
NGOs, Disasters, and Advocacy: Caught between the Prophet and the Shepherd Boy

by Alan Whites

Introduction

Conflict and disasters haunted the 1990s, challenging the complacency of a world which, official development assistance figures suggest, is increasingly bereft of any kind of internationalist ideal. Complex Humanitarian Emergencies (CHEs), famines, and civil strife have forced themselves onto the media agenda, and to that of the politicians, thus creating a more dangerous and unstable environment for NGOs. From Bosnia to Rwanda and beyond, those same NGOs have been successively wrong-footed by the policy analysis and advocacy implications of each emergency. Too often, aid agencies are essentially responding to the last emergency, and so fall short of the mark.

The implications of the increase in internal conflicts have not been lost on the relief capability of the NGOs involved, or on theoretical thinking—which, thanks to writers such as Hugo Slim and Mark Duffield, has largely been transformed. The flowering of work designed to research conflict, and new methodologies in reconciliation, have also seen some aspects of NGO adaptability at its best. But, in the field of advocacy, NGOs have failed to reconcile the implications of CHEs with the underlying obligations of humanitarianism.

NGOs have become trapped by conflicting fears, each apparently equally valid and historically real. There is the spectre of Rwanda and the failure to

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raise the alarm over a situation that resulted in the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people. After Rwanda, a new concern for early warning led aid agencies to enter a field of policy analysis designed to create the potential for early action. This became known as preventive advocacy: the articulation of a potential or imminent disaster with the intention that policy-makers, whether local or international, will act to avert a crisis. This was the NGO community seeking to act as Old Testament Prophet, standing up to proclaim the potential for disaster should the world fail to change its ways.

This new approach was given its first real test in 1996. That year some agencies, notably Oxfam GB and World Vision, were already predicting a serious escalation in the conflict in eastern Zaire—with potentially serious humanitarian consequences. Large numbers of Hutu refugees within reach of the Rwandan border, plus the deteriorating situation within Africa's largest state, seemed to suggest that preventive advocacy was justified. In the weeks that followed, these organizations and others called for the world to intervene to secure safe access for humanitarian workers to these refugees. The international community, its new-found interventionist tendencies tested by Bosnia and Somalia, seemed reluctant to concur. In the heat of the advocacy drive, NGO opinion split—with the Save the Children Fund (SCF) in the UK declaring intervention unfeasible and unwise.

The charge that NGOs had exaggerated in order to fuel public appeals was inevitably difficult to refute—stories of impending genocide had failed to materialise (though massacres did occur later), leading to a sense that the public had been misled. Some in the NGO community began to point to the dangers of preventive advocacy; fears were raised which were also ultimately disproved, i.e. that NGO credibility would be lost, which would make advocacy of any kind more difficult. By 1998, when the famine in



Sudan was coming to light, this concern was being given full voice. NGOs were warned not to be the Shepherd Boy, crying wolf too often until finally unable to raise any alarm at all.

This is the continuing dilemma for all advocacy-oriented NGOs. Is it preferable for aid agencies to listen to their prophetic calling and risk their hard-earned credibility, or should NGOs instead be wary of calling wolf too often?

Advocacy and disasters

We are increasingly told that advocacy and awareness-raising are the future of NGOs (particularly Northern NGOs), although precise definitions are rarely offered. The rising numbers of NGOs that are adopting advocacy as an approach, coupled with the diversity of views within the development community, have created considerable room for divergence. It is not surprising, therefore, that any reference to advocacy automatically raises numerous—perfectly appropriate—questions along the lines of: what is the aim of advocacy, on whose behalf is it undertaken, and with what legitimacy?

