

Prospects and New Trends in Tourism in the Post COVID Era and Strategic Policy Options for Sustainable Tourism in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The COVID-19 outbreak has generated unprecedented impact for the world turning it into life changing situations for individuals, organizations, industries and community. Tourism is one of the hardest hit industries due to the pandemic, with travel bans, closing of borders, lockdowns of countries and cities and quarantine periods severely impacting national economies including their tourism value chain, that is accommodation, travel and transport, gastronomy, MICE sector and the entertainment industry. With the tourism industry bouncing back, this paper attempts to identify the changes and new trends that can be expected in the global tourism industry particularly highlighting the role of slow tourism, technologies, travel behaviours which ensure the economic, social, and environmental sustainability in post-COVID era. Further, strategic policy options to rejuvenate and rebuild the tourism industry in Sri Lanka while ensuring the confidence and safety of travellers are also presented in this paper. It is concluded that creation of a new tourism ecosystem is a shared responsibility of all the stakeholders in the tourism industry globally.

Keywords: COVID-19, New Normal, Slow Tourism, Sustainability

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Introduction

Unlike the previous pandemic outbreaks such as SARS in 2002, H1N1 in 2009, MERS in 2012, and Ebola which was peaked in 2013, the COVID-19 still remains as the deadliest global pandemic of the 21st century. The COVID-19 outbreak has created the largest healthcare, financial, economic, and educational crises in the world in this century so far. Consequently, majority of the existing systems, practices, and protocols are now irrelevant and invalid due to this catastrophic outbreak. It has already altered the lives and livelihood of the people around the globe providing a new perspective towards almost every aspect of the societies.

One of the severely affected industries due to this deadly epidemic is tourism which is the third largest export sector in the global economy (UNWTO, 2020). COVID-19 pandemic episode has caused severe downturns for many tourism dependent economies of both developed and developing countries. On the other hand, international tourism and business travels may have accelerated the spread of the deadly virus across the globe (Farzanegan et al., 2020). Škare et al. (2021) highlight that the impact of COVID-19 on tourism industry is incomparable to the effect of previous pandemic outbreaks.

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), from January to October in 2020, the export revenue lost from international tourism sector recorded as US\$ 935 billion which is ten times larger than the loss of global economic crisis in 2009 (UNWTO, 2020). It is further expected that this will reduce global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 1.5% to 2.8% affecting economies and livelihood of both developed and developing countries. This will result in an economic loss of US\$ 2 trillion in global GDP (UNWTO, 2020). On the other hand, one out of ten

people in the world depend on tourism industry directly or indirectly and 100 to 120 million direct tourism jobs are at risk due to the decline of international tourists' arrival by 70-75%. Consequently, UNWTO (2020) predicts that the tourism industry will bounce back to its 1990s level.

The time when both the global economy and social life of people restore or become stable is still uncertain even one year after the outbreak (Tsai, 2021). However, the global tourism industry and the related service sectors and providers are now preparing for the recovery stage. Therefore, it is of paramount importance in identifying the impacts and new prospects in the tourism industry to be more resilient in the new normal context. Further, this will assist in making policy decisions by the governments in recovery and post-recovery stage. This paper shed lights on the changing tourism prospects and strategic policy options for sustainable tourism in Sri Lanka.

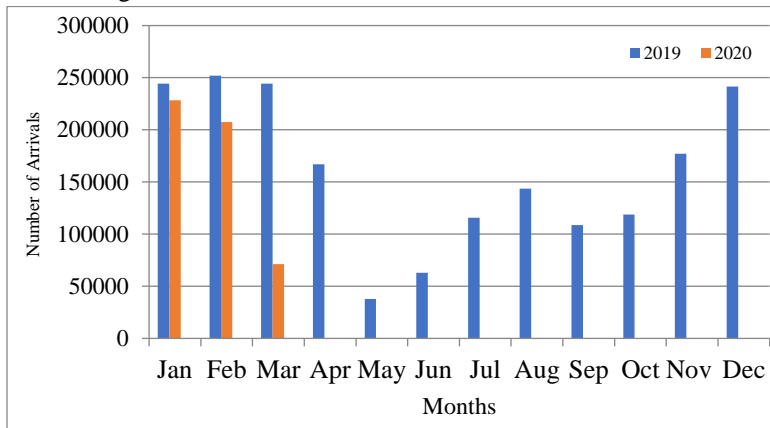
Tourism in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, an island blessed with numerous natural and cultural attractions, was still boosting its international tourism after the tragedy of Easter Sunday attack when the COVID-19 started spreading rapidly around the globe. The country's economy is of US\$ 84 billion and tourism is the third largest foreign exchange earner after foreign remittance and textile industry (CBSL, 2020). Sri Lanka tourism contributes approximately 5% to the national GDP and it is inevitable to the economy since 11% from total employment is also generated through tourism (SLTDA, 2019). However, Sri Lanka suspended international tourist arrivals from all countries on 18 March, 2020 due to the COVID-19. On the other hand, the country's top five source markets; India, United Kingdom (UK), China, Germany, and France, have been severely

