



Reviving Tourism in Malawi: Assessing the Capacity of Tourism Trade Associations

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Abstract

This study examines the nature of tourism associations in Malawi and assesses their effectiveness in promoting the interests of private tourism operators. A qualitative research approach was used, and 43 semi-structured interviews were carried out with key tourism stakeholders. The study found that the Malawi tourism association plays a critical role in tourism development and private sector growth but also faces a number of challenges that include financial constraints, limited linkages with key stakeholders, inadequate human resources, internal conflicts, and power disparities which pose significant obstacles to the effective operation of tourism association. To increase efficacy during the COVID-19 recovery period, it is recommended that the tourism association should strengthen its relationship and coordination with tourism sub-sector associations, the Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and the Ministry of Trade to increase its lobbying and negotiating power. Additionally, the study suggests that the tourism association should develop more direct business development services and diversify its revenue streams by seeking financial assistance from developmental organizations, negotiating with financial institutions for better borrowing rates, and providing direct services at a fee. The study also recommends intensifying awareness programmes to dispel misconceptions about the association and increase stakeholder engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was widely credited with causing global healthcare crises, financial crises, and economic recession. The pandemic had a negative impact on a broad range of industries tourism inclusive. Tourism was the most hit as governments across the globe took drastic measures by locking down entire countries or the most affected cities and also by prohibiting entry to their countries. Restrictions on movement and gathering in public spaces as a countermeasure to the spread of Covid-19 obliterated the most fundamental aspect of tourism, bringing the industry to a standstill. With COVID-19 nearly eradicated, tourism stakeholders at the national, regional, and global levels shifted their focus away from containing the virus and toward revitalizing the tourism industry. Among numerous other measures, partnerships among tourism stakeholders is strongly recommended as a primary strategy for tourism recovery (McCartney et al., 2022; Nazarudin et al., 2022; Rogerson, 2021; Wan et al., 2022).

Partnerships have been widely recognized as essential for the development of tourism, as they enable the achievement of collective and organizational objectives (Cehan et al., 2020; Morrison et al., 2004), as well as contribute to the sustainability of the tourism industry (Graci, 2013; March & Wilkinson, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2019). These collaborative efforts advance the development and competitiveness of destinations, while simultaneously empowering stakeholders, most notably businesses (Pansiri, 2013). In the tourism literature, partnerships are often described as collaborations, tourism marketing alliances, tourism strategic alliances, tourism networks, and tourism associations (Garrod & Fyall, 2017; Morrison et al., 2004; Pansiri, 2013). These partnerships vary in terms of their composition and may serve different purposes. For example, partnerships may exist between the government and the private sector, known as a public-private partnership (PPP) (Augustyn & Knowles, 2000; Kim & Woo Park, 2007; Novolodskaya et al., 2018); between the government and the community (Niezgoda & Czernek, 2008); between the private sector and the community (Bopape, 2017; Roe et al., 2001); and between the government, private sector, and community (PPCP) (Adnyana et al., 2015; Schultz & Bricker, 2020). Other partnerships are between government agencies and departments (Morse et al., 2018; Smythe, 2017); among private companies (Palmer & Bejou, 1995); among community members (Hwang & Stewart, 2017); between training institutions and the community (Grunwell, 2014); between NGOs and communities (Barkin & Bouchez, 2002; Barkin & Pailles, 1999); or among various forms of tourism stakeholders within a destination (Bhattacharya & Fayezi, 2021; Worley & Parker, 2011).

