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# The Impact of COVID-19 on Small-Scale Sporting Events in South Africa

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**Abstract:** This article evaluates the impact that COVID-19 has had on small-scale sporting events within the context of South Africa. To this end, it considers the impacts that the pandemic has had on these types of events, and reflects on the strategic direction in the management and organisation of these events going forward. To achieve this, a content analysis of existing frameworks and documentary analysis of government policies and strategies, coupled with interviews with stakeholders involved in the organisation and management of small-scale sporting events domain was conducted. Through a purposive sampling technique, as well as snowballing, key stakeholders in the small-scale sporting event domain were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. The key findings revealed that small-scale sport events experienced great financial loss due to the global pandemic which resulted in some of these events having to cease their operations during the hard lockdown levels. However, the lessons learnt during these times have offered event organisers ideas and guidelines for dealing with future external shocks. A key observation is made for increased governmental support for small-scale sporting events in this regard. This research forms a basis for improved understanding of sport tourism, and specifically small-scale events especially in changing times.

**Keywords:** sport tourism, small-scale events, COVID-19, South Africa, environmental management

## Introduction

The sport tourism sector has grown considerably over the last few decades and has thus become one of the leading sectors in the global tourism industry which has led to significant academic attention (Gibson, 2013; Hinch et al., 2016; Nyikana and Tichaawa, 2018a; McKay et al., 2019; Hemmonsbey and Tichaawa, 2020; Higham, 2021). Growth in the sector has been especially observed in the emerging world, resulting in increased research focus which seeks to analyse the socio-economic implications of the sector on these economies (Gibson, 2017; Swart et al., 2018; Tichaawa et al., 2018; Tinaz and Knott, 2021; Nyikana et al., 2021; Higham, 2021). The rapid development of the sport tourism sector in this region has significantly contributed to the overall growth of the tourism industry because it is a vibrant sector that presents various socio-economic as well as environmental benefits for sporting destinations in this context (United Nations, 2020; Higham, 2021; Mchunu et al., 2021). Many countries, especially those in the Global South have recognised the benefits offered by the sport tourism sector, and as a result, have sought to develop their countries by strategically promoting sporting events, specifically major and mega-events in order to achieve this aim (Fourie and Santana-Gallego, 2011; Njoroge et al., 2017; Bama and Tichaawa, 2020a). Hemmonsbey and Tichaawa (2019) argue that sport tourism has, indeed, contributed towards the socio-economic growth of many African countries including South Africa, Gabon and Cameroon amongst others. However, they have also observed that some developing countries have somewhat become overly-dependent on sport tourism for economic growth. This is evident in the current state of the world, where countries are actually trying to find ways to revive the sport tourism sector so as to aid in the recovery of the tourism sector especially in the economies that have been most significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Daniels and Tichaawa, 2021). The importance of the sport tourism sector is further emphasised by observations that sport tourism, as a tourism activity, is used to market host destinations owing to its ability to serve as a multi-purpose tool for development and marketing (Hinch and Higham, 2011; Uvinha et al., 2018). Additionally, the sector has been used by many countries as a development tool, and a vehicle for fast-tracking economic growth and as a regeneration tool for local economic development (LED) (Badurina et al., 2020; Nyikana and Tichaawa, 2020). Resultantly, many countries have sought to focus on revitalizing and relaunching sport tourism so as to fast-track economic growth in the face of the COVID-19 global pandemic and beyond.

Beyond the often-mentioned economic benefits that the sector brings, sport tourism is also associated with other implications such as the improvement in the wellbeing of residents, increased employment opportunities and improved infrastructure specifically transportation systems, as well as enhanced environmental awareness (Knott et al., 2015a; Bama and Tichaawa, 2020b; Mchunu et al., 2021). Some scholars (Malchrowicz-Mosko and Munsters, 2018; Zarotis, 2020) have observed that sporting events, as a sport tourism product, promote cultural diversity during their hosting. They argue that this is because sporting events provide insights into the cultural dynamics of the host destination and the events allow for cultural learning to take place among attendees from different cultural

backgrounds. Therefore, sport event tourism, which is an integral part of sport tourism, is considered a tourist attraction because sporting events attract tourists to host destinations and the events positively influence seasonality patterns as well as increased tourist numbers (Wise and Harris, 2017; Richelieu, 2018). Moreover, sporting events promote host destinations as attractive tourist attractions which influences repeat visits to the host destination (Kotus, 2016; Nyikana and Tichaawa, 2020).

