

Koh Phi Phi: Clean Slates, Disaster Capitalism or Boiled Frogs? A research update on
post-disaster vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

Through a study which took place on Koh Phi Phi Island, Thailand between 2005 and 2011, concerning the influence of political economy and conceptualisations of sustainability upon post disaster reconstruction, the author attempts to fill the void expressed by numerous commentators who have highlighted a relative lack of academic attention directly addressing the influence of political economy on achieving sustainability in post-disaster reconstruction. In existing academic debates concerning the political economy of post-disaster reconstruction, there appears a trend towards ‘disaster capitalism’ (Klein, 2005: 3), ‘smash and grab capitalism’ (Harvey, 2007: 32) or ‘attempts to accumulate by dispossession’ (Saltman, 2007a: 57). This research observes however, that this did not occur on Phi Phi Island post Asian tsunami of December 2004. Despite claims of a ‘clean slate’ being offered by the

tsunami in developmental terms, this research provides evidence and explanation of why this did not and would not exist on Phi Phi, a finding that may be applied to other destinations in a post-disaster context. Furthermore, in response to Blaikie *et al.*'s (2004) concerns that vulnerability is often reconstructed following a disaster and may create the conditions for a future disaster; this work has extended discussions of disaster vulnerability through an adapted application of Turner *et al.*'s (2003) Vulnerability Framework, presenting a post-disaster situation that remains highly vulnerable and non-conducive to sustainability. The author draws on the notion of 'strategic drift' (Johnson, 1998: 179) and 'boiled frog syndrome' (Richardson, Nwankwo and Richardson, 1994: 10) to explain how host attitudes to tourism may increase vulnerability. Both these contributions may assist in identifying destination vulnerability and limitations in disaster response and recovery.

Keywords: Koh Phi Phi, Sustainable Tourism Development, Disaster, Clean Slate, Vulnerability, Disaster Capitalism, Boiled Frog Syndrome

BACKGROUND

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the pursuit of sustainability within tourism development planning (Kingsbury *et al.*, 2004; Swarbrooke, 2000). The discourse surrounding such development has focused upon the need for informed consent and stakeholder involvement (Mowforth and Munt, 2003) but, as Pleumarom (1999) has argued, this ideology can become compromised when global forces conflict with local interests. The interplay of international political economy and conflicting global and local interests becomes vividly exposed in the context of

developing nations (Stubbs and Underhill, 2006) and, in particular, situations where natural disasters produce an alleged 'clean slate' upon which to plan the post-disaster reconstruction (Klein, 2005; Klein 2008; Tangwisutijit and Warunpitikul, 2005). However, there have been few published empirical academic works directly addressing the influence of political economy upon achieving sustainability in post-disaster reconstruction (Klein, 2008). Where such research does exist, it suggests the increased takeover of global powers in the reconstruction effort as has been evident in not only post-tsunami reconstruction in Thailand, Sri Lanka and India, but Caribbean and Middle-Eastern states post-9-11 (Klein, 2005; 2008).

The Asian tsunami of December 2004 left a long-lasting global footprint (Rice, 2005). This event was locally devastating, but also lingered in the global consciousness because of the intense media coverage, and the fact that many of the areas affected were those we have personal familiarity with through tourism (ibid., 2005). The factual, physical reasons for this were those instrumental in the total devastation of affected areas. Nevertheless, religious justification was also proffered. The Buddhist religion, as widely practised in areas across the affected region (the Andaman coast), and increasingly so on the island of Phi Phi due to the influx of migrant workers from other parts of Thailand, would suggest that the tsunami revealed divine anger with man and his use of the land, and that this disaster was a cleansing process associated with bad karma attributed to past actions (Harvey, 2001).

It is widely acknowledged that, if any benefit could be derived from the disaster, it was the recognition of the impact of high-density, poorly planned and unsustainable tourism infrastructure that many of these destinations had prior to the tsunami (UNDP

and World Bank, 2005; FAO 10 January 2005, Bangkok Post, 29/12/04; Pleumarom, 2004; Cummings, 2005). This sentiment was mirrored by a CNN report: '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). It was thought by some that the tsunami provided a 'clean slate' in developmental terms (CNN, 2005; UNEP, 2005). Furthermore, it was clear that there were a wealth of options as to how the affected destinations could be redeveloped in the future, to correlate with more sustainable practices (UNEP New Frontiers Vol. 11, No.1).

It was thus of interest to assess the redevelopment process, through a naturally occurring case study that allowed examination of the influence of political and economic factors upon achieving sustainable development within the context of tourism and natural disasters. The case study chosen was that of Phi Phi island, Thailand, a popular backpacker and day-tripper destination, the epitome of a paradise location (Fahn, 2003; Cummings 2005), which, when struck by the Asian tsunami of December 2004, suffered a tremendous loss of life and vast destruction of island infrastructure to support both tourism and local livelihoods (Cummings, 2005; Altman, 2005; Bergman, 2005). Historically, the development of Phi Phi, including tourism, had been subject to widespread criticism (Fahn, 2003; Byrne *et al.*, 2005; Hart, 2005; Cummings, 2005; Dodds, Graci and Holmes, 2010), due to the unsustainable nature of infrastructure development and lack of strict regulation and planning, particularly with regard to an alleged 'sell-out' of the Phi Phi Le's Maya Bay (part of Hat Noppharat Thara National Marine Park) following the filming of Fox's motion picture *The Beach* (Cummings, 2005; Laopaisarntaksin, 1998;

Puthipucha, 1998; Noikorn, 1998; Ekachai, 1998; Ing. K, 1998; Fuengprichavai, 1998; Techawongtham, 1998; Hongthong, 1998; Lonely Planet, 2004: 348).



