

# **Harnessing Regionalism To Promote Health Tourism For Economic Development In Kenya**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Given that tourism has a significant multiplier effect on economic growth, countries are developing innovative strategies to spur the industry. Promoting health tourism, which is the travel to a foreign country for medical treatment, has been identified as one of the strategies to boost economic development. Traditionally, health tourism has involved travel from less to more developed countries. This has changed in recent years, where patients' motivation for travel is to seek lower-priced medical treatments, medical services unavailable or non-licensed in the home country, or higher quality treatment. Patients are now traveling from more to less-developed countries for medical treatment. Kenya's strategic objective is to be the region's destination of choice for highly specialized healthcare, making health tourism a leading foreign exchange earner by 2030. Despite this strategic objective being set over fourteen years ago, the government has not developed policies to exploit this potentially massive source of economic development. This paper aims to inform health tourism policymakers and stakeholders in Kenya about the potential of harnessing regionalism to grow the health tourism sector. Regionalism is the "political/economic trend toward cooperation and integration of states within a region, where the region has an equal or greater focus as the state." Geographic proximity has a significant, although not a deciding, role in influencing people's decisions to go to particular locations for medical treatment. The study found that most countries with thriving health tourism industries have source markets within their regions. South Africa, the most successful country in the Southern Africa region as a medical tourist destination, gets most of its health tourists from the Southern Africa region. Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia have focused their health services to be responsive to the health needs of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Kenya is a member of the East Africa Community (EAC) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The study results showed that, like other successful health tourist destinations globally, the country can exploit numerous comparative advantages over nations in the EAC and IGAD regions. These include; being politically and economically stable, having a vibrant private healthcare sector, a highly successful traditional tourism industry, and diverse cultures derived from the presence of large regional and international communities. The Kenya Health and Foreign Policies are revised to include strategic actions to develop, promote and support Kenya's health tourism sector in the Eastern and Horn of Africa regions.*

**Key Words:** *Medical tourism, Health tourism, Regionalism, Treatment, Procedures*

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Realizing that tourism has a significant multiplier effect on employment creation, foreign exchange revenues, the balance of payments, and the tourist supply chain, governments in developing countries support, aggressively promote and pursue the sector's growth.<sup>1</sup> The opportunities of globalization and the challenges of the twenty-first century are compelling nations to consistently pursue their development goals by developing innovative strategies to boost their economic development.

One of the ways is promoting tourism beyond the traditional outlook of travel for leisure to traveling in pursuit of medical treatment. The Cambridge Dictionary defines health tourism as "travel to a foreign country for medical treatment." Historically, this referred to those seeking care unavailable at home and who traveled from less developed nations to major medical centers in developed nations. This has since changed in recent years, where patients' motivation for travel outside their country is to seek lower-priced medical treatments, medical services unavailable or non-licensed in the home country, or higher quality treatment.

Due to these factors, patients are now traveling from developed to developing countries, developing to developing countries, and developed to developed countries for treatment. In Africa, only four countries; South

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Africa, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, are widely recognized as major destinations for health tourism.<sup>2</sup> These countries are known for their advanced health infrastructure, highly skilled specialized medical staff, and affordable treatments. Most countries famous for health tourism have also long been attractive to leisure travelers. Apart from the medical facilities, health tourists consume the same transport and hospitality services as conventional tourists. They also enjoy the same weather, sites, and culture. Health tourism, therefore, can be correctly viewed as an extension of traditional tourism.

## **II. NON-TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO ATTRACTING FOREIGN TOURISTS**

The pursuit of economic security and prosperity has made countries come up with non-traditional approaches to attracting foreign tourists. One of these is advancing health tourism as an industry. Despite health tourism being on the rise globally, its adoption and scale-up have remained slow in many developing African countries. Traditional tourist attractions cannot achieve accelerated economic development without policies to build the capacity and potential for health tourism.

Kenya has made a name in the East Africa and Central African Region as a preferred destination for patients from countries within the region seeking cost-effective specialized treatment. The Kenya Vision 2030 strategic objective under the health sector is to make Kenya the preferred region's destination of choice for highly specialized healthcare, making health tourism a leading foreign exchange earner by 2030.<sup>3</sup> Despite this strategic objective being set over fourteen years ago, the government has not developed policies to exploit this potentially massive source of economic development.

## **III. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY**

This research was conducted in Kenya between October and December 2022 and applied a descriptive research design. Primary data were collected from health and tourism stakeholders from the government and private sectors, processed through thematic analysis, and compared with secondary data and researcher interpretation for presentation.

## **IV. THE UNDERPINNING THEORY FOR THE STUDY**

Regionalism is the "political/economic trend toward cooperation and integration of states within a region, where the region has an equal or greater focus as the state."<sup>4</sup> Like most countries, African states have entered into several regional integration agreements. No country in Africa is not a member of at least one regional economic group. These groupings advance common operating standards and lower common regional trade customs barriers to create larger markets for goods, services, capital, and labor. Regional economic blocs face transnational public health threats due to increased travel, environmental factors, modern communications, and technological change<sup>5</sup>. They also share epidemiological characteristics concerning health problems, endemic and emerging pandemics.