According to Tichaawa et al. (2018), sport tourism influences stakeholder relationships between governments, event organisers, businesses and local communities, and such sport tourism stakeholders are interconnected as they share similar characteristics such as the love of sports. In this sense, sport tourism can be seen as an interactive field, and the success and continuity of the field is highly dependent on different stakeholder groups interacting with the sector (Clarkson, 1995; Reid, 2006). As such, sport tourism events of different magnitudes are affected by this interconnectedness, and their direction in the face of external shocks is determined by such fruitful interactions. In the context of the current study, the argument is that all tourism types have been largely devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic from its initial emergence (Bama and Nyikana, 2021; Lekgau et al., 2021; Mbatha et al., 2021; Daniels and Tichaawa, 2021; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2021 and 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic caused disturbances in the success and continuity of the sport tourism sector, and has affected many stakeholders in the sector. This devastation has led to the need for empirical research seeking to unpack the effects of the pandemic on tourism activities, specifically sport tourism events. This paper specifically focuses on the impacts of the pandemic on small-scale sport events in the context of South Africa from the perspective of event organisers. We argue that this typology of events has greatly been affected by the pandemic more so than other typologies of sport events and the restrictions initially placed on the sector has slowed down the growth of small-scale sport events. This study, therefore, offers recommendations that may aid in the kick-starting of small-scale sport events post-pandemic. In terms of organisation and structure, the first section of this paper presents the literature review which focuses on small-scale sport events in the context of developing countries and the impact of COVID-19 on small-scale sport events. This is followed by an explanation of the research methods applied for this study. Thereafter, the findings are discussed and conclusion as well recommendations are provided.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Nature of small-scale sporting events***

For many decades, major and mega sporting events dominated sport event tourism literature with small-scale sport events receiving little research attention from sport tourism scholarship (Gibson et al., 2012; Yuan, 2013; Kwiatkowski, 2015). However, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in small-scale sport events and several research studies have advocated for this typology of events to be equally analysed for better comprehension, analysis and evaluation (Gibson et al., 2012; Dingle and Mallen, 2021; Mchunu et al., 2021). These studies have highlighted

the socio-economic benefits of hosting regular small-scale sport events, arguing that these events create long-term benefits that are sustainable for host destinations (Badurina et al., 2020; Van Rheenen et al., 2021). As a result, developing countries are increasingly paying more attention to small-scale sport events because of the potential benefits presented by this typology of events to fast-track economic development and to build strategic, reliable event portfolios (Bob and Swart 2010; Chalip, 2017; Ardiet et al., 2021; Cernaianu et al., 2021). In fact, Mchunu et al. (2021) point out that hosting regular small-scale sport events is in fact more feasible for developing countries since these events require less financial resources compared to larger events. In any case, there are very few countries on the African continent that have successfully hosted major and mega-events, and as such, some scholars suggest that hosting small-scale sport events is more realistic for developing countries (Nyikana et al., 2021). Higham (1999) as well as Hemmonsbey and Tichaawa (2019) further suggest that countries that wish to develop their sport tourism sectors should consider hosting regular small-scale sporting events as such events will positively contribute towards the marketing and branding of host destinations which will assist developing countries in gaining competitive advantages.

