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# A PERCEIVED SIGNIFICANCE OF HOSTING ATA'S CONGRESS IN VICTORIA FALLS ON ZIMBABWE'S TOURISM SECTOR

Zibanai ZHOU<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Mega events are associated with urban regeneration, infrastructural development, and legacies in host cities. This study examines economic and social benefits associated with the hosting of ATA congress in Victoria Falls on destination Zimbabwe. Positive and negative effects at micro level are also analysed. Data were collected through 30 self-administered questionnaires on Victoria Falls tourism operators and residents. Results showed that ATA's congress repositioned Zimbabwe's tourism sector, endorsed Zimbabwe as a MICE destination, and projected a positive image for the country. Hotels registered high occupancy levels, the municipality's sewer and water system, and health service facilities were upgraded. On the downside, brothels, taxi fares, vending in undesignated areas and street begging increased. The media ignored these negatives but amplified on the positives. Adoption of a new pricing model for accommodation service providers, equitable distribution of mega events revenue and liberalising the skies to enhance connectivity on destination Zimbabwe are recommended.*

**Keywords:** ATA congress, Economic and social significance, Zimbabwe tourism sector.

## INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe hosted the 37<sup>th</sup> edition of Africa Travel Association (ATA) congress on the 18-22 of May 2012 in the resort town of Victoria Falls. Victoria Falls is Zimbabwe's selling point in tourism circles as it is not only considered as the country's tourism flagship but also the prime tourist destination domiciling one of the seven wonders of the world. The hosting of ATA congress event in Victoria Falls comes at a time when there are green shoots of recovery on Zimbabwe's tourism landscape. The tourism industry has been in a comatose following a decade long economic slump, but latest tourism statistical data attest that the sector is on the mend although not yet completely

<sup>1</sup> Midlands State University, Tourism and Hospitality Management Department P. Bag 9055, Gweru, Zimbabwe

[zhouz@msu.ac.zw](mailto:zhouz@msu.ac.zw)

out of the woods. Christine (2009) and Bird (2006) noted that mega events that are convened for a short duration, such as the Olympic Games, World expos or FIFA World Cup are increasingly becoming more significant in this era of globalisation. Mega events have successfully been held in more affluent locations, especially in developed nations, where they have left legacies (Getz, 2006, Fredline *et al.*, 2003; Cornelissen, 2010, and Wagen and Carlos, 2009). For example, the 19<sup>th</sup> session of the UNWTO General Assembly which was held in Gyeongju, South Korea in 2011 led to renovations of hotels like Hyndai where the event was held and in South Africa the development of the Gautrain and the Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) system were directly linked to 2010 FIFA World Cup (Bond and Cottle, 2010), the Eiffel tower is a legacy of the Paris exhibition 1889 which was held to mark the centenary of the French revolution and attracted over 30 million visitors. Moreover, in London, Wembley stadium is also a legacy of the British Empire exhibition held in 1924-5 (Silver, 2008; Getz, 2009; Matheson and Baade, 2005).

The hotel sector benefits much from the fruits that come along with events. This has been seen in terms of increased bookings and upward trends in tourist arrivals. In this context, in the run up to the recently held ATA event, there were so many expectations on the benefits to follow after the event in Zimbabwe's tourism fraternity. For example, road shows, publicity stunts and tourism exhibitions were held in the United States of America over the past year on an effort to boost interest by the Americans to travel to this hallmark event (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2011). The ATA executive director was optimistic that this event would be a major turnaround for Zimbabwe hence the need to empirically investigate on the economic and social significance of hosting this event.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A mega event can be a catalyst for long term outcomes for its host locality or country (Faulkner *et al.*, 2003). In 1991, the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) held their joint international conference in Bangkok, bringing over 10,000 delegates from more than 160 countries to the city. In the months before the event, the Thai government forcibly removed over 2000 slum dwellers from the areas immediately surrounding the new \$90 million Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre that hosted the conference (Branigin, 1991; Shenon, 1991). Hundreds of shanties in informal settlements were destroyed and a high metal wall was erected to conceal the devastation left behind. Similarly, when the WB and IMF held their conference in the Philippines in 1976, President Marcos initiated a 'beautification' campaign in which 400 families were evicted from slums in Manila during the months preceding the event (Berner, 1996). Despite the increased attention to displacement associated with mega events, scholars have paid little attention to the impacts international events have on informal settlements, street vendors and beggars alike, and mushrooming of illegal brothels in the developing world (UN, 1996). The WB and other organizations such as WTTC, UWTO, ATA, have failed to look at what happens behind the scenes when global conferences, sporting events, and international expositions are held in cities in the

