

## **TOURISM EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP DYNAMICS IN WILDLIFE DESTINATIONS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

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**Abstract:** This study takes on a micro-institutional perspective to examine tourism employment and entrepreneurship dynamics within a complex socio-political and environmental Transfrontier Conservation Area context, using three destinations across Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Drawing insights from in-depth interviews with tourism businesses, governing authorities, and community organisations, the study highlights how institutional structures shape employment opportunities and entrepreneurial ventures. The findings reveal that while residents are employed in hospitality and conservation-related roles, their participation remains limited to specific roles in tourism. Moreover, despite the growth in local tourism enterprises, these ventures show a lack of diversification, often replicating existing business models. Skills development initiatives exist but are largely ad hoc, addressing immediate business needs rather than fostering long-term growth and innovation. The study advocates the need to critically reassess how employment and entrepreneurship are conceptualised and supported in wildlife tourism in southern Africa and provide insights for the long-term planning of wildlife tourism in fostering an inclusive, sustainable, and resilient industry

**Key words:** employment, entrepreneurship, institutional theory, wildlife tourism, youth empowerment

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The development of tourism, and subsequently investment and policy support, is premised on its capacity to spur job creation and entrepreneurship development through the tourism value chain (Adiyia et al., 2017; van der Merwe and Slabbert, 2025). Yet, Adiyia et al. (2017) point out that the difficulty for many small and micro businesses operating in peripheral areas of developing nations is to establish their own market and tourism provides the opportunity to tap into an already-existing value chain. Tourism employment and entrepreneurship support the livelihoods of many individuals, families, and regions (Mooney et al., 2022; Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2020a), more so in tourism-dependent destinations with very few alternative job opportunities. While the economic contribution of tourism has been well documented by authors such as Tamene and Wondirad (2019), Souza et al. (2019), Lekgau and Tichaawa (2020b), and van der Merwe and Slabbert (2025), the issues of employment and entrepreneurship have been broadly examined under economic impacts, with their nature and dynamics largely lacking in recent literature. Similar sentiments have been put forth by numerous scholars acknowledging the neglect of workforce themes within the scholarship of tourism (Adiyia et al., 2017; Mooney et al., 2022; Ladkin et al., 2023). Moreover, existing studies on tourism entrepreneurship in the Global South tend to focus on challenges, opportunities, and institutional constraints faced by these enterprises (Eijdenberg et al., 2018; Madanaguli et al., 2021). Therefore, this study seeks to advance the scope of literature by examining the tourism employment and entrepreneurship dynamics within the context of wildlife destinations in southern Africa. This is particularly important, considering the potential of wildlife tourism, socioeconomic realities of tourism communities in wildlife destinations and the strategic policy interventions and national and international investment into these destinations. As such, we draw attention to three countries that are part of the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area: Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe. These three countries are established wildlife destinations and have strategically leveraged wildlife tourism to support community livelihoods (Tichaawa and Lekgau, 2024a).

The rich biodiversity of sub-Saharan Africa is a key driver for wildlife tourism development (Mokgalo and van der Merwe, 2022; Tichaawa and Lekgau, 2024b). In particular, southern Africa is the leading wildlife tourism destination, with governments in the region leveraging these natural resources for inclusive economic growth and poverty eradication (Rylance and Spenceley, 2017; Stone and Nyaupane, 2017; Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2020). This is largely due to the prominence of protected areas, the subsequent emergence of wildlife tourism, and the growing vulnerability of surrounding communities (Mokgalo and van der Merwe, 2022). Regarding the latter, it is reported that people residing in wildlife (rural) destinations face a complex and changing landscape affected by high levels of multidimensional poverty, lack of livelihood diversification opportunities, the lingering effects of the previous crisis, and increasing pressure from the natural environment as a result of climate change (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2020; Jones et al., 2024). These issues are operating within the broader scale of intersecting socioeconomic, political, and environmental challenges in wildlife tourism destinations (Harilal and Tichaawa, 2024; Jones et al., 2024). Consequently, governments in these regions encounter the challenge of simultaneously addressing pressing biodiversity conservation objectives,

economic development, regional cooperation and development goals (Mokgalo and van der Merwe, 2022; Tichaawa and Lekgau, 2020, 2024b), with wildlife tourism underscored as a strategic lever to attaining these goals. However, the examination of wildlife tourism in achieving sustainable livelihood outcomes has only been examined sparsely in a transfrontier conservation area context, in which case wildlife tourism and conservation are developed and managed on a much wider regional scale, thereby necessitating the examination of the local context.

In this paper, we adopt an institutional theory perspective, recognising that all social-economic processes, including those relating to tourism planning, development, and implementation, are dependent on the various existing institutions that are represented as a complex interplay of economic, political, social, and cultural factors (Lavandoski et al., 2016b). As such, employment and entrepreneurship characteristics, patterns, and issues operate within a broader institutional environment. Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are part of the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area, the world's largest transfrontier conservation area, with goals directed to conservation, economic development, tourism growth and regional cooperation, thereby providing a valuable context to understand the operations of employment and entrepreneurship using a cross-country analysis. In doing so, the study adopts a qualitative approach to gather deeper insights into the lived experiences and realities of host communities in the destinations, in relation to the labour and entrepreneurship landscape in the three countries. Accordingly, the study makes a modest contribution to Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work) and 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by providing empirical insights on employment quality in wildlife destinations and the nature of productive and innovative local tourism enterprises. Furthermore, the study findings are able to support the strategy planning and implementation for fostering an inclusive tourism environment that supports sustainable employment and entrepreneurship.

