

# THE CURRENT TREND IN KENYA'S TEA INDUSTRY

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**Abstract:** The tea industry in Kenya is comparably similar to other production firms – ups and downs surround its operations day in and day out. Several previous research studies have majored in Kenya's tea industry, with the aim of studying what surrounds tea production. In this project, the focus is to establish a concrete comprehension pertaining current status of Kenya's tea, the global trade of Kenyan-based tea, the impacts of COVID-19 on the tea industry, and the sector's possible countermeasures. To fully capture the requirements of the study, helpful resources were obtained through rigorous retrieval of data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Tea Board of Kenya Statista, KNBS, and Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) websites. Also, other sources of information that stood to provide relevant data for this purpose were considered eligible for the research study. The key findings obtained from the studied resources established the following: To start with, Kenya is a significant player at the international level regarding the production and exportation of tea products. India, Kenya, China, and Sri Lanka are the four countries dominating the world in the tea industry. Secondly, the current performance of Kenya's tea has deteriorated. Third, tea production and trade in Kenya have become resilient during the pandemic coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Lastly, implementing appropriate strategies is required to enhance companies' performance.

Keywords: *COVID-19, COVID-19 on Kenya's tea, Global trade, Kenya's tea global trade, Kenya's tea, Kenya's tea countermeasures, Kenya's tea industry.*

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## INTRODUCTION

A clear comprehension of Kenya's tea industry and all that concerns the entire sector is a hill to climb. In consideration of this fact, baseline facts need to be gathered from a number of past research studies. Many changes are expected to occur in the tea sector, many of which may falter the average health of the industry.

Kenya is considered one of the countries in the world leading in producing and exporting tea (Kamer, 2022). In the East African community, according to the articulation of Kamer (2022), Kenya is by far the leader in the tea industry. Despite the country shining in East Africa and the entire African continent, Sri Lanka and China stand to outshine the African country in highly admired crop

production (Kamer, 2022). However, as confirmed by Ateka *et al.* (2018), together with the already mentioned China and Sri Lanka, India and Kenya form a combined list of four countries accounting for seventy-five percent of the total amount of tea produced in the entire world.

As confirmed by Kamer's 2022 findings, Kenyan highlands' favourable weather patterns, as well as red volcanic soil, make it possible for tea production to flourish in the East African country. Much has been witnessed to be brought in by the tea industry in Kenya. For many years, the tea industry has boosted the Kenyan economy through massive exports and local sales (Kamer, 2022). Based on Kamer's establishments, tea – a significant economic builder – is supported by other exported products, including spices and coffee. The combined

exports, as of 2021, accounted for more than twenty percent of the entire Kenyan exports. As affirmed by Ateka *et al.* (2018), tea production in Kenya has been for many years experiencing progression, hence enhancing the country's economic growth. The nation's gross domestic product (GDP) and earnings from the foreign exchange the industry accounts for are approximately five percent and twenty-five percent in that order (Republic of Kenya, 2017). Based on this consideration, therefore, the tea industry in Kenya is unsurprisingly one of the economic backbones.

Setting aside the tea industry as the country's primary foreign earner, tea plantation in Kenya employs and enhance the financial capabilities of more than five million individuals, hence is among the list of income earner for many families in the nation (Republic of Kenya, 2015). Gesimba *et al.* (2005) observe the tea industry in Kenya as a superior sector with over eighty thousand people employed directly. Also, according to the research, roughly three million people directly depend on the sector to earn a living (Gesimba *et al.*, 2005). In support of Gesimba's *et al.* (2005) observations, Ateka *et al.* (2018) articulate that the sector is a significant source of livelihood to many small and large-scale farmers in Kenya, hence indicating the consistency of the private sector in promoting the employment stability of the many people of Kenya.

Like any other local or commercial crop planted in the country, tea production thrives well in optimum weather and soil conditions. In this case, tea does well on red volcanic soil (Kamer, 2022). It is mainly carried out in Kenyan highlands, whose altitudes range between 1500 – 2700 meters (Ateka *et al.*, 2018). In such highlands, the crop planted can have the opportunity to fully utilize eighty percent of suitable weather conditions (Gesimba *et al.*, 2005). The Kenyan highlands – as confirmed by Gesimba *et al.* (2005) to have favorable weather conditions for growing tea – include Kericho, Sotik, Kisii, and Nyeri, among many others.

