

After the tsunami: rebuilding for tourists

Disguised as a reconstruction plan, a second “tsunami” has struck the coasts of Sri Lanka. Tourist operators and private sector developers are taking advantage of the exclusion of local communities in the formulation of recovery plans and the availability of government and international funds for reconstruction. They have drawn up plans that push local people away from the coast to make room for luxury hotels and float plane docks, focussing the Government’s attention on tourism rather than the needs of local people.

Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform

Sarath Fernando

After the tsunami struck Sri Lanka on 26 December 2004, the Government moved quickly to announce it was launching not only a rehabilitation plan in the affected areas, but a plan to rebuild the entire nation. It has since gathered over USD 3 billion in commitments from international financial institutions and foreign governments to carry out this task. In the meantime, non-governmental agencies have been carrying out almost all of the clean-up work in the destroyed areas, as well as the construction of temporary shelters and the regeneration of livelihoods.

Within days of the disaster, the Government announced that people should not rebuild their homes on the coast. A few weeks later an exclusion zone of 100 to 200 metres was announced. Shortly thereafter, exceptions were announced for tourism operators. Throughout the recovery process, the Government has continued to talk about the need to promote tourism. For example, the Sri Lanka Tourist Board says, “In a cruel twist of fate, nature has presented Sri Lanka with a unique opportunity, and out of this great tragedy will come a world class tourism destination.”¹

The master plans

Plans are now being developed to transform 15 coastal towns around the island into magnificent tourist resorts as part of the post-tsunami reconstruction process. Wadduwa, Beruwala, Bentota, Hikkaduwa, Galle, Unawatuna, Koggala, Matara, Hambantota, Tangalla, Yala, Arugam Bay, Passikuddah, Nilaweli and Kalpitiya have been singled out for redevelopment according to different themes.

The first plan to emerge was for the redevelopment of Arugam Bay, a small town nestled on the edge of a 300 hectare lagoon on Sri Lanka’s east coast. It just happens to be one of the best surfing spots in the world, complete with beautiful beaches. Arugam Bay will serve as the model for all the other areas to be rebuilt.

Transforming the local environment and economy

The *Arugam Bay Resource Development Plan: Reconstruction Towards Prosperity* announced in April 2005 covers a stretch of land measuring 17 by 5 kilometres between Komari and Panama, and includes the town of Pottuvil.

The Plan envisages the total reorientation of the area. It will transform what were once fishing and agricultural communities, which offered some services in the way of seasonal guesthouses, into an extensively developed area complete with hotels for anyone from a “low cost budget windsurfer to a 5-star tourist”.² The transformation also includes a commercial “shoppers’ paradise”,³ a yachting marina, a float plane pier and a helipad. According to the Plan the amount of land used for tourism will increase exponentially due to redevelopment from the mere 9 hectares (out of 25,000) currently being used.

Consultants contracted to carry out the Plan admit that they, “have drawn heavily upon past plans (esp. the Tourism Master Plan) ... which were widely recognized as being grandiose and inappropriate.”⁴ The disconnection between the planned development and the interests of local people is illustrated in the following quote, “the location of the helicopter pad near the new pedestrian road will bring a new vibrant life into Arugam Bay town centre”.⁵

Fishermen pushed away to make way for tourists

In order to carry out the Plan, the Sri Lanka Tourist Board is willing to acquire not only all the land within the buffer zone - 200 metres from the high tide line as declared by the Taskforce for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN)⁶ - but also a one kilometre wide stretch running along 3 kilometres of the coast beyond the buffer zone, and a belt of over 600 metres around the edge of the lagoon. The area of sea next to the lagoon entrance for the yachting marina and a strip across the middle of the lagoon for the float plane landing pier must also be considered.

Notes taken at a community meeting organized by the Sewalanka Foundation and attended by community members and the Sri Lanka Tourist Board Chairman⁷ reveal that “the land belongs to the Government. Maybe your forefathers lived in that area, but the 860 acres belong to the Government. It will be developed as a tourist zone. We will put up buildings and develop the area and we will ask you to come and work there... After I became Chairman I captured 5,000 acres of land for the Tourist Board. My target is 15,000 acres”.

The Plan explains that new housing for the estimated 5,000 displaced families⁸ will be located at five separate inland locations. In all cases housing will be situated well over one kilometre from both the sea and the lagoon behind areas zoned for tourism and with obstructed access to the water bodies due to the new infrastructure. The Plan proposes allocating housing using a lottery system. The same set of notes mentioned above reports that “these houses will be given to people who support our program”. Further, “if you built any illegal structures in Arugam Bay, the army and the police will have to come and remove them”.

The Plan also says that the over 70 estimated existing guesthouses and numerous other small enterprises requiring relocation, will be given a 30 year leasing option within the zones if they were already registered businesses, while unregistered businesses will have no such rights. These unregistered businesses will receive no compensation.

What else could be done with USD 80 million?

The Government has decided to stop the weekly food grant of 200 rupees in cash and 175 rupees in rations for the 881,000 people affected by the disaster. With USD 80 million this relief could be extended for another six months.

The Government has just started to build 1,659 permanent houses to replace the 41,393 that were completely destroyed. USD 80 million would allow 32,000 families to build new homes.