developing world. In other words, the international development community has failed critically to examine what happens in the 'backyard' of the mega-events they host or participate in. The evictions that occurred prior to the WB and IMF conferences epitomise a much broader trend. Since mega-events bring increased attention to host cities, they often inspire municipal or national governments to improve the appearance of the host city, usually on a very condensed timeframe. Under the logic of event-oriented development, the visibility of poverty becomes paramount in renewal schemes, and preparations often involve removing the poor from high-profile areas surrounding event venues, without significant attention to long term solutions to streets begging, vending and commercial sex workers.

### **Mega-events and economic development**

Mega-events, also referred to as 'hallmark' or 'landmark' events, are large scale events intended to renew investment in host cities, usually in the tourism sector, by projecting a positive image of the city (Ritchie, 1984, 2000; Hall, 1984). Mega-events can be distinguished from smaller events-such as routine conferences, celebrations, or sporting events. Frequently, in the years prior to a mega event, the host city will witness unprecedented rates of construction activity as the city gears up for a massive influx of visitors and heightened international attention (Yoo, 1989; Pealamn and Mollere, 2009; Susic and Dordevic, 2011). A British sociologist laid out the critical characteristics that define mega-events (large scale leisure and tourism events such as Olympic Games and World Fairs) as short-term events with long-term consequences for the cities that stage them. They are associated with the creation of infrastructure and event facilities often carrying long term debts and always requiring long term use programming. In addition, if successful, they project a new or renewed and perhaps persistent and positive image, and identity for the host city through national and international media, particularly TV coverage. This is usually assumed to have long term positive consequences in terms of tourism, industrial relocation, and inward investments (Roche, 1994; Hiller, 1998; Hiller, 1989; Hall, 1995).

Research on mega-events has focussed on the role and impact of mega events within Western, post-industrial cities (Hall, 1987). Mega events are increasingly used as a means of revitalising depressed post-industrial city centres. In the Zimbabwean context, central government prioritised the ATA congress event as a platform to re-launch the tourism sector that is on the rebound. More often, researchers focus on the political economy of mega-events and their role in generating both revenue and international prestige for host cities. On a national level, mega events are typically part of a larger program to develop tourism and international investments (Roche, 1994). On a municipal level, that is, Victoria Falls, mega-events can play an important role in recasting down town areas as sites for leisure activities and consumption, typically through the development of sports venues, hotels, and tourist attractions (Ritchie, 2000). Perhaps the most compelling explanations for the increasing popularity of mega events situate them within the context of intercity competition for capital in a post modern, global market place (Roche, 1994; Hall, 1987).

The international attention that mega events attracts can help emerging global cities define or 're-image' themselves to both potential investors and tourists. Mega events play a critical role in enabling local elites to offer 'a coherent interpretation' of a city's 'intentions' and of its economic and political environment, that is, 'its image' (Judd and Parkinson, 1990). The view by Roche (1994) suggests that mega events are being produced by cities in the throes of transformation and in various sorts of crisis, and play an important role in assisting host cities 'to renew their image, to restructure and reposition themselves as centres of capital and labour, production, and exchange in the national and global economy and generally to modernise' (Roche, 1994).

Despite the renewed attention by academics to the efficacy of mega events as a redevelopment tool, the existing literature on mega events is largely limited to first world urban centres. Mega events have also played an increasingly prominent role in the developing world, however, and in recent years several developing cities have aggressively pursued bids to host international sporting events, such as Olympic Games, and ATA (Matheson and Baade, 2002). While literature on mega events in the developed world often focuses on the trend toward revitalizing post industrial urban centres through consumption-based economic development, (Roche, 1994), mega events in the developing world are often motivated, at least in part, by a desire to demonstrate that the host country embraces international legal norms (Ritchie, 1974). In addition, to recasting the image of the host city as a hospitable location for tourism and leisure activities through physical improvements, mega events in the developing world can help the host country assure tourists and potential investors that it respects human rights and the rule of law (Hiller, 1990). By selecting a country to host their mega event, international institutions such as WB, IMF, United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), ATA, and World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) seemingly place their stamp of approval on the host country's legal and political institutions (Berner, 1996). The use of mega events as a means of showcasing political stability and legal maturity in developing countries promises to intensify as development scholars increasingly emphasise the links between economic development and strong legal institutions and as international aid organizations condition assistance on legal reform (Roche, 1994). Perhaps more surprising than the lack of scholarship on the role of mega events in developing countries is the dearth of research on the impact of event related development on low-income communities, vulnerable under-privileged groups of people, either in wealthy or developing countries. Few researchers have asked critical questions about the ways in which mega events impact the lives of the most economically and socially disadvantaged in host cities (Matheson and Baade, 2002). ATA congress fall under event tourism which is a growing sector in the tourism industry (Page and Connell, 2009; Carlsen and Taylor, 2003).