As learned from Ateka *et al.* (2018) establishments, the structure the country employs in tea production consists of both small and large-scale plantation systems. The small-scale plantation system dominates in the country, with exceeding half a million individuals enrolled in the farming system (Ateka *et al.*, 2018). According to Ateka *et al.* (2018), a small-scale plantation system produces sixty percent of what the tea industry in the East African country outputs; hence is ranked as the most successful small-scale plantation scheme in the entire globe. The successful implementation of the

small-scale plantation scheme in Kenya proves that its contribution to the country's economic growth is enormous enough. However, KTDA's (2013) data proved the productivity of small-scale plantations as very low – with processed tea averaging at 1785 kilograms per hectare – a figure far below 4745 kilograms per hectare (potential figure of the sector).



Figure 1. 1963-2011 Kenya's Tea Productivity for Small-scale Tea Plantation (KTDA, 2013).

For many years, tea plantation in Kenya has undergone many changes in scientific advancements (Gesimba *et al.*, 2005). The scientific advancements brought in by the sector's management have benefited many resourceful outcomes of small-scale and large-scale (Gesimba *et al.*, 2005). With higher auction prices and the technology employed in tea plantations, based on Gesimba *et al.* (2005) findings, the tea industry in Kenya has recently reaped plentifully.

Previous research studies have studied tea plantations in Kenya and many of its concerns differently. With the baseline facts gathered from a number of sources targeted in this research project, this particular project, therefore, seeks to understand tea plantations in Kenya, the current status of Kenya's tea, global trade, the impact of COVID-19 on Kenya's tea industry and possible countermeasures the tea sector in the country have.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In strict adherence to the guiding protocols, relevant data for this project were obtained. Websites and public portals visited for this specific task included KNBS, KTDA, Ministry of Agriculture, and Tea Board of Kenya Statista. Furthermore, articles that provided helpful information considering the research questions were also selected. The search process was accomplished with the help of search terms related to the research questions the research focused on. The search terms include COVID-19, Kenya's tea, countermeasures, and global trade.

All the obtained sources were rigorously subjected to a thorough screening process to ensure that only sources with relevant information on the topic under study were selected for inclusion in the research work. The selected resources were rigorously compared and analyzed to discover concretely what the research problems entail.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section of the paper, results and discussion of the current status of Kenya's tea, global trade, COVID-19's impacts on Kenya's tea industry, and countermeasures in Kenya's tea sector are presented as follows.

### *Current Status of Kenya's Tea*

The status of each crop continuously changes with time, depending on the many conditions – such as government policies – which also change continuously. According to Kenyan-based Susan Nyawira, Kenya's tea in the recent past has been witnessed to perform in the international market poorly (Nyawira, 2022). According to the researcher, Kenya's tea has dropped its earnings in the last phase of 2021 by 9.1 percent when closely compared to the same time period in the year 2020, as proved by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) information. According to KNBS, the tea earnings dropped to 27.7 billion Kenya shillings in the third quarter (Q3) of 2021 as compared to 30.5 billion Kenya shillings in 2020's Q3 earnings report (Nyawira, 2022). The downfall of Kenya's tea earnings, as reported by KNBS, was attributed to the declining quantities of export (Nyawira, 2022). The declination of Kenya's tea earnings, according to Nyawira (2022), has also been witnessed in the previous quarters of 2021. According to the researcher, the first quarter of 2021 reported above thirty-five billion Kenya shillings which was higher than the second quarter's earnings of thirty-two billion Kenya shillings. In this regard, the performance of Kenya's tea internationally has been deteriorating lately.

Following the deteriorating performance of Kenya's tea in the previous years, a shockwave of fear was sent to the Kenya tea industry and the government. The value of Kenya's tea declined. According to the source of reports, the government responded through its ministry of Agriculture to rescue the falling treasure (Nyawira, 2022). As learned, the government set \$2 as the minimum price the tea can sell, following the new low of 186 Kenya shillings that Kenya's major export had previously

hit (Nyawira, 2022). Therefore, Kenya tea farmers are currently expected to reap better returns due to government interventions. The current value of Kenya's tea exports at the domestic stage, based on Nyawira's (2022) KNBS data, has increased by 10.6% from the 2020s 144.8 billion Kenya shillings to the current 160.2 billion Kenya shillings.

