

‘Rising out of the waves. An analysis of the challenges faced by disaster affected locations in their quest for sustainable redevelopment’

A Report on Research in Progress

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The Asian Tsunami of December 2004 left a long lasting global footprint. There is no denying that this event touched hearts in all corners of the globe, the extent of consciousness spurred not only from intense media coverage but because many of the destinations affected were those we have personal familiarity with; tourism destinations (Rice 2005). There are many perceptions as to the cause of the disaster, although factually correct, physical reasons are those that we acknowledge. Incidentally, according to the Buddhist religion, thus practiced in the majority of affected areas, it is believed that the Tsunami reveals God’s anger with man and that this disaster reflects a cleansing process associated with bad Karma attributed to past actions of man (BBC 5/12/05). Whilst acknowledging the extent of such a tragedy, it is perhaps realistic to suggest that if any good can be derived from the tsunami, it will be the widespread recognition of the impact of high-density, poorly planned and unsustainable tourism infrastructure that occupied many of the destinations affected (UNDP, World Bank, FAO 10 January 2005). This sentiment is mirrored by an Associated Press article for CNN News in which it was commented, ‘if there was a saving grace to the tragedy – it was the opportunity left by the devastation to build anew in areas that had been developed in environmentally and socially unjust ways’ (4 December 2005). There is widespread opinion that the Tsunami has provided a ‘clean slate’ in developmental terms, it is clear that there are a wealth of options as regards the redevelopment in order to address more sustainable practices.

United Nations Environment Programme, in their recommendations for the rebuild contained within their report entitled ‘After the Tsunami – Rapid environmental Assessment’, suggest the erection of ‘natural buffer zones’ in the coastal areas, rebuilding in less exposed areas and shoreline tree planting to protect coastal infrastructure (New Frontiers Vol. 11, No.1) thus heeding the long term environmental lessons posed by the tsunami. It is recommended that this be enforced through strict building codes in coastal areas. Parallels can be drawn between these recommendations made to ensure that destruction reaped by future natural disasters is minimal and that of tourism development for which these guidelines would minimise criticism often experienced by the industry with regard to shoreline developments. Although it is clear that there has been a longstanding recognition of the need to develop more sustainable tourism practices in many tsunami affected destinations, it must be investigated as to why these practices have not been adopted still, when there are numerous commentators that now highlight the importance of encompassing sustainability principles into the reconstruction plans. Considering also, that the legacy provided by the Asian Tsunami was not just one of the destruction of infrastructure and lives but of the continued loss of earnings of those reliant upon the tourism industry on the island, it might be suitable therefore to include amongst the options for redevelopment an exploration of strategies to reduce the dependency upon tourism and diversify the economy (Pleumarom, A. 31 December 2004).

In the immediate stages post-tsunami, there are early warning signs that the desire to rebuild and again accommodate tourism, i.e. economic considerations may supersede any caution for sustainability issues and intricate planning. It is ironic that considering the extent of negative impact that tourism brought to the islands that it be regarded as the economic saviour post tsunami (Pleumarom 12/2004). Clearly, this mindset, although understandable in the wake of such a large-scale disaster, conflicts with the philosophy of sustainable tourism development, which encourages a greater focus upon future perspectives. This sentiment, and equally one mirrored by Governments and the Tourism

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Industry alike, is commented to be a typical mindset in Thailand whereby priority for aid and rebuild is awarded to that of the reconstruction of the tourism industry (Pleumarom December 2004:2). According to published literature, it would appear that financial assistance for the tourism industry is a priority, to the extent that taxpayers' money is being allocated for this purpose in addition to the provision for promotional campaigns designed to attract back the tourists to the Andaman region. Indeed, a vast amount of literature is now being published that would appear to confirm that the rebuild of the tourism infrastructure is taking a clear priority over the rebuild of livelihoods (Roberts, J. 17/01/2005). Commentators such as Pleumarom (5 January 2005) recommend that redevelopment should only be carried out, 'after a series of brain-storming sessions about the reconstruction of local people's lives and livelihoods and the rehabilitation of the natural environment.' It still remains to be seen if the advice will be heeded this time around or whether it will be set aside in favour of more powerful economic and political forces.

What is interesting is that despite claims by the Thai Government that no further development is to be granted at present on Phi Phi Don, plans have been released for the establishment of two new 'all-inclusive' concept resorts on the island. One in Lanah Bay, built by the Intercontinental Hotels Group, and is due to open in 2007 (Phuket Gazette 25/09/2005), the other, by Sofitel was scheduled for early November 2005 (TAT 29/09/2005). These development plans are confirmed by Choo, B. (16 September 2005) in a News Release for InterContinental Hotels Group and Sritama, S. (21 December 2005: The Nation) who report the signing of three new management contracts to operate luxury hotels in Thailand, amongst those being one development on a private beach in Koh Phi Phi. Based upon this evidence it could be proposed that the Thai Government do indeed have plans for the redevelopment of the island post-tsunami and indeed it would appear that there is a trend toward capturing the luxury market, in contrast to the backpacker market from which the island originally gained popularity. It is evidenced that several of the destinations affected by the Tsunami, in particular Sri Lanka plan to pursue the 'high-end' luxury market as an alternative to their traditional forms of tourism under the banner of 'sustainable development' yet is instrumental in attracting high spending tourists and 'big business' at the risk of alienating small scale traditional industry (Rice, 2005).

Pleumarom (1999) highlights this trend toward internationalisation of industry following liberalisation of trade and suggests that there is greater occurrence of this practice during times of economic hardship, as Thai owned businesses may not have the necessary capital to shoulder the burden of debt. Particularly as liberalisation in Thailand has allowed foreign investors to acquire a 100 percent stake in a business in contrast to the previous 49 percent (Pleumarom 1999). Evidently, the economic rationale for this practice can be demonstrated, however continued and increased internationalisation of the tourism sector will have serious implications in terms of economic leakage and reduced local control, potentially jeopardising the sustainability of development on Koh Phi Phi (Pleumarom 1999).