Tourism associations constitute a significant form of partnership in the tourism industry, which has been faced with unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the critical role played by these associations (McKercher, 2022). However, despite their crucial importance, tourism associations have been given inadequate attention in the tourism literature (McKercher, 2022). Tourism associations operate at different levels, including community, national, regional, or global, with the membership composition depending on the association's primary objective (Yu, 2017). Some associations are composed of stakeholders from various subsectors, while others are limited to a specific subsector of tourism (Yu, 2017). The primary functions of tourism associations include: promoting general tourism development and management of a particular destination; supporting members' business development, marketing, promoting specific types of tourism or interests of specific groups; protecting and advocating for the interests of the private sector; advancing training and research in the tourism and hospitality industries; and advancing professionalism in tourism (Buiatti, 2011; Garrod & Fyall, 2017; Goeldner, 2015; Smalinskis & Auzina, 2017; Williams et al., 2001; Xiao, 2011; Yu, 2017). As such, tourism associations have been a subject of significant interest in both research and practice within the tourism industry, owing to their diverse range of functions.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, tourism associations play a critical role in the growth and success of the industry, particularly in facilitating collaboration among tourism stakeholders in the private sector. As the tourism landscape continues to evolve, scholars have recognized the need to re-examine the nature and roles of these associations. Recent literature, including Armenski et al. (2018) and Garrod, and Fyall (2017), suggests a shift towards management actions conducted by tourism stakeholders, and a transition of tourism associations from their traditional roles to that of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs). To further explore these developments, this study aims to investigate the expected and existing roles or services of tourism associations from the perspective of private tourism operators, evaluate the effectiveness of these associations, and identify managerial and operational issues associated with them. This research is informed by the collaboration theory (Gray, 1985) and 360-degree approach to trade associations (Lawton et al., 2018).

By examining the changing landscape of tourism associations in Sub-Saharan Africa, this study seeks to contribute to the development of effective and resilient tourism policies and practices. Despite the recognized importance of tourism associations, there is limited global literature as noted by McKercher (2022). Existing studies have predominantly focused on applying collaboration theory in tourism settings, yet no research has employed a 360-degree approach to comprehensively analyze managerial and operational aspects of tourism associations. In the African context, only two notable studies have explored tourism associations: Glen and Mearns (2018) in South Africa and Rasethunsa (2021) in Lesotho. However, these studies are constrained by their focus on localized contexts and do not address tourism associations at the national level. Additionally, they have overlooked critical managerial issues

within these organizations. In Malawi, no academic studies have been conducted on tourism associations, leaving a significant gap in understanding their roles, challenges, and contributions to the tourism sector. This paper seeks to fill this void by addressing the geographical and conceptual gaps in the literature. Specifically, it offers fresh insights into the managerial intricacies of tourism associations and their potential to shape sustainable and collaborative tourism frameworks in the region.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Inter-Organizational Collaboration

In the realm of organizational theory, policy analysis, and organizational development, there has been a notable interest in examining the conditions necessary for successful collaboration between organizations. In 1985, Gray synthesized research to propose a set of success conditions for collaboration that can be applied to different types of organizations, whether they belong to the public or private sectors (Gray, 1985). Gray (1985) defined collaboration as the pooling of resources by two or more organizations to address challenges that cannot be resolved by a single entity alone. To that end, he posited that a collective response to a problem is a primary condition for collaboration. Gray (1985) further outlined three stages of collaboration development and identified the enabling conditions for each stage. The enabling conditions include the recognition of interdependence, the identification of a sufficient number of stakeholders, perceptions of legitimacy among stakeholders, a legitimate and skilled convener, the convergence of values, power dispersion among stakeholders, a high degree of interdependence, external mandates, power redistribution, and the capacity to influence the contextual environment. Although originally presented as stage-specific conditions, this study views these factors as facilitators of collaboration at any point in time. Several studies in the tourism literature have applied Gray's conditions to evaluate and discuss collaborations in tourism from various perspectives (Can et al. 2020; Graci, 2013; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Ullah et al., 2020). For example, Jamal and Getz (1995) reviewed Gray's conditions and developed a framework for a collaboration process for tourism, even though with focus on community-based tourism, and could be applied to trade associations in tourism as it is based on foundations of Gray's framework.

2.2. Roles of Trade Associations

Trade associations, across various industries, have a primary concern with influencing regulation, public policy, and public opinion for the industry and its members, as noted by Rajwani et al. (2015). These associations work towards enhancing the business operating environment by influencing public policy and managing industry and member reputation, establishing industry standards and governance, and advising members on industry and regulatory issues, as stated by Lawton et al. (2018) and Rajwani et al. (2015). In addition, trade associations gather and disseminate industry information to their members and manage conflict over resources (Esparza et al., 2014; Rajwani et al., 2015). They also provide their member firms with specific economic incentives and broader economic motivations that cannot be achieved individually (Tucker, 2008). Trade associations offer direct membership services, such as insurance and collective promotion through trade fairs and advertising campaigns, in exchange for subscription fees paid by individual businesses (Bowman et al., 2017). In the tourism industry, trade associations are known for promoting and enforcing sustainable practices among members, although Clarke (2004) critiques the extent to which this is achieved. Organizations form associations primarily to decrease unpredictability in their shared environment and to acquire perspective on shared issues (Lawton et al., 2018). Economic benefits are cited as some of the common reasons for private tourism operators to join trade associations, except for businesses that join solely because other successful businesses do (Tucker, 2008).