#### **Data collection and instrumentation**

A questionnaire survey was used to collect data from the study units namely; hotels, tour operators, Victoria Falls Publicity Association, Zimbabwe Tourism Authority and Chinotimba suburb residents. The instrument measured the ATA congress's economic and social significance using a

seven point Likert type scale ranging from -3 very much insignificant, -2 much insignificant, -1 insignificant, +1 significant, +2 much significant +3 very much insignificant. Other sections included the questionnaire measuring the independent variables and demographic information. These variables were included to examine variations in significance/perceptions within the tourism operators. Given that the instrument used in this study drew very heavily upon an instrument that was used successfully in previous research (Fredline, 2000; Fredline and Faulkner, 2002a), it was deemed that there was no need to employ an extensive pilot testing phase. However, prior to the data collection phase, the instrument was tested with an appropriate group for comprehension and ease of completion. 50 survey packages were despatched, the usable returns were 30 representing an effective response rate of 60%. The research study was confined to Victoria Falls resort town where the event was held. The questionnaire was administered to respondents from the ZTA office, 8 hotels, 4 tour operating companies, Victoria Falls Publicity Association, and 20 residents from Chinotimba high density suburb. The researcher used the drop and pick method where in this case, the questionnaires were left early in the morning and were collected the following morning. To select the respondents the key informant technique was used on all other study units except on Chinotimba residents where a simple random sampling was used to select respondents. This study population was selected by way of putting the names in a hat and picking randomly. The researcher used content analysis to analyse the data.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Marketing and positioning platform**

Results indicated that the hosting of ATA's congress came in as a marketing tool for Zimbabwe's tourism sector. In this case, 95% of the respondents indicated that ATA's congress helped in marketing while 5% of the respondents thought otherwise. As revealed by the results, 95% of the respondents who responded to the questionnaires agreed that the ATA's congress marketed not only Zimbabwe but also their organizations. From the researcher's analysis, the 5% of the respondents who did not agree that ATA's congress was a marketing tool were those organizations who did not have enough information about the congress. As a result the companies failed to participate fully on the event. This was because of lack of full information from the local tourism board since the main committee that was running and facilitating the hosting of this event was based in Harare. Tour operating companies like Shearwater and Wild Horizons got the opportunity to exhibit their products on stands at Elephant Hills where the congress was held. Some of the participants also went on the activities that were on offer from the tour operators and were also making a lot of enquiries from the operators. Rainbow hotel that had sponsored some rooms and had its sponsorship recognized through advertising of its logo on various publicity platforms that were available throughout the event. The respondents also highlighted that they managed to get a new coverage and generic destination promotion as well as exposure of the business to new markets. The ATA congress was indeed a golden opportunity that prepared Zimbabwe for the hosting of

UNWTO general assembly in 2013. Bowdin *et al.* (2011) indicated that events can provide their host community with a strong platform for showcasing their expertise, hosting potential investors and promoting new business exposure. Local residents highlighted that they also got the opportunity to showcase their curio markets to the visitors.