affected by the pandemic both in terms of spread of the virus and the mortality rate. Yet, the country was highly praised and recognized internationally in the initial months of the pandemic for its successful control of the outbreak. Thus, it was planned to reopen the country for international leisure tourism in August, 2020, but unfortunately reopening had to be abandoned due to emergence of the second wave of the pandemic.

The following graph reveals the movement of international tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka in 2019 and 2020 until the country's border is shutdown.

Figure 1 – International Tourist Arrivals into Sri Lanka



Source: SLTDA, 2020

Since the tourism is an umbrella industry, no country, no company, or no individual can recover on its own or by themselves. Temporary shut downs and lockdowns of tourism and tourism supporting businesses may create many unparalleled socio-economic impacts (Williams and Kayaoglu, 2020). Moving skilled workforce away from the tourism industry is one among many critical issues in Sri Lankan context. However, the Sri

Lankan government has taken few initiatives to prevent moving the skilled workforce from vulnerable tourism sector to other stable industries. Offering cash grants, tax relief/extensions, loans/loan repayment support, rules alleviation, license fee waivers for businesses, retraining tourism workers to support the health crisis, and extending visa period of foreign employees and tourists stranded in Sri Lanka due to port closure are few among them.

Prospects and New Trends in Tourism

The COVID-19 pandemic episode may change the societies and economies globally including the tourism sector. The tourism essentially involves human interaction and movement. Thus, the pandemic has significant impact on travel behaviour and interests of tourists. According to Assaf and Scuderi (2020), the government should play a crucial role in the recovery stage of the tourism industry since there will be many differences, which are discussed below, in the industry after the pandemic.

The world is now moving to new normal situation and tourism has also been rejuvenated with many prospects. The researchers need to understand and predict the changes in the industry in order to contribute to ensure a sustainable post-COVID tourism sector. Therefore, these new trends and prospects, discussed below, should be taken into consideration, when planning and implementing new policies and strategies by relevant regulatory bodies and tourism service providers.

Prime focus on health, safety, and hygiene

The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2020) has emphasized that health, safety, and hygiene will be of prime

concern of the tourists in the new normal context. Tourism suppliers such as hotels, restaurants, travel agents, entertainment and activities, Destination Management Companies, Meetings, Incentives, Conferencing, Exhibitions (MICE) operators, airlines, cruise lines, and other transport service providers should implement many strategies to ensure the safety, security, and hygiene of their operations to lure tourists. It is mandatory to introduce necessary protocols to the tourism stakeholders in close collaboration with medical experts and industry leaders. Consequently, the UNWTO and other governing authorities have set new protocols to be followed and therefore tourism service providers are obliged to provide necessary facilities to tourists such as health certificate requirement, mandatory room and public area disinfections, provision of hand sanitizers, maintenance of proper ventilation, and effective screening and crisis communication procedures and so forth. Incorporating operational changes and new employee practices may increase the cost of the tourism businesses. However, contentedly, the tourists in new normal era will pay even a premium price to the service providers who ensure the safety during their tours. This has been further confirmed by a survey carried out by Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA, 2020) involving more than 1200 tourists. Thus, it will be a win-win situation for both tourism practitioners and tourists.

Sustainability as the New Normal

Three pandemics: Spanish flu, Asian flu, and Honk Kong flu, were occurred in the 20th century and, four pandemics have already occurred in the 21st century (Gössling et al., 2020). The irresponsible and unsustainable practices in social, cultural, economic, and environmental activities of human beings have led

the world into a disaster including the increased number of pandemics occurring frequently. Tourism activities, including different modes of travelling, irresponsible travel behaviours and so forth are also contributing in increasing the risk of epidemics and frequency of epidemics directly and indirectly. However, the COVID-19 has given the world a unique opportunity to seriously reflect on what kind of planet we envision for the present and future of all living beings. Therefore, according to UNWTO (2020), sustainability should no longer be a niche part of tourism but must be the new norm for every part of tourism chain.