Figure 1: Map to illustrate the location of the Phi Phi islands within the Krabi Province (Source: <http://www.ko-phiphi.com/maps/> accessed 24.03.2011)

This island group, incorporated into the Hat Noppharat Thara National Marine Park in 1983 is located within the Ao Nang sub-district of the Krabi Province of southern Thailand, 42 kilometres from the holiday mecca of Phuket and 38 kilometres from the provincial capital, Krabi Town (www.phi-phi.com), as illustrated within Figure 1 above. They represent another addition to the great number of island and beach destinations in southern Thailand, which include Koh Samui, Koh Phuket, Koh Phan Ngan and Koh Tao, which developed beginning in the 1980s to support tourism

activities (Konisranakul and Tuaycharoen, 2010). Phi Phi is within easy travelling distance (by boat) of both Phuket and Krabi, the journey taking approximately ninety minutes. Despite being more accessible in recent times, the islands bear similarities to Cohen's (1983) description of Koh Samui in the 1980s: they are little incorporated into the national society and only superficially controlled by the national civil administration and police.

Whilst prior to the tsunami, the island was widely criticised for unsustainable development planning (Rice, 2005; Fahn, 2003; Byrne *et al.*, 2005; Hart, 2005; Cummings, 2005; Dodds, Graci and Holmes, 2010), after the tsunami there seemed, at the outset, the opportunity for reconstruction to occur along more sustainable lines. Pleumarom (2004:2), a Thailand-based academic, suggested that in the reconstruction phase, the political context in which tourism was being promoted also needed to be critically re-examined: 'As the Government seems set to nurture a tourism monoculture again ... would it not be the time to explore strategies to reduce the dependencies on tourism, diversify the economy and build more secure and sustainable livelihoods for the majority of the people?' Certainly, the Thai government presented Phi Phi as requiring 'total restoration' following the tsunami. In this respect, initial moves in the redevelopment already suggested a complex scenario may be unfolding. The Thai government indicated that it wished Phi Phi to retain its concept as a paradise island, promising redevelopment of a lower density to preserve the dual bay views in line with sustainable tourism principles.

Further debates concerning the redevelopment plans were elaborated by Tangwisutijit and Warunpitikul (2005:9), for instance: 'the devastation wrought by the Tsunami on

Phi Phi island is known around the world, yet there are much quieter efforts underway that could result in further dramatic changes to the island's landscape.' On the surface, the new look planned for Phi Phi was an environmentalist's delight. It called for the elimination of all permanent concrete structures from the space between the famous twin-bay beachfronts of Tonsai and Ao Lo Dalaam. Thailand's iconic tropical paradise would be restored to its natural beauty. The new plan, however, left many island residents and business operators who survived the tsunami feeling as if they would be threatened with yet another disaster.

This alleged 'clean-slate' situation and the ensuing redevelopment, then, presented the opportunity for research to consider what shape stakeholders would wish tourism to take in the post-tsunami era, and to look at what opportunities were presented following commencement of the rebuild of island infrastructure. Using a political economy framework interlinked with other evaluative frameworks, Phi Phi offered a rare opportunity to see which political, economic and cultural factors shaped the planning of tourism development and, importantly, whether actual practice mirrored the principles of sustainability. Furthermore, the research presented the opportunity to explore the concerns raised by researchers such as Klein (2005; 2008) and Pleumarom (2004; 2005), amongst others, to investigate whether affected areas appear to be set to be re-designed by a range of governments, private companies, non-governmental organisations and members of think tanks in a manner that often does not consult local communities. The research considered whether Phi Phi's development plans were adapted post-tsunami to ensure the long-term economic, environmental and social sustainability of the destination. Could the types of political and developmental

concerns, processes and structures described by Klein (2005; 2008) be related to what was taking place in Phi Phi or not? If they could not, why was this?

METHODOLOGY

In this research, it was not the intention to facilitate replication, but to unearth richer and deeper interpretive understanding of the perceptions of tourism stakeholders in Phi Phi. Subsequently, an inductive approach was used to permit the ‘multiple realities’ held by the island’s stakeholders to emerge, rather than a deductive approach which seeks to prove or disprove hypothesis (Veal, 2006). This also assisted in tempering any bias introduced by the researcher’s own ‘self’ by beginning free from pre-conceived views.

The research adopted a mixed method, case study approach as a means of providing a holistic, in-depth investigation and the provision of a test site for theory building based on the perspectives of all main stakeholders. As Denscombe (2003: 30) argues, case studies allow a range of methods to be utilised in order to be reactive to meet research needs and leads to a detailed study of one particular instance or situation. The characteristics of a case study allow unique insight into the case study and a holistic view to be sought, most appropriate for the nature of this research focused upon a single destination.

Methods included online research, comprising the design and operation of a tailored website to overcome geographical and access limitations; and offline methods such as visual techniques to monitor change and confirm opinions offered by participants of

the research; in-depth face-to-face interviews with hand-picked stakeholders of Phi Phi's development; open-ended questionnaires with tourists; and extended answer Thai script questionnaires in order to overcome language barriers and present the 'Thai voice'. The primary data was gathered from April 2006-December 2011 including a period working at The Prince of Songkla University in Phuket (June-December 2006).

