

REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: INSIGHTS FROM THE KAZA TRANSFRONTIER CONSERVATION AREA

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Abstract: Governance is recognised as crucial for supporting transfrontier conservation and regional cooperation; however, how governance processes translate into regional destination development outcomes across the different scales of the TFCA grounds the premise of this research. Attention is drawn to the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA) in Southern Africa, which, although formally institutionalised in 2011, has been under development since 2006, thereby providing an opportunity to examine the progress of tourism development in the region since the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). This research aimed to explore the progress of tourism and community development as shaped by governance and stakeholder processes. This qualitative research draws on insights from interviews with tourism and governing authorities, community organisations, and community representatives located in tourism-dependent destinations in the TFCA, namely Kasane in Botswana, Livingstone in Zambia, and Hwange in Zimbabwe. The findings demonstrate that the KAZA TFCA has created an enabling environment for regional tourism development through improved cross-border mobility, regional cooperation, destination marketing, and tourism-supporting infrastructure. However, the translation of regional integration into local tourism development remains constrained by policy inconsistencies across member states, limited tourism-specific support, weak integration between regional governance structures and local tourism stakeholders, and challenges affecting tourism businesses. Overall, the findings suggest that the effectiveness of Transfrontier tourism governance depends not only on establishing regional agreements and structures, but also on their effective coordination, harmonisation, and implementation across national and local levels to ensure that regional tourism growth generates inclusive and equitable socioeconomic benefits.

Keywords: transfrontier conservation areas, meta-governance theory, regional tourism development, KAZA TFCA

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INTRODUCTION

A considerable amount of research has been published on Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs), with studies focusing on their progress towards ecological outcomes (Naidoo et al., 2022; Trezza et al., 2026; Köhler & Bollig, 2025), or their contributions to poverty alleviation and community development (Mpofu et al., 2025; Bourgeois et al., 2023). This is due to the underlying goals of these transboundary protected areas; being to balance nature conservation with community livelihoods and development (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2026; Mpofu et al., 2026).

Certainly, since their initial conception in 1920, TFCAs have become globally recognised as innovative means for broadening nature conservation, with such initiatives strengthened by the underlying collaboration and sharing of resources to tackle escalating, interrelated and intersecting concerns related to biodiversity conservation, poverty alleviation and regional development (Munthali, 2007; Usman et al., 2023). Notably, Southern Africa is a global leader in TFCA development, with TFCAs covering over 10% of the land mass of the region (Southern African Development Community [SADC], 2025). Currently, TFCAs in the region are facing a myriad of emerging challenges, including rising human and wildlife populations, human-wildlife encroachment into each other's spaces and subsequent conflict, and changing natural processes, such as changing and extreme rainfall patterns, temperatures and vegetation.

These challenges require multilevel governance and collaboration to address, while simultaneously balancing other goals, including community development, economic growth, regional cooperation and peace, and tourism (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021, 2026; Mpofu et al., 2026). As the latter goal is foregrounded to support the attainment of these other goals, the current study deviates from the predominant environmental focus on TFCAs in the region and shifts attention towards regional cooperation, tourism development and community development.

Communities in Southern Africa have utilised wildlife and wilderness resources for livelihood benefits, including subsistence hunting, harvesting of wild plants and other natural resources, livestock grazing, small-scale agriculture, and participation in wildlife- and tourism-related activities, with the latter considered a sustainable form of livelihood that can

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generate substantial economic returns and growth. Wildlife tourism is a key lucrative market in Southern Africa, taking two primary forms: consumptive and non-consumptive (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2026; Van der Merwe & Slabbert, 2025).

The region offers numerous wildlife experiences, with the dissimilarity of tourism products, including the diversity of wilderness and cultural landscapes, key attractions and experiences in the region, and the establishment of TFCAs, being key to stimulating cross-border tourism movement and collaboration (Blasco et al., 2014). This is especially the case in the Kavango Zambezi (KAZA) TFCA, which has been utilising well-known natural attractions such as the Okavango Delta, Victoria Falls and Hwange National Park to maximise tourist stays in the region and trigger scaffolding effects for rural development and community livelihood support. Undeniably, recent research has underlined governance as a mechanism to stimulate and support this process, with governance across borders constituting a complex task of recognising, coordinating and collaborating with several countries, communities, businesses, NGOs and various levels of government authorities (Blasco et al., 2014; Mpofu et al., 2026; Dittmann & Muller-Mahn, 2023; Tichaawa & Lekgau, 2025).

Governance and institutional perspectives on tourism at regional scales posit that the development of tourism for regional socioeconomic growth should be viewed as a process rather than an end goal (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017).

Accordingly, this study considers the KAZA TFCA, which, although formally institutionalised in 2011, was under development since 2006 through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which laid the groundwork to formally establishment this TFCA which is the largest TFCA in the world shared by Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. There is therefore an opportunity to explore the progress of tourism development in this TFCA region since the signing of the MoU. This TFCA was primarily designed to foster cross-border conservation and tourism development, and therefore an intellectual opportunity exists to understand the effects of supranational governance processes on regional and local tourism dynamics. While existing research has increasingly recognised the role of governance in supporting Transfrontier conservation and regional cooperation, less attention has been given to understanding how these governance processes translate into regional destination development outcomes across the different scales of the TFCA. In particular, there remains limited understanding of how regional agreements and governance structures are translated into tourism development at national and local levels, and how the coordination, harmonisation and collaboration amongst different stakeholders influence the development of an integrated regional tourism destination.