These results confirm the observation by Bowdin *et al.* (2011), who asserted that events create a profile for destination, positioning them in the market and providing competitive marketing advantage. Generally, during the ATA congress, all the tourism players got the opportunity to market their products including those who did not have stands at the venue where the event was hosted. From the respondents, the participants moved around the town a lot and were able to note what the resort town had to offer. In view of this respondents concluded that the event was indeed a marketing tool for Zimbabwe's tourism sector. All respondents were agreeable that the ATA's congress was a marketing and positioning platform to showcase Zimbabwe's ability to host international events, since from the outset it had been decided to have the ATA congress event in Zimbabwe to allow international tourism delegates, travel and tour operators and international media to have a better understanding of the situation in the country and what it has to offer in terms of tourism. The hosting of this event was important for the tourism sector as an endorsement to the country as a safe destination after years of negative publicity by the international media. Finally, the ATA congress event came at the most opportune time for Zimbabwe's tourism sector trying to sell its new brand: Zimbabwe, A World of Wonders. The event was therefore significant to Zimbabwe's tourism sector as a marketing and advertising tool of the destination.

#### **Meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (mice) destination confirmation**

The event made conference organisers aware that Zimbabwe is a MICE destination that is well packaged. From the responses, the researcher is also convinced that Zimbabwe is a potential bidder for future events. Respondents indicated that the hosting of ATA congress in the resort town of Victoria Falls was a tacit approval by the world tourism governing body, that is, UNWTO, that destination Zimbabwe has what it takes to hold conferences and events of such huge magnitude. Such an endorsement coming from a powerful and influential global body constitutes a vote of confidence on Zimbabwe's tourism industry which is currently on the recovery path. Many a tourist destinations are increasingly scouting for such endorsement given the highly competitive environment and process associated with the bidding, inspection and final awarding of the right to host such hallmark events. Zimbabwe's tourism industry has huge potential, and its amenities are of global standards. The country successfully hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) conference in Harare in 1995 at the then Sheraton Towers. Since the MICE sector is an increasingly growing tourism market segment, such an endorsement gave Zimbabwe a clean bill of health clearing way for the hosting of other high profile events in future. This is certainly good news on destination Zimbabwe and local tourism players as it is ample evidence that the international community still has confidence and faith in the country's tourism sector despite the

rough economic and political patch the country has been going through. More importantly, the MICE market take guidance from world bodies like ATA, UNWTO, and WTTC and chances are high that in future Zimbabwe would be on the menu as a prime tourist destination candidate to hold other forthcoming congresses. MICE endorsement comes on the back of the country having bided and won to jointly co-host the forthcoming UNWTO's general assembly in the same resort town of Victoria Falls alongside Zambia. Tourism players were indeed upbeat since this represents the crowning moment for Zimbabwe's tourism sector that has been vilified through adverse media reportage.

### **Infrastructural facilities development and refurbishment**

Respondents noted that the ATA event in a big way enabled the municipality of Victoria Falls to access funding to upgrade the Victoria Falls international airport runway, sprucing up the roads, and upgrading the general hospital in order to provide top of the notch health care services that commensurate with the hosting of such a spectacular event. Had it not been the hosting of ATA, respondents conceded that such funding would not have come to Victoria Falls given that the town had been battling for some time to secure funding for the rehabilitation of these facilities. Given the constrained budgetary support from treasury, numerous infrastructural development projects country wide are either behind schedule or have been completely halted due to the non availability of funds. Victoria Falls infrastructural projects were no exception but the fact that the resort town was chosen to host ATA congress as the face of Zimbabwe, money had to be found to fund the critical infrastructural facilities. The reality of the matter is that such funds were most probable taken from other projects so that Victoria Falls could be prioritised given the implications and significance of hosting the ATA event not only to Victoria Falls but to Zimbabwe's tourism sector fraternity. The foregoing is supported by Bowdin *et al.* (2011), who say that events are a catalyst for expansion and improvement of destination infrastructure which will continue to be used even long after the event. Respondents identified the refurbishment of the roads and its maintenance, and the upgrading of the hospital and airport.

### **Improved delivery of social services**

Residents in Chinotimba suburb were ecstatic about ATA congress since it had transformed their lives in a short space of time. Residents wished that such events were held as often as possible so that they would continue to enjoy the quality and style of life they were accustomed to during the ATA congress. Most of the cities and towns in Zimbabwe as a whole are currently facing serious challenges ranging from the provision of clean and safe drinking water to the provision of proper sanitation facilities to residents. The Victoria Falls municipality is even worse given its geographical location, that is, Matabeleland region 5 where rainfall patterns are erratic with high temperatures. Through the funding, the municipality was capacitated to rehabilitate not only the water system but also the sanitation facilities which had become an eyesore and time bomb for the outbreak of diseases. In the same vein, in the run up to, during, and after the ATA congress tourism

operators and ordinary residents alike testified of having an uninterrupted supply of the precious liquid and electricity, courtesy of ATA congress. The country is battling a huge deficit in terms of electricity generation and demand hence it has become the normal order of life in most cities to endure long power cuts of not less than 12 hours per day. However, the holding of ATA event in Victoria Falls came as a relief to local people since energy authorities prioritised and dedicated a constant power supply to the resort town so as not to interrupt the ATA proceedings, and at the same time the residents benefited. Residents were very much excited that they had been relieved of walking long distances fetching firewood and at the same time risking their lives from wild animals.

