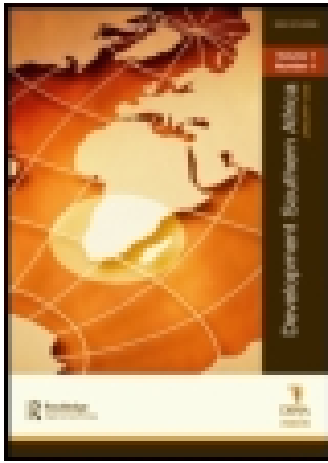


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Tourism and regional development: The case of South Africa's distressed areas

Christian M Rogerson

Uneven development is a long-established feature of South Africa's space economy. Recent policy initiatives have been launched for tourism to be a vehicle for regional development. Against the background of international debates about tourism and regional development, this article examines the tourism economy of South Africa's 23 priority development districts or distressed areas that are the current focus of national policy to redress uneven development. The nature and growth of tourism occurring in these areas is shown to be primarily domestic tourism and concentrated upon visiting friends and relatives travel. The prospects for regional development ultimately hinge upon leveraging potential assets for leisure tourism. Key challenges for incipient tourism-led regional development in South Africa are identified.

Keywords: tourism; regional development; peripheral regions; South Africa; visiting friends and relatives travel

1. Introduction

South Africa's space economy manifests a distorted core–periphery structure with massive unevenness in patterns of geographical development. Recent work by Turok (2011:2) spotlights that 'spatial inequalities are substantial', inequitable, and generally viewed as structural or deep-seated in character. The New Growth Path (NGP), launched by the national government in 2009 to drive job creation and economic inclusion, recognised an urgent need for evolving fresh policy initiatives 'to address the extraordinary divergence in terms of the spatial concentration of economic growth', which it attributed as an apartheid legacy (Mkhonza, 2011). Within the 2011 National Development Plan the aims of spatial development are (re)focused to address inherited geographical divides in the country's space economy that exacerbate exclusion (National Planning Commission, 2011). For the South African government it is acknowledged that 'the super-ordinate goal has been the redistribution of economic opportunity' (DED, 2013:5). This is deemed a national priority 'because of the stark realities of a South African geography of extreme wealth disparity, spatially rooted poverty and unequal access to opportunity and amenity' (DED, 2013:5).

Although Turok (2011) cautions for more nuanced policy conversations around the space economy than simply those between advocates of pro-urban versus pro-rural development, the overt thrust of the NGP is strongly towards promoting rural development. In July 2011 the Cabinet requested government departments to address the national challenge of rural development. The Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR) was tasked to develop and implement an initiative to address infrastructural backlogs and to evolve a framework for rural economic transformation (Heimann, 2013). A central role in spatial development is assumed also by the Department of Economic Development with its mission linked to

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implementation of the NGP, one pillar of which is spatial development. Mathfield (2013:6) asserts that the Economic Development Department policy agenda places the revitalisation of rural areas and challenging the legacy of the apartheid space economy among its top priorities. In collaboration with the DRDLR and the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, the Economic Development Department is engaged in a regional economic programme that seeks to take up the development challenges of 23 priority district municipalities. These areas constitute South Africa's peripheral lagging regions, which experience 'high levels of poverty, service constraints, high unemployment and low levels of economic development' (CSIR, 2013:2).

Spatially, the central policy focus is upon the historically disadvantaged former Homelands or Bantustan areas, which make-up most of the 23 priority development districts. During the apartheid period these areas were the focus of regional development initiatives that promoted industrial development in growth points where investing manufacturing firms benefitted from available infrastructure and lavish state incentives. However, the location of most 'growth points' was based on a racialised concept of space and triggered investment in areas which had scant chance of experiencing subsequent catalytic growth. The programme was suspended in 1991 and evaluations undertaken at the time indicated few tangible regional benefits derived from the intervention (Rogerson, 2001). Among the reasons cited were the politically-driven nature of the programme, the poor linkage development with local host economies, a failure to create sustainable economic growth in the identified nodes and the costly nature of the incentives. Against this backdrop of failed regional development planning it is perhaps not surprising that 'the early post-1994 policy frameworks tended to treat any notion of regional differentiation and spatially informed policies with some deep suspicion' (Robbins, 2008:3). Nevertheless, following short-lived experiments to restructure the space economy using the programme of infrastructure-driven spatial development initiatives (Rogerson, 2001), there is a renewed interest from the Department of Trade and Industry in leveraging manufacturing for driving development in underdeveloped regions. Special Economic Zones are promoted alongside the Department of Trade and Industry Regional Industrial Development Strategy in support of national government programmes for reversing industrial decline and re-industrialising South Africa, albeit not specifically targeted at former Homeland areas (Nel & Rogerson, 2013).