This is particularly important in the context of TFCAs, where tourism development is expected to contribute to broader objectives of regional integration, community development and socioeconomic growth, but where tourism stakeholders operate within different national policy and institutional environments. This study therefore draws on a meta-governance perspective to explore the regional tourism development process within selected KAZA TFCA sites, with particular attention to how Transfrontier governance processes enable and constrain regional tourism destination development and the extent to which regional tourism objectives are translated into local tourism and community development outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From cross-border tourism to Transfrontier tourism

Cross-border tourism has increasingly been conceptualised as more than the movement of tourists across national boundaries, but, a process through which geographically proximate territories in different jurisdictions can be experienced, marketed and potentially governed as an integrated tourism destination (Studzieniecki et al., 2016; Makkonen & Williams, 2024). This perspective challenges conventional approaches to destination development that remain largely organised around administrative and national boundaries (Su & Li, 2021). Blasco et al. (2014), for example, argue that tourism destinations should increasingly be understood according to tourists' consumption patterns rather than administrative boundaries, particularly where neighbouring destinations are geographically proximate and offer complementary attractions. From this perspective, cross-border tourism emerges where the functional geography of tourism extends beyond the political geography of the state. The cross-border character of tourism can consequently create opportunities for destinations to combine attractions, infrastructure, markets and tourism resources across jurisdictions (Makkonen & Williams, 2024; Stoffelen & Ioannides, 2025). Cross-border collaboration can also provide opportunities for destinations to develop joint products, strengthen destination competitiveness, exchange knowledge and practices, and potentially increase visitor flows and tourism income (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019). In this respect, cross-border tourism can be understood as a mechanism for overcoming the fragmentation created by political boundaries and creating a broader tourism space that corresponds more closely to how visitors experience destinations (Su & Li, 2021).

However, the literature cautions against assuming that geographical proximity automatically translates into an integrated cross-border tourism destination. In their study, Stoffelen & Vanneste (2017) found that local cross-border tourism projects do not guarantee positive regional-development outcomes and may, under certain circumstances, reinforce existing socioeconomic asymmetries between neighbouring territories. Their findings as such as others suggest that the developmental contribution of cross-border tourism depends less on the number of tourism projects undertaken and more on the institutional arrangements through which these projects are embedded (Wong Villanueva et al., 2022; Stoffelen & Ioannides, 2025; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2019). Accordingly, governance represents a central theme within the cross-border tourism literature. Cross border cooperation, and subsequently governance has become a common and fundamental strategy used to leverage on opportunities within border territories, through their integration (Wong Villanueva et al., 2022; Blasco et al., 2014; Ferrer-Roca et al., 2022). In Eastern and Southern Africa, this integration is primarily through TFCAs, which seek to leverage collective resources for broad scale conservation interventions and promoting complementary sustainable livelihoods, through wildlife tourism. Transfrontier tourism, or transboundary tourism, therefore, represents the development and organisation of a regional tourism destination within TFCAs (Mayer et al., 2019). Indeed, while many

studies have made the argument that wildlife, natural resources and their ecosystems transcend territorial and political borders and therefore require transboundary approaches to their protection and conservation, this study goes further to contend that the leveraging of these resources for tourism should also transcend national boundaries. This requires tourism development and governance processes to similarly reflect the transboundary nature of the resources upon which the tourism industry depends. Therefore, in understanding the complexities in politics and governance of multiple places and networks operating at various scales individually and collectively, with variable socio-spatial and socio-temporal articulations in the local destination, we leverage the meta-governance theory, which is unpacked in the discussion below.

Meta-governance and the TFCA perspective

Meta-governance is considered an evolutionary form of government and governance perspectives, where the latter gained much academic interest in the 1980s and typically represents a shift from hierarchical decision-making models to network-based and collaborative decision-making arrangements (Yankson, 2024). The criticisms of the governance model and its policies lie in the related market, network and state failures, which have led to attempts at redesigning governance arrangements to balance the various models of governance, thereby situating meta-governance within this discourse (Jessop, 2016; Jones, 2023). Meta-governance emerged as a response to these governance complexities by recognising the continuing strategic role of the state in coordinating diverse governance arrangements rather than directly controlling them (Bornemann et al., 2025; Ek Österberg & Qvist, 2022). Accordingly, meta-governance has been defined as "a practice by (mainly) public authorities that entails the coordination of one or more governance modes by using different instruments, methods and strategies to overcome governance failures" (Gjaltema et al., 2020:1771).

Rather than replacing governance networks, meta-governance provides the institutional architecture through which governments facilitate collaboration, manage competing interests and steer collective action towards agreed policy objectives (Ek Österberg & Qvist, 2022). Applied to tourism, this perspective suggests that the role of government in a cross-border destination is not necessarily to directly control tourism development, but to create the institutional conditions through which collaboration becomes possible (Lindström, 2024). This may include establishing enabling policies, facilitating partnerships, providing funding, connecting actors across administrative scales, developing common planning frameworks and addressing institutional asymmetries (Jessop, 2016).

