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Impact of COVID 19 and the Future of Tourism Employments in Sri Lanka: A Route to Recovery and Resilience

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic started to attack Sri Lanka in the middle part of the tourism season. During this period a larger number of tourists were enjoying in Sri Lanka while some other tourists were already purchased their holidays. The effect of COVID 19 global pandemic to the tourism industry caused the complete shutdown of tourism not only Sri Lanka, but also in the global context. Top tourist generating markets of Sri Lanka are China, India and UK and these countries are highly affected by this pandemic. The main objective of this review paper is to identify the impact of COVID 19 pandemic on the tourism and hospitality industry employees in Sri Lanka and second, to identify the future challenges faced by the employees of the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. The study was carried out using qualitative methodology with the qualitative data collection techniques. The personal interviews were carried out with the public and private sector officers to get their opinions and suggestions such as Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, Sri Lankan Airlines, Sri Lanka Hotel Association, Sri Lanka Inbound travel operators, Sri Lanka Institute of National Tourist guide lecturers. The findings revealed that the industry is badly affected and presently around 12000 tourists are blocked in the country. There are more than 400,000 direct and indirect tourism and hospitality employees in the industry lost their jobs or income sources. All the potential income sources of the country have been blocked and therefore the local community has faced a severe financial crisis. It will not be easy to retain the employees in the tourism and hospitality industry since they expect the job security. Thus, it is essential to go for resilience strategies immediately like such as giving governments support for the industry, conduct programmes to keep positive mind-set of tourism employees to remain within the industry during this hardship, empowering employees effectively. In this critical situation, the industry expect the active mediation of government to facilitate them to face this devastating situation with favourable concessions, relief packages, reduction of tax burden, favourable policies and strategies to rebuild the industry, Tourism Employees Relief Package (TERP) etc. However, it will not be easy in short run in the pandemic affected economies and societies. Therefore, it needs to have effective resilience strategies first, to retain the employees with the industry and next to rebuild the ruined industry

Introduction

Sri Lanka claimed the top spot as the Lonely Planet's best travel destination to visit in 2019. Also, more other tourism related global media gave a good promotion about the country as a must visiting destination during the past. As a result, Island became a popular destination among tourists and tourist arrivals started to increase. But, unfortunately, Sri Lanka faced two critical incidents after claiming the top spot as a best travel destination. In April 2019, Easter Sunday Terrorist attack blocked the progress of tourism industry in Sri Lanka. While Sri Lankan tourism industry is recovering from the Easter attack, COVID 19 outbreak emerged in early 2020 and shutdown the industry completely. As the outbreak continues to spread, Sri Lankan restricted movement of people, imposed curfews and travel bans.

These measures are having a huge impact on people's lives, employments whilst having significant consequences on industries like tourism. In addition, the Colombo Stock Exchange has not been functioning for several days as foreigners began to withdraw funds. As a major source of revenue, tourism industry has been severely affected. Based on the Sri Lanka Tourist Development Authority data, tourist arrivals fell below over 30%, during the first quarter of 2020, compared to the previous year (SLTDA, 2020). From April onwards, economic growth and development of the country collapsed due to the impact of the pandemic. Because of the non-business, Industries started to lay off their employees to cover the losses. As a result, it badly affected to the tourism industry. Real wages of permanent employees fell sharply and many of them lost their jobs and became unemployed. It is specially created the issues for non- permanent staff such as trainees, casual employees, contract employees.

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Many tourism establishments including airlines, hotels, and travel agencies stopped salary increments, and even cut salaries at different percentages according to the salary step of their permanent employees. It influenced not only for the direct employments also for the indirect employments. There are many people indirectly depended on tourism such as farmers, linen industry, surrounding community of hotels and tourist attractions, souvenir shops, entrepreneurs etc. Due to this COVID 19 outbreak, they lost their income sources and life standards. Therefore, it is important to analyse this situation systematically and provide suggestions to manage the industry during the post pandemic era. The global and local context of the outbreak, impacts of the outbreak to the employment of the travel and tourism sector and resilience strategies are critically evaluated in this review to protect the tourism employments of the country.