At the COVID-19 recovery stage, the governments and other relevant authorities should consider introducing new tourism models which are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable in long run. UNWTO's The One Planet Sustainable Tourism Program, Hilton's Travel with Purpose Program, Programs of Tourism Cares, Impact Travel Alliance are few examples on how the world is embarking on restarting tourism in a sustainable way. The entire sector including tourism service providers, travellers, local communities, and regulatory bodies should make an extra and conscious effort on learning their roles in new sustainable tourism models. Tourism stakeholders can support and ensure the sustainability through abiding with health and safety protocols, supporting local communities and small scale businesses, protecting culture and heritage, educating travellers on sustainable behaviours, preserving natural environment, understanding humans' impact on the environment, and many more. It should be a continuous process of combined efforts which need expert knowledge and vast experience for shifting towards sustainable tourism. These measures will ensure and take care of the entire tourism industry to everyone's betterment.

Travel in small groups avoiding crowded places

Since tourism had come to a standstill and social distancing was paramount, even a small-scale tourism activity could have produced harmful outcomes in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the world is now shifting towards a new normal situation and new forms of travel behaviours can be expected. Mainly the demand for mass tourism; where large number of tourists travel together to popular destinations, will not be the same in this new normal era as it used to be. Seraphin and Dosquet (2020) also share the same opinion that the travellers may select less crowded destinations that practice social distancing. Particularly at the initial recovery stage, the potential tourists may tend to travel in smaller groups avoiding crowded destinations. Tourists' desire to spend more time in open spaces, with fresh air ensuring their personal wellbeing will be of major concern. Travelling with family members or close friends using private guides, drivers, and vehicles will give them the sense of confidence and security. Further, the demand for small scale accommodation providers and homestays will be drastically increased over high-density large-scale hotels.

On the other hand, it would give the travellers the benefit of last minute amendments or cancellations by the service providers easily than for larger travel groups. Providing free cancellations and flexible pre-sale bookings to tourists is important in this uncertain condition after experiencing the biggest pandemic in the modern history. Further, the airline sector will experience an increased demand for direct flights or direct connectivity to destinations over transit flights to ensure minimum contact and lower possibility of transmission.

Role of slow tourism

Slow tourism where tourists are staying in one destination for a long time; for weeks or even for months exploring local people and their culture will have a new trend in the post-COVID era. In slow tourism, travellers interact with less number of people yet experience a lot deeply during their tour without feeling overwhelmed by restrictions and fear. The concepts such as Community Based Tourism, Rural Tourism, and Home Stay Tourism have a major role in slow tourism which highlights quality over quantity while encouraging many sustainable tourism practices. Small scale, local tourism service providers play a vital role and their livelihood will be well secured in Slow Tourism. Therefore, governments should introduce mechanisms to promote small scale local tourism businesses.

Technology will be essential and not an option

Technology is no longer an option in the post-COVID 19 era, but an essential for every traveller irrespective of their demographic background. In order to limit the interaction between employees and guests and to prevent the contamination, contactless solutions are needed. Technology plays a vital role in it and the tourism and hospitality practitioners need to prepare themselves to survive in the new technologically oriented context. However, in this crisis, with reduced income, it will be an additional cost for them to apply new technological features while implementing the safety measures insisted by the authorities. Hence, tourism and hospitality service providers advised to reevaluate their business models to adapt in the new normal context (Fotiadis et al., 2021). Along with the new technological solutions, the concern for security in digital services and identity protections has also increased among travellers. The digital assistance with human interfaces such as self-check-in and

check-out, contactless paying methods, mobile apps, mobile room keys, robotic maids, in-room technologies for entertainment and e-shopping, and virtual tours etc. will increase the comfort and confidence of travellers in the post-COVID era.

Thriving through Domestic Tourism

The international travel restrictions still remain in many countries in the world and consequently the bounce back of international tourism is not in sight. Understanding and accepting the vitality of promoting domestic tourism as an alternative for the standstill international tourism by the governments and regulatory bodies is crucial in the new normal context. Consequently, the countries with high tourism dependent economies have already commenced promoting domestic tourism to lead the recovery of their tourism sectors. Demand for domestic air travel has strikingly increased and returned to pre-COVID levels in countries such as China and Russia (Fotiadis et al., 2021). In many countries, at the initial stage, the domestic tourism was limited only to visiting friends and relatives, but gradually it was expanded further to leisure travels. Therefore, the countries should keep encouraging their domestic travels further by introducing domestic tourism promotional campaigns, increasing the affordability of tourism products and services, loosening restrictions, and gradually lifting lockdowns are motivating people to travel again. On the other hand, people who have been stranded in their homes for long time are itching to get out and move again particularly within their home countries due to the fear of infection and uncertainty.