The table below details the phases of fieldwork and mix of methods employed.

| Period | Context | Data Collected |
|--|--|--|
| PHASE ONE (I) October 2005 | To analyse selected web discussion fora to elicit key themes and contacts Development of a specific research website and online questionnaires | Qualitative data from web discussion threads Eleven online open-ended questionnaires completed |
| (II) April 2006 – Three weeks of fieldwork | To conduct preliminary (pilot) interviews and secure employment in Thailand to fund the main period of data collection. To generate contacts – key informants | Five in-depth pilot interviews with development stakeholders Observational and visual data Generation of contacts and networks Reflexive journal and observational notes |
| PHASE TWO (I) June 2006-December 2006 Six months of fieldwork | To live and work within the field To be sensitised to the internal and external environments of the field Main phase of primary data collection | 21 in-depth interviews Progressive observational and visual data collection to document change Policy documents for regional and destination specific development plans Phi Phi Island master plan Reflexive journal and observational notes |
| (II) December 2007 – two weeks of fieldwork | To document change in the island's infrastructure To gather further primary data in the form of interview, visual and documentary sources. | To photograph the island, documenting change To gather film footage To contribute to the reflexive journal and observational notes |
| (III) April 2008 – three weeks | Three weeks of immersion in the field to gather further primary data | 38 extended answer Thai script written interviews with |

| | | |
|--------------|--|--|
| of fieldwork | and explore emerging themes with stakeholders of Phi Phi's development | residents, business owners and operatives of Phi Phi 76 open answer questionnaires to island visitors Photography and film to document change Reflexive journal |
|--------------|--|--|

Table 1: The phases of primary data collection

The in depth interviews followed a structured format initially, with flexibility should the researcher wish to pursue a topic in more detail. The initial questions of the pilot study were adapted as it was found that a highly structured approach resulted in a more descriptive account of the island's development, which could easily be sought within documentary and secondary data. Subsequent interviews used a semi-structured format, using the research questions as a guide, to ensure that the data collection fulfilled the goals of the research. As all interviews were face-to-face, technical terminology could be explained by the researcher as necessary. In total, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted between April and November 2006, using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques based upon stakeholder theory (Swarbrooke, 1999; Weaver and Lawton, 2002). Respondents were selected purposively and on the basis of their role and familiarity with Phi Phi.

Research in the literature and observations from initial field visits suggested that one of the greatest influencing factors in shaping the island's future development was the tourist market. Therefore, in order to ascertain the typology of tourists visiting Phi Phi to comprehend the nature of demand and subsequent impacts of tourism (in line with proposals made by Plog (2001), Wickens (2002) and Cohen (1979)), a snapshot, convenience-sampled, short-answer questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire

was designed provide a profile of the tourists visiting the island, and to learn more about the needs, motivations and desires of the tourist market at this time, as was similarly undertaken by Dodds *et al.* (2010) approximately six months later. The questions posed therefore had these goals in mind. The questionnaire was designed to be short for ease of completion, as respondents were approached in a variety of environments including the beach, ferries, restaurants, bars and in tourist accommodation. The majority of questions were open-ended to solicit unbiased responses.

Prior experience working in Thailand and as elaborated through the literature, has highlighted limitations with both online surveys and face-to-face interviews, in the sense that respondents may answer to please. This issue, in addition to language barriers, was further addressed during phase two (April 2008), whereby research questions translated into Thai script were developed and handed by the researcher to 38 inhabitants of Koh Phi. These questions were pre-tested with a Thai colleague to ensure comprehension. These questionnaires were left with the respondents for half a day or a whole day, to enable them to write a full, unbiased response in Thai. This went some way toward overcoming language barriers and biases introduced through the face-to-face interviews (which were predominantly in English), and also enabled respondents to express themselves clearly their own language. However, other influences and biases are introduced through the use of convenience sampling such as willingness to participate in the study and visibility within the community (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). Nevertheless the researcher was satisfied that the sample fairly represented the views of Phi Phi's Thai inhabitants due to the settings in which the

respondents were identified. The responses were translated by a native Thai colleague.

Banks (2002; 2005) discusses the use of visual data, including photography as a 'visual notebook'. Most certainly, in a study seeking to document change, and project future change, this method would seem highly appropriate. Film and photography may be used to gain understanding of societies and cultural forms (Edwards, 1992) and the study of spatial behaviour (Hockings, 1995). Within this research therefore, this method was used in combination with other data collection techniques as detailed. The purpose of using visual data was to document change over time (2006-2011) and to validate observational field notes and interview data. Banks (2005) discusses how images may be used. The photography in this research was not intended as visual anthropology, but rather as a visual record and *aide memoire* (Knowles and Sweetman, 2005).

FINDINGS

From the data, twenty-five dominant themes arose. These themes provided a detailed insight into the issues of significance to Phi Phi Island's stakeholders in respect of its future development. The reason that data was considered both generally and segregated according to respondent group is to elaborate how individual views differ from that of a consensus view.

Despite Klein's (2005; 2008) claims of 'disaster capitalism', there was minimal evidence found of this at an international or national level. Claims of an increased

takeover of global powers and a dangerous level of power held by multinationals are not apparent in this localised case study. There is a trend in Thailand for high-end tourism; however, this is not exclusively pursued through selling out to international hotel chains, and in fact this is restricted by policies favouring national interest (Noy, 2011; Konisranukul and Tuaycharoen, 2010; Krutwayscho and Bramwell, 2010) and a focus upon what can be regarded an inward facing 'sufficiency economy' (Noy, 2011; Krongkaew, 2004). Where there are international hotel chains on Phi Phi (e.g. Intercontinental Hotels Group through their Holiday Inn brand), development has taken place considerably, in association with Thai landowners, further strengthening landowners' control over the future development of the island, through the establishment of international bonds and support structures, an example of local elites perpetuating their own interests under dependency theory. Furthermore, there is evidence of plans on Phi Phi to privatise utilities at a local level. There has been a loss of local control on Phi Phi, which occurred in the early 1990s when the traditional inhabitants sold their land to wealthy business people from the mainland. There is limited evidence of the 'radical social and economic engineering' that Klein (2005; 2008) speaks of.

