

# The Tangible Economic benefits of the 20<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation General Assembly to Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

This paper is a documentation of the tangible economic benefits that accrued to the town of Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, by co-hosting with Zambia, the 20<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) General Assembly (GA) in 2013. The paper intends to offset speculations, half-truths and exaggerations on the tangible economic benefits of the event to the town and to contribute significantly to the scanty existing literature on the impact of these events to developing countries. A single case study research design focusing on the town was adopted for this study. The study participants to the research included tourism and hospitality organizations, the Victoria Falls municipality authorities, service providers and Victoria Falls town residents. Researcher administered questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and observation check lists were used to collect the data. In general, although the GA brought some significant transformative effects to the town of Victoria Falls in terms of employment creation, infrastructural development, revenue generation and the country's image, future host cities and countries to this event should mobilize adequate funds for the event, time it appropriately, ensure a fair spread of the benefits to various sectors and put up structures that do not turn into white elephants soon after the event.

**Key words:** UNWTO General Assembly, mega events, tangible economic benefits, white elephants, Victoria Falls and Zimbabwe Tourism Authority.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The UNWTO is an agency of the United Nations (UN) headquartered in Madrid, Spain with 156 member states, seven associate members, two permanent observers and more than 400 affiliate members. It is the leading supranational body in the field of tourism and serves as a global forum for tourism policy issues and a practical source of tourism know-how (United Nations Group on Information Society 2013). As the world tourism's supreme organ, its meetings are generally expected to draw sizeable attention and benefits to the host cities and countries including marked increases in tourists, foreign exchange generation, infrastructural development and marketing (Mhlahla, 2011).

The UNWTO General Assembly (GA) is therefore the most important meeting for senior tourism officials and high-level representatives of the public sector from all

over the world. Delegates to the GA are drawn from the five regional commissions of the UNWTO which are Africa, Europe, America, Asia and the Middle East. The UNWTO GA is held every two years and attended by full delegates and associate members as well as representatives from the business council. Humphreys and Prokopowicz (2007) noted that such mega-events are convened for a short duration but are increasingly becoming more significant in this era of globalisation and have proved to be transformative moments in the history of their host nations.

The August 2013 20<sup>th</sup> session of the UNWTO GA was co-hosted by Zimbabwe and Zambia for the second time in Africa with the first having been held in Senegal in 2005. The chance to host the UNWTO GA is therefore a highly contested and charged affair for bidders. Zimbabwe and Zambia won the right to co-host the 20<sup>th</sup> session of the UNWTO GA, between the 24<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of August

2013 (Mhlahla, 2011). The two countries are separated by the mighty Zambezi River and share the World Heritage site of the Victoria Falls. The host towns were Livingstone and Victoria Falls for Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively.

Since 1980 to date, Zimbabwe has hosted a wide variety of tourism related events albeit with mixed fortunes. The dawning of the 20<sup>th</sup> session of the UNWTO GA in Victoria Falls heralded an opportunity for the host city to invite the entire world into its gardens. As a result, the 20<sup>th</sup> session of the UNWTO GA in Victoria Falls presented itself as the premier mega-event within the context of the tourism industry in post-colonial Zimbabwe to the effect that, at the beginning of the year 2013, there was a lot of hype and buzz from all sources of media with regard to the co-hosting of the event by the two nations. Investors and event planners were optimistic of the impending benefits that were forecasted to accrue to both nations. The event was also believed to have a potential for positive ripple effects in rejuvenating the tourism sector of the two economies.

However, despite the significant growth and increasing attractiveness of mega events, their actual potential to benefit host countries is highly controversial. Florek and Breitbarth (2007) noted that when forecasting the expected outcome of mega events, forecasters and event planners deliberately and strategically overestimate benefits and underestimate costs in order to increase the likelihood that the event can gain approval and funding.