### **INSTITUTIONAL THEORY**

The institutional theory considers organisations and their subjection to their institutional environment (Eijdenberg et al., 2018). The institutional environment, which is crucial to the development of destinations, organisations, and businesses, is guided by internal and external institutional logics (de Groisboi, 2016; Lavandoski et al., 2016b; Soares et al., 2021). Internally, these include corporate positions, practices and procedures of businesses as guided by regulatory structures (i.e., policies and laws), educational systems and public opinions whereas external institutional environment refers to the assemblage of consumers, suppliers, partner organisations and regulatory agencies (Soaves et al., 2021). As such, while several scholars have offered various definitions of 'institution', we follow that presented by Lavandoski et al. (2014) as the 'rules of the game or humanly devised structures' that shape and influence economic actors. Relatedly, de Groisboi (2016) considered organisations as open systems, influenced by the regulations, socially constructed belief systems and norms (i.e., institutional environment). Scott (1995; 2008) defined the three institutional pillars guiding the behaviours of organisations, as (i) the regulative pillar which includes formal rules, policies, and laws that provide explicit

direction and guidance to organisations, (ii) the normative pillar which refers to the informal rules that are guided by social standards and values, and (iii) the cognitive pillar which is understood as organisational behaviour guided by cultural elements (such as abstract meanings and social rules).

The institutional theory posits that, over time, organisations within the same sector will start to become more similar to one another owing to the shared institutional environment (de Groisboi, 2016; Lavandoski et al., 2016b; Eijdenberg et al., 2019). This process of homogeneity was termed ‘institutional isomorphism’ by Di Maggio and Powell (1983). This institutional isomorphism occurs as a result of institutional pressure and is categorised as coercive, normative, and mimetic, relating respectively to the regulative, normative, and cognitive institutional elements (Lavandoski et al., 2016a). Coercive isomorphism arises from formal regulations, such as laws and penalties, which enforce compliance among organisations (Lavandoski et al., 2016b; Soares et al., 2021). Normative isomorphism, on the other hand, stems from professionalisation, driven by educational institutions and the dissemination of information through entrepreneurial and professional networks that promote standardised regulations and practices within the sector (Lavandoski et al., 2016a; Soares et al., 2021). Mimetic isomorphism, in contrast, emerges from societal expectations, where organisations imitate the behaviours, successes, and strategies of others, particularly industry leaders (Lavandoski et al., 2016b; Soares et al., 2021).

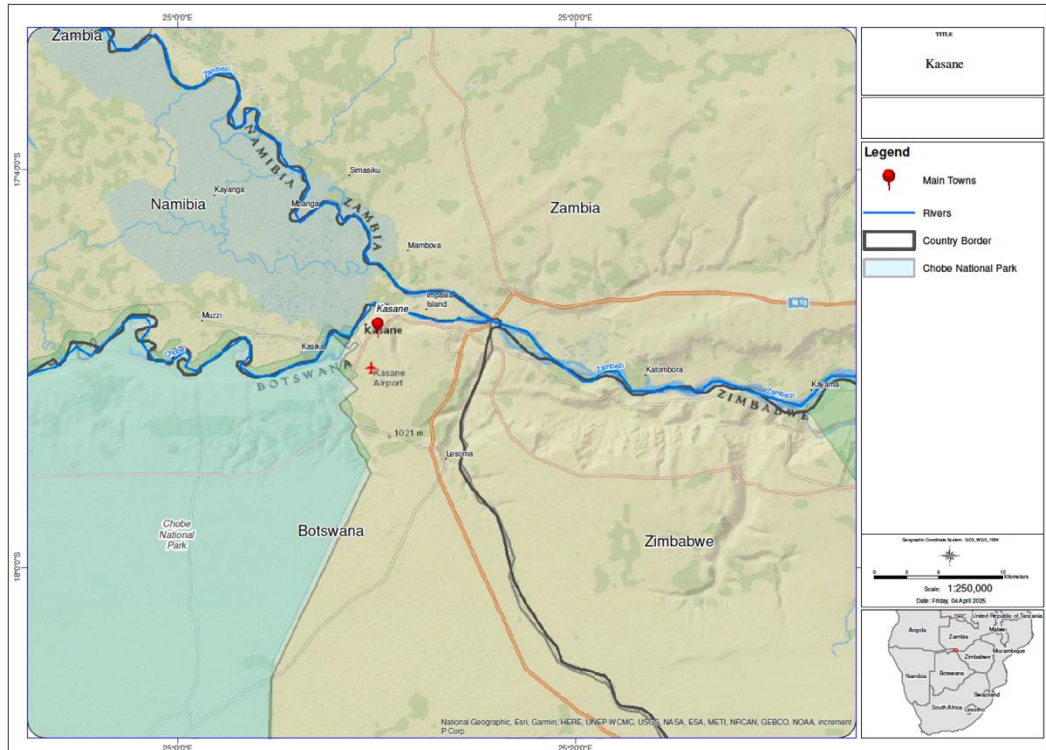
The institutional theory has long been used to understand the influence of the institutional environment on the workings, practices, and realities of entrepreneurs (Su et al., 2017). Largely, this theory has been utilised to examine the development patterns of entrepreneurs, often within a single-level context (Zhai and Su, 2019). We seek to ground this theory within a transfrontier conservation area context, whereby stakeholders are influenced by national policies, strategies, and ideals, as well as the collaborative governance structure of the KAZA TFCA arrangement. Furthermore, these contexts are influenced by wildlife tourism and conservation norms, practices, and concerns. As such, this theory becomes useful in providing a lens through which to explore employment and entrepreneurship patterns, characteristics, and challenges across multiple countries.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Study sites**

