Unlocking policy impediments for service delivery in tourism firms: Evidence from small and medium sized hotels in sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Attempts by many African governments to implement institutional reforms aimed at developing and implementing inclusive tourism-related policies have met with mitigated success. This study ergo, critically unpacks policy-related impediments associated with the operations of tourism firms in Africa, drawing on evidence from small and medium sized hotels in Cameroon. Analysis of empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 hotel owner/managers in Cameroon revealed that: (i) their impact on employment was minimal, with a heavy reliance on family members/relatives; (ii) limited employee education and skills for effective service delivery; (iii) low hotel occupancy rates; and (iv) poor destination competitiveness. Important policy and planning recommendations are made, most notable of which is a critical (re-)examination of tourism policy and planning practices by means of developing and implementing cogent development plans that are cognisant of the local realities and geared towards guaranteeing effective service delivery, thereby ensuring destination competitiveness.

Keywords: destination competitiveness, emerging destinations, tourism policy, small and medium size hotels, sub-Saharan Africa, Cameroon

1. Introduction

The importance of tourism and the capacity of the sector for economic growth and development has been widely recognised in the academic literature (Christie, Fernandes, Messerli & Twinning-Ward, 2014; Ward, 2016; Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016; Pillay & Rogerson, 2013; Bakker & Messerli, 2017; Harilal, Tichaawa & Saarinen, 2018). The tourism industry broadly constitutes the twelve-standard industrial classification of the sectors of the economy that provide products and services consumed by visitors and residents. Within consumer services, the tourism industry is depicted as a super-sector that constitutes a main sector (travel and leisure) and sub-sectors (accommodation, airline, gambling, recreational services, food and beverage, travel and tourism) (ILO, 2013; UNWTO/Eurostat/OECD, 2010). In the last two decades, the sector has seen growth that has emerged and positioned the African continent as being one of the fastest growing tourism regions globally (Rogerson, 2014). As both a consequence of, and a condition for, tourism growth, the hospitality sector is similarly experiencing substantial growth in SSA, with the entry and expansion of international and regional SME hotel groups on the subcontinent (Rogerson & Visser, 2014), and an increase in the number of unbranded hotels (Dedeoglu & Demirer, 2015). The growth in the number of tourist arrivals has sparked the attention of international hotel investors from the Global North in planning hotel chain pipelines in SSA (Ward, 2016). Ward (2016) reports that there were 270 hotel pipelines in 2015, comprising unbranded hotels, and regional and international hotel brand developments. Unbranded hotel developments are said to constitute the largest share in accommodation development in SSA (Christie et al., 2014; Dedeoglu & Demirer, 2015). With respect to particular tourism enterprises, we focus on small and medium-sized hotels (SMSHs). SMSHs are known to contribute to tourism development through entrepreneurial or innovative activities, such as reward for owners and employees, influence on consumer purchase decisions and tourist experiences (De la Peña, Núñez-Serrano, Turrión, & Velázquez, 2016; Hjalager, 2010), and contributions to job creation and destination competitiveness (Aldebert, Dang, & Longhi, 2011; Hjalager, 2010). The extant literature indicates the increase in hotel investors' interest in SSA, which could ergo induce substantial contributions to the socio-economic development of countries within the subcontinent, were it not for the inherent structural policy constraints in tourism development in SSA (Gatsinzi & Donaldson, 2010; Nwosu, 2016; Christie et al., 2014; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2017; Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016).

The aim of this article is therefore to critically examine the policy-related impediments associated with the operations of small- and medium sized hotels (SMSHs) within the SSA, using Cameroon as a case study. We conceptualise SMSHs as hotels that are independently owned and are not part of a hotel chain. Small hotels have up to 50 rooms, employing less than 10 people, while medium-sized hotels operate between 51-120 rooms (Ahmad, 2015; Çetinel, Yolal & Emeksiz, 2008). In particular, we focus on the nature of operations within SMSHs to identify and unpack policy impediments, given the noted upward turn in the development of hotels in the country (Tichaawa, 2017).

The next section develops a theoretical framework for understanding the policy impediments affecting service delivery in Cameroon's hotel sector. This is followed by a description of the study methods, results and discussion respectively. The paper concludes by discussing some of the strategies which could be adopted to facilitate service delivery and increase the effectiveness of (inter)national tourism policies, programs and initiatives in supporting and sustaining the development of the hotel sector.

