

Effects of Transfrontier Conservation Area Public Tourism Policies on Destination Marketing and Management: A Critical Realist Investigation of Private Sector Perspectives in Zambia's KAZA TFCA

Dr. Ephraim Kaang'andu Belemu

Africa Research University

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ABSTRACT

Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) have emerged as significant instruments for promoting sustainable tourism and regional integration in Southern Africa. However, the effects of TFCA public tourism policies on destination marketing and management remain insufficiently understood, particularly from the perspective of private sector stakeholders. This research gap persists despite the critical role of private sector operators in delivering destination brand promises and managing competitive tourism experiences. This study investigated the impact of TFCA public tourism policies on destination marketing and management in Zambia's Kavango-Zambezi (KAZA) TFCA, employing a critical realist (CR) philosophical framework combined with grounded theory and retroductive analysis. A qualitatively driven case study was conducted in the Livingstone tourism development area, collecting data from 30 private-sector stakeholders through semi-structured interviews and strategic document analysis. Data analysis utilised grounded theory for theory building, thematic analysis for pattern identification, and retroduction to uncover underlying causal mechanisms. The findings reveal that TFCA policies significantly impact destination marketing and management through four underlying mechanisms: power dynamics, institutional inertia, resource constraints, and limited stakeholder engagement. These mechanisms operate on deep structures—including existing policy frameworks, economic systems, and social norms—to produce observable outcomes such as stakeholder conflicts, resistance to change, inequitable benefit distribution, limited infrastructure development, and inefficient policy implementation. The study contributes a context-specific framework for private sector involvement in TFCA public tourism policy-making and strategic agenda-setting. Theoretical contributions include advancing the application of critical realism in tourism policy research beyond its traditional positivist and interpretivist foundations, and demonstrating the utility of mechanism-based explanations for understanding complex multi-stakeholder policy environments. Practical implications emphasise the necessity of collaborative governance, context-sensitive policies, enhanced stakeholder engagement, and adaptive management strategies for successful TFCA implementation and sustainability.

Keywords: Transfrontier Conservation Areas; KAZA TFCA; Tourism Public Policy; Destination Marketing and Management; Critical Realism; Private Sector Policy Subsystems; Mechanism-Based Explanations; Collaborative Governance

INTRODUCTION

The travel and tourism industry has become a central contemporary public policy theme in numerous countries, primarily due to its significant economic contributions, including job creation, foreign exchange earnings, multiplier effects across various sectors, and catalyst effects for regional development (Mazumder et al., 2011; Pike & Page, 2014; UNWTO, 2021). In Zambia, tourism is strategically prioritised for economic diversification away from reliance on mining and has been reclassified from a social to an economic sector (Ministry of Tourism [MOT], 2015, 2018). One significant public tourism policy initiative has been Zambia's participation in Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) framework.

Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) are large ecological regions straddling the boundaries of two or more countries, encompassing protected areas and multiple-use zones (SADC, 2011). The concept recognises joint management of shared natural resources across international boundaries and envisions sustainable conservation and utilisation. Zambia participates in three TFCAs: the Kavango-Zambezi TFCA (KAZA TFCA) with Angola, Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe; the Lower Zambezi-Mana Pools TFCA with Zimbabwe; and the Malawi-Zambia TFCA with Malawi. The KAZA TFCA, established through a 2011 treaty signed by Heads of State, covers approximately 520,000 square kilometres and represents one of the world's most significant conservation initiatives (SADC, 2011), encompassing several of Zambia's prime tourism assets: the Victoria Falls (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), Kafue National Park, Liuwa Plain National Park, and various safari lodges and adventure activities. Key policy commitments under the KAZA Treaty include engaging private-sector operators and harmonising the policy and legal frameworks of partner states.

Research Problem and Justification

Tourism destinations represent intricate social systems characterised by multiple stakeholders with diverse interests, open system dynamics, and nonlinear interactions (Baggio, 2013; Reinhold et al., 2015). This complexity creates what scholars term 'wicked problems'—policy situations featuring intractable conflicts, divergent stakeholder viewpoints, and uncertainty regarding consequences (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Head & Alford, 2015). Despite the KAZA TFCA Treaty's explicit commitment to engaging the private sector, and despite scholarly recognition of the private sector's criticality in destination marketing and management, research investigating the impact of TFCA public tourism policies from the private sector perspective remains limited and inadequately documented in Zambia.