Among further recent regional development initiatives in South Africa are those relating to using the potential of tourism, which is a priority sector in terms of the NGP and has experienced major growth since democratic transition and the country's re-insertion into the global tourism economy (Rogerson & Visser, 2004). It is within a fluid policy environment concerning regional development in contemporary South Africa that this paper examines the specific role of tourism in the country's 23 priority development districts or distressed areas. This nexus of tourism and regional development is so far little explored in African tourism scholarship (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2011; Rogerson & Visser, 2011; Rogerson, 2012a). In the next section, the regional development potential of tourism in South Africa is situated within a review of international debates around tourism and regional development. Discussion then turns to the nature of the South African tourism space economy, to contemporary policy directions which seek to enhance tourism as a driver for regional development in the country's peripheral regions and analysis of the current state of tourism in the 23 priority development districts.

2. Tourism and regional development: International debates

Tourism is increasingly under scrutiny as a tool for catalysing economic growth, welfare improvements and employment opportunities in peripheral regions (Telfer, 2002; Brouder, 2013; Saarinen, 2014). Hall points out, however, the:

reality is that tourism's role in regional development remains relatively poorly understood as it is often given only a cursory examination by those in regional planning and public policy analysis, while the tourism literature itself often fails to place tourism in its broader economic and social environment. (Hall, 2007:19)

This said, Vukonic (2012) asserts that debates about tourism as a factor in regional development are longstanding and can be traced back to the early 1950s in tourism studies.

The concept of a core–periphery dichotomy is at the heart of debates about tourism as a tool for nurturing economic growth and employment opportunities in peripheral regions and breaking down existing spatial structures (Müller & Jansson, 2007; Hall, 2013). One of the earliest contributions was by Christaller (1964), who discussed tourism as a vehicle for economic development in peripheral regions that benefit from visits from tourists from richer core regions, especially metropolitan areas. It was argued that the real qualities of the periphery – amenity landscapes – served to attract pleasure tourists and a flow of people from core regions to the tourism periphery (Hall, 2013:74). With the popularity of Perrouxian growth pole theory and the wide promotion of growth centre planning during the 1960s and 1970s, it was unsurprising that tourism came to be applied as a lead sector for regional development in several countries. The best examples were the development of the planned tourism resort at Cancun, Mexico and of the Languedoc-Roussillon coastal development in France. In these cases, state strategy involved investment in tourism as a means for regional development and/or the selection of economically marginal areas with appropriate basic tourism resources and then leveraging regional uplift through tourism infrastructure extension (Clarke, 1981; Brenner & Aguilar, 2002; Torres & Momsen, 2005).

Since the rise of tourism in the global economy from the 1980s, the popularity of tourism as a vehicle for promoting regional economic development is reflected across the experience of several countries (see Keller, 1987; Pearce, 1988; Oppermann, 1992; Müller & Jansson, 2007; Huijbens et al., 2014). Brouder (2013:1) observes that an ‘increase in demand met by a general growth in business activities has seen many regions develop the tourism economy, usually as part of broader regional development strategies’. Kang et al. (2014) maintain that the effective regional development of tourism requires both the heightened demand for travel, in terms of not only the desire but also the ability to participate in tourism activities, and an expanded supply of tourism infrastructure, including accommodation and transport access to and within tourism destinations. In some instances, tourism development capitalises on the presence of natural or cultural attractions, whereas in other cases, such as Cancun, entire destinations are purposefully created by national tourism entities. It is argued that these master-planned developments represent an agglomeration approach to economic development, whereby the spatial clustering of tourism activities offers both increased choice to consumers and economies of scale to the industry (Kang et al.,

2014). With mounting criticism of growth pole approaches since the 1980s there has been greater emphasis upon smaller-scale, more people-oriented approaches that encourage local participation via bottom-up planning and incorporate not only economic but also social and environmental concerns (Telfer, 2002).