The relevance of meta-governance is particularly evident within TFCAs, where conservation, tourism development and community development are negotiated across multiple sovereign states and diverse stakeholder groups. The KAZA TFCA represents a complex governance landscape comprising national governments, the KAZA Secretariat, conservation authorities, tourism organisations, community representatives, traditional leaders, non-governmental organisations and international development partners. These actors possess distinct mandates and priorities, yet are expected to collectively pursue shared objectives relating to biodiversity conservation, regional integration, tourism development and livelihood improvement. Therefore, grounding this research in the meta-governance framework enables an examination of how diverse stakeholders and coordination mechanisms operate under a consolidated governance structure within cross-border destinations, particularly those guided by several interconnected objectives. In particular, this research seeks to understand the ground-level tourism effects of meta-governance processes. The meta-governance perspective therefore provides a lens through which to examine how institutional mechanisms shape the conditions under which cross-border tourism development becomes possible.

METHODOLOGY

Study areas

The study was conducted in three tourism nodes within the KAZA TFCA, namely Kasane in Botswana, Livingstone in Zambia and Hwange in Zimbabwe. These sites were purposively selected based on their proximity to prominent tourism attractions within the KAZA landscape, namely Chobe National Park, Victoria Falls and Hwange National Park, respectively. The three locations represent important tourism destinations within the KAZA TFCA and are characterised by established wildlife and nature-based tourism activities, making them appropriate sites for examining tourism development within the Transfrontier context. The selection of these sites was also informed by their relative geographical proximity to one another, despite being located across three different national jurisdictions.

This proximity provides an appropriate context for examining the cross-border dynamics associated with tourism development, including tourist mobility, interactions between tourism stakeholders, regional tourism linkages and the influence of Transfrontier governance processes. By focusing on tourism nodes that are geographically connected through the broader KAZA landscape but administratively separated by national borders, the study was able to explore how regional tourism development processes are experienced and implemented at national and local levels.

Research approach

We followed a qualitative research approach, drawing data from semi-structured interviews with governing officials representing tourism and conservation departments, tourism businesses owners and managers as well as tourism entrepreneurs in the formal and informal economy, traditional and recognized community leaders, community-based tourism organisations' leaders and some members, and community members directly involved in the tourism industry. The interview questions were developed from a synthesis of literature on TFCA governance and community development, cross border tourism integration, and wildlife tourism and community. Accordingly, the questions were grouped under three interrelated categories; perceptions towards KAZA governance, tourism developments under the KAZA regime and

challenges hampering regional tourism growth. The semi-structured interview approach allowed for the researchers to probe further, ensuring full elaborations on each key thematic areas. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, where participants were targeted based on their direct involvement, knowledge and expertise in wildlife tourism in the study sites. In terms of operationalization, key individuals representing the targeted sample groups were identified and approached and time spent in the field revealed other participants who were not on the original list, for instance, the researchers found a local tourism association in Zambia representing in informal market, of which its position in the town as well as goals of the KAZA necessitated its inclusion. We conducted a total of 59 interviews and group interviews in Kasane, Lusaka and Hwange, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participant profiles

Participant code	Stakeholder group	Location
P1-2	Tourism and conservation authority representatives	Kasane
P3-4	Community trusts' representatives	Kasane and Kazungula
P5-9	Informal tourism entrepreneurs	Kasane
P10-11	Local traditional authorities	Kasane
P12 – 17	Formal tourism businesses	Kasane
P18 - 22	Community members involved in wildlife tourism	Kasane
P23-25	Conservation NGOs representatives	Livingstone
P26	Conservation authority representative	Livingstone
P27	Tourism association representative	Livingstone
P28 – 31	Informal tourism entrepreneurs	Livingstone
P32- 37	Formal tourism business owners/ managers	Livingstone
P38 - 41	Community members involved in wildlife tourism	Livingstone
P42 – 46	CAMFIRE representatives	Hwange
P47 – 49	Tourism and conservation authority representatives	Hwange
P50 – 55	Informal tourism entrepreneurs	Hwange
P56 – 59	Formal tourism business owners/ managers	Hwange

In most cases, interviews were conducted in English, however some participants preferred local languages which led to some interviews being conducted in Setswana in Kasane, Bemba in Lusaka and Ndebele and Shona in Hwange. The research obtained ethical clearance prior to its commencement and participants were assured of their voluntary involvement, confidentiality of information and were asked for their consent in the recording of the interviews.

Data recordings were loaded onto Otter.ai for transcription, of which the output was reread and edited to ensure consistency and that contexts were captured in the transcripts. Following, the transcripts were loaded onto Atlas.ti, in which a descriptive line by line coding technique was utilized.

This process yielded 539 codes, which were subsequently reread and merged to reduce repetition. Following, similar codes were grouped together, forming the key themes which are discussed in the following section.

RESULTS

Regional integration and conservation governance

Perceptions of the KAZA TFCA revealed mixed responses on their understanding of this regional initiative, particularly as there were a significant portion not aware of the TFCA agreement amongst the five countries, through were aware of the outcomes of this transboundary collaboration. Participants that aware of the KAZA TFCA agreement described the TFCA has a means to recognise the shared ecosystems amongst the five member states. Certainly, participants alluded to the inherent collaborative nature of the partnership, underscoring the significance of its premise to conservation, tourism development and economic growth, goals which bare crucial implications for community livelihoods in the study areas.

