**RESIDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF EMPOWERMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE ERA OF COVID-19 IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*Residents’ empowerment, aimed at improving their standard of living, perceptions and support for tourism, is well highlighted in the literature. Such empowerment, support and positive perceptions can be through participation in planning, decision-making or sharing of benefits, which are crucial for sustainable tourism development. Whilst that is the case, there is limited research to understand residents’ perceptions of empowerment and recovery from a pandemic, such as the COVID-19, which is a global menace. This research was conducted to understand whether and how COVID-19 influenced or can influence the perceptions of residents from selected communities in Enugu State of Southeastern Nigeria towards tourism, and how they can be empowered to participate in the industry in the COVID-19 era towards achieving sustainable development. Following a case study approach the research employed semi-structured interviews to interact with 30 participants from different age brackets. The findings show that the perceptions of older participants were influenced negatively by COVID-19 as they were more prone to contracting the virus and more concerned about survival. The participants identified vigorous health awareness creation, more government support and vaccination as ways to improve their perceptions towards tourists and tourism. The paper concludes that COVID-19 has offered Nigerian tourism stakeholders the opportunity to re-evaluate efforts made towards sustainable tourism development.*

**Keywords: Residents’ perceptions, Empowerment, Sustainable tourism development, Southeastern Nigeria, COVID-19 pandemic**

# **INTRODUCTION**

Residents are central to tourism planning, development and sustainability. This realization has raised more awareness among tourism researchers to understand how and why residents perceive and respond to tourism the way they do. This could explain why research focused on residents’ perceptions, attitudes and empowerment is one of the most discussed topic area (Cordero, 2008; Nunkoo, Smith & Ramkissoon, 2013). Findings have shown that residents need to be at the centre of tourism planning and decision-making to increase the chances of sustainability, explaining why their expectations and concerns should guide the process (Franzidis & Yau, 2018; Ramseook-Munhurrun and Naidoo, 2011). Sustainability is not new in the tourism literature (Mihalic, 2016; Mundt, 2011), it has raised the advocacy for more responsible ways of approaching development. A good way to support sustainable tourism is through community participation (Cole, 2006; Eyisi, Lee & Trees, 2021; Tosun, 2000). Muganda, Sirima & Ezra (2013) had earlier noted that implementing community participation is by allowing them to share in tourism benefits and to take part in decision-making. This explains why Tosun (2000) noted that the end product of community involvement in tourism should be empowerment, where local people are placed in a position to take control of tourism development and decide how it should be approached to improve their wellbeing.

The idea of residents’ empowerment involves improving their capacity to make more informed decisions about their lifestyle and placing them in a position to lead and manage tourism. Aghazamani and Hunt (2017) noted that empowerment as an area of discourse in tourism and development has a long history in the social sciences, covering disciplines such as tourism, economies, education, political science, psychology and management. Hu, He and Hu (2022) established a connection between community participation and empowerment, noting that without the latter, the former will lose its significance. For Scheyvens and van derWatt (2021), empowerment is very vital in sustainable development as it helps to achieve social, economic and environmental goals. Few scholars such as Aleshinloye, Woosnam, Tasci and Ramkissoon (2022) also extended the discussion of resident empowerment in tourism to the psychological dimension, noting that residents have strong attachment and value for their place as a means of identity.

That said, research to understand residents’ perceptions of empowerment in tourism and their recovery from a typical pandemic such as COVID-19 is still limited and needs to be explored. The reason is that COVID-19, which started in 2019 and became a pandemic in 2020, has been unprecedented and affected the economies of many countries of the world. Specifically, it affected tourism the most as a result of the closure of international and national borders, implementation of social distancing, compulsory wearing of face mask, closure of businesses, including hotels, entertainment centres, schools and airports. These measures resulted in untold hardship, especially in many countries within the emerging economies. The measures, while curbing the spread of the virus, also hampered tourism development. Therefore, drawing from the background, it is important to explore how the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic might have affected residents’ perceptions toward sustainable tourism development and their feeling of empowerment towards the industry.