This research gap is particularly significant because: (1) Private sector stakeholders are responsible for operational delivery of destination brand promises and must navigate complex regulatory and governance environments; (2) The effectiveness of TFCA public policies ultimately depends on private sector adoption, compliance, and collaborative engagement; (3) Policy resistance and implementation failures often originate from misalignment between public policy design and private sector realities; and (4) Understanding private sector perspectives is essential for developing contextually sensitive policies that achieve both conservation and sustainable tourism development objectives.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the mechanisms through which TFCA public tourism policies influence private sector stakeholder behaviour, outcomes, and participation in destination marketing and management—thereby providing an evidence base for improving policy effectiveness and collaborative governance in transfrontier conservation contexts.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to: (1) describe from the private sector policy subsystems' perspective the influences of TFCA public tourism policies on destination marketing and management; (2) explain the effects of these policies through identification of underlying causal mechanisms and the deep structures that generate them; and (3) develop a context-specific, evidence-based framework for private sector involvement in TFCA public tourism policy-making and strategic agenda-setting in Zambia, with applicability considerations for other transfrontier conservation contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism Public Policy and Destination Competitiveness

Scholarly discourse widely acknowledges that public tourism policy and effective destination marketing and management are determinant factors of destination competitiveness (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Pike, 2008; Martínez et al., 2014). Public policy improves tourism product offerings through measures that enhance development and quality, while the actual delivery of the destination brand promise is accomplished by stakeholders, including the private sector (Pike & Page, 2014). This interdependence reveals a critical theoretical proposition: policy congruence between public and private sectors is essential to avoid policy resistance or

unintended consequences. In transfrontier conservation contexts, this principle becomes even more complex, as policies must simultaneously address conservation objectives, economic development goals, and coordination across multiple sovereign jurisdictions.

Tourism Destination Systems Complexity

Contemporary literature conceptualises tourism destinations as multifaceted and structurally complex adaptive systems rather than mere amalgams of tourism products (Baggio, 2008; Reinhold et al., 2015). These systems exhibit characteristics including openness to external influences, nonlinear behaviour, limited functional decomposability, adaptive behaviour, and non-deterministic dynamics (Heylighen et al., 2006). Tourism destinations feature multiple stakeholders with varied interests, making policy environments susceptible to what Sterman (2000) terms 'policy resistance'—the tendency to delay, dilute, or defeat responses to policy interventions. This resistance manifests as stakeholder conflicts, implementation delays, and divergence between intended and actual policy outcomes.

Policy Subsystems and Meta-Governance

The consideration of policy subsystems has evolved from positivist to post-positivist perspectives (Howlett & Ramesh, 1998). Policy subsystems, including private sector operators, constitute discourse coalitions that transcend traditional agent-structure dichotomies. In tourism destinations, private-sector operators constitute prominent policy subsystems because destination brand delivery relies heavily on them (Mazanec & Strasser, 2007; Beritelli et al., 2014). Meta-governance—the governance of governance processes—has gained acceptance in tourism studies, recognising the need to reconceptualise the appropriate roles of government and non-government actors (Amore & Hall, 2016). This study adopts a meta-governance perspective, viewing governance as interactions among government, public bodies, private sector, and civil society institutions aimed at addressing societal problems and creating opportunities (Meuleman, 2008).

Critical Realism as a Framework for Policy Research

Critical realism (CR), originating from Bhaskar's philosophical work (1975, 2013), provides a distinct framework for investigating complex social phenomena by uncovering underlying causal mechanisms and structures. CR is particularly suited to policy research because it explicitly recognises that observable policy outcomes result from the operation of underlying generative mechanisms operating within specific contexts. This approach moves beyond empiricist approaches that treat observable events as primary, and interpretivist approaches that rely solely on subjective meaning-making, toward what Archer (1995) terms 'critical morphogenesis'—understanding how structures shape agency while agents modify structures.