Data were derived from in-depth interviews with wildlife tourism and conservation stakeholders in Kasane (Botswana), Livingstone (Zambia) and Hwange (Zimbabwe). These three areas are key towns in the KAZA TFCA owing to their proximity to prominent wildlife tourism attractions, which has spurred their development and targeted investment. Kasane is a small village in Botswana situated near the national borders of Zimbabwe, Zambia and Namibia (Rylance and Spencer, 2017). Largely, (wildlife) tourism activity is concentrated in the Chobe district, home to renowned attractions such as the Okavango Delta, Moremi Game Reserve and the Chobe National Park (KAZA TFCA, 2024). Kasane is the administrative capital of the district and is considered its tourism hub alongside Maun (Rylance and Spencer, 2017; Stone and Nyuapane, 2018). The tourism industry in this town is built on its proximity to the Chobe National Park, which boasts the largest concentration of biodiversity in the continent, and

the Zambezi River, as shown in Figure 1 (Stone and Nyuapane, 2017; Tichaawa and Lekgau, 2024a). Both the park and the river systems ensure the presence of diverse and attractive wildlife, thereby fostering the development of a wildlife tourism industry (Blackie et al., 2023).



**Figure 1:** Kasane

The second study area is Hwange National Park and the surrounding communities, as seen in Figure 2. Hwange National Park is the largest protected area in Zimbabwe and houses the biggest concentration of African elephants in the country (Mushawemhuka et al., 2018; Dervieux and Belgherbi, 2020). Wildlife tourism in Hwange occurs in the national park as well as the game parks that offer hunting safaris (Muboko et al., 2016; Mushawemhuka et al., 2018). There are a number of lodges and camps developed in Hwange, adjacent to the park, to accommodate the growing number of tourists to the area (Mushawemhuka et al., 2018). Additionally, tourism is further boosted owing to its proximity to the Victoria Falls, where tourists can take day trips to either one of the attractions (Mushawemhuka et al., 2018; Dervieux and Belgherbi, 2020).

The third study area, Livingstone, was established in 1905 and was named after the famous Scottish missionary and explorer, Dr David Livingstone (Bwalya-Umar et al., 2016). Livingstone is dubbed the tourism capital of Zambia and considered the premier tourist destination in the country (McLachlan and Binns, 2014; Bwalya-Umar et al., 2016).