Far more fitting for the case of Phi Phi would be the considerations of Pleumarom (1999), and Bradshaw (2002), who note the inequalities that exist within society and the influence that these have over developmental outcomes. Inequalities are certainly apparent on Phi Phi. Those who own land on the island, and specifically the major landowners have the greatest influence over development. One may argue that there may have been a desire to 'capitalise' on the disaster, as the government has been accused of trying to do, but this was not borne out. Bradshaw's (2002) observations

would be most apt for the situation on Phi Phi, that, ‘reconstruction processes are not newly constructed in the light of the disaster but are the result of existing power struggles and structures’. Scheyvens (2002) added strength to this argument, highlighting due to the complex interplay of class, values and power that exists at a destination level, it ultimately may result in a lack of equitable participation and consultation in planning for tourism. This would certainly appear to be the case on Phi Phi, whereby, on account of economic power and landownership, the key players in shaping the future of Phi Phi’s development are the landowners. The ladder of influence that exists on Phi Phi is illustrated below. It can be seen that the desires being realised in the island’s development are those of the groups towards the apex of the pyramid.

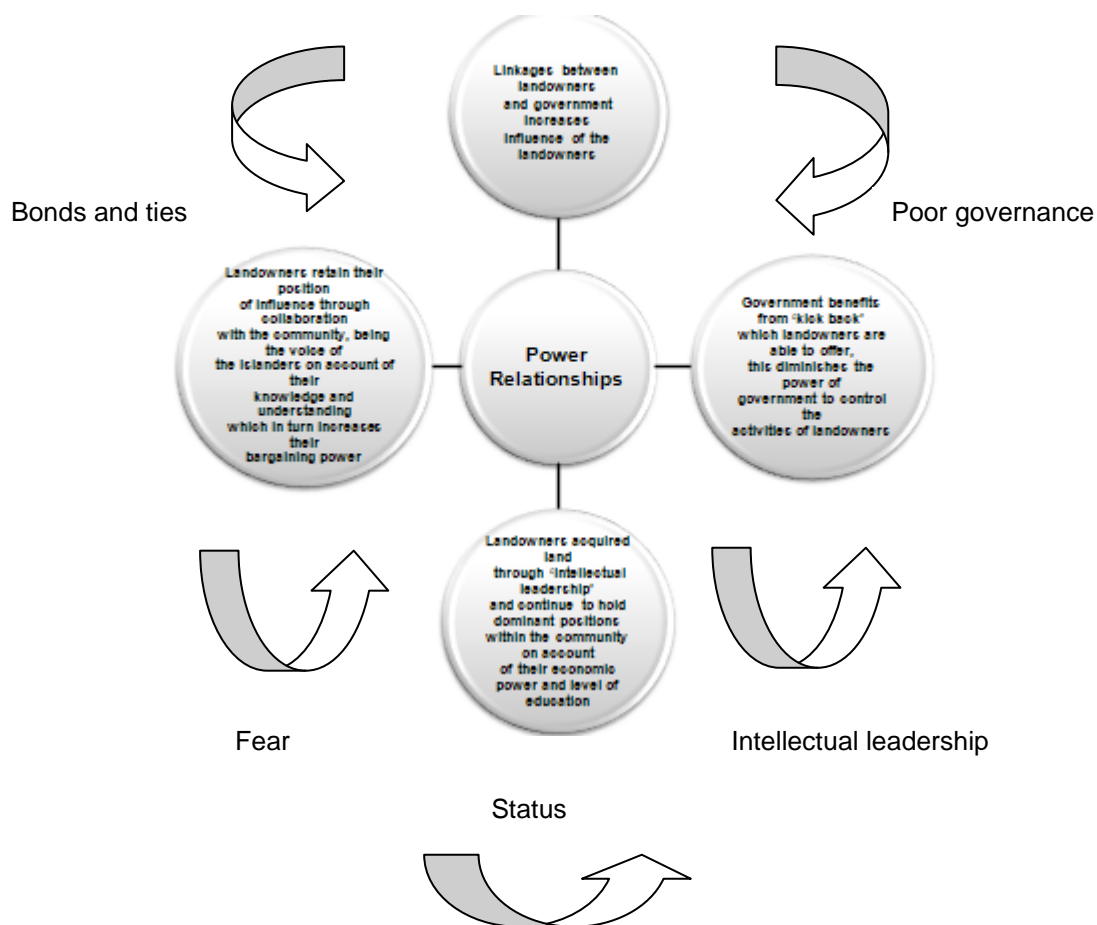


Model 1: Illustration of the structure of influence in Phi Phi’s development
(author’s own from data)

The landowners' level of influence over the development of Phi Phi undoubtedly arose as one of the strongest themes within the research. Commentators explain how traditional landowners were tempted to sell and how land was acquired by wealthy business people from Phuket, Krabi and Bangkok. Nowadays there are few traditional inhabitants left, and if they do remain, they do not own land. Many will say that they are local but when one traces their background, they are usually businessmen from Phuket or Krabi. Many respondents appeared fearful of the links between big business and the government. Power, on Phi Phi, would appear to lie with four major landowners, whose power appears to surpass that of the government and on whom all other inhabitants are dependent in some way, mainly because these landowners hold approximately 80% of the land in the central 'apple core' area and the majority of shops and businesses are on rented land.

There would further appear to be evidence of hegemonic relationships within Phi Phi's redevelopment. Brohman (1996) claims that, 'there is a well-known tendency of local elites to appropriate the organs of participation for their own benefit', and one can see that these structures exist on Phi Phi. Phi Phi is essentially governed by a small group of ruling elite and, as Calgaro (2005) argues, it is the agenda of these people that shape development within a destination. It may initially appear that the government's position is weak in relation to these landowners, as a respondent from the Provincial Government would like one to believe, and certainly illegal building and National Park encroachment would suggest that is the case. However, the research findings are indicative in some cases of, links between the landowners on the island and provincial government, so one can see that (albeit indirectly) government does have an influence.

