

Sustainable Environmental Practices in Malawian Hotels

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How to cite this article: Khonje, L.Z., Bello, F.G. & Sepula, M.B.(2021). Sustainable Environmental Practices in Malawian Hotels. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 10(1):376-387. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720-106>

Abstract

This paper discusses the governance practices in the Malawi tourism and hospitality sector and their impact on the sustainability of natural resources. The focus of this paper is the National Tourism Policy (NTP) for Malawi and how central and local government structures enforce it to promote environmental sustainability practices in hotels. The paper uses a Case Study approach whereby the Sogecoa Golden Peacock Hotel and the Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel are used to explore how the NTP has ensured sustainable environmental practices are followed. A qualitative research method was used through semi-structured interviews to secure the perceptions of key informants. Through a Grounded Theory analysis, the findings revealed that the NTP does not facilitate the enforcement of sustainable environmental practices. Furthermore, because of this shortfall in the NTP, hotels do not have an environmental management policy to promote sustainable environmental practices. This paper, therefore, recommends an urgent need to revise the NTP and introduce sustainable environmental management guidelines in order for the hotel sector to emulate. It is further recommended that hotel managers should have a thorough understanding of environmental sustainability to ensure that the industry addresses negative environmental impacts.

Keywords: Sustainable environmental practices, hotel sector, Malawi, governance, tourism

Introduction

The academic debate on sustainability within the hotel industry has become viral nowadays. Within this debate, it is argued that modern hotel management should appreciate that the power of socio-environmental transformation is increasingly latent (Khatter, McGrath, Pyke, White, & Lockstone-Binney, 2019; Santos, Mexas & Meeirino, 2017). Available evidence further emphasizes that green products and services have gained tremendous attention because customers are more concerned with environmental sustainability and worried about the deteriorating environment (Nilashi, Ahani, Esfahani, Yadegaridehkordi, Samadi, Ibrahim, Sharef & Akbari, 2019). However, a number of challenges have been highlighted that impede the implementation of the sustainability paradigm within the hotel industry. For instance,

Wickens, Bakir and Alvarez (2015) highlighted that the hotel industry competes with other sectors for resources; and as such a political solution becomes necessary to achieve a trade-off between diverse sectors by taking into consideration the greater good of the community. The other challenge according to Musavengane (2019) is the lack of participatory democracy in the hotel industry and other key stakeholders to augment sustainability practices. From the backdrop of these highly contentious issues, this paper explores sustainable environmental practices and attempts to establish the challenges facing environmental management issues within the hotel industry in Malawi.

Sustainability in the hotel industry

Sustainability in its broader sense implies a situation where the economy is growing and distributed equitably whilst minimizing environmental impacts (Albertini, 2017). Available evidence suggests that sustainability concerns have gained prominence in various forms of business including the hotel industry (Mbasera, Plessis & Saayman, 2016). Various authors agree that environmental management is an important part of sustainability. For example, Boley and Uysal (2013), Hassan (2000), Hsieh (2012), Kasim (2006) and Wickens et al. (2015) note that sustainability in the tourism discourse entails preservation of the environment on which the tourist and the community depend upon. Similarly, Iraldo, Testa, Lanzin and Battaglia (2017) state that sustainable hotel operations are determined by green business practices such as usage of green food products. The limited evidence available suggests that in Malawi, efforts are being pursued to incorporate sustainability practices in the hotel industry through philanthropically (Bello, Banda & Kamanga, 2017; Mzembe, Melissen & Ginneken, 2018).

Furthermore, in 1987 the Montreal Protocol phased out ozone-depleting substances in an effort to promote sustainability (Falkner, 2013). Mohapatra (2016) also suggests that smart hotels introduce sustainability through improved technology that has a positive impact on the environment. It is also reported that the first-ever hotel to start sustainability initiatives is the Intercontinental Hotel Group in 2008 (Fukey & Isaac, 2014). Available evidence further suggests that employees of the Intercontinental Hotel Group contributed significantly to the successful implementation of the sustainability practices because of the available environmental management policy (Wu, Thongman, Leelapattana & Huang, 2016). In the case of the Malawian hotel industry limited literature available indicates that there could be a lack of similar policy direction (Mzembe et al., 2018; Khonje, Simatele & Musavengane, 2019).

