



**THE IMPACT OF EBOLA VIRUS OUTBREAK ON THE TOURISM
AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IN SIERRA LEONE**

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ABSTRACT

Over the past years the tourism and hospitality industry has experienced a steady increase in tourist arrivals which has also contributed to an increase in visitor's expenditure, employment and revenue generation. This has made a significant improvement in facilities within the country to meet the expectation of guests and

economic growth. The outbreak of Ebola Epidemic in May 2014 has caused a negative impact in the tourism and hospitality industry in Sierra Leone such as the closure of many hotels, restaurants, guesthouses and airlines right across the country Drop in revenue, profit and unemployment. The purpose of this research is to examine the extent to which the Ebola outbreak has had negative impact on the tourism and hospitality industry in the country. A survey was conducted in four (4) regions namely, western, southern, northern and eastern Region of Sierra Leone. Random samples of 200 respondents were selected from four regions out of a population of 400. Questionnaires, interviews, discussions and document analysis were used for data collection. Data was analyzed using statistical package for social sciences. It is recommended that disaster recovery plan and budget be developed by all active businesses within the tourism and hospitality sector.

KEYWORDS: Impact, Ebola Virus Outbreak.

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone has strong potentials for tourism and hospitality development. It has excellent beaches, islands, mountains and rich biodiversity, interesting wildlife, friendliness of the

people and rich socio cultural heritage. It occupies a special place in the world history of anti-slave trade movement as the land of Freetown, hence the name Freetown has its capital city. Since the 1980s, the country has been developing a small but thriving tourism and hospitality industry. The end of the civil war conflict in 2002 led to renew arrivals by business travelers as well as members of the Diaspora visiting friends and relatives; this in turn has stimulated some investment in the hotel and guesthouse infrastructure in Freetown. For example the Chinese investment in Bintumani Hotel, Atlantic Beach Hotel, NASSIT investment in accommodations and the new construction of hotels along the Lumley beach road, the peninsula road and the new Brookfields Hotel by other domestic investors form part of increased investment in the tourism and hospitality sector in the country. Very recently the country has attracted the Hilton group of companies with vast experience in hotel and tourism management and they are developing the former Cape Sierra Hotel into a five star Hotel. After 2007 general elections which saw democracy at work encourage a lot of foreign investors in areas like mining, Agriculture, Communication and Business corrupt free environment policy coupled with the benefits of tourism and hospitality experienced by Sierra Leoneans while seeking refuge in other countries. The above factors have given rise to the high demand for accommodation, restaurants and bars services across the country. Today, there are more of these facilities in the country as compared before the rebel war. The countries touristic advantages particularly its proximity to Europe, tourism in Sierra Leone has developed relatively slowly, partly as a result of the relative unstable political environment that has existed in much of the post-interdependence era.

Over the past five years, Sierra Leone experience a steady increase in tourist arrivals-38,615 arrivals in 2010, 52,442 arrivals in 2011, 59,730 arrivals in 2012 and 81,250 arrivals in 2013 (National Tourist Board statistics, 2014). This increase in visitors arrival contributed to an increase investor expenditures from US \$38 million in 2002 to \$58 million in 2004 (National Tourist Board Statistics, 2014).

According to the world travel and tourism commission (WTTC) statistics report (2011), the direct contribution of travel and tourism to the GDP in Sierra Leone was expected to be Le 351.9 billion (3-6% of total GDP) in 2011, rising by 6-1% per annum to Le634.9 billion (4-0%) in 2012 (in constant 2011 prices). With a steady increase in hotels, motels and guesthouses related facilities, there was an increase in room occupancy rates, which has continue to date.

In the first three months of the year 2014, there were conflicting news of Ebola outbreak in neighboring Guinea and Liberia. In May 2014 it was officially announced by the Ministry of Health that Ebola virus has reached a village around Koindu in the Kailahun District. Ebola virus disease (EVD) was considered one of the most oppressive viruses known to date because of its rapidity to quickly kill, which can be within one week from exposure or three to four days from the first symptom became apparent. This leaves very little time for any treatment to act and save any infected individual.

Within a couple of two months after the official announcement, the tourism industry started to experience the negative impact of the Ebola virus. Cancellation of flights, hotel bookings, some hotels closed down while others were operating in a small scale business. A good number of foreign airlines stopped flying into the country with expectation of SN Brussels and Air Maroc operating on high risk. Both international and national tourists' movement were restricted and subjected to a screening process at the gate ways. This effect caused a decrease in employment, foreign exchange earnings and revenue dropped down and businesses like fishing, vegetable growing, poultry, cattle rearing and infrastructural development were affected.

The weak health system in the country in terms of facilities, equipment and human resources made the country unable to tackle the Ebola virus easily. Despite the negative impacts of the Ebola, the country became a popular destination for international tourists expatriate because of their interest to hear and see Ebola survivors.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design:- A cross sectional descriptive research design was adopted for this study and both qualitative and quantitative methods in nature were used. Questionnaires were structured and administered and focus group techniques were used. Detail information was obtained to the useful conclusion. I considered this design appropriate for the study because it requires a report on economic and social characteristics of the Ebola impacts on operators within the tourism industry.