### **Increase in business performance Duringata's congress**

Respondents across the board were upbeat on the significance of ATA congress as they recorded brisk business. From hotels, tour operators, sculptors to airtime street vendors echoed the same sentiments that their sales were up. Hotels reported 100 per cent occupancy largely due to ATA delegates, and had to turn away some of their regular customers due to lack of space. Hotels and tour operators reportedly hired extra manpower to beef up their staff so that they could cope with overwhelming demand. Personnel who were hired on a part time basis largely comprised waiters and tour guides and this provided jobs for the locals albeit on a short term basis. Most vendors in the curio market received high sales during the event. Sculptors and souvenir vendors also had huge volumes of sales since their items were moving fast. One sculptor could not hide his joy:

*'You see my stock is finished and I am rushing home to get extra stuff. The sales which I have made today have surpassed all my sales for the past 6 months'*

The same story characterised airtime vendors who indicated that they had doubled their stocks after realising that airtime was moving fast since the commencement of ATA congress. Respondents wished the ATA congress to run for eternity. Another vendor said:

*'I have texted my colleague in Beitbridge to bring extra stuff because from the look of things in a matter of time my stock would be finished and I will have no more stock to sell. He should be here any time from now so that we make money. I am very happy that business is good and I am contemplating to increase my prices because the demand is just too much'.*

Such was the level of business spawned by ATA congress. Around half of the food and drink outlets reported increased performance. Facilities such as restaurants at the hotels also increased business for the hotel sector during the congress. The Boma restaurant at the Victoria Falls Safari Lodge recorded over 300 covers each night during the event. The covers were mainly from the delegates who had come for the ATA congress.



### **Projection of a positive destination image**

Respondents concurred unanimously that ATA congress helped in projecting a positive market image to the international audience. With the presence of media houses from the region and beyond, their coverage of the event and what they saw on the ground was different to what other international news channels have been reporting on Zimbabwe. Indeed Zimbabwe went through economic and political challenges but all are now in the past. The consummation of the Inclusive Government in 2009 helped to thaw the political tensions and the subsequent introduction of the multi-currency regime tamed hyper inflation and the situation obtaining on the ground point to a tourist destination that is now experiencing the lowest inflation rate in the region, stable and fastest growing economy in the region, a factor that was even acknowledged by the WB and IMF. The normalization of relations with other progressive western countries and the removal of negative travel advisories once issued by the international community is evidence that Zimbabwe as a tourist destination has come back into the family of nations.

The Zimbabwe's perceived risk is not real on the ground. The country boasts of a hospitable people, is enjoying economic growth and political peace. Yes, given the once highly polarised political environment one would find some skirmishes here and there which are normal even in democratic and politically peaceful countries but it is a pity that the situation is magnified and blown out of proportion when reported by the international media. The ATA congress came at the most opportune time for the delegates, tour operators, industry experts, and opinion leaders to see for them and to have first hand information on the real situation obtaining on the ground in destination Zimbabwe. With the provision of tight security from the professional Zimbabwe republic Policy (ZRP) and other state security organs the international media had no other option but to tell the international community that Zimbabwe is a safe tourist destination. It is hoped that this would resonate well with prospective visitors who had second thoughts on coming to Zimbabwe and would also boost repeat business. ATA delegates shall be ambassadors spreading positive word of mouth on destination Zimbabwe. The congress actually marketed the Zimbabwe's tourism sector on a very wider coverage through media from different delegates' countries. The respondents indicated that ATA's congress helped in marketing Zimbabwe as a safe tourist destination especially considering the negative publicity that had been put upon the country as a tourist destination.