In line with this observation, the hosting of the 20<sup>th</sup> session of the UNWTO GA in Victoria Falls was expected to generate a lot of direct and indirect economic benefits to the hosting cities ranging from perceived heavy refurbishment and construction with the downward spiral effect expected to spill over to transport, tour operators, travel agents, hotels, lodges, retailers, ancillary service providers and Victoria Falls residents. It is from this background that this study intended to document the tangible economic benefits of hosting the 20<sup>th</sup> session of the UNWTO GA to the town of Victoria Falls. The results of this paper

therefore offset any speculations, half truths and exaggerations with regards to the economic benefits that accrued to the town.

## **2. BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Jago and Shaw (2008, p. 29) define mega-events as “one-time major events of short duration that are generally of an international scale.” These events, by virtue of their magnitude and significance, often yield extraordinarily high levels of tourism, media coverage, prestige or economic impact to the host community, venue or organisation (Gratton, Shibli and Coleman (2006). Anderson, Ambrecht and Lundberg (2008) note that, events of such magnitude recur somewhere in the world at least once within a period of 1-4 years and to host these events are therefore rare occurrences for the host cities and countries. As an example, South Africa hosted the 2010 FIFA World Cup and is not expected to host this same mega-sporting event anytime soon just as Zimbabwe and Zambia cannot expect to host another UNWTO General Assembly in the near future, having hosted the most recent one in 2013.

### **2.2 Views on the economic benefits of hosting mega-events**

The economic benefits of hosting mega events to host cities as summed up by Kasimati (2007) include newly constructed event facilities and infrastructure, urban revival, enhanced international reputation, increased tourism, improved public welfare, additional employment, and increased inward investment. Several studies e.g. by Cress (2008) for the Barcelona 1992 Olympics, Hensley and Behrens (2006) for the 2006 Sydney Olympics, Del Omo (2009) for the Malaysian Grand Prix etc attest to this summation. As an example, Cress (2008) noted that in the preparation of the Barcelona 1992 Olympics, 300 projects took place including improvements to parks, telecommunication services, housing, offices, premises, sporting facilities, cultural and health facilities, and transportation infrastructure. Hensley and Behrens (2006) in

their study of the 2006 Sydney Olympics noted that, substantial construction was undertaken to host the games. New sporting facilities were constructed, existing facilities were upgraded, new roads were built, the Sydney airport was expanded, and hotel room capacity in Sydney was increased by 25%. The city of Sydney undertook an extensive urban beautification program that included widening of footpaths, installation of new street lights, enhanced security (e.g. safety cameras, lighting), adding and upgrading public landscapes, and supplying improved disabled access.

However, despite the above expected and actual economic benefits of hosting mega events, existing literature reveals a growing skepticism over the extent to which hosting mega-events potentially results in economic growth or significant and sustainable developmental impacts (Humphreys and Prokopowicz 2007; Whitson and Horne 2006; Cornelissen and Swart (2006); Baade and Matheson 2008; Horne and Manzenreiter 2006). A host of scholars conclude that, although there are some positive economic and legacy impacts (Lee and Taylor 2005; Matos (2006), the urban economic impact is sometimes variable, intangible and at best ambiguous (Golovnina 2005). There are three categories of scholarly consensus concerning the exaggeration of benefits linked to mega-events. The first suggests that “the increase in direct spending attributable to the games may be a ‘gross’ as opposed to a ‘net’ measure” (Matheson and Baade 2008). In essence, this figure does not account for the costs incurred in preparation for the event. Secondly, mega-events may crowd out regular business travelers in a particular region. In this regard, regular business travelers may avoid host cities for the duration of the event. Thirdly, the notion of the multiplier effect, which suggests that further spending is stimulated by initial and direct spending on mega-events, is criticized in that the multiplier for any particular mega-event “could possibly be lower than the multiplier for spending on many other local goods and services” (Matheson and Baade 2008, p. 1091).

Existing literature also reveals that the extent to which host cities and countries benefit from

mega-events are a result of different factors which vary from one place to the other with regards to the type of the event, timing, level of development of the host city or country, business cycles and event management capabilities of the hosts. Swart and Bob (2005) identify factors such as accountability, political support, relationship marketing ability, infrastructure, communication and exposure, and existing facilities as decisive for a successful host.

