes are increasingly ubiquitous features in the tourism landscape”, while Stoffelen (2022, p. 379) points out that routes have become “popular tourism products throughout the world”.

A large part of the literature in this field is concerned with the planning and impacts of route tourism practices. The planning of a ‘tourism route’ has been defined as an initiative designed to bring together an array of activities and attractions under a unified theme and thereby to stimulate entrepreneurial opportunities in the form of ancillary products and services (Grefe, 1994). Route promotion, particularly, the establishment of themed routes as tourism attractions, has become an increasingly important economic or developmental goal. In several parts of the world, themed routes have been a particularly popular strategy of promoting small town and rural tourism (Olsen, 2003). Scenic routes are linear corridors designed to showcase a wide array of nature-based, scenic and cultural attractions to tourists (Anuar & Marzuki, 2022). Pedrosa, Martins and Breda (2022, p. 2) add that their design and structure corresponds to linear models, which go from one or several points towards an end point, and “network models based on an archipelago of points and connected by themes rather than territorial continuity”. Routes provide a unique opportunity for rural operators to achieve ‘economies of scale’ by establishing networks of different service providers organised in such a way to maximise opportunities and offer a wide array of products and activities (Grefe, 1994).

“Routes appeal to a variety of users, such as international overnight visitors who use them as part of a special interest holiday, longer-staying visitors who use them (or parts of them) for day excursions, or urban domestic day visitors” (Lourens, 2007, p. 475). Although different definitions of route tourism exist in the literature, there is consensus that it is based on mobility, is geographically determined and aims to link different tourism attractions and products. Points of attraction are linked in a supply network such as to accord coherence of the destination and theme, which might be heritage, food and drink, religion, culture or arts and

crafts (Stoffelen, 2022). There is agreement that successful routes require a high level of pre-planning and organization in order to present a cohesive offering and plan for the spatial dispersion of tourists which potentially might spread local impacts for economic development (Vada, Dupre & Zhang, 2023). Destination route attractions must have varied offerings in order to foster visitor satisfaction and loyalty. Above all, the development of routes, and tourism in general, requires infrastructure, services and accessibility (Denstadli & Jacobsen, 2011). All these accompanying aspects “should be of such a quality that the journey to the product is also enjoyed” (Van Wyk-Jacobs, 2018, p. 61).

Route tourism is primarily focused on tourists who travel by car and explore routes and their attractions at their own pace (McLaren & Heath, 2013). The establishment of tourism routes is considered an effective method of tourism distribution, especially for tourists travelling by road within a given geographical area (Van Wyk-Jacobs, 2018). According to Denstadli & Jacobsen (2011), the appeal of routes “as instruments of tourism development is not only related to large proportions of self-drive tourists in many areas but is also linked to tourism as wanderlust — an interest in being on the move” (p. 781). The success of a route depends on how well it is promoted (a unified marketing and branding strategy) and on the provision of the required infrastructure (roads and signage, area development, facilities) by the public sector (Van Wyk-Jacobs, 2018). The international experience confirms that well-designed and imaginative tourism routes are a great advantage for destinations (Lourens, 2007; Timothy & Boyd, 2015).

The creation of a tourism route can bring together a network of actors — municipalities, associations, and the local private sector — to work and cooperate in order to market a local destination. The evolution of such local partnerships is regarded as essential for the growth of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises (Yachin, 2020). Routes “allow each participating community along a route to benefit from being linked to the experiences, and the knowledge gained, of other participants” (Moulin & Boniface, 2001, p. 243). According to Vada, Dupre and Zhang (2023, p. 883), route tourism represents “an original model in terms of relationships with a variety of stakeholders”, while Pedrosa, Martins & Breda (2022, p. 2) note routes require the existence of “a network where a group of stakeholders works together to achieve common goals”. Tourism routes should be established in line with “firm guidelines to enhance local economic development” (Anuar & Marzuki, 2022, p. 331) by attracting more visitors and strengthening local community livelihoods. According to MacLeod (2017), while the role and usefulness of tourism routes as applied tourism products has now been well documented, the body of theoretical research on this topic is still relatively limited (MacLeod, 2017).