Advocacy is in theory related to one of the higher ideals of the NGO world—the search for justice. At a more prosaic level, advocacy is simply a tool or set of tools—mechanisms through which NGOs try to push their own agenda onto that of others. Most NGOs would state that this tool is used to support Southern communities whether through specific requests for action at the local level, or through the call for changes to the macro-context which shapes the lives of the poor. Like all tools, advocacy can be dangerous as well as useful, both for an NGO's own staff and for the poor whom it is trying to help. This is especially so in a disaster setting, where background analysis can be rushed and the agency may be completely unfamiliar with the context.

Indeed, for much of the 1990s, pressures on NGOs to be seen to be involved as well as informed (not least the pressures of fundraising) led to a considerable increase in NGO comment on each new geopolitical problem which arose.

De Waal neatly summarised the situation: *In recent years, international relief organisations . . . have become increasingly significant political actors, both in the African countries where they work, and in western countries where they undertake publicity, lobbying and advocacy. They have expanded their mandate to encompass human rights and conflict resolution. The call for foreign military intervention is perhaps the most striking example of 'humanitarianism unbound:' liberated from the Cold War straightjacket, international relief organisations in strategically unimportant countries like Somalia and Rwanda can make an extraordinarily bold call, apparently unimpeded by limits on their mandate and expertise, or by accountability. In an ever wider arena, relief agencies are now empowered to make important political judgements, implicit and explicit, which go far beyond their traditional role.*

Hugo Slim has also written of the crisis in values affecting NGOs. Slim notes that: In their choice of position, more and more NGOs and UN forces are adopting a robust form of impartiality which allows them not just to dish out relief in proportion to needs, but also to dish out criticism (advocacy) or military bombardment in proportion to human rights wrong-doing. This hardened impartiality may be the NGO posture of choice in the future, but it will have operational implications and no doubt be met by an equally hard response on occasion.

The retreat from advocacy

The current crisis of confidence among NGOs regarding this more 'robust' position has been largely a result of their attempt to rein in the excesses. Valid criticism has also arisen from the temptation for each agency to comment on every conflict regardless of experience, qualifications, or sometimes even presence. The negative reactions to these dynamics, both internal and external, are healthy, but create their own dangers if they are pressed too far.

The primary concern here is that the current loss of confidence may cause a retreat from preventive advocacy (i.e. those actions taken to raise awareness in time to avert the fulfilment of the worst-case scenario). CHEs are not static; they are in reality a sequence of events forming an often lengthy process. With in this context, external action usually arrives late in the day. It is this

problem which early warning and preventive advocacy have the potential to change.

Accountability and credibility

Support for risk taking and a prophetic function in advocacy should not be read as *carte blanche* for the well-meaning mistake. Without a balance of responsibilities, such an argument can degenerate into the simplistic perspective that we 'have to do our best and make the most informed judgement possible'. It is in the interest of NGOs to go beyond such thinking and to establish a broader understanding of advocacy and its risks. Partly this is a question of protecting our credibility. More importantly, however, it is an extension of that critical obligation to donors and the poor alike—the need for accountability, transparency, and impact.

Advocacy has sometimes been less scrutinised in relation to these standards than have other NGO efforts. Yet advocacy, like any area of NGO activity, should live or die by its usefulness to the poor. An emphasis on clear and measurable objectives must be complemented by a willingness to monitor and evaluate results. The infrequency with which NGOs tend to consult either donors, policy makers, or partners on the effectiveness of their advocacy work raises questions of its own, questions which the rapidly developing nature of CHEs often allow to be quietly left behind. It is, however, precisely during CHEs and concomitant public appeals that transparency and accountability should become an acute NGO concern.

CHEs happen within a context of global policy. Ongoing work in partnership with organisations such as the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to create a better context for assistance should not be limited to policy-makers alone. NGOs will have a critical role if the constituency for timely interventions is to stretch beyond Washington, London, and the UN Security Council to the wider public in both the North and South.

Credibility for whom?