Trade associations can be classified into powerhouses, fast followers, orators, or campaigners based on their roles and resources (Rajwani et al., 2015). Powerhouses are large, well-resourced associations that focus on arbitrating between private and public interests and building industry and member reputation. Fast followers focus more on internal industry activities such as community building, training and development, and sharing new standards and governance knowledge, with less emphasis on strengthening public-private partnerships and building industry and member reputation. Orators are small organizations with limited resources that prioritize internal communication and intra-industry coordination over external communication and political regulatory roles. Campaigners are also small trade associations with an emphasis on external communication and campaigning.

2.3. Challenges of Trade Associations

Trade associations face various challenges that hinder their ability to fulfil their expected roles. While these organizations outline appealing roles and benefits for their members in their strategic documents, implementing them can be difficult (Rajwani et al., 2015). Typically, these associations struggle to strike a balance between their long-term objectives and the individual interests of their members, while also considering both member and public benefit goals. They must prioritize objectives while weighing competing interests, monitoring member volunteers, and integrating hired workers (Harris, 1998). Some argue that large and influential companies are more likely to benefit from trade associations by influencing areas of interest and promoting their own agendas (Esparza et al., 2014;

Rajwani et al., 2015). Moreover, trade associations frequently lack the internal expertise needed to support their operations (Bowman et al., 2017; Bradley, 1992). Bradley (1992) also notes that these associations have limited financial resources that are primarily dependent on membership fees and donations. In addition, legal systems often impose strict regulations on trade associations to prevent them from exerting political pressure.

2.4. A 360-Degree Approach to the Study of Trade Associations

Methods of examining trade associations has been a topic of great debate in the academic community. In response to this, Lawton et al. (2018) have put forth a 360-degree approach to studying associations, which acknowledges that these organizations are meta-organizations composed of multiple organizations collaborating on a common goal. This approach differs from the traditional individual-based organization view, as meta-organizations rely heavily on their members, who can even compete with one another or the meta-organization itself. Lawton et al. (2018) suggest that research on associations should focus on the ways in which associations and member organizations influence each other, as well as the benefits that associations provide to their members. Moreover, the authors stressed the importance of studying the managerial and operational opportunities and challenges that arise within associations as standalone strategic organizations. Lawton et al. (2018) advocate for continued research into how associations construct meaning and define shared issues and interests. Unfortunately, despite the growing importance of associations in various industries, particularly trade associations, research on this topic has been neglected in the broad management literature (Lawton et al., 2018; Spillman, 2018). As such, there is a need for greater attention and scrutiny of these crucial organizations, which have far-reaching implications for the wider industry.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore the operational and managerial intricacies of the Malawi Tourism Council (MTC), a major tourism association in Malawi from the perspectives of selected internal and external stakeholders. Employing qualitative approach, the research gathered data through a series of interviews with various stakeholders, including private tourism operators, MTC leadership and employees, and key players such as the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Wildlife, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and the Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (MCCCI). The study extended to encompass MTC subsidiary organisations, such as the Hotels and Lodges Association, Travel Agents Association, Tour Operators Association, and Tourist Association of Mulanje.

The study employed a purposive sampling technique, a common approach in qualitative research, to select participants based on their roles and the nature of their working relationships with their respective organizations. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, a method known for fostering participant engagement and eliciting detailed, flexible responses (Bryman, 2016). The interviews were conducted over a four-month period, from November 2021 to March 2022, involving a total of 43 participants (see Table 1). Of these, 36 interviews were conducted face-to-face, 5 via phone, and 2 through Zoom. This combination of modalities allowed for flexibility and inclusivity in capturing diverse perspectives.

Table 1: Study Participants

Stakeholder group	Male	Female	Total
Private operators (Members)	10	3	13
Private operators (Non-Members)	7	4	11
MTC Board and employees	5	2	7
Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Wildlife	1	1	2
Ministry of Trade and Industry	1	0	1
Tourism subsector associations	5	3	8
Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (MCCCI)	1	0	1
Total	30	13	43

To further enrich the study and gain an unparalleled understanding of the association internal landscape, the researchers analysed the MTC internal guiding documents, including their strategic plan, constitution, annual reports, website (www.mtcmw.com), newsletters, and social media posts (<https://web.facebook.com/mtc265/about>, and https://www.instagram.com/malawitourism_council/). This research endeavours not only provides a comprehensive overview of the MTC and its affiliated subsector associations, but also highlights avenues for improvement in their operational and managerial strategies, paving the way for future development.