Although in one recent narrative literature review by Vada, Dupre and Zhang

(2023, p. 879) the claim was made that “route tourism has received little attention”, it is evident from the above discussion that over the past 20 years a substantial body of writings has accumulated on the topic, covering several research aspects, such as consumer behaviour, route planning and development, local impacts, tourism development and COVID-19 route crisis management (Anuar & Marzuki, 2022; Pedrosa, Martins & Breda, 2022). Finally, there is a small number of studies that deal with stakeholder relationships. Different stakeholder perceptions of route planning and impacts of route tourism initiatives are also the focus of the following study.

3. Study Area and Research Method

The study concerns the Panorama Route, which winds through the eastern part of South Africa’s Mpumalanga province, situated close to the Kruger National Park. Figure 1 shows that the major share of the route lies within the administrative

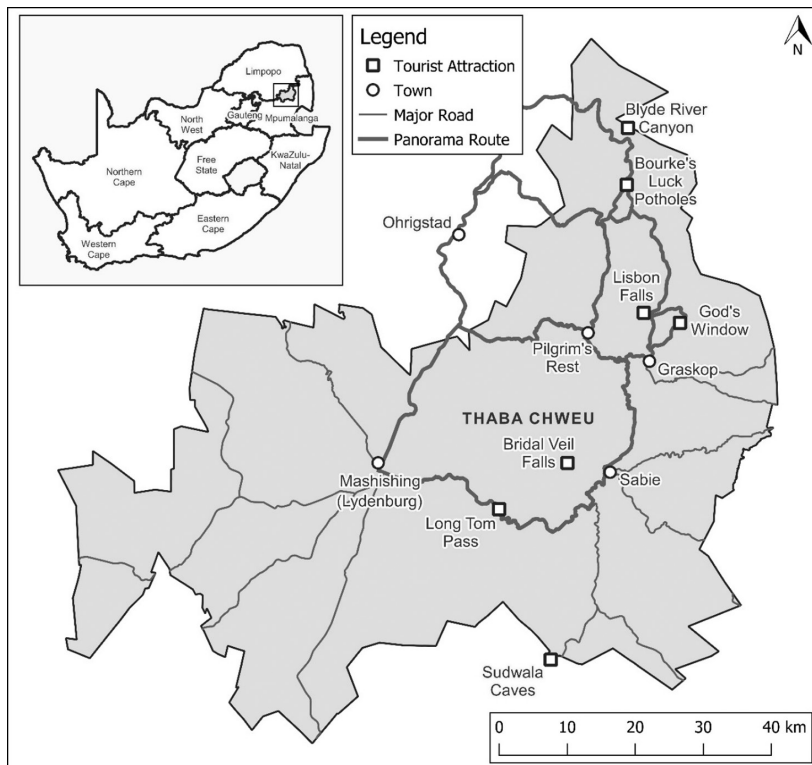


Figure 1: Location of the Panorama Route

Source: Authors

boundaries of Thaba Chweu Local Municipality, part of the Ehlanzeni District Municipality (centred at the adjoining Mbombela Municipality). The major urban settlements are the small towns of Sabie, Graskop and Lydenburg (also known as Mashishing) as well as the village of Pilgrim's Rest. The route features several natural scenic attractions including God's Window, Bourke's Luck Potholes, Blyde River Canyon, Sudwala Caves and a number of spectacular waterfalls (such as Lisbon Falls). In addition, the route includes the historic gold-mining settlement of Pilgrim's Rest, an important heritage site.

The study is based on qualitative data collected during 63 interviews with route tourism stakeholders: 6 representatives of the public (government) sector involved in the planning or implementation of the route, and a purposive sample of 57 interviewees from the private sector consisting of two groups. The first included representatives of formal, registered tourism businesses (mainly accommodation providers) and the second one — representatives of Black-owned, unregistered informal businesses, mostly those involved in the sale of handicraft goods. For the past 20 years the government policy has concentrated on 'transforming' and supporting emerging (Black-owned) businesses in the tourism sector (Sixaba & Rogerson, 2023). Interviewees from informal and emerging businesses were included to obtain perceptions of these critical small business stakeholders regarding the route and its local impacts. The interviewed government officials represented all major institutions involved in the planning of the Panorama Route. Tables 1, 2 and 3 present lists of interviewees from the public sector, the formal and informal businesses. Full details of the interviews are given in Mhlabane (2023).