CR posits a stratified ontology comprising three domains: the empirical (observable events), the actual (events regardless of observation), and the real (underlying mechanisms and structures generating events). The theory combines ontological realism with epistemological relativism, acknowledging that while objective reality exists, knowledge of it remains partial and provisional (Bhaskar, 2008). Crucially for tourism policy research, CR provides tools for retrodution—a reasoning process that moves from descriptions of observed phenomena to inferences about generative mechanisms and the conditions under which they operate (Tsoukas, 2006).

Previous applications of CR in tourism research (Scott, 2011; Mingers, 2011) have focused primarily on organisational issues and market dynamics. This study advances CR application by extending it to policy analysis in complex transfrontier conservation contexts. By integrating CR with grounded theory and conducting retroductive analysis, the study demonstrates how mechanism-based explanations can illuminate why private sector stakeholders experience particular policy constraints and opportunities, and why certain interventions succeed or fail in generating intended outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy and Design

This study employed a critical realist philosophical framework to understand the underlying causal mechanisms and structures of TFCA public policy that produce observable effects on destination marketing and management. The research design was a qualitatively driven single-case study, appropriate for CR-based abductive explanatory research and theory building (Tsoukas, 1989; Avenier & Thomas, 2015).

The study integrated three scientific logics of reasoning (Svennevig, 1997; Edwards et al., 2014): (1) Abduction—re-describing observable phenomena in abstract theoretical terms; (2) Retroduction—identifying mechanisms and contexts that explain observations; and (3) Functional pragmatism—developing practical solutions grounded in the causal analysis. This methodological integration is novel in tourism policy research and demonstrates the complementarity of CR with grounded theory approaches (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Study Site and Sampling

The case study was conducted in the Livingstone tourism development area within Zambia's portion of the KAZA TFCA. Livingstone was selected through critical case sampling as Zambia's tourist capital, featuring well-developed tourism products, proximity to the Victoria Falls, and position as the primary entry point for international leisure visitors to the KAZA TFCA. The selection ensures relevance to policy implementation and provides sufficient policy complexity for mechanism identification.

Thirty private sector stakeholders were selected through purposive snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria required: (1) in-depth knowledge of the tourism industry and KAZA TFCA; (2) at least ten years of operating experience in Livingstone; (3) active involvement in destination marketing or management; and (4) capacity for reflexive discussion of policy experiences. Initial seed participants were selected from the Livingstone Tourism Association and Africa's Eden, who subsequently referred additional participants. This approach ensured diversity of stakeholder types while maintaining connection to those most affected by TFCA policies.

Data Collection and Multi-Method Analysis

Primary data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted at respondents' premises in July 2024. Interviews were electronically recorded and supplemented with researcher notes. Secondary data was obtained through systematic document analysis of government policy documents, KAZA TFCA materials, Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) strategic documents, parliamentary records, and academic literature.

Data analysis employed four integrated methods: (1) Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) for simultaneous theory development with data collection; (2) Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide for identifying patterns; (3) Contextual analysis for examining documents within broader social, economic, historical and political contexts; and (4) Retroduction (Bhaskar, 2008) for systematically inferring underlying mechanisms and deep structures. This integration is methodologically novel and demonstrates how CR-informed policy analysis operationalises mechanism identification through multiple analytical lenses.

RESULTS

Policy Events Shaping TFCA Implementation

The study identified three categories of efficacious public policy events affecting destination marketing and management. The critical event was the signing of the KAZA TFCA Treaty in 2006, establishing cooperation among the five partner states. This was followed by trigger events categorised as: (1) Governance events—including the establishment of the KAZA Secretariat in 2009, development of the Regional Tourism Strategy in 2010, and creation of the Joint Management Committee in 2012; (2) Economic events—including investments in tourism infrastructure, launch of the KAZA Tourism Marketing Campaign in 2015, and introduction of the

KAZA Uni-Visa in 2014. The catalytic event was the implementation of the Community-Based Natural Resource Management Programme in 2015, which accelerated policy effects by empowering local communities and creating new stakeholder engagement channels.