Target population:- The population of this study consisted of 130 employees of the various sectors within the tourism sector from the four regions within Sierra Leone and fifty (50) employees from among the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs, National Tourist Board,

National Museum, National Revenue Authority! Who were charged with the responsibility of ensuring that the tourism industry activities are planned, managed and coordinated.

This study also targeted 20 respondents such as suppliers, guests and local communities in the four regions.

Data collections and procedures:- In order to meet the objectives of this study, both primary and secondary data sources were used Secondary sources including National Tourist Board data publications, journals, books, periodicals, newspapers and the internet. The primary data was obtained through interviews, questionnaires and observations.

Questionnaires:- A questionnaire is a set of questions or statements that assesses attitudes, opinions, beliefs biographical information. In order to collect data that precisely meets the objectives of the study. A structured questionnaire was used for the public sector (ministry of tourism and cultural affairs and the National Tourist Board) and a semi-structured questionnaire was used for the private sector. Hotels, restaurants and transport providers and local market. Both open-ended and close-ended questions were included in the questionnaire (Kombo and Tromp, 2006:89). The questionnaires were presented and administered to the respondents in a flexible way. Flexibility in data collection was applied by allowing the respondents to choose either to discuss the questionnaires in the process of filling it in or when the questionnaire was collected. This was preferred in order to reduce bias as well as allow room for probing to elicit more information.

Interview:- An interview is an oral administration of a questionnaire and it gives a general plan to follow for data collection (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003:86). An interview guide was preferred because it encourages face to face interaction with the respondent so that issues can be clarified therefore gaining in-depth information on the subject. In addition, the interview guide was used to supplement and corroborate the information given in the questionnaires.

Focus group discussion:- A focus group discussion between 8 – 10 respondents was organized in all the five regions comprising employees within the tourism and hospitality industry to ascertain their opinion on the impact of the Ebola on their employment status.

Data analysis and interpretation:- The raw data collected was sorted and edited as the first step towards its analysis. The questionnaires were organized and classified according to the patterns given by the respondents and their homogeneity. The responses from the

questionnaires were organized in line with the research questions and descriptive narratives were used to reflect the situation as it occurred at these sectors. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used in the analysis of the data. Inferential statistics included frequencies from which percentages were derived. The analyzed data was summarized and findings were reported as a description of the total population of the study. Data is presented in form of frequency tables and in percentages.

Validity:- We did a pilot test of the questionnaires to know the validity and reliability of the tool. (Krishna's wamy et al. 2009) contents that validity is the degree to which the sample of test items represents the content the test is designed to measure. To establish the validity of the research instrument, opinions of experts in the field of study, especially the research supervisor, were sought. This led to the revision and modification of the research instrument thereby enhancing the overall validity of this study.

Reliability:- Reliability refers to the consistency and stability with which instrument measures and supplies consistent results (Krishna's wamy et al. 2009). Hence reliability is increased by including many similar items on a measure, by testing a diverse sample of individuals and by using uniform testing procedures. In an effect to test the reliability of the research instrument, a pilot group of five individuals from the target population were selected. The pilot study gave a chance for pre-testing of the research instrument so as to establish the clarity of the instrument's items to the respondents and thereby enhance the instrument's validity and reliability. For the purpose of reliability and validity of the data, the measures below were taken into consideration:

- 1) A pilot study that involved these sector managers was carried out.
- 2) The respondents were each given a letter explaining the nature of the research project. The letter also assured the respondents of the confidentiality of the information as well as guaranteeing their anonymity.
- 3) Purposive sampling was used in which the people who were directly linked with the tourism developing and implementing of policies in the country were targeted for data collection.

RESULT

Introduction

The data for this research has been collected using questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed randomly to a sample of employees, over 150 employees who were working in

various sectors in the four regions, with different job responsibilities and organization position.

Data analysis

After collecting the filled questionnaire, they were analyzed for presentation of research findings under the followings:

Table 1.1: Sectors within the Tourism Industry.

Sector	Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Hotels	30	15.0	15.0	
Restaurants	50	25.0	25.0	40.015.0
Guesthouses	70	35.0	35.0	75.0
Night clubs and casinos	20	10.0	10.0	85.0
Airlines	15	7.5	7.5	92.5
Travel agencies and tour operator	10	5.0	5.0	97.5
Tourists handling agents	5	2.5	2.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0		100.0

From the table above, the survey indicated that the highest sector within the tourism industry is guesthouse with 35%, followed by restaurants 25%, hotels 15%, night clubs and casinos 10%, airlines 7.5%, travel agencies and tour operators 5% and tourists handling agents 2.5%. It can be concluded that guesthouses formed the highest sector within the tourism sector as compared to tourist handling agents with 2.5%. Reasons being that, the demand for guesthouses right across the country is high since they are easy to establish, cheaper and can be managed by few staff.

Table 1.2: Sex of the Respondent.