Table 1. Government officials interviewed about the Panorama Route

	Location	Department name	Position
GO1	Nelspruit/Mbombela	Mbombela Local Municipality	Tourism Manager
GO2	Lydenburg/Mashishing	Thaba Chweu Local Municipality (TCLM)	LED Manager
GO3	Sabie	South African Forestry Company SOC Limited (SAFCOL)	Senior Administration
GO4	Nelspruit/Mbombela	Ehlanzeni District Municipality	Tourism Manager
GO5	Nelspruit/Mbombela	Department of Economic Development and Tourism (DEDT)	Deputy Director of Tourism
GO6	Nelspruit/Mbombela	Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA)	Tourism Safety Officer

Source: Authors

As shown on Table 2, most of the formal businesses are long-established operations, mostly engaged in hospitality services, accommodation or restaurants. In nearly all cases, the tourism business is the primary source of income for the

Table 2. Interviewees from formal businesses located along the Panorama Route.

	Location	Type of establishment	Years in operation	Number of permanent employees	Primary source of income	Operates all year
FB1	MWR	Attraction	50	50 FT/12 PT	Yes	Yes
FB2	MWR	Attraction	N/A	3 FT	Yes	Yes
FB3	MWR	Activity/Attraction	6 months	6 FT	Yes	Yes
FB4	MWR	Tour Operator	20	15 FT	Yes	Yes
FB5	MWR	Attraction	10	3 FT	No, the owner has a furniture shop	Yes
FB6	HS	Accommodation	N/A	115 FT/35 PT	Yes	Yes
FB7	HS	Accommodation	54	37 FT/ 3–12 PT	Yes	Yes
FB8	HS	Accommodation	2	7 FT/3 PT	No, the manager does real estate	Yes
FB9	HS	Accommodation	43	10 FT/2 PT	Yes	Yes
FB10	HS	Restaurant	9	9 FT/ 1 PT	No, the owner has a liquor store and a lodge	Yes
FB11	GPR	Accommodation	1	1 FT/ 3 PT	Yes	Yes
FB12	GPR	Restaurant	4 weeks	9 FT	Yes	Yes
FB13	GPR	Accommodation	over 50	35 FT	Yes	Yes
FB14	GPR	Tour Operator	10	5 FT	No, pensioner	Yes
FB15	GPR	Accommodation	10	7 FT/2 PT	No, the owner has other businesses	Yes
FB16	GPP	Attraction	60	15 FT/11 PT	Yes	Yes
FB17	GPR	Accommodation	N/A	53 FT	Yes	Yes
FB18	GPR	Accommodation	7	15 FT/4 PT	Yes	Yes
FB19	GPR	Activity/Attraction	5	3 FT/1 PT	Yes	Yes
FB20	LM	Attraction	43	4 FT	Yes	Yes
FB21	LM	Accommodation	9	5 FT	Yes	Yes
FB22	LM	Restaurant	17	20 FT/2 PT	Yes	Yes
FB23	LM	Restaurant	25	20 FT	Yes	Yes
FB24	LM	Tour Operator	9	4 FT/9 PT	Yes	Yes
FB25	LM	Tour Operator	2	3 FT/ 5 PT	Yes	Yes
FB26	LM	Restaurant	25	5 FT/1 PT	Yes	Yes
FB27	LM	Attraction	52	7 FT/ 6 PT	Yes	Yes

Legend: MWR — Mbombela/White River, HS — Hazyview/Sabie, GPR — Graskop/Pilgrims Rest, LM — Lydenburg/Mashishing, Staff reduced since COVID-19: FT — full time, PT — part-time; N/A — not available.

Source: Authors

owner. Interviewees were selected from registered businesses located in the major tourism nodes along the Panorama Route. As regards informal tourism businesses (Table 3), most of which are craft producers or sellers, are also long-established

Table 3. Interviewees from informal businesses located along the Panorama Route.

