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Regenerative and Responsible Rural Tourism in the Face of Global Uncertainties

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Abstract

The study argues that global uncertainties like pandemics could have opportunities for regenerative and responsible rural tourism development. It investigated possible opportunities of COVID-19 for regenerative and responsible rural tourism development in Nigeria. Key informant interview, focus group discussion and observation were the main research approaches. Multi-stage sampling technique was used to downsize the huge population size to 45 informants for key informant interviews and focus group discussion sessions. Descriptive and literature analyses were

used for data analysis. Opportunity for digitization, shift in consuming habits, rural assess for quality service, reshoring strategies, low carbon economy, mobilization of local networks, reduction in tourist traffic, carrying capacity control, natural recovery for tourism resources, among others were identified as opportunities of the pandemic for regenerative and responsible rural tourism in Southeast Nigeria. This study has implication for opportunities of regenerative and responsible rural tourism in times of uncertainties.

Keywords: Pandemic, Regenerative Tourism, Responsible Tourism, Rural Tourism Development, Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Resources

Introduction

Tourism as a discipline and industry has many evolving concepts. These concepts have determined directions for research and debate in the industry since the turn of the 21st Century. One of these concepts is regenerative tourism. It is an offshoot of sustainable tourism but with a purpose on regenerating tourism resources after use to the original state, to pave way for future use. In the last couple of years, regenerative tourism has triggered some interesting debates in the tourism discourse (Hussain, 2021; Bradley, 2021; Duxbury, Bakas, Castro, & Silva, 2021) ^[18, 7, 12]. It is seen as the hope for the revival of various tourism resources for sustainable use. Tourism activities exert pressures on developed tourism resources with consequential damage on the future use of most of these resources. Some studies have noted that a continuous use of most tourism resources without consequential checks, will lead to their dilapidation and subsequent suspension of tourism activities in these sites. Tourism resources (cultural, natural and built) need some kind of regeneration to be able to maintain future value. The value of tourism resources is most of the time measured in their durability. This explains why huge developmental initiatives are not invested on some tourism resources that are not likely to last for a longer time. Tourism investors focus their investments on those tourism resources that have demonstrated their capacities to be sustainable and likely to last for a reasonable number of years. Most of the time quality assessments of tourism resources are conducted by the relevant stakeholders, including necessary consultations, prior to concluding on the tourism resources to develop in either short- or long-term plan. Despite these efforts, most of these tourism resources deteriorate with time after being explored and developed. These antecedents affect natural, cultural and built tourism resources irrespective of their locations, period or method of use. However, the question has been on how to bring back these tourism resources to their original or semi-original state after use. This is what regenerative tourism as a concept tends to address.

In 2020, COVID-19 pandemic struck global activities and affected virtually all aspects of people's lives ranging from education, sports, entertainment, economy, agriculture, politics and tourism. The tourism industry has been described as the worst hit of the pandemic owing to the various local, regional and international restrictions on travels and movements. There were so many cancellations on travels, events, education programmes, sporting activities among others, across international, national, regional and local boundaries. For example, some international conferences and symposia were cancelled and virtual options were adopted, most of the football leagues across the globe were cancelled. More so, entertainment shows, club activities, cultural activities like festivals and ceremonies were suspended; local sporting and entertainment activities were put on hold within this period. Interestingly, most of these activities involve movements, travels and visits which are the fulcrum of tourism. Tourism as an industry is insignificant without these elements (Su, 2011; Tang, 2017) ^[45, 46]. This explains why

many studies within this period have positioned tourism as an endangered species in the face of global pandemics like COVID (Buheji & Ahmed, 2020; Oruonye & Ahmed, 2020; Ozili, 2020)^[9, 35, 36].

More so, within the tourism circle, rural tourism in parts of Africa suffered greatly with consequential effect on the rural economy, hence most of these traditional communities leverage more on the opportunities of rural tourism resources within their domain for economic recovery and sustainability. It is important to note at this juncture that rural tourism is the bed rock of tourism in most African communities. These communities have interesting tangible and intangible heritage tourism resources that have opportunities for sustainable rural development. This is among the comparative advantages they enjoy over their western neighbors (Bramwell & Lane, 1994; Aref & Gill, 2009; Ezeuduji, 2015)^[8, 3, 14]. This has positioned rural tourism as an integral part of tourism development in Nigeria and some other parts of Africa. However, literature has posited that the nature and understanding of rural tourism, has presented this aspect of tourism as among the worst hit in the system by COVID-19 (Tang, 2017; Giray, Kadakoglu, Cetin, & Bamoi, 2019; Oruonye & Ahmed, 2020; Adalana, 2020)^[46, 15, 35, 1].

Why rural tourism in Africa? Over the years, rural tourism has been used as a revitalization mechanism for rural life and economy. It has motivated infrastructural and other socio-economic development strides for the rural population in Africa and in some other developing nations. Rural tourism has liberated most rural areas from the challenges of rural-urban migration, basic infrastructural neglect, limited economic opportunities, and avoidable poverty degeneration. Most rural areas who had explored rural tourism development options in the 21st century have witnessed reasonable positive change in their socio-economic fortunes. Interestingly, traditional cultural practices, natural sites and historical documentations have been the major motivations for rural tourism in Southeast Nigeria. What this implies is that while these opportunities are explored for socio-economic emancipation of rural life, their promotion and marketing also contribute to the preservation of these rural tourism resources.