Some scholars (Gibson et al., 2012; Fotiadis et al., 2016; Nyikana and Tichaawa, 2018b) argue that small-scale sport events have the potential to improve the socio-economic challenges faced by local communities especially in rural and peripheral destinations. Others (Hemmonsbey and Tichaawa, 2019; McKay et al., 2019) posit that small-scale sport events create more socio-economic benefits for local communities, and as a result these events should be prioritized by local governments as they contribute to sustainable LED and social cohesion. More importantly, small-scale sport events encourage spectators and participants to consume local products and to visit local tourist attractions which results in the development of local economies (Radicchi, 2013; Kwiatkowski and Könecke, 2017; Revindo et al., 2021). According to Taks et al. (2015) as well as Gibson et al. (2012) small-scale sport events are more practical for local communities and rural destinations, because these events are budget-friendly which makes it easily accessible to all stakeholders. Moreover, small-scale sport events mostly operate within existing infrastructure, and in most cases, these events do not require bidding fees thereby lessening the financial burden on developing countries (Giampiccoli et al., 2015; Mchunu et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2012). As a result, some have argued that hosting regular small-scale sport events presents local communities with opportunities to build sustainable partnerships with other stakeholders and to market their communities as sporting destinations (Taks et al., 2015; Hemmonsbey and Tichaawa, 2019). In this case, small-scale sporting events then become practical and realistic for local communities as the events present opportunities for communities to create their own legacies from which local residents will benefit in the long-term.

According to Higham (1999), small-scale sport events are regular-season, domestic sporting competitions such as soccer, rugby and cricket leagues. Based on this definition, it is evident that the nature of small-scale sport events attracts relatively less spectators when compared to larger sporting events, and that the recurring nature of small-scale sport events is likely to influence repeat visits to

destinations (Gibson et al., 2012). Consequently, the recurring nature of these events can be effectively used as a platform for pro-environmental education through which certain campaigns can be launched for this purpose. For example, they can be used to promote and influence sustainable tourism in host destinations (Gibson et al., 2012; Duglio and Beltramo, 2017; Casper et al., 2020). In fact, small-scale sport events are said to better comply with the principles of sustainable tourism because this typology of events does not harm the environment and rather creates sustainable opportunities for local communities that will benefit future generations as well (Liu, 2003). The above discussion reveals that small-scale sport tourism events can play an important role in the development of many destinations, if well-planned and organised. However, for this to be achieved, the implications of external shocks, such as the topical COVID-19 pandemic have to be considered. The next subsection presents a discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications on the sport tourism sector, and sporting events in particular.

### ***Contextualising sporting events in the COVID-19 era***

Sport event tourism in South Africa has experienced significant growth in the last two decades, and the government has largely focused on continuously growing the sector by marketing and branding the country as a world-renowned sporting destination (Knott et al., 2015b; Nyikana, 2016; Swart et al., 2018; McKay et al., 2019; Daniels and Tichaawa, 2021). South Africa has hosted a series of major and mega-sporting events that have contributed towards the socio-economic development of the country (Bama and Tichaawa, 2020b). More importantly the growth of sport event tourism in South Africa has encouraged other developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa to bid and successfully host major sporting events (Achu et al., 2015). However, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 respiratory disease, the sector's growth has slowed down due to the significant impacts caused by the global pandemic (Gössling et al., 2020; Nhamo et al., 2020; Gibson and Fairley, 2022; Kennelly, 2022). Many countries across the globe had to cancel and/or postpone all types of sporting events in the last two years due to the restrictions placed on the sport event tourism sector (Keshkar et al., 2021; Daniels and Tichaawa, 2021; Margvelashvili, 2021). The various actions taken by countries in response to COVID-19 restrictions increased debates on the sustainability of sport event tourism in the era of COVID-19, although such fears are not as dominant now that the pandemic has slowed down significantly (Gössling et al., 2020; Keshkar et al., 2021). For countries in the Global South, specifically developing countries, the restrictions placed on the sport event tourism sector brought forth harsher impacts because of the lack of financial resources to maintain developing economies during the global pandemic. Chuchu et al. (2021) argue that not only did the pandemic have an impact on the global economy, but it has also affected the psychosocial state of athletes and sport fans across the globe because the restrictions placed on the industry prevented social gatherings that provided social support as well as motivation for stakeholders in the sector. Weed (2020) and Margvelashvili (2021) further note that during the first year of the global pandemic, most sport fans experienced sport nostalgia which proves that sport events are fundamental for social interactions as the core purpose of

