



The Indian Ocean Tsunami and Tourism

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The tsunami inundated some prime tourism destinations. Reconstruction of hotels is underway, but will the poor workers and entrepreneurs be able to participate? This Opinion argues that strategies for pro-poor tourism¹ are needed to enable the livelihoods dependent on tourism to be rebuilt, alongside the hotels.

The immediate impact on the tourism industry has been enormous. Many of the areas hit – though not Indonesia's Aceh province where the greatest losses were suffered – were prime tourism resorts. Even resorts that were not hit by the wave have seen this season's tourism collapse, as tourists stay away. In Sri Lanka, 42% of the tourism plant was coastal, and over 60% of tourism plant was not affected by the wave, but have been hit by empty beds. Even in Phuket (Thailand), the Tourist Office reports that 90% of Phuket remains intact. But with tourists at bay, those who did survive have seen their livelihoods also disintegrate. In Sri Lanka, for example, 200,000 people were directly employed in tourism, and many more indirectly living from it. Thousands are now jobless.

Already much is changing. Repair and reconstruction of hotels is underway. In the Maldives, 80% of resorts are in full operation. In Thailand, beaches that were swamped have been cleaned up and reopened. Kpipi Beach is under repair, and Krabi is back to normal, though devastated areas, such as Kowlak, are off the tourism map for now. At a meeting with the UK Travel and Tourism Industry at the Foreign Office on January 17th, the overwhelming message from the governments of Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Thailand was 'send the tourists back'. Thailand, for example, has said it does not need any further financial donations from overseas – but it does want tourist dollars. While tourists stay away, the economy cannot recover.

Whether it takes a couple of months or twelve, the mainstream industry in the different destinations will – drawing on insurance, great effort, and tourists' relatively short-term memories – bounce back, as it has in other destinations that have suffered catastrophe.

The question is though, will the livelihoods of the poorer workers and entrepreneurs recover? How will

the taxis, sewing machines, fishing boats, bullock carts, and tools be provided that enable the poor to provide their goods and services to hotels and tourists? Beyond just recovery, will the rebuilding of tourism be used as an opportunity to develop tourism in ways that optimise benefits for local people, and minimise costs for their natural resources?

What is needed is not just restoration of tourism, but integration of pro-poor tourism strategies² into reconstruction. What this will mean in practice will vary by area, but three key components would be:

- Integrating local voices and local concerns directly into the tourism action plans that will be developed and implemented at local level; not restoring business as usual, but building a better model of tourism.
- Hotel design and rebuild maximising use of local materials and artisanal skills; using the bulldozers and diggers not only for building hotels, but simultaneously building homes and infrastructure for local communities; installing efficient technology that mean hotels will use less water and produce less waste, reducing their competition with neighbours.
- Ensuring that micro-tourism entrepreneurs have the credit and resources to re-establish their businesses, and that red tape does not mean that their loss of paperwork strangles their business; beyond restoration, developing tourism in ways that open business opportunities for new micro-businesses to supply the industry and have access to tourists. This will mean partnerships at destination level to bring together suppliers, hoteliers, restaurateurs and ground handlers, to explore what local goods can be supplied, and how.

The World Tourism Organisation has already held emergency meetings and is meeting in Phuket later this month. It is liaising with UN organisations to integrate reconstruction of tourism into wider plans. Within the UK tourism industry, many companies have already raised funds for the international humanitarian effort or for specific local partners, and the industry as a whole

1. see www.propoortourism.org.uk

2. see www.odi.org.uk/pptourism/strategies.html

is discussing how to help.

However, three unavoidable tensions arise in reconstructing tourism in a more responsible way:

One is the tension between rebuilding now, because operators need beds filled, staff need wages, and entrepreneurs need tourists – and taking a slower-paced longer-term approach that says this time we'll do it differently. Many of the governments are saying that it will be different: Phuket is being used as a model for sustainable tourism for the rest of the country, according to Richard Hume of the [Tourism Authority of Thailand](#).

However, the business imperative is to get business going. How easy will it be to then start prioritising community involvement, entrepreneurial opportunities and environmental standards, once operations are back in full swing?

Another tension, that is far from unique to this situation, is between being responsive to what is needed on the ground, while seeking to promote a different and pro-poor vision of how tourism can be. Will the governments, municipalities, tourism associations and hotels themselves seize the opportunity to develop an approach that prioritises local economic development through tourism? If not, what is the position of outsiders, who are supporting local reconstruction, then to demand or encourage it? One answer is to engage – quickly and persuasively – with decision-makers at the top. Another is to ensure that funding for technical support has a strong focus on skills in these 'pro-poor', 'responsible' and 'sustainable' tourism approaches. A third, and essential counter-balance to all the top-down reconstruction efforts, is to ensure that local people and voices are empowered to participate in the reconstruction, not just as casual labour, but in making decisions and demands. [Tourism Concern](#) is catalysing further discussion of ideas on how the poor can be given a voice in reconstruction.

The third tension lies in the need to get tourists back to the Indian Ocean. Livelihoods depend on them. Thailand will recommence marketing in February. The destinations are urging UK operators to emphasise the welcome that awaits their guests and requesting Foreign Office to be more and more geographically specific in its travel advisories. [Responsibletravel.com](#) is offering holidays that specifically benefit local communities in the Indian Ocean. But how soon will tourists go? If Indian Ocean sales are boosted simply via lifetime bargains, the economic boost will be constrained. But unmitigated marketing of the smiling welcome that awaits could

well – in the short term – produce revulsion rather than bookings. International tourists, not generally known for their astuteness on development issues, in this case are all well aware of the grieving that must now permeate. Whether a more subtle message – we need you to come and enjoy yourself – would work remains to be seen, were any advertising executive happy to even try. By next year, this problem will have waned, but the voice from many destinations is already clear – they cannot wait that long.

If it is not too offensive to draw lessons for tourism from such a human disaster, two of note emerge. One is not new: the contribution of tourism to development is never so widely recognised as when tourism collapses – as has been seen through other recent crises, particularly 9/11. The second is distinctive of this disaster, in that it demonstrates the impact of travel to an area on westerners' empathy with disaster and their desire to respond to it. Public donations have so greatly outweighed donations to previous disasters, or to the ongoing daily losses of life in poorer countries, partly because so many in the West have been there themselves.

Ironically, it was just six days before Boxing Day, that the Maldives graduated from being one of the world's 49 'Least Developed Countries'. Their government ascribes this mainly to tourism – which accounts for 80% of GDP, and which was built from scratch since the seventies under strict regulations. We have to hope that instead of the tsunami knocking back development, in the longer term it will instead provide opportunities for several countries to use their tourism as an even more effective vehicle for local economic development.

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Notes

Further information on pro-poor tourism: www.propoortourism.org.uk

Information on ODI's programme on business implementation of pro-poor tourism: www.pptpilot.org.za

The meeting at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at which comments above were made, was the 'Indian Ocean Long-term Recovery Meeting' organised by the Travel Foundation in conjunction with its AGM, on January 17th 2005. www.thetravelfoundation.org.uk

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