Private Sector Challenges and Opportunities

Four significant challenges were identified from the private sector perspective:

Regulatory Complexities (80% of respondents): Unclear policies, overlapping jurisdictions, bureaucratic inefficiencies. Respondents struggled to navigate multiple layers of regulations, permits, and licenses. As one respondent stated: 'We struggle to navigate the multiple layers of regulations, permits, and licenses required to operate in the KAZA TFCA, with different requirements from national, provincial, and TFCA authorities creating confusion and compliance costs.'

Funding Constraints (75% of respondents): Limited access to financing compared to operators in adjacent destinations, constraining expansion and innovation

Limited Stakeholder Engagement (70% of respondents): Insufficient consultation in policy-making processes, creating misalignment between policies and stakeholder realities

Infrastructure Limitations (65% of respondents): Constraints on competitiveness including transportation, accommodation, and tourism product development

Opportunities identified included: (1) Growing demand for tourism products within the KAZA TFCA; (2) Possibilities for product diversification and market expansion; (3) Partnership opportunities with stakeholders across the TFCA; (4) Potential for innovation in destination marketing through regional cooperation; and (5) Access to new market segments through the KAZA Uni-Visa and regional marketing initiatives.

Observable Policy Outcomes

Five observable outcomes emerged from the interaction of policy events, challenges, and contextual factors: (1) Stakeholder conflicts arising from differing interests, unequal power distribution, and competing priorities between government agencies, private operators, and international organisations; (2) Resistance to change among some stakeholders opposing new policies and management practices due to entrenched interests, sunk costs, and distrust of policy intentions; (3) Inequitable benefit distribution, with tourism revenue, job creation, and infrastructure development unevenly allocated among stakeholders, creating resentment and disengagement; (4) Limited infrastructure development on the Zambian side due to resource constraints, bureaucratic delays, and coordination challenges across TFCA partners; and (5) Inefficient policy implementation manifested in inadequate enforcement, absence of effective management plans, and divergence between policy intent and actual outcomes.

Underlying Causal Mechanisms and Deep Structures

Through systematic retrodiction, four underlying mechanisms were identified that shape policy outcomes:

Power Dynamics: Power asymmetries among government, private sector, international organisations, and communities influence policy decisions, agenda-setting, and benefit distribution. These dynamics lead to inequitable benefit distribution, marginalisation of private sector voice, and stakeholder conflicts.

Institutional Inertia: Existing policies, regulations, and institutional arrangements constrain innovation and policy adaptation. This generates resistance to change, implementation inefficiencies, and path-dependency in policy responses.

Resource Constraints: Limited financial, human, technological, and information resources hinder policy implementation, infrastructure development, stakeholder capacity building, and adaptive management.

Limited Stakeholder Engagement: Insufficient participation of private sector subsystems in policy development processes exacerbates conflicts, undermines policy effectiveness, and produces misaligned policies that fail to address stakeholder realities.

Five deep structures were identified on which these mechanisms operate:

- Policy frameworks (often unclear or ineffective)
- Economic systems (including market structures, access to financing, and regional economic asymmetries)
- Social norms (encompassing industry standards, benefit-sharing arrangements, and leadership practices)
- Institutional capacity (reflecting government agency effectiveness, coordination capacity, and technical expertise)
- Physical infrastructure (transportation, accommodation, tourism product availability)

The production of effects by underlying mechanisms is contingent upon contextual factors: (1) Colonial legacy and its effects on governance structures and property relations; (2) Regional integration through SADC creating both opportunities and coordination challenges; (3) Zambia's post-independence development trajectory and relative economic position within KAZA; (4) Centralised government structure affecting policy implementation and stakeholder empowerment; (5) Existing tourism policy frameworks and their evolution; (6) Shifting government priorities affecting resource allocation; and (7) International relations among KAZA member states affecting transboundary cooperation.

TFCA Private Sector Engagement Framework

Based on the findings, a context-specific framework was developed for involving the private sector in TFCA public tourism policy-making. The framework's objective is to ensure effective collaboration between public and private sectors in developing and implementing TFCA tourism policies.