Sex	Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Male	80	40.0	40.0	40.0
Female	120	60.0	60.0	100.0
Total	200		100.0	100.0

Regarding the sex of the respondents, 60% are female and 40% are male. The survey indicated that there are more female employees within the tourism industry as compared to their counterpart male. Reason being that most jobs such as catering, housekeeping, waiters and front desk are perceived to be female job and as a result more of women are engaged in them.

Table 1.3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents Age.

Age	Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
18 – 30	80	40.0	40.0	40.0
31 – 42	60	30.0	30.0	70.0
43 – 55	45	22.5	22.5	92.5
56 – 68	10	5.0	5.0	97.5
69 – 81	5	2.5	2.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0		100.0

The survey indicated that, the age group between 18- 30 with 40% is the highest, followed by 31 – 42 with 30%, 43 – 55 with 22.5%, 56 – 68 with 5% and 69 – 81 with 2.5%. Based on the survey, 40% being the youths made up of a strong working force within the tourism industry as compared to 69 – 81 which is considered as retirement age in Sierra Leone. Those within this age group are mostly owners or managers.

From the table above, 20% of the employees are below WASSCE/GCE, 7.5% are holders of WASSCE/GCE, 35% are holders of diplomas, 25% are first degree holders, 10% are masters' holders and 5% are PhD. It can be concluded that more of the employees are diploma holders as compared to PhD. Reason being there are more of these non-entry requirements diploma that can be acquired cheaper and are found within the country where courses like catering, housekeeping and waiting are offered.

Table 1.4: Causes of Ebola.

Causes	Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
From bush meat	70	35.0	35.0	35.0
Chemical	10	5.0	5.0	40.0
Reaction national	50	25.0	25.0	65.0
Epidemic demonic	40	20.0	20.0	85.0
No idea	30	15.0	15.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0		100.0

One of the causes of Ebola was from bush meat, 5% indicated from chemical reaction, 25% indicate from national epidemic, 20% indicated from demonic activities and 15% indicated no idea. It can be concluded that, More of the respondents were of the view that Ebola was from bush meat as compared to chemical reaction. The reason being that it was difficult to convince people about the right cause of Ebola due to the high level of illiteracy in the country.

Table 1.5: Perception of Respondents about Ebola.

Perception	Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
No cure for it	70	35.0	35.0	35.0
Killer virus	110	55.0	55.0	90.0
Early treatment give chances of survival	20	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0		100.0

From the table above, 35% of the respondents indicated that their perception About Ebola that there is no cure for it, 55% indicated is a killer virus and 10% indicated an early treatment give chances of survival. It can be concluded that most of the respondents are of the view that Ebola is real and it kills.

Table 1.6: Negative Impact.

Impact	Frequency	Percent (%)	Valid percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Closure of some sectors	100	50.0	50.0	50.0
Unemployment	40	20.0	20.0	70.0
Dropped in revenue	10	5.0	5.0	75.0
Dropped in arrival rate	30	15.0	15.0	90.0
Suspension of some flights	20	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0		100.0

From the table above, 50% indicated that Ebola has caused the closure of some businesses within the tourism sector such as hotels, night club and casinos, restaurants and guesthouses, 20% indicated unemployment, 5% indicated in revenue which used to be from tourism activities, 15% indicated dropped in arrival rate and 10% indicated the suspension of some flights either for safety or abide by the messages from the World Health Organization from the data collected and analyzed above, it is clearly evident that the tourism and hospitality industry in Sierra Leone is experiencing a negative impact of the Ebola Virus as good number of these establishments are now closed since the outbreak, flights have cancelled, arrival rate, revenue and other activities that has to do with beaches has been suspended. Some staff within this period has been laid off and some on half salary. Up to September 2015, Ebola was still a challenging issue facing the industry. This has also brought a multiplier effect on the living conditions of these staff and social problem for the government of Sierra Leone.

SUMMARY

The Ebola virus outbreak has had a negative impact on all the sectors within the tourism industry in Sierra Leone as indicated from the table above, 35% of the sectors within the tourism industry in Sierra Leone are guesthouses, 60% of the employees within the industry are female, strong and energetic working force is between the ages of 18 – 30 with 40%, 35% of the employees are holders of a diploma which indicated the highest population, 35% of the respondents are of the view that Human beings were infected with the Ebola virus as a result of eating bush meat, 55% were of the view that Ebola has no cure and 50% of the sectors within the industry were temporarily closed and employees laid off whilst some managers had left the country. Close to 80% of the industry employees were out of job and the virus was still of great concern.

CONCLUSION

From the data collected and analyzed above, it is clearly evident that the tourism and hospitality industry in Sierra Leone was experiencing a negative impact of the Ebola virus as a good number of these establishments were closed since the outbreak, flights have been cancelled, arrival rate, revenue and other activities that has to do with beaches has been suspended. Some staff within this period has been laid off and some on half salary. Up to September, 2015, Ebola was still a challenge issue facing the industry. This has also brought a multiplier effect on the living conditions of these staff and social problem for the government of Sierra Leone.

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