1 Sri Lanka Tourist Board, www.srilankatourism.org/bb_slrebuilds.htm

2 Arugam Bay Resource Development Plan (ABRDP).

3 *Ibid.*

4 Arcadis. “Environmental Assessment for Post-Tsunami Rehabilitation: Assisting the Planning Process at Arugam Bay”, March 2005, www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka/infocentre/assessments/others/doc/Arcadis.pdf

5 ABRDP, *op cit.*

6 Taskforce for Rebuilding the Nation, www.tafren.gov.lk

7 Notes from Arugam Bay Meeting in the Committee Room of the Sri Lanka Tourist Board, 17 May 2005.

8 Lancaster, John. “After Tsunami, Sri Lankans Fear Paving of Paradise.” *Washington Post*. 5 June 2005. www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2005/06/04/AR2005060401136_pf.html

USD 80 million of tsunami funds to facilitate the process

The initial investment in the planned development is estimated at USD 80 million. Of that, USD 50 million is earmarked for a bridge over Arugam Lagoon, which according to the document “will stand as an inspirational symbol that shows progress towards the achievement of prosperity for Arugam Bay” as “the gateway to a tourist paradise”.

Another USD 5 million is allocated to build a new road around Arugam Lagoon. A further USD 20 million is proposed for the construction of the new inland townships of 2,500 houses.

The remaining USD 5 million is designated to water supply schemes and sanitation systems in the new townships and the tourist zone. The cost of the other proposed infrastructure and amenities, such as the float plane landing pier and helipad, has not yet been included in the overall plan, although it is stated in the document that these will use Government or non-governmental organizations funds.

Putting the wrong people in charge of planning

The Plan was apparently initiated independently by the Rebuild Sri Lanka Trust,⁹ which was set up in the aftermath of the tsunami by four individuals who started working in the Arugam Bay area as a “non-political private sector initiative”. The Trustees are Ajith De Costa, Michel Sproule, Hanif Yusoof, and D Kumara. Mr De Costa is Managing Director of a garment manufacturing company called Maxim Ltd. He was previously appointed Chairman of the Central Environmental Authority and chairman of the taskforce that produced the Colombo Megapolis 2030 Master Plan. Mr Sproule is his stepson and a senior partner in a Colombo law firm which specializes in foreign investment, infrastructure development advisory services and real estate. Mr Yusoof is the Managing Director of a transport services company called Expolanka Freight Ltd. Mrs Kumara is a retired doctor.

Business interests at the top

The plan falls under the authority of the Task Force to Rebuild the Nation (TAFREN), an extra-governmental body functioning under the authority of the President.

TAFREN is led by 10 business leaders, of which at least 5 own or manage companies that operate beach hotels.

9 Rebuild Sri Lanka Trust, www.rebuildsrilanka.org

The Rebuild Sri Lanka Trust had within a month of the tsunami contracted a series of consultants to work on the plan. The group included Arcadis, an engineering consultancy company from the Netherlands, ECOPLAN-Z Limited from New Zealand, and Environment & Management Lanka (EML) Consultants from Sri Lanka. All are involved in or directly linked to work on large Asian Development Bank or World Bank infrastructure projects. According to their website, the local company - EML Consultants - normally works facilitating investment from the United States in water and environmental services, carbon trading, plantation agriculture and floriculture.

The Plan was finalized on 25 April 2005 and states that the President had approved the project, and was “keen to see the action projects proposed in the report [were] implemented without delay”¹⁰. In fact, by 8 April 2005 the United States Agency for International Development had already published a presolicitation notice¹¹ for a contract to construct the bridge, road, water supply and wastewater systems in Arugam Bay. They also hosted a pre-bid conference for potential contractors in Colombo on 10 May 2005.

The residents of Arugam Bay first heard of the plan at a meeting organized by the Sri Lanka Tourist Board and Sewalanka Foundation in Colombo on 17 May 2005.

An assessment of the Plan carried out by Arcadis said that “the most important shortcoming is that it has largely been produced in isolation in Colombo, with little or no stakeholder involvement. It is evident that the team spent only two days in Pottuvil-Arugam Bay, and apart from the Government Agent officer in Ampara and the District Secretary in Pottuvil, they met only with international non-governmental organization staff.”¹²

The second “tsunami”

It is becoming clearer by the day that the direction taken in the post-tsunami reconstruction is completely opposed to the interests of the survivors of the disaster. These people are being driven from their land and away from their livelihoods in the name of a grand plan to modernize the country.

This process started long before the tsunami, but it is now being pushed along with the weight of the USD 3 billion gathered by the Government in the name of the tsunami victims. If all 15 tourist townships require an investment of USD 80 million to rebuild, the cost will be USD 1.2 billion, or a whopping

40% of the total amount raised. If the 15 tourist township plans follow the model of Arugam Bay, the number of families pushed out of the way of hotels, yachting marinas, helipads and float plane landing strips could easily reach over 75,000, a smaller, yet equally devastating “tsunami” for these people.

Conclusion

When the wrong people are placed in charge of planning, the wrong plans result and the majority of the people end up left out. Like the tens of thousands of people that are sweltering in their tents and tin huts, waiting to find out where they will be allowed to rebuild their lives and what resources they might be permitted to use. Like the hundreds of thousands of people who have been living in this uncertainty for up to 20 years. Like the millions who have been told to wait until 2015 to perhaps feel half as poor or half as hungry.

The millions of people who have contributed, so promptly and generously, to the post-tsunami rebuilding funds should demand that the people they wanted to reach out to and help get what they need to rebuild their lives. All they want is access to the resources that have been theirs for generations - the land, the water, the beaches, the sea - and the space to make their own plans. ■

10 ABRDP, *op cit*.

11 Presolicitation Notice for Upcoming Issuance of Request for Proposal, No SL688-05, 8 April 2005.

12 Environmental Assessment for Post-Tsunami Rehabilitation. “Assisting the Planning Process at Arugam Bay”, 16 March 2005.