	Location	Type of establishment	Years in operation	Number of permanent employees	Primary source of income	Operates all year
IB1	BVW	Craft Seller	44	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB2	BVW	Craft Seller	26	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB3	LCW	Craft Seller	22	1 FT	Yes	Yes, sometimes on Sundays the owner goes to church
IB4	LCW	Craft Seller	30	1 FT	Yes	No, depends on whether the owner needs to rest
IB5	MMW	Craft Seller	7	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB6	MMW	Craft maker & seller	31	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB7	GR	Craft Seller	25	1 FT/1 PT	No, the owner has several craft shops	Yes
IB8	GR	Craft Seller	5	1 FT/1 PT	Yes	Yes
IB9	GR	Craft Seller	4	2 FT	Yes	Yes
IB10	GW	Craft Seller	29	1 FT/1 PT	Yes	Yes
IB11	GW	Craft Seller	24	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB12	GW	Craft Seller	10	1 FT	Yes	Yes, depending on weather conditions
IB13	WV	Craft Seller	8	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB14	BLP	Craft Seller	27	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB15	BLP	Craft maker & seller	28	1 FT	No, pensioner	Yes
IB16	BLP	Retail	6	7 FT	Yes	Yes
IB17	BLP	Craft Seller	27	1 FT	No response	Yes
IB18	TR	Craft Seller	4 to 5	1 FT	No, also sell vegetables	Yes
IB19	TR	Craft Seller	11	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB20	TR	Craft Seller	19	1 FT	Yes	Yes except when it is raining
IB21	TR	Craft Seller	25	1 FT	Yes	No, depends on health.
IB22	TR	Craft Seller	26	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB23	TR	Craft Seller	30	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB24	TR	Craft Seller	28	1 FT	No, pensioner	Yes
IB25	PR	Craft maker & seller	10	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB26	PR	Craft Seller	15	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB27	PR	Craft Seller	4	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB28	PR	Retail	4	1 FT	Yes	Yes
IB29	PR	Craft Seller	5	1 FT	Yes	Yes but not operating on Sundays
IB30	WR	Craft Seller	8	5 FT/5-10 PT	Yes	Yes

Legend: GR — Graskop, WR — White River, PR — Pilgrims Rest, BVW — Bridal Valley Waterfalls, LCW — Lone Creek Waterfalls, MMW — Mac Mac Waterfalls, GW — God's Window, WV — Wonder View, BLP — Bourke's Luck Potholes, TR — Three Rondavels — TR, Staff reduced since COVID-19: FT — full time, PT — part-time.

Source: Authors

and many have been in operation for more than 20 years and are typically the main source of household income. Interviewees in this group were selected from different locations along the Panorama Route, representing the major attractions as well as others operating in clusters along the road. All interviews focused on route development, local impacts and challenges. Interviewees from the private sector were also asked about their views concerning the government's role in the development of the route. Thematic analysis was applied to identify topics discussed during the interviews.

4. Results

The results are organised into three sub-sections, each dedicated to perceptions of one of the three groups of stakeholders: the public (government) sector, formal businesses, and informal businesses.

4.1. Public Sector Stakeholders

As with other route tourism initiatives in different parts of South Africa, policy initiatives and activities of several provincial and local agencies impact the development of tourism linked to the Panorama Route. The Panorama Route itself has existed for a long time, albeit not called a route and without route branding. The interviewees confirmed its importance for the development of tourism in the province: according to GO1, "it is the main attraction after Kruger National Park". From the perspective of the public sector the Panorama route was viewed a successful initiative for tourism development. As interviewee GO4 pointed out, "when tourists travel along the route they support jobs, the economy, they bring money into the area". The benefits were recognised by formal businesses — local hotels, restaurants, and guest houses — as well as informal businesses. Community impacts were seen to result from development priorities within local integrated development plans, which include support systems for making business opportunities in tourism available to emerging (Black) entrepreneurs (GO4). The interviewee from the MTPA (GO5) indicated that small businesses benefited from the organisation's marketing initiatives. In general, according to the representatives of the public sector, there was involvement and collaboration with other stakeholders from the private sector and local communities regarding ways of spreading the benefits of the route to local communities, including alleged empowerment of women in the local tourism industry, which would be disputed by other stakeholders.