Those who argue that accuracy must be the predominant factor in any advocacy or awareness raising work during emergencies do so for a number of reasons. For some it is a question of jealously protecting the power of the

NGO message, power which rests on the credibility of the commentator. There can be no doubt that we ignore the need for credibility at our peril—NGOs have no divine right to the ear of the public or of policy makers. Our right to be heard has to be earned. We must also, however, be conscious that credibility can become an end in itself—rather like money it can be permanently hoarded and never put to good use.

Inevitably there are those who will be quick to point to what they perceive to be scaremongering and inaccuracy on the part of NGOs. Potential criticism is inevitable but should not silence those NGOs who believe that their own credibility can be used to draw attention to humanitarian crisis. It is for NGOs to make a commitment never to seek to raise international concern regarding humanitarian crises in any context in which accurate statistics remain more a hope than expectation.

Credibility is simply a resource—something to be marshalled for future use. The protection of NGOs' credibility becomes an offensive luxury when it is placed above the inherent obligation which rests on all humanitarian NGOs to save lives. Credibility is a prerequisite for our right to be heard, but we must accept that advocacy inherently means risking reputations—they are usually, after all, our only collateral.

Preventive advocacy and motives for raising the alarm

The newly reorganised Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in the UK, which combines NGOs and the media, faced its first significant test with the conflict-induced crisis in the Sudan in early summer 1998. The DEC prevaricated for weeks before eventually being pushed into an appeal by the pointed criticism of television journalists filming in feeding centres. The lasting impression for many was a degree of inter-agency competitiveness that was strange in a group intended to coordinate efforts during crisis. Accusations of agencies briefing the press both against other agencies and against the DEC itself were followed by suggestions from the British Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short that the motives of the agencies concerned were to a large degree financial.

There is nothing new about the issue of motives and competitiveness in situations in which the public are known to give generously. Nor the idea

that fundraising drives organizational agendas — but it remains an oversimplification of the internal dynamics involved; particularly the relationships between fundraisers and desk officers. In reality, the drive to raise funds during emergencies is both market and field driven; responding to emergencies is expensive, as is the rehabilitation phase which follows—for which funds are far harder to raise.

NGOs have their own agendas and suffer from many faults. Even so, the pronouncements of NGOs during disasters, and the partnerships with the media which they forge, may also be the only way to press for the issue of saving lives to be added to the policy agenda. The recommendations may be flawed—and unfortunately there are no easy ways to guarantee NGOs' wisdom. Nevertheless, pressure for action to prevent avoidable fatalities creates a concern which is both invaluable and life-saving.

Conclusion—the impetus to advocacy

In the field of NGO advocacy and awareness-raising, the humanitarian ethic is not entirely without meaning—even during disasters. Aid agencies do not exist to raise money—though cynics can easily believe otherwise and will find support for their view in every appeal and all home-country expenditure. But in reality, few Northern aid agencies do not connect their ultimate purpose to the improvement of lives in the South. In emergency relief contexts, the humanitarian ethic increasingly means a willingness to deal with complex external demands, rigorous monitoring, and physical danger. The deaths of ICRC workers in Chechnya served to underline the altered reality of relief assistance in a world in which NGOs are no longer considered to be neutrals. It is important to recognise inherent problems and dangers. This is a complex area and a major contributory factor to the unrealistic expectations facing today's relief workers, who must now provide policy analysis as well as managing interventions on the ground. Recognition of the dangers, however, does not diminish the usefulness of the tool—advocacy does have the potential to bring the attention of policy makers to bear on an issue, and ultimately to secure action. It is, therefore, not a tool to be given up easily.

The importance of recognising the place of the humanitarian ethic within aid

agency responses to disaster is partly therefore, a need to reflect the real linkages between headquarters staff and people on the ground. Equally, the humanitarian ethic, and the impetus from the field, should be the driving force behind the advocacy work (including media awareness-raising) which may be essential if early warning is to be made real. As an industry, NGOs should safeguard (even if for some it is a question of 'tolerating') preventive advocacy whenever such advocacy is based both on the best information available and on a genuine desire to save lives.