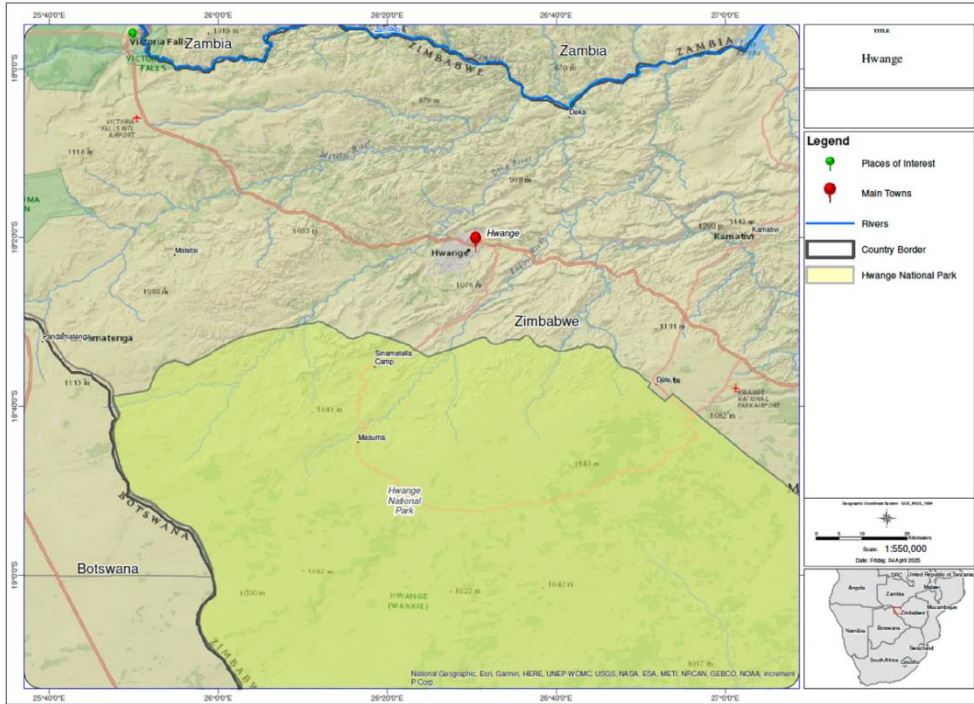


Figure 2. Hwange

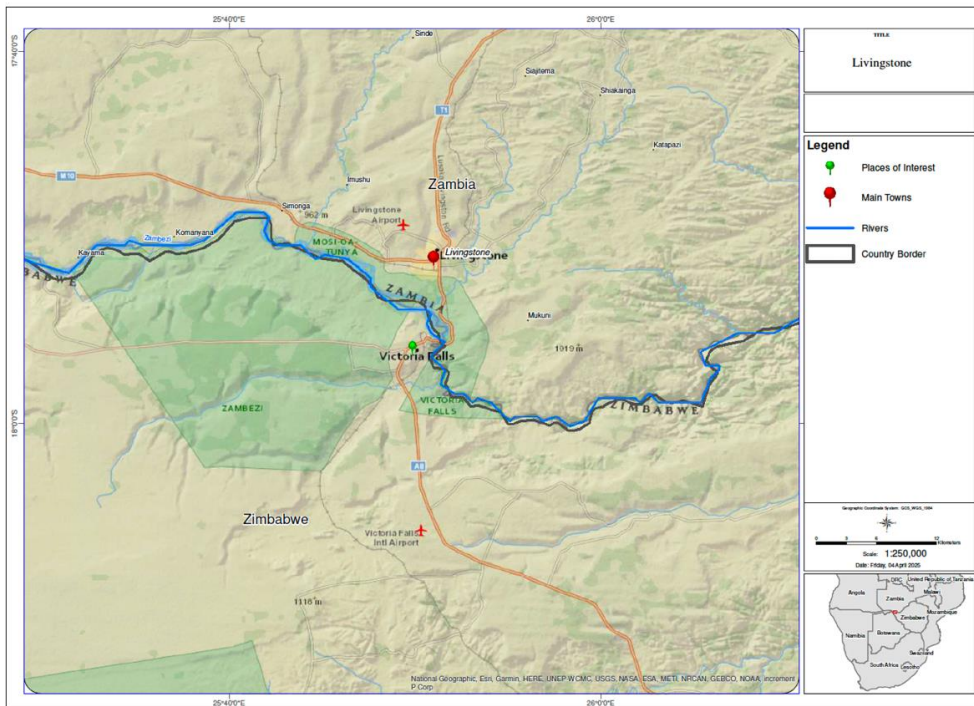


Figure 3. Livingstone

This is largely due to its proximity to the Victoria Falls (see Figure 3), a UNESCO world heritage site, located partly within the Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, which is the second most-visited national park in the country (Bwalya-Umar et al., 2016). Victoria Falls is the country’s most visited attraction and has spurred the development of tourism in Livingstone (Nsanzya and Saarinen, 2022). Tourism has become the leading economic sector in Livingstone, transforming it from a ‘ghost town’ in the early 2000s due to the investments made in the tourism industry, which stimulated its development (McLachlan and Binns, 2014; Nsanzya and Saarinen, 2022). Additionally, the growth of tourism in Livingstone was further driven by the political instability in Zimbabwe, which led to international tourists preferring to visit Victoria Falls from the Zambia side (McLachlan and Binns, 2014).

The tourism entities in the three study areas are largely multinational (and international) hotels and tour activities that largely centre on wildlife viewing and interactions, hunting safaris, adventure activities (such as bungee jumping and abseiling), and boat cruises (Tichaawa and Leggau, 2024b). To a large extent, the tourism sector supports the livelihoods of most residents through direct and indirect employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in transport, food and beverage, retail, and accommodation subsectors. However, this is more so in Zambia and Botswana, whereas subsistence farming is still the predominant livelihood strategy in Zimbabwe (Dervieux and Belgherbi, 2020; KAZA TFCA, 2024).

### Research approach

As economic phenomena, the complexity of employment and entrepreneurship necessitates complex knowledge (Radovic-Markovic, 2023). Subsequently, the researchers employed a constructivist qualitative research design to support the exploration of micro and meso-institutional dynamics of employment and entrepreneurship in the three communities. Typically, a constructivist research approach centres the perspective of the research participants and how they view the research phenomenon, a necessary approach when employment and entrepreneurship have largely been quantitatively measured, which (in the case of the study area) cover the nuances related to context, state of tourism development, (policy) intervention and a myriad of other factors. Participants were selected purposely based on their involvement and role in tourism development and conservation. In this regard, in-depth interviews were held with owners of tourism businesses, community leaders, and representatives of governing authorities in all three countries. Additionally, interviews were held with community representatives, including community leaders and tourism employees. It is important to acknowledge that data collection in Hwange only included interviews, owing to the fact that the geospatial characteristics could not allow for a focus group discussion for this study. Table 1 below delineates the research participants involved in the study.

