

Solidarity with the Victims of the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean – Solidarity in Tourism?

The flood waves of 26th December killed probably more than 200.000 people, left half a million people injured and five million homeless. Whole coastal stretches of India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and East Africa as well as the Maldives, Andaman and Nicobar Islands have suffered devastation. The livelihoods of millions of fishermen, farmers and their families in the coastal regions were wiped out. And also the "paradise destinations" of large numbers of holiday makers have all of a sudden been destroyed. The scale of destruction and human suffering brought by the tsunami has led to an unprecedented wave of solidarity and donations worldwide.

Even many days after the tsunami, the extent of destruction caused by the flood waves of 26th December remains inconceivable, and it has not at all been fully assessed in all of the regions affected. In many places, relief operations are functioning effectively – but not in all of the places in need. At the same time, huge amounts of aid and donations are expected to pour in, while people the regions affected are still in a state of shock and are hardly able to think about their future and the development of their communities. Wherever regions or entire countries strongly depend on the tourism sector, there are loud calls to quickly rebuild the tourism infrastructure, and reconstruction has already started in various places. The tourism industry is calling for international solidarity while tourists in Western countries are all but sure whether holidays in the affected areas would at this stage be appropriate, or possible at all. But what does solidarity in tourism really mean?

1. To shift the focus from "tourism destinations" onto the people most in need of support and help

In many places hit by the tsunami disaster, both reporters as well as relief agencies arrived fast, also because many thousands of Western tourists were among those affected. This contributed to trigger the unprecedented wave of solidarity and donations. Governments as well as insurance companies in the most important tourist sending countries have promised fast and unbureaucratic aid to those affected and to the families of the victims – promises that are now to be honoured. But the tourist and tourist destination-centred view on the Indian Ocean region, dominated by the Western media, also led to the neglect of people and entire regions in need – regions not involved in tourism, some of which received aid only much later – too late for many of them – if at all.

Most worrying in this context is the fate of the inhabitants of the coastal regions of Burma, the Indian Andaman and Nicobar islands and the coast of Somalia. Every day we receive queries, e.g. related to the situation in Burma. However, three weeks after the tsunami, we get only very little information, which is often contradictory and which makes us assume that there may be an acute situation of crisis in many of the areas concerned.

The number of people who died in Burma is officially quoted as 90 by the military government, with another 5,000 to 7,000 people homeless. On the basis of eye witness reports and data laboriously gathered from various villages and islands in the South of Burma, representatives of the Burmese Democracy Movement and of refugee organisations in the area bordering Thailand put the death toll at more than 400, and the number of people in need of emergency relief at 30,000. Drawing upon its own sources of information, the "Democratic Voice of Burma" (DVB), a media office run by Burmese journalists in exile, estimates that several thousand people in Burma have fallen victims to the tsunami. Tens of

thousands of people may have lost their homes and livelihoods. Most affected, it seems, were the so-called "sea gypsies", a group of indigenous people who predominantly inhabited the islands and coastal regions in the South of Burma and neighbouring Thailand. US satellite photos showed few signs of damage in Burma, but considering the major damages in the North of Thailand, e.g. in the tourist resort of Khao Lak, which is situated only a mere 200 kilometres from the border, this does not seem credible. But apparently the Burmese military regime makes it impossible for reporters to get a clear picture of the situation, and for aid to be brought in. The Burmese people in the areas affected in the North of Thailand also urgently require aid and support. Experts estimate that, before the tsunami struck, at least 70,000 migrants workers from Burma were registered in Phuket and PhangNga, and many thousands more were living along the Thai coast, doing jobs in tourism or leading precarious lives as refugees or illegal immigrants. Many of them have lost everything due to the tsunami, and if they now come to seek assistance, they risk to be deported to Burma by the Thai authorities.

With regard to the fate of the population in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, there is not much clear information either. The Indian government considers the archipelago as a protected area for indigenous peoples, and access for visitors is partly barred. Over the past few years, however, more and more Indian business people have settled on the archipelago. The little information we get from the Andaman and Nicobar islands give rise to the fear that especially the indigenous inhabitants of the islands are in urgent need of international aid, which they are not getting now, because of the restrictive immigration rules originally introduced for their own protection. The Nicobar islands are in close proximity to the epicentre of the tsunami. In view of the floods and devastation, eyewitnesses estimate that 10,000 people on the Nicobar islands may have lost their lives, and that most inhabitants may have lost their homes and livelihoods and are now in acute danger from cholera and other epidemics. The people evacuated from the islands were mostly Western tourists and Indian businessmen. Furthermore, survivors from the Nicobar islands were taken north to the Andaman islands. However, anthropologists who have been doing research on the islands for years have reported bad conditions in the refugee camps. Now and then, small bits of news – which give reason for hope just as doubt - reach us through news agencies, saying that a tribe on the Andamans so far feared missing, may have survived the tsunami without losses because the indigenous people were able to interpret the signs of nature and take refuge in time. The Andaman and Nicobar islands are inhabited by indigenous people with so far little contact to the outside world. At the moment they seem to be lacking everything: health care, clean drinking water, clothes. What - one worries - will now become of them?