Geographic proximity has a significant, although not a deciding, role in influencing people's decisions to go to particular locations for medical treatment.<sup>6</sup> Health tourists aim to minimize their cost of travel. Due to this, most countries with thriving health tourism industries have most of their source markets within their regions. Canada, the leading destination for health tourism globally, has the USA as its primary source of patients.<sup>7</sup> Canada is a neighbor to the USA, and both are member states of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). India, which is also a leading destination for medical tourists, receives most of its patients from countries in the Asian region, with the top leading source countries being Afghanistan, Pakistan, Oman, and Bangladesh.

South Africa, the most successful country in the Southern Africa region as a medical tourist destination, gets most of its health tourists from the SADC member states.<sup>8</sup> The Northern African medical tourists giants; Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, have focused their health services to be responsive to the health needs of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. These countries are ranked as the leading destinations for health tourism globally.<sup>9</sup> From these examples, regionalism seems to be one of the leading factors in a country growing its health tourism sector.

Countries that have tailored their health services based on the gaps in the neighboring countries' health systems, infrastructure, skills, and professionalism have been able to attract sufficient numbers and quality of

health tourists to make the sector profitable and contribute to a significant proportion of the GDP and foreign exchange earnings. These countries have gained a reputation from this growth and have gone ahead to attract clients from outside their region and even globally.

## **V. OPPORTUNITIES FOR KENYA IN THE REGION**

By virtue of its location in the Eastern part of Africa, Kenya is a member of the East Africa Community (EAC), whose member states are; Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. It is also a member state of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), whose member states are Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. The EAC is regarded as Africa's most integrated regional bloc.<sup>10</sup> The reason for the region's good performance in comparison to the other RECs in the continent is due to the ability of free movement of its citizens to any state without the requirement of a passport. There are also no tariffs for commodities produced by the member states and traded within the EAC.

Within the region, Kenya has the biggest liberalized and most advanced, and diverse economy and is the only country ranked as a lower-middle income economy. It has the largest population of an urban middle-class citizenry which is able to demand and pay for high-quality services, including private health care. Kenya has consistently ranked high in the region in terms of political and economic stability, making it an attractive destination for business and leisure tourists and foreign investment. Nairobi is host to the largest airport in the EAC and is the region's air transport connecting hub connecting the region with the rest of Africa and the world.

Within the IGAD, Kenya has the biggest economy and is regarded as having the most advanced and integrated infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> It is considered one of the most stable countries, if not the most stable in the region. The Horn of Africa has experienced more violent wars in the past few decades than any other region. The Horn of Africa, within the IGAD, is one of the world's most unstable regions due to trends in conflict and instability. Armed conflict, violent crime, intergroup violence, extremism, political instability, and state failure continue to afflict many areas of the Horn of Africa and have done so for many years. These conflicts have plagued Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Somalia, which are neighbors to Kenya.<sup>12</sup> The region and the world have looked on Kenya to mediate the conflicts. Kenya has stepped up and taken up the role and continues to take the lead in resolving the conflicts. It is considered a neutral mediator and is most highly regarded by all conflict actors.

The status of Kenya in the EAC and IGAD positions it as the entry point to trade and investment in the region. Most Multinational Corporations (MNCs) operating in the area have their regional headquarters in Kenya. These present an excellent opportunity for the country's health tourism development and growth.

Kenya can tailor its health services to be responsive to the needs of its citizens and the populations of the region's countries. It can research the countries' health systems to identify gaps in their health infrastructure, equipment, specialists, and professionalism. The research would also determine the most prevalent medical conditions that citizens of the region travel abroad to seek treatment. Anecdotal data indicates that Kenya is already receiving about 5,000 medical tourists, mainly from the EAC and IGAD regions.<sup>13</sup> These patients are said to be the elites from

South Sudan, Somalia, and Burundi, among all the other states in the region. The main source countries are known for having governance challenges and conflicts that have led to underdevelopment and, therefore, low investment in social services such as health. The elites from these countries often travel abroad for routine medical check-ups and treatment of chronic illnesses such as cancer, diabetes, and hypertension. They also travel to seek emergency treatment for trauma and acute conditions such as strokes and infectious diseases. Being elites, they pay for medical services mainly in cash, and the cost of the services is rarely an issue. The issues are usually the availability of the medical services and procedures in the destination state, the quality of the services, and the professionalism of the health providers. For these elites, discretion is also a significant consideration for their choice of destination.