Findings indicate that landowners acquire their power through economic strength, which enables them to purchase land. The ownership of land and material wealth ensures that they attain a higher level within the structure of society on Phi Phi, as other islanders are dependent upon them. Few landowners are native to Phi Phi and have attained a certain level of education either internationally or nationally, which places them intellectually in a stronger position to engage in debate and be active participants in planning meetings and as such to leverage their views in regional and national fora. Their position within society enables them to diffuse their views within the community, resulting in intellectual and moral leadership, heightened by sending their offspring overseas to be educated within a Western system who then are actively linked into global networks and as such can draw upon global knowledge pools (Zeldin, 1995; Hannam, 2002). Thus, planning meetings, despite being alleged to be, are non-participatory on account of 'intellectual leadership' of the landowners and the Thai cultural notions of 'face' and 'status'. The landowners were likened by some respondents to the Mafia-style strong families who characterised the island of Samui in the 1980s (Cohen, 1983). There is evidence of collaboration between landowners and the international tourism industry to further strengthen their ties and bargaining power. Model 2 provides a conceptual illustration of the basis on which landowners achieve and maintain their level of influence within Phi Phi's development.



Model 2: Illustration of the factors governing the landowners' level of influence over Phi Phi's development (author's own from data)

In the literature surrounding the political economy of post-disaster reconstruction it became evident that there were two clear schools of thought concerning Koh Phi Phi's reconstruction: firstly, that the tsunami had created a 'clean slate' and hence opportunity should be taken to pursue a more sustainable future; and secondly that global neoliberal policies have incited a trend towards disaster capitalism, in which disaster capitalists would use desperation and fear created by catastrophe to engage in radical re-engineering of affected areas. Neither school of thought has been wholly correct in respect of Phi Phi. These outcomes are strongly influenced by the political

economy of the island and as such make the experiences on Phi Phi a contribution to the existing knowledge on post-disaster tourism redevelopment.

Although this research did demonstrate a desire by the Thai government to capitalise on the disaster in the sense of reclaiming encroached land and changing the face of the island to pursue a lower-density, high-end model, the tsunami did not, as Klein (2008), Bradshaw (2002), Saltman (2007), Harvey (2007) and Ayub and Cruikshank (1979) predicted, reflect a growing trend in disaster capitalism. The research explored why that did not occur. The table below elaborates the evidence of ‘disaster capitalism’ in tourism destinations post-tsunami, the manner in which these experiences were or were not present on Phi Phi and a subsequent explanation of why this was the case. It can be seen that the tsunami did present the opportunity for disaster capitalism but the political economy surrounding Thai tourism development and development on Phi Phi did not permit this to happen.

| <i>Characteristic of disaster capitalism (taken from existing debates)</i> | <i>Presence post-tsunami</i> | <i>Presence and influence on Phi Phi</i> |
|--|--|--|
| <i>Shock event</i> | <i>Earthquake off west coast of Sumatra measuring over 9 on the Richter scale</i> <i>Sea receded to 100 metres from the Andaman coast for about five minutes; three staggered waves hit the Andaman Coast, up to 10m in height; one hour inundation</i> <i>5395 Killed</i> <i>2817 missing</i> <i>58,550 affected</i> <i>120,000+ lost livelihoods in tourism</i> | <i>3m (10ft) wave hit from Tonsai Bay</i> <i>5.5m (18ft) wave hit from Ao Lo Dalaam</i> <i>Devastated low-lying land</i> <i>70% of buildings destroyed</i> <i>850 bodies (approx.) recovered</i> <i>1500 missing</i> <i>The tsunami had a profound effect on the central area of Phi Phi Don Island, destroying 70% of the infrastructure and presenting what was considered by some to be a blank canvas</i> <i>The disaster was characteristic of a low intensity, low threat, low control event with</i> |