However, with the arrival of COVID-19 pandemic, many tourism experts and other tourism stakeholders have identified rural tourism as among the worst hit by the pandemic (Oruonye & Ahmed, 2020; Adalana, 2020)^[35, 1]. They also maintain that the developing nations like Nigeria would have a devastated rural tourism initiative both for the existing and prospective rural tourism destinations. This has given COVID-19 a 'Terrorist Mask' against a mild and susceptible rural tourism development initiatives. However, with this in mind, are there no opportunities for regenerative and responsible rural tourism development in the face of global uncertainties like COVID-19 pandemic? This study was an attempt to explore possible opportunities COVID-19 pandemic for regenerative and responsible rural tourism development in Southeast Nigeria. Evidence from pilot investigations have pointed to the fact that a deep search and investigation would open up some COVID-19 opportunities for regenerative and responsible rural tourism opportunities in Nigeria. It is expected that at the end, this study would succeeded in exposing the opportunities of COVID-19 for rural tourism development in Southeast Nigeria and beyond.

Research Method

This study adopted case study and causal research designs. The research approach was qualitative. Due to the huge population size hence the focus on the rural parts of Southeast Nigeria, multi-stage sampling technique was found to be useful, in the first stage, cluster sampling technique was used to group these communities state-by-state for easy identification. In the second stage, judgemental or purposive sampling technique was used to sample 10 communities with known rural tourism resources. In the last stage, convenience and random sampling techniques were useful in identifying 20 informants, 2 from each of the communities, for key informant interviews, and 15 informants for focus group discussion sessions. These communities were Ndiowu, Afikpo, Ajalli, Arondizuogu, Enugu-Ezike, Awhum, Obinoafia, Arochukwu, Ogbunike, and Ndiokpaleze. More so, convenience and purposive sampling techniques were also used to select 10 visitors/tourists who had visited any or more of those rural communities on tourism experiences in the past. More so, secondary data were collated from some published works on rural tourism, responsible tourism, sustainable tourism and COVID-19. Descriptive analysis and literature analysis were used to match and analyse data collated. The study was focused on Southeast Nigeria. The Southeast is among the six geopolitical regions of Nigeria that is largely occupied by the Igbo people. It is located in the eastern part of Nigeria. The region is made up of five distinctive states of Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia and Ebonyi States. The 2021 World Bank's estimated population of Nigeria, puts the region at twenty-one million, nine hundred and fifty-five thousand, four hundred and fourteen (21,955,414) (World Population Prospectus, 2021). The region has more of rural tourism resources than urban tourism resources. This is manifested in the conspicuous scattering of natural and cultural tourism resources across rural communities in the region. Scintillating traditional festivals like New Yam, Ikeji, Omabe, Owu, Igbotonma, Odo among others, and some astonishing natural tourism resources like Awhum waterfalls, Ezeagu waterfalls, Udi hills, Ngwo forests, Ogbunike cave, Opi cave, Obiom cave, Ajali cave, Owerreezukala cave, Ndiowu spring water, Agulu lake among others, are among the notable tourism resources in the area. Most of these tourism resources have contributed in packaging the region as among the notable rural tourism destinations in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Conceptualisation Framework

There have been debates on the historical development of rural tourism. For instance, while Lane (2009)^[22] have argued that the concept was introduced after the World War II with visits and holidays at rural destinations, Ayazlar and Ayazlar (2015)^[5] inform that rural tourism introduction could be traced to the late eighteenth century during the romanticism movement in the global economic history. Though from their explanations, while one may be referring to earliest rural tourism, the other (Ayazlar & Ayazlar, 2015)^[5] could be referring to modern rural tourism industry. A further investigation traced the earliest rural tourism practice beyond the eighteenth century to sixteenth century when the world was under the hegemony of empires. During this period, people from the loyal family or the earliest class travelled to the rural areas for relaxation, medical care and

rest from the troubles emanating from the daily activities and interactions in the empire. Such travels which in the company of their royal security, lasted for some days in the place visited. Sometimes they operated in a hidden identity while in those rural areas so as to mingle easily with the natives. However, looking at this hypothesis, rural tourism could not have been dated back to the romanticism movement as noted by Ayazlar and Ayazlar (2015)^[5], Lane (2009)^[22] and Nulty (2004). Rural tourism as a concept has

metamorphosed through various processes to where it is today as one of the major socio-economic options for rural life (Su, 2011; Daugstad, 2007; Park & Yoon, 2009; Dashper, 2014)^[45, 11, 37, 10]. This metamorphosis has led to the various conceptions for the concept. It will be pertinent at this juncture to look at the meaning of the concept from various authors' bias. The table below illustrates the various conceptions or definitions of rural tourism:

Table 1: Conceptions/Definitions of Rural Tourism

S. No	Studies	Conceptions/definitions
1	Bramwell & Lane, 1994 ^[8] Insu, 2001, 1438	Education, arts and heritage taking place in countryside not only farm-based but also multi-faceted activities
2	Pedford, 1996, 173	The concept includes rural custom and folklore, local people's traditions, values, beliefs and common heritage
3	Mckercher & Robbins, 1998	Operated on a small and regional scale that lie outside the mainstream of tourism
4	Reichel <i>et al</i> , 2000, 451	Rural tourism is based on features of rurality and sustainability with small scale enterprises in rural areas
5	MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003 ^[26] , 308	Refers to a distinct rural community with its own traditions, heritage, arts, lifestyles, places, and values as preserved between generations
6	Sharpley & Roberts, 2004, 122	Rural tourism can be both a complement to mass tourism in most countries that have warm climates and also a pioneering initiative in a place where tourism is low
7	Negrusa <i>et al</i> , 2007, 1.	A form of tourism provided by local people in rural areas, with a small-scale accommodation, rural activities and customs life
8	Daugstad, 2007. 404	Rural tourism is an area where the tourists and farmers come together. This provides some physical and/or aesthetic changes in the area
9	Aref & Gill, 2009 ^[3] , 68	An experience oriented, the rural area is sparsely populated and based on preservation of culture, heritage and traditions
10	Kulcsar, 2009, 122	Tourism that takes place in the countryside
11	Irshad, 2010 5	Rural tourism is located in rural areas, contains traditional societies and practices, in small scale
12	Lo <i>et al</i> , 2012, 59	Rural tourism offers differentiated products to the industry