**Table 1.** Study participants

<b>Study sites</b>	<b>Key stakeholder</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>
<b>Kasane (Chobe National Park)</b>	Tourism businesses (informal and formal)	12
	Community representatives	7
	Community trusts representatives	3

	Conservation agency representatives	2
	Tourism governing authority representatives	1
<b>Livingstone (Victoria Falls)</b>	Tourism businesses (informal and formal)	10
	Community representatives	4
	Conservation agency representatives	2
	Conservation governing authority representatives	2
<b>Hwange (Hwange National Park)</b>	Tourism businesses (informal and formal)	6
	Community representatives	5
	Community CAMPFIRE representatives	3
	Tourism governing authority representatives	1
<b>Total:</b>		<b>58</b>

Data collection occurred between June and September 2024. In some cases, the interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in local languages (Setswana in Botswana and Bemba in Zambia) and were recorded with the permission of the research participants. Recordings of the interviews and focus groups were translated and transcribed verbatim. The researchers read the transcripts over several times to ensure that the meanings and views of the participants were accurately captured, as well as to assist in comprehending the information and the related context in which it was provided. Thereafter, Atlas.ti was used to analyse the data through the coding and thematic grouping of the codes. The next section presents the themes derived from the interviews.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Scope of tourism employment**

Wildlife tourism is the leading economic sector in the three case study sites. Generally, there was an overwhelming consensus that the sector is the largest employer in the three towns. For the most part, many of the employed residents worked in accommodation, tour guiding (in the national parks or the boat cruises in Botswana and Zambia), and travel service companies, as well as in the CBO's establishments. Most of the participants make mention of housekeepers, receptionists, chefs, entertainers, and tour guides as the prominent jobs available for members of the community, as shown in the quotes taken from community leaders in Zimbabwe and Botswana, respectively:

“Even within the companies or the camps, within themselves, you find that as the business grows, managers don't always have the free liberty of time to host the guests because of other business[es] to attend to. So that opens up a job post [for] people who are into guest relations as and also good entertainers. That opens up a fair post for having a host or a hostess, someone who can sit and interact with the guests and let them get to know more about the culture, the environment, and the place at hand.” [P40ZW]

“Tourism has created opportunities for development because it is a source of income for people, many people are employed in the tourism sector, as tour guides, as receptionists in hotels and others doing different activities in the hotel, others are chefs others drive the boats. Other people have built guest houses and hotels., providing accommodation.” [P10BW]

Certainly, several countries in southern Africa have introduced policies and incentives to ensure that multinational companies, which make up the majority of tourism establishments in the three study sites, prioritise local hires (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2020b; Tichaawa and Tichaawa, 2024b). The consequences of such regulative and normative institutional pillars on tourism establishments in Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe can be seen in this study.



The presence of such companies is determined by the political environment, which explains the differences in participant perception on tourism as an employer in the three countries. In Zimbabwe, the primary focus was on the informal establishments that emerged as a consequence of wildlife tourism. This phenomenon can be attributed to the comparatively limited development initiatives driven by international investments in the country, as it was perceived as a political risk for foreign investors (Makone, 2025).

Moreover, community-based organisations (CBOs) such as trusts and CAMPFIRE have established their projects geared towards community development, which offer further employment opportunities in the community-owned lodges in Botswana, the traditional Mukuni village in Zambia (that hires local performers for international guests) and the conservancies and their anti-poaching units that require administrators, trackers and hunters in Zimbabwe.

“And we [as the community trust] employ people. It's more like a lodge where they are based, we have our people working there in a camp inside, and we have everybody. They even gain skills, some know-how to do the skinning, some are trackers - they do track animals, some of them are assistant hunters, and some are escort guys sent by the community. So all those people like getting paid, we have got drivers [and] operators. So that is how we operate.” P5BW

“There's [the] conservancy, they create a lot of employment creation, and because of the community, they get a lot of some of the benefits. Directed benefits, because when the local authorities are administrators, they employ locals.” [P33ZW]

“Opportunities such as companies that offer anti-poaching units, which allows an increase in employment Safari camps opening and employing local people from the area.” [P26ZW]

CBOs, as policy initiatives developed to diversify and support communities' livelihoods through the sustainable use of natural resources, have been under inquiry in tourism and conservation research (Adeyanju et al., 2021; Cassidy, 2021; Mokgalo and van der Merwe, 2022). These studies underscore substantial inconsistencies in these programmes and their outcomes. The findings presented in the study acknowledge their importance in diversifying the number of job availabilities in these communities. However, the findings also suggest some institutional isomorphism in these CBOs (which could be a product of the wildlife tourism context) in that they often establish similar community enterprises. Furthermore, the findings also allude to the differences in the implementation of the Community-based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) policy. A few local participants in Zambia were of the view that local community members were disadvantaged in employment opportunities in Zambia. A small number of them disagreed with the assertions of the larger tourism stakeholders on the contribution of tourism to local employment, which could be partially consequential to the lack of a collective community voice. One such participant mentioned:

“People are angry because most people that are being employed here are from the outside. Yes. So that itself creates a gap in conservation because there's no way you promised me that you're gonna give me a job, and you don't give me, and you expect me to respect that elephant.” [P17ZM]

The underlying effect of misleading narratives is the consequential attitude and behaviours towards wildlife, as the participants suggest being one of the

contributors to human-wildlife conflicts. In Zambia and Botswana, some participants further allude to the seasonal nature of tourism employment in these study areas, dependent on the volume of tourists at specific times. Most notably mentioned seasonal jobs included the waiting staff and housekeeping staff. This temporal nature (or the lack of stability) of employment was reaffirmed with the pandemic, where many such workers were made redundant.