2. Literature Review

To derive a framework for examining the policy-related impediments associated with small- and medium sized hotels' (SMSHs) operations in Cameroon, this article draws on two main theoretical literature streams: 1) the literature examining structural weaknesses impeding hotel development in SSA and its impacts on hotel development and 2) the tourism and hospitality literature that discusses the nature of the tourism industry context, tourism policy and planning. The former provides the foundation for this research, while the latter justifies the relevance of the influence of the tourism industry context on tourism policy and planning with regards to SMSHs that emerge from the empirical analyses. A synopsis of the relevant sets of literature review are presented below.

2.1 Impacts of increased hotel development in SSA

The hospitality sector has, in comparison to all the other subsectors in tourism (ILO, 2013), attracted the majority of investments from both local and foreign investors which, together with the infrastructural developments associated with hotels, demonstrates the importance of the sector to economic development (Gatsinzi & Donaldson, 2010; Rogerson, 2014). The growth in hotel development in SSA promises economic growth opportunities in terms of employment, linkages and the structural transformation of the sector (Fortanier & Van Wijk, 2010; Ward,

2016; Bakker & Messerli, 2017; Khanna, Papadavid, Tyson & te Velde, 2016). The tourism industry, as an economic sector, has been accredited as being one of the largest employment generators, with the hospitality sector being recognised as a highly labour-intensive sector, producing employment opportunities for both low and highly skilled employees (Bakker & Messerli, 2017). For SSA, the growth of hotels creates employment opportunities in the local economy, enabling local tourism and non-tourism businesses to further benefit from such development (Fortanier & Van Wijk, 2010). Additionally, hotel developments are noted to induce the need for other local services which directly complement the functioning of the hotel sector supply chain (Trinh, Ryan, & Cave, 2014), as well as support other tourism subsectors and services. These include tour guides, local craft markets, transport, and food and beverage, all of which benefit from the multiplier effect that is characteristic of the hotel sector in particular and the tourism industry as a whole (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016; Ajake, 2015).

Moreover, the development of the hotel sector has indirect employment benefits through linkages with suppliers from the local economy, stimulating the business environment within the localities in which the hotels operate. The above can prompt the development of small, micro and medium enterprises (SMMEs), aiding in the structural transformation, as well as in the inclusion of the local suppliers in the tourism value chain (UNCTAD, 2017; Buitendijk & Tschunkerts, 2016). In the above regard, Pillay and Rogerson (2013) note that realising meaningful economic impacts from hotels occurs through the leveraging of backward linkages to the community. Consequently, for hotel development to be said to contribute to economic growth, local community involvement in the supply chain, and subsequently in the tourism value chain is crucial (Trinh, Ryan, & Cave, 2014; Pillay & Rogerson, 2013).

Furthermore, tourism and the hotel sector in particular has one of the highest propensities of any sector to integrate both women and the youth in the tourism economy, and to provide employment opportunities for those communities living in the rural regions of the continent (Bakker & Messerli, 2017; Christie et al., 2014). However, even though women form a significant portion of the hotel sector workforce in SSA (and other developing countries), they tend to work in the most vulnerable jobs, where poor working conditions, inequality of opportunity and treatment, violence, exploitation, stress and sexual harassment are the norm (Baum, 2013). The inclusion of specifically designed policies in national and tourism development plans aimed at empowering women and enabling career progression chances is thus imperative in SSA (UNCTAD, 2017). Ward (2016) approximated that, from 2015 to 2020, the hotel sector will create an estimated 78 000 new jobs from the hotel development pipelines

on the subcontinent. However, UNCTAD (2017) notes that employment opportunities can only be substantial and realised through direct procurement practices (for example staff recruitment, training and development) adopted by the hotel investors and operators, within the local economy.

Fortanier and Van Wijk (2010) note that the development of hotels, particularly international hotel brands, could lead to the transfer of skills and technology, as well as business practices and infrastructural developments that could shape the competitiveness of a destination. As aforementioned, a positive implication of hotel development is the infrastructural developments that are associated with hotels, as they can additionally induce investments in other socio-economic sectors such as transport and other public services (e.g. security and public health), as well as enabling growth in other sectors of the local economy (Khanna et al., 2016). These enabling factors further contribute to boosting a destinations competitiveness as it becomes more appealing and attractive to potential visitors (Tsai, Song, & Wong, 2009; Aldebert et al., 2011; Hjalager, 2010). However, for any significant gains to be felt by the hotel and other sectors, concrete policy measures and implementation/monitoring strategies need to be put in place which will ensure that the gains accruing from the sector are actually felt by all stakeholders. This is apparently not the case at the moment in many African destinations as suggested in the extant literature discussed hereafter.