Global Impact of COVID 19 to the Tourism Industry employments

The COVID 19 or the Corona outbreak started from Hubei province, Wuhan City in China in November, 2019 and spread all over the world by March, 2020. The impact of this pandemic has already taken down 200 countries around the world with more than 4 million infections and over 300,000 deaths by 18th May, 2020. As a result, travel restrictions were imposed and all airports were closed and the movements of the people were forbidden. Due to this situation, tourism and hospitality industry had to stop all activities and businesses. The world tourism industry is on knees due to this pandemic. Global tourism has been "hit hard, with millions of jobs at risk in one of the most labour-intensive sectors of the economy. No one knows when this will be ended. The COVID 19 has stopped the enthusiasm of people for movement and gathering. Thus, the employees in the industry were in a serious trouble of losing their jobs and income. Tourism and hospitality businesses had temporarily laid off staff, with 78% of businesses reducing at least three quarters of the workforce. Hotels and gastronomy, as well as attractions reported the largest decline in their staff numbers (Hall., Scott., & Gössling, 2020). Significantly, workers in the accommodation and food services sector have the lowest annual earnings and the lowest levels of education of all sectors indicating the way in which the pandemic may serve to strengthen already substantial differences in income. Indirectly, the pandemic shines a light on social welfare and job security in tourism (Gossling et al., 2020).

The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) forecasts that up to 75 million jobs are at risk in the sector. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) predicts that up to 100 to 120 million directs jobs at risk (UNWTO, 2020). These predictions denote a serious impact of losing direct and indirect jobs in the tourism and hospitality industry. In South-East Asia, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam are the countries with the highest share of employment in tourism, reaching 6.7, 9.0 and 6.9 per cent, respectively. In South Asia, Nepal and Sri Lanka show relatively high shares of jobs in tourism, reaching 8.1 and 6.8 per cent (Figure:1) Employment in the tourism sector in Sri Lanka is mostly informal in nature. They are the worst affected in this situation (ILO, 2020).

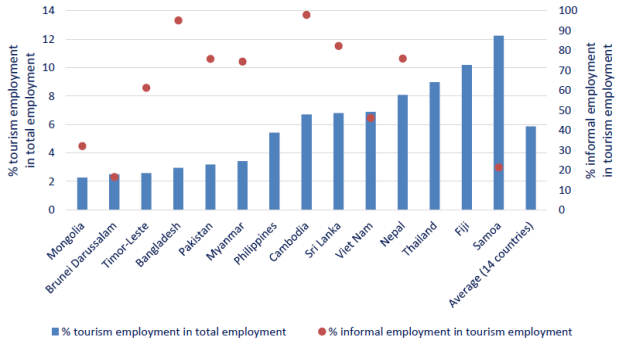


Figure 1: Employment in the tourism sector

Source: International Labour Organization, 2020

The Figure 1 shows the employment in the tourism sector as share of total employment and share of informality in tourism employment. Tourism industry is sensitive to economic shocks. Therefore, tourism employees are having an issue of job security. Another element is the high seasonality and instability of the jobs: the likelihood of occupying a temporary job is significantly higher in tourism than in the total non-financial business economy (Maniga. 2020).

Another important aspect is the gender ratio in the hospitality industry. According to the International Labor organization, hospitality Industry consists 54% women employees (Figure: 2). It is higher than the other industries. It shows that this pandemic is causing more impact to the women unemployment in the tourism and hospitality industry.

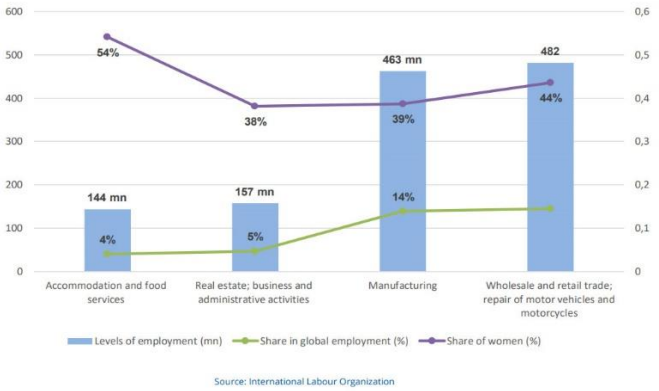


Figure 2: Women employment ratio

Source: International Labour Organization, 2020

The McKinsey and Company Consultancies (2020) have estimated that mainly who are in the hospitality and restaurants sector, fast food industry are more vulnerable to the unemployment in this pandemic situation. Indirectly, the pandemic gives a red light to the social welfare and job security in tourism.

Impact of COVID 19 to the Tourism and Hospitality employments in Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan tourism industry is a major contributor to the country's GDP, with its direct contribution being 4.9% (SLTDA, 2018). After naming Sri Lanka as the best country in the world to visit in 2019 by Lonely Planet, tourist arrivals of the first quarter in 2019 increased compared to the 2018. But unfortunately, there was a sudden drop of arrivals from April to October 2019 due to Easter Sunday terror attack. During that period industry was suffered with less revenue. Further, it was badly affected to the income of the employees in the industry. However, Sri Lanka was able to recover the impact positively step by step from November 2019. Tourist arrivals were increased in a positive manner at the last 2 months of the year 2019 (Table 1).