Source: Modified from Ayazlar & Ayazlar, 2015

However, from the illustrated views above from the previous authors, there are some levels of commonalities in their choice of concepts or anchor points. One of it is that this type of tourism has to take place in the rural areas, and cultural and natural resources are the major motivations for rural tourism; there is interface between the tourists/visitors and the members of the host community; the rural destination is densely populated; such tourism activities have the capacity to boost the socio-economic life of rural dwellers, among others. From these juxtapositions, rural tourism can be defined as a type of tourism that takes place in the rural areas with cultural and natural attractions as the main motivational factors. Such tourism activities have the capacity for socio-economic transformation of the rural population. In addition to the above, Tsephe and Obono (2013)^[49] infer that such tourism activities create some opportunities for the rural population. These opportunities include foreign exchange generation, creation of employment opportunities, increase in the price of land resources, improvement in the public services, creation of economic opportunities and increase in demand for goods and services in the rural destination among others (Tsephe & Obono, 2013)^[49]. Other values of rural tourism at rural destinations include decrease in rural-urban migration, critical maintenance of natural sites, promotion of indigenous cultures, improvement on agriculture and other rural activities, improvement on the quality of health and education services in the rural areas, improved social

amenities, promotion of rural crafts and agro products, biodiversity preservation and promotion of indigenous value system. More on rural tourism will be discussed later as the study progresses.

More so, sustainable rural tourism is defined as "tourism that is based on the principles of sustainable development" (UNEP & WTO, 2005, p. 11)^[50]. Sustainable development has to do with a development model and practice that considers the three fundamental aspects of the human society: the Past, the Present and the Future (PPF). A development initiative is termed unsustainable if the PPF factor is not represented by the project developers. However, from the definition of sustainable rural tourism by UNEP and WTO (2005)^[50], rural tourism development initiatives should be anchored on the PPF factor to be adjudged sustainable. In line with this conceptualization, UNEP and WTO (2005)^[50] further defined sustainable tourism as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (p. 12. in Saarinen, 2014 p.3)^[43]. There are some basic principles to sustainable rural tourism. These principles are anchored on the fact that the roles of relevant stakeholders are sacrosanct in ensuring a sustainable rural tourism development. To this end, Ezeudji (2015)^[14] classified these stakeholders and their stakes in the tabular illustration below:

Table 2: Stakeholders, their demands and roles in rural tourism development

S. No	Stakeholder group	Demands	Roles
1	Local communities	Income from tourism	Staging events
2	Tourists	What they pay for	Service consumers
3	State governments	Compliance to policy	Policy formulation monitoring and evaluation
4	Local governments	Rural development	Environment impact
5	National environment agencies	Environmental standards	Assessment
6	Tourism authorities	Popularity of destination	Marketing communications
7	Not-for-profit organization	Equity, local empowerment	Initial funding, research and capacity building
8	Tour operators	Returns on their investments	Tourists acquisition

Source: Ezeuduji, 2015 p. 220

These classifications by Ezeuduji (2015) ^[14] is most applicable to sustainable rural tourism development in most African nations like Nigeria where rural tourism potentialities dominate among other tourism potentialities. Although the position of tourism developers and private tourism investors and tourism resources were conspicuously omitted in the table above, a careful articulation of these stakeholders and their stakes would facilitate successful sustainable rural tourism development in parts of Africa. More so, Ezeuduji (2015) ^[14] failed to categorize these stakeholders into major and minor stakeholders. For instance, the host community, tourism resources and the tourists/visitors are the major stakeholders and leaving many others as minor. In support of this, MacDonald & Jolliffe (2003) ^[26] infer that the local residents, attractions and visitors/tourists are the integral part of rural tourism development. This argument has repositioned these three as the fulcrum of major consideration in sustainable rural tourism development.

Moreover, sustainable rural tourism development is further conceptualized by MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003) ^[26] in to different stages. These stages are illustrated in the table below (Table 3);

Table 3: Stages in Sustainable Rural Tourism Development

Stage I	A few residents recognize opportunities and integrate tourism resources into socioeconomic planning.
Stage II	Community groups plan and implement tourism strategies as part of economic development.
Stage III	Developing community partnerships and a formal tourism body to turn plans into enduring attractions.
Stage IV	Fully centralized, cooperative, and long-term planning and marketing of tourism occurs.

Source: MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003, p. 309 ^[26]

It is worthy to note that a sustainable rural tourism development in most African communities may not strictly follow this stages as stated by MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003) ^[26]. This is owing to the fact the most African communities have seemingly peculiar and may not be discussed or analysed as whole as can be found in most communities in Europe and America. African traditional communities are studied independently and their peculiarities observed when planning for a sustainable rural tourism development. Successful studies in rural tourism development in Africa have focused on understanding and analyzing the peculiarity of respective communities (see Ezeuduji, 2005; Okech *et al*, 2012 ^[33]; LO *et al* 2012 ^[25]). Therefore, some degree of success in sustainable rural tourism development is dependent on the peculiarities of factors of the respective communities. That notwithstanding, the propositions in Table 2 above may not be jettisoned completely in rural tourism discuss globally.

