



Vol. 08 No.1 | Global Crises and Tourism

Vol. 08 Article 1 | August 2021

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The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Employment in the Tourism Industry in Uganda

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Received date: June 10th, 2021; Accepted date: July 20th, 2021; Published date: August 30th, 2021.

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Abstract

The coronavirus Covid--19 pandemic is unfortunately in Uganda. The raft of measures by the World Health Organisation[WHO], and Governments across the globe[including Ugandas] to contain the spread of the virus have resulted in an unprecedented disruption of businesses and day-to-day life. The worldwide lockdown and the ban or restriction of international travel disrupted businesses literally bringing them to a grinding halt in some sectors of the global economy. In Uganda's case, one industry that has suffered the most immediate repercussions due to the pandemic is the hospitality and leisure industry. The hospitality industry is among the hardest hit due to fears of community spreading the virus through travel and group environments.

There is no doubt that there have been massive disruptions at the work place especially in Uganda's tourism industry in light of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, this state of affairs happens at the backdrop of Uganda's extensive legal regime governing the employer/ employee relationship in specific situations. This article sets out to specifically explore the legal gaps and impact of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic. This includes issuing lockdown to the employment sector more especially in Uganda's tourism industry and what can be done to bridge the gaps.

Keywords: Legal gaps, policy impacts, Covid-19 lockdown, employment

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Emergence and Global Spread of COVID-19 and Global Responses

Covid-19, also known as the Coronavirus, is a new strain of infection that emerged in Wuhai China at the end of 2019 [The Guardian, March 31, 2020]. The novel coronavirus first surfaced in a Chinese seafood and poultry market manifesting pneumonia like symptoms [PLA-Uganda, 2020]. The coronavirus currently knows no boundaries. COVID-19 is a rapidly spreading virus that has taken the whole world into a whirlwind. People are torn between staying at home and following health guide lines so as to keep the virus at bay or going out to work in search for their daily bread [PLA-Uganda, 2020]. Since the first identified case in China, the virus has rapidly spread across the globe [Lena Combs, 2020]. As of October, 26, 2020, the virus has spread to over 250 countries with 43,694,629 confirmed cases around the globe [World Meter, 2020].

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation [WHO] formally declared the coronavirus outbreak was a pandemic [Lena Combs, 2020]. By April 6, 2020, in accordance with the applied case definitions and testing strategies in the affected countries, some 1,244,421 cases of COVID-19 had been reported globally, including 68,076 deaths. Uganda was among the 54 African countries that had confirmed cases of COVID-19. By April 5, 2020, Uganda had registered 52 cases of COVID-19 [PLA-Uganda, 2020]. To alleviate the impact of this deadly pandemic, countries across the globe have adopted measures including social distancing, self isolation, institutional quarantine and travel restrictions [OECD, 2020].

1.2 Effect of COVID-19 on Global Tourism Industry.

According to the International Labour Organisation [ILO], the Covid-19 crisis has already transformed into an economic and labour market shock around the world. It impacted not only supply [production of goods and services] but also demand [consumption and investment]. All businesses around the world regardless of size, are facing serious challenges, especially those in the aviation, tourism and hospitality industries. There is a real threat of significant declines in revenue, insolvencies and job losses in specific sectors [ILO, 2020]. One industry that is suffering the most immediate repercussions due to the pandemic is the hospitality and leisure industry [Dogan Gursory, 2020]. The hospitality industry is among the hardest hit due to fears of spreading the virus through travel and group

environments. News channels around the world continuously featured stories of postponement and cancellation of events, conferences, conventions and sports leagues. These immediately drove down travel and tourism for business and pleasure [Aljazeera News, 2020; BBC News, 2020]. As the phrase 'social distancing' becomes a household term, many consumers played it safe and stayed at home. Some others attempted to continue typical day-to-day operations through restrictions and curfews. In some cities around the globe, full lockdowns have created a precarious business climate for restaurants, bars, cafes and other businesses dependent on guests. These roadblocks significantly impacted their bottom line [Lena Combs, 2020].