2.2 Structural weaknesses impeding hotel development in SSA

Despite the attractiveness of SSA for hotel investment, several factors are inherent in the subcontinent that create barriers to hotel development and management, and consequently to the competitiveness of African countries as tourism destinations. An important factor in this regard is the diversity and quality of accommodation offerings (Rogerson & Visser, 2014; Sharpley, 2009). The first, and critical, structural weakness in the hotel sector is the lack of sufficient skills and education that fail to meet the requirements of the sector (Christie et al., 2014; Salehudin, Prasad, & Osmond, 2013; Baum, 2013; Baum, 2018). The hotel sector requires highly skilled and trained employees to deliver quality services, and for international and regional independent and/or chain hotels to maintain a set standard, from which they gain their competitiveness (Ward, 2016; Nwosu, 2016; Magombo, Rogerson, & Rogerson, 2017). Africa is recorded as having the lowest human capital development globally, hampering the hotel sector, as there is a lack of tourism and hospitality educational programmes on the continent (Folarin, Oladipupo, Ajobeje & Adeniyi, 2017; Christie et al., 2014). The lack of

skills leads to the subcontinent having the highest staff per room ratios in the world, impeding the competitiveness of hotels (Ward, 2016), as they are unable to ensure “...sustainable employment capacity, service delivery capacity and service quality capacity” (Baum, 2018, p. 873). Additionally, the lack of skills and training programmes often results in the dominance of expatriates in managerial position within hotels, as well as in the reverse transfer of skills that occurs from the sourcing of skilled individuals to international hotel chains which pay relatively higher wages (Fortanier & Van Wijk, 2010) to the detriment of independent SMSHs. This particular constraint ergo limits the operations of the local hotel operators and investors, as they end up with an unskilled or semi-skilled workforce, thus posing a barrier to the sustainability of their operations and competitiveness (Fortanier & Van Wijk, 2010).

Beyond the lack of educational infrastructure, the governments in SSA countries fail to provide an enabling environment for operators in the tourism sector (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013; Kimbu, 2011a). Consequently basic services, such as water, energy and other public services that are required for tourism development are inadequate, not well developed and/or poorly managed (Sharpley, 2009; Gatsinzi & Donaldson, 2010; Gelb, Meyer, & Ramachandran, 2014). Gelb et al. (2014) suggest that the lack of, and the inadequacies in, such basic services is one of the major constraints imposing itself on business development in SSA. In particular, in relation to the hotel sector, these barriers induce hesitation from international hotel groups looking to extend their foothold on the subcontinent, as it implies substantially extra costs in accommodating and overcoming such barriers through the construction of their own enabling infrastructure (Christie et al., 2014). Additionally, owing to the global concern regarding environmental sustainability in hotels nowadays, hotel development in SSA might involve the importation of technology and the adoption of green construction practices that would serve to enhance the sustainability of hotels. However skilled foreign construction personnel might have to be imported to undertake these developments due to the absence of locals with the required skills and competencies further adding to the overall cost of developing hotels (Salehudin et al., 2013).

Furthermore, a major constraint to economic growth in terms of hotel development is that citizens living in SSA countries face difficulties in entering the sector, or in competing with international hotel chains, owing to the lack of investment capital (Christie et al., 2014). SSA countries often emphasise the need for foreign investment in hotel development, which can sometimes have adverse effects such as leakage and importation of foreign labour, should there not be regulatory policy or legislation in place (Gatsinzi & Donaldson, 2010). This results

in the hotel sector in SSA countries being dominated by foreign multinational hotel chains serving the expatriates, international visitors, and local well-to-do citizens, with local operators relegated to running independent SMSHs and having a much smaller customer base. For instance, Booysen (2012) notes that South Africa's hotel sector is largely dominated by a small group of affluent white people who operate independent SMSHs.

2.3 Policy and planning implications

The growth of tourism, and the subsequent realisation of its critical importance to economic development, has led to the adoption of the sector as part of economic growth, with tourism development in principle, becoming a national priority in many African countries (UNCTAD, 2017; Ajake, 2015). However, such growth and its success in contributing to the socio-economic development in SSA countries depends on a number of stakeholders including government, private sector operators, and communities who have varying interests (Christie et al., 2014). There is a recognised need by many national governments in SSA countries, to integrate the tourism sector into national development plans and strategies (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013; Sharpley, 2009; Magombo et al., 2017; UNCTAD, 2017). All levels of government (national, regional/provincial and local) play a crucial role in hotel development within their countries, and capitalise on the development undertaken to pursue economic growth (Booyesen, 2012). Part of the above involves the creation of an environment that is conducive to industry growth through policy and legislation (Nwosu, 2016).

