

Post Disaster Tourism Development of Phi Phi Island: The Influence of Sustainability and Political Economy

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Author: Dr. Faye Taylor

Position: Lecturer in Marketing

Address:

Nottingham Trent University
Burton Street
Nottingham
NG1 4BU
England

Tel: +44 (0) 7429706635

Email: faye.taylor@ntu.ac.uk

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Introduction:

Through a study which took place on Koh Phi Phi Island, Thailand between 2005 and 2011 concerning the influence of political economy and interpretations 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 (Klein, 2008; Hystad and Keller, 2008; Olsen, 2000; Bommer, 1985; Beirman, 2003; Faulkner, 2001; Glaesser, 2003; Ritchie, 2004). Within these debates there is an observed trend towards 'disaster capitalism' (Klein, 2005: 3) or 'smash and grab capitalism' (Harvey, 2007: 32) and 'attempts to accumulate by dispossession' (Saltman, 2007a: 57). This research observes however, that 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 provides evidence and explanation of why this did not and would not occur on Phi Phi, a finding that may be applied to other destinations in a post-disaster context.

This research takes an interdisciplinary approach and includes aspects of applied geography, applied management, political economy, development studies, sociology and anthropology, in line with the tradition of progressive tourism studies. It seeks 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, 1998; Maida, 2007) and furthermore how these interpretations are shaped through expressions of political economy in a post-crisis context. The research aimed to evaluate how political economy and interpretations of sustainability affected post-disaster tourism redevelopment using the case study of Phi Phi Island in Thailand, which was devastated by the tsunami of December 2004.

Method:

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

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present a '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).

Findings:

Twenty-five themes emerged from the data, the most significant being the social impacts of tourism, environmental impacts of tourism, power relationships and future desires. It was found that the factor with the greatest influence over Phi Phi's development is the desire to develop the economy through tourism, and the philosophy underpinning the development is largely economic. The tsunami did not cause any significant reassessment of the tourism development trajectory, but served to uncover a range of conflicts, 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.

Despite Klein's (2005; 2008) claims of 'disaster capitalism', there was minimal evidence found of this at a local level post tsunami. 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; Krutwaysho and Bramwell, 2010) and a focus upon what can be regarded as an inward facing 'sufficiency economy' (Noy, 2011; Krongkaew, 2004).

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'. 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 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 the island. This may be on account of concerns that the secondary impacts of the tsunami would be almost as

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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 via a tried and tested approach, and that tourism was the key shaping influence post-tsunami.

Implications:

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. This meets Calgaro and Lloyd's (2008) recommendation that further longitudinal research is required in other tsunami-affected locations. This research refines their work to identify a detailed framework of vulnerability factors intertwined with factors of political economy, presenting a post-disaster situation that remains highly vulnerable and non-conducive to sustainability. This is in response to Hystad and Keller's (2008) recognition that there is a lack of long-term studies, which not only show how disaster has shifted the nature of the destination and tourism product, but also identify successful strategic processes and actions in disaster response. The strategic response has been 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 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 can assist in identifying destination vulnerability and limitations in disaster response and recovery.

Unlike the work of Dodds (2010) and Dodds *et al.* (2011), the aim was not to assess the practice and attainment of sustainability on Phi Phi; rather, it was to elaborate interpretations and conceptualisations of sustainability. 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 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 posits that an effective response to the disaster and pursuit of sustainability are undermined by the political economy of the destination.

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