The same question must be asked with regard to Somalia, where many people had taken refuge on the coast from the confusion of the civil war. The media reported that immediately before the tsunami, when the water withdrew from the coast revealing rich fish resources and lobster, thousands of people had rushed towards the sea, and lost their lives in the flood waves. Their boats and many of their homes were destroyed. For them, aid has only been coming in very slowly.

2. No hasty rebuilding of tourism, but efficient aid to those who need it the most. No reconstruction without full participation of the concerned communities and clear economic, social and ecological criteria for an equitable and sustainable development

The tsunami disaster has led to an unprecedented willingness to help and donate money. So far, about four billion US dollars of foreign aid have been pledged, and about twice as much is estimated to have been made available in the form of individual donations. No doubt, these include certain questionable fundraising efforts, e.g. the motives of private donors, or states that compete in pledging assistance. And one may certainly argue that the US continue to

spend several times the amount pledged as assistance for the victims of the tsunami on the war in Iraq and against terrorism. Nevertheless, the extent of the spontaneous global readiness to help is extremely impressive: First Nations from North America wishing to help tribal people in the Indian Ocean region, as well as all the children who are now robbing their piggy banks, or Mozambique as one of the world's poorest countries, or North Korea which has been labelled a "rogue state", who are now making funding available to help the victims of the tsunami. The catastrophe in the Indian Ocean has triggered solidarity which is not only needed, but which is also a sign of hope and of trust in the relief agencies and eventually in the international community that even the worst disasters can be handled. May all the money, unlike in the case of previous pledges, actually be transferred and may it reach the right places, i.e. the people who need it the most.

The huge amounts of aid, however, may also pose new problems for the communities. What can and shall they do in order to protect the interests of the local population? In order to assert the needs of the population and to ensure their participation in all decisions that will affect future development, which is – as is widely recognised - a precondition for sustainable development? The flood of donations can easily turn into a nightmare for the people affected who, after the tsunami, are still in a state of shock. Development experts fear that under enormous pressure due to the dependence on tourism, and with the funds suddenly available, aid and investment may first of all be directed to where it will quickly yield high returns – to the tourism sector. Tourism is again being promoted as an engine of economic growth, despite the fact that in the areas affected by the tsunami, we find many examples of tourism developments having contributed to the impoverishment of the local population and to their marginalisation: Farmers having lost their land, fishermen having lost access to the beach, families becoming poorer because their income does not take pace with the increasing costs of living in tourist destinations, women and children becoming subject to exploitation and being forced into prostitution. Many of them belong to the poorest groups of the population who were most affected by the flood waves.

In addition, the fast and uncontrolled development of export-oriented industries such as tourism and shrimp farming in coastal areas has turned out to be one of the factors that made the flood waves a disaster in many areas. Not only nature, but also man-made detrimental development, eventually led to the tsunami's disastrous effects. It is not without reason that many of the coastal areas flooded by the tsunami have for a long time been „untouched paradises“. There were no constructions exactly because of the vulnerability of these areas. Beach resorts as well as the many shrimp farms represent a considerable threat to the ground water reserves and the fragile coastal ecosystems. The development of infrastructure has led to the destruction of mangroves and coral reefs, and has destroyed natural defenses. Sri Lanka has now declared to reinforce a coastal protection zone of 300 meters from the shoreline. But this has raised new concerns among the fishing communities and beachfront people who are facing eviction, while there are already discussions on exceptions to be granted to the large tourist resorts. In principle, India already has a Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) of 500 meters from the beach. However, frequent violations by international hotel chains have occurred, for example in Goa, because punishment was hardly ever enforced, or turned out to be rather mild. Due to the tsunami, entire communities have lost their livelihoods – communities, who had never been directly involved in tourism or shrimp farming, who had not benefited from this "coastal development" and who – most probably – have never been consulted about it.