# **Background to COVID-19 Pandemic**

In December 2019, there was news of a virus outbreak in Wuhan, a city in the People’s Republic of China (Jamal & Budke, 2020; Zheng, Goh & Wen, 2020). The outbreak raised global health concerns and garnered worldwide media attention. Coronaviruses are viruses that attack humans and animals. In humans, the virus affects the respiratory system, manifesting with symptoms such as cold, fever, cough, tiredness and difficulty in breathing. COVID-19 is related to the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) that also originated from China in 2003 (Jamal & Budke, 2020). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization classified the outbreak as a pandemic (Wen, Aston, Liu & Ying, 2020; Ying, Wang, Liu, Wen & Goh, 2020). Brazil, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States of America are some of the most affected countries. In Africa, some of the worst hit countries are Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa and Tunisia. The first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was reported on 28th February 2020 when an Italian businessman arrived the country. With this news, many people were devastated by the closure of markets and restrictions on movements because they depend on commercial trading (Omeje, 2021).

Subsequently, the government took some measures and made these provisions:

1. Ten billion naira (about USD 24,000,000) grant to Lagos State, the epicentre of the outbreak;

2. Release of 5 billion Naira (about USD 12,000,000) special intervention funds to NCDC to equip, expand and provide personnel across the country;

3. Instruction to the Nigerian Air Force to make its fleet available to the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, to enable a better coordinated and effective response;

4. The closure of International airports and land borders to help put up policies, processes and infrastructure to cope with suspected and confirmed cases; and

5. Minimizing the negative impact of the pandemic on the livelihood of Nigerians

While these measures seemed pragmatic and proactive in minimizing the impacts of COVID-19 on her citizens, Nigerians complained that implementation was difficult. Reflective of previous attempts by the government to promote the wellbeing of her citizens, corruption, selfish politicians, and misappropriation of funds marred efforts to distribute palliatives (Ojogiwa & Akinola, 2020; Omeje, 2021). Reflections from these authors also suggested that the government’s responses to the COVID-19 outbreak were theoretically fantastic and grossly inappropriate because they exposed government’s level of insincerity and non-chalant attitude towards the plights of millions of Nigerians.

## **COVID-19 and Challenges of Sustainable Tourism**

Although the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism can be transformational in many countries (Ateljevic, 2020; Hall, Scott & Gossling, 2020), the downside is grievous. The pandemic impacted the global tourism industry severely because its activities involve people travelling from one place to another. This implies that the measures put in place – closure of borders, shutdown of airports, restaurants and entertainment centres and social distancing - to curb the spread of COVID-19 are antithetical to tourism development (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Flights were grounded, hotels closed, businesses were affected and tourists’ lifestyle adjusted (Niewiadomski, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). Besides, there has been an increase in racial discrimination that affected tourists and their preferred choices of destinations (Zheng et al., 2020). Ying et al. (2020) noted that some world leaders referred to COVID-19 as a ‘Chinese virus. Whilst the virus started in China, it is unethical to segregate against Chinese or people of Asian origin. Such racial remarks resulted in countries marginalizing the Chinese, leading to attacks in Australia, America, Italy, France and the United Kingdom (Zheng et al., 2020). Chinese businesses also experienced slow patronage in other countries. Wen et al. (2020) and Jamal and Budke (2020) added that Chinese and Asians are often maltreated at airports since the COVID-19 outbreak, while tourists returning from China are subjected to harsh testing.