The political support of tourism development is often a factor that tourism investors in general and hotel investors in particular, consider in their decision to develop hotels in different countries (Sayman & Saayman, 2009; Kimbu, 2011a). Gatsinzi and Donaldson (2010), note that hotel investors view governments' intention to boost tourism development through policy as being a strength in hotel development throughout SSA. Inasmuch as the national governments have to take the lead in formulating conducive tourism policies and strategies, the role of the local communities and local governments in enabling their formulation and implementation is also accentuated in the literature (UNCTAD, 2017; Christie et al., 2014; Ajake, 2015; Fortanier & Wijk, 2010; Gatsinzi & Donaldson, 2010; Khanna et al., 2016). The consultation and involvement of the local communities in developing tourism strategies and plans, through local representatives in planning bodies, is said to be crucial in developing a sustainable tourism sector which ensures that benefits obtained from tourism filter down to the communities (Christie et al., 2014; Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013).

Moreover, the political will for tourism development should, additionally, facilitate the provision and development of basic infrastructure and the integration of local communities in tourism (UNCTAD, 2017). The role of the government further extends to the fostering of partnerships with private sector investors or SMEs, as well as providing support to local hotel operators who have to compete with the international hotel chains. This reduces some of the structural weaknesses identified earlier (UNCTAD, 2017; Booysen, 2012). Gatsinzi and Donaldson (2010) assert that domestic investment can also be catalysed by foreign direct investment that is in tandem with an appropriate tourism policy agenda. Additionally, Ajake (2015) espouses this view by calling for more public-private partnerships in developing and growing tourism, which should have positive outcomes for the hotel sector. He further notes that an increase in tourist numbers encourages investment in the sector, as well as in the whole tourism industry at a given destination. Such partnerships according to Saayman and Saayman (2009) play a significant role in enhancing the competitiveness of the sector, and destination, as well as in attracting investment to other related sectors, all of which need supportive policies from government.

The above discussion illustrates that while extant research has focused on the trends and impacts of hotel development, the analysis of performance with the view to unpacking the associated policy impediments, in emerging SSA destinations such as Cameroon is limited. The current research seeks to fill the existing gap by critically examining such impediments, and by proposing policy-led pathways towards sustainability in hotel development. The next section presents the study method for critically examining the policy-related impediments associated with SMSHs development in Cameroon

3. Study Methods

3.1 Research site

Our research setting is Cameroon, an emerging but under-researched destination with an institutional context that creates opportunities, but poses many challenges and risks for tourism and hospitality development (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013). Cameroon was selected for tourism and policy-related reasons. Often described as “All Africa in one country” because of its topographical, multicultural and biological diversity, Cameroon offers various forms of environmentally sustainable nature-related tourism activities (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013). Cameroon also represents an interesting case study due to the mitigated success of attempts

made by government to implement institutional reforms aimed at developing and implementing tourism-related policies that reach out not only to all public structures but also local communities and private operators within the country's tourism sector (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013; Ngoasong & Kimbu 2016). Important milestones in this regard included the creation of the Ministry of Tourism and Leisure (MINTOUR) in 1989, followed by the creation of the National Tourism Council (NTC) to coordinate and manage tourism development in Cameroon in 1999 (MINTOUR, 1999); the adoption of a Commonwealth-sponsored Cameroon Tourism Marketing Plan in 2002 and a Cameroon Destination Branding Report in 2008 (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013); and the prioritization of tourism and hospitality development in the Vision 2035 development masterplan for Cameroon (MINEPAT, 2009). These were all attempts to give more citizenship power to non-state actors in Cameroon's tourism and hospitality sectors, and more importantly to enhance the competitiveness of the country as a tourism destination. As Tsai, Song and Wong (2009, p. 524) note, "the issue of competitiveness of tourism destinations has become increasingly important, [not only] for countries and regions that rely heavily on tourism", but also for those wishing to transform tourism into an important contributor in local social and economic development. Cameroon falls into this category.

We focused specifically on the hotel sector in the major gateway cities of Douala (the economic hub) and Yaoundé (the capital city) (see Fig. 1 below). Both cities were considered ideal for testing the main study objective, because, besides being the most populated urban cities (with Douala having 3 million people and Yaoundé 2.5 million inhabitants), in Cameroon, they can boast of a range of hotels in the categories under investigation (Akamba Mani & Puscasu, 2009). The two major international airports and the interconnected road network makes both cities a hive for domestic and international tourism activities.