Framework Component	Details
OBJECTIVE	Ensure effective collaboration between public and private sectors in developing and implementing TFCA tourism policies
GUIDING PRINCIPLES	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inclusive Participation - Ensure comprehensive representation of all private sector actor types 2. Collaborative Decision-Making - Establish joint processes for policy development 3. Mutual Benefit-Sharing - Align policy benefits with stakeholder contributions 4. Context-Sensitive Policy-Making - Ground policies in local and regional realities 5. Sustainable Development - Integrate conservation and economic development objectives
ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular stakeholder forums (quarterly) • Public-private partnerships (PPPs) for infrastructure and marketing • Joint planning committees with formal authority • Capacity building programmes (technical and business)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative market research and tourism product development
KEY ACTORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government agencies (Tourism, Environment, Local Government) • Private sector (operators, hospitality, tour guides, entrepreneurs) • Industry associations (Livingstone Tourism Association, etc.) • Local communities and customary leaders • International organisations (UNWTO, IUCN, regional bodies)
FIVE-STEP DEVELOPMENT PROCESS	POLICY
	<p>Step 1: Stakeholder Identification - Map all private sector actor types</p> <p>Step 2: Policy-Making Process - Systematic process from situation analysis to implementation</p> <p>Step 3: Strategic Agenda Setting - Prioritize objectives aligned with stakeholder needs</p> <p>Step 4: Capacity Building - Provide training, technical assistance, and incentives</p> <p>Step 5: Monitoring & Evaluation - Track performance and enable adaptive management</p>
IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP	<p>Short-term (0-12 months): Establish stakeholder forum, conduct situation analysis</p> <p>Medium-term (13-24 months): Develop implementation plans, establish PPPs, provide capacity building</p> <p>Long-term (24+ months): Monitor effectiveness, adjust policies, scale successful initiatives</p>
TFCA-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transboundary conservation and management requirements • Community-based tourism initiatives linked to conservation • Cross-border coordination mechanisms with KAZA partners • Sustainable tourism and environmental conservation imperatives • Regional coordination of marketing and infrastructure development

DISCUSSION

Policy Mechanisms and Destination Competitiveness

The findings demonstrate that TFCA public tourism policies significantly impact destination marketing and management through complex causal pathways operating across multiple structural levels. The identification of power dynamics, institutional inertia, resource constraints, and limited stakeholder engagement as underlying mechanisms aligns with broader literature on policy effectiveness and governance challenges (Giddens, 1984; North, 1990; Jessop, 2016). However, this study advances theory by showing how these mechanisms specifically manifest in transfrontier conservation contexts and how they interact with deep structures to produce divergent outcomes.

Advancing Critical Realist Application in Tourism Research

The critical realist approach proved valuable for uncovering generative mechanisms underlying observable events. This advances calls for mechanism-based explanations in social science research (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998) and demonstrates the utility of CR for investigating complex tourism policy environments. Critically, the integration of CR with grounded theory and retroductive analysis operationalises a novel methodology not extensively employed in tourism studies. By using retrodution to move from observable policy outcomes to inferences about underlying mechanisms and the contextual conditions enabling them, the study demonstrates how CR provides superior explanatory depth compared to purely positivist (focused on empirical regularities) or interpretivist (focused on subjective meaning) approaches.

This methodological contribution has implications beyond TFCA research: mechanism-based explanations can illuminate complex policy challenges wherever multiple stakeholders with divergent interests interact within institutionally constrained environments.

Private Sector Engagement and Policy Effectiveness

The finding that 70% of respondents reported limited stakeholder engagement confirms scholarly arguments regarding the importance of involving non-government actors in tourism governance (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007; Jenkins et al., 2014). The private sector's concerns about regulatory complexities and funding constraints underscore the necessity of collaborative governance approaches aligned with meta-governance perspectives (Amore & Hall, 2016). This research extends meta-governance theory by showing how its principles should operationalise throughout the policy cycle—from agenda-setting to implementation to monitoring—rather than being treated as isolated engagement events.

Understanding Policy Resistance in Complex Systems

The study's findings support conceptualizations of tourism destinations as complex adaptive systems subject to multiple external influences (Pike & Page, 2014; Reinhold et al., 2015). The observed outcomes—stakeholder conflicts, resistance to change, and inefficient policy implementation—exemplify what Sterman (2000) describes as policy resistance in complex systems, where well-intentioned interventions may be delayed, diluted, or defeated by system responses. By identifying the underlying mechanisms generating resistance, this research provides a pathway to designing interventions that account for how systems resist policy changes, rather than treating resistance as an implementation failure.