Arguably, tourism now can be considered ‘a significant tool’ for regional and local development in many areas of developed countries (Hall, 2007:19). The value of tourism is magnified particularly in those marginalised, peripheral or rural areas where it is a driver for economic growth, employment and welfare improvement (Müller & Jansson, 2007; Saarinen, 2007). Especially in parts of Europe, tourism ‘has become synonymous with regional development in rural and peripheral areas’ (Brouder, 2012a:334) and considered as one way in which marginal regions can overcome their continuing stagnation or decline and instead prosper anew as ‘post-productive’ places (Hall et al., 2011; Brouder, 2012b). Sometimes tourism promotion is viewed as a last resort for communities in many rural and peripheral areas which have few resources to exploit other than selling the only thing that they may have of appeal to people in core regions, namely the expanse that surrounds them and notions of ‘wilderness’ or ‘rural idyll’ (Brouder, 2012b, 2013). For northern peripheries, Saarinen (2007) attributes three drivers of tourism-led development; namely the project-driven approach of European Union policy, the real or perceived lack of alternatives to tourism, and the rising consumer trend towards nature-based and other niche forms of tourism.

Tourism is viewed often as having a favourable economic and developmental impact at the regional level, introducing new external sources of monetary income into the local economy but at the same time producing other undesirable forms of change and costs as far as other sources of livelihood are concerned (Telfer, 2002). Conventionally, the regional impacts of tourism consist of direct, indirect and induced effects upon incomes, employment, earnings and local tax revenues. Saarinen states:

since the development of tourism in a region will provide it with new business activity, tourism and the support given to it will tend to be viewed from the regional development perspective not merely as a matter of competing for customers, but also of competing for investors and attracting new capital. (Saarinen, 2003:94–5)

In developing countries, Yang & Fik (2014:144) forward that ‘the local multiplier effects of tourism, as a byproduct of the many forward- and backward-linked industries supported by tourist flows/revenues and the spatial externalities that spill across geographic boundaries, have had tremendous positive impacts on local and regional economies’. One policy avenue is to build and extend local linkages from tourism investments with other economic sectors such as agriculture or construction (Torres & Momsen, 2004; Rogerson, 2012b). By linking tourism to other local productive livelihoods, not only can the positive economic and employment impacts of tourism be maximised but also the negative impacts of tourism monoculture can be tempered (Lacher & Nepal, 2010).

Beyond strengthening inter-sectoral linkages between tourism and other existing production sectors, it is urged that synergies with other components of the economy should be undertaken. Saarinen (2003:105) stresses that ‘by using the social capital of a destination region, tourism could more effectively benefit both regional development

and its own economic growth purposes'. The tapping of regional social capital requires increased interaction and networking between tourism and other sectors (such as education) and ultimately to reach a situation whereby tourism may actually foster social capital. The goal should be of integrating tourism strongly into local development processes as a whole, including use of traditional knowledge, economies and production of goods and services. In the absence of integrated planning, the danger exists that local people and communities become the objects rather than the subjects of development. Correspondingly, tourism is not used as a vehicle for development 'but rather as an end in itself without any active integration towards regional or local development goals' (Saarinen, 2003:107).

Overall it is cautioned that 'the desired goals of regional development are not necessarily the same as the tourism industry's outcomes are as a specific economic activity, which in many cases is based on non-locally set priorities, values, needs and goals' (Saarinen, 2003:95). Indeed, tourism's role in regional development usually is evaluated in terms of tourism employment, tourism flows or revenues and often is seen as positive (Telfer, 2002). This said, it must be understood that regional development as compared with regional growth 'involves deeper and qualitative goals, referring to an improvement in the quality of life and well-being of the people which are not automatic results of tourism growth indicators' (Saarinen, 2014:10). In addition, from a sustainability perspective, tourism-led growth does not necessarily translate into benefits for local communities and the environment. Indeed, whilst tourism can be a potential and fruitful tool for regional development, 'it may not always be the most favourable use of resources in specific locations' (Saarinen, 2014:10). The imperative is emphasised for 'the stronger integration between the tourism industry and other local livelihoods', which is viewed as essential for sustainable and locally beneficial tourism development (Saarinen, 2003:93). Critically, tourism and its economic and other impacts must be situated within the perspective of larger regional socio-economic contexts (Hall, 2007; Brouder, 2012a).