[INSERT FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE]

Due to the absence of a reliable database on the number of hotels in Cameroon, the researchers, in choosing a sample, relied on a recent hotel audit conducted by Tichaawa (2017), as can be seen in Table 1 below.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

3.2 Data collection and analysis

This study adopts a qualitative approach. We began by examining available company documents (information on website, leaflets and company reports), as well as policy documents, technical reports published by government ministries and other agencies about the hotel sector and tourism development in Cameroon. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 30 hoteliers (15 per city) in Douala and Yaoundé, and across a range of SMSH categories (Table 2). A noticeable repetition of answers by the interviewees indicated that data saturation had been reached after 30 interviews (Patton, 2002; Ashley, Mitchell & Spenceley, 2009; Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013). The interviews aimed to understand not only the respondents' opinions on the supply and demand of tourism but more importantly their perspectives on the role and influence of tourism policy in facilitating or impeding the development of the hotel sector in Cameroon. Two criteria were used to select interviewees: 1) be in senior management in independently owned SMSHs, i.e. within the range of 25-120 bedrooms (purposive), and 2) ease of access and availability of data (convenience) (Ahmad, 2015; Patton, 2002). The respondents were ergo purposively selected (Patton, 2002) based on their functional roles and depth of knowledge about Cameroon's hospitality sector to inform the study outcome and meet the research aim. Soliciting the perspectives of hoteliers managing/operating a varied category of SMSHs, enabled the collection of rich, varied and meaningful data with regards to their understanding of tourism policy formulation and implementation, and its impact on hotel performance.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The semi-structured interviews which lasted between 40-60 minutes were face-to-face and conducted at the respondent's workplace or precinct. They were digitally recorded and then manually transcribed verbatim by the researchers, and complemented by fieldwork notes; with every attempt being made to reveal a balanced assessment of the diverse qualitative data collected. To ensure quality, the authors cross-checked the interview guide against the transcripts and recordings. Further triangulation and validation of the data was ensured through informal interviews with two senior officials in Cameroon's Ministry of Tourism and Leisure (e.g. Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016). The interviewees were for example asked about the impact of the hotel sector on job creation, skills and capability development, service delivery, room occupancy, effectiveness of tourism policies, and destination competitiveness challenges. These questions included consideration of the key themes associated with factors affecting hotel performance, tourism policy formulation and implementation and its implications for SMSHs

based on the literature review. The interview questions were framed and conducted in both English and French, which are official languages in Cameroon. Both authors are fluent in the two languages. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, interviewees are represented by numbers rather than real names. Every attempt has been made to reveal a balanced assessment of the diverse qualitative data collected (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013).

The data analytical technique that was employed involved coding the interview data into conceptual categories using Atlas.ti software. According to Rambaree (2007), such software assists in making data more visual, portable and easy to comprehend. For example, the software developed a list of codes that allowed for the development of the four major themes that formed the basis of the results that are presented and discussed hereafter.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 The impact of the hotel sector on job creation and employment

It was evident from the data that hoteliers in both cities (Douala and Yaoundé) recognised the impacts of their establishments on employment and job creation. Whilst this finding is consistent with those noted in terms of the growth in hotel development in SSA, with optimistic narratives of employment generation (Fortanier & Van Wijk, 2010) for skilled and highly skilled employees (Bakker & Messerli, 2017), four distinct clusters linked to employment were identified. Firstly, the nature of employment as described by respondents. The majority of the hotels employed women who performed relatively low-paid jobs, such as cleaners, room service attendants, housekeeping, and hostesses. Men were mostly employed as porters, security, drivers, bartenders' stewards, and chefs. An almost identical trend was observed in a related study conducted by Ajake (2015) in Nigerian hotels. Most noticeably, with the exception of the branded and state-owned hotels, the nature of employment was largely described as casual, often with no employment contracts, reflecting the exploitative nature of the sector. This resulted in poor conditions of work being experienced by employees leading to poor service quality and delivery (Baum, 2015). Secondly, low employment figures were noted, especially amongst the relatively lower category of graded SMSHs, and those that were ungraded and/or unbranded. Such SMSHs typically employed, on average, between five and ten staff who, in most cases, had to perform multiple duties. For example, one hotel manager (HM) in Douala explained:

We only employ people who are willing to work hard and go the extra mile. By this, I mean that the person must be ready to do anything that I ask on the day. They can do cleaning and cooking for the guest, or even go to the local market to procure goods for the hotel. That is the way we do it here (HM1).

By employing the above-mentioned strategy, the hoteliers were attempting to maximise profits and were cognisant of the pricing effect and low occupancy rates (discussed later). Another hotel manager-owner in Yaoundé firmly asserted:

We have standard prices for our rooms, but, sometimes, people will walk in and don't want to pay. We are then forced to bargain, otherwise the room remains empty. I have bills to pay; I don't have many international tourists coming [in], so I have to employ people who can multitask to survive (HM2).