Because this protocol [is] between countries, a bilateral agreement between five countries because they share the waters, they share the wildlife and everything. There's also community involvement and stakeholder involvement, they [KAZA management committees] do public education. At the kgotla, here we go, they educate people and they are quite collaborative [P10 - Kasane]

Certainly, the few participants who understood this agreement, and its outcomes, had an optimistic view on its contribution towards various facets of development in the region. Largely, this optimism was directed towards harmonizing the relationships between communities and protected areas, communities and tourism as well as facilitating cooperation and social capital amongst communities in the different member states. One participant in Hwange, aptly explains:

Because for instance, we are giving an opportunity for the TFCA, in this community, to work together and lower barriers between people in the [member] countries. And instead of us promoting conflict between the community and the Transfrontier [conservation area] [P48- Hwange]

While the understanding of KAZA TFCA as an entity was not widely understood across the study sites, the creation of wildlife corridors, being one of the key objectives of the TFCA, was widely acknowledged amongst many participants involved in this study. This may have been attributed to the information and training occurring at the local destination scale, with limited explicit linkages to the KAZA agreement, that neighbouring countries share ecosystems and subsequently wildlife, which belong to the region and not necessarily the individual states. This understanding was determined in the discussions with communities' representatives in the study sites, and captured with the quotes below:

KAZA [TFCA] is the five countries [that] have come together. They are being brought together, like their story in Germany, it was to discuss and have agreements and we have those agreements. So if animals leave Zimbabwe, they are not Zimbabwean animals, they become Zambia animals. Yes, if the leave Zambia they do to... that's how it is works. So those are just like agreements, that KAZA made. [P24 – Livingstone]

KAZA also created key wildlife corridors and free space for wildlife movement, thereby improving the gene pool for the benefit of wildlife populations and also conservancies, which will always continue to get wildlife coming from other rich protected areas like the Hwange National Park. [P47 - Hwange]

Interestingly, the study participants in Hwange underscored the centrality of inclusivity and trust in the transboundary conservation body, owing to the resources provided to support community development goals. Notably, these participants explained that CAMPFIRE was an integrated early on in the initial discussions around the KAZA, owing to the community based organisation being forefront in highlighting the concerns with the then practices of nature conservation and related community development support.

[The] relationship between the Transfrontier conservation area and the community can be served as collaborative, partnership based, trust based, empowering, respectful, inclusive and supportive in the sense that TLCA provides support and resources to help the community achieve their goals [P48 – Hwange]

That's why they came up with this Transfrontier, KAZA. It came reality through the communities exposing those irregularities [between park management and community needs]. So now KAZA is a solution to bring national parks, forestry, [those] who advise [and are] involved council together. [P33ZW]

Though the KAZA TFCA is a partnership amongst five member states, a few participants reflected on the long-term aspirations of this partnership towards the future generations, *'As you know, it's like a vehicle which is being used to serve our needs, necessities to the future generations, so that our grandchildren, what overcome our generation will be now be for them'* (P42 – Hwange) as well as the broader continent and what it could someday represent. In this light, the success of the TFCA was perceived as a positive movement a more unified African continent, with some participant espousing *"If other presidents could hear the President's speech, the support, once you build yourself like that, other countries will start joining if it works out then as you can continue to have one Africa"* P26 – Livingstone.

However, despite the importance underlined above, it is important to report that a couple of participants expressed concerns over the KAZA management structure, particularly in relation to the prevalence of international donor funding organisations. One participant especially viewed this TFCA as a form of neocolonialization, stating:

I'll tell you this not because I have got a political path, but because KAZA for me is like a colonial kind of rule. And I'll explain this to you soon, KAZA is connected to like five countries. We have in the indigenous people in those countries, you know, you know, how their system works, they get in Zambia, they get, like they exchanged like leadership, and whatnot. But those are controlled by foreigners [P39 – Livingstone].

These concerns were directed towards the conservation ideologies and practices that would be utilized in the collaborative governance of nature and wildlife conservation, and relatedly tourism sector, and the implications for the role of the community in these interrelated sectors, particularly in terms of equity, representation, ownership and empowerment.

Regional tourism product development and destination competitiveness

One of the major outcomes and achievements of the KAZA TFCA agreement since its formalization, is the related to the easing of movement between the countries. On the tourism development front, the member states have introduced the concept of the KAZA UniVisa, which seeks to enable easier and seamless movement between the member states. While, this is currently being piloted between Zimbabwe and Zambia, participants attribute this as a positive step towards developing a regional tourism product. Some governing officials explained that this is still in its developmental stages:

They are also bilateral agreements between the countries. Of note also is the univisa that is currently being piloted, which is being piloted between Zimbabwe and Zambia. So if you get a visa from one of the countries you are allowed to go to all the five member states without having to reapply for another visa, it is the case. Because now, we're still piloting, like still at pilot stage, so we haven't fully rolled out. [P1 – Kasane]