The literature also indicates that a number of studies have been done on the perceived economic benefits of mega-events and yet few researchers have asked critical questions about the ways in which mega-events impact negatively in most economically disadvantaged host cities (Matheson and Baade, 2008).

In terms of economic impact measurement, literature indicates that there is lack of accurate measurement of the economic impacts of mega-events. For instance, the Tourism Satellite Accounting (TSA) recording is based on observations or counts of economic variables while ex-post studies are more descriptive, detailing the actual economic impacts that take place during a particular mega-event on the basis of various economic indicators (Lee and Taylor 2005). This then questions the validity and reliability of such findings as researchers can use different methods for the same event and produce different results. Therefore a standard model and method to measure the economic impacts of mega events should be developed.

In terms of academic direction and as already alluded to in the introduction to this paper, existing literature on mega-events has so far been skewed towards developed countries by virtue of the fact that, until recently, these events have been rare occurrences in developing countries. Tourism academics in these countries have therefore tended to focus on other issues. In addition, post event analyses is rarely done as event organizers quickly disband and governments turn their focus on other activities of more immediate concern to them (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006).

Conceptually, this research is bound by the fact that, the hosting of mega events is always expected to yield significant economic impacts to the host cities and countries. Firstly, this is because there is overwhelming evidence that cities and countries which have previously hosted these events have immensely benefited from the occasions and secondly, such high expectations may also be a result of event forecasters and planners who sometimes deliberately and strategically overestimate the benefits and underestimate the costs of hosting these events in order to increase the likelihood that the event will gain approval and funding. However, as it is to date, the economic benefits of these events to host cities and countries have been a mixed fortune as the extent of benefit is dictated by the several factors constituting the event environment. As an example, Cornelissen and Swart (2006) and Matheson and Baade (2008) in their analysis of the 1994 World Cup in the United States of America noted that, as opposed to the expected \$4 billion gain, host cities experienced losses ranging from \$5.5 to \$9.3 billion. In another case, Horne and Manzenreiter (2006) and Whitson (2004) also noted that, for the 2002 Soccer World Cup, South Korea received approximately the same number of visitors as they had in 2001. Therefore, on the basis of these observations, economic benefit

claims resulting from the hosting of mega-events need to be carefully measured and recorded especially in the context of the developing countries in order to offset any speculations, half truths and exaggerations with regards to the benefits. Such studies consentize future event bidders on what to expect in terms of economic benefits, whether positive or negative.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research design

A single case study research design was adopted for this study with a view to obtaining detailed information on the impacts. The research was largely descriptive and the data collected was both quantitative and qualitative data.

#### 3.2 Study population and respondents

There were several study populations for this research. Firstly, the researcher targeted all the tourist facilities in Victoria Falls registered with the country's national tourism organization (the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA). For these facilities, the researcher obtained a stratified list from the ZTA and sampled a third from each category as shown in table 1. The managers of the chosen facilities were then taken as the study respondents.

Table 1: Registered tourism facilities in Victoria Falls and the samples

Organizations	Total number of registered facilities	Sample
Hotels	7	4
Travel agencies	18	6
Tour operators	40	13
Curio shops	20	7
Bed and Breakfast Facilities	2	1
Boats Cruises and Yachts	17	6
Houseboats	2	1
Hunting operators	10	4
Lodges	14	5

Safari Operators	14	5
Restaurants	9	3
Self-catering accommodation	4	2
Adventure Safaris	32	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>68</b>

Departmental heads and responsible authorities in the local municipality authorities, the department of transport and telecommunications, taxi drivers and residents in The Victoria Falls town were also part of the participants. Probability sampling allows each segment of the total population to be represented

Non-probability sampling of the convenience type was adopted to select taxi drivers and snowball sampling was used to select residents as there was no full listing of who could have benefited.