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|--|--|--|
| | | <i>limited response options, shock event</i> |
| <i>Slate wiped clean</i> | <p><i>Mass evacuation plan in Sri Lanka, displaced fishing communities 1km inland</i></p> <p><i>Rules imposed on fishing communities in Sri Lanka and Khao Lak in Thailand forbade rebuilding for 'safety' reasons</i></p> <p><i>Communities in Ban Namken, Ban Laem-pon, and Tubtawan forcibly removed from coastal homes</i></p> | <p><i>70% of infrastructure in the 'apple core' destroyed</i></p> <p><i>Islanders evacuated for a month following the Tsunami, accommodated in disparate locations across the Krabi province and in refugee camps</i></p> <p><i>Rubble cleared</i></p> <p><i>30m setback imposed</i></p> <p><i>New inland homes provided</i></p> <p><i>Resistance, delays and inaction resulted in islanders 'forging ahead' with rebuilding the island despite ban on construction</i></p> <p><i>A clean slate can never exist in development terms unless 'terra nullius' as the landscapes of development that preceded the tsunami cannot and will not be erased.</i></p> <p><i>The tsunami has shown the challenges that face this community in 'high colour'</i></p> <p><i>Strong political-economic structures at a local level on Phi Phi Don resisted government plans</i></p> <p><i>Strong support from the international backpacker and volunteer community strengthened resistance</i></p> |
| <i>Increased takeover of global powers</i> | <p><i>Ambiguity in foreign ownership laws in Thailand</i></p> <p><i>Foreigners cannot own land in Thailand, but can own buildings separate from the land</i></p> <p><i>Thailand restricts and prohibits economical areas and business categories for foreigners primarily in the Foreign Business Act (A.D.1999).</i></p> <p><i>Sector specific legislation on foreign ownership of 49% stake</i></p> <p><i>Many 'loopholes'</i></p> | <p><i>Multinational hotel chain Intercontinental develops as the management company of the Holiday Inn through co-operation with local landowner</i></p> <p><i>High levels of control are maintained by dominant landowners through status, predominantly 'outsiders' (Thais who are not native of the area – Cohen, 1983)</i></p> <p><i>Islanders are rushing to rebuild homes to avoid any claim on the land by wealthy families</i></p> <p><i>Anti-liberalisation stance and emphasis on 'sufficiency economy' places power back in the nation of Thailand</i></p> <p><i>Strong socio-political structures created by major landowners prevented takeover</i></p> |
| <i>Increase in multinationals</i> | <p><i>Set back or 'buffer' zone policy of 100m imposed in Sri Lanka represents a state-sponsored dislocation of coastal populations</i></p> <p><i>10m setback policy for hotels</i></p> | <p><i>Presence of multinationals arises from co-operation between landowners and foreign operators and shows dependency theory.</i></p> <p><i>At present Intercontinental have two developments on the island using this means but these are in the Laem Tong area, not Tonsai</i></p> |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| | <i>The Thai government has liquidated public land holdings in tsunami-affected areas. In Nai Lai the local government has sold 240 acres of public land to developers, and 1,800 acres has been bought from villagers. Rather than favouring Multinationals this favours big business in Thailand.</i> | <i>Pursuit of high-end tourism across Thailand. On Phi Phi this is realised in the northern and eastern beaches although it does not involve solely multinational corporations. Phi Phi Island Village and Zeavola are considered 'high-end' however there is no involvement of international capital, more so favouring national 'big business'</i> |
| <i>Extreme capitalist takeover</i> | <i>Tourist resorts in Sri Lanka and Khao Lak exempted from the buffer zone ruling as works classified as 'repair'; used as a means to acquire land</i> | <i>Phi Phi differs from Khao Lak in that the central part of the island (80% of which) is owned by a small collection of landowners who form a strong resistance against capitalist takeover in the same sense as other tsunami affected locations such as Sri Lanka, however these landowners can be seen as the capitalists themselves. Ownership has not shifted therefore following the tsunami, capitalist takeover occurred on Phi Phi in the 1980s</i> |
| <i>Reconstruction loans with crippling conditions for the privatisation of industry</i> | <i>The Thai government refused 'disaster relief' only accepting 'technical assistance' in light of a resistance to be bound to neoliberal measures imposed by the World Bank post-Asian Financial Crisis</i> | <i>Focus on 'sufficiency economy' pioneered by the King, focuses upon fostering national interests General populace against neoliberalism post-Asian Crisis experience Resultant inward facing development programmes favour national interest over external assistance Funds for the reconstruction of the island generated predominantly through private capital (landowners) and volunteer fundraising retained local ownership</i> |
| <i>Highlights existing power relationships and the inequalities that exist within society</i> | <i>Unveiled complexity of land rights problems in Thailand</i> | <i>Presented delays in reclaiming land by original owners and identifying who held the title deeds Landowners asserted power by reclaiming land from tenants for new developments as new terms of lease were established resulting in erosion of trust and strong community bonds</i> |
| <i>Used by power brokers to profiteer</i> | <i>Land seized, ownership rights to coastal land claimed by development companies with close governmental links</i> | <i>This took place on Phi Phi long before the tsunami. Wealthy investors made connections with indigenous landowners in the 1980s, who would be willing to make land claims on the investor's behalf. Title deeds claimed under the pretence that the land was being used for farming</i> |

Table 1: A summary of why Phi Phi avoided ‘disaster capitalism’ (Sources: Author’s empirical research; Klein, 2008; Bradshaw, 2002; Saltman, 2007; Kaewkunttee, 2006; Rigg *et al.*, 2005; Scott, 1985; Rice, 2005; Department for Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, Ministry of Interior, Thailand, 2004)

The opportunity was presented to consider an alternative form of tourism (as it appears the government wanted), but this was not taken. The tsunami did not change the island’s appeal, but rather continued poor environmental practices and poor building regulations, which continue to decrease the beauty of Phi Phi. This may be on account of concerns that the secondary impacts of the tsunami would be almost as destructive as the tsunami itself i.e. loss of earnings and livelihoods from the tourism industry. It is no wonder, therefore, that the islanders chose to rebuild their lives the only way they know how, and tourism was the key shaping influence post-tsunami. As academic commentators have observed, an event on this scale has the potential to radically transform structures and processes, representing a break in the trajectories of existence (Rigg *et al.*, 2005). This research has shown that to suggest a ‘clean slate’ existed is unrealistic and would be unlikely to exist in development terms post disaster. An explanation of why is given below:

| <i>Reasons why ‘clean slate’ opportunity could not be taken</i> | <i>Evidence</i> |
|--|---|
| <i>Prevailing development philosophy on the island pre-tsunami is economic</i> | <i>Theme [Development philosophies]; Theme [Future Desires]; Theme [Past reflection]</i> |
| <i>Lack of economic diversity, nurturing of tourism monoculture</i> | <i>Pleumarom, 2004; Theme [Development philosophies]; Dodds, 2011; Ko, 2005;</i> |
| <i>Preference for the ‘tried and tested’ model of tourism development</i> | <i>UNDP; Theme [Future Desires]; Theme [Development philosophies]</i> |
| <i>Complacency born of competitive success</i> | <i>Theme [Development philosophies]; Nwankwo and Richardson, 1994; Argenti, 1976</i> |
| <i>Failure to see the interconnectedness of environmental viability and economic sustainability</i> | <i>Theme [Conceptualisations of sustainability]; Theme [Development philosophies]</i> |
| <i>Island still does not have a robust system of basic infrastructure</i> | <i>Theme [Needs]; Theme [Community Challenges]; Brix, 2007; Ghobarah et al., 2006; Dodds et al., 2010</i> |
| <i>Fear, confusion and improper communication surrounding future plans for the island were met with suspicion and resistance</i> | <i>Theme [Communication]; Theme [Future Plans]; Theme [Fear]; Theme [Conflict]; Rice, 2005; Altman, 2005</i> |
| <i>Inaction and delays in the release of plans, caused islanders to forge ahead illegally with rebuilding as there was an immediate need to secure livelihoods</i> | <i>Rice, 2005; Theme [Barriers]; Theme [Future Plans]; Theme [Economic impacts of tourism]; Theme [Conflict]; Theme [Lawlessness]</i> |
| <i>Strong political-economic structures maintained by major Landowners who also have ties with local government deter on-going government involvement</i> | <i>Theme [Power Relationships]; Theme [Lawlessness]; Theme [Conflict]</i> |
| <i>The Tsunami not only creates new challenges but uncovered existing ones</i> | <i>Theme [Influence of the Tsunami]; Theme [Community Challenges]; Theme [Conflict]; Theme [Lawlessness]</i> |
| <i>The psychological effect of tourism development cannot be erased</i> | <i>Theme [Economic impacts of tourism]; Theme [Social impacts of tourism]; Theme [Influence of the Tsunami]</i> |