Interview data were subjected to thematic analysis in accordance with a widely recognized six-step protocol proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Specifically, the researchers obtained verbal accounts from study participants,

transcribed these accounts verbatim, and engaged in a process of immersion in the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the information provided. Using an inductive approach, key themes were derived from the interview data, employing a structured method of analysis facilitated by the use of Microsoft Excel software. Drawing on the methodological framework on application of Microsoft Excel software to thematic analysis proposed by Bree and Gallagher (2016), the researchers subsequently engaged in a process of coding, theme generation, and moderation to ensure the reliability and validity of the data analysis. The data was transcribed, and key sentences from the participants' responses were identified. These sentences were systematically organized in an Excel spreadsheet, categorized according to the research objectives. Subsequently, themes were extracted from the identified sentences. Each theme was assigned a distinct colour, and the corresponding sentences were colour-coded to reflect their alignment with specific themes. This systematic and rigorous process facilitated the identification of meaningful patterns, themes, and supporting arguments within the data. Ultimately, it provided a rich and nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon under investigation, ensuring depth and coherence in the analysis.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Roles and Services of the MTC as the Tourism Trade Association

Inquiries made with the management and leadership of the MTC, coupled with constitutional and strategic plan analyses, scrutinized a plethora of services and responsibilities undertaken by the association. The principal focus of the association is widely recognized as the vanguard for the private sector in the tourism industry of Malawi, representing their interests. Information was gathered indicating that the association engages in promoting the value of Malawi as a tourism destination, influencing and advocating for opinions, policies, and plans, and lobbying for an inclusive legislative, fiscal, and physical environment that fosters the sustainable development and growth of the industry. Furthermore, the study revealed that MTC monitors and promotes the development of tourism facilities and services. Additionally, MTC provides direct services to its members, including promoting member services, advocating for reduced tariffs or duty-free importation of goods for its members, providing tourism-related data and trends to its members, negotiating reduced training fees for its members at various training institutions, and creating opportunities for inter-member service discounts. The association also facilitates the formation and management of tourism associations on geographic and sub sectoral levels, as well as encouraging the advancement and growth of tourism training and research. One of the MTC Board member said:

We represent the interests of private sector in the tourism industry and ensure that the government policies, plans and development goals are supportive of the growth and development of businesses in the industry. When we face challenges that necessitate government intervention, we approach the government and lobby for it. We are successful at times and sometimes not. For example, when the government raised the price of VISAs, the private sector was concerned that this would reduce international visitors to the country, thereby reducing demand for tourist-related services. We approached the government through the Tourism Ministry to revise the related policies (MTC participant 2).

The roles, responsibilities, and services outlined by the MTC leadership were found to be in line with the expectations of both the government and private operators. However, both stakeholder groups had concerns to raise. Private operators noted that many of the functions claimed by the association were not being carried out to the extent promised, and some were not being carried out at all. Furthermore, they expressed that the association had difficulty delivering on its promises. The private operators also emphasized that the association was not doing enough in critical areas such as lobbying for lower taxes and utility bills, marketing member services in local and international markets, and providing services that improve the quality of its members' services and products. On the other hand, government participants echoed the private sector's concerns about the association's failure to fully execute its responsibilities. Additionally, they noted that the association's roles encroached on the duties and responsibilities of government bodies tasked with tourism development and management, necessitating clear boundaries between the roles of government bodies and tourism trade associations. However, the specific roles and responsibilities that conflicted with those of government bodies were not explicitly stated. The following are some extracts from private and government participants expressing this point of view:

You may have been told that the organisation [MTC] does this or that. That's what we were told before becoming members, but the truth is that most of these activities are not done. We have failed to carry out the tasks outlined in our constitution as an organisation (Private participant 11).

The association is doing fine but it should stick to its duties and responsibilities. I'm going to tell you the truth as I see it. I feel that MTC sometime loses focus and oversteps into what the Department of Tourism [Department under Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Wildlife] should do. I wish the association would leave Department responsibilities to it; otherwise, we may experience conflicts between the two important bodies (Government participant 1).