## **FLIPSIDE OF ATA CONGRESS AT MICRO LEVEL**

### **Poor air access on the country**

Respondents noted that ATA was successful but were quick to highlight that they personally heard the delegates complaining about destination Zimbabwe's poor connectivity largely due to the absence of airline carriers. This really is a cause for concern that has been exacerbated by the demise of the national airline flag carrier Air Zimbabwe. It irked respondents that South Africa

Airways (SAA) had moved in to fill in the gap left by Air Zimbabwe and was the official airline partner for ATA delegates at the expense 'our' national carrier. Accessibility of a tourist destination is a pre-requisite as indicated by Cooper *et al.* (2001) that a tourist destination which is inaccessible loses out in terms of arrivals and receipts. Tourists are ready to substitute inaccessible destination with accessible ones and this is an area that needs urgent attention by authorities because without access virtually there is no tourism to talk about, worse still when one looks at the long haul tourism market. Of late the country has targeted the Asian market and is making significant inroads to recapture the western markets and the Americas, however all these efforts will be in vain if the issue of poor connectivity is not addressed once and for all. Tourism is all about movement hence an efficient air transport system must be in place to link destination Zimbabwe and her source markets. Internal air connectivity cannot be over emphasised since it is equally critically and ATA congress came at a time when Air Zimbabwe abandoned almost all the domestic routes. Most international airline carriers pulled out of destination Zimbabwe in the late 1990s citing economic and political problems and ever since then Zimbabwe has been rendered virtually inaccessible, more so that Air Zimbabwe is technically solvent.

#### **Increases in prices of food stuff, taxi fares and brothels**

Whilst on the positive side, the ATA congress brought smiles to some residents, the event was also frowned upon by others since they perceived it had caused a sharp increase in prices of foodstuff in supermarkets, taxi fares and had contributed to the upsurge of brothels in and around the resort town.

*'This ATA event has brought misery on us, prices of foodstuffs and taxi fares have gone up. Here in the resort town there are dangerous wild animals especially at night so we are used to using taxi cabs but they have just hiked their fares from \$5, now its \$10. This is not fair because not everyone is a tourist and we don't have that kind of money. We implore the responsible authorities to intervene as a matter of urgency otherwise we are being fleeced off. Next time such events should be held in Harare, not here in Victoria Falls because life is expensive and they go on to increase fares'.*

The above showed that ATA congress disturbed the local residents` rhythm of life, following the increases in taxi fares and prices of food stuffs since they had not budgeted for such eventualities. Normalcy would be restored well after the event would have ended but that would not benefit the residents since they would have lost. One respondent even suggested that responsible authorities should revoke licenses for these taxi owners because in his view they were punishing the residents in the name of ATA congress yet the residents have been supporting their businesses all year round. Respondents revealed that soft drinks and other food stuff have their prices also hiked as a result of ATA congress.

One resident said: *“Just go around the suburb and in the outskirts of the city centre all the houses there have been temporarily turned into brothels to provide accommodation for commercial sex workers. This really is a social menace given that this practice defiles our moral values and culture. I know of certain young ladies who have camped at this brothel who travelled all the way from Bulawayo anticipating brisk business because of this event here in Victoria Falls. And the city council is not doing anything about it”*.

The above showed the other down side of the ATA congress, which ironically were shied away by the media as it reported on the positive aspects. The mushrooming of such brothels was directly linked to ATA event.

### **Upsurge in street beggars and vending in undesignated places**

Respondents noted that ever since the ATA congress started the whole town is full of beggars on almost each and every street corner. Respondents retorted that the trend had just emerged owing to the publicity given to ATA and the anticipated tourist inflows. The number of street beggars shot up quite dramatically as they hoped to get money from overseas tourists like what they used to do when the tourism industry was at its peak in the 1990s. This was yet another social ill brought about by ATA congress. International visitors were sympathetic to these beggars; they dished out money to them as revealed by respondents.

As if that was not enough, the entire resort town was swarmed by vendors mostly in undesignated areas hoping to sell their wares and stuff. Every strategic and open space was invaded by vendors ranging from sculptors, arts and crafts, basketry, airtime vendors and this is because they had heard that business is high. Mostly, such were vendors who had come from other cities as far afield as Masvingo, Harare, Beit bridge and Bulawayo having caught wind that stocks were in high demand here in Victoria Falls due to ATA congress and they had to invade every open space.