sporting events is to bring stakeholders from different backgrounds together to experience new cultures and explore new destinations during sporting events. Subsequently, Hemmonsbey et al. (2021) posit that the pandemic will Kotze e the social behaviour and travelling patterns of sport tourists because of the different COVID-19 restrictions that were implemented in different countries that limited social interactions during events or restricted sport tourists from attending events.

In the extant research on sport tourism, the sport event tourism sector has proven to be quite susceptible to crises. The pandemic revealed that many countries did not have an effective crisis management strategy in order to deal with global pandemics or strategies to effectively navigate the various restrictions placed upon the sector (Hemmonsbey et al., 2021; Daniels and Tichaawa, 2021). This implies that if another external shock were to be experienced in future, the sector would still not be adequately prepared, particularly from a regulatory or strategic point of view therefore the sector would remain susceptible to external shocks. The United Nations (UN)(2020) as well as Daniels and Tichaawa (2021) note that despite the impact of the pandemic on sport tourism, the sector has demonstrated its ability to overcome crises since the sector is known to be quite resilient and it is already showing signs of recovery. More recent sport tourism literature has focused on the recovery of the sector, and stakeholders are currently developing strategies that will aid in the sustainable recovery of sport event tourism (Keshkar et al., 2021; Daniels and Tichaawa, 2021; Hemmonsbey et al., 2021; Kennelly, 2022). However, while the pandemic was an external shock and could not have been predicted, the approach being adopted is one that is largely reactionary. As mentioned earlier, sport tourism contributes to the growth of the tourism industry globally. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) (2021), states that sport tourism is important in the sustainable recovery of the tourism industry, and therefore, different strategies should be developed and implemented which would fast-track the recovery process. Different strategies that could be implemented in order to aid in the recovery of sport tourism have been put forward (Hemmonsbey et al., 2021; UNWTO, 2021). These strategies include the development and implementation of effective risk-communication and management strategies, adhering to the COVID-19 action plans, community engagement plans and the urgent return of mega-sporting events amongst others. Despite such strategies being proposed, the focus still largely leans towards high profile sporting events with limited research studies including small-scale sporting events in the recovery process of the sport tourism sector despite this typology of events exhibiting great potential to aid in the recovery process. In any case, the recovery of sport tourism will depend on the involvement of all stakeholders and investing in all types of events including small-scale sport events to fast-track the recovery of the sport event sector. An advocacy brief by the UN (2021) further recommends collaborations and partnerships between governments, health care services, and the sport tourism sector itself so as to ensure a safe and healthy sporting environment in the post-pandemic era. This study is conceptualised from this ideal, in terms of which the small-scale sporting events sector is reimagined beyond the COVID-19 period, particularly as relating to recovery. The next section of the paper presents the methodological processes that were followed for this study.