4.2. Membership Eligibility and Subscription

The purpose of the study was to identify the composition of the membership of the Malawi Tourism Council (MTC). It was found that membership was voluntary and open to all tourism operators, including individuals, organizations, corporations, societies, and other associations. The MTC accepted members from various subsectors of the tourism industry, such as accommodation and hospitality, transport, water sports, travel intermediaries, leisure and entertainment, tourism organizations, culture and heritage, adventure and outdoor activities, attractions, conferences, tourism services, and services to tourism, as well as training institutions. To become a member, an applicant had to voluntarily apply and pay membership fees determined annually by the Board of Trustees. The fee varied based on the size of the organization and the type of tourism services provided.

Members of MTC are entitled to various benefits and privileges including the following:

- i. Branding and promotion opportunities at association events and programs as well as on the association website,
- ii. Discounts on advertising on the association website,
- iii. Brochures displays in the association visitor racks,
- iv. Discounted rates for association functions and services,
- v. Online links to members' websites on the association website,
- vi. Support of applications for reduced rates of duty or duty-free importation of goods and other tax issues,
- vii. Representation at fairs, meetings, and other official forums,
- viii. Monthly briefings on global, regional, and national tourism trends; and
- ix. General support on issues affecting members, such as application for utility services, visa issues; and lobbying in general.

Despite these benefits, majority of private sector participants reported that members did not access the documented member benefits, leading them to believe that there was no value for their money.

The constitution of the MTC allowed for diverse and inclusive membership, but the majority of registered tourism businesses were not members, and some subsectors were underrepresented in the association. Three reasons were given to explain this low membership and underrepresentation. First, many operators in the tourism industry do not appreciate the role and value of tourism associations in Malawi. Second, some operators were not aware of the existence of the association, while others did not consider themselves part of the tourism industry and therefore did not see the need to join. Third, some participants felt that the association favoured certain sectors, such as hospitality and travel intermediaries, leading to neglect of other tourism subsectors and a loss of interest in the association.

4.3. Membership Motivating Factors

The majority of private participants identified the pursuit of business growth opportunities as their primary motivation for joining industry associations. As profit-driven entities, the operators seek to capitalize on the benefits of association membership, with a particular focus on growing their businesses and advocating for improved government policies that can facilitate industry growth and create a better business operating environment. Members viewed direct membership benefits, such as advertising and promotion, reduced rates of duty or duty-free importation of goods, tax-related issues, discounted services, and general government support, as a means to achieve a competitive advantage over non-members and to support business growth. The pursuit of direct services and benefits is thus central to their membership.

Beyond this, members have also joined the association to influence government policies and interest in tourism, with the ultimate aim of developing the tourism industry in the country which ultimately create opportunities for their businesses. They point to a range of challenges facing the Malawian tourism industry, including inadequate tourism infrastructure, delayed and costly utility connectivity, conflicting licensing requirements, and uncontrolled development in prime tourism hotspots, as areas where government action is urgently needed. Members believe that, by influencing relevant policies, they can boost tourism in the country and create new opportunities for business development.

I joined MTC because I wanted my Lodge to benefit. I should mention that I definitely benefited when I was building my lodge. I requested a duty exemption on some building materials and equipment. The association supported and MRA [Malawi Revenue Authority] approved my application. I tried applying on my own before joining the association and it failed (Private participant 5).

In addition to the aforementioned motivations, a few respondents expressed other reasons for joining the association, albeit less frequently. Some members cited that they joined the association because MTC membership certificates enhanced their businesses' credibility in the eyes of customers and financial institutions. Additionally, some believed that the association membership was mandatory for a tourism business to qualify for a tourism certificate of operation in the country. However, it should be noted that membership is not compulsory, and efforts to make it so in the past were unsuccessful due to the lack of supporting regulations and laws.