The impact plummeted the economic value of the tourism industry and is likely to continue in the near future. In terms of Chinese tourism, Ying et al. (2020) reported that the industry would likely experience about $22 billion decline in Chinese outbound spending and 9 million inbound trips. They further highlighted that the global impact of COVID-19 could result in between 7 and 25 million fewer Chinese departures in 2020. The Australia Tourism and Transport Forum (2020) also estimated a reduction in international visitation down to 40% between January to June 2020, a loss of 1.8 million visitors and a decline in international receipts. The estimate also showed that tourism jobs will be affected, with staffing reduction of between 15% - 20% likely to occur, the net effect being an estimated reduction of 99,000 - 133,200 jobs. Lost salaries and wages economy could be between $3.9 billion to $5.3 billion. Statistics of the impacts of COVID-19 on Nigerian tourism showed that hotels and tourist sites are affected, with the country’s airline projected to lose USD 434 million, 2.2 million overseas-bound travellers and 22,000 jobs (Oyebade, 2020). The travel agencies could also lose millions of dollars in ticket booking. Oruonye and Ahmed (2020) reported that travel agencies in Nigeria generated about N335 billion naira (approximately USD 867 million) in 2019 and the revenue could go down by 25% in 2020 because of COVID-19. With over 2.5 million persons working in the country’s tourism sector, stakeholders called on the government for a tax holiday.

With these challenges resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak, concerned tourism stakeholders identified measures to revamp the industry. For instance, Jamal and Budke (2020) noted that whilst tourism researchers have called for pragmatic crisis management, countries are yet to find coordinated ways of implementing policies. The authors emphasized the need for the tourism and hospitality sector to develop a communicating strategy to make medical information available to hosts and guests to ensure their safety. There is also a need for cooperation between national and international bodies and public and private sectors to assist in awareness creation and recovery process, as some scholars believe that the pandemic has offered an opportunity for a reset (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Nepal, 2020) Another way of tackling the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic that has been identified by scholars is through vaccination and presentation of medical certificates and clearance to enable travellers move from one country to another (Gossling, Scott & Hall, 2021; Hall et al., 2020). This way, residents feel more comfortable and secured while receiving tourists. For instance, Dube (2022) noted that the emergence of COVID-19 vaccine has offered hope in the process of recovery, even though there are still resistance from religious bodies and human right activists. This study will not only explore residents’ perceptions of sustainable tourism during COVID-19 recovery, but also identify ways to ensure their empowerment and support for the industry. The research aims to answer this question: how has COVID-19 influence residents’ perceptions of tourism and how can they be empowered during recovery?

# **The Study Location**

The fieldwork for this research was conducted in Southeastern region of Nigeria, one of the six geopolitical zones in the country. The region is home to the Igbo people and comprises five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo (Eyisi et al., 2021; Nwaezeigwe, 2007; Ojiaku, 2015). Southeastern Nigeria is in the tropical region, with abundance of flora and fauna, which explains why the people are predominantly subsistence farmers and livestock keepers in addition to iron working, wood carving, bead and pottery making, arts and crafts and petty trading. The region is rich in cultural tradition and belief system in which the people’s cosmology are guided by the concept of reciprocity (Nwoye, 2011). This means that the Igbo people believe in appeasing the gods and showing appreciation for good fortunes that come from the higher gods and reaffirmation of their submission to such gods in anticipation of better days ahead. Such belief system is reflected in numerous cultural festivals such as new yam, title taking, Ofala, masquerade and coronation. Igbo society is male-dominated because men are allowed more freedom than women (Nwoye, 2011).

Within the study region, Enugu State was selected for further inquiry because it was one of the epicentres of COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria. Enugu State was also one of the few to establish a dedicated isolation centre during the COVID-19 crises and recorded high number of recovery and cure. The State is regarded as the administrative capital of Southeastern Nigeria because it has a long history. It attained township status in 1909 (Enugu State Vision 4, 2020) when coal was discovered by the British colonial masters. Enugu State has a landmass of about 8,000km2 and is located between latitudes 5° 55" and 7° 10" North and longitudes 6° 50" and 7° 55" East. It was formerly part of the current Anambra State (called old Anambra) before 1991 when Enugu State was carved out by the military government. Enugu State got its name from the hilly nature of the environment (Enu-Ugwu which means top of the hill). The State is bounded to the east by Ebonyi State, to the west by Anambra State, to the north by Kogi and Benue States and the south by Abia State. The National Bureau of Statistics (2018) placed the 2016 population of Enugu State at 4,411,119. Figure one is the map of Southeastern Nigeria showing the five major states.