### **Scale of entrepreneurship ventures**

Similarly, the centrality of tourism in the region's economy has spurred on many entrepreneurial activities, from locals establishing their own lodges, tour guiding companies, and souvenir selling and food and beverage provision, operating in both the formal and informal economy. For instance, one participant in Botswana had the following to say:

"Yes, because many people have started their own businesses. They employ other people, you know, many people are working in tourism this year. Yeah, I think it has created a lot of opportunities." P7BW

In Zambia, some participants raised concerns about the limited understanding of tourism and how to enter the tourism industry beyond souvenir selling. For example, one participant aptly stated:

"There's many ways but I feel mostly like people from the community, they do not understand how they benefit from it [conservation]. The best example I give most people is a tourist doesn't come with tomato, a tourist doesn't come with onion, a tourist doesn't come with charcoal." [P19ZM]

Small local enterprises are the backbone of the many economies in southern Africa (Madanaguli et al., 2021). However, it is clear that many of the establishments were developed as a normative response (isomorphism) to the presence of wildlife tourism in the region. While this may yield some economic returns, these establishments have yet to tap into the full potential of wildlife tourism due to several reasons, of which the participants pointed to lack of knowledge about the tourism value chain and how and where to feed into it. Regardless, participants, when discussing entrepreneurial opportunities in wildlife tourism, recognised the dominance of women in this regard in Zimbabwe, particularly in the informal sector.

"It's mostly women who've benefited when tourists come through, they're the ones who sell their wares along the roads. We also have some markets, some flea markets rather, which are along the way, and it's mostly women will be selling their wares. Even when it comes to employment, we have got female operators who were employed for tourism." [P34ZW]

Furthermore, the entrepreneurial opportunities extend to community cooperatives, which have gained further exposure through the tourism industry. Through observations during fieldwork, it was evident that certain souvenirs were directed toward certain genders. For instance, women predominantly operated weaving works, while sculptures (made of natural minerals) were predominantly sold by men. A few participants in Botswana mentioned that they sourced their materials and souvenirs from Zambian suppliers. Similarly, some participants in Zimbabwe pointed to the weaving cooperative in their community, as shown in the quote below:

"We have seen cooperatives opening through small projects we have like the weaving weaved basket from the women. We have what you call, the curio. What you call them, they act, they add sculptures, the sculptures which are

being made by the men in the form of animals. You have different wild animals being made through wood.” [P41ZW]

Such findings align with the existing literature, stating that women constitute a significant portion of entrepreneurs in the Global South (Kimbu et al., 2024). Similarly, while there is a presence of local entrepreneurs in the study areas, many of these enterprises are micro to small-scale and are unable to realise the hope placed on them to provide additional employment opportunities to surrounding communities.

In addition to the recognition of tourism as the largest employer, most participants alluded to the additional opportunities due to the growth of the tourism industry in the region. Indeed, many of these views were discussed under the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery of the sector. The importance of tourism as an employer was reemphasised during the crisis (owing to the lack of feasible livelihood and economic options) and the opportunities that exist to spread the contribution of tourism by stronger local linkages within the tourism supply chain.

“It [tourism] is the source of jobs. It creates employment in a lot of communities. Not only in your own communities but also on an international scale. What do I mean? People that are coming from far, from other countries, transported by airlines create jobs.” [P30ZM]

### **Tourism training and skills development**

Training and skills development were frequently alluded to as important consequences (and predictors) of tourism employment and entrepreneurship in the study areas. Largely, training and skills development were discussed in the context of job training and the opportunities provided by companies in skilling community members in tourism and hospitality services. Some quotes to exemplify this include:

“It grooms people. We also have whereby we need to get attachees [interns], especially from the community, and help them learn a lot of different departments before they graduate or they finish their school, and it helps a lot” [P38ZW]

The training of staff exemplifies the normative isomorphism between tourism and conservation establishments, adhering to industry standards (and educational systems). Additionally, mimetic isomorphism supports social transformation within the communities they serve. Pertaining to training, the findings point out that certain jobs require specific skills such as nature guiding. In this regard, participants recognised the importance of leveraging local knowledge in the training sessions. On-the-job training is further extended to casual staff, with some participants stating that while they may not have the capacity to employ these individuals permanently, there is a list of trained casual workers available when needed. One hotel manager had the following to say:

“So you find that we need extra hands most of the time, and we don't look very far. there are people that we are training, and even if we cannot accommodate them in our staff complement, we know where to find them when we need extra humans on the ground.” [P5BW]

However, a few managers expressed some concerns with this approach, noting that while staff training enhances their employability, more often than not, training is done ad hoc and as per immediate business needs. Accordingly,

a skills gap still exists in the industry, considering the long-term growth of the business and the kind of skills required from locals. The quote below accurately captured such sentiments:

“But you find that it's now very busy. But in terms of skills, we are employing to meet the business needs and not necessarily focusing on the proper skills required to be in the setup, you know, so we're just employing people who are available to work, but how we have sorted out is what I mentioned earlier that we are in the process of training a lot of people and we are not, you know, we hire temporary workers, pay them and then train and we're training them through the process as well. So it's a challenge. Yes, it's been a challenge in getting people with the right skill set, but again, you know.” [P7BW]

This underscores some questions on the long-term planning of wildlife tourism and conservation operations, as the efforts are geared toward addressing immediate goals of employment creation and community livelihood support, which compromises the long-term goals. Moreover, considering the challenges facing both tourism and conservation in the region, it is important to consider who is providing the training and the purpose thereof. The findings suggest that training is required for wildlife tourism establishments to ensure that service meets the expectations of (international) tourists. For community and conservation stakeholders, this training and skills development is aligned with community development (and livelihood diversification through tourism) and conservation goals, which are influenced by similar policies, though the implementation is dependent on the resources of the stakeholders. The investment in skills development programmes is also to gain legitimacy amongst the stakeholders, particularly tourism businesses, as well as CBOs that are constantly in pursuit of legitimacy owing to their use of resources available for community gain (Adeyanju et al., 2021; Cassidy, 2021; Mokgalo and van der Merwe, 2022).