A pressing burden of responsibility on NGOs that are involved in relief work is, therefore, to view advocacy as going beyond the immediate and local. Advocacy strategies should be coherent and medium term, and so based on a fuller appreciation of successive international responses to emergencies than can be provided by a single incident.

NGOs remain a central voice in the battle to seriously address the world's response to CHEs. New foreign policy initiatives and any willingness to take rapid action to avert humanitarian disaster remains dependent both on the work of the media and on NGOs' ability to interpret events. The potential not only to save lives in the immediate term, but also to affect long-term thinking on how best to respond in other situations, makes the contribution of NGOs to the discussion a critical part of our humanitarian work. We cannot, therefore, shun the risks involved in such preventive interventions; but neither can we afford to avoid the responsibilities entailed in such engagement. ▶

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Community Based Preparedness, Prevention and Mitigation: Sustainable Approaches

by Dr. Dipankar Das Gupta

Nations across the globe are now committed to minimize the effects of the natural disasters on communities - to reduce injuries and loss of lives, property and environmental damages and the social, economical disruption caused by extreme natural events. The ultimate goal is to keep hazards from becoming disasters.

There are a number of ways to achieve, or rather work towards this goal, but there is one that is the most important and the foundation for all others - it is through the creation of disaster-resilient communities. Recent approaches in disaster management in different countries is based on a shift in the prevailing emergency management framework to disaster risk management, which calls for proactive disaster management activities with the local communities having a key role.

There is a gradual but slow acceptance of the need to reduce the over-emphasis on relief and reconstruction and have an increasing focus on prevention, preparedness, early response and mitigation. Total risk management also incorporates the involvement of multiple stakeholders instead of the earlier approach where the government was the only responder to emergencies.

Involvement and participation of the local communities in disaster reduction programmes receives the highest priority in the present approach as they are affected by the disaster, and more importantly, they are the first responders to the event. Irrespective of the scale of the event, it is the community, which

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suffers its adverse effects. In absence of any specialized skills, they rely on traditional coping and survival mechanisms to face and respond to the event before they start receiving any outside help.

Community Based Disaster Management (CBDM) covers a broad range of interventions, that includes measures, activities, projects, and necessary policy changes that focuses on disaster risk reduction that is designed by the communities at risk and is based on their needs and capacities. It is a unique approach because: (i) it ensures people's participation. The people are the main actors/ motivators/propellers and direct beneficiaries with outsiders having only a supportive and facilitating role. (ii) Its priority is for the most vulnerable groups, families and people in the community. (iii) Community itself identifies specific risk reduction measures through risk analysis. (iv) It recognizes its own existing capacities and coping mechanisms (v) It strives towards resilience with concerted attempt to reduce its vulnerabilities and increase its capacities with linkage between disaster mitigation and local developmental planning.

With the paradigm shift from reactive emergency management to disaster risk reduction, there is an increasing emphasis on proactive pre-disaster intervention - prevention, mitigation and preparedness.

While natural hazards cannot be prevented, measures can be initiated from preventing hazards becoming disasters by making the communities more resilient.

There is an integral relationship between the way we plan and develop our communities-the form, configuration, function, and use-and the ability of these communities to resist the forces of extreme natural events. To make the community resilient, this relationship requires more attention and the support systems are to be developed accordingly. Poverty reduces a household's ability to mitigate and recover from disasters. To implement equitable and sustainable mitigation, vulnerability and poverty have to be jointly addressed through vertical and horizontal integration of development activities and disaster mitigation approaches. All damages - loss of life, and socioeconomic disruption caused by disasters mainly occur due to the failure of the built environment. What is of paramount importance is to

design the support systems in a manner so that affected communities can more effectively resist the physical forces of disasters and bounce back to normalcy in the shortest time.