Table 2: Justification of the absence of a ‘clean slate’ on Phi Phi (Sources: Pleumarom, 2004; UNDP, 2005; Dodds, 2011; Ko, 2005; Nwankwo and Richardson, 1994; Argenti, 1976; Rice, 2005; Altman, 2005; Brix, 2007; Ghobarah *et al.*, 2006; Dodds *et al.*, 2010 and Researcher’s own empirical evidence)

There is an assumption that Phi Phi will always be a success in terms of tourism and therefore it is treated as a cash cow. Respondents claimed that the general attitude is to grab as much money as they can from the island. The warning signs noted by Pleumarom (2004) and Thongpra (2005) that the desire to rebuild and accommodate tourism again would far supersede any consideration for sustainability have been borne out. The importance of marketing to boost tourism seems to be a philosophy that is common to Thai government representatives and within discussions of sustainability originating in Thailand, but it does not engage in discussions of sustainability within literature of Western origins, adding further evidence of the author’s observations regarding the differences between local and global interpretations of sustainability and how definitions and principles which are Eurocentric in bias represent a poor fit for local conditions .

Favourable memories of Phi Phi of the past appear to dominate within the research findings and seem to prevent stakeholders seeing the damage that tourism model in place has wrought. They do not fully ‘see’ the damage that the present form of tourism on the island is having. This phenomenon was similarly illustrated during a personal visit with a friend to the island who, when watching film footage back failed to recognise certain aspects of the island, noting that when taking a detached view, the island takes a very different shape to when you are immersed in it.

In respect of inhabitants, this is also evidenced. Commentators on Phi Phi liken this to what is called 'boiled frog' syndrome. This phenomenon offers an alternative way of comprehending destination vulnerability, which may be drawn from the notion of a 'boiled frog syndrome', acknowledged within the literature surrounding strategic management of organisations and business failure, however to a much more limited extent within the literature on the strategic management of tourism destinations and disaster. However, the theory presents some clear parallels with the experiences on Phi Phi. Coined initially by Villiers in 1989 in respect of business, Richardson, Nwankwo, and Richardson (1994) explain that if you:

put a frog into a container of hot water, it will feel the heat and jump out. Put a frog into cool water and then gently heat the water to boiling point and the frog will happily sit there unaware of the incremental, dangerous change occurring in its environment. This well-observed, generic form of business failure has its roots in the tendency of organization managers to become trapped in their own "boiled frog syndromes" (Richardson, Nwankwo and Richardson, 1994: 4)

This phenomenon is a key feature of complacent managers who remain 'blissfully unaware whilst the environment around them heats up' (Richardson *et al.*, 1994: 4), something Johnson (1998) describes as strategic drift, illustrated in Figure 3.

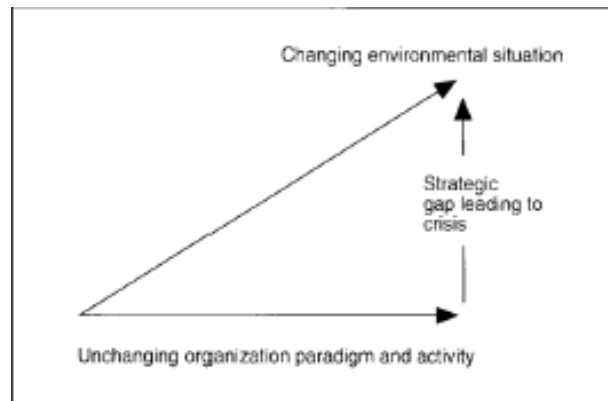


Figure 3: Strategic Drift Model (Johnson, 1998)

Importantly, this model shows that inertia in changing circumstances increases the likelihood of a crisis. In a tourism context, Sonmez et al. (1999) recommend that tourism destinations vulnerable to crises should incorporate strategic crisis management planning into their overall sustainable development and marketing strategies in order to protect and rebuild a positive destination image and re-establish the area's functionality. In relation to Phi Phi, this 'strategic gap' can be viewed in several ways. Firstly, a lack of action in implementing measures to manage tourism impacts, control the nature and volume of tourism development and developing sustainable tourism practices creates a crisis of tourism 'killing the golden goose', degrading the environment upon which the tourist product is based. Secondly, a lack of proactive action by the Thai government in terms of disaster preparation and complacency about the probability of such an event, a resistance to act for fear of harming the tourism industry exacerbated the strategic gap created by a rapidly-changing environmental situation. A further strategic gap developed on account of delays by the Thai government in agreeing and delivering redevelopment plans in the recovery phase. This represents a further 'crisis' due to the time elapsed between the

Prodromal (pre-impact) phase (Ritchie, 2004) of 26th December 2004, and Resolution (normal or improved state resumed), which, arguably, has still not been reached due to rebuilding work taking place in many areas of the island including shoreline developments near the pier in Tonsai and shop houses adjacent to the Wastewater Treatment Plant and wetlands. This notion of ‘strategic gap’ is embedded in the authors’ model of Vulnerability derived from her doctoral research as a factor that has heightened the vulnerability of Phi Phi.

