

Policy uncertainty is halting the recovery of SA's tourism sector

 By [Robin Fredericks](#)

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CEO of the Tourism Business Council of South Africa (TBCSA), Tshifhiwa Tshivhengwa, one of the speakers at this year's Africa Brand Summit, which took place between 5-8 October as a hybrid event, shared his thoughts around how coordinated the South African tourism sector is, and explored barriers working against the industry as a whole.

Tshivhengwa began his talk highlighting how important the business of tourism and that of the MICE industry, as it relates to tourism in general, contributes significantly to the industry, as well as to the spend.

However, Tshivhengwa shared how we need to understand that people are travelling to South Africa on the basis of perception surrounding the country as a brand. That this is of more importance.

The brand perception, said Tshivhengwa, relates to decision-making when people decide whether or not they want to come to South Africa for conferences, exhibitions or any other form of travel, including leisure travel.

This perception, said Tshivhengwa, is directly linked to policy certainty.

Policy uncertainty a growing concern

"If we talk about the tourism side of things, we need to ensure that people understand and that they are certain that they can travel to South Africa hassle free, and that they are able to do what they do best."

"Instituting policy certainty is important – we should be able to ensure that people understand that when they arrive in South Africa, that they won't face confusion at airports and many other different places where tourism takes place. If we can do that efficiently, we should be able to enhance brand South Africa in light of deciding where they need to be travelling to."

Sharing his thoughts on educating government on the importance of tourism, Tshivhengwa said that the country is well past the point of guiding government in terms of this importance, especially after 26 years of democracy.

Informing policy, said Tshivhengwa, starts by building trust around brand South Africa. Without trust, challenges surrounding policies will hinder the growth of the sector.

Removing barriers, addressing challenges

In terms of travel, Tshivhengwa emphasised the need for change. Within the SADC region, for example, Tshivhengwa said that "regional integration becomes important to enhance the brand of a particular region in Africa in general. The removal of visa barriers is quite important, including challenges surrounding crime – a hinderance which prevents people from travelling to the country.

"We need to deal with other challenges that also taint our brand, such as gender-based violence, for example. We find ourselves responding to these challenging in the tourism industry, especially when we travel overseas as this has become a



Tshifhiwa Tshivhengwa

deciding factor dominating the narrative of the country."

From a policy point of view, Tshivhengwa said that certainty needs to be created, especially on the tourism side of things in terms of people arriving in the country, notwithstanding challenges around acquiring visas.

"We are still behind in terms of creating an e-visa platform where people can apply and get issued with a visa. Those are critical challenges that need to be addressed in order to boost the MICE industry – in this way we can ensure that those that want to come to conferences here in South Africa and many other African countries are able to do so with ease."

“ When we can understand the impact that tourism has on the economy, which is still lacking, policymaking decisions can change as they are not conducive for the growth of the tourism industry right now. ”

On deciding whether or not to invest in tourism in the country, whether it be an overseas country or brand within the hospitality sector, for example, or hotels that wish to branch out in the country, investors look at societal, political and economic challenges. "We need to continue to bring certainty of investment when it comes to the barriers that we face," said Tshivhengwa.

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With regards to the coronavirus pandemic, Tshivhengwa said that we can see how policies have been going back and forth with regards to attaining some form of normalcy, with the industry facing decisions that have been less than perfect, leaving more questions than answers. "From the traveller's perspective, with this created confusion around policies, they then decide to go elsewhere and this not only impacts leisure tourism, it also impacts business travel and that of the MICE industry.

"How can a conference marketer decide to come to South Africa when we still have this confusion around how travellers are going to arrive in the country, and how they will be treated on arrival at the airport."

Understanding the impact of tourism

Tourism is not just fun and games, said Tshivhengwa, but it also creates jobs, just like many other sectors. The lack of understanding of the impact of tourism on the economy and the value chain of tourism continues to have a negative effect on the 1.5 million people that support the industry in terms of employment and the contribution of 8.6% the industry makes to the country's GDP.

"Dependency on the tourism industry goes way beyond what we can see. There are many sectors who are reliant on tourism, from manufacturing, to agriculture, vehicle distributors, to those who supply uniforms and curtains; it spreads even further. These are the things government needs to look at to really understand the impact the tourism industry has, and also what the impact of Covid-19 has had on the industry."

“ We ought to protect our brand and address the challenges that are hindering us as a nation. ”

To strengthen brand South Africa, we have to have policy certainty, said Tshivhengwa, we must deal with the challenges that we have as a country and also deal with those that have been lingering for the past 26 years. "For us in the tourism industry, it is important that we continue to impact this economy. In terms of the pandemic crisis, I think that the tourism industry, which has been the hardest hit, has navigated itself well in terms of developing product protocols."

Although grateful for the opening of domestic travel, Tshivhengwa believes that it was too late an opening. "We could have done so at level 3, and we could have seen more people going back to work."



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"At the moment, we are sitting with confusion around international inbound travel, where we have a list of high-risk countries of which the majority are countries that contribute greatly to our international tourism receipt. They are some of our major source markets. We ought to protect our brand and address the challenges that are hindering us as a nation – at the moment we are not looking good when it comes to that."

"Instead of getting things right the first time, it takes us weeks, and I don't think that that is good for the brand that we should be building. As I mentioned, we have been a democracy for 26 years – we should by now be able to solve these challenges the first time around and do it correctly and with precision."

"Unfortunately, the understanding of how big the industry and its impact is has perhaps been slowly understood in order to truly highlight the magnitude of the value chain," concluded Tshivhengwa.

ABOUT ROBIN FREDERICKS

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