Historical and Geographic Context in Policy Analysis

The contextual factors identified—particularly colonial legacy and centralised government structures—highlight the importance of historically and geographically situated analyses. This resonates with arguments for context-sensitive policy-making in tourism (Hall, 2019; Timothy, 2019) and extends them by specifying how historical-institutional contexts shape the mechanisms through which contemporary policies operate. Understanding that Zambia's centralised governance structure, inherited policy frameworks, and relative economic position within KAZA all shape how TFCA policies are experienced by private sector stakeholders provides essential grounding for policy design.

Implementation Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

Advancing from framework design to implementation requires explicitly addressing predictable challenges:

Challenge	Root Causes	Mitigation Strategy
Political Resistance to Private Sector Involvement	Government fears loss of policy control; history of state-led approaches; resource competition	Establish formal MOUs with clear role definitions; Demonstrate private sector commitment through pilot projects; Build

		government capacity for collaborative governance
Budget Constraints for New Coordination Structures	Limited government budgets; competing fiscal priorities; private sector reluctance to fund coordination	Phase implementation over 3+ years; Leverage PPP mechanisms and donor support; Link coordination costs to efficiency gains and revenue increases
Institutional Capacity Limitations	Understaffing in key agencies; limited technical expertise; coordination capacity constraints	Develop government capacity through targeted training; Deploy technical assistance from international partners; Create dedicated coordination secretariat
Private Sector Coordination Challenges	Competitive relationships among operators; historical fragmentation; different business models and scales	Establish industry association leadership role; Create competitive rules ensuring fair participation; Develop common interest framing around market expansion
Transboundary Coordination Complexity	Different national policies; sovereignty concerns; weak KAZA Secretariat enforcement capacity	Develop bilateral agreements between Zambia and key KAZA partners; Focus initially on Livingstone cluster before wider coordination; Build technical capacity at KAZA Secretariat

Key Performance Indicators for Framework Implementation

Effective implementation requires measurement of progress. Recommended KPIs include:

Dimension	Key Performance Indicator	Target (Year 2-3)
Stakeholder Engagement	% of private sector stakeholders participating in coordination forums	≥70%
Inclusive Participation	Representation across operator types (budget, mid-range, luxury)	≥3 operator types with leadership roles
Policy Development	# of policies co-developed with private sector input	≥3 policies
Collaborative Governance	# of functional public-private partnerships	≥2 operational PPPs
Regulatory Alignment	Reduction in reported regulatory complexity concerns	50% reduction from baseline
Benefit Distribution	% increase in private sector access to TFCA financing	≥30% increase

Infrastructure Development	# of new tourism infrastructure projects initiated through framework	≥3 projects
Market Competitiveness	Growth in regional tourism product innovation	≥5 new products
Capacity Development	# of stakeholders completing capacity-building programmes	≥50 participants
Policy Implementation	Reduction in policy implementation delays	50% reduction in average implementation timeline

Applicability to Other TFCA and Conservation Contexts

While the framework is grounded in the Livingstone context, several elements generalise to other TFCAs and transfrontier conservation areas:

Context-Specific Applicability: The mechanisms identified (power dynamics, institutional inertia, resource constraints, limited engagement) operate in other TFCA contexts. The Lower Zambezi-Mana Pools TFCA and Malawi-Zambia TFCA share similar governance structures, private sector characteristics, and conservation objectives as KAZA, suggesting framework applicability. However, each TFCA has distinct: (1) tourism market maturity; (2) stakeholder power structures; (3) institutional capacity; and (4) conservation pressures. Framework implementation must be adapted to these specific contexts.

Boundary Conditions: The framework is most applicable to TFCAs where: (1) private sector tourism operators constitute significant economic stakeholders; (2) destination marketing and management are priorities; (3) government willingness to engage private sector exists; and (4) institutional coordination capacity can be developed. It may require modification in contexts with weak private sector capacity, absence of tourism tradition, or government resistance to private sector engagement.