Governance, policy and environmental management

Good governance provides for a more sustainable way of managing natural resources in hotels from any country that strives for sustainable development (Mbasera, Plessis, Saayman & Kruger, 2016). As such, environmental management has become a central policy issue in tourism development (Saarinen, 2006). Pantelidis, Geerts and Acheampong (2010) recommended that the hotel industry needs to develop a clear policy on environmental management in order to develop sustainably. However, Waligo, Clarke and Hawkins (2013) observed that ineffective stakeholder participation is one of the major obstacles to the success of most environmental management policies in the hotel industry. Policy plays an important role in sustainability issues because it helps to shape individual/organisation behaviour and attitudes (Bramwell & Lane, 2012). Some authors such as Cobbinah and Darkwah (2016) in Sepula and Korir (2019: 142) define Tourism Policy as, “...a set of regulations, guidelines, directives, and development/promotion objectives and strategies that provide a framework within which the collective and individual decisions directly, affecting long – term tourism development and the daily activities within a destination are taken.”

From the above definition, it could be argued that the objectives of a tourism policy should reflect the government's responsibilities and ideologies. It could further be argued that the overall objective of such policy would be to allow integration of the economic, political, and environmental benefits and society in order to improve livelihoods (Bramwell & Lane, 2012). Despite indicators that the Malawi hotel sector is growing rapidly, information that such growth embraces environmental management policy is not readily available (Khonje & Leonard, 2019; Mzembe et al., 2018). As such, this paper, therefore, attempts to investigate the Malawi National Tourism Policy and its implementation in order to gain insight into the core challenges with sustainable practices. In this regard, therefore, this paper firstly examines how hotels promote and implement sustainable environmental practices. Secondly, the paper examines how authorities regulate and enforce sustainable environmental practices within hotels.

Kuwali (2011) defines governance as a system of rules/regulations that provide guidance. Available evidence suggests that developed countries have very good governance practices such that sustainable environmental issues are properly governed (Adams, Muir & Hoque, 2014; Bramwell & Lane, 2012; Smith & Leonard, 2018). Unfortunately, governance in Malawi faces a number of challenges. Some of these challenges include a lack of qualified people to formulate, implement and monitor policies and policy action (Khonje et al., 2020). In addition, Khonje and Leonard (2019), note that the technical and expert skills in most institutions are not fully developed. Bureaucracy is another common problem in institutions. As a result of these bottlenecks, the system is inefficient and ineffective. Another serious challenge facing governance in Malawi according to Kuwali (2011) is that the political system is characterised by patronage where support is given in return for recognition and regional relations rather than ideological or policy commitment.

Notable challenges that impede sustainable environmental practices (SEPs) in hotels

SEPs are emerging issues in modern management approaches in the hotel sector. As such there are challenges that are faced in an attempt to adopt this approach. Environmentally sustainable policies and practices assist organisations to achieve their environmental management goals (Kraft, 2017). Available evidence suggests that there are six major challenges that hotels face in the implementation of sustainable environmental practices. For instance, Idahosa and Ebhuoma, (2020) highlighted the following; geographical location, financial and non-financial resource constraints, service nature, poor policy, lack of appropriate infrastructure, lack of employee commitment due to inadequate knowledge. Other authors also made similar observations. Fukey and Isaac (2014) for example noted that because of the nature of the hotel industry which utilise a lot of natural resources to offer service, environmental sustainability poses a challenge. Iraldo et al. (2017) were of the view that lack of knowledge on sustainable environmental practices amongst employees in the hotel industry affects the adoption and implementation of SEPs. Limited research and dissemination of the research outcomes on SEPs exacerbate the knowledge gap to motivate appropriate attitudes amongst employees and policymakers towards environmental management (Mohapatra, 2016). Furthermore, it was observed that in most developing countries such as Malawi, there is a lack of information on SEPs because of insufficient data. As such appropriate supporting legal and regulating systems on environmental sustainability in the tourism and hospitality industry are missing (Bello, Carr & Lovelock, 2016). The evidence available also suggests that in developing countries especially in Africa, low levels of community appreciation of the environmental socioeconomic impacts affect the successful adoption of SEPs within the hotel sector (Snyman & Spenceley, 2012). It is further underscored that in most African countries SEPs innovation in the tourism industry at large, is not well documented and that lack of policy guidance is lacking (Booyens, 2012). It is also reported that the political and economic realities facing

many developing countries compounds challenges in adoption and implementation of SEPs (Bello et al., 2016).