Many participants concurred on the significance of training to grow the livelihood diversification opportunities within the wildlife tourism sector. However, some participants opined that this training enhanced local agency, particularly considering the lack of meaningful (or effective) political support in Zimbabwe and Zambia, as well as the limit of such support in Botswana. In this regard, a participant in Zimbabwe remarked:

“They are managing those skills and transferring to the local community, because at the end of the day, it will be the local people who are doing it for themselves, having all necessary skills, and they can know how to treat them and what to do if they react.” [P33ZW]

The findings support those of Eijdenberg et al. (2018), that the political and economic environment plays a role in enabling and inhibiting economic actors, such as entrepreneurs and CBOs. In the case of these countries, where the political environment has led to a lack of political trust, tourism stakeholders such as CBOs have responded by skills training to legitimise the role of communities as an economic stakeholder in wildlife tourism. In Botswana, some participants mentioned training in filming wildlife as an alternative use of existing resources. One accommodation establishment has partnered up with such a school, as demonstrated in the quote below:

“In terms of opportunities, I would say that, well, a lot of entrepreneurs and locals are starting to learn more about tourism. So, we are seeing a lot of people gaining interest in the tourism sector and open, whether it's tour

operators, local tour operators, and then I think you've seen the sign offside, we have a wildlife, film school. So we, I believe that they're being trained to be able to make our own documentaries rather than somebody coming in from the outside and doing that. So, in the next few years, I think we'll be seeing a lot of documentaries by Batswana." [P10BW] This is arguably an innovative means to operate within the wildlife tourism sector, particularly considering the concentration of residents within a narrow scope of tourism activities.

### **Institutional constraints to entrepreneurship growth**

Owing to the role of local entrepreneurs and SMMEs in the local economy, as well as the attainment of the conceptualised benefits from wildlife tourism and the TFCA, an exploration into the realities of these enterprises becomes pertinent. While participants recognised opportunities in tourism as the primary reason for the establishment of their enterprises, many of them alluded to the difficulty in growing their enterprises to the next phase of their respective business development. For instance, a few of the small-scale accommodation providers mentioned the difficulty in broadening their scope of operation by opening up new accommodation in other parts of the towns (in Kasane and Livingstone), as seen in the quotes below:

"The challenge is to acquire land in Kasane. It's a challenge, because Kasane, as you can see, is just a small town and the rest is at the National Park. So as everything is low, and you know, the land opportunities are very scarce, but we do compete." [P11BW]

"So we want [to] avoid a situation where communities are growing and are suppressing the protected area so that means we are monitoring aspects." [P21ZM]

Largely, this constraint is due to the land management structure as the two towns are in wildlife management areas, zoned specifically for conservation, facilitating eased wildlife movement and tourism activity. As such, acquiring new land is a cumbersome process. In Botswana, this is partially a result of the Kazangula Redevelopment Plan, whereas in Zambia, this was to avoid further development in wildlife corridors. Certainly, in the case of Zambia, representatives of governing authorities mention the expansion of the human population, and tourism enterprises typically mean expansion into the conservation spaces, which then increases the likelihood of a human-wildlife crisis. Additionally, several concerns were raised on the limited scope of entrepreneurial pursuits by the local residents. In Botswana, most locals were either tour operators, food vendors, or souvenir sellers, while in Zambia, there were very few tour operators, with most of the local entrepreneurs selling souvenirs to tourists. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, much of the entrepreneurial activities involved food as well as arts and crafts. The lack of diversification in tourism operations thereby leads to substantial competition amongst the local entrepreneurs. Some quotes illustrating this concern are presented below:

"What [the government] is doing, empowering the youth without looking at how many people are going to [be] empowered and [go] into the same industry? So where's the market? You end up instead of selling your product \$30 because there are too many, you going to drop your prices so that at least you can run with that. You will be running at a loss, assuming [you are] operating. We cannot sustain that." [P15BW]

The lack of diversification in tourism entrepreneurship and increased competition could stem from the imitation of local entrepreneurs, where residents replicate existing business models (e.g., accommodation, tour activities, and craft markets) rather than innovating new tourism products. Moreover, advertising and marketing were noted as key priorities for the growth of tourism SMMEs in the study areas.

“Particular like, I'll start that from this market particular from this market, we need advertising like us, for us to motivate like myself, for me to motivate other artists out there, I need to have a business so that I also give business to others who make like this other stuff so that we can grow in our industry.” [P23ZM]

While a large share of the discussion around marketing was centred on the need to increase tourist arrivals and, therefore, tourist patronage to SMME establishments, some participants in Zambia further lamented the lack of support from neighbouring (and established) businesses in raising awareness of smaller businesses. Notably, the literature on nature-based tourism and economic transformation points to the importance of economic linkages to fit rural entrepreneurs into the tourism value chain (Madanaguli et al., 2021; Tichaawa and Lekgau 2024b). However, the findings indicate some variation in the manner in which this is accomplished across different study settings. In the case of Zambia, these linkages are partly driven by the desire to disseminate economic opportunities among the local population. However, it is acknowledged that the costs of business are a significant factor in determining the extent to which this is achieved.