Sustainability of this programme is dependant on convergence of various elements and principles and the presence of an organizational mechanism. The disaster management committees or grass root disaster response organizations will have to be involved to oversee the risk reduction process. It is not of much relevance whether the CBOs or communities take the initiative for sustainability. Community participation can be sustained if the risk reduction measures respond to their immediate needs and they are involved in the vulnerability analysis and decision-making process to identify relevant, realistic and do-able mitigation and preparedness solutions. Relevance and community participation then create ownership, and with even small success achieved, sustainability of the CBDM can be ensured.

Community based organizations, groups, volunteers; people's representatives at the village/GP level are the key to mobilize the communities. These groups are the focal point for local leadership and responsibility in this CBDM approach. The importance of these grass root leaders lies in the pains they take to educate and motivate the members of the community to prepare for and mitigate the disaster risks. The community volunteers, disaster management committees, and disaster response organizations are the necessary interface or the channel for outsiders such as NGOs or government agencies to assist /support the community. Training programmes, formation and development of volunteers, leadership training, exposure tours, technical assistance and support in fund raising and net working with other stakeholders will increase the capacities of the communities. Information made available to strengthen the process of capacity building will be a source of empowerment of the communities.

Devolution of power to Panchayat acts as a catalyst in sustaining the programme. Sustainable disaster mitigation is possible only with the support of the local governments by facilitating institutionalization and mainstreaming through incorporation of CBDM in the agenda, plans and

programmes of local government units-Panchayat Samitis, Gram Panchayats and Municipalities.

It will not be possible to sustain this process unless the approach leads to more partnerships, mobilization and self reliance, control and access to power, resources, basic services and local decision making to solve the problems faced by the community. It must be ensured by the stakeholders that this approach is based firmly on functional participation, a strong interactive process and community mobilisation.

To replicate, the sustainability, success stories and benefits of one community have to be publicized within and beyond the initially adopted areas. Initial and even small success stories provide the springboard to sustain disaster preparedness and mitigation. The results of the community-based approaches to disaster mitigation are vulnerability reduction solutions, which are more relevant and in tune with what people need and want. Since the community is involved in the whole process of problem identification, their ranking/prioritization, solutions, they feel a sense of ownership in this process. Only when they feel a sense of ownership will they manage, maintain and sustain the process for their own interests. Community participation and ownership builds their confidence, skills and ability to cooperate and to face the challenges posed by the natural hazards.▶

Farce follows Disaster

by Max Martin

Disaster Management is fast emerging as a key concern in India's academic, bureaucratic, scientific, technical and humanitarian circles. India enacted the Disaster Management Act in 2005 which became a law almost at the will of the bureaucrats who framed it.

The drafting period of the Disaster Bill was a missed opportunity for NGOs working in the field of disasters to make it more people-friendly and grassroots-oriented like the Right to Information Act is to a large extent. Some of them did debate it, but the hectic schedules of tsunami relief, the hurry to burn foreign funds and concerns about proposed changes to the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act somehow overshadowed any talk about the relevance of the Act and the possibilities it offered.

Now a draft national Disaster Management Policy is to be released for consultations. It is time for humanitarian workers, legal experts, academics and media professionals to come together and ensure that the policy-makers walk the talk till the last mile.

One Act, half a policy

Let us first examine the Disaster Management Act 2005. It has put in place a three-tier administrative framework to deal with disasters and integrate it with the activities of various government departments and other organisations. It envisages management and mitigation plans, a coordinated and quick response and penal action against those who do not comply with its provisions. The Act has led to the setting up of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), the National Disaster Management

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Institute and the National Disaster Response Force of about 10,000 trained and equipped personnel stationed across the country.

It is a top-down Act, in the classic command-and-control mode. It gives sweeping powers to National and State governments and district collectors and an almost ornamental role for elected local representatives and local communities. Lower courts, cannot entertain any suit against action taken under the provisions of this Act. The Act takes precedence over other laws. It can get further sharpened as it allows the government to iron out difficulties through Gazette notifications in a two-year interval period.