Table 1: Tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka – Comparison of year 2018 and 2019

Month	2018	2019	% change
January	238,924	244,239	2.2
February	235,618	252,033	7.0
March	233,382	244,328	4.7
April	180,429	166,975	
May	129,466	37,802	
June	146,828	63,072	
July	217,829	115,701	
August	200,359	143,587	
September	149,087	108,575	
October	153,123	118,743	
November	195,582	176,984	
December	253,169	241,663	
Total	2,333,796	1,913,702	

Source: SLTDA (2019)

The first two months in 2020, tourism industry was trying to speed up the recovery from Easter attack. However, that momentum of recovering the tourism industry was halted with the emergence of COVID 19 pandemic from March 2020. This was the second attack to the Sri Lankan tourism sector within a one-year period (Table 2).

Table 2: Tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka – Comparison of year 2019 and 2020 (1st Quarter)

Month	2019	2020*	% Change
January	244,239	228,434	(6.5)
February	252,033	207,507	(17.7)
March	244,328	71,370	(70.8)

Source: SLTDA (2020)

As a result of this COVID 19 global pandemic the tourism and hospitality industry was severely affected in terms of the revenue. With disturbances to global travel and restraints issued to some countries due to the pandemic outbreak, Sri Lanka's tourism industry faced a significant impact. Sri Lanka closed its borders for non - essential passenger travel and domestic travel from April 2020 onwards. And imposed travel restrictions. Tourism industry was shut down permanently. The business organizations faced big crisis of surviving. Therefore, they had to lay off their employees. It caused for a high rate of unemployment in the industry. According to Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (2018), there are more than 400.000 direct and indirect tourism and hospitality employees in the industry. The indirect employment of the informal sector of tourism industry is nearly 60% of the total contribution. On the basis of information gathered from industry practitioners and experts, the impact of COVID-19 on informal tourism sector is much more severe than that in the formal sector.

Currently tourism and hospitality sector is facing the biggest challenge of managing human resources during this period, as keeping small teams of essential staff to maintain plants and machinery, the rest being sent home. Due to the COVID 19 pandemic the direct tourism employees such as tour guides, tourist drivers are totally unemployed. Further, other direct employees who are not in a permanent position such as casual staff, contract basis staff and trainees also lost their jobs. Since the industry can't generate income due to this pandemic, permanent staff is also vulnerable to pay cuts and down-sizing. Small and Medium Entrepreneurs who involved in tourism businesses had to close down their businesses. Moreover, the majority of indirect employees and income earners such as self-employees, employees of souvenir shops, hotel suppliers, homestay operators, safari boat and jeep operators, employees working in tourism related businesses such as spice gardens, cinnamon, tea, gems & moonstones and community in the tourist areas lost their main income source. This is a serious situation to involve and manage effectively otherwise the industry will suffer greatly even in the post pandemic era. This has caused for an uncertainty not only to the existing employees also potential employees. Even though once control is gained over the pandemic in the island and life returns to normal, tourism industry workforce will continue to get a lower pay for a significant period of time as a result of an island-wide attempt to revive the economy.

Methods

This review was carried out getting the opinions and suggestions from key industry personnel in both the public and private sectors. Further, the semi structured interviews were held with top level government officials, academics and stakeholders representing Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), Sri Lankan Airlines, The Hotel Association of Sri Lanka (THASL), Sri Lanka Inbound Travel Operators (SLITO), Sri Lanka Institute of National Tourist Guide Lecturers (SLINTGL). Interview checklist was prepared and used to get the opinions from them. 10 interviews were conducted till the data maturity was reached. Director of the domestic tourism and community relations and Director of research and international relations of SLTDA, Presidents of SLITO, SLINTGL, THASL, Head of Marketing Sri Lankan Airlines, Former Minister of Tourism Sri Lanka and two academics who are in the field of tourism and hospitality were interviewed. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample. Data were collected using telephone conversations and online platform. The collected interview data were transcribed and developed the coding. In addition to that a desktop study was carried out to identify the response of government, academic, organizational and media publications. The data obtained from secondary data sources such as journals, newspapers, web articles were reviewed thoroughly to develop the discussion.

Results and Discussion

Based on the secondary data and interview analysis, recovery and resilience strategies on tourism employments and challenges faced by them in future were identified. Those findings were critically discussed below.