Thirdly, most of the respondents who belonged in the lower hotel categories relied heavily on the domestic tourists, whom they described as “having little spending power” (HM6) and “undertaking shorter stays” (HM9). It is this category of SMSHs that dominate the hotel sector in both Douala and Yaoundé, and are reluctant to provide more services, such as banqueting and concierge, which might generate more direct employment for the local community members.

Fourthly, an interesting trend that emerged from the interviews was that most of the lower categories of graded hotels and those that were ungraded were managed by a family member/relative, or by a friend, with women playing a predominant role at the lower level positions. They often had to work very long hours and were often on casual contracts, a similar trend observed in other emerging destinations (see e.g. Baum, 2013). When asked why this was the case, the typical responses noted concerned the element of “trust” and “keeping it within the family” (HM8), thereby helping to alleviate “poverty within their immediate and external family due to the lack of [alternative] well-paid full time employment” opportunities (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016 p. 72; Khavul, Bruton & Wood, 2009). Most striking was that the interviewees did not recognise relevant hospitality and tourism qualifications and skills as a prerequisite for the job. One hotel manager contextualised the aforementioned in the following way:

Why should I have a business like this and employ someone from 'outside', when my own family members have no jobs? How will they look at me? It is better to have them

work here even if they don't have the right skills, because they understand it is also their business, and will not steal from it, and crumble it down (HM3).

While hotel development might represent a significant economic opportunity, the impact on employment has not yet yielded the desired results, owing to the issues identified above and which are a consequence of the “neglect of an employment or workforce focus in policy engagement and planning for sustainable tourism” (Baum, 2018, p. 837).

4.2 Shortage of service delivery skills linked to hospitality and tourism

The interviews also confirmed a regrettable lack of relevant related skills that are required for contemporary hospitality service delivery in an increasingly competitive tourism market. In line with the major theme discussed above, the managers noted that, while the profiles of their employees included cohorts of those with varying levels of education, most had attained some form of advanced education, but with very few being skilled in hotel and/or tourism management. The above was equally evident in the lower tier SMSHs, where none of the managers indicated having a hotel related qualification. This observation is in line with Baum (2015) and Khavul et al. (2009) who noted that human resources capability is major factor affecting productivity and service quality in small and medium-sized hospitality enterprises in African countries, and the developing world. While the hoteliers considered education to be of essence, most seemed satisfied with the status quo. The argument advanced by a manager in Douala was as follows:

I train those whom I employ, because it easy to do. What do they need to know besides the things in the hotel such as welcoming guest, reception services, taking care of them during their stay, room services, and how to take clients to their rooms? One does not need to go to school for that. They will learn by doing (HM4).

Even though the above quote may paint a picture of a strategy that might be plausible in the Cameroonian context, it equally illuminates the concerns with the long-term sustainability of the sector (Baum, 2018). Service quality is a critical component of effective service delivery in the hotel sector which is linked to skills, capacity and capability development and training in the sector (Baum, 2018; Ntimane & Tichaawa, 2017). Hence, the Cameroonian tourism authorities together with the hotel operators should work together to put in place a strategy that will enable the development and enhancement of the skills required for the sector to function effectively. This should include implementing specific education policy-related actions for the

sector, as was previously proposed by Kimbu (2012) and Kimbu and Ngoasong (2013). The above is possible, as evidence from the data suggests that some of the hotels in this study especially those that were internationally owned and branded, and a couple of local hotels in the four- to five-star category were more actively engaged than others in in-house service-related training for both their skilled and unskilled staff. Rather than having independent ad-hoc initiatives by individual hotels there should be a collaborative effort by all stakeholders concerned (e.g. hoteliers, related government departments, tour operators) to work together through the National Tourism Council and the small business owners association to address this persistent human resource challenge specific to the hotel and related sectors (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013; Baum, 2015; McKeever, Jack & Anderson, 2015).

Pertinent to the expansion of the hotel sector in Cameroon and other SSA countries is the provision of educational programmes and training, complying with international standards that would meet the needs of the hotel sector, boost the sector's contribution to the economy and enhance the destination competitiveness (Ward, 2016). Baum (2018) and Nyakunu and Rogerson (2014), both emphasise the importance of skills development as a priority investment area for governments, in terms of ensuring the sustainable development of tourism, as it can be instrumental in removing investment barriers to hotel development, enhancing competitiveness and service capacity and quality (Ntimane & Tichaawa, 2017). However, the responsibility for educational programmes as part of long-term tourism planning is not solely that of the national government though governments have to set the tone by formulating and implementing the relevant policy frameworks. As Dedeoglu and Demirer (2015), Ward (2016), and Khanna et al. (2016) contend, owners/managers and other hospitality stakeholders should be in support of the above, as it creates conditions for sourcing suitably skilled local staff thereby contributing to local growth, and reduces the costs of introducing expatriate personnel in the hotels. Additionally, vocational training would, further, be crucial to the development of this sector, by closing the skills gap experienced in Cameroon and other SSA countries, and by ensuring that well- trained personnel (including women and other marginalised groups) are available to meet the hotel sector demands. The current lack of an integrated and coordinated approach to tourism skills development seriously limits the potential of these groups to empower themselves to impact positively on service quality delivery in the hotel sector. Policy initiatives facilitating the training, integration and absorption of women in the hotel sector in SSA as workers, owners and managers therefore need to be considered. This should also