More so, responsible rural tourism is another prominent concept in this study that beckons clarifications. This concept has been misconstrued by many with sustainable tourism. In some cases they were used interchangeably or as interdependent concepts. Responsible tourism is a unique concept that was not aimed at interchanging sustainable tourism, but giving a support to the ideals of sustainable tourism. The two concepts are aimed at improving the standard of tourism development on a wider scale. For instance, Godwin (2009) ^[16] defined responsible tourism as those principles and practices of tourism development with a focus on improving the state of a destination for better living and visit. This implies that such tourism development is focused on the welfare of the host and visitor. In another way, responsible tourism "... aims to minimize the negative and maximize the positive social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism in destination communities and environments by promoting ethical consumption and production among all stakeholders" (Saarinen, 2014 p.2) ^[43]. From these two definitions, one can conclude that responsible tourism is 'stakeholder-focused' with the aim of ensuring the acceptance of the project by the major stakeholders. Responsible tourism is a tourism development principle and practices that are focused on guaranteeing the acceptance of the project by the major stakeholders (tourism resources, host community and visitors/tourists). Such initiatives do not impede on the liberty and comfort of any of the major stakeholders in rural tourism development. However, from the understanding of the concept, it is evident that responsible tourism is among the parameters of sustainable tourism since general acceptance of rural tourism development projects guarantees the sustainability of such projects.

Responsible rural tourism development has been identified as among the key success points for rural tourism development. This is simply making tourism initiatives responsible in rural areas to promote sustainability. The question now is who is tourism responsible to in rural areas? In rural areas, the responsibility of tourism lies on the major stakeholders such as the tourism resources, host community and tourists/visitors. Responsibility in tourism has made the tourism industry to be responsible and not seen again as those industries "...that satisfies the commercial imperatives of an international business, yet rarely addresses local development needs" (Ringer, 1998, p. 9) ^[42]. Rural tourism development projects or plans may not be responsible without addressing the concerns of the principal stakeholders on rural tourism especially in African communities. However, the "Responsibility" concept has been identified as paramount in rural tourism development in the 21st century especially where African communities are the focus.

Literature Review

Some literatures have focused on the gains of rural tourism development to the socioeconomic growth of rural areas. Also there have been studies on the distinctive ingenuity of COVID-19 to different strata of economies including the rural economies. However, this section of the study is focused on the gains of rural tourism to rural growth and productivity. For instance, Juan-Jose *et al* (2017)^[20] in their studies affirmed that quality environmental management concerns are paramount in actualising the gains of rural tourism development in Spain. This is because tourism businesses and other investments may subject the tourism destination under serious threat if not checked accordingly. Tang (2017)^[46] is also of the opinion that rural tourism is among the keys to sustainable rural development, but maintained that the development and management of such projects should not be handled without the participation of the host community. This view was supported by Okech, Haghri and George (2012)^[33] when they added that resident attitudes and community participation should be considered if rural tourism can be harnessed to improve poor living condition of people in the rural parts of Luanda and Kenya. In addition, Ling-en, Sheng-Kui, Lin-Sheng, Song-Lin, Bijaya, and Guo-Zhu (2013)^[23] informed that rural tourism have not only raised income for farmers in rural China, but has also transformed the economic opportunities of rural life in China, and play a significant role in the protection of the rural landscape and heritage resources. They concluded by saying that this is dependent on the support from the government to ensure responsibility and sustainability (Ling-en *et al*, 2013)^[23]. The implication of this study is that rural tourism has transformational ingenuity to re-write the economic history of rural economies for better, if properly checked and supported. In support of this proposition Tao, Huang and Ran (2018)^[47] noted that analysis on the sustainable rural tourism development should be based on three principal factors of attractions (A), Towns (T) and Villages (V), in Mufu township in China. However, this study has implications for adequate planning and analysis to maximize the gains of rural tourism development in the rural areas in China.

Moreover, Matic, Djordjevic and Vujic (2019)^[27] are of the view that sustainable rural tourism development would not only encourage people to live in rural areas of Sumadija, but will also preserve the environment of Sumadija. They also assert that cultural tourism should be the basis for tourism development in rural areas coupled with other tourism products with special interests. They concluded by noting that positive attitude from relevant stakeholders towards tourism development in Sumadija should be based on innovation, smart specialization and sustainable development (Matic *et al*, 2019)^[27]. This view is also held by Tolon-Becerra, Lastra-Bravo and Galdeano-Gomez (2010)^[48] when they proposed a Three Pillar Approach to sustainable development. This include-harnessing endogenous potential, developing social capital, and promoting local participative democracy. This would give room to sustainable rural tourism development in rural areas. More so, Giray, Kadakoglu, Cetin and Bamoi (2019)^[15] infer that pre-visit experience by tourists would promote sustainable tourism development in Kuyucak South-West Turkey. This pre-visit experience can only be achieved through articulated rural tourism marketing that is visitor-based. In such cases, visitor motivation and satisfaction

should form the focal point of rural tourism development with the engagement of the critical stakeholders. These studies have implications for sustainable rural tourism development in the rural areas.