## Methodology

This study was conducted in the City of Johannesburg, South Africa. The City of Johannesburg, located in the province of Gauteng, has experienced significant growth in the tourism industry in the past two decades, becoming one of the leading tourist destinations in South Africa (Rogerson and Sims, 2012; Booyens and Rogerson, 2019). The city has several well-known destinations that attract different types of tourists ranging from international tourists to domestic (City of Johannesburg, n.d). The City of Johannesburg is considered the economic hub of the province and entire country, with the tourism sector significantly contributing to the rapid economic growth and urban regeneration of the Gauteng province (Pandy and Rogerson, 2019; City of Johannesburg, n.d). The tourism sector in the city has created employment opportunities, promoted social cohesion and improved the transportation systems and other infrastructure. The City of Johannesburg has a thriving events sector which has been named the 'exhibition capital' of the country because it attracts a great number of Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions tourists (MICE) (South African Tourism [SAT], 2019; Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2021). Furthermore, the city is home to many internationally recognized conference facilities that attracts international events as well (Gauteng Tourism Authorities [GTA], 2019). Additionally, the city has world-renowned sporting facilities that have hosted various sporting events ranging from international mega-events such as the 2010 FIFA World Cup to small-scale sport events such as the Varsity Cup games. The city is known to attract domestic and regional sport tourists that attend annual sporting events such as the famous Soweto Derby (football game between two of the country's biggest football clubs). According to Langkilde (2016) and Meyer (2021), approximately 10% of foreign tourists that use Johannesburg as a point of entry into the country through the Oliver Tambo International Airport are sport tourists. The authors argue that since Johannesburg is the most used point of entry into the country for many sport tourists, their sporting experience essentially starts in the City of Johannesburg. Therefore, the City of Johannesburg was chosen as the study area for the present study, owing to its great sport management reputation and its proclaimed title as 'Africa's sporting capital' that has demonstrated potential as a sporting destination (Rogerson, 2012). The frequency at which small-scale sport events are held in Johannesburg presented the authors with the intellectual opportunity to collect data in the area considering that sport tourism and COVID-19 research in the context of Johannesburg remains an under-researched area.

A content analysis of existing sport tourism frameworks and guidelines was conducted as well as a documentary analysis of government policies and strategies particularly relating to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, a qualitative research approach was adopted, whereby semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with small-scale sport event organisers (n=12). Currently in South Africa, there is no known database for small-scale sport events or for event organisers that are responsible for this typology of events. As suggested by Daniels and Tichaawa (2021), sport tourism in South Africa has a strong domestic characteristic to it, with many attendees being locals and many such events occurring

in localized spaces and thus not being part of formal governmental regulation. In fact, Mchunu et al. (2021) suggest that the domestic nature of small-scale events make it difficult to have accurate databases and figures for the frequency of these events before the pandemic and beyond due to the informality that can be observed at the small-scale local levels. The researchers, thus, purposively identified three event organisers that possess extensive knowledge and involvement with small-scale sport events in Johannesburg. Thereafter, a snowball sampling technique was adopted, wherein the identified participants were asked to refer the researchers to other event organisers in Johannesburg who had the required information and knowledge on small-scale sport events. The key stakeholders for this research were purposively selected owing to their extensive experiences with small-scale sport events in Johannesburg. This allowed the researcher to probe for in-depth information from the participants in relation to their experiences and intentions for the sector in the face of the pandemic. Given that the focus of the study was a largely exploratory enquiry into the impacts of the pandemic, emphasis was on experiences and views relating to how small-scale event organisers experienced the pandemic in Johannesburg.

The interviews were conducted virtually using the Zoom application and Microsoft Teams. The participants were provided with the interview schedule prior to the actual interview and were also provided with information about the purpose of the interview and the project overall. The interviewees were made aware of the fact that they could withdraw their consent to participate in the project at any given time in the event that they felt uncomfortable or were unable to continue with the interview. More importantly, permission to record the interviews was requested and granted by all participants. On average, each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, although others were about an hour long. The structure of the interviews allowed the interviewer to be flexible and probe further to gain a better understanding of the research issues (De Vos et al., 2011). The semi-structured interviews consisted of questions regarding the effects of COVID-19 on small-scale sport events as well as the implications of this for the sector going forward. The virtual interviews were recorded and manually transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were then analysed using the thematic analysis technique whereby themes were identified from the in-depth discussions with the key stakeholders, and these are discussed in the section below.