However, Valenti and Atlas (2015) noted that there is a significant transformation in matters of SEPs in the countries from the Global North. A significant change has been made in environmental policy, industry practice and public thinking because of the involvement of organisations such as the International Panel of Climate Change, the United Nations and the G8 countries (Albertini, 2017). In this regard, therefore, there could be significant hope for a better future in SEPs in the hotel sector in developing countries because their policies are mostly driven by the influences from these countries in the Global North.

Methodology

This case study used a qualitative methodology where semi-structured interviews were utilised to collect data. The perceptions from key informants on the sustainability of the hotel sector in Malawi were solicited from central and local government officials, hotel employees and managers and a private sector association in the tourism industry. The aim was to understand how Malawian owned hotels and Foreign Investor-owned hotels generally promote and implement sustainable environmental practices. The data for this study were collected from September to December 2014. A sample of thirteen participants drawn from central government, local government, Malawi Tourism Council, and the two case study hotels were purposively selected for the study. It should be noted that, at one case study as shown in Table 1, only one participant was allowed to respond to the interview questions because of the hotel policy.

Table 1: Profile of participants

Pseudonyms	Organisation	Responsibility
A	Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel	Middle Manager
B	Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel	Middle Manager
C	Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel	Middle Manager
D	Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel	Middle Manager
E	Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel	Middle Manager
F	Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel	Middle Manager
G	Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel	Middle Manager
H	Mzuzu City Council	Directorate
I	Department of Tourism	Directorate
J	Sogecoa Golden Peacock Hotel	Management
K	Lilongwe City Council	Directorate
L	Malawi Tourism Council	Directorate
M	Regional Tourism Office	Inspectorate

Digital recording of in-depth interviews was conducted with permission from informants. The interviews took a minimum of 30 minutes. During the interview process, additional questions were asked to gain insight information on this topic (Glaser, 2016). Data were transcribed verbatim whereupon a line by line analysis was conducted to generate themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The themes that were related were merged to form a major theme and information from the major themes informed the results of this research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Results

The results are presented under three policy thematic areas; Central Government; Local Government and the Hotel Sector. Extracts from interview transcripts are used to represent perceptions from the respondents. Basing on their perceptions a discussion follows.

Policy direction from the central government perspective

Governance was a major recurring concern from all participants. This was attributed to a lack of policy direction on sustainable environmental practices both at the central and local government levels. For instance, it was revealed that the Ministry of Natural Resources, Energy and Mining and Local Councils had no policy on the sustainable environmental practices to guide the hotel sector as per their mandate. Some informants noted that this was one of the factors that affected the sustainable environmental practices in the hotel sector as noted by Participant H, who indicated that:

You see there are a lot of stakeholders who have a stake in this hotel sector. You would have two or more stakeholders policing this sector. For example, the Department of Trade and Industry will have special interests in this sector, Malawi Bureau of Standards will also be interested in this sector and more importantly, you have the Department of Tourism, very interested, as a key controlling unit. Each one of these has their own policies which they administer on the same sector. So that is why if you ask hotel operators about their priority areas of policy focus, they will give you mixed answers, and SEPs may not be part.

This suggests that the organisation had no policy to guide it on SEPs. However, this did not mean that they could not foster sustainable environmental practices in the hotel sector. Their role was that of a watchdog to voice concerns when they observed malpractices in their niche policy area. Furthermore, this statement might mean that there is policy fragmentation which might confuse hotel operators. As such these operators may not be focusing much on SEPs. Similarly, it was noted that there was limited guidance from the parent Ministry regarding SEPs in the hotel sector because of the lack of policy direction. Participant I said:

The draft policy talks about the need to follow sustainable practices. But from there, we need to develop guidelines on sustainable tourism practices in the tourism sector as well as hotels. These can be checked on a regular basis to make sure they are being adhered to; if they do not adhere to punitive measures can be applied.