However, according to interviewee GO6, economic benefits generated by the route are mainly concentrated at Graskop and manifested by the expansion of local accommodation establishments and restaurants, the construction of the Graskop Gorge Lift and Skywalk. In contrast, the town and surroundings of Sabie did not benefit much because of poor destination management, the bad condition of roads and the lack of water and electricity. The town of Pilgrim's Rest was also considered to be deriving much fewer spillover benefits from the Panorama Route. According to GO5, the development of the Panorama Route is faced with a number of challenges. The first one is the lack of maintenance of roads and attractions along the route. Owing to inadequate investments by the Department of Public Works and failure to upgrade local roads by the Thaba Chweu Local Municipality (TCLM) had a negative impact on the towns of Sabie, Lydenburg, and Graskop. The majority of tourist attractions along the route are located within TCLM, which is has one of the worst records in the province as regards financial mismanagement (Giddy, Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022).

Another challenge is associated with crime and consequences of community protests. According to interviewee GO6, "crime that takes place along the route, that affects our international and national tourists.... We have heard recent incidents against tourists coming to visit the Panorama route... There was an elderly couple from Germany [who] were hijacked there". Interviewee GO5 said that "from time to time we have social unrest, people picketing". These protests are often accompanied by road blockades, which interrupt operations of local businesses and prevent them from being able to receive incoming tourists. The provincial government sought to combat crime along the route by organising different stakeholders into a safety forum and introducing tourism safety monitors.

The public sector stakeholders acknowledged that the expansion of the Panorama Route was also stifled by a skills shortage, which was likely to intensify as tourism demand grew. The lack of links between the tourism industry and training colleges was also perceived as a problem. Since not enough has been done to increase the pool of skilled employees and the services offered have often been substandard, the province's competitiveness in the field of tourism has suffered.

Another problem mentioned by the public sector stakeholders had to do with community land claims to several of the route's key attractions, most notably the Blyde River Canyon Nature Reserve, which has been claimed by several communities. Finally, certain attractions along the route undergo gradual deterioration (sometimes, as is the case with the waterfalls, because tourists ignore local regulations) and no new tourism products are being developed, which translates into fewer return visits: "the route is old now, everybody has seen God's Window, Bourke's Luck Potholes, so people returning to the area want to see new attractions

but in the last 10–15 years there has been no new development along the route... so it's become stagnant (GO4).

In summary, the public sector stakeholders identified a number of problems that had a negative impact on the development of the Panorama Route, including the poor condition of provincial and municipal roads, rising crime, community protests, unresolved land claims and a skills gap.

4.2. Formal Business Stakeholders

Most respondents in this group were fairly familiar with the Panorama Route and its geographical boundaries. The critical importance of the route for the provincial economy was recognised by one tour operator: “The GDP of Mpumalanga comes from the Lowveld and the Lowveld is Kruger National Park and the Panorama Route” (FB4). Formal businesses generally understood the complexities associated with the route's management, which involves different stakeholders: “Everyone is allowed to participate in the tourism industry, which means everyone is responsible for the management of the Panorama Route” (FB3). Practically all interviews in this group agreed that the development of the Panorama Route was beneficial to their businesses and to local communities across the region. The majority of formal businesses indicated that they benefited from the route as the second most visited attraction in the province after Kruger National Park. According to one accommodation provider (FB7), “When the Panorama Route is busy, it sustains a lot of local tourism entrepreneurs. They give people the opportunity to be creative and find ways to market and sell products. I believe that the busier the route is, the more sustainable it is for local tourism entrepreneurs”.

The main benefit for local communities was income from employment opportunities in tourism along the Panorama Route. According to FB17, “People who stay here get employment opportunities, nothing more”. There are also opportunities for informal businesses that sell craft products: “If you come to the Panorama Route, there are stores and roadside kiosks with people selling stuff” (FB4). The respondents also mentioned the reduction of local poverty as an outcome of tourism flows along the Panorama Route; providing opportunities for local employment was the most important contribution of formal businesses to local communities: “When it comes to employment opportunities, we prioritise local people” (FB1). Interviewee FB19 said: “We pay community dividends annually through the Communal Property Association. The dividends are paid to the community that we are operating on”. Speaking about indirectly contributing to poverty reduction, a tour operator with over 20 years' experience (FB4) said: “we promote the region and more people come, more jobs are created, more beds and restaurants are filled”. The stakehold-

ers in this group generally agreed that the route was important, continued to grow and they recognised benefits for their own businesses as well as positive spillover effects for local communities.