4.4. Membership Demotivating Factors

Non-member tourism-related business operators were queried regarding their reasons for not joining the association, with a variety of concerns expressed. These included issues of trust, communication, and member engagement, as well as concerns around value for the businesses, politics, and power distribution, and a lack of awareness. The predominant factor cited, however, was the perceived lack of value addition. Participants contended that the association places greater demands on members than it provides benefits in return. While membership fees and other monetary contributions are expected to yield returns, the benefits are seen as minimal. Private operators appreciated the association's lobbying efforts but noted that the majority of such efforts fail to yield tangible results. Some also acknowledged that the association facilitates tax exemptions marginally better, but observed that even when exemptions are granted, they tend to favour larger investments over small businesses, thus disadvantaging the majority. One of the MTC ex member made the following sentiments:

We are not saying the association is not helpful, no, all am saying is that the association does not meet my expectations. We expect more benefits to members and their businesses, and the association can't just deliver what we are looking for. If the association doesn't give us what we want, then why should we pay for the membership (Private participant 17).

Other salient factors mentioned were power dynamics, inadequate communication between the leadership and members, and lack of transparency in resource management. Study participants perceived the association as characterized by a white-centric bias that favoured particular tourism subsectors while neglecting others. Moreover, they observed that there was little transparency in fund utilization and poor communication between the association and private operators. Participants who reported a white-centric bias claimed that the association focused on placating foreign-owned businesses at the expense of Malawian-owned businesses. Those who bemoaned the lack of transparency and poor communication asserted that the association's leadership rarely updated and engaged members on developments, operational challenges, future plans, as well as financial inflows and outflows, leading to accusations of financial mismanagement. Furthermore, they emphasized that the association's annual meetings, which could have enhanced communication, were ad hoc, thereby preventing active participation, contribution, and assessment of the organization's programs and finances.

4.5. Operational Challenges

The study found consensus among members, non-members, and association leadership that the MTC has fallen short of its goals and struggled to implement its activities. Participants identified several significant obstacles hindering the success of the association. Among these challenges, the study highlighted insufficient financial resources, understaffing, a lack of technical specialists within the management team, low negotiating power, and a lack of cooperation and coordination between the tourism association and the wider private sector representative body. Insufficient financial resources were among the most critical challenges hindering the MTC's operations. Association leadership and the management team recognized the need for adequate financial resources to support the majority of the association's activities, including business development initiatives such as marketing and training. While the MTC understands the needs of its members and is willing to deliver value, it is unable to do so due to a lack of financial resources. One leader and management team member explained:

We are aware that we are not meeting the expectations of our members. We fully understand the concerns of both current and potential members, but without funding, we can't just deliver. How can we build a network for the association and its members if we do not attend tourism fairs in nearby nations, such as Indaba in South Africa? How can we conduct business development training without funds? (MTC participant 2).

It was determined that the primary source of funding for the association was membership fees, with the majority of private operators agreeing that this was insufficient. Participants argued that the vast majority of private operators were not members of the association, and that low membership numbers meant low revenue generated from membership fees, a circumstance that worsened the financial situation. Participants observed that the association had not diversified its financial sources and continued to rely on membership fees. Some members suggested that the association could have identified more income generating activities such as providing more paid services to both private sector and tourists to increase revenue streams. Participants from the government were of the view that financial problems were also orchestrated by MTC overdependency on government. The government formerly

provided financial assistance but had since ceased doing so; however, the dependency mentality persisted. Lack of funding caused numerous issues, including MTC inability to hire temporary or permanent staff in technical and specialized positions to drive its operations.

Participants also perceived that the MTC had limited lobbying and bargaining power compared to other associations in the country, besides limited funding. According to participants, this was due to a lack of coordination between the Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (MCCCI) and MTC. The MCCCI is responsible for representing the private sector in all of the country's economic sectors and is highly regarded by the government. In Malawi, sector trade associations are typically affiliated with MCCCI, but the Malawi tourism trade association was not affiliated with MCCCI at the time the study was conducted. Additionally, participants asserted that the association had a stronger relationship with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Wildlife than with the Ministry of Industry and Trade, which is responsible for managing the affairs of trade associations and relaying their concerns to the government.