This statement suggests that the responsible Ministry lacked an appropriate tool to guide the hotel sector on sustainable environmental practices. Moreover, the Department of Tourism only relied upon the draft policy which mentions about SEPs in the hotel sector but lacks supporting policing instruments to guide and enforce SEPs. According to GoM (2008), the requirements stipulated in the Tourism and Hotels Act were on sanitation and public health. However, the guidance from this Act was on good sanitation and public health practices as opposed to sustainable environmental practices. Furthermore, when participants were asked to comment on current inspection practices and the guiding policies on SEPs, Participant M said:

The policy would need a lot of things to be changed. For example, I am not trained properly in SEPs. So if I am to be an SEPs inspector competent enough, I need to undergo separate training on sustainable environmental practises for the hotel industry. Again, in the checklists we use for inspection, it means we would need another section on SEPs.

The above statement suggests that cleanliness is the most important aspect upon which inspections are centred. The statement further suggests that SEPs are not considered as

important during inspections. To this end, one might conclude that SEPs are not enforced in the hotel sector. Furthermore, Participant I also corroborates with the above statements:

We do not have specific guidelines or policy direction on how the hotel industry could manage itself in terms of SEPs. But we have a law which was enacted in 1968 if not 1969 and reviewed in 2004, which set minimum requirements for one to operate a hotel. In addition, one needs to meet all other statutory requirements. They have to comply with the Environmental Act, Land Management Act and any other laws. So we would say that by virtual of fulfilling that conditionality under different Acts which relate to Environmental Issues then they are also complying with the Tourism and Hotels Act.

The above statements are correlating well with the revelations made by Participant H above. Policy fragmentation might be the cause of the lack of appropriate guidance on matters of SEPs. As revealed in the above statement, the Department of Tourism relies on other departments to enforce compliance to SEPs in the hotel sector. The statements confirm that gaps exist in the policing tools that are used to enforce compliance with prevailing regulations. Furthermore, the results confirm confusion that might arise within the hotel sector from the prevailing policy fragmentation.

Policy direction from the local government perspective

Local government authority also demonstrated a lack of policy direction which affected sustainable environmental practices in the hotel sector. City councils failed to engage the sector on sustainable environmental practices. Participant K said:

We have not done anything on sustainable environmental practices. We just go to such places as hotels to check compliance with occupation and health aspects. I remember once we visited Golden Peacock Hotel to check if they had an occupation and health policy.

The above statement also suggests that city councils are concerned more with public health practices in the hotel sector. The statement also suggests that councils are only enforcing what is stipulated in the Tourism and Hotels Act. In Malawi, local councils have certainly been ineffective for some time regarding enforcement of sustainable environmental practices in the hotel sector as noted by Participant L:

We must also accept that councils have been down for a long time, as a result, most of the by-laws are no longer responding to the needs of the time. We need to amend them to make sure that we incorporate current issues on sustainable environmental practices because if the by-laws are not covering such issues, you cannot enforce them.

The above statement suggests that by-laws which empower councils to govern the hotel sector are outdated. The statement further indicates that these bylaws do not include sustainable environmental practices. Furthermore, the statement suggests that there is a need to revise the by-laws in the councils to incorporate merging issues such as sustainable environmental practices in the hotel sector.

Policy direction within the hotel sector

The participants indicated that there is a lack of policy direction and enforcement by the government, hence the hotel sector in Malawi was not moving towards sustainable

environmental practices. It was further noted that hotels also lacked policy direction on sustainable environmental practices. It was revealed that despite being a four-star hotel (GoM, 2017), Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel did not have any environmental management policy. Participant B mentioned that:

I cannot say that there is any policy that is tackling the environmental issue. But we have some policies that are addressing environmental issues. One of such policies is the Health and Safety Policy. So it addresses some of the environmental issues surrounding the hotel. In our corporate social responsibilities, we are also involved in environmental issues.