Transferable Elements: The five-step policy development process, engagement mechanism types, and KPI approach are applicable across TFCAs. The specific implementation timelines, resource requirements, and priority mechanisms should be adapted based on contextual assessment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides a nuanced understanding of TFCA policy effectiveness by identifying the underlying mechanisms and deep structures shaping policy outcomes in Zambia's KAZA TFCA. The findings underscore that effective public tourism policies are crucial for promoting sustainable tourism development, but their success depends on addressing regulatory complexity, funding constraints, and deficiencies in stakeholder engagement. The critical realist approach successfully uncovered how multiple causal mechanisms operating on deep structures generate observable policy outcomes—an explanatory depth unavailable through purely positivist or interpretivist analyses.

Theoretical Contributions: The study advances critical realism application in tourism policy research beyond existing organisational and market-focused applications. It demonstrates how mechanism-based explanations illuminate complex multi-stakeholder policy environments and how retroductive analysis can identify the conditions under which mechanisms generate particular outcomes. This contributes to theory by showing how CR methodology operationalises in policy research contexts.

Empirical Contributions: The study contextualises policy effectiveness within Zambia and the Southern African region, providing evidence on specific challenges facing TFCA implementation and private sector perspectives on policy constraints and opportunities.

Methodological Contributions: The integration of critical realism with grounded theory, thematic analysis, and retroductive reasoning demonstrates a novel approach to tourism policy research that other scholars can adopt and adapt.

Practical Contributions: The proposed framework provides a structured, evidence-based tool for enhancing private sector involvement in TFCA policy development and implementation, with explicit guidance on engagement mechanisms, implementation roadmaps, performance measurement, and contextual adaptation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish a formal KAZA Tourism Private Sector Engagement Forum with quarterly meetings, dedicated secretariat support, and decision-making authority. This addresses the 70% of respondents identifying limited engagement as a critical constraint.
2. Develop integrated TFCA tourism policies that holistically address destination marketing and management while accommodating diverse stakeholder interests. Ensure policies explicitly address regulatory clarity, funding access, and infrastructure development—the three most frequently cited private sector constraints.
3. Implement the five-step policy development process for all future TFCA tourism policies affecting private sector operations. This ensures systematic stakeholder identification, participation throughout the cycle, and adaptive management.
4. Establish public-private partnerships for critical infrastructure development (accommodation, transportation, tourism product development) to address the 75% of respondents identifying funding constraints. Structure PPPs with clear benefit-sharing and risk-allocation mechanisms.
5. Develop and deliver capacity-building programmes targeting: (1) private sector stakeholders on collaborative governance and regional marketing; (2) government officials on stakeholder engagement and meta-governance; and (3) industry associations on coordination and representation.
6. Implement the recommended KPIs for framework monitoring. Conduct annual progress reviews with stakeholder forums, generating adaptive management adjustments based on evidence of effectiveness.
7. Conduct contextual assessments in other TFCAs (Lower Zambezi-Mana Pools, Malawi-Zambia) to identify mechanism-specific adaptations required for framework application in different conservation contexts.
8. Establish a regional tourism coordination committee with representatives from all KAZA member states to address transboundary policy alignment, harmonise regulations, and coordinate regional marketing initiatives.

Study Limitations and Future Research

This study's limitations include: (1) Focus on a single site (Livingstone) within the KAZA TFCA, potentially limiting generalisability to other TFCA regions with different tourism market maturity, infrastructure development, or government capacity; (2) Temporal limitation to a single data collection period (July 2024), providing a snapshot rather than longitudinal understanding of mechanism operation; (3) Deliberate focus on private sector perspectives, though a more comprehensive analysis would include government and community stakeholder perspectives equally.

Future research should: (1) Extend mechanism-based analysis to other TFCAs to identify context-specific variations in how mechanisms operate; (2) Investigate how public policies specifically influence private sector investment decisions and innovation in TFCA contexts; (3) Conduct comparative studies of policy frameworks across KAZA member states to identify policy harmonisation opportunities and mutual learning; (4) Implement longitudinal studies tracking framework effectiveness and adaptive management over 3-5 year implementation periods; (5) Develop quantitative measurement tools for mechanism operation, building on the qualitative foundations established here.

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