5. DISCUSSION

The roles, responsibilities, and services provided by the Malawi Tourism Association are consistent with those of typical trade associations, as well as certain specialized tourism trade associations, according to Bowman et al. (2017), Lawton et al. (2018), McKercher (2022) and Rajwani et al. (2015). As argued by Bowman et al. (2017), trade associations typically offer direct membership services, as well as lobbying efforts on industry-specific regulations. The Malawi Tourism Association indeed provides both of these services. Similar to Rajwani et al. (2015), the primary focus of the Malawi Tourism Association is on influencing regulations and public policy for the industry and its members, rather than providing direct services to its members. However, the private operators, who are the primary stakeholders, would want equal emphasis on direct business development services. Nevertheless, the roles of the Malawi Tourism Association do not align with Spillman (2018) definition of a trade association, which characterizes trade associations as organizations that aim to limit competition in their industry. The study found no evidence of a role related to controlling competition, suggesting that this role may not accurately describe the nature of the tourism association in question. Additionally, the role of conflict resolution, as suggested by Esparza et al. (2014), was not emphasized in the findings. The study also found no indication that the Malawi Tourism Association promotes sustainable practices, confirming Clarke (2004) assertion that trade associations have not given sufficient attention to instilling and enforcing sustainability among their members. This study has established that the available data was not sufficient to classify MTC into Rajwani et al. (2015) powerhouse, quick follower, and campaigner categories, as the characteristics of the associations cut across these classes.

In the context of ongoing debates on the transformation of tourism associations into DMOs, the MTC appears to prioritize its traditional roles. However, despite the fact that the participants and MTC documents did not explicitly emphasize DMO roles, the association does perform some functions of both Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), as defined by Presenza et al. (2005). As a Destination Marketing Organization, DMOs are responsible for promoting their destination and the services of their members, as well as providing tourism information and trends to their members. As a Destination Management Organization, DMOs are responsible for facilitating and monitoring the development of tourism facilities and services. The MTC membership composition, as outlined in its constitution, which includes not only private tourism operators but also non-private organizations such as public training institutions, may suggest that the MTC is gradually evolving into a DMO. In conclusion, while the MTC may prioritize its traditional roles, the association does perform some functions of DMOs, as defined by Presenza et al. (2005). Further research is needed to explore the extent to which the MTC is evolving into a DMO and the implications of such a transformation for the association and its members.

The study finds that the motivations of Malawian tourism businesses to join the trade association are consistent with those identified by previous researchers elsewhere. Lawton et al. (2018) suggest that private operators join associations to reduce uncertainty in their business environment by influencing government plans, policies, and incentives, as well as to gain access to specific services, expertise, and resources. Similarly, tourism operators in Malawi are motivated by these factors. However, the study was unable to determine the primary and secondary motivations of Malawian tourism operators between affecting the operational environment of businesses and obtaining direct services from the tourism association. In contrast, the study identified that the failure to keep promises and satisfy expectations is the biggest deterrent for tourism private operators to join the tourism association. Lawton et al. (2018) argue that a trade association's failure to provide results disconnects the association from the needs and expectations of its members. The present study findings indicate that concerns related to trust, communication, member engagement, and power distribution may result in challenges to member motivation if the Jamal and Getz (1995) collaborating conditions are not met.

The challenges being faced by the MTC are consistent with the key areas highlighted by Berkowitz and Dumez (2016), namely, their dynamics, effectiveness, interactions with members, and the environment. The results suggest

that the primary concerns of association members are their effectiveness and utility. However, inadequate financial resources, understaffing, a lack of technical specialists, and a lack of negotiating power have all impeded the capacity of the associations to deliver value and implement their promises. Financial constraints are a typical challenge faced by many trade associations, as they primarily rely on membership fees for revenue (Lawton et al., 2018). MTC is no exception, as insufficient financial resources impede its operations. The MTC expectation for government financing is at odds with the government's stance. This expectation can be traced back to the government's role during the formative years of the MTC. In its nascent stages, the MTC relied heavily on the government's financial and technical support to hasten its development. However, once the MTC was firmly established, government support dissipated. Despite this, the mindset of continued government assistance appears to have persisted within the MTC.

A lack of coordination between the Malawi Tourism Council (MTC) and sub-sector associations has created a competitive and non-complementary relationship. This discord primarily arises due to differences in subscription requirements. The MTC mandates that members of sub-sector associations pay their membership subscriptions directly to the MTC rather than to their respective sub-associations, which has led to tension between the MTC and sub-sector associations. Power dynamics within MTC also merit attention, as emphasized by Jamal and Getz (1995) framework. The study reveals two types of power inequality in these associations. Firstly, some tourism industry sub-sectors possess more power than others, leading to a skewed distribution of resources and influence. Secondly, foreign operators wield greater power than their local counterparts, further exacerbating power disparities. The existing literature on power disparities in trade associations has predominantly focused on the contrast between small and large companies. However, this study has revealed a different aspect of power differences, specifically related to the sub-sectors within the tourism industry, as well as the nationalities of the private tourism company owners. This novel finding sheds light on a unique cause of power differences in tourism-related associations and requires further examination. Exploring the intersectionality of power differences within the tourism industry, including factors such as race, nationality, and sub-sector affiliation. Such an approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of power disparities and can inform the development of more effective policies and strategies for reducing such disparities.