### **Business diversion and turning away regular customers**

Accommodation service providers conceded that they had turned away some of their regular patrons because they were full and they feared this might result in a backlash in future after the ATA event ended. Disappointing regular customer is very bad because the event was for 5 days only and these particular customers have been providing business to these hotels. Resentment on the part of the customer may result in them never coming back to such accommodation service providers hence the hotels would have lost out their loyal clientele because of a 5 day event. Accommodation service providers revealed that there was nothing they could do to salvage the situation since they were ordered to accommodate the ATA delegates at a negotiated and complimentary rate by the authorities. This showed that there was business diversion owing to AT's congress with regular customers denied accommodation at their regular hotels and obviously

they ended up going elsewhere. Some visitors also avoided Victoria Falls upon discovering that ATA congress was underway preferring to stay at Hwange and Bulawayo.

### **Depressed revenue inflows for accommodation service providers**

Finally, most service providers particularly hotels and tour operators conceded that the revenue they realised from ATA event from rooms did not meet their initial projections. They revealed that in the run up to the event the regulatory authority directed them to slash their room rates since it was felt that they were on the high side and they had to comply or risk losing licences. Tour operators were requested to provide a gesture of goodwill by rendering services on a complimentary basis for ATA delegates. This eventually ate into the operators' projected revenue and some hotels indicated that they were better off if they had taken in their regular customers at the standard rack rates instead of accommodating ATA delegates at negotiated rates. Indeed occupancy levels were high but revenue was very little. In the tourism sector once revenue is lost it is lost forever and cannot be recouped. In this view a revised accommodation service pricing model needs to be put in place jointly by hotels and the regulatory authority so that the pricing model is acceptable to both parties ahead of the UNWTO general assembly in 2013 to avoid a replication of this sad development.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In conclusion the hosting of the ATA's congress was of great significance to Zimbabwe's tourism sector as it was a marketing and positioning platform to showcase Zimbabwe's ability to host international events as well as the marketing the country as a safe tourist destination. Moreover, the hosting of the ATA's congress was a great opportunity to prepare and test the country's ability to host the upcoming UNWTO general assembly which is another mega event. However, some of the benefits were only short term and could only be accrued during the hosting of the event. With a boisterous, spirited campaign by the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) now underway for the successful hosting of the UNWTO general assembly in 2013, Zimbabwe risks failing a critical test of its accessibility and pricing regime. That, in turn, could mar its status as tourist destination recovering from a decade long tourism slump. ATA event enabled authorities to identify key areas which needed urgent attention, that is, the pathetic airline connectivity issue, and the controversial accommodation pricing regime. Local governments are willing to invest several million dollars of public money in mega events in order to demonstrate their city's ability to compete in an increasingly global market place. According to the logic of mega events, by successfully hosting a world class event and show casing the resort's modern infrastructure and amenities to a global audience, Victoria Falls as the host city would certainly recoup its expenses in renewed tourism and international investment. Much of the research on mega events reinforces this view by focusing on the economic costs and benefits of mega events for the host city or the event sponsors while largely ignoring the social and spatial consequences of the events for low income communities. As noted

in this research study the local resident populace suffered the brunt of increased taxi fares and prices of goods even though this was concealed by the media in order to construct the positive image of this global event. Hotels and other accommodation service providers did not realise the anticipated revenue as they were instructed to reduce their rates by the regulatory authority so that the rates would be politically correct to the international delegates. Under normal circumstances, in the tourism industry during peak seasons when accommodation demand is high hoteliers increase rates in line with the law of supply and demand but in this particular case this was not done due to the intervention of the regulatory authority. This issue could be a tip of the iceberg showing mistrust/discord on the appropriate pricing model for the sector between service providers and the ZTA as the industry regulatory body. The reality on the ground is that accommodation rates in destination Zimbabwe are on the steep side hence the rates charged on ATA delegates were artificial; there is therefore need for a new pricing model that is acceptable to both parties ahead of the UNWTO general assembly. By way of recommendations, there is need for a systematic framework for planning and managing of events in order to optimise their contribution to wider development. An events tourism board should also be established that will be responsible for running and planning events so that events are properly managed and take on board other informal business players like curio vendors. Moreover, good corporate government and ethics should define business to avoid any negotiations on rates with the service providers to enable the sector to maximise their revenue from such once off event. It is further recommended that during the hosting of such mega events, live international TV channels should be accredited to create a vibrant marketing of the event itself and the hosting destination , and that the media should report on both the positive and negative effects of such events at local level.

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