According to the KNBS, Kenya's tea production in 2022 is far much less than the production level reached in 2021. Also, there was a decline in the production level when 2021 compared to 2020's tea production. As proved by KNBS data in figure 2, the trend of decline will decline the country's total exports, reducing foreign earnings.

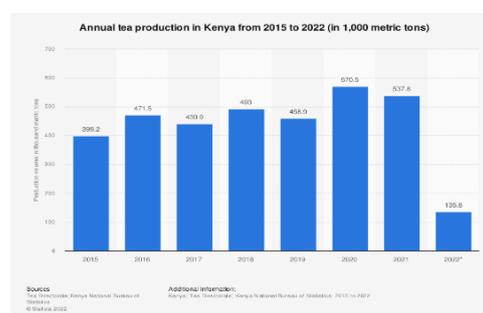


Figure 2. 2015-2022 Annual Production of Tea in Kenya.

In recent months, due to the eruption of the Ukraine-Russia war in Ukraine, international trade routes have been closed, with the black sea route now non-operational (Andae, 2022). Due to the trade blockage, it now takes shipping tea products a much longer time to reach their destinations (Andae, 2022). As revealed by the researcher, it now costs more to ship than before the war. The higher shipping prices have export volume while reducing the price of a kilo of tea product sells (Andae, 2022). With the price of a kilo of the commodity reaching \$2.53 high before the war, the price stood at \$2.22 in the previous weeks (Andae, 2022). Due to the high prices of Kenya's tea in the international market, it is viewed to have grown less competitive (Andae, 2022). The current demand for Kenya's products has been reduced, reducing the country's total exports (Andae, 2022). Generally, export volumes and demand for Kenya's tea have reduced, with farmers witnessing declining earnings due to reduced auction prices. Kenya's tea has lost its competitiveness in the international markets, the Russia-Ukraine war being the attribute.

### **International Trade 2017 – 2022**

Kenya, being one of the leading producers of tea in not only the African continent but Globally, exports its product to the international market (Kamer, 2022). According to the researcher, the

produced tea in December 2021 was exported to more than 45 nations globally, with Pakistan outshining other importers by importing approximately forty percent of Kenya's total tea exports. The United Kingdom and Egypt also made the top destination list of their favored commodity (Kamer, 2022). During the period, exported were fifty thousand metric tons of the commodity, which amounted to approximately 109 million US dollars in the country. Figures 3 and 4 below show the 2019 and 2022 tea export volume and value, respectively.

