

Tinkering with ‘sustainable or eco-tourism’ hides the real face of tourism*

By Anita Pleumarom (Tourism Investigation & Monitoring Team) and

Chee Yoke Ling (Third World Network)

The United Nations committed a substantial error when it proclaimed 2017 the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. Despite its pronouncements of tourism being a positive force for economic development and poverty eradication, tourism is inept at meeting the challenge of implementing the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Like no other industry, tourism promotes – and glamorizes – a hyper-mobile and hyper-consumeristic lifestyle, rendering sustainability elusive. In fact, most tourism development is fraught with negatives including gross inequalities, human rights violations, cultural erosion, environmental degradation and climate instability (1).

Recent research is particularly alarming in terms of tourism’s contribution to climate change, primarily due to the high energy use for transport such as air travel. Based on a new global tourism emissions model, global tourism is set to emit some 300 gigatonnes of CO₂ between 2015 and 2100, which is 30 percent of the global carbon budget for sustainable development (2). It is preposterous to allocate so much of this budget to tourism, instead of meeting the acute energy needs of billions of people around the world. Meanwhile, tourism alternatives such as ‘green’ or ‘eco’-tourism can also be problematic. Not only do they usually depend on long-haul flights that drive climate change, they also tend to penetrate fragile ecosystems and Indigenous Peoples’ ancestral lands, triggering both biodiversity loss and culture loss.

Tourism as a major source of financial leakage is well documented (3). Since it is frequently large foreign companies that either initiate or take over commercially successful tourism projects, the domestic retention and distribution of tourism benefits has a very poor record; profits are generally repatriated to corporate headquarters and shareholders abroad. A particular characteristic of tourism in this age of neoliberal globalization is that it is closely intertwined with the finance and real estate industries. Ground evidence shows that vast tracts of public land are being privatized and acquired by foreign investors for luxury tourism - plus tourism-related residential, commercial and mega-infrastructure developments (e.g. ‘aerotropolis’, or airport cities) - resulting in displacement and disempowerment of local people. The radically de-regulated business environment spawns price hikes and speculation, posing high risks to local economies, ways of life and community social structures.

The nature and conceptualization of the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) does not allow for it to adequately deal with the unsustainable and unjust patterns of tourism. Originally formed as a business organization, the UNWTO remains industry-controlled and industry-oriented, and its critics do not regard it as a responsible UN agency acting for the common good. In synchrony with the global tourism and travel industry, it continues to aggressively campaign for further tourism growth despite the fact that much of contemporary tourism is antithetical to sustainable development and most of the tourism-related goods and services are

luxuries that can only be enjoyed by the world's minority. Even if some improvements can be achieved in tourism through better regulation and management as well as increased incentives for ecologically sustainable activities (alleged 'eco'-tourism among them), it is clear that the gains made will be negligible in the context of the continued growth of the tourism industry at large, as forecast and aspired by the UNWTO. Instead of down-scaling the inflated tourism sector and effectively engaging in harm avoidance, the UNWTO sends a wrong message to the public: that 'sustainable (eco)tourism' is the solution and needs to grow without barriers for the benefit of us all.

Actually, steering tourism policy and practice towards more sustainability requires first and foremost correcting the unjust economic structures and power relations that drive tourism development. It is also necessary to put in place laws and regulations that effectively protect local citizens and communities from harmful tourism, including mechanisms that require travel and tourism businesses to compensate for social losses and to clean up the damage they created. Clear transparent, accessible processes for accountability are needed, which empower people(s) to monitor and hold governments, financial institutions, development agencies and the private sector engaging in tourism accountable for their actions.

Rather than aiming at further tourism expansion, other more sustainable economic activities should be developed, particularly in small island developing states (SIDS) and least developed countries (LDCs) that heavily rely on tourism - which not only must contend with the volatility of tourism (e.g. due to international financial/economic crises, acts of violence, extreme weather events, natural disasters and pandemics), but also are endangered by tourism-induced climate change. This is a major undertaking that the international community must assist with, for the transition of those economies and health of their populations.

References:

- (1) Third World Network, 'Global Tourism Growth: Remedy of Ruin?', TWR, Sept./Oct 2015, <http://www.twn.my/title2/resurgence/2015/301-302.htm>
- (2) Sustainability Leaders Interview: Paul Peeters on Tourism, Aviation and Climate Change, 8 June 2016, <http://sustainability-leaders.com/interview-paul-peeters-on-tourism-aviation-climate-change/>
- (3) Pleumarom, A., 'Tourism - a driver of inequality and displacement', TWR, Sept./Oct 2015, <http://www.twn.my/title2/resurgence/2015/301-302/cover01.htm>

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