As noted from the above statement, the hotel did not have a clear internal policy addressing sustainable environmental practices. Moreover, this response suggests that the employees lack proper knowledge of sustainable environmental practices as opposed to safety and public health issues as the two are not one and the same. The above statement also suggests that the hotel had a policy addressing the requirements of the Tourism and Hotels Act since the Act requires that hotels embrace good occupational health and safety practices. This also demonstrates a lack of understanding of what ‘sustainable environmental practices’ entails due to a lack of policy direction and understanding. Although health and safety deal with environmental issues, this was not specifically about greening the hotel. Above this, the lack of policy in this hotel might have also emanated from the gap in the Tourism and Hotels Act. Similarly, Participant C indicated that:

The policy [internal policy] is not yet established. But the standard operating procedures are there. Those are the documents I use as a guide. However sustainable environmental practices have been disadvantaged. If we had this policy [environmental management policy] established I am sure sustainable environmental practices would improve in this hotel.

Participant F also indicated that:

We do not necessarily have any evidence that an environmental management policy is available, but rather the issues are taken on board through the standard operating procedures and of course the strategic business plan...these are documents where it is mentioned that the hotel has to be environmentally friendly.

The statements from the two key informants imply that there was no environmental management policy at the hotel. Conversely, it may also mean that standard operating procedures and strategic business plan guided them on sustainable environmental practices. Furthermore, the statements reveal that an environmental management policy is urgently required at Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel. It is possible that lack of internal policy direction on sustainable environmental practices at this hotel has come with its varied ideologies regarding policy existence and the practices carried out. However, according to Gardner (2014), Sunbird Hotels has had intentions to incorporate climate conservation in its corporate social responsibility programme. Similarly, Participant J also confirmed this uncertainty at their hotel by revealing that:

The top Management here at Sogecoa Golden Peacock Hotel is Chinese. So most communication is in Chinese. We may have some environmental management policy,

although I have not seen it. Clues come out when we have staff meetings on the availability of environmental management policy.

The above account reveals that there is uncertainty over the existence of an environmental management policy. It seems there is a veil of secrecy on the issue just like the situation at the Sunbird Mount Soche Hotel. However, with Sogecoa Golden Peacock Hotel, the issue is compounded by language barriers. By extension, the assertions made by the above informants can also mean that there is a lack of environmental management policy at the Ministry responsible for tourism and local government levels, and it does negatively affect the adoption and enforcement of sustainable environmental practices in the hotel sector. The revelations also indicate that the two hotels discussed herein, do not have any internal environmental management policy to guide their operations.

Discussion

The results have revealed that there is a common problem in every institution regarding sustainability issues. For instance, it has been demonstrated that the governance of sustainable environmental management has been an institutional challenge because of the lack of internal environmental management policy. Both from the side of the hotels and to a certain extent on the part of the government. The Department of Tourism, which is directly responsible for the supervision of the hotels, lacked clear sustainability policy guidelines. The Malawi Tourism Council, which is the umbrella body for the private sector in the entire Tourism Industry, also lacked policy guidelines. The two case study four-star hotels have no internal policy guidelines to steer them towards sustainable environmental practices. These revelations are in tandem with the information provided by Khonje and Leonard (2019), Khonje et al. (2020) and Mzembe et al. (2018) that lack of institutionalised policies affect the adoption and operationalisation of environmental management practices. Furthermore, these results are confirming the observations made by Kuwali (2011) and Mbasera, Plessis, Saayman and Kruger (2016) that in Sub-Saharan Africa politics hampers the adoption and enforcement of sustainable environmental practices policy.

These results also reveal that there is policy fragmentation. The policing departments within the Central Government enforce their policies on the hotel sector independently. As mentioned by most participants, this arrangement might be confusing hotel operators. In which case SEPs may not be a priority to them. This observation correlates with the revelations made by some participants from the hotel sector. In this regard, therefore, these results are confirming the challenges that underpin the implementation of SEPs as highlighted by Idahosa and Ebhuoma (2020) that poor policy arrangement affects SEPs in the hotel sector.