**Figure 1.** MAP OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA SOWING THE FIVE IGBO STATES

Source: Okonkwo & Eyisi (2014).

# **METHODOLOGY**

This research adopts qualitative design which entails studying a group of people using a subjective approach to understand an aspect of their life that can help in addressing a research question. The fieldwork for this research lasted for two month and was conducted in Enugu metropolis, the location of the COVID-19 isolation centre established by the state government. During the fieldwork, the case study approach was used which involves selecting a particular group of people from a larger component. The case study approach is a method of empirical inquiry for studying a group of people within a real-life setting. The limitations of quantitative methods for supplying in-depth explanations of social problems led to the acceptance of the case study approach (Zainal, 2007). Ihuah and Eaton (2013) commented on the following characteristics of case study: 1. it focuses on in-depth rather than breadth; 2. the natural setting is the site for data collection; 3. it includes multiple sources and methods; and 4. the research is holistic. Using a case study approach enabled us to interact with the group deeply.

In-depth interview was used as a key qualitative method of collecting data (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Interview works on the premise that by talking to participants, research questions can be answered. The interview sessions were audio-recorded, lasted for about two hours and conducted in the native Igbo language (later transcribed in Enugu to suit an English audience). Using snowball sampling technique, which enables researchers to identify people who are knowledgeable about the research topic by recommendation (Robinson, 2014), 30 participants were identified (12 men and 18 women). From these participants, 16 were between the ages of 19 and 49, while the remaining 14 were between 50 and 80 years. These age brackets were chosen because they represent youths and elders, respectively. Eight (8) participants have previously tested positive to COVID-19 and recovered. Their experience was invaluable in understanding the topic. Participants were requested to comment on if and how the pandemic has shaped their perceptions of tourism and the strategies for empowerment. They signed the consent form and were encouraged to withdraw from the interview when they no longer feel comfortable. Their names were represented with pseudonym to conceal their identity.

For the data analysis, qualitative content analysis was used. Content analysis can take three forms: conventional, directed and summative (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The first, which was used in this paper, entails deriving the initial codes and categories from the data as a guiding framework. The second entails deriving the initial codes and categories from already existing theory or research findings, while the third involves counting and comparing the contents before interpretation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In using the conventional approach, the data collected during the fieldwork was reviewed many times to identify key themes and categories that represent the main ideas in the text. Following Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) and Roller and Lavrakas’s (2015) procedures for conducting content analysis, initial nodes (as containers) were created with ideas derived from the data. Some of the nodes created to understand participants’ perceptions of tourism during COVID-19 and the strategies for empowerment include: fear of uncertainty from COVID-19, economic hardship, restricted movement, increased health campaign, support and verifying health status. Next, the codes were dropped into the nodes from which categories were developed after the final coding process. The categories were grouped based on similarities and differences in their content from which themes were generated to answer the question.

# **FINDINGS**

After going through iterative processes for latent and manifest meanings in the data, some themes were identified for answering the research question concerning if and how COVID-19 influenced residents’ perceptions of sustainable tourism development and strategies for empowerment. These themes are: fear of death, increased poverty, health awareness, government support and vaccination. These themes will now be discussed.