**3.3 Data collection methods and instruments.**

The researcher adopted indicators such as changes in revenue, employment rates, hotel occupancies, dinner covers; and airport traffic and infrastructure legacy which were also adopted by Matheson (2006) in his research on economic benefits of Olympic Games in

2000 in Barcelona. Researcher administered questionnaires were used to collect data from managers of hotels, lodges, travel agencies, tour operators and curio shop owners. Structured face to face interviews were used to collect information from the municipality and the department of transport and telecommunications. Observation check lists were also employed by the researcher to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. The researcher also took photographs of the physical structures put up in the town for the event. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze and report on the economic benefits of the UNWTO GA to the town.

**4. FINDINGS**

**4.1 Revenue generation**

Table 2 shows the percentage increases in revenue realized by the various organizations. The write up that follows discusses these increases in more detail.

Table 2: Revenue increases realized by some organisations in Victoria Falls during the General Assembly.

Organizations	Hotels and lodges	Travel Agents	Tour Operators	Other transporters including taxis	Curio shops
% Approximate revenue increases	35-40	10	15	5	5

**(i) Hotels and Lodges**

The hospitality establishments that benefited most and registered 100 % occupancy rates for the duration of this event were those which were accredited by the ZTA to host the delegates. These included the Victoria Falls Hotel, the A' Zambezi River Lodge (AZRL) and the Elephant Hills Hotel. For the rest of

the hospitality establishments, 70% reported revenue increases of up to 80%. However, the accredited hotels reported that the revenues they realized from the GA did not meet their initial revenue projections because ZTA gazetted the accommodation charges for them after it felt that they were on the high side. As an example, the standard rack rate

for AZRL was USD\$300 for a double room but was reduced to USD\$245. Other hospitality establishments felt that they failed to meet their revenue expectations because of media reports that falsely reported that accommodation facilities in the town were fully booked well ahead of the event. This led to 'crowding out' as some independent tourists could not make bookings while others cancelled their bookings fearing congestion, tight security and therefore lack of spontaneity during the event. Contrary to this claim, 15% of the hospitality establishments were of the view that the revenue increases they realized could partially have been out of the wish by some visitors to make their visits coincide with the general assembly.

#### **(ii) Tour Operators and Travel Agencies**

All the sampled tour operators were accredited to ferry guests from Victoria Falls to Livingstone in Zambia and for any other internal travel. All in all, this led to a 15% increase in revenue for the tour operators. The sampled travel agencies also realised an average of 10% increase in revenue although they felt dis-intermediated for the accredited hotels and lodges where direct bookings were made.

#### **(iii) Revenue related to the transportation of guests**

The Victoria Falls International Airport registered significant increases in revenue from landing and other fees as a number of new airlines and airbuses were introduced in the Victoria Falls route. As an example, Air Zimbabwe added two new airbuses namely, Airbus 320 and an Embreair which offered direct flights from Victoria Falls-Chobe and Chobe-Victoria Falls. British Airways also introduced a flight in that route. Air Zimbabwe also increased its frequency and number of domestic flight schedules especially between Harare, Victoria Falls and Bulawayo. A flight from Victoria falls to Great Zimbabwe was also added. Non-scheduled light bodied aircrafts such as Wildernes Air, Safari Logistics, Matetsi Air and the United Air also landed at the Victoria Falls International Airport.

Taxi operators who were charging \$30 from Victoria Falls town to Victoria Falls International Airport (VFIA), a distance of less

than 20 kilometres, also indicated that they had recorded brisk business apart from the fact that "*the availability of the shuttle buses from the government's Central Mechanical and Engineering Department reduced their expected chances to ferry guests*", said one of the taxi driver.