Respondents from formal businesses appreciated additional benefits associated with the maintenance of the route infrastructure and the cleaning of attraction sites, which offered additional employment opportunities for members of local community along the route and stressed that these attractions required appropriate conservation/preservation measures. One attraction owner (FB3) said: “Let’s keep the attraction for future generations, because without them, there will be no Panorama route”.

Representatives of the formal business sector also realised that the benefits of the route were not distributed equally along its course. Graskop was seen as a ‘tourism hotspot’ and derived most of the benefits: “Everything turns around tourists in Graskop, the entrance to the Panorama route” (FB14). In contrast, Lydenburg was regarded as the area benefitting the least from tourism along the route. The town’s decline was believed to be the result of a high rate of local crime and of inadequate road maintenance. A Lydenburg restaurant owner (FB26) observed that “At the moment our town is getting passed by via Nelspruit; tourists don’t come to this side anymore because the roads are very bad”.

For the majority of respondents in this group, the role of provincial government was of central concern. Its performance was generally assessed negatively, with criticism levelled at several matters. An established tour operator (FB4) expressed opinions shared by many other respondents representing formal businesses: “The government’s role is to create a conducive environment for people to come in and develop. A conducive environment means that basic services must be delivered. How can an investor go and build something in a place that does not have water? Roads are closed and people cannot travel on them ... there is a high rate of unemployment so that will directly impact you, when they have blocked the roads how do people get to your attraction? The government has not played a big enough role in safeguarding and allowing investors into the area”.

These negative perceptions of the provincial government are the consequence of its poor performance in dealing with the infrastructure, unemployment and crime and its concession policies, which have deterred private sector investors: “there is a high rate of crime and the roads are full of potholes” (FB24). Formal businesses mainly complained about the fact that the government did not maintain the roads in good condition, as a result of which customers/tourists found it difficult to reach them. There are also problems with the provision of basic utility services. According to a tour operator manager (FB24), the provincial government has been a “hindrance to business”.

From the perspective of formal businesses, the main challenge inhibiting the development of the Panorama Route is the lack of proper road maintenance. A number of respondents criticised the local municipality of Thaba Chweu, which has neglected its upkeep efforts in recent years: “They could clean the town, clean the area along the road, and make this place beautiful again as it was 20 or 30 years ago” (FB21). An accommodation provider (FB26) said: “Fix the roads, tourists cannot travel here and the place is dirty, get things in place, Thaba Chweu must keep this place clean”. The poor state of roads was not the only infrastructural shortcoming pinpointed by the formal business respondents. A restaurant owner in Sabie (FB10) mentioned issues with the provision of water and electricity in Sabie and Lydenburg: ‘last year [2021] in December we stayed for 4 days without water and December is our peak season; the supply of electricity is unstable”.

Another problem criticised by business owners was poor marketing of Mpumalanga as a whole and of the Panorama Route in particular. They were highly critical of insufficient destination marketing activities undertaken by the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MPTA). One accommodation provider based in Hazyview (FB7) compared the inadequate destination marketing of Mpumalanga with that of other South African provinces: “Mpumalanga no longer markets itself. They think that everyone knows what Mpumalanga has to offer. In the province of KwaZulu-Natal everywhere you will see signs along the roads, showing what you can see or do in and around it.”

In summary, according to formal business stakeholders, the main challenges preventing the growth and development of the route include inadequate road and infrastructure maintenance and poor marketing, which constrain their ability to create new employment opportunities for local communities.

4.3. Informal Business Stakeholders

An immediate difference was observed between formal and informal business owners regarding their knowledge of the Panorama Route. Whereas interviewees in the first group were fairly familiar with the Panorama Route and its course, informal business respondents were less aware of the route as a whole and mostly referred to its attractions and were more concerned about the allocation of trading places enabling informal entrepreneurs to conduct their activities at particular locations. The majority of informal business owners had limited knowledge about which organisations were responsible for the management of the route. Asked about this aspect, a craft seller interviewed at Pilgrim’s Rest (IB26) said: “I don’t know. Maybe someone powerful and with experience concerning the road”.