As a whole, efforts at tourism development in peripheral regions have occasioned widely varying outcomes with the existence of both success stories and of many communities left disappointed by the false hopes offered by tourism (Hall, 2007; Brouder, 2013). Oppermann (1992) and Telfer (2002) surveyed tourism and regional development impacts and point to the contested nature of debates about tourism's contribution, particularly from the perspective of dependency. From research based in Yunnan province, China, Wu et al. (2011) aver that the external control of tourism results in an uneven distribution of benefits from tourism to locals and thus reconsideration of the justification of tourism as a vehicle for local development is warranted. This said, in the context of core-periphery systems it is shown elsewhere that tourism can assist in transferring wealth from richer core areas to marginal poorer peripheral regions. Further, tourism can also be a spearhead of modernisation in peripheral regions but in order to do so 'the region as a whole should benefit economically from tourism' (Saarinen, 2003:95). Usually, across the international experience, tourism development in peripheral regions is shown to result from a combination of top-down government strategies, such as infrastructure development or the establishment of 'protected areas', and of bottom-up enterprise development, which concerns both community initiatives and issues around tourism entrepreneurship. Arguably, as Brouder (2013:3) contends, 'how these top-down and bottom-up forces meld together to lead to local tourism development is a central concern of tourism studies'.

3. South Africa's tourism space economy and the distressed areas

In common with many developed and developing countries, tourism is increasingly applied as a potential vehicle for regional development in South Africa. This section draws upon a critical review of recent policy documentation, official surveys and, most importantly, a detailed analysis undertaken of a local municipality dataset on tourism trips from Global Insight. Together, these sources facilitate an investigation of the emerging role of tourism in regional development for the country's distressed areas. Two major sub-sections of discussion are presented. First, past and current policy initiatives for tourism and regional development in South Africa are discussed. Second, the peripheral role of the distressed areas in South Africa's tourism economy is highlighted, with identification of the characteristics of the tourism base of the 23 priority districts. The development implications of tourism growth that is occurring in these regions are debated.

3.1 Tourism and regional development in South Africa: The policy context

Current policy initiatives for using tourism as a driver for regional development in South Africa must be situated briefly in a historical context. It must be understood that the first initiatives to apply tourism as a basis for regional development in South Africa were launched during the 1970s and 1980s and concerned the making of a distinctive 'pleasure periphery', which was fostered by apartheid spatial engineering.

Following the award of nominal 'independence' to Transkei, Ciskei, Bophuthatswana and Venda, opportunities were opened for South African tourism capital to establish casino-gaming resorts in these areas (Rogerson, 1990). This growth of casino tourism resorts represented a foil for the grand strategy of apartheid planners because it offered legitimacy to the 'independence' of these areas as well as weaning these chronically impoverished regions off revenue dependency upon South Africa (Crush & Wellings, 1983). In addition, they served also as a social 'safety valve' by according whites access to leisure opportunities, including multiracial sex and gambling, which were denied in areas ostensibly defined as white space (Grundlingh, 2006). This context precipitated a burst of hotel casino resort development, with 17 gaming resorts established by 1992, the most lavish being the Sun City and Lost City mega-resorts. These resorts triggered a wave of new tourism flows from South Africa's core regions to the peripheral Homelands areas.

The monopoly of these peripheral regions for casino gambling was relatively short-lived. With political transition came the re-incorporation of the formerly independent Homeland areas and the permit of legal gambling throughout South Africa, most importantly at casinos situated in major cities. The tourism asset base and attractiveness of these areas for pleasure travellers from core regions were thus eroded. Since democratic transition, the patterns of tourism development in South Africa have become highly polarised geographically with the major positive impacts of tourism growth experienced in the urban centres of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Pretoria. This is manifest in patterns of new hotel investment occurring since 1990, which are strongly concentrated in the country's major urban areas as well as a select few secondary centres and small towns (Rogerson, 2013a, 2013b). The geographically polarised character of tourism has meant that the benefits of tourism expansion since 1994 are distributed in a spatially uneven manner with limited opportunities outside the major nodes of tourism growth. Visser & Hoogendoorn

(2012:67) draw attention to the highly uneven and polarised tourism space economy of South Africa and stress that a key challenge for tourism policy 'has been the need to distribute the potential benefits of tourism expansion more evenly across the country'.