## **Results and discussions**

This section presents the perceived socio-economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on small-scale sport events. Small-scale sport events have been one of the key drivers for economic and domestic tourism growth in many local communities prior to the global pandemic. Such growth has significantly contributed towards local development and has supported small businesses around the venues that depended on the regular events for financial stability (Keshkar et al., 2021; Mchunu et al., 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected their contribution to local economic growth which has caused uncertainty regarding the growth of this typology of events post-pandemic. The interviewees stressed the



negative implications that the pandemic has had on the sector, emphasising the unexpected nature of such impacts on their operations. They noted that small-scale sport events had experienced great financial loss during the global pandemic, as some of these events depended on sponsors. Such sponsorship allowed them to host reoccurring events while other small-scale event organisers depended on league affiliation fees from participants in order to maintain the financial backing for the events. In this regard, it is evident that the foremost impact on the sector was financial. Due to the global pandemic, many of these small-scale sport events have not been able to recover from the financial setbacks. For instance, one of the participants that organises university small-scale events expressed this concern in the following manner:

*“The problem that many small-scale sport event organisers face is that of financial constraints. For instance, without sponsorship many small-scale sport events will not take place as frequently as they should and that has been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. We [event organisers] did not have enough money before COVID-19 to host regular sport events and now, we have less money because of it [COVID-19]. Bigger events have the luxury to decline sponsors and the events will still take place and generate economic benefits which is not the case for smaller events”.*

The above quote clearly illustrates the financial struggle that has been imposed by the pandemic on small-scale event organisers. This is exacerbated by the lack of sponsorship injections that some of them largely relied upon. Some scholars (Yuan, 2013; Kruger, 2015; Vicente-Molina et al., 2018) posit that the lack of financial support is considered a barrier for the success of small-scale sport events as event organisers may not have enough financial resources to host regular sport events. It is also noted however, that the more informal and smaller events were struggling to even access the sponsors prior to the pandemic - a situation that they observe has worsened since the COVID-19 period. In addition to the direct financial injection from sponsors and events, the participants also highlighted that the sector was already stretched prior to the pandemic where financial resources are concerned. This is understandable as some of these were resource-scarce community events. As a result, event organisers were not able to sustain the events during the global lockdown which caused most small-scale sport events to completely cancel their local leagues due to the lack of financial resources. For example, an event organiser that organises informal small-scale sport events made the following comment:

*“One of the major challenges I would highlight is the overall structure of informal small-scale sport events. Remember, we host informal games so the COVID-19 pandemic had definitely impacted us more than structured or formal small-scale sport events. We did not have the money to deal with the impacts of COVID-19 because we have an informal structure, so it raises questions like who exactly will investigate the damages caused by the pandemic on smaller events? We operate in the informal side, so how can we think of formalized recovery if we already don't have the financial muscle to be more formal?”.*

Similarly, another key informant involved in hosting community small-scale sport events said:

*“In terms of funding and sponsorships, I will use the COVID-19 pandemic as an example. Sponsors have introduced new criteria to be eligible for funding. They will not award you funds if you do not have COVID-19 measures in place like social distancing, hand sanitizers around the venue and ensuring that the venue is thoroughly disinfected after each event. The problem is, as small-scale events in the informal economy if I can call it, we do not have enough money to implement all these measures and we rely on sponsors and donations of some of these to operate. This means that we will not get new sponsors if we don’t get a helping hand from good Samaritans in the community”.*

The above quotes reveal that most of these event organisers lack the basic financial resources to host regular events. Moreover, the findings reveal that sponsors play an integral role in the success of small-scale sport events. According to Van Niekerk and Getz (2019) as well as Garrod et al. (2012) the financial assistance event sponsors provide to small-scale sport event organisers contributes towards the success of small-scale sport events. In fact, an argument can be made that such sponsorship and financial assistance has become more important for the sector in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, particularly in contexts that are lacking in resources and where such events show potential of playing a key role in community development and growth. Considering the economic impact of COVID-19 on smaller events, it can be expected that small-scale sport event organisers will greatly depend on financial support from different stakeholders in order to revive small-scale sport events.