There are many informal businesses along the Panorama Route, including craft stores located next to local or provincial roads in towns like Graskop and Pilgrims Rest, or in the vicinity of tourist attractions such as parks or waterfalls. According to interviewee IB6, craft sellers relied mostly on international tourists interested in purchasing local souvenirs. Half of the respondents in this group said their businesses depended on local communities as sources of art and craft goods: “I get a lot of my curios from local sculptors and especially those who are coming from Zimbabwe to sell to us” (IB27). Others did not maintain links with local communities: “A lot of the things that I sell here I got from Johannesburg” (IB26). How much informal businesses contribute to poverty alleviation in their local communities depends on how well they perform: “When my business is doing very well, I manage to donate the poor in church.” (IB3). The majority of self-employed informal business owners said they contributed to reducing poverty by taking care of their families and obtaining art and crafts products from local producers: “I don’t make these craft products myself, I get them locally then I sell here” (IB1).

While recognising these benefits, the informal business owners realised that they were not distributed equally along the route. One specific problem was the negative role played by tour guides who often discourage tourists from purchasing goods from local craft sellers. A respondent interviewed at the Three Rondavels (IB24) said: “It does not benefit. As you have been sitting here you can see no one has come to get something from us. After viewing the mountain, tourists get on the bus and leave. To be honest... this is the fault of tour guides, who tell them not to get anything from us and instead buy in curio shops in town”. Owners of these shops pay a commission to tour guides for bringing customers to their shops.

Critical opinions were also voiced about entrance fees for accessing attractions along the Panorama Route. According to craft sellers, increasing charges discourage tourists from purchasing their goods. Until 2009, all Panorama Route attractions could be accessed for free; charges introduced in 2009 have been regularly increased: “My business does not benefit — every 5 to 6 months they increase entrance fees, so rather than coming and supporting us, tourists already spend a lot at the gate” (IB15).

The informal business owners also complained that only small part of the benefits from the route actually reached local communities: One respondent (IB15) said: “even if the park can make money from what they collect at the gate, they don’t do anything for the local community, it goes straight to their pockets. They do not even fix the road... there are no opportunities for locals to benefit from tourism”.

Several issues and challenges identified by formal businesses were also mentioned in interviews with informal business entrepreneurs. For example, a respondent operating in Lydenburg (IB26) complained about the town’s demise as a con-

sequence of inadequate infrastructure and road maintenance: “I used to have lot customers traveling by buses, but now buses don’t even go through Lydenburg they just go to Kruger National Park” Several attractions, e.g. God’s Window, had inadequate water supply, limiting the use of ablution facilities on site: “the restrooms are unclean and that this needs to be rectified right away” (IB13). What was particularly disappointing was the fact that entrance fees paid at God’s Window’s were to be used to pay for water delivery to the site, which did not happen.

The main infrastructural challenge identified by the informal entrepreneurs was the lack of appropriate physical facilities where they could run their businesses. A seller of souvenirs and curios at God’s Window (IB15) said: “I believe that the current infrastructure needs to be improved”. Critical comments were also made about structures provided by the provincial government: “The structure is not well built, it is cracking, and is too small to accommodate two people” (IB22). A craft seller (IB23) in a new building built by MTPA said: “when tourists come from viewing the Three Rondavels, they think this building is the bathroom”. Structures located at the waterfalls are also in a poor condition: “This store is not well built. When it is cold, it is even worse inside the building and when it’s raining the souvenirs and curios are also getting wet. The place is not safe and not protected, criminals often come and steal our souvenirs and curios’ (IB6). To protect their goods from rain craft sellers have to use large plastic sheets making it difficult for tourists to see them.

Interestingly, compared to strongly negative views expressed by formal business owners, informal entrepreneurs assessed the role of the provincial government more positively. Many of them appreciated the provincial government for allowing them to operate and sell goods along the Panorama Route and in the parks: “They have played their role because without them we would not be here and the Panorama route” (IB26). They were also grateful for stores/shelters built next to different route attractions: “The provincial government has built this building here” (IB2). In contrast to formal business owners, several respondents from the informal business sector appreciated assistance offered during the COVID-19 crisis.