Indeed, the easing of the border movements is greatly perceived as an enabling factor to leveraging on the unique resources of the individual states and forming a stronger destination product, enabling tourism growth within each state. Participants mentioned the proximity of the key destinations to one another and ability to build a travel itinerary that cross multiple countries in one day, with one tour operator highlighting the distinctiveness of such experiences in the broader Southern Africa region:

And we're also situated in an area where you can visit the three countries [in] one day, you can have breakfast in Kasane in Botswana have lunch in Zimbabwe have dinner in Zambia and be back in bed in Botswana. And nowhere else in the Southern Hemisphere can you do that. One guest just argued to me and said 'but you know in South Africa you can go to Lesotho and that's it'. That's true. I've just said Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, you can get your passport stamped four times in one day. So here's the beauty of operating in this area [P16 – Kasane]

Similarly, participants further mentioned the infrastructural improvement of the Kazungula border post, connecting Botswana and Zambia as facilitating easier border crossing and movement between the two countries. Notably, other participants underline the missed opportunity to integrate Zimbabwe in this border, *'Right now, one of our other challenges is that since Zimbabwe was not part of the Kazungula border.'* (P22- Livingstone). Generally, the efforts undertaken thus far have enabled the development of a unified destination brand, leveraging on the share wildlife resources and wilderness spaces. In this light, the cultural resources pose another resource that can be leveraged to support the existing primary

wildlife tourism product. In this regard, participants point to the cultural differences amongst the three countries as opportunities to be explored by tour operators and tourism marketers for the region, stating:

And cultures. Because it's not only wildlife tourism that caused this to tie within our communities, you know, the difference in Angola, difference in Namibia, difference in Zambia and difference in Zimbabwe. So we could target those things, you know, as the community of tour operators, or the governments, you know, to sell this product, which we think, you know, is quite unique. Yeah. But we're not there yet. [P2 – Kasane]

So many villages here, the government helps to establish like a cultural village, where all the ladies, old people can showcase their talent through weaving, basket weaving, having making skills, so tourists will come see dances, culture, dresses, showcasing their culture [P49 – Hwange].

The promotion of cultural resources, products and experiences as part of the KAZA tourism landscape was grounded to being another means to extend the potential of tourism to provide livelihood benefits to residents that are not able to enter the wildlife tourism market. Evidently, the discussions on regional tourism product development revealed some missed opportunities. Also, while participants recognise that there has been increased marketing of the region, both by individual states, businesses as well as the collective KAZA TFCA, more awareness of the region is required, particularly for natural and cultural experiences supporting the key attractions.

While this was not explicitly linked to the TFCA establishment, there was a general consensus amongst study participants, more especially in Botswana and Zambia, the tourism economy is growing and subsequently providing more income-generating opportunities for residents, largely in terms of employment and entrepreneurship developments. Similarly, some participants have alluded that the growth of tourism, the attractive natural assets and established attractions, coupled with relative stability of certain countries and focus on foreign investment policies, larger integrated tourism market due the KAZA TFCA agreement, have attracted some investors to the areas, which represent the opportunity for local communities to evolve their livelihood activities from predominantly subsistence levels. One tourism business owner cautioned that these investors need to be met openly the communities:

I think being open minded and welcoming investors. The community's understanding that people that come in here are not here to take away anything from them but to add value more than anything in what is already there. You understand? So many areas I've seen ethnic tribes be like 'now we don't want you' you know 'we are just okay with our fishing' But you can allow us to operate in your area. And we will provide a quality lifestyle both in health care and employment and you know [P16 - Kasane]

Interestingly, a number of tourism businesses owners involved in study were considering expanding their business to neighbouring countries to capitalize on the growing regional tourism market, and working with local partners in other KAZA TFCA member states:

The last year I went to Namibia because I'm trying just to on my own to try and scout for opportunities just across [the border], so that in future I know where I know where to diversify and grow my business into. [P34 - Livingstone]

However, the movement towards facilitating regional tourism development and strengthening the destination is severely hampered by the accessibility challenges in entering the region, for international tourists.

Airlines has been a major, major problem when it comes to us in the tourism industry. These is less of disadvantages. I mean, advantages. And challenges are few. But it's how the properties react towards that. Yeah, like I say, if we are working with an agent in the UK, and that person is unable to put flight together to complete their itineraries, then it means business won't materialize. We can't receive business from that particular agent. Yeah, yeah. So those are some of the challenges. [P3 - Kasane]

Similarly, a few participants recognized that the easing of border/travel barriers have already led to heightened competition amongst tourism businesses, particularly for accommodation businesses, across borders. Therefore, subsequent concerns that may arise could be related to pricing of tourism services, considering the wider destination options available for guests. In this regard, one tourism business owner already noted this issue with Zimbabwe and Zambia due to their sharing of the Victoria Falls as a key attraction, stating: *"I think the bed space, pricing, I think, we have been informed that we are a little on the higher side in comparison to our counterparts in Zimbabwe"* (P37 – Livingstone). Furthermore, other participants recognized that this regional collaborative relationship, and its benefits, are largely dependent on the vitality of the natural ecosystems, in which subsequent adverse climate changes impacts could threaten the tourism landscape, owing to its dependency on wildlife and natural resources such as extensive river systems.