Addressing the uneven distribution of international tourist flows in the country has been a stated objective of South African Tourism for over a decade. However, Visser (2003) argues that the marketing strategy of South African Tourism contributed to reinforcing the existing uneven space economy rather than changing the regional flows of international tourists. The situation is little altered a decade later. In a recent analysis, Visser & Hoogendoorn (2012:67) conclude that South African Tourism is still 'not encouraging the redress of the uneven South African tourism space economy' and that 'the spatial implications of the contents of its web-based marketing initiatives could potentially aggravate (rather than address) the development of an already uneven tourism space economy'. Following the establishment of the National Department of Tourism, several additional policy initiatives have been launched to redress the uneven spatial impact of tourism development across South Africa and to channel tourism flows away from the traditional tourism hotspots into less visited parts of the country.

One of the major identified challenges of the National Tourism Sector Strategy is that of ensuring the greater 'geographic spread' of tourism with emphasis given to supporting tourism growth in rural areas (Department of Tourism, 2011a). A critical aspect is encouragement of domestic tourist flows to increase geographic spread effects (Department of Tourism, 2011b:1). The expansion of domestic tourism holds considerable promise for stimulating economic development outside the existing tourism nodes (Rogerson & Lisa, 2005). In addition, another important new policy initiative relates to promoting 'rural tourism', which aligns closely with regional development (Department of Tourism, 2012). The National Department of Tourism prepared a Rural Tourism Strategy that prioritises a number of selected rural nodes for short-term and medium-term promotion (Department of Tourism, 2012:12). The strategy serves to complement other government initiatives (by the Economic Development Department and the DRDLR) to support rural development as a whole. Its aims are to foster 'a developed rural tourism economy' and 'enhance the growth and development of tourism in rural communities, particularly in less visited provinces' (Department of Tourism, 2012:8). Specifically, the strategy seeks to overcome identified 'problem areas' in rural tourism development, namely that it is inadequately resourced and funded, certain key attractions are not receiving tourism benefits, and there is a lack of local community involvement and of local ownership of rural tourism products.

3.2 The 23 priority district municipalities in South Africa's tourism economy

The central focus of initiatives for new 'rural tourism' development and promotion is the 23 priority district municipalities (Figure 1). The boundaries of these distressed areas incorporate most of the former Homelands but also encompass certain growing secondary urban nodes, most notably Nelspruit and Polokwane (CSIR, 2013). In economic terms, many (if not the majority) of these districts are welfare dependent and include the most poverty-stricken, underdeveloped and marginal zones of the country. These areas contain more than 20% of the country's population and many are zones of outmigration. They are scarred by huge infrastructure backlogs in access to