## **Fear of Death**

The participants were all worried about the dreaded COVID-19 pandemic because of the scary news emanating from the social media. They showed antagonism towards foreigners and COVID-19, referring to the virus as a punishment from the western world. Whilst majority of the participants did not contract the virus, they were all afraid for themselves and loved ones. For the eight participants who contracted the virus, mostly elderly people, they noted that they almost gave up on life as the medical experts at the isolation centre could not understand how to handle the virus**.** One of the survivors noted that the most terrifying part of COVID-19 pandemic was that they lost sense of taste and could not eat properly. On the psychological aspect, at the isolation centre, family members and loved ones were not allowed to visit their people. One of the younger female participants noted that whilst she did not contract the virus, it was like an endless punishment to sit at home for more than one month hearing news of deaths caused by COVID-19. A participants recounted his experience at the isolation centre:

We lived as outcasts at the isolation centre. We had no freedom of our own in terms of where to go to and what to eat. Nobody was allowed to visit us and in the event of loss of anyone at the centre, the family members were not allowed to come and take the corpse for burial. It was a horrible experience that I will not wish on anyone (elderly male participant).

When the participants were asked about the implications of such negative COVID-19 experiences on their perceptions of sustainable tourism, many participants noted that they are not ready to receive foreigners (especially white people) as they are worried about another possible outbreak of what they called ‘the white man’s sickness’ (the name they gave to COVID-19 because of its origin). As the participants associate tourism with white tourists, they noted that it will take time before they are open to interacting with them in the future. This is understandable as many of them are yet to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

## **Increased Poverty**

Comments from the participants showed that many people in the study area suffered terribly during the lockdown. All the participants agreed that the pandemic brought untold hardship on residents as many people in Enugu State depend on daily market to survive, making the sit-at-home a severe nightmare. During the peak of the pandemic, the participants noted that many major markets were shut down, meaning that petty traders were forced to lock up their goods in the shop and stay idle at home. They equally noted that even people who find it difficult to eat three square meals were forced to obey the sit-at-home order without adequate provisions from the government to curb the effects of COVID-19 on their survival. One of the participants – an elderly woman – noted that at one point, she could not bear seeing her children go hungry during the sit-at-home, so she had to sneak into her shop to sell to customers on special request in order to find what they will eat. She added:

As a mother, it is heartbreaking to see your children go hungry and you cannot do anything about it. That was why we heard news of increased arm robbery and suicide attempts during the lockdown. Crime was on the increase in this area and we know why. At a point, it became unbearable for me to watch my children die of hunger. So I formed the habit of giving bribe to the security agents to allow me sell to my customers (elderly female participant).

Some participants added that social vices were on the increase because there was hunger occasioned by the pandemic and many young men who were idle because of the strict order to stay indoors. According to these participants, when you put these two things together in a society (hunger and idleness), evil doing will not be far-fetched. A young businessman alluded to the point noting that the sit-at-home period was the worst time of his life as he could not bear staying indoors. With regards to residents’ perceptions of sustainable tourism in the area in this era of COVID-19, the participants were equally worried about discussing tourism, noting that it will take a long time before they can get over the trauma of COVID-19 and engage with tourists (mainly foreigners whom they believe caused the pandemic) or support tourism.

Drawing from the comments about the challenges that residents faced in this era of COVID-19 in the study area, participants were asked to identify possible ways for empowering and strengthening their perceptions of sustainable tourism to ensure future support for the industry. The ways re-echoed by all the participants were: raising health awareness through campaigns and advertisement, government support and vaccination.

## **Health Awareness**

This strategy is important for empowering the participants as some of them (apart from those who had contracted the virus) found it difficult to believe that COVID-19 is real in Nigeria. Amongst the elderly participants, most of who did not acquire western education, they see COVID-19 as the white man’s disease ‘mysteriously imported’ (fake story created out of corruption) into Nigeria by the ruling class to steal public funds. For instance, few elderly women referred to COVID-19 as ‘cololo virus’ and ‘monono vilus’, explaining their poor understanding of the virus. Two participants noted their points this way:

Based on what we heard about COVID-19 on the news, I do not believe that this virus is in Nigeria. Look at other more advanced countries, they have not been able to control the spread and we are here playing politics as usual. It is really sad that our leaders can go to any length to deceive us. I tell you, if this virus actually entered Nigeria, we will not be here today (elderly male participant).