2.0 UGANDA'S TOURISM INDUSTRY AND EMPLOYMENT SECTOR

Tourism in Uganda is focused on Uganda's landscape and wildlife. It is a major driver of employment, investment and foreign exchange contributing 7.86 per cent to Uganda's GDP for the last 5 years [Arthur Kakande, 2020]. Tourism is also used to fight poverty in Uganda [Wakyereza R. Kuledran N. and Ihalanayake Ranjith, 2020]. Uganda's tourism industry comprises companies which employ people directly as drivers, guides, secretaries, accountants etc. These companies sell products to tourists, for example art and crafts as well as traditional attire. Tourism is also operated online by online based companies. Tourist attractions in Uganda include National Game Parks, Game Reserves, traditional sites and natural tropical forests. Traditional celebrations like Mbalu in eastern Uganda, boat riding and waterfalls also attract many international tourists. [Tourist Attractions in Uganda, 2020].

2.1 The Extent of COVID-19 in Uganda

2.1.1 The Ugandan Government's Immediate Reaction to COVID-19

Following the World Health Organisation's [WHO] declaration of the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, the Ugandan Government issued measures aimed at stopping the spread of Covid-19. These included suspending all forms of public gatherings of a political, social and religious nature. It closed schools and banned cross border movement of non-residents for 30 days. Public transport means including buses, taxi, coasters, passenger trains, tuku tuku [motorcycles] and boda boda [mini-buses] were suspended for 14 days. The sale of non-food items in

markets that usually bring together many people was also suspended. [PLA-Uganda, 2020]. More specifically, in March 2020, Uganda's Minister of State for Labour, Employment and Industrial Relations, Honourable Mwesiga Rukutana delivered an official press statement. It drew the attention of employers, workers and the general public regarding employment matters. He noted that the spread of the coronavirus would impact the world of work across three key dimensions. These included the quantity of available jobs, the quality of work and the vulnerability of work to adverse labour market outcomes. Furthermore, Uganda's Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development issued further guidelines on the March 25, 2020 to employers on the employment effects and their relationship with Covid-19. [Human Resource Manager's Association of Uganda, 2020]. These measures pushed most of Ugandans from their workplaces into their homes. This left employers without a plan to manage these turbulent times. Gradually, the lockdown in Uganda was lifted in phases. Life slowly returned back to normal.

3.0 GAPS IN LAWS ON EMPLOYMENT IN UGANDA

There were glaring gaps in the employment, contractual workers' compensation and occupational safety and health as well as legal regimes presented by the emergence of Covid-19 Pandemic. The Covid-19 lockdown in Uganda presented businesses with an unprecedented situation where they were not operating but still had to keep up with payment obligations, especially to their employees. This left many of the Ugandan employers pondering on how to balance their legal obligations with the reality of the new economic situation. Key among these obligations is the duty placed on an employer by the Employment Act to provide work. There were serious questions to address. What is the employer's duty in this regard in light of the Covid-19 pandemic? What options can an employer exercise that would ensure compliance with the law while still allowing the business to remain afloat? [Issac Newton Kyagaba, 2020]. In this section of the article, the legal regime on employer/employee relationship is highlighted. The author's arguments specifically base themselves on Uganda's Employment legal regime. The emphasis will be on the Employment Act [Chapter 219, 2006]; Contract Act, 2010 ; Worker's Compensation Act [Chapter 225, 2000] and the Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2006. They all bring out the gaps that exist in the context of the Covid-

19 pandemic and the lockdown imposed by the Ugandan Government in its wake.

3.1 Gaps in Employment Act [Chapter 219, 2006]

An important aspect of this law is the employer's payment of wages during Covid-19 pandemic. Uganda's law on employment revises and consolidates the laws governing individual employment relationships and provides for other connected or related matters. The Employment Law advocates for positive work environments which are essential for workers' mental and physical well-being. Uganda's Employment Act is marred with inconsistencies that have rendered employers completely bewildered and unprepared to manage the current Covid-19 situation. For instance, Section 40(1) of the Act states to the effect that "every employer shall provide his or her employee with work in accordance with the contract of service during the period for which the contract is binding as well as the number of days equal to the number of working days expressly or impliedly provided for in the contract". However, section 40(2) of the Act provides that the duty of the employer to provide work shall not apply if (a) the contract is frustrated, (b) its performance is suspended, or (c) it is prevented by an act of God or civil strife.