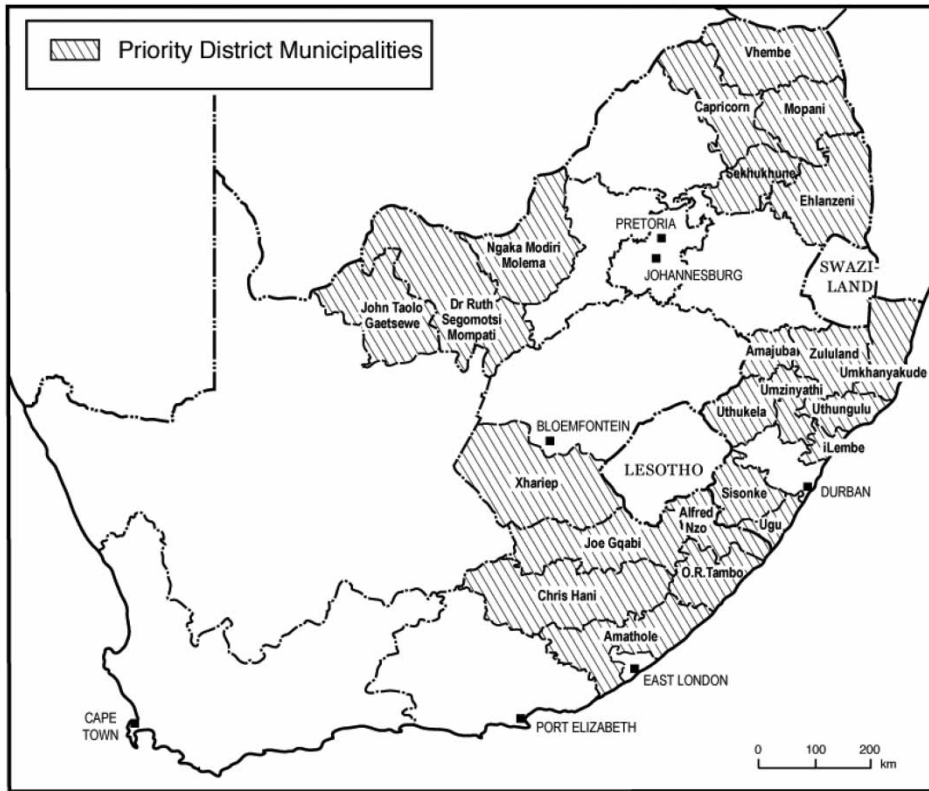


Figure 1: The 23 priority district municipalities or distressed areas

basic services such as water, sanitation and housing. National government, led by the DRDLR, is committed to the creation of sustainable work opportunities in these distressed districts. Alongside job opportunities related to promoting small-scale agriculture and the provision/maintenance of basic services, the potential of tourism is under critical scrutiny (CSIR, 2013). In particular, tourism must come increasingly into the spotlight as government infrastructural investment shifts from service provision towards a search for a ‘catalytic pathway’ for economic transformation of these peripheral regions (Heimann, 2013). A key element of the economic transformation plan for these areas is maximising potentials for rural production through use of tourism assets (Heimann, 2013:57). Nevertheless, little research is available about the actual nature of the tourism economy in these areas. A first step for informing policy support for regional development in these distressed areas is to confront the fundamental knowledge deficit about the regional tourism economy. Using tourism data aggregated from Global Insight, a picture can be drawn of the growth and characteristics of tourism that exists across the 23 priority development districts.

The overall position and contribution of the 23 priority districts as a whole to South Africa’s tourism economy is indicated in Table 1. This table reveals a broad-brush picture that these areas in 2012 account for one-third of total national trips and 31% of national bednights but only 20% of total visitor spend. The importance of domestic rather than international tourism to these areas is apparent and, in terms of purpose of

Table 1: The 23 priority districts: Share of national tourism – select indicators

Indicator	2001	2006	2010	2012
Total tourism trips	32.8	37.2	35.2	33.9
Total domestic trips	35.8	40.7	38.5	37.9
Total international trips	17.7	19.7	21.8	22.0
Total leisure trips	16.3	20.9	21.4	20.8
Total business trips	16.4	18.4	18.0	16.3
Total VFR trips	39.5	42.3	40.6	40.0
Total other trips	50.2	50.1	50.9	46.2
Total bednights	30.3	32.2	31.8	30.6
Total domestic bednights	34.6	37.4	37.9	38.4
Total international bednights	15.6	16.2	15.6	15.4
Estimate share of total visitor spend	16.5	18.4	19.3	20.0

Source: Author calculations from Global Insight data.

travel, Table 1 indicates that the priority districts account for a significant share of national visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel and of travel for other (mainly health and religious) purposes, albeit they are only a small component in the national economy of leisure and business travel. This profile is further unpacked below.

Table 2 reveals a promising picture that in terms of the volume of tourism trips between 2001 and 2012 considerable growth has occurred from 7.58 million to 11.71 million trips, an expansion of 54.5%. A parallel expansion is recorded in the number of bednights from 47.72 million in 2001 to 66.36 million by 2012. The observed growth in bednights, however, is only 28.1%, which hints at the distinctive nature of tourism taking place in these areas. The impact of global financial crisis and recent economic downturn upon South Africa's tourism economy as a whole is evidenced by downturns recorded since 2010 in these peripheral regions for both the numbers of recorded trips and total bednights.

Table 3 discloses the important finding that the tourism economy of the priority districts is dominated overwhelmingly by domestic as opposed to international visitors. In total for 2001, domestic visitors represented 91.2% of all tourism trips and 88.4% of bednights, which is proportionally far more than the share of domestic visits in the national totals of tourism trips and bednights. This trend towards a major concentration of the regional tourism economy by domestic visitors is confirmed for 2012, when domestic visits account for 83.8% of trips and 83.6% of bednights; once

Table 2: The 23 priority districts: Tourism trips and bednights, 2001–12

	Total tourism trips	Total bednights
2001	7 588 587	47 724 248
2006	12 363 895	60 970 522
2010	13 136 571	68 556 141
2012	11 707 606	66 363 634

Source: Author calculations from Global Insight data.