I do not know whether to say that our government officials were truthful to themselves for the first time and fought this virus to a standstill or they were not truthful in telling the public that COVID-19 is in Nigeria. I think it is all about their usual game because we have not seen anybody known to us who died after contracting the virus. People are just being forcefully taken to the isolation centre against their will (young male participant).

When asked if empowering and improving their perceptions about sustainable tourism and COVID-19 will be achieved through health campaign and advertisements, participants were affirmative that they need to be assured that they are safe and secure when foreigners start to visit their community again. Through such campaigns and advertisements, participants believe that they will know what to expect from tourists, the questions to ask about their health and the best way to interact with tourists to ensure their safety in the fight against COVID-19.

## **Government Support and Vaccination**

By government support and vaccination, participants made reference to the role of the state government in curbing the scourge of COVID-19 through funding, employing qualified health personnel and sensitizing people about the importance of vaccination. Although there was disagreement among the different participants about vaccination, they all agreed that the state government have major roles to play in supporting the fight against COVID-19. Whilst some participants agreed to take the vaccine to enable them travel outside the country (especially young male and female participants), others (mainly elderly participants) were very indifferent. Some of them cited religious affiliation, while others argue that the Nigerian government imported fake or expired vaccines. A young female participant – a civil servant - noted that she will take the vaccine if that is the best way to remain safe at her workplace and ensure the safety of her loved ones. One of the elderly male participants rejected the vaccine, citing the inability of the government to manage it because of inconsistent electricity supply. An elderly female participant lamented about the vaccine this way:

I am not taking that vaccine because there are lots of news on the social media. I know that the Nigerian government must help us to fight this virus but I am not sure they are genuine. Aside my religious belief, I am not going anywhere near that vaccine since I am not sure of the side effects and its authenticity. Our government should share the vaccine the same way they share our money.

Overall, most of the participants were more supportive of the government using the vaccine to control the spread of COVID-19 and to verify the health status of tourists visiting their community in the future. The participants will also like to be allowed to discuss how tourism should be implemented and tourists approached, when they should visit and who they should be because the trauma of the pandemic is still horrifying to some of them (especially the elderly participants). Taking the vaccine, therefore, was identified by the participants as a strategy for improving their perceptions of tourism and tourists and empowering residents to be part of sustainable tourism development in the era of COVID-19.

# **DISCUSSION**

This research has explored a topic area that is ongoing, novel and has threatened and still threatening tourism. Therefore, research is needed not just to identify or proffer solutions to the menace caused by COVID-19, but to also highlight the way forward for the sustainability of the tourism industry. COVID-19 is unprecedented and has proven to be more deadly than any virus previously known to mankind, which explains why its challenges are far-reaching and seem to have defiled attempts to curb the spread. While the governments of many countries have responded favourably in the fight against COVID-19 by putting measures in place, it is equally important to understand the perceptions of residents concerning the pandemic and how it has influenced sustainable tourism development. This is particularly crucial when we recall that there is always a gap between formulating policies to curb and control situations and how they affect the welfare of the people for whom the policy was formulated. Therefore, this research has contributed to the ongoing research on COVID-19 and tourism.

With regards to the perceptions of the participants about COVID-19 pandemic and how or whether it influences sustainable tourism, some observations can be gleaned. Firstly, the emergence of COVID-19 in Enugu State instilled fear in the people, made life more unbearable and increased the level of poverty and suffering. Secondly, COVID-19 and its challenges has negatively influenced residents’ perceptions of sustainable tourism development and support for the industry. Thirdly, it will take time before the local people begin to accept tourists (especially white foreigners) as they see COVID-19 as a white man’s virus. Fourthly, there are ways to empower the local people and improve their support and perceptions of sustainable tourism in this era of COVID-19. Fifthly, there are variations in participants’ perceptions of COVID-19, its influence on tourism and strategies for empowerment. Regarding fear of death from COVID-19, this is quite understandable as many people in the study area have never witnessed any outbreak of similar magnitude. This is consistent with the views of Dube (2022) and Hall et al. (2020) who noted that the pandemic came with fear, anxiety and uncertainty.