I think the only thing that could destabilize is when that river dries out, Because we get that water comes all the way from Angola. Or in case where our international relations, I was with Angola, and they decided to block the water. I don't know I think government sometimes I think that is the only thing that I'm thinking of, in terms of that could that could greatly shake the tourism landscape because it's all about the wildlife and then that river sustains everything else it doesn't. So that's that river is the source of tourism its the core. (P6 – Kasane)

Governance tensions limiting tourism development

Despite the positive shift noted in the development of a regional destination product through the KAZA TFCA arrangement, however, uneven policy harmonisation and implementation constrains tourism integration. Some of the challenges highlighted refer to the management of policies affecting local tourism businesses, border concerns, as well as political influences and nature of support for tourism businesses. The efforts to improve the accessibility amongst the countries was perceived to be hampered by the process at the borders' posts. Some participants recall guest to have complained over the long waiting times at the border as well as some uncertainties in procedures which may cause

confusion for visitors. One participant further stated that some individuals have been exploiting this uncertainty by making false promises to guests and assisting with border paperwork. This is not permitted for agents who are not authorised to enter the border building, see quotes below:

‘Okay, I think from our guests point most... the borders. Okay. They always complain about the delays of the borders. Because you know, the guys will especially the guys who drive from South Africa to here, will leave Joburg maybe about five o'clock in the morning, get to this border, maybe at six at night and spend another three hours. So we're only getting 10 at night, some 11 at night, depending on the chaos they find there.’ [P33 – Livingstone]

‘So I've got friends who are clearing agents. So we're just trying to see for, maybe next month, for the guys coming in from South Africa, and stuff if I could have my guy meet him there just to show them how to do the paperwork and tell them not to pay [anyone outside] because that's the process we're just supposed to do. yeah because even with that come in in the agents actually not even allowed inside the border area to clear account that needs temporary import permit and stuff. But these guys they find them outside say ‘no I can do it for you’ and all that so we trying to see how we can help the guests make it easier for them to come through.’ [P36 – Livingstone]

Some discussions with representatives from Kasane suggest that these complaints are recognized by some government officials and under consideration by the relative authorities in the country. Another matter participants expressed concern on, and requirement of government attention was the issue of unregulated tour guiding. These concerns were largely expressed by tourism entrepreneurs in Kasane and Livingstone, where they highlight the injustice of competing with guides who have not completed the required certification and programmes and the influence this has on the guiding experience as well as income generated from the tourism industry.

‘They [registered guides] are active but it's only that its hard to have those licenses, it's very hard to have those licences in tourism operations’ [P12 – Kasane]

‘I decided to register but then I'm paying fees, I'm legal I pay for my own licenses. It's a cost but then there are others who are doing all these things unregistered and don't have any legal consequences. Its very unfair.’ [P34 – Livingstone]

‘We don't have a uniform amount, legal operators will have a uniform amount. Like game drives, its \$75 for internationals, so as we know it, but if you go to these that are illegal [operators], they will take \$30. You know, they are putting the value down. And they make it seem like we're overcharging the client but actually that's the price.’ [P37 - Livingstone]

In addition to the competition amongst legal and illegal tour guides, which extend towards how other tourism businesses, such as accommodations and activity providers are exacerbating this issue, participants underlined the importance of ensuring that national policies and their implementation are aligned with local realities and priorities. Largely, these concerns were centred on the prevalence of foreign owned businesses in the study sites, which affected local enterprises in a couple of ways. In Livingstone, some participants questioned the investor friendly policy environment created by national government, which limited the tax revenue generated from businesses that could better assist the country, while other participants noted the unfair competition amongst informal creative art traders and larger scale accommodations in selling local arts and crafts:

‘So most of them [internationally owned hotels] when they come here, they come with licenses to do activities, maybe lodge, may be restaurants, but after seeing that the people that [have] visited , most of them want to buy souvenirs, they [hotels] also start selling souvenirs. So this is a good big block because they're [hotels] the people receiving guests. So it becomes a bit of contention. So those are some of the challenges, the intolerance. I think we don't have deliberate policies that can stop that.’ [P29 - Livingstone]

‘We need policy of some kind, you cannot go to American and start selling indigenous American art? I don't see that, it is only here in Africa where you can do that. But giving them land and they are making money out of that land. Because they are only paying their workers, the electricity and roads. So why are they encroaching in this land?’ [P30 - Livingstone]

In Hwange, participants postulated that concerns with the national governing party, and the administrative challenges, had led to delays in being rewarded funds and other benefits through the KAZA TFCA, of which these support mechanisms were supposedly geared towards assisting local communities. Relatedly, participants in all study areas contended for the need to empower local entrepreneurs and local businesses, to be able to establish and grow their business and compete the tourism market. In this regard, the lack of funding opportunities from government authorities was a contentious matter, with several participants espousing the lack of financial capital experienced by a large share of the local population.