According to UNWTO (2020), Malaysia allocated US\$ 113 million worth of travel discount vouchers and personal tax relief of up to US\$ 227 for encouraging domestic tourism. Costa Rica has moved all their holidays of 2020 and 2021 into Mondays

to enjoy long weekends to travel domestically. France also has launched a campaign called *#CetÉtéJeVisiteLaFrance* ('This Summer, I visit France') highlighting diverse destinations across France. However, it should be kept in mind that even though promoting domestic tourism is comparatively easier and is beneficial in short term, highly tourism dependant countries may not be able fill the gap entirely by domestic tourism.

Crowd Management

As health and safety is the biggest concern for travellers in new normal situation, tourism regulatory bodies must and will incorporate many measures to avoid overcrowding and to control the crowd in destinations. Smart tourism, in which information and communication technology is highly involved, will be of a great benefit in controlling the crowds, screening and crowd management in tourism destinations. Automated technologies in monitoring physical distancing in crowds will be highly beneficial in smart tourism. Further, it allows monitoring and tracing of the travellers' movement across destinations which is an important aspect of both crowd management and controlling COVID-19. However, it should not be ignored that implementing these new technologies may lead to many challenges such as securing the privacy and sensitive information of the tourists while providing real-time precise tracking information with high accuracy.

These new prospects and patterns emerged during COVID-19 pandemic should be key concerns in introducing and implementing new policies and strategies by any governments, authorities, and/or service providers. Moreover, it is mandatory to be conscious that some of these prospects are temporary while some of them may redefine the tourism sector in new normal and in years to come.

Recovery and resilience

The entire world is dominated by health concerns which apply to tourism industry as well. Therefore, at the recovery stage, numerous actions should be put in place to ensure the destinations are safe to travel. Rebuilding consumer trust and confidence is paramount to protect not only the travellers but also all the stakeholders in the tourism industry. In order to reassure the trust and confidence of travellers, Sri Lankan government; Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), has taken many initiatives which are listed below.

- Introducing a comprehensive operational guideline with health protocols
- Issuing COVID-19 safety compliance certification for hotels by SLTDA
- Introducing all-inclusive Sri Lanka Tourism App
- Working closely with the Ministry of Defence
- Obtaining “Safe Travel” Stamp issue by World Travel and Tourism Council

Additionally, national and regional tourism organizations should change their strategic approach towards tourism. SLTDA should develop a strong and long-term vision for a sustainable future of tourism in Sri Lanka in collaboration with wide range of consultation representing all levels of tourism stakeholders such as all sizes of tourism service providers, communities, academics, and the travelers. Ensuring that all parties are well aware and understood of their roles in sustainable tourism is vital for the success of the effort.

In addition, I would like to suggest that the domestic tourism sector should be strengthened and stimulated through various strategies as mentioned earlier in this article. Crowd management and crowd control guidelines should be put into

practice by the government and the support of law enforcement bodies should be employed. Thereafter, regional cooperation with neighboring countries towards restoration of the industry is vital since the travellers will begin to explore regional countries in the second recovery phase.

Formal regional partnerships with neighboring countries allow governments to focus on next level of recovery through sharing the lessons learned. Understanding travellers' new behavioural patterns, monitoring search demand, emerging trends and sharing them at the regional and international levels is also vital in post-COVID era. Further, Establishing travel bubbles; Travel Corridors or Air Bridges, will establish a safe zone between two countries or among group of known counties.

The countries which are highly depending on international tourism from one of few specific countries; source markets will be highly benefited from travel bubbles. Consequently, Sri Lanka can consider their major source markets such as China, India, UK, Germany, and France etc. In addition to that, with the time, facilitating and improving accessibility for international tourists in second or third phase of the recovery stage can be considered in various ways such as removing visa restrictions, improving access to infrastructure (roads, ports, rail, and air), aviation deregulation, and easing border crossing formalities.

However, only after ensuring the control of spreading the COVID-19 virus through effective measurements, can the Sri Lankan tourism pay attention on applying recovery strategies to all the possible source markets despite the fact whether there are travel bubbles or not. The existing markets in Europe and Middle East and other possible potential markets can be strategically approached thereafter.

However, we cannot deny the fact that social distancing rule and other health instructions must be followed for a long time until a successful vaccine against the virus becomes available.

(This Policy Perspective is based on the speech made by the author on “Changing tourism prospects during Covid-19: Policy options for sustainable tourism in Sri Lanka” at the #WebPolicyTalk by South Asian Studies Center, IMPRI Impact and Policy Research Institute, New Delhi on 5 January, 2021. The lecture can be accessed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Ow0n-UXPL8>)

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