Certainly, it would appear that upon visiting the islands (June 2005) there was much frustration and confusion with regard to the provision (or non provision) of a strategic plan by the Thai Government to assist the rebuild effort, in fact there appears to be great concern for the lack of transparency about the reconstruction plans of all destinations affected by the tsunami (Rice, A. 2005; Altman, M. 2005). It is reported by Altman (2005) that survivors were told by the Thai Government to refrain from rebuilding damaged homes and businesses until a plan was finalised that would, 'recreate Phi Phi as a safer, structurally stronger, and more eco-friendly island.' In fact, in the wake of the Tsunami, the only Governmental guidance that was provided was that partially damaged buildings could be temporarily restored but that islanders were prohibited from rebuilding completely damaged structures (Altman, M. 2005). The only progress that has been made is the decision that the Organisation for Specific Areas Administration for Sustainable Tourism Promotion (OSAASTP), under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, will be given the responsibility for maintaining and improving island infrastructure (Phuket Gazette 9/9/2005).

This is however contradicted in Altman's report (19 December 2005) which reports that the responsibility for the Island's reconstruction lies with the City Planning and Public Works, with the island Master Plan being co-ordinated by Tanya Hanpol the acting Director of the Designated Area for Sustainable Tourism Administration. A master plan for how this will be conducted is not yet available, yet was claimed to be due for release in May 2005 (McGeown, K. 18 March 2005) then

again on 27 January 2006 (Phuket Gazette 6/1/2006). Further to this, in a report in the Phuket Gazette published on 24 January 2006, detailing a meeting that had taken place on the island with Deputy Prime Minister, Suwat Liptapanlop, to discuss the future development of Koh Phi Phi, many islanders were again frustrated by the lack of progress, reported to be 'a lot of talk but no decisions' by Phankam Kitithorakul, Chairman of Or Bor Tor. The only recommendations that were made at the meeting concerned the pier improvements with a policy that once the pier had been completed, all trip boats must pick up and drop off passengers from the pier rather than the shoreline in order to improve the visual appearance of Ton Sai, turning it back into a 'tourist paradise', nevertheless rebuilding had been delayed due to unsuccessful funding bids at this time (Phuket Gazette 24.1.06).

There is, therefore at present only speculation as to how the Thai Government plans to rebuild the island's tourist market. The majority of these commentators appear to believe that the Thai Government plans to reposition the tourist product of the island to provide a high-class luxury resorts in contrast to that of the backpacker and dive tourism that has existed successfully until now (correspondence with island inhabitants). Certainly it would appear that a trend towards development of luxury hotels on Koh Phi Phi is appearing to include Zeavola, Phi Phi Villa and Spa and the new Intercontinental Hotels development (Rosenfeld, C. 9 January 2006; Phuket Gazette 6 January 2006; Altman, M. 2005; Sritama, S. 21 December 2005; Choo, B. 16 September 2005). Other commentators suggest that the Government plans to adopt zoning techniques and reclaim encroached national park land to develop a central 'Leisure Park' where the original tourist village used to be (Lonely Planet 2005; McGeown 2005), in addition to banning residents houses from being rebuilt along the beachfront, which is projected to deprive locals of their livelihoods and potentially prevent displaced islanders from returning to their homes.

From research undertaken to date, it could be claimed that the 'high end' trend is not constrained to Koh Phi Phi but is pursued nation-wide as a means to providing a lucrative quality tourism model that caters for the needs of high spending tourists. Indeed, the 'less is more' philosophy might be appropriate to pursue a policy of sustainable tourism development but it is flawed when existing provision is simply transferred to 'high end'. Findings would however indicate that despite the critique of the internationalisation of the hospitality and tourism industry, these larger hotel chains might actually be better served to pursue a policy of 'responsible tourism'. This might be explained by the growing concern for the environmental effects of industrialisation; evidenced in the depletion of forests, the ozone and subsequent global warming (UK Government, Sustainable Development Unit) resulted in an emergent world view that challenged the prevailing 'dominant western environmental paradigm', and opposed the consumption patterns that were placing a burden upon the environment (UK Government, Sustainable development Unit). Thus a 'green paradigm' has evolved, which has given birth to a focus upon alternate business strategies, designed to enhance environmental preservation and conservation of natural resources with increased emphasis upon the future. This 'green paradigm' is filtering through many industries, resulting in increased pressure upon corporations interacting with the environment to adapt business practices in a 'responsible' manner, considerate to the environmental and social structure upon which the destination is based. This increasingly encompasses all stakeholders within the Tourism and Hospitality Industries.

Findings of interviews conducted as part of the research process with Managing Directors of numerous National and International hotel chains based on Phi Phi and Phuket have confirmed an adoption of the 'Responsible' paradigm, evidenced through increasingly strict environmental and corporate social responsibility practices. Whilst it is noted that, tourists are becoming increasingly discerning and environmentally aware with regard to their travel choices (Poon 1993) one might argue that to pursue 'responsible' business practices offers competitive advantage in marketing terms, thus adoption of such policies may be driven by dual objectives. There is therefore growing evidence to suggest that the sustainable future of a destination area may be better served by accommodation typologies that pursue a policy of 'corporate social responsibility'. However, particularly in less developed countries, it is the larger national and international chain that has the financial capability to do as such. This therefore presents a challenge to the feasibility of sustainable development as a concept, as it is often found that the introduction of larger tourism businesses results in significant economic leakages and dilution of what is deemed, 'local'.

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