

# Voices from the South

E-Newsletter - April 2012

## Tourism: A Call for Justice. A Call to Churches.

*As part of the Karibu Foundation's 2012 theme of Justice Tourism and Pilgrimages, Caesar D'Mello, former Executive Director of the Ecumenical Coalition On Tourism (ECOT), reflects on the impact of tourism on the poor and oppressed, and the need for a church-based response.*

Today, the global tourism industry is one of the four largest industries in the world alongside oil and fuels, arms and armaments, and pharmaceuticals. Tourism outlays according to some calculations amount to some 10 % of the global GDP, while employing globally around 300 million, or about 10 % of the global workforce.

With rising incomes, the number of leisure travellers is steadily on the rise, with a billion tourism arrivals in a year globally now, and trending towards 1.5 billion by 2020,

according to the estimates of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO).

Asia, home for around 65 % of the world's population, and teeming with innumerable tourism destinations, is a magnet for tourists. To entice more of the world's tourists, catchy marketing slogans are used such as Incredible India, Amazing Thailand, Malaysia Truly Asia, Remarkable Indonesia, The Heart of Asia: Taiwan, Marvellous Melbourne, Infinitely Yours: Seoul, and others.

Despite what its advocates may claim, the kind of tourism seen in Asia and the wider global South indicates that, in its own way, it plays a role in impoverishing communities, alongside factors such as poverty, war, ethnic conflict, lack of infrastructure, lack of educational opportunities, corruption, inequitable distribution of wealth and resources, and trade injustice, among others.

The macro-economic data might suggest good returns for investors from tourism, but how do the poor benefit?

The negatives associated with tourism are not as obvious as those linked with the other factors, however, thanks to the slick tourism advertising, the superficial assumptions regarding the 'benefits' of tourism, and the innate human desire to travel.

Developing economies in South, South East, and North East Asia look to tourism as a means to assist the poor. The UNWTO, the tourism industry, and governments posit that tourism is 'a motor for development', that it contributes to poverty alleviation in developing countries.

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Modern tourism is accompanied by a serious level of 'leakage' of income and profits out of developing countries to overseas-based tourism businesses, airlines, cruise companies,



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The Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism (ECOT) serves as a response to the profound impact of tourism on the third world communities. It works in collaboration with faith-based and secular groups to promote socially, ecologically and ethically responsible tourism that benefits all. Visit: [www.ECOTonline.org](http://www.ECOTonline.org)



Photo: Fishermen in Sri Lanka

hotel chains, food and drink exporters, and other interests. And even though the poor figure largely in tourism policies, the major portion of what income remains in the country goes to the owners and investors.

Little evidence exists to justify tourism as beneficial for vulnerable communities. While economic information is available on tourist arrivals, revenue earned and related statistics, often little or no social indicators on tourism's impact are generally kept.

The employment generated is limited to the few lucky enough to be selected for low paying jobs such as guards, gardeners, cooks, cleaners, chamber maids, receptionists, lifeguards on beaches, and other services.

In different parts of Asia today tourism operations cause community, social, political, and even physical violence. Several places come to mind, including Goa, Kanyakumari, Kerala in India, north-eastern Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bali in Indonesia, Boracay in

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the Philippines, and parts of Thailand. It is often stated that due to the injection of resources through tourism into developing economies, the South owes a debt to the North.

In fact, the reverse is true. The South subsidises the tourism enterprise through costs borne by communities in various ways as discussed earlier. Eventually these far outweigh whatever gains are made from tourism. It is the Global North that owes a debt to the South.

Tourism is multi-faceted in that it relates to a mix of inter-related dimensions of culture, community, politics, economics, commerce, trade, locale, biodiversity, ecology, gender issues, and other aspects.

Within this framework, tourism reflects a host of a priori positions and assumptions based on a neo-liberal economic philosophy wherein growth

and the market are prime drivers, and incorporates the structural injustices within such ideology, making it futile to seek to 'reform' tourism.

There is an essential theological dimension to the investigation and reflection on tourism and the integrity of creation. It points to God's creative nature whose outpouring is seen so dramatically in Genesis, with the declaration that 'God saw that it was good'.

Tourism is a profits-driven industry that exploits what it does not own. It thrives by marketing nature – the sun, sea, mountains, rivers, landscapes – icons from Genesis. What the industry serves, however, in Asia and the rest of the world, is an offering in large measure of what is described as 'sun, sand and sex' tourism, which is an affront to God's creation.

The poor are at the mercy of economic and political thinking that justifies the inequitable distribution of power, resources, rights, and the gifts of nature in an unwholesome reflection on God.

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*Mr. Caesar D'Mello is a consultant who has had long involvement with development and ecumenism, most recently as the Executive Director of the Ecumenical Coalition On Tourism (ECOT).*

*The entirety of his text can be found in the upcoming book from the World Council of Churches, "Teaching Ecumenism in Asia".*