The tendency of tourism trade associations to develop strong ties with government departments responsible for tourism, while neglecting relationships with government departments mandated to manage collaboration between the government and private sector, has been observed to have a detrimental impact on the operations of tourism associations. McKercher (2022) in Canada has also noted this phenomenon. According to McKercher (2022), this trend leads to prolonged periods required to create trust and familiarity between the government and trade organizations. In the context of Malawi's operational environment for trade associations, the Ministry of Trade and Industry plays a crucial role in enhancing the bargaining power of trade associations and acts as a mediator between the associations and the relevant government ministries and departments. Failure to collaborate with the ministry can result in ineffective association lobbying efforts.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the nature of tourism associations in Malawi and assess their effectiveness in promoting the interests of private tourism operators. The study found that while Malawian tourism associations share common characteristics with generic trade associations, they face unique challenges that require further investigation and the development of customized management frameworks. The study revealed that financial constraints, limited linkages with key stakeholders, inadequate human resources, internal conflicts, and power disparities pose significant obstacles to the effective operation of tourism associations in Malawi.

To overcome these challenges, the study recommends that Malawian tourism associations strengthen their relationships and coordination with tourism sub-sector associations, the Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and the Ministry of Trade to increase their lobbying and negotiating power. Additionally, the study suggests that tourism associations develop more direct business development services and diversify their revenue streams by seeking financial proposals from developmental organizations, negotiating with financial institutions for better borrowing rates, and providing direct services at a fee. The study also recommends intensifying awareness programmes to dispel misconceptions about the Malawi Tourism Council and increase stakeholder engagement. Finally, the study suggests that the Malawian government should consider providing financial support to tourism associations at a sustainable level.

The study has highlighted that while collaborations facilitated by tourism trade associations hold significant potential for revitalizing the tourism sector in the post-COVID-19 era, managerial and operational challenges within these associations can hinder the realization of their expected roles. The findings specifically reveal that the Malawi Tourism Council (MTC) faces obstacles in fully executing its mandate due to a combination of managerial inefficiencies and operational constraints, further compounded by policy gaps. Addressing these issues is crucial to unlocking the full potential of tourism trade associations in driving sectoral recovery and growth.

The findings underscore critical national policy implications for improving the effectiveness and sustainability of tourism trade associations in Malawi. The Department of Tourism (DoT) should establish a comprehensive framework to guide the development and management of tourism associations, ensuring their alignment with national priorities. This framework should provide clear guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of trade associations like the Malawi Tourism Council (MTC), reducing overlaps and conflicts between the government and such entities. Additionally, the government should adopt deliberate policies to incentivize trade associations to integrate sustainable tourism practices into their mandates, aligning with the Malawi National Tourism Plan and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). Addressing power disparities within tourism associations is also critical and requires policies that promote equitable representation and participation in decision-making. The DoT should lead the development of these policies to foster inclusivity and mutual respect among operators within the associations, ultimately enhancing collaboration and industry cohesion. The study provides several areas for further research, including the extent to which the Malawi Tourism Association (MTC) is evolving into a Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) and the implications of such a transformation for the association and its members. Additionally, the study suggests the need to determine the primary and secondary motivations of Malawian tourism operators to join the MTC, as well as the challenges facing the association and its effectiveness and utility. Furthermore, research is also needed to explore the power dynamics within the MTC, including issues related to trust, communication, member engagement, and power distribution. Moreover, the lack of coordination between the MTC and sub-sector associations merits attention. Finally, the study suggests exploring the role of the MTC in promoting sustainable tourism practices, which could help to instil and enforce sustainability among its members.

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Ethical Approval

We declare that our study, the information of which is given above is among the studies that do not require ethical committee approval. The data was collected through a study commissioned by Malawi Tourism Council (MTC) which provided permission for the authors to collect data from their members and no ethics committee approval was needed as MTC procedures were followed.

Researchers' Contribution Rate

The authors contributed equally to the work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no potential conflict of interest in this study.