Route to recovery and resilience strategies on tourism unemployment

In this crisis situation, industry needs to address the employees' needs and maintain the relationship with them continuously. Industry should assure when the industry resume and recover the business, their employees will be absorbed. It will assure the job security of them. In that case, industry should obtain the government support, develop a positive mind set in their employees while empowering them.

Government support

Many countries have implemented some form of wages support to enable employers to continue paying basic wages to the sectors worst affected by the pandemic, e.g. tourism and other service sectors, construction, export manufacturing etc. The focus should be job retention by easing the cost of employment of affected sectors. An employer grant will enable enterprises to pay salaries and refrain from job redundancies. On new ways of working: industry should believe that laws need to become more flexible to permit staggered / flexi working hours, shorter day weeks and flexible work arrangements that suit employers and employees; and improve productivity across the state and private sector. Sri Lanka In bound Tour Association (SLITO) and Hotel association officials mentioned that they expect government to provide interest free soft loans, also demanded the government to allow their members to stop paying into employee pension funds until April 2021. Sri Lankan government has given a financial package to the tourism and hospitality industry. It includes a loan scheme with 4% interest to Destination Management Companies and hoteliers to pay the salaries of their staff, relief period to pay electricity and water bills of the hotels, extension for the six months grace period to twelve months for the vehicles leased for tourism purposes. In addition, as mentioned by many of the interview participants, they expect a wage support staff package and insurance scheme from the government for sustaining the livelihood of them. It will be helpful for employees some extent to survive and keep the members within the organization without any job cuts. Many countries have implemented those schemes to enable employers to continue paying basic wages to the sectors worst affected by the pandemic. The focus should be job retention by easing the cost of employment of affected sectors. An employer grant will enable enterprises to pay salaries and refrain from job redundancies. This could also come through interest free loans or limited pay-outs from pension funds savings.

However, industry and SME's need more support from government to survive and look after employees such as reduction of tax burden, tax breaks, concessions, favourable policies etc. In this situation, the government can provide economic relief packages under two sections. One section is funding based initiatives such as business disruption funding scheme. The other section is to provide tax or grant based initiatives. Hoteliers and members of the hotel association of Sri Lanka cited that it is difficult to maintain their staff since there is no income. They have an issue of working capital needs of tourism businesses. It is important to maintain the livelihood of employees, hence they request the government to make some financial provision available by way of grants or soft loans directly given by the government to the industry at least for six months. It is very important to keep employment within the industry and government can pressure employers to keep continue with their employees even at reduced salary levels. Further, the government can put a condition where concessionary finance facilities will only be presented to "organization who remain with its work force with zero job cuts".

Re-starting work with a positive mind set

Most of the participants of the interviews highlighted the importance of motivation existing and potential employees in the industry. Tourism and hospitality sector should look at this issue from the employees' perspective. First, they have to improve the confidence level of the employees establishing the job security. It will be a great motivation to them. Then there should be an open discussion with the employees to aware the situation. The clear understanding about the existing difficult situation faced by the industry is essential. Then, the employees will adopt with it and change their mind set to sacrifice time and other benefits till industry back to normal. They will be encouraged to work and worked hard to regain the position of Sri Lanka as the best travel destination in Sri Lanka. Further, tourism and hospitality service

providers should adopt with enhanced disease preventive and controlled methods for the health and safety of employees. While taking actions for the safeguard of employees, service providers have to create a good working environment to the employees. In that case, the industry can introduce flexible working hours for employees, work from home, encouraging to work with customers online, providing transport facilities etc. It will boost the confidence level and loyalty of employees. Further, industry should apply more employee retention strategies. Continuous caring and maintaining relationship with employees will enhance their loyalty. If the industry take care their associates, they will care of the customers. Some international hospitality chains have taken initiatives to provide temporary jobs for their employees during this time period, medical insurance so forth. It is really essential to for tourism and hospitality sector to maintain a positive attitude towards staff caring in this crisis situation. If they do so, it will be a competitive edge when the situation is back to normal.

Empowering women

As mentioned by the UNWTO (2020), 54% female workforce in the tourism and hospitality has faced the economic shock to tourism caused by COVID 19. In Sri Lankan context, female participation in the tourism sector is not very high comparing to the global context. According to the interview results of participants, many of them have identified this situation as a good opportunity for women empowerment to reduce barriers to entry. Here, it is very important to empower the women in informal sector and low skilled level. Tourism authorities in Sri Lanka are now planning to increase the women participation of the industry. They should provide some supportive measures for females who are facing adverse effects of COVID 19 pandemic such as facilitate the health care needs of women, flexible working conditions, promoting women entrepreneurship. Hence, women empowerment will be a main point to be considered in tourism recovery planning.