Furthermore, the results also reveal that lack of policy guidelines resulted in misconceptions amongst hotel employees surrounding what sustainable environmental management practices entails. According to the key informants from the Department of Tourism, the Tourism and Hotels Act provides guidelines for sustainable environmental practices in the hotel sector. However, the analysis of the results from participants from the two hotels suggests that guidance provided by this Act was not on sustainable environmental practices but rather sanitation and public health. This revelation also confirms the concerns raised by Khonje and Leonard (2019); Mzembe et al. (2018) that lack of appropriate capacity hampers policy guidance on sustainable environmental practices within the hotel sector. Furthermore, the key informants from the city councils and the regional tourism office also confirmed that the Tourism and Hotels Act provide guidance on public health issues since those were the issues that are enforced in the hotel sector. In addition, the results show that a deficiency in capacity affects the monitoring and enforcement of sustainable practices in the

hotel sector. The results also show that local councils' bylaws that are used to govern the sector are outdated.

It was noted that the inspections that are conducted in hotels focus on sanitation and public health issues, which were prerequisites in the Tourism and Hotels Act. This outcome, therefore, suggests that the focus of this regulation is not sustainable environmental practices. This result may be suggesting that what Mzembe et al. (2018) stated that hotels practice sustainability philanthropically and not because of policy provisions. Furthermore, this result may be confirming the observations made by Mbasera et al. (2016) that some hotels in the SADC region are becoming innovative on their own and not because of policy guidance. In this regard, it only becomes the responsibility of the hotel sector to proactively engage in promoting sustainable environmental practises as a response to the needs of socially and environmentally conscious stakeholders.

Results from the hotel sector indicate that hotels lacked an internal policy on environmental management. Furthermore, these results are confirming that hotels had a policy on Occupational Health and Safety (OHS). This result also could be suggesting that these hotels are addressing the requirements of the Tourism and Hotels Act. In this case, it could be argued that the guidance available is on Occupational Health and Safety. The results also suggest that the hotel sector assumed that OHS policies also govern sustainable environmental practices. This further suggests that this sector assumes that it is environmentally friendly. In addition, the results show that the sector believed that inspections that were done in hotels addressed sustainable environmental practices. These assumptions may be confirming the observations by Mbasera et al. (2016) and Musavengane and Steyn (2015) that employees in the hotel sector have limited knowledge on matters of sustainability.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that despite having a national environmental management policy, hotels do not have their own internal environmental management policies. The results also revealed behavioural challenges. In light of the above revelations, it could be concluded that both Case Study hotels are not environmental friendly. The Department of Tourism also demonstrated some lack of leadership on sustainable environmental practices. The assumption here is that lack of policy guidance at the ministry level affected leadership. It could also be concluded that this led to bad governance of sustainable environmental practices in the hotel sector. It was further noted that the hotel inspection tools used did not capture sustainable environmental practices. The study has also revealed that the local councils did not have the necessary policing tool for sustainable environmental practices in the hotel sector. Overall, the absence of policy and good governance affected sustainable environmental practices in the hotel sector and as such the hotel sector in Malawi fails to adhere to the most sustainable environmental practices.

This paper, therefore, recommends that the National Tourism Policy should be revised to align it with other existing environmental management legislation in Malawi. Further to this, it is recommended that appropriate hotel inspections tools should be developed alongside the National Tourism Policy. Local Councils' by-laws governing the hotel sector also need to be revised to align with the NTP and appropriate inspection tools. Any tourism or hotel business creates some negative environmental impacts hence it is imperative for the hotels to have environmental sustainability as a core business value (Bocken et al., 2014; Lubin & Esty, 2010). Therefore, there is a need for hotels to formulate their internal environmental management policies to provide the necessary guidance on sustainable environmental practices within their respective hotels. From the formulated policies, stakeholders would be able to formulate appropriate tools to govern sustainable environmental practices. After such policy formulation, there would be a need to embark on awareness or capacity building programmes

so that employees are aware of recommended practices that would enhance environmental management efforts. As noted by Boley and Uysal (2013), Hassan (2000), Hsieh (2012), Kasim (2006) and Scholz (2018), hotel management and employees need to have a thorough understanding of environmental sustainability to ensure that the hotel sector addresses environmental issues as the industry mainly relies on the natural environment to attract guests. In this regard, senior managers need to demonstrate leadership and strategic commitment if the hotels are to follow sustainable environmental practices.

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