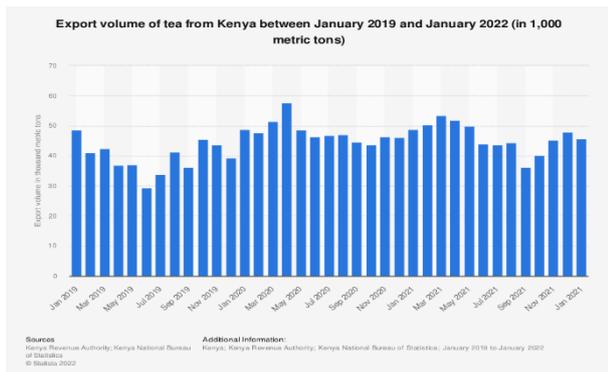


Figure 3. 2019 – 2022 Kenya’s tea export volume

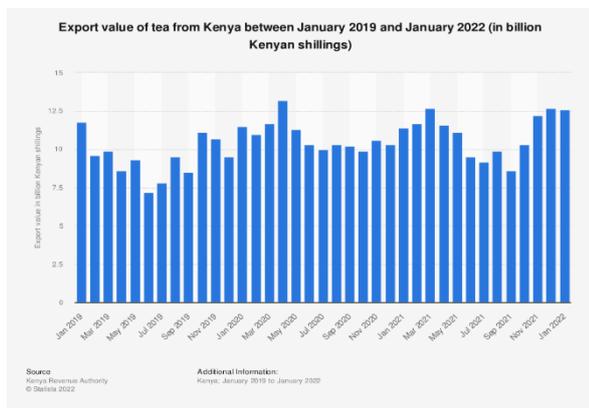


Figure 4: 2019 – 2022 Kenya’s tea export value

Most recently, the newly launched and ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has devastated the international trade between Kenya, Russia, and other parts of Europe (Andae, 2022). The effect of the war has dramatically been felt by Kenyan tea growers, who have found it hard to export their products to European countries (Andae, 2022). Andae (2022) claims that Russia and other European nations be significant destinations for Kenyan products. The closure of the black sea route, according to Andae (2022), has resulted in rising costs of shipping the commodity from the country from about 357 to 952 thousand Kenya shillings. The price of tea in the Kenya auction base, Mombasa, has been falling since the war broke out (Andae, 2022). The low prices have therefore hit hard the local farmers, based on Andae's (2022) reports. On the other hand,

the high shipping costs have raised the prices of Kenya's tea in the international markets, hence can no longer sell competitively.

Compared to the other seasons earlier before the war, when shipping costs were at a standard level, the current unduly high costs of shipping the commodity have negatively affected tea export to the regions (Andae, 2022). As a result, the demand for the Kenyan commodity has currently declined, reports Andae (2022). The volume of exports to Russia and its neighborhood has dropped dramatically, Andae (2022) states. According to the information presented by the Tea Board of Kenya, the war has contributed to a fifteen percent reduction in Kenya-Russia tea exports (Andae, 2022). With Russia being Kenya’s 5<sup>th</sup> major destination of tea products, Kenyan exports have significantly dropped.

The world recession attributed to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine, as articulated by Andae (2022), has seen Kenya’s tea exported to only forty destinations as opposed to 51 recorded the previous year. As figured out by the Tea Board of Kenya, the commodity in various destinations is running low due to reduced imports (Andae, 2022). The export volume to Russia in 2021 was 74 percent higher than that of 2022, reducing the earnings by 598 million shillings (Andae, 2022). The current financial year will likely see farmers suffer huge losses suffered due to the ongoing war in Ukraine.

**Pre and Post-COVID-19 Impacts Both in Production and Trade**

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, companies operated their business operations without restrictions. However, things changed in late 2019. The novel coronavirus disease brought in many government restrictions to curb the spread of the disease (Nechifor *et al.*, 2020). According to Nechifor *et al.* (2020), the restrictions in the country that included lockdowns, travel, and gathering bans contributed significantly to labor productivity's downfall. The tea industry is always highly dependent on on-site labor rather than remote working. In regard to this, tea production in Kenya declined considerably. According to the Kenyan Ministry of Agriculture, COVID-19 restrictions contributed to slow production in the tea industry in the country (Xinhua, 2021).

As opposed to the onset of the pandemic, the ministry of Agriculture emphasized that Kenya's tea industry adapted quickly to a new normal (Xinhua, 2021), relieving the companies from the threatening fear of the disease. According to Xinhua's (2021) establishments, tea production in 2020 of five hundred and sixty-nine kilograms was a 24% increment as compared to the low production level of four fifty-eight million kilograms recorded in the COVID-19-onset year 2019.

The food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (2022) recognizes the impact COVID-19 has contributed on the tea industry at the international level. According to the organization, COVID-19 has become a stumbling block to humans from all perspectives by disrupting agricultural food systems (FAO, 2022). As such, the pandemic has by far threatened the food security of human beings. Based on the findings, the containment measures governments put in place to curb COVID-19's spread have impacted the demand and supply of food (FAO, 2022). Containment measures that comprise curfews travel restrictions and closure of business activities had already been implemented by many nations globally by the end of the first quarter of 2020 (Hale *et al.*, 2020). Restrictions on global mobility led to a decline in the importation of agricultural products on the global stage (FAO, 2021). It, therefore, clearly indicates that global trade of commodities considerably declined from late 2019 to May 2020, when business restrictions were eased to rebound trade. In support of the above research study, Mold and Antony (2020) found that the initial shock in Kenya on trade was short-lived as imports and exports improved by May 2020.

In consideration of global trade for tea products specifically, FAO (2022) found trade of tea to have been distracted from late 2019 until the end of the first quarter of 2020. Also, the price index of tea in Kenya (Mombasa) declined to 2.28 US dollars in the first quarter of 2020 due to COVID-19 (FAO, 2022).