### **Youth empowerment**

Youth empowerment is a key priority focus, owing to the predominantly young population of these countries. The primary challenge in these case study areas is the lack of adequate employment opportunities for the younger adult population and the limits of tourism establishments to absorb them all, as captured in the quote below:

“The challenges that we have here, number one, like I said, there [are] a lot of people, young people, coming here to look for jobs, the jobs that they're looking for, they're not enough and then actually they contribute to increasing the population. And an increasing population means more unemployment.” [P11BW]

Responses from the interviews highlighted some of the initiatives to empower the youth in the study areas. To an extent, training and skills development was one of the key initiatives:

“We have those young ones, youth didn't go further for more studies. Now we separate a certain percentage off so that you can engage them in tourism training, like professionals, chefs, desk, front desk.” (P10BW)

Additionally, education was deemed crucial in Zambia, with participants affirming the importance of imparting knowledge and skills on the opportunities in the tourism and conservation value chain. In this regard, education included instilling positive conservation behaviours in the youth. This aligns with existing research on the importance of education in legitimising the role of communities within wildlife conservation and tourism in the regions (Del Rey et al., 2022; Al Balushi and Ambusaidi, 2023). For instance, Del Rey et al. (2022) state that education is a prerequisite for communities making informed decisions based on scientific facts related to conservation and tourism policy and implementation strategy. In this study, this education refers to capitalising on the current

economic opportunities, with a few participants suggesting that education should be geared toward widening potential economic opportunities.

Finally, financial assistance to start business ventures was mentioned by the participants in Botswana and Zambia. This was done through government agencies such as the Local Enterprise Authority (LEA) in Botswana and initiatives such as the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) in Zambia. See the description of LEA below:

“So that is that. And then also, that is businesses, especially for the young people, you realize that there are schemes that are offered by the government. So young people, let me say youth get funds from the government. And then they are helped to start small business and most of these businesses there, they actually tourism related. So, they these are the organization is called, is the LEA. It's called Local Enterprise Authority. So you go approach them, you give them a business proposal, and then they find you. So most of these projects that are given, like, brought forward, they are tourism related, because that's where there is actually a living.” [P4BW]

However, there were concerns highlighted in these programmes. In Botswana, while several participants applauded the contribution of LEA to funding and supporting youth-owned businesses, a few participants questioned the long-term sustainability of these programmes when most youth-owned enterprises are concentrated on a very narrow scope of tourism (tour operations or activities), thereby leading to high levels of competition. Notably, in Zambia, concerns related to these programmes were directed to the difficulty in accessing these funds. This concern is compounded by the difficulty in accessing funds through banks and other financial institutions:

“We just don't have access to funds. Because for me to apply, of course, I [have to] go to the bank, they want to see my bank statements what but I just started and I'm trying to do so how, how will I show them the bank.” (P29ZM) Unfortunately, access to funding for SMMEs has been a long-acknowledged concern in tourism entrepreneurship literature (Rogerson et al., 2021).

## **CONCLUSION**

The present study sought to explore the employment and entrepreneurship dynamics in wildlife tourism in three destinations in southern Africa. The institutional approach to exploring employment and entrepreneurship is one which has yet to be fully realised in tourism research, more so within the context of multi-country collaborative agreement centred on regional economic and tourism growth, development and conservation. The theory provided a valuable theoretical basis to understand the employment dynamics in Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe by demonstrating how coercive isomorphism was seen in employers who were required to hire or provide job opportunities for local residents. However, this was dependent on the level of tourism development in each country and the manner of implementation of tourism policy, particularly directives geared at local development. Additionally, coercive isomorphism was shown through the land zoning policies, which restricted the expansion and growth of tourism establishments. Normative isomorphism was evident in the training of tourism staff to ensure professionalism in the sector, seen in the efforts of CBOs to provide employment opportunities for locals and capacity-

building initiatives. Mimic isomorphism was established through the residents' entry into limited jobs in wildlife and enterprises.

Accordingly, the findings have implications for the long-term planning and development of tourism in this region. Certainly, while skills development is a vehicle used to equip locals with tourism skills, these programs often address short-term needs, having implications for both business and destination growth and development. The importance of entrepreneurship for innovation has been widely acknowledged (Madanaguli et al., 2021) and in the case of these rural regions in southern Africa, there is a need to leverage the natural resources and the potential of entrepreneurship to diversify both livelihoods and tourism offerings to foster an inclusive and competitive tourism sector. Similarly, succession planning emerged as an important agenda that needs to be addressed in the future to ensure a sustainable and decent workforce in wildlife tourism operations in the destination.

While the current study focused on the structure and characteristics of the employment patterns, one of the major limitations was the lack of depth in examining the working conditions of tourism employees in wildlife destinations, a matter severely neglected in tourism research. Another limitation was the lack of further interrogation of the gendered perspectives and experiences in tourism employment and entrepreneurship dynamics. Arguably, these limitations provide avenues for future research to comprehensively examine the sustainability of tourism and entrepreneurship in wildlife destinations.

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