The EAC and IGAD regions are potential sources of sufficient numbers and quality health tourists who, if successfully tapped, can make the sector profitable and contribute to a significant proportion of the GDP and foreign exchange earnings. The country already has the advantage of being a near and easily accessible destination for medical tourists, which is a significant consideration for medical travelers.<sup>14</sup>

Within the region, Kenya has the most vibrant private health sector. Its hospitals are the biggest in the region, and some consider themselves regional referral hospitals. These facilities include the Nairobi Hospital, The Aga Khan University Hospital, Avenue Hospital, and Gertrude's Children's Hospital, among others. These

hospitals have sought, received, and retained international accreditations that assure the quality of services and professionalism. The Aga Khan University Hospital and the Gertrudes's Children's Hospital possess the highly coveted JCI (Joint Commission International) accreditation. This is considered one of the top accolades for hospitals worldwide and a critical consideration referral of patients by doctors outside the country.<sup>15</sup> Kenya has the highest number of private health facilities with credible international accreditations in the region. This significantly adds to the relative competitiveness in the global medical tourism sector.

Major hospitals in Kenya, such as the Aga Khan University Hospital (AKUH), have collaborated with major pharmaceutical companies and hospitals abroad to become trial sites for the newest cutting-edge treatments and procedures. The AKUH has collaborative agreements with a major US-based hospital and pharmaceutical company to become a trial site for experimental drugs for cancer treatment. Patients seeking treatment with trial drugs often have life-threatening conditions, and standard approved treatments have failed. One major reason patients travel abroad, especially to the US, to receive cancer treatment is the failure of the disease to respond to the conventional approved treatments. Their only hope is usually to be referred to receive promising experimental therapies that are only available in major university hospitals abroad.<sup>16</sup> Due to the availability of these trial drugs, AKUH has become a regional referral center for cancer patients who would otherwise travel to health facilities outside the region and even the continent.

Culture is one of the major factors that health tourists consider when choosing their destination.<sup>17</sup> Kenya has the most diverse cultural composition within the region, if not the continent. As conflicts escalate in the countries in the region, the population of refugees in Kenya has continued to rise with the current number being over 550,000. Somalia accounts for 53% of all refugees and asylum seekers. Congolese (10%), Ethiopians (5.6%), and South Sudanese (25%) are the other three significant nationalities. 6.9% of the country's refugees and asylum seekers population comprises people from other countries, including Sudan, Rwanda, Eritrea, and Burundi.<sup>18</sup>

The United Nations Office in Nairobi is Africa's United Nations Headquarters. It is also the global headquarters for the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat).<sup>19</sup> The UN's staff establishment in Nairobi brings citizens from every corner of Africa and the world. The presence of communities from countries in the region and a vibrant expat community adds to Kenya's already rich and diverse culture. Most expats seek healthcare in the private sector. This sector's healthcare practitioners are particularly conscious of the significant cultural problems brought on by different geographies, languages, religions, societal views, customs, traditions, and personal opinions. They are, therefore, already empowered to provide health services to clients of diverse cultures and nationalities.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Kenya is aware of the potential health tourism has to contribute to the country's economic development. It has also recognized that this potential lies in tapping the region as the primary source of medical tourists, as stated in the "Kenya Vision 2030" development blueprint unveiled in 2008. However, fourteen years later, no significant progress has been made in engaging tourism, health, and other relevant stakeholders to develop and implement policies to realize this vision. Like other successful health tourist destinations globally, the country has the opportunity to exploit numerous comparative advantages it has over nations in the EAC and IGAD regional communities, both of which it is a prominent and highly regarded member. These include; being stable politically and economically, having a vibrant private healthcare sector, a highly successful traditional tourism industry, and diverse cultures derived from the presence of large regional and international communities. All these are features that are deficient in one way or another in most of the neighboring countries and have led to under-investment and, subsequently, under-development of their public and private health systems.

Anecdotal information points towards Kenya being the already leading destination of health tourists from the region. This indicates that despite the lack of investment in strategic efforts to promote the country as a health tourist destination, the clients have decided to seek medical procedures and treatments. The development of this sector will therefore target the acceleration of its growth to a level where it is considered one of the main sources of foreign exchange and economic development.

## **VII. RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper has successfully argued the case for regionalism as an excellent opportunity for the development of health tourism for the economic development of Kenya. However, the availability of this opportunity, if not exploited, cannot lead to achieving this potential. Even when successfully harnessed, it cannot

be enough to make the country a top-ranking destination for health tourism. Successful health tourism destinations have employed other strategies to boost their attractiveness in their regions. These include reducing the overall costs of treatment, marketing, and the capacity of the health system to offer responsive quality health services.

Overall, the Government of Kenya, in collaboration with all the relevant stakeholders, should fast-track the country into being the regions leading destination for health tourists. It is recommended that;

1. The Kenya Health and Foreign Policies are revised to include strategic actions to develop, promote and support Kenya's health tourism sector in the Eastern and Horn of Africa regions.
2. The Kenya health sector invests in being responsive to the health needs of patients and clients from countries in the region through research and capacity building.
3. Research on the challenges and other opportunities for health tourism in the country is conducted to develop treatment and medical procedure packages targeting medical travelers.

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