Furthermore, another major consideration in this study is COVID-19 as it affects communities. To this end Phillipson, Gorton, Turner, Shucksmith, Aitken-McDermott, Areal, Cowie, Hubbard, Maioli, McAreavey, Souza-Monteiro, Newberry, Panzone, Rowe and Shortfall (2020)^[40] is of the opinion that COVID and its containing measures have caused devastating effects on the rural income when compared with previous pandemics like the Foot and Mountain Disease (FMD) outbreak in 2001 among others. It affected rural agriculture, gender and rural economy especially women, rural resilience, coping and adaptability among others. They concluded by recommending public and private sector support in controlling the devastating effects of COVID on rurality (Phillipson *et al*, 2020)^[40]. In line with this, Ozili (2020)^[36] notes that rural parts of developing nations are among the worst hits of COVID-19. He further revealed that biological crisis can be translated to medical crisis like in the case of COVID-19 in these rural areas. This explains the unprecedented rate of fear for COVID-19 at the rural areas. That notwithstanding, OECD (2020)^[32] is of the view that COVID-19 would give opportunity for social distancing at the rural areas looking at their less populated nature when compared with urban areas. Hence people would prefer visiting areas with less population figures. "For example, in terms of tourism, overcrowded destination might see high reductions in tourism flows, while smaller rural destinations may become more popular. The Veneto (Italy) for examples wants to leverage lesser-known UNESCO heritage sites to shift volumes to different attraction as part of its recovery plan" (OECD, 2020 P. 5)^[32]. This is an attempt to explore the opportunities of COVID-19 pandemic to develop more rural tourism sites in Veneto. They finally summarized their argument in the following lines:

"...rural areas comprise the vast majority of the land, water and other natural resources which are fundamental to absorbing CO₂, providing eco-system services and safeguarding biodiversity. Supporting countries in developing pathways for climate conscious rural economic development will be key to the recovering of COVID-19" (OECD, 2020 p.5)^[32].

This view has opened opportunities for further discussions on exploring the opportunities of COVID-19 for regenerative and responsible rural tourism development in the rural areas.

In addition, Buheji and Ahmed (2020)^[35] are of the view that disease outbreak in a place can be explored for positive opportunities after understanding the visible and hidden risks that are peculiar with the disease outbreak. Understanding of these two categories of risks would guarantee the responsiveness and sustainability of the explored alternatives. Buheji and Ahmed (2020)^[35] further posited that pandemics like COVID-19 can be explored for positive alternatives in a particular place. This can only be possible after understanding the visible and hidden risks of COVID-19. These two major risk categories of covid-19 as informed by Buheji and Ahmed (2020)^[35] are illustrated in the table below (Table 4):

Table 4: Socio-economic visible and hidden risks of covid-19

Visible Risk	Hidden Risk
Risk of cross-infections	Limitation of human development capacity
Risk inside and outside health centre	Being busy with AI while pathogens are getting sophisticated
Limitation of isolation facilities	Stagnant business models
Increase in the interconnectivity	High-rise buildings in global cities with minimal preparedness
Uncontrolled human appetite and desire	Non-availability of global agreed risk management framework
Free market hostility	Low competence in solving socio-economic complex problems
Food born-diseases	Chaos due to global panic

Source: Modified from Buheji & Ahmed, 2020

This is an indication of opportunities of COVID-19 in boosting dwindling economies. More so, Oruonye and Ahmed (2020)^[35] are of the view that covid-19 has caused cancellation of bookings and scheduling in the travel, tourism, hospitality and entertainment industries in Nigeria. This has resulted to great economic loss to the nation in many ramifications (i.e., unemployment, low-income generation, increase in crime rate, low government revenue among others). This may have explained why Amzat, Aminu, Kolo, Akinyele, Ogundairo and Danjibo (2020)^[2] quickly suggested that combination of more articulated social and medical responses from both public and private sector would help in minimizing the devastating impacts of COVID on the Nigerian economy.

Moreover, some studies have been able to look at the destructive impact of COVID on the rural areas. It is imperative that these impacts are considered before making case for harnessing COVID-19 for responsive rural tourism development in Nigeria. For instance, Adelana (2020) notes that poor availability of social infrastructures has made local communities more endangered to COVID-19 pandemic than urban or semi-urban areas. This is owing to the fact that most rural communities lack substantial basic socio amenities. Also, Peters (2020)^[39] informs that infections rate of COVID-19 is much higher in rural America than the cities; which implies that smaller communities in America has high risk factors. In addition, Peters (2020)^[39] went further to develop the COVID-19 susceptibility scale which uses eleven indicators to understand the nature of spread of the disease among nations of Europe and America. And this reveals the vulnerability of rural areas in the face of COVID -19. He concluded by noting that unchecked spread of the disease in the rural areas may promote ethnic sentiments and rural discrimination among rural population (Peter, 2020)^[39]. More so, Hasan, Ismail and Islam (2017)^[17] had highlighted the integral position of safety and security issues in tourist risk perception of a destination; that despite the other contents or attractions in a particular destination, the decision to visit and enjoy is crucial in the mind of tourists. Also, that in the event of health risk factors, tourists are very careful in visiting or revisiting places for tourism experience (Hasan *et al*, 2017)^[17].

In conclusion, these studies have been able to highlight the position of regenerative and responsible rural tourism development to rural life and economy. They presented rural tourism as among the major alternatives in revamping rural economies. Some other studies also noted the devastating tendencies of COVID-19 to economies, more especially

rural economies. Most of these studies have succeeded in drawing a wide gap between rural areas and COVID-19 without considering other alternatives for exploring the opportunities of COVID-19 for regenerative and responsible rural tourism development. However, this study sought to explore possible opportunities of COVID-19 for regenerative and responsible rural tourism development in Southeast Nigeria. This is necessary hence pandemic has become a recurring decimal in global trajectory.