It has been pointed out that apart from the financial benefits, hosting regular small-scale sport events present social benefits for host destinations such as promoting social cohesion and socio-cultural dynamics at events (Knott et al., 2015; Marshall and Barry, 2015; Swart et al., 2018). The participants expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the social aspect of small-scale sport events as these events really involve the local community. The initial cancellation of these events meant that there were limited opportunities for social benefits to be accrued. The pandemic has been a stressful time and sports fans had been experiencing feelings of sport nostalgia and were craving for a sense of belonging of which the pandemic deprived them. In situations where event organisers were able to host informal small-scale sport events during the different levels of the Disaster Management Act, they were still not able to fully generate the social benefits since people were reluctant to participate or attend these small-scale sport events. The pandemic has changed the atmosphere of the sport event tourism sector as stakeholders are anxious and reluctant to engage in the events. For example, one of the participants that organises local league games offered the following:

*“Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we used to involve community members in our events. We have what we call ‘The 5km Walk’ where the entire community, participants and attendees pick up litter around the community during the walk. We also had marathons for the elderly that encouraged them to keep healthy but we have not been able to do all that because of the after effects of the COVID-19 pandemic”.*

Relatedly, another key informant that hosts university small-scale sport events observed that:

*“Another impact COVID-19 had on small-scale sport events would be from a social perspective. Sport events are social activities and gatherings, the COVID-19 restrictions on events like social distancing and limited number of people at events created challenges for us [event organisers]. We had questions such as “how do we supply entertainment that is worthwhile and worth attending small-scale sport events for?” The pandemic has affected how we conduct our events and engage with spectators especially with local events”.*

The views above illustrate the difficulties on a social level that were experienced by event organisers and those who attend such events. By their very nature, small-scale sporting events are community-orientated. The pandemic has therefore caused greater disruptions than just merely the financial costs. The morale and atmosphere has been altered, and the participants suggest that it will take time in order to restore the confidence, as the pandemic is still present in their discussions and activities. They feel that while many people want to come to the current events and the future ones that will be organised, there are still elements of reluctance. Some have high levels of vaccination reluctance while others generally wish to avoid crowded spaces for fear of infections.

Despite the negative socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on small-scale sport events, the participants did express a general positive perception regarding the environmental relationship that the events have with the places they are hosted. In this regard, they felt that the pandemic has encouraged event organisers to consider environmental sustainability in the planning of future small-scale sport events. For example, one of the event organisers who arranges community sport events said the following:

*“The COVID-19 pandemic has helped us look more into hosting environmentally sustainable events and making sure that we [event organisers] do not harm the environment in any way. For instance, restrictions such as social distancing and limitation on number of attendees that could attend these events had contributed to less overcrowding at events and that had also decreased the waste that is generated at small-scale sport events. This has given us a ‘new eye’ towards what we do and how we do it”.*

The above quote supports what has been widely argued in literature regarding the environmental sustainability of small-scale sport events (Gibson et al., 2012;

Saayman, 2012; Bazzanella et al., 2019). These scholars have argued that small-scale sport events are more environmentally sustainable compared to major and mega-events. Moreover, environmental impacts are easier to manage in a small-scale setting and the implications of the pandemic has strengthened this argument. The above quote further reveals that even in the middle of a global pandemic, small-scale sport events are likely to be more environmentally sustainable compared to larger events.

The perceptions of event organisers regarding the impact of the global pandemic on small-scale sport events suggests that small-scale sport events have severely been affected by the pandemic. The events experienced extreme financial challenges as a result of the restrictions and regulations placed on the sport event tourism sector. As noted by the participants, small-scale sport events may have been more affected by the COVID-19 pandemic because there is limited support structures for these typology of events, especially during the pandemic hence some of the events had to cease operations altogether. Moreover, such decisions have an adverse impact on other stakeholders involved in the events such as participants, attendees, community members and small businesses in local communities hosting these events. Ultimately, from an impact perspective, this study reveals that the pandemic has had a negative influence on small-scale sporting events from a financial and social viewpoint. However, there has been a positive mind-set instilled by the pandemic where environmental management is concerned in the sector. This serves to present a platform from which to build and enhance environmental strategies associated with small-scale sporting event hosting in the City of Johannesburg and South Africa as a whole.