#### **(v) Curio Shops Owners**

The curio shops which registered the highest revenue increases were those located in areas where there was reasonable interaction with the guests. These included those that were located at Elephant Hills Hotel, the Victoria Falls International Airport and the Landela Complex along Livingstone way. On the other hand, those curio shops located at the Open market and the Elephant Walk and other traders in these areas reported that their sales were extremely low during the event due to the nature of the event itself which lacked spontaneity and hence it made it impossible for delegates to find free time to move around and shop. The traders therefore spent days in the scorching tents and stalls for almost nothing despite the fact that some of them had spent huge sums of money preparing their exhibition stands, hoping for good returns. One trader said that he had actually benefitted nothing except "seeing delegates being shuttled to and from the conference centre"

Other traders like sculptors and souvenir vendors who had been invited by the ZTA to showcase their weirs at the event from as far as Bulawayo, Harare, and Beitbridge had little or nothing bought from them and had to be refunded the transport costs they incurred. In general, the traders blamed the ZTA for the losses, claiming that it had allocated them stands which were inaccessible to the guests.

#### **(vi) Victoria Falls National Park**

The Victoria Falls National Park also earned some revenue from the game drives that were organized for the visitors. The visitors were assured of seeing the animals after the country's National Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (NPWMA) relocated 151 wildebeests, 25 eland, 60 zebras, 100 impalas and 10 giraffes from the Save Conservancy to beef up animal populations in the park.



### **(vii) Independent Home Owners in Victoria Falls**

Independent home owners who rented out their houses to vendors from Harare, Bulawayo and Beitbridge for that whole week also realized some revenue. One of the residents said, " *the UNWTO GA brought additional revenue to my household because for one week, I rented out my house to Harare and Bulawayo souvenir vendors while I stayed in Bulawayo.*"

## **4.2 Infrastructural and Telecommunication Developments**

### **4.2.1 Conference Facilities**

An aluminium and glass double storey structure shown in figure 1 was put up at Elephant Hills Resort to serve as a conference centre for the event. The structure had a very large conference room to accommodate 500 invited delegates and 300 members of the public and a registration and accreditation room on the ground floor. The upstairs had the UNWTO offices, journalists working area and viewing deck.

Figure 1: The aluminium and glass structure put up for the UNWTO General Assembly at Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe



## **4.2.2 Transport**

### **(i) Road network**

There was massive upgrading and construction of new roads in Victoria falls. Roads such as Parkway road, Courtney Selous Crecent road, Pionner road, new and old Chinotimba roads, Livingstone way and the Victoria Falls International Aiport to City road were upgraded with heavy carriage way markings done, together with signage and upgrading of lighting systems in the streets.

The municipality authorities also reported that 38kms of new tarred road was developed.

### **(ii) Victoria Falls International Airport (VFIA)**

The researcher observed a newly constructed 4km stretch of runway and an extended old runway. The old runway was extended by 2.2km. An arrival concourse with electronic sliding doors for both international and domestic visitors were also put in place. These are shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: The extended International and Domestic arrival concourses



#### 4.2.3 Health facilities

The Victoria Falls municipality reported significant improvements in health facilities. The GA saw the rehabilitation of Victoria Falls District Hospital (VFDH) into a new-state-of-the-art medical centre. The VFDH went through refurbishment with newly painted walls, a concrete security wall and an amazing reception. Figure 3 shows the upgraded and newly painted VFDH. Other

new developments included the extension of the intensive care unit, the construction of a new paediatric ward (PD), an administration block, a guard room, a waiting bay, an incinerator and a kitchen. New equipment for the hospital was also purchased. A private medical centre, that is, the Premier Medical Services (PISMAS) was established and Emras also introduced 2 new ambulances in the town.

Figure 3: The upgraded newly painted Victoria Falls District Hospital



#### 4.2.4 Water and sanitation

The municipality authorities reported improvements in water and sanitation facilities. New public toilets were built at



Chinotimba bus terminus and Khosana shopping center. Water was connected to Mfelandawonye residential area and new sewer and waste water pumps were installed by the government to improve the resort town's sanitation requirements.

#### **4.2.5 Hotel refurbishments**

40% of the hotels in the town refurbished their facilities. As an example, the Victoria Falls Hotel renovated 50 rooms. The A'Zambezi River Lodge replaced bath tubs and purchased new restaurant chairs. The Cresta Spray View hotel was also renovated in preparation for the event. The refurbishments and renovations were made possible by the government's decision to re-introduce statutory instruments 45 and 46 of 2009 that facilitated duty-free importation of capital goods for renovations at the destination.