Results and Discussion

This aspect of the study will present and discuss the various data as collated during the study. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in their 2020 publication proposed various strategies of harnessing the opportunities of COVID-19 pandemic for responsible rural development. See the illustration in the Table below: The propositions of OECD (2020)^[32] were considered in designing the interview and other research guide for the study. These propositions were investigated during the study, including other opportunities that were identified in the course of the study.

Table 5: Opportunities emerging with the covid-19 crisis for rural development

Higher relevance to enhance quality and use of digital tools/broadband in rural areas
Remote distributed work might increase linkages between rural and urban areas
Shift in consuming habits can favour local products and destinations
Greater awareness to ensure accessibility to quality services (e-health, e-education, etc)
Reshoring of strategic industries that were once delocalized (i.e., raw materials)
Momentum to accelerate a just transition towards a low-carbon economy for rural communities
Mobilise and strengthen local networks and cooperative structures to face future shocks

Source: OECD, 2020 p. 6^[32]

However, the application of the above listed opportunities was considered for possible opportunities for regenerative and responsible rural tourism in Southeast Nigeria, in the face of pandemic like COVID-19. For instance, the possibility of the opportunity of Use of digital tools was investigated. The result shows that as occasioned by COVID in Southeast Nigeria would strengthen rural tourism through enhanced quality and use of digital tools in rural areas. This is because COVID-19 has imposed necessary digitization platforms that people would have been reluctant to accept under normal circumstance. The numerous internet platforms would aid in the marketing and promotion of various rural tourism resources. For instance, e-conferences, zooms, e-marketing, etc, would enable for online marketing of rural tourism destinations. A well-developed web page for a rural tourism destination can generate profits on daily basis from the huge online traffic. For instance, this opportunity can be harnessed for sites like Ezeagu Tourist Complex in Enugu State, Awhum site in Enugu State, Ikeja masquerade festivals in Arochukwu, Ndiowu, Arondizuogu, Ajalli, Ndikelionwu, ekpe masquerade festival among the Akwa-Ibom and Cross River communities, Argungu Fishing Festival, Odo and Omabe masquerade festivals in Nsukka area, among others. These

rural tourism destinations that were hardly visited despite their rich attractions, can harness various e-platforms that was occasioned by COVID-19 for image-making, rebranding and marketing. During the focus group discussion sessions, it was deduced from the informants that despite the direct ravaging effect of the pandemic on the local economy, it has promoted their cultural heritage resources in the internet. Also, that this exposure does not only promote the tourism resources but also their rich heritage values across the globe. More so one of the key informants expressed his opinion in the following lines:

“I have imagined the kind of global visibility we and our cultural resources would enjoy if quality digital tools occasioned by the COVID, are used to promote our heritage resources” (Kanu, 2021. Personal communication).

The implication is that these communities in the study area are opened to embracing the used of digital tools in marketing their rich heritage resources. That notwithstanding, some of the informants insisted that such digital tools providers may need to work together with the host community to properly edit every information before exposing them to the global village. This is to ensure the authenticity of what is represented. Most of the rich cultural festivals and masquerade displays stated above can leverage on the opportunity to gain quality global visibility. Digital tools have been identified as among the opportunities for cultural heritage promotion and preservation (Arnod, 2007; Bendicho, Gutierrez, Vincent & Leon, 2017; Nwankwo & Onyemechal, 2022; Onyemechal, Osinem, and Nwankwo, 2022) [4, 6, 31, 34]. With this, it can be concluded that opportunities of the use of digital tools as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, can be leveraged for regenerative and responsible rural tourism in Southeast Nigeria.

More so, Restrictions on movements was investigated. This second opportunity infers that covid-19 have conditioned the human society to uninformed specialization through restrictions on movements. In this case, while those in the urban areas work in the urban areas, those in the rural areas concentrate on the rural businesses and industries. This would invariably hinder the destructive rural-urban migration syndrome and boost the rural economy. This is an opportunity for the rural population to harness their various tourism resources and boost rural tourism opportunities in the rural areas. Rural-urban migration syndrome has long been identified as among the major challenges of rural tourism development in many developing nations (Tsephe & Obono, 2013; Juan-Jose *et al*, 2017; Tang, 2017) [49, 20, 46]. Hence it gives less relevance to rural life and the environment. For instance, communities like Ajali, Ikire, Kajuru, Oron, Owerre-ezukala, Enugu-Ezike, Ezeagu, Orlu, Ogbunike, Agulu, Ndiowu, Opi, Enugu-Ezike, Ikot, Alifeke, Ijebu, Unadu, Obima, among others, in Southeast Nigeria, have great potentialities for rural tourism development but have been deterred by the ever-present rural-urban migration syndrome. For instance, many of these communities like Owerre-ezukala, Opi, Unadu, Obimo, Ajali have astonishing caves that have not been harnessed but left to be covered by tick forest. Most of the informants assert that there has been reduced pressure on their heritage resources as a result of these restrictions on movement as occasioned by COVID-19 lockdowns in Southeast Nigeria. Few of these informants

have different opinion in this regard. They were of the view that these restrictions have reduced the number of visitors they receive, with resultant negative economic implications on the local economy. It is obvious that the reduction in visitor statistics will affect patronage negatively, but on the other hand, it will boost opportunities for regenerative tourism effects on those tourism resources; at the same time encourage responsible rural tourism development. Hussain (2021) [18] and Duxbury *et al* (2021) [12], in their separate studies affirm that regenerative tourism is most likely to thrive in rural destinations with reduced pressure on the existing tourism resources. However, it can be deduced that the restriction on movements occasioned by COVID-19 had the potentialities to boost regenerative and responsible rural tourism in those rural communities in Southeast Nigeria.