Similarly, it is stipulated under section 40(3) of the same law that an employer is not to be liable to provide work where interruption to his or her business activities is caused by natural calamities beyond the employer's control. While these provisions seem to insulate the employer from the obligation to provide work to the employee during the entire duration of the pandemic, the section is silent on whether the employer's obligation to pay wages can be suspended. This means that the employer may still be required to pay wages even when the law allows such an employer not to provide work during the duration of the pandemic.

According to section 41(7) of the Employment Act, a worker who has completed at least three months continuous service and is absent from work on account of situations specified in subsection (6), is entitled to receive wages as though he or she has not been absent from work and had fully performed his or her duties under his or her contract of service throughout the absence. Such a worker should not be subject to any deductions. The circumstances laid down in Section 41(6) of the law include absence attributable to the occurrence of exceptional events preventing the employee from reaching his or her place of work from working. We can safely argue that the prohibition of

public and private transport to ease movement for work purposes could suffice as occurrence of exceptional events preventing the employee from reaching his or her place of work and thus entitled to full payment of wages. Furthermore, the Act does not state for how long an employer should continue paying an employee who is prevented from working under such circumstances. The question that arises from the provisions of the law then would be whether it makes legal sense to pay an employee that has not performed any work even when the law allows an employer not to provide work where the contract is frustrated due to the occurrence of an act of God such as Covid-19.

3.2 Gaps in Contract Act, 2020

One aspect of this law is the discharge of employment contract due to the Covid-19 circumstances. Unlike employment contracts, in commercial contracts a non performing party to a contract may be discharged from performing a contractual obligation by relying on force majeure clauses or the doctrine of frustration. In fact, section 66(1) of the Contract Act, 2010 provides that where a contract becomes impossible to perform or is frustrated and where a party cannot show that the other party assumed the risk of impossibility, the parties to the contract shall be discharged from further performance of the contract. This is not the position for employer-employee contracts where force majeure clauses have not been a common practice. Should an employer considers termination, the law requires that such termination should follow the laid down procedure. Section 65(1)(a) of the law states that the termination shall be deemed to take place where the contract of service is ended by the employer with notice. In addition to this, Section 68(1) of the Act stipulates that in any claim arising out of termination the employer shall prove the reason or reasons for the dismissal. When the employer fails to do so, the dismissal shall be deemed to have been unfair. This provision applies to an employer who wishes to terminate less than 10 people. Where an employer wishes to terminate more than 10 people, he or she should comply with the Section 81 of the same law.

The procedure for collective termination as laid out in Section 81(1) of the Act. It provides that where an employer is contemplating termination of not less than ten employees over a period of not more than three months for reasons of an economic, technological, structural or similar nature, he or she shall (a) notify representatives of the labour union with the relevant information [as prescribed] at least four work days

before the first terminations takes effect unless the employer is hindered from giving notice depending on the reason for that termination and [b] notify the Commissioner in writing of the reasons for the terminations, the number and categories of workers likely to be affected and the period over which the terminations are intended to be carried out. The different modes can be utilized by different categories of employers. However, the two strategies require the employer to provide the employee with notice of the termination indicating the reason and pay to the employee their entitlements under the Act. The employees will be entitled to unpaid salary, payment for accrued leave not taken, payment in lieu of notice in case the company does not intend for the employees to continue working during the notice period. The question that we need to ask ourselves is whether it was really practicable to fulfill all these laid down requirements in the prevailing Covid-19 circumstances in Uganda.