include training for employment that is directly associated with the hotel sector, such as construction work, and suppliers within the local economy (UNCTAD, 2017).

4.3 Low room occupancy

A major concern that was reported by all of the interviewees in the study was the generally low levels of room occupancy (32%) currently being experienced. Since Akamba and Puscasu's (2009) study on hotel development trends in Cameroon (that were mainly government-led to boost tourism), Tichaawa (2017) has reported an upward surge in the development of hotels in the country, but with an average of 42% occupancy rate. This is up from Christie et al.'s (2013) calculations of 17%. To contextualise the significance of the occupancy rate, the existing data points to an oversupply of rooms in relation to demand but an undersupply of rooms meeting international standards (see Table 3). The interviewees all complained of "plenty of hotels being available with no customers" (HM10), with, at times, no beds being sold for the night. This view was well captured by one senior manager in Douala who maintained that:

We were one of the first hotels to be constructed in this area over a decade ago. At that time, business was ok and we could claim to have a monopoly of the market. However, a lot of hotels have been constructed around here and in the city generally. Almost every "quartier" [suburb] has a lot of hotel options. I can tell you that the situation is not good for us as there are a few occasions where we even have the whole property empty (HM22).

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The drop in hotel occupancy rates from 42% in 2017, based on 2016 data, to 32% in 2018 could be attributed to two major geopolitical situations that Cameroon has experienced in recent times and which directly affect the two cities under investigation as they are the main gateways into and out of the country. Firstly, demand from its main international tourism leisure markets has experienced a decline, owing to terrorist activities perpetrated by the Boko Haram group in the northern parts of the country, where visitors used to go for wildlife safaris in the Waza and Bouba Ndjida national parks (International Crisis Group, 2016). The perceptions of such political unrest and its spill over effects have been noted to affect tourism performance in the past (Ndze, 2016). Secondly, the domestic tourism market, of which both cities have a major share, attracting both formal and informal sector business tourists (see Tichaawa, 2017), have since 2016 been affected by the current ongoing Anglophone crisis (Okereke, 2018). These

have contributed to a downturn in economic activities linked to both domestic and international tourism (International Crisis Group, 2018), and affected the country's image. These crises have previously been noted are important contributors that limit the country's competitiveness when compared to other destinations (e.g. Gabon, Kenya, Rwanda) offering similar tourism products (see Kimbu, 2011a). This is expounded upon below.

4.4 Poor destination competitiveness

Cameroon's destination competitiveness was ranked low by the interviewees not only as a result of the geopolitical situation and an over-supply of hotels but also because the poorly managed primary tourism assets in most African countries are difficult to access (Christie et al., 2013). This study's data revealed that Cameroon is no different. Our interviewees were able to expose the current uncompetitive nature of the two cities (Douala and Yaoundé) within which they operate. Most complained of "inadequate infrastructure such as electricity and water supply, and access roads" (HM14), "falling visitor numbers due to insecurity and the prevalence of kidnappings" (HM23), "inflation and depreciation in the value of the franc CFA [local currency]" (HM25), and consequent effects on costs and consumer spending, "oversupply of hotel rooms and competition from other hotels" (HM19), and "lack of recycling facilities" (HM8). These are factors which although not all tourism industry specific contribute in making the destination uncompetitive (Tsai et al., 2009; Aldebert et al., 2011; Christi et al., 2014). While the respondents put the blame wholly on the government, a claim which appeared to be contradicted by the informal discussions with government representatives, the oversupply of rooms (see Table 3 above), coupled with the low level of demand and inadequate infrastructure, is noteworthy, as it evidences the poor, or improper, planning and coordination by the relevant stakeholders. Not surprisingly, all but 5 of the hotels managers indicated not having a marketing plan in place, nor had they at any given time conducted any market research to inform supply and demand. One manager mentioned that:

We operate rather informally, without any strategy document. Besides, we survive on clients who normally walk in, or [who] are booked via a few travel agents, including those online. We have never done any research to know how to price our rooms, we just follow what other hotel[s] do to survive (HM5).