From a close-range analysis of FAO's (2022) discoveries on the tea industry, it is concluded that the tea industry has been resilient throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with short-lived bar effects on production, trade, together with product prices.

#### **Counter Measures: SWOT Analysis**

Kenya's tea industry, just as compared to any other production industry, is always surrounded by many unforeseeable challenges that may comprise climate change, rising production costs, and even market unreliability (KTDA, 2022). As a company, there is a need to implement strategies that will ultimately ensure that the company remains competitive in the market environment. Without implementing the necessary strategies, the company will be at a high risk of being outshined by other competitors in the market – companies producing and marketing similar products. It is, therefore, appropriate for the tea sector to realize the best approaches to revive the lost treasure of the company into prosperity. To achieve this, the analysis of favorable internal factors (Strengths), unfavorable internal factors (weaknesses), favorable external factors (opportunities), and unfavorable

external factors (threats) is recommendable. This approach is referred to as SWOT analysis, and the paper looks at it as below.

#### **SWOT Analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats**

Over the last twenty years, the tea industry has faced a number of challenges in the global trade environment (KTDA, 2022). On the basis of KTDA analysis, such trade constraints include climate change, weaknesses in the market environments, and oversupply (KTDA, 2022). As a matter of fact, climate change has been witnessed to cause more threats in the production sectors than benefits. With erratic weather patterns, tea plantation is deteriorating due to disturbing patterns of rainfall. On the other hand, oversupply means that the prices in the market are likely to reduce and hence decline in final sales earnings. Due to reasons including changing customer demands, the weaknesses in the market environments are another stumbling block in the tea industry. The sales of tea products supplied in the markets have a high chance of stagnating due to failing or weakening markets. Based on these three constraints, the tea industry has long been kept at bay without immediate resilient responses being realized.

The blows have caused many impacts on the KTDA farmers, which include, according to KTDA (2022), reduced earnings. It is well recognized that the success of every company is entirely dependent on the grassroots players. As such, tea company is highly dependent on farmers, ensuring that the objectives of the industry are successfully achieved. However, failure has always been the norm in the tea industry. The agency has therefore Incorporated numerous programs to ensure that farmers have their earnings boosted at the end (KTDA, 2022). The programs include wood fuel and the implementation of training opportunities for involved players. The following is a detailed analysis of favorable and unfavorable elements in Kenya's tea industry.

#### **Strengths (S)**

Kenya's tea industry is boosted by the reliability of climatic conditions and suitable soil (Kamer, 2022). According to the researcher, the Kenyan highlands that plant tea crop enjoys diversified climatic conditions. In the highlands, both rain and sunshine are suitable for the crop to do well. In regards to the industry's initiatives, it is, therefore, their task to ensure that much is realized out of the already available weather characteristics in the region. The suitable weather patterns enable

tea to thrive despite the ongoing climatic change threatening production companies globally. Also, Kamer (2022) articulates the suitability of the highlands for tea production in regard to the red volcanic soil. In the Kenyan highlands, the soil characteristics are best suited for the crop to be grown and prosperously. In this consideration, therefore, the tea industry in Kenya already has got an advantage on its side to maximize the output of the much-favored crop in the country.

#### **Weaknesses (W)**

KTDA is concerned about its establishments' high operational costs (KTDA, 2022). As opined by KTDA (2022), the high operation costs in its management reduce the earnings the farmers get in return for their laborious commitments. As a remedy, therefore, KTDA (2022) wishes to enlarge green energy by plantings numerous hectares of land with trees to provide a sustainable source of fuel, both now and in the future.

#### **Opportunities (O)**

In an attempt to ensure the factories managed by KTDA remain sustainable in the market, moving into the use of wood fuel is a massive opportunity (KTDA, 2022). The factories spend more than three percent of their revenues annually on plant-based fuel. In so doing, the cost of production will be significantly reduced and, as a result, will enhance the earnings the farmers get (KTDA, 2022). According to the KTDA updates, in order to sustainably use wood fuel, the factories aspire to expand their plantation field (KTDA, 2022). Also, in the fields, KTDA (2022) confirms that fast-maturing trees are planted in the field. The opportunity will stand to provide the entire sector with sufficient wood fuel.