3.3 Gaps in the Workers Compensation Act [Chapter 225, 2000]

One aspect of this law is the unresolved loss of life due to Covid-19. Under the Workers Compensation Act, an employee is entitled to compensation for any personal injury resulting from an accident arising out of and in the course of his employment. However, it remains unsettled as to whether death of an essential employee who suffers Covid-19 complications can be treated as death in the course of employment. According to section 3(1) of the Act, an employer is liable for personal injuries sustained by accident if they arise out of or in the course of the worker's employment. Subsection 2 of the same law is to the effect that the employer's liability does not extend to an injury which does not either result in permanent incapacity, or incapacitate the worker for at least three consecutive days from earning full wages at the work at which he or she is or was employed.

Under the Workers Compensation Act, an act done out of and in the course of employment to qualify for accident compensation is when (a) a worker acts to protect any person on the employer's premises whom the worker believes to be injured or imperiled and (b) personal injury by accident arising while the employee is travelling directly to or from his or her place of work for purposes of employment. Apparently in Uganda, personnel providing essential services especially those in the hospitality industry were allowed to continue working even with the probable risks associated with

the coronavirus. It is possible that such people especially the waiters and receptionists were exposed to the virus which could spread to other family members leading to loss of lives. While the period of sickness can be treated as sick leave under section 55 of the Employment Act, the question of loss of life an employee still remains unresolved by the Workers Compensation Act, 2000.

3.4 Gap in Occupational Safety and Health Act [OHS] 2006]

One aspect of this law is the vagueness of OHS, especially regarding Covid-19. Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act, employers have a legal obligation to ensure the safety, health and welfare at work of their employees. This law also includes all employees employed in Uganda's tourism industry. Section 13(2) (d) of the Act provides that it is the responsibility of an employer's control to ensure the maintenance of the work place in a condition that is safe and without risks to health. Section 13(2) (e) of the law requires an employer to ensure the provision and maintenance of a working environment for the workers. This is as far as is reasonably practicable, safe, without risk to health and which is adequate regarding facilities and arrangements for the welfare of workers at work. To fulfill their statutory obligation under OSH, employers have a duty to get their work places ready for Covid-19 by providing the recommended sanitation measures to minimize risk of exposure by their employees. According to the World Health Organisation [WHO] guidelines on getting your workplace ready for Covid-19, employers are to ensure that their workplaces are clean and hygienic, surfaces [e.g. desks and tables] and objects including telephones, keyboards are to be regularly wiped with disinfectants, promote regular and thorough hand-washing among others. However, it is still unclear whether the employer's obligation to ensure that his or her employees, more especially those in Uganda's tourism industry, work under safe and healthy conditions extends to the coronavirus. It exhibits unique aspects and is said to spread not just by sneezes or coughs, but also by talking, or possibly even just breathing close to another person.

4.0 IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON EMPLOYMENT IN UGANDA'S TOURISM INDUSTRY

4.1 Remote Working Challenge Presented by COVID-19

As a means of practicing social distancing in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, Uganda's employers encouraged their employees to work from home. The traditional office is defined by a physical facility housing work teams to facilitate coordination of activities. This necessitates that team players must each move from their places of abode to congregate in one place and execute their jobs from there. It is important to note that the concept of remote working is fairly new and has not taken root in Uganda's employment sector [Douglas Broom, 2020] In other words, most employees have been working from home for the first time. This means that they have to figure out how to task in a new environment that may not lend itself to productivity. Employers too are not in position to provide the necessary tools [computers, laptops and internet connections] to all their employees to facilitate their remote working. They are also not able to monitor productivity when the employee is working from the comfort of their homes. Experts on remote working suggest that the key to successful remote working is self-discipline. This requires setting and following a work routine. There should be clear guidelines defined within an organisation's working policies specifying tools and strategies for successfully executing work roles outside office. There should be clear and concise communication between the employer and employee.