Table 3: The 23 priority districts: Tourism trips and bednights, by domestic and international origins, 2001–12

	Numbers of trips				Numbers of bednights			
	Domestic	%	International	%	Domestic	%	International	%
2001	6 916 108	91.2	672 379	8.8	42 173 926	88.4	5 594 987	11.6
2006	11 288 972	91.3	1 083 278	8.7	54 007 654	88.6	7 298 520	11.4
2010	11 503 621	87.6	1 638 243	12.4	57 836 138	84.4	9 855 163	15.6
2012	9 808 115	83.8	1 903 087	16.2	55 471 077	83.6	11 103 885	16.4

Source: Author calculations from Global Insight data.

again, a regional share which is much larger than the national total and confirms the relative underdevelopment of international tourist flows into these areas.

The essential components of the tourism economy of the distressed areas are unpacked in [Table 4](#), which differentiates total trips by purpose. More specifically, [Table 4](#) disaggregates total trips to the 23 priority development districts between the four categories of leisure, business, VFR and other (religious and health) travel. The data point to the difficulties of tourism planning for regional development in these areas because over 80% of tourism trips currently are accounted for by the categories of VFR and ‘other’ travel. The massive dominance of domestic VFR travel reflects the historical making and role of the Bantustans in South Africa’s political economy. Cheap labour power in South Africa hinged upon the establishment and maintenance of a coercive system of oscillatory movements of (mainly male) black workers, which allowed for the externalisation of ‘reproduction costs for the labour power needed in the urban-industrial centres of the country’ (Steinbrink, 2010:38). With the transition to democracy, many observers assumed that circular migration between urban and rural areas would decline as people could settle permanently close to their urban places of work. However, this has not occurred and circular migration persists on a widespread basis, albeit in a different form as households restructure their way of organising migration (Todes et al., 2010). Continued major flows of VFR travel to the former Homelands are the consequence of ‘translocal’ households choosing to organise their livelihoods across considerable distances and bridging rural and urban areas (Lohnert & Steinbrink, 2005).

Table 4: The 23 priority districts: Tourism trips by purpose, 2001–12

	Leisure		Business		VFR		Other	
	Trips	%	Trips	%	Trips	%	Trips	%
2001	844 820	11.1	410 195	5.4	5 234 499	69.0	1 099 022	14.5
2006	1 122 199	9.1	562 927	4.6	9 461 185	76.5	1 220 297	9.9
2010	1 589 816	12.1	688 656	5.2	9 565 760	72.8	1 302 361	9.9
2012	1 413 960	12.1	668 082	5.7	8 402 820	71.8	1 221 574	10.4

Source: Author calculations from Global Insight data.

For leveraging potential regional tourism development and expanded visitor spend, it is significant that average expenditure per trip for VFR travel is considerably less than for business or holiday purposes (SAT, 2013). According to research reported by StatsSA (2013), only 3.9% of VFR tourists use commercial forms of lodging; the majority are accommodated in the rural 'second home' (Hoogendoorn, 2011). Accordingly, the largest share of tourism in the distressed areas is VFR travel, which is undertaken by poor migrants moving between urban and rural homes for purposes of household survival and reproduction rather than for recreational purposes.

Beyond VFR travel, another distinguishing facet of the tourism economy of the distressed areas is the high proportion of travellers represented by the category 'other' (Table 1). It is evident the category of other travel is again concentrated in the distressed areas. One component of this category is travel for medical purposes, mainly trips focused upon regional centres such as Nelspruit or Polokwane. The largest share is religious travel. These areas host major pilgrimage sites of large African independent churches in South Africa, including: in Limpopo, Moria village, site of the Zion Christian Church and Ha-Mavhungu village of the United African Apostolic Church; and in KwaZulu-Natal the sacred places of the Nazareth Baptist Church. At various times of the year these (and other sacred) locations attract large gatherings of church followers, with the most important, Zion City, drawing more than one million church members for several days during the Easter pilgrimage. As religious travel is often also seen as an opportunity for outside visitors to rekindle ties with family members residing in rural areas, these events often combine a secondary element of VFR travel (Fairer-Wessels, 2007). In common with VFR travel, the development impacts of religious tourism in South Africa are shown as limited with high levels of leakages resulting in limited local impacts (Saayman et al., 2014).