Challenges faced by tourism employees in future

Trend of introducing robots instead of humans

According to the views of the interviewers of THASL and SLITO, researchers and innovators are currently working on introducing robot technology to the tourism and hospitality industry with the intention of avoiding highly contagious nature of the COVID 19. The adoption of robots in tourism and hospitality can increase the efficiency of work, the quality of services, and reduce the financial costs (Ivanov & Webster, 2019). It may help to maintain the social distance. However, many also see major challenges in the adoption of robotics. For example, wide application and use of robots in the service industries could cause a large number of people to lose their jobs (Boyd & Holton, 2018). But, it may be a short term solution because people needs human touch when it comes to the services. It is still doubtful whether artificial intelligence can replace the humans. In future, some tourism and hospitality jobs will be lost to robotic technology. Therefore, this technology transformation will come to Sri Lanka soon and industry will adopt it soon.

Increased workload

Many tourism enterprises introduced Working From Home (WFH) concept during this pandemic period. This experience will create a future challenge for tourism and hospitality employees. It shows that employees will be asked to work from home in future with the expectation of minimizing the use of resources. There is a possibility of arranging virtual discussions, meetings in future than current context. The way knowledge-based work is traditionally done in a physical office environment will be challenged. It will create an additional burden for the employees. In the interviews, some professionals highlighted that employees will have to deal with the additional challenges of a '24/7 full house', the hassles of securing their life basics and the fear of business sustainability, job losses and pay cuts. Though this concept is beneficial from employers' perspective, it will increase the stress level of employees and reduce the performance. However, this concept cannot be implemented for operational level staff, this will be applied only for knowledge based workers who are working in the back office. Thus, office workers in Tourism and Hospitality industry will have to face this challenge in future.

Decline of confidence level of existing and potential employees

Since tourism sector is sensitive and vulnerable to the external uncontrollable factors such as diseases, natural disasters, terrorist acts so on, employees who are in the industry have to face these situations very often. As a result, they have to accept various challenges relating to their job security and income. They have a doubt of future. The job is not secured and income level is not stable. In that case they may be discouraged themselves and also influence potential employees' decision on entering to the industry. There may be certain number of qualified tourism and hospitality employees leaving the industry and joining more stable industries in the short-run. Therefore, government and business entities should take immediate actions to protect and retain them in the industry. Otherwise, there will be a difficulty of finding required qualified and trained human resources to the industry in future. However, tourism industry employees should adopt to these situations and survive though it is a great challenge.

Temporary foreign workers and shortage of labour

Sri Lanka is a country where enough labour can be found. Many investors are willing to invest in Sri Lanka due to the availability of quality workforce. If the local potential employees are discouraged to come to the industry as a result of COVID 19 pandemic, then the industry have to get foreign workers to the industry. It may create problems to the tourism industry. It will not help to reduce the unemployment and retain the money within the country. Then there will be an economic leakage. It will be difficult for the laid off tourism industry workers to find alternative employment. It will create distress among them and the dependents. Though as a short term strategy, industry can work with foreign employees, it is not clever decision in long term in terms of job security of them. Labour cost of the foreign workers in the industry may hire than local employees. Then, Labour cost inflation will be a problem in Sri Lanka. If unemployment remains high for many months to come, it will end up putting downward pressure on wages. In addition, whether it is local or foreign workers, they will have to work more hours than earlier. Further, workload of the employees will be higher than earlier due to the less number of employees.

Conclusion

In this pandemic situation, it is necessary to assess the affected parties and give financial and other supports immediately to retain them in the industry. Further, the authorities need to use short, medium and long-term resilient strategies effectively to ensure the sustainable tourism development in the post COVID 19 Pandemic. Due to Covid-19 impact, companies are more motivated than ever in providing intelligent manufacturing systems, automated systems and robot technology etc. This has created a major challenge for the employment opportunities in the industry. There is a possibility of replacing more automated systems instead of human involvement. Though Sri Lanka is a labour oriented country, there is a shortage of labour to the tourism and hospitality industry. It will be worsen by this COVID 19 situation due to the fear of infection. If the industry fails to keep the existing employees with them. Their labour cost will be further increased due to the hiring and training cost of new employees. In that case best strategy is to protect the existing employees in this crisis situation rather than downsizing them. Downsizing will create a reputational risk for the tourism operators. The job security of the tourism and hospitality employees should be assured. Otherwise the confidence level of employees will go down and they will switch the industry in future. It is a more challenging task for the industry associations, professionals and the government. Otherwise, the industry will further enter into more conflicted situations. Therefore, it is necessarily have more independent, transparent and collective works effectively.

Declaration of interest statement,

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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