Wood fuel, as opined by KTDA (2022), is both sustainable and as well as a cheap source of energy. Other than reducing the cost of operationalizing tea processing, it also abides by climate change initiatives requiring the constant re-plantation of trees (KTDA, 2022). Wood fuel is an opportunity (O) tea industry in Kenya aspires to use to its advantage. Training of farmers is another opportunity KTDA utilizes to ensure tea production in Kenya is both boosted in volumes and quality (KTDA, 2022). The classes, sponsored by KTDA, teach its farmers about appropriate farm practices (KTDA, 2022). Kenya enjoys a broad market, being the top exporter of tea commodities in the African continent and the top four globally (Kamer, 2022). In this respect, the tea industry in Kenya is able to

claim a significant market share opportunity, hence generating more revenues on the global stage.

#### **Threats (T)**

KTDA updates confirm climate change as one of the threats to the production sectors in the country (KTDA, 2022). Climate change can contribute to unpredictable weather conditions, which can significantly devastate the tea sector in the country.

Also, the report pointed out another market weakness threat (KTDA, 2022). The market can be weakened by a number of factors, with the COVID-19 pandemic being the recent major player (FAO, 2022). With disturbing marketing patterns, as seen through the travel and exports ban, the commodity's market is significantly reduced, ultimately reducing the local and foreign earnings. Market weakness is, therefore, a threat that can alter the typical prices of commodities and reduce the farmers' earnings. It is the ultimate test the tea industry will ever encounter.

As already mentioned in the paper, the COVID-19 outbreak interfered with many standard agricultural systems globally (FAO, 2022). One of the significant setbacks generated by the pandemic was the export ban, which declined the international trade of Kenyan commodities. The export ban only left local buyers the potential customers of the industry, leading to declined earnings for the industry and the local farmers. In respect to the above analysis, the strengths (S), including good soil and reliable weather patterns in tea growing zones, together with broad markets for tea, wood fuel, and constant training for farmers, as opportunities (O), can best be strategic countermeasures Kenya tea industry can utilize to beat a weakness (W) of high operational costs and threats (T) posed by climate change and COVID-19-related challenges. Peris *et al.* (2017) emphasized that the implementation of appropriate strategies is an approach to realizing the project's performance.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The project specifically focused on establishing tangible solutions to the research problems at hand, which comprised finding background information on the tea industry in Kenya, the current status of Kenya's tea, international trade, impacts of COVID-19 on tea production and trade, and possible countermeasures in tea industry the attempt to answer the review questions, a summary of the various findings are presented as below.

Kenya is one of the major producers and exporters of tea in the whole world. Together with

India, China, and Sri Lanka, Kenya forms a list of the top four countries globally with high production levels of tea. Tea is a crop that does well in favorable climatic conditions. It requires well-aerated volcanic soil to thrive well. The two conditions are met by many districts in Kenya, which include Bomet, Nyeri, and Kericho. In the market, due to fluctuations, the value of Kenya's tea continuously changes. 2022 recorded a poor performance of Kenya's tea in the market. With government interventions and in an attempt to run into farmers' safety, setting up a minimum selling price for tea is always a solution to fluctuating prices. As the primary producer and exporter, Kenya exports to countries such as the United Kingdom, Pakistan, and Russia. Also, the country imports tea from Uganda, India, and Malawi, among other nations.

The outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019's last quarter brought many shockwaves of fear and threats to both agricultural and business environments. FAO (2022) claimed that the pandemic was tasked to constrain human beings in all corners of life. Little grounds for distractions were recorded regarding its impact on tea production and trade. Production of tea was initially distracted due to containment measures but immediately resumed normalcy. Also, distractions of COVID-19 on trade and prices of the product were reported to be short-lived. In this regard, therefore, the tea industry, under the pandemic, has since shown resilience.

Countermeasures that the Kenya tea industry can implement are numerous. Strengths (S) and opportunities (O) can best be incorporated in the business sector to beat both weaknesses (W) in the organization and threats (T) available. In the case of Kenyan tea companies, diversified climatic conditions together are strengths (S) that can be added to opportunities such as a move to sustainable wood fuel, constant training to farmers, and a broad market in order to beat climate and COVID-19-related threats (T) that are in conjunction with companies' weakness (W), high operational costs.

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