Table 4 shows the least represented forms of tourism in distressed areas are travel for business or leisure purposes, forms of travel which are associated with the greatest visitor spend (SAT, 2013) and corresponding potential impacts for regional development. Given the chronic state of economic and social development in the 23 priority districts, it is unsurprising that, with the exception of the two provincial capitals of Nelspruit and Polokwane, business tourism is marginal and under-represented. The situation of leisure travel is the most complex and potentially most significant challenge for regional development planning, especially in view of national government initiatives to target its growth for leveraging rural upgrading.

Although the 23 priority districts embrace a wide range of tourism assets, including cultural and heritage tourism attractions as well opportunities for adventure tourism, the most significant assets concern nature and safari tourism. Several of South Africa's iconic wildlife attractions linked to protected areas either are within or proximate to these distressed districts. These include Kruger National Park, part of Ehlanzeni, and the Isimangaliso Wetland Park, which impacts upon several districts of Northern KwaZulu-Natal. Between 2001 and 2012, leisure trips expanded in total by 569 140 or 67.4% for the 23 priority districts. Nevertheless, of this growth in leisure trips 53.8% was accounted for by one district, namely Ehlanzeni. Over the period 2001–12, net absolute declines in leisure travel were recorded by several districts, including Chris Hani and OR Tambo in Eastern Cape and Ngaka Modiri Molema and Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati in North West province. As a whole, such findings highlight the uneven geographical potential for tourism-led regional growth across the distressed areas.

South Africa's nature tourism attractions represent central anchors for national tourism development, and in particular for attracting long-haul international tourists as well as the established market of domestic tourism. Arguably, for successful tourism-led regional development, attention to this leisure tourism component is most critical for regional planning. However, what emerges from several investigations is the enclave character of safari tourism, which often is externally controlled and exhibits limited local linkages (Strickland-Munro et al., 2010; Rogerson, 2012b; Rylance & Spenceley, 2013). As a consequence of their location in peripheral and remote rural areas, the safari lodge sector must be a key focus for sustainable regional development. Nevertheless, despite a policy environment that encourages 'responsible tourism' practices and local sourcing, this form of leisure tourism has evolved only limited linkages with local (especially small) food producers. The food supply chains of luxury safari lodges are articulated by a network of intermediary suppliers that source the bulk of fresh fruit and vegetable produce from distant urban wholesale markets. Other more specialised food products required by lodges are sourced almost exclusively from suppliers based either in Johannesburg or Cape Town (Rogerson, 2012b).

4. Conclusion

The potential of tourism as a lever for regional development is attracting increasing international scholarship. This paper opens up South African debates around tourism's role in regional development, and more especially about the nature of tourism growth occurring in the country's 23 priority development districts or distressed areas. It is shown that the majority of tourists to these areas are domestic rather than international visitors and numerically most tourists engage in forms of VFR tourism involving trips to rural homes. The most promising opportunities for leveraging tourism-led regional development surround the expansion of leisure tourism. Question marks must be raised, however, as to the extent to which leisure tourism growth can be translated into wider development impacts that improve quality of life and well-being of populations. The rise of leisure tourism in the distressed areas is narrowly confined only to select districts which neighbour protected areas. This suggests that tourism has potential in some sub-regions but that in others it might not be the most appropriate sectoral focus for development planning.

The current evidence base for South Africa confirms that planning for tourism to function as a vehicle for regional development, as opposed to simply promoting regional growth, is in its infancy. Although tourism can be a potential tool for regional development, the international record suggests it 'may not be the most favourable use of resources in specific locations' (Saarinen, 2014:10). The National Department of Tourism views its rural tourism strategy as a complement to planning for agricultural improvement and rural development, which is the focus for action by the DRDLR. Absent from policy discourse is any attempt to strategise and maximise the potential for strengthening the inter-sectoral linkages between tourism and other sectors, such as agriculture through initiatives to enable tourism establishments situated in rural areas to source, wherever possible, local food supplies. Learning from international experience, one useful starting point for tourism and regional development planning in South Africa is nurturing greater interaction and networking between the tourism industry and other sectors in any regional economy.

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