When asked if they had engaged in any marketing campaigns with the assistance of the government, the respondents equivocated with a negative response, stating that they considered

it to be “a waste of time” (HM9), and “not value for money” (HM11) as they saw any such initiative as the government “trying to milk them” (HM14). This depicts the current lack of trust existing between SMEs and the public sector. This is similar to the observations of Ngoasong and Kimbu (2016) in their study on the role of microfinance in development-led tourism entrepreneurship. Incoherent marketing, and the lack of a national hospitality association involving both public- and private-sector-driven interests that could manage and coordinate the sector limits competitiveness. Although tourism-related academic research, in the context of Cameroon, is still an emerging focus, several studies (Kimbu, 2010; 2011a/b; 2010; Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013) echo the above sentiments, indicating an urgent need for the development and implementation of a coherent, holistic and integrated tourism policy.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

This article has critically examined the policy-related impediments impacting the operations of SMSHs in emerging SSA destinations such as Cameroon. Based on the empirical results obtained, a number of policy and planning recommendations which could be considered by different stakeholders to increase efficiencies in the hotel sector are suggested.

Increased hotel development represents a significant opportunity for emerging tourism destinations in SSA, as it can provide, among others, employment opportunities for vulnerable groups, including the poor, women and the youth (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016). However, the evidence from the research suggests an oversupply of hotel rooms that is unmatched by demand. Additionally, SMSHs especially the unbranded/low graded ones face human significant resource challenges which limits their efficiency and productivity. They therefore risk being crowded-out of the market by better performing large-sized multinational hotel chains and consequently are not competitive. Hence, SMSHs and the tourism authorities must together revisit the key aspects of policy, strategy and marketing efforts to address these issues in Cameroon. These would include the implementation of policies geared towards speeding up the legalisation of SMSHs and their classification, and encouraging networking through membership in small businesses associations and the creation of a national hotel association. These measures will support SMSHs to overcome industry context related challenges, related to improving service quality, skills development, accessing international tourist markets and enabling business planning.

Furthermore, hotels can play a fundamental role in promoting economic diversification and structural transformation at such emerging destinations by strengthening the linkages between tourism and other sectors if they are well harnessed through effective stakeholder collaboration, knowledge exchange and long-term planning (Tosun, 2006). In addition to unlocking the potential for hotels to contribute to the destination's competitiveness and economic growth, the "inter-sectoral relationships they have with other industry sectors on which the tourism industry depends for its survival" need to be aligned and integrated within the policy framework at regional and national levels (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013, p. 235). Emerging tourism destinations in SSA such as Cameroon therefore require a critical (re-)examination of their tourism policies and planning practices, by means of developing cogent development plans that are cognisant of their current situation. The policy makers should ensure that such policies and plans are geared towards facilitating effective service delivery and destination competitiveness.

The mix of hotels studied and the wide variance in the policy challenges uncovered is significant for case analysis and theory elaboration. However, we acknowledge that the possibly self-selecting sample size (30 hotels) and the use of convenience and purposive sampling, limits generalizability of our findings. Future research could increase the generalizability by either repeating our study with a different sample size and/or use probabilistic randomized sampling with a larger sample size in other comparative SSA countries. A second limitation is our focus on the perspective of hotel managers and/or owner-managers only. Future research can examine more in-depth the external and internal industry contexts (culture, operational practices and governance) to uncover the other impediments hampering the operation of small and medium sized hotels by going beyond the managers to capturing the views of other stakeholders – government and employees.

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Tables

Table 1: Audit finding in terms of the number of hotels in Douala and Yaoundé

City	5–4-star	3–1-star	Ungraded
Yaounde	4	133	65
Douala	5	135	94
Total	9	268	159

Source: Tichaawa (2017)

Table 2: Geographic spread of interviewees

<i>Hotel Category</i>	<i>Yaoundé</i>	<i>Douala</i>	<i>Persons interviewed</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Brand type</i>
Ungraded	8	7	Owner-managers	9	Unbranded
			General managers	6	
1 – 3 star	5	6	Owner-managers	4	Unbranded
			General managers	7	
4 – 5 star	2	2	General managers	4	Internationally branded
Total	15	15	-	30	-

Table 3: Top 6 SSA countries by hotel accommodation

World region	Total hotel rooms	International hotel rooms	Average occupancy (%)
South Africa	61 417	9 850	57
Tanzania	31 365	1 588	43
Kenya	24 354	2 284	92
Cameroon	24 803	673	17
Ghana	24 410	902	75
Malawi	20 871	120	61

Adapted from: Christie *et al.* (2014)

Figures

Fig. 1: Map of Cameroon, indicating study areas

Source: Tichaawa, 2017.