### **Conclusions**

Globally, the COVID-19 restrictions and regulations imposed on the sport event tourism sector has had a great impact on different typologies of sporting events. Sport event tourism literature has widely discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on major and mega-events with little research focus being directed towards the effect of the pandemic on small-scale sporting events. Despite several research studies (Gibson et al., 2012; Giampiccoli et al., 2015; Badurina et al., 2020) advocating for the promotion of small-scale sport events given their potential socio-economic benefits, there is still limited attention that has been given to small-scale sport events, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of developing countries. This paper presents the perceptions of event organisers regarding the impact of COVID-19 on small-scale sport events in the City of Johannesburg, South Africa. One of the recurring themes identified from the current study is the economic impacts of COVID-19 on smaller events. The research revealed that small-scale sport events experienced great financial setback during the hard COVID-19 lockdown and most of the small-scale sport events in Johannesburg are still struggling to recover from the financial losses. The findings also revealed that the global pandemic affected the social aspect of the events. Based on the nature of small-scale sport events, they typically tend to be interactive events that actively involve local communities and allows them to engage with the different stakeholders

involved in the management and coordination of event activities. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected stakeholder relationships between event organisers, sponsors, local residents and event attendees alike. In this regard, it has been noted that local communities are important for the success of small-scale sport events because they actively attend local sport leagues and support local businesses that are close to sport venues, whilst engaging in entrepreneurial activities themselves (Fotiadis et al., 2016; McKay et al., 2019; Hemmonsbey et al., 2021). However, in this study it has been found that such activities had been halted and in some cases the events were cancelled indefinitely. In other cases, the temporary halt on the hosting of events has been found to remove the excitement and enjoyment opportunities that are often associated with these events. In fact, some interviewees indicated that they had great concerns about social ills like drug use and unemployment, because before COVID-19, such ills were on the decline since the youth found the event spaces to be good distractions and overall constructive ways to spend their time.

On a more positive note, some of the event organisers expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged them to consider environmental sustainability in the planning process of small-scale sport events. It has been argued that it is easier to manage environmental impacts and sustainability at small-scale sport events because there are less spectators attending the events and this particularly worked to the advantage of event organisers during the COVID-19 era (Gibson et al., 2012; Yuan, 2013). Thus, the pandemic brought about some reflections in the part of the event organisers linked to the need to effectively incorporate environmental management strategies in their current and future planning and organising activities. This, they argue, would assist in the hosting of long-lasting, sustainable events, especially in areas where environmental management may not be seen as a priority. In this regard, there is a feeling that the events in question can be used as a platform from which to communicate environmental responsibility messages, which in turn would enhance environmental awareness in the broader communities.

The present study presents recommendations that could aid in the revitalization of small-scale sport events which could ultimately contribute towards the recovery of the sport tourism sector in a post-pandemic era. Whilst there were similarities with other research studies on the impacts of the pandemic on sporting events generally, this study has raised key observations from the specific context of small-scale event perspective, particularly in a developing world context. This paper advocates for policy transformation in the sport event tourism sector and as such, we argue that including small-scale sport events in frameworks and policies will not only fast-track recovery of the sport tourism industry, but it will also contribute to the sustainable development of the industry. Furthermore, this study recommends that government and large companies should increase funding opportunities for small-scale sport events since these events play an important role in community development and LED. We argue that increasing financial investments in this typology of events will equip local communities with the necessary skills and opportunities to create their own legacies from sport tourism events.

As previously mentioned in the methodology section, there is no known database for small-scale sport events in South Africa. This study recommends that the relevant sport tourism stakeholders should create and introduce a database of small-scale sport events around the country. Such a database would allow for government, big companies and other stakeholders to access small-scale sport events for funding purposes. Moreover, the database would also make it easier for local municipalities to keep track of socio-economic growth and the contributions of small-scale sport events in their respective communities. For future purposes, such measures would additionally help to prepare small-scale sport events for any external shocks that might occur and disrupt the growth of this typology of events.

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