#### **4.2.6 Immigration Facilities**

A one stop border post was established at Chirundu between Zambia and Zimbabwe to facilitate movement of goods and people between the two countries.

#### **4.2.7 Telecommunication developments**

There were significant developments in the telecommunications sector as the country's network service providers such as Telecel Zimbabwe opened a new shop in the town and Tel-One also commissioned a USD\$2 million cyber link in the resort. Econet wireless, the country's leading cellular service provider, launched a 4-G internet broadband network which saw the mounting of three

boosters in Chinotimba Township, Elephant Hills Hotel area and at the border post to Zambia. All this was achieved through the installation of new fibre optics and upgrading of satellite links with the city. Today, through this event, Victoria Falls is now a cyber-city, with excellent internet connectivity. In the words of Zimbabwe's Tourism Minister, "Victoria Falls will never be the same again in this regard after this event."

#### **4.3 Employment creation**

The UNWTO General Assembly created both full time and part-time employment for the locals. However, most of the employment generated was part-time as is expected of most events. One of the residents said, "*August 23-30 was a busy week for hotels in Victoria Falls such that several college students who were on holiday and school leavers were engaged in one week-long contracts in hotels and lodges.*" The longest contracts were mostly 3 months and were mostly associated with construction and refurbishment. Table 3 shows a sample of the level of permanent and temporary employment generated by the event.

The capacity to generate employment was dampened by the need to cut costs and lack of adequate funding for the event. To accommodate this requirement, some organisations used students on work related learning and group employees from their other establishments instead of hiring new employees. For instance, A'Zambezi River Lodge got some of its from Bulawayo Rainbow and Civil Aviation Authority of Zimbabwe (CAAZ) got some of its workers for the event from Harare and Bulawayo International Airports.

Table 3: Level of employment generated by the event

Organizations	Number of new employees engaged	
	Full time	Part-time
A' Zambezi River Lodge	2	16
CAAZ	0	13
Elephant Hills hotel	3	20
Ilala Lodge	0	2
Victoria Fall Anytime TA	0	2
Shear Waters	0	1
The municipality	10	175
<b>Totals</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>229</b>

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the 20<sup>th</sup> session of the UNWTO GA, to a greater extent lived up to its expectations and brought and left significant economic benefits to the Victoria Falls town. These benefits were both short term and long term and included general urban regeneration in terms of infrastructural developments, employment creation and increased revenues for the various businesses in the town. However, improvements in revenue generation were sector specific, with the curio shops benefiting the least and those accredited to offer accommodation and specific activities to the delegates benefiting the most.

All in all, more than US\$150 million was used to upgrade the Victoria Falls International Airport and the overhauling of roads, water reticulation and sewerage systems. In addition, Zimbabwe's tourism Minister said

*"There were also huge improvements to the hospitality infrastructure amounting to US\$16 million made possible by the government's decision to introduce statutory instruments that facilitated duty-free imports. I will push for the extension of the instruments that are a great benefit to the tourism sector".*

The study findings in this paper are in

congruence with what was recorded by Cress (2008) for the 19<sup>th</sup> session of the UNWTO GA in South Korea. In this case, the event led to improved telecom services, renovations of hotels like Hyundai, health facilities, transportation infrastructure and employment creation. In the 2006 Sydney Olympic Games, Matheson (2006) noted that substantial constructions were undertaken to host the games. Existing facilities were upgraded; new roads were built; the Sydney airport was expanded; and hotel room capacity in Sydney was increased by 25%.

The seamless border post established between Livingstone town and Victoria Falls town for purposes of this conference should become the rule rather than the exception, for all adjacent touristic border communities throughout the country, the SADC region, and ultimately throughout Africa.

Event planners and organizers should calculate the visitor crowding out effect and hence the opportunity cost of these events to the host cities. The government should create an event fund to accommodate future events and hence eliminate cases of insufficient funds to host them. There is also a need to ensure post event utilization of structures put up to host the event so that they do not turn into white elephants.

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