The Asian Development Bank, in its initial assessment published in mid-January, estimates that the tsunami could throw nearly two million additional people into poverty. However, the tragedy could on the medium term also provide a surge of economic activity in the region. Tourism and shrimp farming are among the key words now and then mentioned in this context. The World Tourism Organization, which was in 2003 officially made a specialised

agency of the United Nations, is also confident with regard to the growth of tourism in Asian countries. The tourism industry has over the past few years seriously been put to the test. Despite financial crisis, terrorist attacks, SARS and bird flu it has been following a hopeful trend upwards. In a special session at the beginning of February in the Thai island of Phuket, World Tourism Organization (WTO) Executive Council will deliberate with organisations, investors and the tourism industry on the needs in connection with the rebuild tourism. It is not clear from the announcement whether representatives of civil society and of the population of the areas affected are also invited to attend the consultation. It would not be for the first time if they were left out. The World Tourism Organization, the members of which are governments, authorities and tourism companies, has recently introduced a programme on how to make tourism – after all the most important economic sector in the world – contribute to poverty alleviation. In this context, it explicitly points out the need for participation of those affected. However, the programme, launched in a major effort, has so far only paid lip service to its objectives, and has not yet shown any actual results. In the meantime, most of the countries affected by the Tsunami have promised to rebuild tourism as quickly as possible. This does not come as a surprise, as many of these countries are strongly dependent on tourism. Under this kind of pressure, there is little room for the discussion needed on what dependence actually means for the inhabitants of the countries concerned, and how vulnerable to crises and disasters this pillar of the economy actually is. In many places, however, representatives of local communities could provide valuable information on these impacts and contribute know-how on sustainable development – including or not tourism, but involving all those concerned – a development, which can meet the basic needs of all citizens without overexploiting resources and destroying the foundations of life.

However, even the best initiatives cannot develop sustainably if the international financial and trade system does not offer a suitable framework. In the aftermath of the tsunami, The Paris Club has agreed on a debt moratorium for the countries affected. On the short run the pressure to develop tourism might therefore be slightly reduced, since tourism is also being promoted to earn foreign exchange for debt servicing. Nevertheless, developing countries worldwide are under enormous pressure due to the competition in tourism. When it comes to promoting international tourism, they continue to offer more and more incentives to lure foreign investors and tourism companies, offering more and more favourable conditions such as tax exemptions for ten to twenty years, free repatriation of profits as well as infrastructure such as roads, electricity, etc. Eventually, these incentives represent generous subsidies offered by tourism destinations and their tax payers in support of the leisure experiences of foreign guests and foreign tourism companies. Now the liberalisation granted to private companies is to be extended even further. In the current negotiations on services under the World Trade Organization industrialised countries are requesting developing countries to further open up their markets. This may include the possibility of foreign majority shareholdings in tourism companies, curbing the possibilities of communities and host regions to develop tourism in accordance with the needs of the local population, e.g. when setting social and ecological standards for businesses wishing to acquire licences, or when introducing regulations to favour the employment and training of local people, or when determining the ecological carrying capacity and when passing environmental protection legislation. Therefore, it is now necessary to stop negotiations on the further liberalisation of global markets, especially in services such as tourism, until the extent of the impact of the tsunami is clear and the affected countries and their people have developed a clear vision of the regulations and laws needed for sustainable reconstruction.

It remains, however, extremely problematic for the international community if this disaster, having at one fell swoop brought death and devastation to the region from South East Asia to East Africa, generates such major aid pledges and special conditions for those affected, while other disasters, which are often slowly “creeping”, never trigger comparable international solidarity. These include civil wars, AIDS or even tuberculosis, a curable

disease killing 1.8 million people per year. And if we followed, over a period of one year, with similar attention as after the tsunami what happens in these very countries affected by the tsunami, we would be witnesses to an even more terrible tragedy which takes unfolds in slow motion: In the countries on the Gulf of Bengal, several million people die every year due to lack of safe drinking water. In view of the fate of each individual victim, disasters must not be played off against each other. A debt moratorium for the countries affected by the tsunami is not a solution; it rather seems to be a piece of candy that the rich industrialised countries now quickly and without major losses pull out of the hat in order to avoid tackling the debt issue as such – despite the fact that proposals for fair, comprehensive debt relief such as the HIPC initiative for heavily indebted poor countries are already on the table. The donations generously made available under the impression of the tsunami disaster cannot replace long-term commitment on the side of the industrialised countries towards developing countries. But it is this very commitment that is at risk, as many industrialised countries are currently cutting down on official development assistance, as part of general budget cuts. This also calls into question whether the widely endorsed Millennium Development Goals aimed at global poverty reduction will be reached.

The tsunami disaster, as terrible as it is, is one in a never-ending series of disasters, revealing the structural poverty of the poorest and most disadvantaged people on this planet. Ad-hoc solidarity action cannot alleviate this kind of poverty. What is needed are rather long-term, sustainable solutions which can only be achieved by a consistent political struggle for a fairer global economic order. We can only hope that the enormous solidarity shown by the international community in the aftermath of the shock of the 26th December tsunami will contribute to more understanding for the disadvantaged, and will also give a boost to a policy of solidarity that will benefit the disadvantaged.