‘Some of the barriers to participation is the lack of startup capital of the people, most of the people are poor, the local people don't have the capital to start companies like safari lodges, camp sites, so its the lack of funding.’ [P12 - Kasane]

‘I think the most top one would be funding constraints. Like the tourism department hardly gets funds. So the amount is kind of limited to bigger projects and things like that you can't really expand if you don't really have the capital’ [P57 - Hwange]

‘People like myself [entrepreneur] at the start, I need money to have a variety of things to do. Because let's say I want to venture into car hire, I don't have that money. Things are expensive, the dollar is high. I need like a loan or capital basically. So how it can go is if maybe they [government] are able to fund us, of course, maybe with a minimal interest?’ [P37 - Livingstone]

Some governing authorities' representatives indicated the existences of several interventions and opportunities for fundings, though acknowledging the inherent limitation in such public funds. Furthermore, support structures in the sector have been under scrutiny over their internal problems that have resulted in their inefficiency in assisting locals involved in the tourism industry, with a participant in Livingstone espousing ‘*There are associations, Zambia tourism association, and*

Livingston tourism association but they are not doing anything' (P34 – Livingstone), while in Kasane, the misuse of funds by the community trust was frequently mentioned,

'So most of the trusts have collapsed because of that. Yes. Yeah, I guess you've seen in Maun, some of them have been fired because they used money from the trust, they'll be borrowing themselves money from the trust.' [P5 – Kasane]

One of the key strategies to action KAZA TFCA goals at the local scale is through education and training. Notably, previous studies have found this education to largely revolve around wildlife protection and harmonizing community and conservation relationships. In this regard, participants underline the significance of tourism specific skills and knowledge to enable a locally inclusive and competitive industry. For instance, some responses on this matter were communication skills development and foreign language proficiency skills, to accommodate international guests:

'For instance, you might need to have maybe, translators in case of maybe Spanish speaking people. To provide a channel for communication. And that's where communities can they can be willing to venture into what tourism activities.' [P49 – Hwange]

Participants generally agreed that even entry-level employment requires training and specific skills, and the priority on the absorption of the local labour market needs to recognise this fact:

'Because for them [communities] to be involved, there's a certain level of skills [required]. You realize that some of them are not that much educated. So that's what makes it a bit difficult. For instance, for one to be a waitress, you just have to be able to have to bring your certificate.' [P17 – Kasane]

Finally, the awareness of KAZA TFCA as a meta-governance entity was not widely known by study participants, of which those that were familiar explained that it largely operated at a supranational scale, with little integration with local stakeholders. The discussions above illustrate while that the deliverables of the collaborative arrangements were seen in the destination, the explicit linkage to the KAZA TFCA ecosystem was not apparent. This raised several questions on the localized effectiveness of the entity, particularly in Kasane and Livingstone, where participants noted the apparent disconnect between tourism and conservation outcomes of the TFCA agreement, where a few people perceive them as solely conservation governing bodies and not focused on tourism businesses, with one tourism business owner stating '*They deal with animals there, counting animal problems and all the like. I never saw myself as an operator sitting down with KAZA. I know they're operating out there*' (P5 – Kasane). Another tourism business owner had the following input:

'I think they are not driving their mandate on how as [tourism] operators we can benefit from them, and how they can also benefit from us. I don't know how to put it but if you ask me about KAZA, I won't tell you anything about KAZA, as compared to other board like BTO [Botswana Tourism Organisation] , Africa's Eden, where if you go there and meet other business operators, you know, you have a chance of getting business from them.' [P13 – Kasane]

Interestingly, in Hwange, some CAMPFIRE representatives outlined the existence of working groups fostering the integration of local stakeholders and localized imperatives to the KAZA management structure, with one such representative affirming:

'For example, if it's the KAZA, we've got working groups that have representatives of the nations, like Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Angola and Botswana. They have working groups for every sector. Can it be tourism? Can it be finance? Can it be law enforcement? They do bilateral meetings, and we have bilateral meetings at ministerial level and at the state, state aid level, and their exchange programs for the community leaders.' [P40 – Hwange].

DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the regional tourism development process in selected KAZA TFCA sites, considering the meta-governance processes. Generally, the study found that the Transfrontier governance has fostered an enabling environment for tourism growth primarily through the easing of tourist mobility through cross border agreements and infrastructure. Cross border literature confirms the necessity of alignment amongst governing states to enable cross border tourism (see Dittmann & Müller-Mahn, 2023; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017; Clark et al., 2026).

In the case of Southern Africa, this alignment is grounded from the policies and agreements signed at SADC level, enabling the creation of TFCAs and subsequently the facilitation of supporting mechanisms to grow tourism in the region. These mechanisms including facilitation of visa and cross-border formalities, improved transportation networks and transport arrangements, varied experiences and the development of tourism ecosystems, all of which Kozak & Buhalis (2019) constitute factors propelling cross border travel. From a meta-governance perspective, these developments demonstrate the role of regional governance actors in creating the institutional conditions through which tourism actors can operate across national boundaries, rather than directly controlling tourism development.

However, the study also found that while movement within the KAZA TFCA member states have become somewhat easier, regional tourism growth is hindered by the ease of travel to the region, in which case airline connectivity as well as the problems associated with national airline carriers were deemed to be key challenges. This highlights an important limitation of regional meta-governance, where progress in one component of regional integration does not necessarily result in corresponding integration across the wider tourism system.