Many of the concepts discussed by Villiers (1989), Johnson (1988) and Richardson, Nwankwo and Richardson (1994) chime with the failures of Phi Phi if considered as a business, which the Thai inhabitants and landowners consider it to be. In particular, causes of failure on account of ‘boiled frog’ syndrome are identified, several of which the author considers pertinent to Phi Phi, as explained below:

- complacency born of competitive success (as seen in the development philosophies theme);
- cultural rigidity (as seen in the community and cultural issues themes);
- a hierarchy orientation (as seen in the cultural issues theme);
- the push for organisational growth rather than productive growth (as seen in the development philosophies, present and past criticism themes); and
- low motivation amongst employees (community members, as seen in the communication and community themes)

Argenti (1976) asserts that another factor is the nature of leadership. It is the landowners who appear to hold the greatest power and influence over Phi Phi’s

development, and if one reflects on the opinions of respondents, this would be an apt description:

An overambitious, super-salesman type who is so set on hyper-successful performance that he ceases to believe in the existence of failure. These people are noticeable for their outstanding personalities. They are leaders of men, loquacious, restless and charismatic (Argenti, 1976: 123)

Such leaders are characterised as follows (adapted from Richardson *et al.*, 1994:12):

- they stand at the centre of the political arena (key players in planning meetings, as media liaison post-tsunami);
- people in charge of organisations “milk” them to the point of bankruptcy and demise (density of commercial construction on land, resorts, shop houses as illustrated in the development philosophies theme).

Whilst the age of this previous academic research on the concept of the boiled frog is noted, a subsequent search for more recent studies or application to the study of tourism development yields results applied only in the context of generic management. The closest application is Faulkner’s (2000) observation that the impacts of a threatening situation (disaster) are often only realised following a triggering event, implying that a gradual onset of adverse changes affords less recognition of a crisis situation than that of a triggering event, such as a tsunami. More recently still, Johnson’s (2009) work applies the boiled frog concept to encourage hospitality students to develop self-awareness in their attitudes to change,

whilst Hardiman and Burgin (2010) in their research on ‘canyoning’ in the Blue Mountains National Park in Australia likens the lack of care for ecological damage to the boiled frog phenomenon. This research, however, demonstrates the relevance and applicability of Richardson, Nwankwo and Richardson’s (1994) ideas, in order to comprehend how disaster vulnerability can be heightened and how a gradual onset of detrimental changes without remedial action being taken represents a crisis situation.

CONCLUSIONS

Numerous authors have highlighted a relative lack of academic attention directly addressing the influence of political economy upon achieving sustainability in post disaster reconstruction (Klein, 2008; Hystad and Keller, 2008; Olsen, 2000; Bommer, 1985; Beirman, 2003; Faulkner, 2001; Glaesser, 2003; Ritchie, 2004). This work therefore extends existing academic debates and studies in a number of areas. Firstly, in the existing academic debates concerning the political economy of post disaster reconstruction there is an observed trend towards, ‘disaster capitalism’, as Klein (2005:3) puts it, ‘smash and grab capitalism’ as Harvey (2007:32) observes, and in Saltman’s (2007a:57) terms, ‘attempts to accumulate by dispossession’. However, in Phi Phi’s case this did not occur, presenting an experience that is contrary to the growing trend. This work outlines the reasons why Phi Phi avoided the type of capitalism experienced by disaster affected tourism destinations elsewhere. Additionally, despite claims of a ‘clean slate’ being offered by the tsunami in developmental terms (Pleumarom, 2004; UNDP, 2005; Dodds, 2011; Ko, 2005; Nwankwo and Richardson, 1994; Argenti, 1976; Rice, 2005; Altman, 2005; Brix, 2007; Ghobarah et al., 2006; Dodds et al., 2010), this research provides evidence and

explanation of why a 'clean slate' did not and would never exist on Phi Phi, a finding which may be related to many other tourism destinations in a post disaster context.

This has enabled the researcher to note that the island's development followed a linear path of destination development and provides a perfect illustration of how shock events, stakeholder relationships and human agency can impact upon this predicted model of destination evolution. The tsunami illustrates limitations in these models in that it acts as an intervention in the linear path of development. Destinations following this intervention can take many paths. Phi Phi had an opportunity to reassess the development model, but sought to regain the level of development they had pre-tsunami as quickly as possible. One may note that while the infrastructure was removed, the philosophy predetermining that level of development certainly wasn't. Klein's (2008) observations on disaster capitalism, which took root in the notion of shock therapy, designed to erase and remake the human mind and likened to Friedman's search for a 'laissez-faire laboratory' under which he could employ his capitalist 'shock treatment' (ibid 2008: 49), can be applied differently in this case. Certainly a shock did occur on Phi Phi, which presented the opportunity for disaster capitalism, which would be enabled through neoliberal policies, but the ideology and 'memory' of the island had not been wiped clean and therefore could not be remade. The power of the landowners and their development hegemony did not permit this and was more powerful an influence than the hegemony of Western sustainability discourse.

The researcher draws on the notion of 'strategic drift' (Johnson, 1998) and 'Boiled frog syndrome' (Richardson, Nwankwo and Richardson, 1994) which have been

previously applied within strategic management but to a very limited extent within tourism studies in order to explain how host attitudes to tourism may increase vulnerability. Both of these theoretical contributions can be used assist in the identification of destination vulnerability and to highlight limitations in disaster response and recovery. The work posits that under the existing political economic climate, pursuit of an alternative development paradigm will not be possible and the island will remain highly vulnerable in line with Blaikie *et al's* (1994) observations that the factors of vulnerability are often reconstructed following a disaster and as such may create frame conditions for a repeat disaster.

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