Concerning increased hardship and poverty, since the impacts of the pandemic have been unexpected, the responses of many governments have indirectly affected their economic base (Niewiadomski, 2020). Closure of international and national borders, shut down of airports, hotels and other companies have resulted in laying off some workers in these sectors. This means sudden loss of job and economic downturn (Higgin-Desbiolles, 2020; The Australia Tourism & Transport Forum, 2020; Nepal, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). The implication is that even in the study area, many people were left without any source of income during the peak of the pandemic. To worsen the situation, the sit-at-home has made life more complicated for many residents of Enugu State because they depend on daily commercial trading for their daily meal. Therefore, these residents might not be favourably disposed to engage in tourism in terms of domestic travelling (because of decline in income generation and for fear of contracting the virus) or accepting tourists in the near future, as emphasized by some participants. It will take a pragmatic approach from the government to reset the perceptions of these residents, empower them and gain their support for the tourism industry.

With regards to empowering the residents in the study area for sustainable tourism development, participants identified active government intervention and support (financial, mental and psychological) through aggressive health awareness campaigns, advertisements and vaccination. Health awareness is particularly important because some participants still find it difficult to accept that COVID-19 is real. For those who believe that the pandemic is real, they do not agree that it has entered Nigeria. The implication is that such residents will find it very difficult to adhere to the government directives for fighting the spread of the virus. The use of awareness creation as a means of curbing the spread of COVID-19 resonates with the views of Jamal and Budke (2020) and requires a strong partnership between the government, health professionals and other tourism stakeholders, including the local people. Such awareness is a good way of empowering the residents and putting them in a position to engage in sustainable tourism planning and development in this era of COVID-19. Using vaccination is also another way to imbibe hope and empower residents to get involved in sustainable tourism planning and development as they become more confident that tourists coming into their communities are healthy. This assertion is consistent with the views of Dube (2020) and Hall et al. (2020) about the importance of COVID-19 vaccine.

**CONCLUSION**

The effects of COVID-19 have been devastating and unprecedented, disrupting the economies of many countries. For the tourism sector, the impacts have been particularly chaotic because the industry depends on people moving from one place to another for it to remain relevant and make meaningful contributions to the world economy. This explains why it is important for more research to identify, highlight and understand the best possible ways for economic recovery and sustainable tourism development. More specifically, it is equally important to understand residents’ perceptions of the pandemic and how such perceptions influence or can influence sustainable tourism development. This research has contributed to the ongoing discourse by exploring the perceptions of selected residents in Enugu State. The findings showed that COVID-19 increased poverty and hardship, altered the lifestyle of residents and instilled fear in them, especially older people. The findings also identified some strategies for empowering residents and gaining their support for sustainable tourism development in the future. Therefore, these findings can help in future tourism planning and for understanding the perceptions of residents about the pandemic as it is currently threatening tourism sustainability.

The findings of the research opens new areas of knowledge for future researchers to explore other aspects that were not covered in this research. For instance, further research is needed to explore more specific aspects within the topic area such as how the emotional, financial and educational level of residents influence their perceptions of the pandemic and sustainable tourism development in the area. Other researchers should also extend similar research to other states within Southeastern Nigeria and other states within Nigeria to help build a stronger foundation for understating the connection between residents’ perceptions of the pandemic, influence on sustainable tourism development and ways for empowerment. Another important aspect is for future researchers to consider the use of theoretical framework such as emotional solidarity, social disruption theory, chaos theory of tourism and social carrying theory in the topic area. One final point to make is that the findings of this research does not reflect the views of all the residents of Enugu State about the impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 on their perceptions of sustainable tourism development and the strategies for empowerment because of the sample size. Therefore, future researchers should consider increasing the sample size to gather more detailed and in-depth perceptions.

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