The findings demonstrate the growth of regional tourism, supported by a previous study (see Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2025). Blasco et al. (2014) and Badimo & Mathola (2026) recognise that political influences and relations can influence cross border regional flow. In this way, the TFCA provides several advantages in providing access to destinations that could be considered politically unstable by tourists, as well as the opportunity leverage on the different pulling power of destinations in the region and then diversify this flow to other destinations. This provides a strong foundation for future plans to grow tourism beyond frequently visited areas, should such plans be supported by adequate tourism support. From a

destination marketing standpoint, research suggests that regional tourism marketing provides cost advantages to the destination through the sharing of marketing expense (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019; Clark et al., 2026), which is particularly crucial in resource constrained contexts. As such the financial assistance leveraged through the KAZA TFCA and their international donor network provides the ability for tourism to develop further and deliver on socioeconomic outcomes. These findings further illustrate the steering function of meta-governance, whereby regional actors and supporting institutions create opportunities for collective action that individual destinations may struggle to achieve independently.

However, the study highlights some implications to the structure of tourism development, particularly the extent to which guidance and support has been provided for tourism entrepreneurs. The study found heightened competition amongst tourism establishment within individual member states and across borders, often arising from the prevalence of similar tourism product development. Studies such as Park et al. (2022), Tichaawa & Lekgau (2020) and Clark et al. (2026) have underscored diversity and distinctive tourism experiences as central to promoting regional tourism growth. Local cultures are seemingly seen as an avenue to preserve distinctions amongst the states, which could assist in fostering the integration of regional wildlife tourism product but preserving the uniqueness of each destination (Park et al., 2022).

Earlier on, Tosun et al. (2005) affirmed the creation of a joint cross border tourism organisations, and increasing involvement of business stakeholders and NGOs necessary to effectively success in this endeavor. Park et al. (2022) made the same assertion, stating that this shared governance, through the introduction of robust governance mechanisms, facilitates synergistic collaboration amongst the partner states. This is clearly evident in the present study, owing to the need to facilitate the further regional tourism growth by having regional tourism development priorities being purposively integrated various scales the meta-governance structures. The findings, however, suggest that the existence of regional governance structures alone is insufficient to achieve this integration. Meta-governance requires the effective connection of regional, national and local governance levels, as well as the incorporation of actors who are directly involved in tourism development. In this regard, the limited visibility of tourism within local understandings of KAZA indicates a potential vertical governance gap between regional priorities and local tourism realities. The local perceptions of KAZA seems to predominantly focus on conservation. While this is understandably so, considering that the protection natural resources is the foregrounding motivation for the establishment of the TFCA, the tourism industry is that which can generate socioeconomic returns that support the attainment of the other goals of the agreement.

Similarly, previous studies have found that there are several education initiatives for local community members, directed to conservation matters, such as fostering positive and protective human-wildlife dynamics, or introducing wildlife tourism and conservation as potential careers (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2025a, 2025b).

However, tourism specific education, which considers the local labour market is not as widely shared through governance structures, thereby falling onto the responsibility of businesses owners and managers. This creates a gap in the tourism environments, and the lack of cohesion amongst meta-governance structures and the local tourism industries compromises the sustainable and equitable growth of the tourism industry. Relatedly, one of the key challenges facing the KAZA TFCA, and similar transboundary agreements, is the harmonisation of policies. Past studies have found this disconnect to be centred on conservation policies and practices (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2025b), whereas this present research demonstrates this issue to extend to tourism and tourism affected policies and policy imperatives and adversely affect the development and growth of local tourism businesses. Policy harmonisation represents a particularly important meta-governance mechanism in this context, as the creation of a regional tourism destination requires some degree of consistency in the institutional conditions within which tourism businesses operate. Although member states may participate in a shared regional governance arrangement, differences in policy implementation, administrative procedures and institutional capacities can continue to produce fragmented tourism environments.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the KAZA TFCA has contributed to creating an enabling environment for regional tourism development by facilitating cross-border mobility, strengthening regional cooperation and creating opportunities to leverage the complementary tourism resources and attractions of the five member states. The development of cross-border infrastructure, visa and border arrangements, regional marketing initiatives and donor-supported programmes demonstrates the potential of transfrontier governance to support tourism development beyond national boundaries. However, the findings also demonstrate that the existence of a transfrontier governance structure does not necessarily translate into integrated tourism development. Certainly, the effectiveness of KAZA as a meta-governance arrangement is influenced by the extent to which regional priorities are translated into coordinated actions at national and local levels. In particular, the limited visibility of tourism development within local understandings of KAZA, compared with its stronger association with conservation, raises questions about the extent to which tourism is sufficiently embedded within the broader governance processes of the TFCA.

The findings therefore suggest that strengthening tourism development within KAZA requires a shift from viewing tourism primarily as an outcome of conservation and regional integration towards recognising it as an explicit component of transfrontier governance. This requires stronger vertical coordination between regional, national and local governance structures, as well as greater horizontal collaboration between governments, conservation agencies, tourism businesses, communities and other tourism stakeholders, of which policy harmonisation is particularly important in this regard. Theoretically, this study extends the application of meta-governance to Transfrontier tourism by demonstrating that the effectiveness of transboundary governance depends not only on the establishment of regional coordination mechanisms, but also on their translation and implementation across multiple governance levels.

The study therefore conceptualises tourism development as an important outcome through which the effectiveness of meta-governance within TFCAs can be assessed, highlighting the importance of vertical coordination, policy harmonisation and local stakeholder integration in translating regional governance objectives into equitable tourism and community development outcomes.

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