A command-and-control system has its own merits especially in times of an emergency. In fact, the powers vested with the Indian bureaucracy even before the Act made tsunami relief highly efficient here unlike in the free-for-all scenarios in Sri Lanka or Indonesia, where para-dropped international agencies confounded the confusion and misery of people. The provisions of the Disaster Act can be used against discrimination in relief distribution, misappropriation of funds, negligent or dangerous work by companies, departments, agencies and so on. Scores of erring officials, NGO workers and others can be imprisoned under this Act.

However, except in cases of fund misappropriation, false claims and false alarms, the punitive provisions are for “not complying with official orders” or



“obstruction of officials”, not necessarily negligent and dangerous work.

To illustrate this point further, if an NGO builds unliveable temporary shelters as directed by the district collector as most of them did in the tsunami areas they are not really punishable. A large number of the temporary shelters were hot, humid, windowless, flood-prone, wind-blown, rodent-bitten but they are perfectly legal.

On the other hand, if the NGO defied the collector’s order and built comfortable thatch huts, technically its director could be penalised (even imprisoned) on counts of non-compliance, causing danger, neglect and so on. So a law that upholds the infallibility of the IAS is problematic. At least till a time when we have “officially-recognised” rehabilitation codes in the lines of our famous relief codes.

Window of opportunity

The policy-framing period now offers a narrow window of opportunity for people’s groups and humanitarian agencies to work towards a pro-people disaster management regime in India. Discussions with NDMA members and experts reveal the underlying principle of the policy is respect and value for human lives saving the last possible life in effect. The draft policy talks about earthquake-safe building bylaws, disaster management as part of professional degree courses, medical preparedness, amalgamation of the traditional with the state-of-the-art and so on.

As for governance components, the 11th Plan envisages incorporation of a disaster management component in all ministries. Local communities are supposed to be at the centre-stage of disaster management activities. The task of those who uphold civic rights will be to ensure that the policy discourages local officials from imposing uncomfortable box shelters on people affected by disasters. And to see to it that a village chief gets the right to demand the disaster vulnerability map of his neighbourhood from the collectorate or the block office.

Reaching the last mile

The test of a policy is in its implementation. Even if the notions expressed in the policy are noble, implementing them on ground will not be easy. Disaster

managers will have to deal with a system that is red-tape-bound, lethargic, conservative and corrupt in parts; and citizens who tend to be hierarchical in social attitudes and generally indifferent to the safety of oneself and others, when not fatalistic altogether. Then there are conceptual limitations. The government has yet to deal with road accidents, communal clashes and the issue of forced migration as disaster/ humanitarian issues. But for those who want to push for a culture that values human lives there is a chance to influence the policy's final shape.

A key part of the policy will deal with technology in the context of India putting in place its own high-tech tsunami warning system and depending on its scientific institutions to take the lead in disaster early warning measures. The dissemination part is perfect till the district collectorate or the mandal village cluster level in cyclone-prone areas. The real question will be how to take the message from the district or block office onwards.

Dysfunctional telephones and unwired remote villages often make the last mile reach a nightmare. The answer will be in strengthening and sustaining the local systems that work. Community radio initiatives coming up along the coasts and their networking could be an answer. So also village information centres.

At the recent NDMA sponsored Disaster Congress held in New Delhi, Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal talked enthusiastically about such an SMS system with automatic translation of warning messages into scores of languages. His enthusiasm for technology raised many eyebrows. But in fact, cell phones were widely used soon after the tsunami when all other communications were cut to find missing relatives and later to spread alarms that turned out to be false.

The systems should involve not only dissemination of the warning, but also the next step safety measures, such as evacuation and rescue as needed. There are efforts to this end. The Government of India's UNDP National Disaster Risk Management Programme, formulated under the National Disaster Management Framework of the Ministry of Home Affairs, aims at reducing vulnerabilities of communities at risk to sudden disasters in 169 most multi-hazard prone districts, spread over 17 states of India. One of the

key components of the programme is a community-based response system. But often the groups identified and trained under such programmes tend to go back to good-old lethargic ways once the disaster-rehabilitation-training phases are over. A few months after such training was done in the earthquake-torn villages of Kutch, one could find that most of the villagers were totally unaware of any such a trained group.