3) To what extent local people benefit from tourism? How can they assert their rights? And how can the environment, which is the basis of their livelihood, be protected? – These are the questions which must guide the decisions and choices of travellers and tourism entrepreneurs. Solidarity in tourism means also to set the course now to build binding, long-term partnerships for an environmentally sustainable and socially responsible development of tourism

Many Western tourists are actually faced with the dilemma whether to go on a holiday they already booked in an area affected by the tsunami, or not. Many tour operators try to provide information and criteria for decision-making that are to the best possible extent in the interest of the consumer, and offer the possibility for cancellations and changes of reservations. At the same time, the tourism industry and tourism authorities in the countries affected by the tsunami strongly appeal to the solidarity of Western tourists not to abandon the areas in this moment of crisis. What means “solidarity” in this context? With whom? And how should consumers decide? There is no simple answer to this question.

Fortunately, not all the hotels and tourist infrastructure in the countries concerned have been affected. In many places, hosts are feverishly working to repair damages and to receive their guests properly, despite all the difficulties involved. To go there can at this time also be a sign of solidarity. A holiday in an area affected by a natural disaster, however, remains problematic. Tourists must try to get a clear picture of the situation in the destination and to reduce their own expectations: How does the population live? Can I be sure that as a tourist I do not represent an additional burden? That I do not get preferential treatment e.g. with regard to the supply of drinking water, while local people are facing various shortages? Not to go there can at this time also be a sign of solidarity – but only if the solidarity with those affected finds concrete expression in other ways, for example by cutting down on spending during one’s holiday and by donating the money saved, by continuing to gather information

on the situation in the area concerned and by possibly going there at a later point of time. To simply cancel a trip and to shift to some other "paradise" is at this stage certainly not an adequate answer.

It is equally problematic if tour operators now simply "remove" resorts that have suffered damages, or entire packages from their catalogues. Do local businesses, in addition to the devastation caused by the tsunami, also have to accept the loss of income which was guaranteed by tour operators in their contracts for this season? Will they receive any compensation? Or do tour operators assist with the reconstruction of resorts? And what about the staff? Do especially the powerful, integrated multinationals make sure that their staff are sufficiently insured, or that they find other employment within the company? And what about all the others trying to make a living in tourism – the souvenir vendors, taxi drivers, guides etc.? How will they manage? It is well known that in tourism jobs, people do not earn incomes which would allow for extended periods of time without work. So many questions arise with regard to the responsibility of tourism companies: How much and what kind of solidarity do they show towards their partners and staff in times of crisis?

No doubt, many employees of Western tourism companies have also done their bit to help the rescue and aid efforts. No doubt, many tour operators will now have to handle the losses which, in view of the cheap packages and tight margins in the tourism industry, are probably difficult to absorb. It is not sufficient, however, to simply keep a collecting box on the counter and to continue to appeal to the solidarity of tourists while quickly trying to compensate losses in the Asia business by selling other destinations. Sustainable tourism, as tour operators nowadays like to market it, is based on binding, long-term, fair business relations with partners in the destinations. The tsunami disaster has shown how urgent it is to build this kind of partnerships in tourism.

The real tragedy, however, is that it requires a disaster such as the tsunami for ethical questions in tourism to be raised: The pictures of well-nourished, beer consuming tourists enjoying the Thai beaches while in the background bulldozers are removing dead bodies and debris have caused public outrage, moral indignation and strong debates. As it was clarified later, the men shown in the pictures were tourists who had selflessly helped in the cleanup and their photo was taken while they were having a break. But, obviously it needs this kind of pictures along with the knowledge about the disaster to cause outcry, while actually on each holiday in a developing country well-nourished Western tourists pursue their leisure activities while the local population, often in the close neighbourhood, lives in extreme poverty.

Moral indignation doesn't help. We rather need answers to the question if and how tourism can contribute to effectively reducing poverty and to allowing the population in tourist destinations to live their lives in dignity. Do local people benefit from tourism, whether they are directly or indirectly involved in tourism? Which offers, which form of tourism should travellers choose so that the population will profit to the largest extent possible? These are questions which every tourist and every tour operator has to ask themselves, not only after the tsunami. There is a need for a kind of solidarity which goes beyond the dreams of a "holiday paradise" and the immediate business interests, and which is reflected in a long-term interest in the fate of people living in a tourist destination. There is a need for a kind of solidarity that remains alive and continues even when the holidays are over and when disasters do not make headlines.

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