Uganda's labour force is accustomed to working in close proximity with their employers which usually makes communication easy and effortless. Remote working therefore possesses challenges concerning communication breakdown because employees are working in a very unstructured manner. Remote working only favours employees in formal employment who can easily access and apply digital tools and technology. These are not available to informal sector workers. It should be noted that according to the 2017 National Labour Force Survey, only 19.5 per cent of the labour force in Uganda are in formal employment while 74.8 per cent are self-employed. Moreover, the nature of work also done by informal sector workers cannot be performed from home. As such, people working in Uganda's tourism industry such as waiters, receptionists among others may not be able to perform their tasks from home.

4.2 Restrictions on Public Transport Due to COVID-19

Restrictions on public transport due to Covid-19 crippled the informal sector workers of the hospitality industry. As soon as Uganda confirmed 14 Covid-19

cases, the use of buses, taxis, and boda bodas [mini-buses] among other public means of transport was suspended in order to curtail the spread of the deadly Covid-19 virus. Whereas the restrictions are inevitable in the fight against the pandemic, banning public transport further crippled the informal sector because workers in the informal sector largely depend on public transport where prices are fair and affordable. Even those who could have requested for a pick-up from a family member, friend or neighbor, the private vehicles were limited to three passengers including the driver. It is important to note that these categories of workers are surviving hand-to-mouth. Thus a prohibition on public transport means taking away their source of livelihood. Further, the prohibition directly affected people working in the tourism transport sector whose livelihood and survival depends on the number of trips made in a day [UNDP, 2020].

4.3 The Pandemic and the Unprecedented Job Losses in Uganda's Tourism Industry.

The measures restricting international travel, closure of schools, suspension of public, social and religious gatherings directly affected employers operating businesses of that nature. People working in the aviation, tourism and hotel businesses were terminated because their employers were not making any profits due to a lack of customers. While it appears that the tourism and hotel sectors have been hit hard by the restrictions imposed so far, all sectors in Uganda's economy have also been affected in as far as sustaining employees and smooth operations are concerned. For instance, the suspension of public transport left most workers regardless of the distance between their homes and workplaces with no option but to walk to work. Some employers, more especially those in Uganda's tourism industry, had no option but to layoff workers because of their inability to fulfill salary obligations during the current Covid-19 pandemic [PLA-Uganda, 2020].

4.4 Frustrations Caused by COVID-19

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Ugandan Government experienced frustration in its attempts to reduce unemployment levels in the country, especially in the hospitality and leisure industry. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics [2018], the national unemployment rate in Uganda stands at 9.7 per cent. It is particularly highest among youth at 11 per cent. The Government of Uganda has over the years implemented a number of interventions and measures to curb the

unemployment problem especially among young people. These interventions and initiatives include the Youth Livelihood Program [YLP], Skilling Uganda, etc. They are temporary measures to curb the ever growing unemployment challenges in the country. The outbreak of COVID-19 resulted into suspension of some of these strategies that are aimed at addressing unemployment challenges. Subsequently, the measures taken to control the spread of the pandemic continuously affected many of the strategies put in place by the Government. According to economists, the pandemic has already resulted into the downsizing of workforce at the different work places and in the different sectors. The tourism sector which constitutes 7.7 per cent of the country's GDP and employs close to 700,000 people has already registered the pandemic's effects on employment. According to PLA records for the two weeks of March, 2020, a total of 50 cases had been registered reporting claims of unfair termination and lay off by their employers [PLA-Uganda, 2020].

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

It is no news that Covid-19 has rapidly spread across the world with the World Health Organisation reporting millions of deaths globally. Covid-19 [and the lockdown] had far-reaching implications on the employment relationship not only in Uganda but also across the globe. In Uganda, the pandemic caused the Government to order a country wide lockdown leading to shedding off jobs. As a result, incomes have been reduced, especially in the country's tourism industry. Moreover, Uganda has an extensive legal regime in regard to employment. As this article points out, this regime has been laid bare by the emergence of Covid-19 exposing the gaps in the current laws. What needs to be done at this point in time is for the Ugandan Government to come out whole heartedly and initiate immediate amendments in Parliament so as to address the glaring gaps that have been exposed in the wake of the emergence of Covid-19 on Uganda's employment laws.

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