It is important to note there are community initiatives that work very well even without any formal training, programme or funds. Take the case of Pulicat in Tamil Nadu. When the tsunami waves rolled in people managed to summon boats from the mainland and evacuate their villages quickly. The casualties were minimal.

The lesson for disaster policy-makers is to evolve a judicious mix of traditional and technology-intensive systems.

Then there are aspects to be taken care of in the rehabilitation phase. The same absence of sensitivity often shows up in this phase as a one-size-fits-all Government Order.

The result will be structures like empty concrete malls and two-bedroom cattle-sheds in the earthquake-hit Latur, and cyclone shelters custom-made for illegal activities in coastal Andhra Pradesh. People do not live in imposed, alien structures. Villagers do not enjoy shopping from malls. All these brilliant urban ideas showed a singular lack of understanding of local tastes and concerns. It is such top-down approach that is still causing untold miseries to people still living in tight rows of temporary shelters in Tamil Nadu after the 2004 tsunami, many of them braving the second monsoon in knee-deep water. In Andaman and Nicobar, tsunami-affected people stuck in tin-box shelters asked for their rights to choose the kind of houses they would like to live in.

It is rebuilding of communities, not just shelters that the new policy is supposed to envisage. The million-dollar test will be in the last-mile reach of the policy or in bureaucratic parlance, its last-desk reach.▶

From Eco-tourism to Equitable-tourism

by Naren Karunakaran

Sun, sea and sand are not enough. Add sustainability to your holidays. The new trend of responsible tourism goes beyond eco-tourism. It looks at the triple bottom line: tourism's impact on the local economy, society and the environment.

Tourism is often described as the world's biggest industry thanks to its contribution to global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employment-generation and the number of clients served. According to the UN World Tourism Organisation (WTO), international tourism roughly accounts for 36% of trade in commercial services in advanced economies, and 66% in developing economies. It constitutes 3-10% of GDP in advanced economies and 4% in developing economies. And the numbers are continuing to rise.



From Eco-tourism to Equitable-tourism by Naren Karunakaran

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The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) pegged the travel and tourism business at \$ 6 trillion for the year 2006. The council indicates that it will be twice this figure within the next decade. But along with the rapid growth rate are growing concerns about the impact of tourism. Tourism has been considered an elite, insensitive industry, bringing with it a host of problems.

Although the initial concerns were largely environmental -- the impact on fragile ecosystems and biodiversity, the focus now for civil society, governments and change makers in the tourism industry is on the economic and social aspects. This trend is also symptomatic of changes taking place across the board, the corporate responsibility movement, and growing support for ethical consumption, organic food and fair trade.

Prodding from within

One of the principal drivers of change has come from originating markets. Tourists are demanding richer engagements with destinations and communities, says Director, International Centre for Responsible Tourism, UK.

Several surveys have made this very clear. In the US, more than three-quarters of travellers feel it is important their visits not damage the environment. A 2003 study (Travel Industry Association of America and National Geographic Traveller) estimates that 17 million US travellers consider environmental factors when deciding which travel companies to patronise.

In Britain (the Tearfund study), 66% of travellers said they placed importance on the fact that their last trip had been specifically designed to cause as little damage as possible to the environment. While cost, weather and quality of facilities are important, 42% of British tourists look for the quality of local, social, economic and political information available. At least 37% identified opportunities to interact with local people as important.

Waning sun-sea-sand tourism

It's not just a section of tourists who are waking up. Tour operators are also

coming round to the view that an element of responsible tourism can often be the tie-breaker for a traveller to make his or her choice, all other things -- destination, quality and price -- being equal.

