

# **PHI PHI REVISITED: A CONTEMPORARY ASSESSMENT OF DESTINATION VULNERABILITY**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the wake of the Asian Tsunami, research was undertaken on the island of Koh Phi Phi, Thailand, to evaluate how political economy and interpretations of sustainability affected post-disaster tourism redevelopment (Taylor, 2012). It sought to resolve academic concern about the limited insight within existing bodies of knowledge into how sustainability and sustainable tourism development are conceptualised at a grassroots level by inhabitants and other stakeholders of tourism destinations (Redclift, 1987; Liu, 2003; Swarbrooke, 1999; Mowforth and Munt, 2015; Maida, 2007) and furthermore how these conceptualisations were shaped through expressions of political economy in a post-crisis context.

## **LITERATURE**

Numerous authors have highlighted a relative lack of academic attention directly addressing the influence of political economy on 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 extended existing academic debates and studies in a number of areas. In existing academic debates concerning the political economy of post-disaster reconstruction there is a trend towards ‘disaster capitalism’ (Klein, 2005: 3) or ‘smash and grab capitalism’ (Harvey, 2007: 32) and ‘attempts to accumulate by dispossession’ (Saltman, 2007a: 57). However, this did not occur on Phi Phi. 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 provided evidence and explanation of why this did not and would never exist on Phi Phi, a finding that may offer insight to other destinations in a post-disaster context.

## **METHODOLOGY**

An interpretive philosophy informed the research design, in which primary data was gathered using an inductive mixed methodology. 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 a Thai ‘voice’.

## **FINDINGS**

At that time, it was found that the factor with the greatest influence over Phi Phi’s development was the desire to develop the economy through tourism, and the philosophy underpinning the development was largely economic. The tsunami did not cause any significant reassessment of the tourism development trajectory but served to uncover a range of conflicts and unlawful

activity, resulting from powerful stakeholders pursuing their own interests and desired outcomes, in order to suit their own needs rather than those of the community as a whole.

In terms of how sustainability was conceptualised by different stakeholder groups, it was found that the meanings attributed to sustainability in this context differed greatly to meanings elaborated within western ideological debates. Stakeholders' conceptualisations of sustainability were mapped against key debates within literature. How meanings differed between stakeholder groups was also examined and a definition for sustainable tourism development on Phi Phi was compiled encompassing a broad range of interests. The work provided a rare opportunity to see which political, economic and cultural factors shape the planning of tourism development and whether actual practice mirrors the principles of sustainability. For islanders, present needs were yet to be met and education was recommended to increase islanders' understanding of impacts and sustainability, as well as their skills and knowledge base to enable them to compete intellectually with the ruling elite and reduce dependence upon landowners and the mainland.

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, the research refined the work of Calgaro and Lloyd (2008) to identify a detailed framework of vulnerability factors intertwined with factors of political economy, presenting a post-disaster situation that was highly vulnerable and non-conducive to sustainability. The strategic response to the disaster was analysed through an adapted Strategic Disaster Management Framework (Ritchie, 2004) to identify the shortcomings of the disaster response to comprehend how such a disaster has influenced tourism development and planning on the island, showing that this was a mirror opposite to how a disaster should be handled according to the literature (Ritchie, 2004; Adger *et al.*, 2005; Miller *et al.*, 2006; Olsen, 2000; Coppola, 2007; Faulkner, 2001; Baldini *et al.*, 2012). The researcher drew 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.

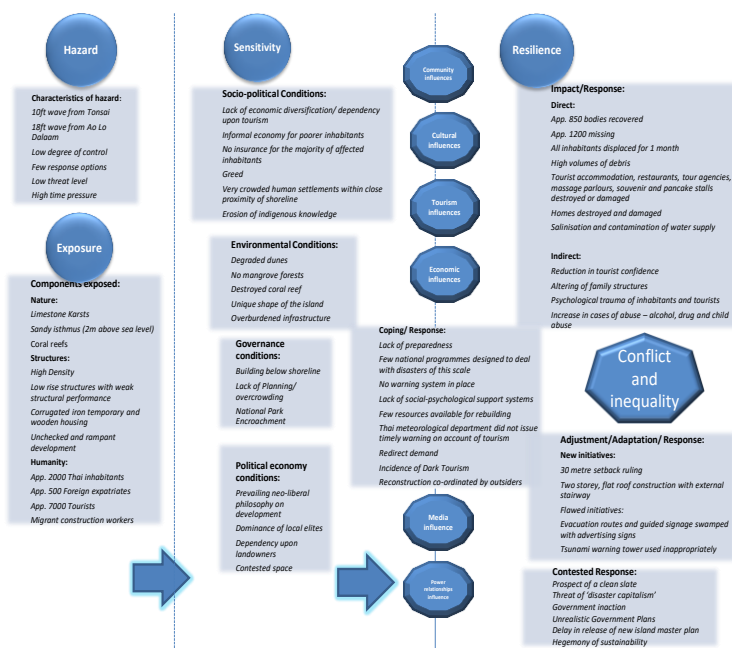


Figure 1: A framework of factors influencing Koh Phi Phi's vulnerability to disasters (Author's own comprised through data collection)

An examination of development philosophy established how specific factors of political economy and relationships of a hegemonic nature influence the development trajectory of both Phi Phi and Thailand. Despite governmental rhetoric influenced by a strong 'sufficiency economy' hegemony led by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the observations of dependency theorists provide a better fit for the experiences on Phi Phi and present significant challenges for the pursuit of sustainability. The research posited that an effective response to the disaster and pursuit of sustainability were undermined by the political economy of the destination.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the current day, the author has revisited this location to explore whether propositions presented within her earlier work had been realised. In 2012, when the original research was concluded, there was still much ongoing redevelopment work on the island, and it was of interest whether the outcome of this work has resulted, once again, in a form of tourism which is socially and ecologically unviable in the longer term. Whilst there has been limited research undertaken from a tourism development perspective in the intervening years (Calgaro, 2011; Steckley and Doberstein, 2011), much web-based discussion of the Ton Sai/ Ao Lo Dalaam area adopts a negative tone, and there is growing evidence to suggest that tourist satisfaction has been diminishing for a long time now (Kahl, 2014). The presentation will discuss preliminary findings resulting from data collection in March 2019 during a field visit, which included observation, visual data, focus groups with island residents and online surveys following the author's return from Thailand.

The importance of undertaking this longitudinal research lies in Blaikie et al's (2004) prediction of the reconstruction of vulnerability. Has vulnerability been re-created on Phi Phi and, does it create the conditions for a future disaster? With an ever-increasing range of shock events threatening the tourism industry (Ritchie and Campiranon, 2014) and with increasing competition from other south east Asian island locations (Hampton and Hamzah, 2016), now seems an appropriate time to assess whether Blaikie's (2004) assertions are true.

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