Nonetheless, several areas in which the involvement of the provincial and local government could be improved were identified. Suggestions included better maintenance of roads and tourist attractions so that tourists could reach local businesses more easily as well as renovation of shelters and structures for informal businesses: “Even the parking lot inside the park is not well built, and a person in a wheelchair cannot get from it to see the waterfall up there” (IB6). The general expectation, expressed by interviewees from the formal and informal business sector, was that the government should do what they are supposed to do in order to allow businesses to prosper: “They should change the way they operate, they need

to work hard and fulfil the purpose of their job descriptions as they work for the government, so that all our things can go well” (IB29).

As can be seen from the above analysis, formal and informal businesses differ in their assessment of the role played by the provincial and local government in the development of the route. The majority of formal business respondents highlighted were critical of the provincial and the local government (Thaba Chweu) and were failing to develop the Panorama Route. In contrast, informal business owners gave some credit to the provincial government for building structures where they can sell their crafts and allowing them to sell crafts next to the attractions along the Panorama Route. Both groups of respondents agreed that local government failed in its most basic task of providing and maintaining essential infrastructure and services.

5. Conclusions

The development of existing tourism routes and the creation of new ones in South Africa is increasingly becoming a central element of place-based development planning. Route tourism depends on local tourism assets and maximises their opportunities for local economies. One of the key lessons resulting from the experience of route tourism planning is the need for different stakeholders to collaborate. The study described in the article documents the complexity of the planning process and different perspectives that particular groups of stakeholders have in this regard. Views expressed by informal tourism business entrepreneurs are especially relevant in the context of national government initiatives geared towards a greater involvement of Black-owned businesses in the mainstream tourism economy.

As indicated above, in some respects the views of public and private sector stakeholders are similar, while in others they differ. Similarities and differences were also revealed between the groups of (nearly all white-owned) formal businesses and (Black-owned) informal tourism enterprises. Not surprisingly, government stakeholders had the most positive opinions about the route’s development and of its local impacts, admitting that a number of challenges still need addressing, such as inadequate infrastructure and road maintenance, crime, lack of skilled employees, and the need for new product development to sustain the local tourism economy along the route. The views of private sector stakeholders diverged on many points from those of government stakeholders. According to formal sector businesses the route’s development and its local impacts are not always supported by the provincial or local government. In many respects, the government was seen

as the ‘problem’ rather than the provider of solutions. Most critical comments concerned inadequate service provision, especially water and electricity, and the dismal state of road maintenance. All three groups recognised that benefits derived from the Panorama Route were not distributed equally. Interestingly, informal entrepreneurs proved to be less informed about the route and its development in comparison with formal business owners or government stakeholders. However, they appreciated the fact that thanks to some government support, they were able to operate their small businesses along the route. At the same time, they berated the government for the poor quality of the structures provided to them. Like the formal sector stakeholders, the informal business owners also are impacted negatively by the problem of water supply and inadequate road maintenance, which makes it difficult for tourists to reach their businesses.

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Planowanie tras turystycznych, lokalne skutki i wyzwania: opinie interesariuszy zaangażowanych w funkcjonowanie trasy Panorama Route w RPA

Streszczenie. Na całym świecie można dostrzec rozwój inicjatyw związanych z tworzeniem tras turystycznych. Trend ten, będący częścią szerszych działań w ramach rozwoju turystyki wokół społeczności lokalnych, daje się zaobserwować także w RPA. W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano opinie kluczowych interesariuszy związanych z trasą Panorama Route położoną w prowincji Mpumalanga w RPA. Dane na temat planowania trasy, jej wpływu na życie lokalnych społeczności oraz wyzwań z nią związanych zebrano podczas 63 wywiadów jakościowych przeprowadzonych w 2022 roku z przedstawicielami sektora rządowego i prywatnego. Oprócz wspólnych spostrzeżeń można było zaobserwować różnice w podejściu do pewnych kwestii przez poszczególne grupy respondentów. W wielu przypadkach przedstawiciele władz (zarówno regionalnych, jak i lokalnych) byli postrzegani jako problem, a nie ci, którzy zapewniają rozwiązania. Podkreślono również, że korzyści wynikające z istnienia trasy nie były rozłożone równomiernie na całym jej przebiegu. Różne perspektywy interesariuszy prezentowane podczas wywiadów świadczą o tym, jak złożony jest proces planowania tras turystycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: trasy turystyczne, planowanie tras turystycznych, wpływ na rozwój lokalny, perspektywy interesariuszy, Panorama Route, RPA



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