In addition, Shift in consuming habit was another critical opportunity that was engaged in the study. COVID-19 restriction has almost affected consuming habits on both edible and non-edible products and services. People are restricted to patronise products and services that are within this locality because of restrictions on movements and travels. What this implies is that, there was restriction in inter-state and inter-community movement of goods and services to check the spread of the virus. This idea was said to have boosted patronage on local products and destinations hence the limited options. It is a motivation for socio-economic activities in the rural areas. The stakeholders who have major roles to play in boosting regenerative and responsible rural tourism opportunities in these rural areas were motivated to live in these rural areas and make impact in harnessing rural tourism opportunities like festivals, traditional dances, natural and historic landscapes, among others. These traditional stakeholders in the rural areas include the married women (Alutara di), daughters (Umuada), kinsmen (Umunna), traditional titled men, youths, age grades, etc. Many of the informants agreed to the fact that COVID-19 restrictions orchestrated the dynamism experienced in their consuming habit. One of them specifically noted that “...I learnt to eat the traditional ‘Ayaraya Ji’ of Nsukka people within this period due to limited diet options in the community” (Mrs Uju Ezema. Personal communication, 2020). Also, many of them could not travel outside the community within this period. It also resulted in huge local participation in traditional festivals and other traditional functions. For instance, informants from Ndiowu, Ndiokwenu and Ndiokpaleke informed that there was huge local participation in Ikeji masquerade display of 2020 season, and that this also enabled for a proper and organised management of the cultural events within their communities. Responsible rural tourism is motivated by this local involvement in their traditional affairs as this will help to preserve and protect their traditional value system and make the various stakeholders more responsive to the ideals of regenerative and responsible rural tourism development (Aref & Gill, 2009; Irshad, 2010; Tsephe & Obono, 2013; Dashper, 2014; Juan-Rose *et al*, 2017) [3,19, 49, 10, 20].

There is also **Access to quality basic services**. COVID was said to have boosted greater awareness for access to quality basic services like e-health and e-education in Southeast Nigeria. Various levels of government, charity organisations, NGO's, philanthropists, and religious organisations provided these communities with various e-health and e-education opportunities to boost learning and

access to health services during the COVID-19 lockdown in Southeast Nigeria. People are now having reasonable health and education services through the various online platforms. Internet has given the rural dwellers the opportunity to access the same information with people living in other parts of the world, at the same time and the same information. This has implications for the reduction in mass exodus of people from rural to the urban areas. One of the major challenges of rural tourism is the neglect on some tourism resources like traditional dance, festivals, masquerading, etc, by chief custodians and performers, for greener pastures in the urban areas. This attitude had affected traditional dances like Mkpokiti in Umunze, Okponshi masquerade in parts of Anambra, Ijere masquerade in parts of Awka and Enugu State, Owu masquerade in parts to Imo State, Ikeji masquerade in parts Imo, Anambra, Akwa-Ibom, and Abia States, Omabe and odo masquerade in some parts of Enugu state, among others. Such information encourages rural living among people in rural parts of Nigeria. And until a reasonable number of these custodians and performers of various tourism resources are much available in the rural areas, the idea of regenerative and responsible rural tourism would be still be a mirage. This is another motivation for regenerative and responsible rural tourism in various rural communities in Southeast Nigeria.

More so, *Reshoring of strategic industries that were initially delocalized* was investigated. COVID-19 crisis has enabled for the reshoring of strategic industries that were initially delocalized. This gives opportunity for more employment options in the rural areas, among other benefits. People are now engaged in white collar jobs in the rural areas. Most of these companies were compelled to have more of the rural people in their workforce. This mobilized and strengthened local networks, and cooperative structure to face future shucks as noted by OECD (2020, p. 6)^[32]. COVID-19 was sudden and that led to the huge impact on both local and urban economies. The devastating effect has helped these economies to reposition their strategies in the event of future occurrence of similar pandemics or any other unforeseen distractions. Localisation of industries boosted the local economies of these traditional communities that were investigated in the course of this study. This encouraged rural-living among members of these traditional communities and discouraged rural-urban migration, which is devastating to the stability of rural economy. Many of the custodians and participants of various heritage resources in these traditional communities were discouraged from leaving their communities for greener pastures. Participants during focus group discussion sessions in Ajalli, Nru, Arondizuogu, Ndiokpaleke, and Ezeagu noted that many of them were happy to work in their communities. This has a huge direct positive impact for regenerative and responsible tourism opportunities in these communities.

Transition to low-carbon economy was another critical opportunity that was investigated in the course of the study. OECD (2020)^[32] noted that COVID-19 have given the opportunity to mobilize for a transition to a low-carbon economy for rural communities. The implication of this claim was verified with respect to the principles regenerative and responsible rural tourism in Southeast Nigeria. Observations and interactions with various sample frames for the study revealed that there was huge reduction in vehicular movements across Nigeria as occasioned by COVID-19 lock-down order by the Federal Government of