Perhaps there's also the niggling realisation that the usual sun-sea-sand tourism has matured as a market, and that the focus is shifting towards a form of tourism that celebrates nature, diversity, culture, heritage and individual contribution/volunteerism.

Enlightened tour operators are examining economic and social impacts seriously. A handful has embarked on a clean-up drive. Pressures are being applied on hotels and other facilities they patronise.

The Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development is a network of 25 operators hosted by UNEP, Paris. The mandate is to incorporate sustainability principles into all their business operations. The Tourism Partnership of the Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum has also been driving the responsibility agenda (11,100 hotel properties and 1.8 million rooms). The Tour Operators for Tigers (TOFT), a British alliance of top 30 operators, is already making a difference in some of India's national parks by aligning the entire tourism supply chains in Indian reserves to certain norms.

Climate change and tourism

Tourism is trying to look at the big challenges as well - global warming and climate change. According to global estimates, air traffic contributes around 10% to global warming. First Choice Holidays, a British charter operator, has promised to offer all customers the chance to make donation towards offsetting the carbon that will be used during its flights. To start with, it will make a contribution equal to that raised by customers. The proceeds will be invested in carbon-saving projects -- protecting rainforests, clean, alternative energy.

Part of a wider global movement

It is encouraging that the tourism sector is responding to the demands of civil society and, in a way, the market too. It is actually a wider movement

sweeping across several other sectors as well. Some of the perceived villains of big business, for instance the mining and oil leviathans, now realise that ensuring business sustainability would necessarily mean adhering to corporate responsibility norms along what is called the triple bottom line: impacts of the business on the economy, society and the environment.

Tourism has borrowed the concept and now acknowledges the triple bottom line with its emphasis on equitable tourism that benefits local communities in multiple ways -- skills training and jobs for locals; encouraging partnerships; improving markets for local goods and services.

Trends to watch

The urge to seriously place tourism in the development paradigm came about early this decade. In 2002, the WTO released a report "Tourism and Poverty Alleviation" in which it was argued that tourism was one of the few developmental opportunities for the poor.

The first International Conference on Responsible Tourism Destinations was held in Cape Town as a side event preceding the World Summit on Sustainable Development, in 2002. This led to the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism and called for efforts towards better places to live in, better places for people to visit.

The responsibility has been placed at the doorstep of all stakeholders -- government, national and local, NGOs, industry, conservationists, and communities. The focus has to be on partnerships and identifying and setting local priorities.

Step up

The trend is apparently gathering steam and has also engendered a sharply focused pro-



poor tourism agenda. It focuses on changing the very nature of tourism development so that it increases the flow of income to poor people, or increases their assets and participation. The WTO's Sustainable Tourism-Elimination of Poverty (ST-EP) initiative, launched in 2006, is already presiding over 44 projects around the globe.

The wake-up call for change in the conduct of tourism has been ringing for some time now in the form of people's movements and community campaigns. The pressure from civil society, and rising expectations of recent years, has seen the emergence of a number of good practices in India lately.

Kerala's Periyar Tiger Reserve is perhaps the finest example of how a mass tourism destination has been transformed into a high-value, low-impact zone through community-based initiatives. It revolves around Eco Development Committees (EDCs): 72 in all, covering 58,000 villagers. Scores of tribal families that once eked out a living by illegally stripping the bark of cinnamon trees, for instance, have been brought into the fold through the Thekkady Tiger Trail, a trekking and camping scheme.

In Khonoma village, in Nagaland, northeastern India, an alternative model of community-led tourism is making waves. The village council is at the core of this initiative. The Sunderbans Jungle Camp in West Bengal has made it to the list of 12 finalists for the WTTC's Tourism for Tomorrow Awards 2007, considered the Oscars of the travel and tourism industry.

The ball has been set rolling. What remains to be seen is whether the tenets of responsible tourism permeate deep and wide. Tokenism can be perilous.▶

Source: ICRT, UK; Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex; Conservation International, US; UNEP

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