Nigeria, has reduced the rate of carbon emission in those rural areas in Southeast Nigeria that were sampled for the study. It has supported the kind of serene, natural and quite atmosphere the traditional rural areas in Africa are originally known for, hence before the pandemic, many people were interested in visiting rural areas for relaxation, recreation and holidaying. Conducive and serene environment supports the ideals of regenerative tourism, and also boost the opportunities of developing various tourism resources for rural tourism development in Southeast Nigeria. For instance, excessive carbon emission from automobiles depletes the ozone layer, and this has devastating effects on the biodiversity. When this occurs, the opportunities of regenerative tourism are debased. Most of the tourism resources (both cultural and natural) are endangered to excessive heat from the sun. Materials for masquerade and other festival regalia among others are not left out as noted by the informants. This has shown that the opportunity of transition to low-carbon economy as occasioned by COVID-19 pandemic has positive implications for the survival of regenerative and responsible tourism in Southeast Nigeria. Lastly, *Reduction in tourist flow* was identified in the course of the study. It is no more news that COVID-19 outbreak has drastically reduced tourist traffic to both urban and rural tourism destinations. Most rural tourism destinations in Nigeria and some other sub-Saharan Africa have limited space for tourist activities. As a result, unrestricted tourism traffic has not only decimated the natural landscape of such destinations, but also, tourist comfort and host community's activities. This has in some places raised unnecessary hostilities between the three principal factors of rural tourism (tourism resources, host community and visitors/tourists). A very good example is the Awhum tourist site, Ezeagu Tourist Complex, Ogbunike Cave, Ajalli Cave, among others. However, with the restriction of movements during COVID, these rural tourism sites had the opportunities of reduced traffic and natural recovery strategy for the rural landscape that was almost depleted by huge tourist traffic. For instance, Ezeagu tourist site, Awhum tourist site, Ogbunike cave, Ajalli cave etc, have witnessed various recovery of their respective landscape features as a result of movement restrictions, as informed by the informants during the study. These informants also noted that various rural tourism promoters, developers and planners were availed with the opportunity of reorientation of the host communities, feedback mechanisms and re-strategisation for regenerative and responsible rural tourism development in Southeast Nigeria. They may explore the organization of town hall meetings for these communities; engage in further consultations and discussions with the relevant stakeholders, and renegotiations as the case may be. It will also give rural tourism developers the opportunity for evaluation strategies to reposition the rural landscape for tourism activities after the pandemic, and also ascertain the current state of most of the tourism resources in the rural areas to make way for regenerative tourism. It will also avail them with the opportunity to appraise their activities so far and the various responses from the principal factors in rural tourism (tourism resources, host community and visitors/tourists). This feedback mechanism would enable for a re-strategization to reposition the rural landscape for a regenerative and responsible rural tourism in Southeast Nigeria. Hence, evaluation and feedback strategies have

been identified in some literatures as among the keys to regenerative and responsible rural tourism (Mihalic, 2016; Saarinen, 2014; Juan-Jose *et al*, 2017; Okech *et al*, 2012; Matic *et al*, 2019; Ling-en *et al*, 2013; Giray *et al*, 2019) ^[29].
43, 20, 33, 27, 23, 15]

Conclusion

So far, constructive arguments with responsive points have been presented on exploring the COVID-19 opportunities for regenerative and responsible rural tourism in Southeast Nigeria. This is critical owing to the fact that among the causes of host-visitor hostilities in some rural tourism destination in Nigeria is the depletion of the rural landscape as a result of congestion and overcrowding. Key informants that were purposively and conveniently sampled during this study, informed that they were always afraid of having their rural landscape destroyed by incessant tourist activities including the fear of decimation of their irreplaceable cultural heritage resources like dance, masquerading, festivals, and other cultural practices. Also, that this has always arouse hostilities from some cultural groups like the Umuada, Aluteradi, Age Grade, Youths and Title holders against tourist activities in their respective communities. Fortunately for them, the restriction on movements as a result of covid-19 have drastically reduced unnecessary congestion and overcrowding, thereby giving some fresh air to their rural landscape including cultural heritage resources. A very good example was witnessed during the popular Ikeji festival in March 2021 at Ndiowu, Ndikelionwu, Ndiokoro, Ndiokpaleke, Ndiokpaleze, Arondizuogu, and Ajalli traditional communities in parts of Anambra and Imo states. Observation showed that there was drastic drop in the number of visitors to these communities unlike what was obtainable before COVID-19. The hostility level was drastically minimised, hence a much increase in the hospitality level among the host and their manageable number of visitors. This peaceful atmosphere enabled for a smooth digital coverage of the Ikeji festival in some of these communities, for both marketing and documentation.

In conclusion, results of the study have shown that opportunities of COVID-19 can be explored for regenerative responsible rural tourism in rural parts of Southeast Nigeria. This includes opportunities of low-carbon economy, shift in consuming habit, carrying capacity management, opportunities of digital tools for rural tourism destination marketing, opportunities for feedbacks and evaluation mechanisms, opportunities for recovery strategy for rural tourism resources, among others. However, this does not imply that COVID-19 has done much for rural tourism initiatives and should be encouraged. Hence COVID-19 has devastating effect on economies as can be found in the literature (Amzat *et al*, 2020 ^[2]; Buheji & Ahmed, 2020 ^[9]). To this end, the study was aimed at using another eye to x-ray COVID-19 to see if it would offer some opportunities for responsible rural tourism, not minding its devastating effects. Finally, policy makers, researches and developers are invited to explore the opportunities of covid-19 for regenerative and responsible rural tourism in Southeast and other parts of Nigeria including other nations in Sub-Saharan countries of Africa. Rural tourism initiatives need not to be abandoned in the face of pandemic. Various facets of the global economy have been restarted not minding the second wave and subsequent waves of the pandemic as recorded in some parts of the globe. Sports and its related

activities is a very good example. Sporting activities have since commenced but with cautions to check the spread of the virus. Policy makers, researchers and developers, can leverage on the opportunities of COVID-19 as identified and discussed in the study, to actualize a sustainable regenerative and responsible rural tourism in Southeast Nigeria and other parts of Africa.

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