



The Islanders and the Scientists; Post-tsunami Aid in the Nicobars Epilogue

The discussion at the seventh meeting of the Sustainable Indigenous Futures (SIF) Steering Committee on November 30, 2007, was, according to Simron Jit Singh, the committee's scientific advisor, "very intense but useful."¹ The committee briefly considered returning the remaining funds to the Austrian donors² but decided instead to carry on in the Nicobars with new staff and slightly different priorities.

Most significantly, the committee agreed to search for an outside "mentor" or "guide" to work with the Nicobar Youth Association (NYA) in the islands, replacing Singh and his field assistant, Venkat Ramanujam, who felt they could no longer serve in that capacity. The committee also ended support for the student hostel and its commitment to traditional Indian school training, preferring instead to develop some sort of "innovative learning module" that would specifically support sustainable development. Finally, the committee reaffirmed its support for village co-ops and asked that the scientific team continue helping the Nicobarese design good business plans and production portfolios. Singh, in particular, urged that SIF not give up hope for sustainable development in the Nicobars but rather reconsider "what may be defined as success."

Early efforts to identify an outside "mentor" willing to work with the NYA in the islands were unsuccessful.³ The islands were too remote, access too restricted, the NYA too rudderless, the prospects too uncertain. By mid-2008, SIF Chair Marina Fischer-Kowalski had decided to discontinue the search for an individual field worker who could operate under SIF's direction. Instead she began seeking an experienced team or institution, based in India and with experience

¹ Unless otherwise noted, information about decisions taken at the Steering Committee meeting comes from Simron Jit Singh, memo to RECOVER partners, "Protocol [Minutes] of the SIF Meeting," December 3, 2007, in SIF files.

² Golden Girls Filmproduktion, "Aftermath—The Second Flood," documentary film written and directed by Raphael Barth, 2013.

³ Kirsten Lundberg interview with Marina Fischer-Kowalski, February 25, 2014, in Vienna. All further quotes from Fisher-Kowalski, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

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in the Nicobars, that was willing to develop projects and manage the remaining funds—with SIF serving only as “endorsers,” “observers,” and “overseers.” In essence, Fisher-Kowalski was looking to hand off SIF’s field-level work to an experienced project manager; in particular, she sought a collaboration that would allow SIF “to withdraw from operational support, monitoring and financial administration.”⁴

After another round of search, SIF identified the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) as its lead candidate. TISS, a 72-year-old academic institution based in Mumbai, had a uniquely field-based and hands-on approach to teaching students development work and disaster relief. It had been working in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands since 2005 in partnership with Save the Children, Action Aid, and the Indian government, helping to build tribal capacity around issues of local governance and sustainable development. SIF had crossed paths with TISS before, in 2006, when members of the NYA management team attended a TISS training program in Port Blair.⁵

In 2009, TISS committed a five-person team to the partnership. After some intensive brainstorming and resource sharing, TISS and SIF settled on two programs: a revitalization of the earlier co-op network, again focused on sustainable livelihoods but now specifically including agriculture, fishing, handicrafts, and shop-keeping enterprises; and a new education initiative based on decentralized “island knowledge centers” which would provide a variety of resources and services specifically to support sustainable livelihoods.⁶ In November 2009, just as India was winding up its own post-tsunami programs in the Nicobars, TISS entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the government, enlisting its support for SIF projects and ensuring TISS’s continued access to the islands.⁷

Over the next four years, TISS took SIF’s commitment to sustainable development to a more local level than the NYA had been able to reach. Its staff conducted a survey of 4,569 tribal households, detailing their livelihood losses from the tsunami and documenting the islanders’ own ideas for economic regeneration. The original focus on village economic co-ops shifted somewhat to include a broader range of “collective action” and “social enterprises,” including micro-enterprise collectives (e.g. for tailoring and fish pickling) that could help diversify the economy. On the capacity building side, TISS established five “island knowledge centers” and trained local people to staff them; these centers distributed information on such things as government training and subsidy programs, job vacancies, copra prices, tribal rights, health, and renewable energy

⁴ Notes on “Talk with TISS,” Marina Fischer-Kowalski and Willibald Haas (for the Institute of Social Ecology) and Rector Parasuranam (for TISS), October 16, 2008, in SIF files.

⁵ Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Annual Report 2005-2006, Mumbai, May 6, 2006: passim. See: http://download.tiss.edu/annual_reports_new/Annual_Report-2005-2006.pdf.

⁶ Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Annual Report 2009-2010, Mumbai, May 10, 2010: p. 92. See: http://download.tiss.edu/annual_reports_new/Annual_Report-2009-2010.pdf.

⁷ Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Annual Report 2010-2011, Mumbai, May 11, 2010: p. 12. See: http://download.tiss.edu/annual_reports_new/Annual_Report-2010-2011.pdf.

sources. The island centers were connected to each other and to the outside world through a free SMS messaging service that TISS developed with help from IBM volunteers. TISS also established village notice boards and worked with the Indian journalist Denis Giles to publish a community newspaper called *Hamara Nicobars—Our Nicobars*—which drew extensively on local interviews and on islanders' own submissions, including children's submissions.⁸

TISS finished its work for SIF in the Nicobars in 2013 to everyone's satisfaction, and after the final audit SIF dissolved the same year. Looking back on the partnership, both the scientists and Caritas agreed the collaboration was fruitful, but that project management in development work should reside with professionally trained NGO managers, not with academics or the beneficiaries. "You need a real project manager, someone who represents the donors to say, 'OK, guys, let's give us a goal and a deadline,'" says Georg Matuschkowitz, speaking for Caritas. "Participative decision making is fine, but you cannot just let people discuss things for *years*."⁹ Singh came to the same conclusion. He commented:

What is good help, and how best to help people in crisis? Do they really need help and if so, in what way? It is important that science does not shy away from taking responsibility [for answering these questions]. Maybe the best way is that when scientists work with NGOs they bring together two skills, two ways of thinking: Scientists bring expert information on the region and the people, and the NGOs are the ones who carry out the action.¹⁰

For her part, Fischer-Kowalski found aid work more difficult than she expected. "It is really very hard to do it right," she says. "Really very hard. I must say I learned it the hard way." One lesson was especially painful. "The idea we had that they would collectively become responsible actors, I think it failed," she admits. "It was maybe illusionary to start with."

As of 2014, Marina Fischer-Kowalski continued at the Institute of Social Ecology and the University of Vienna and served as president of the International Society for Ecological Economics. Venkat Ramanujam contracted malaria in the Nicobars, which complicated an existing hearing problem; he nevertheless went on to earn a Master of Philosophy degree in Environment, Society, and Development from the Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge (England) and later enrolled to a Ph.D. program at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the

⁸ Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Annual Report 2011-2012, Mumbai, May 10, 2010: p. 92. See: http://download.tiss.edu/annual_reports_new/Annual_Report-2009-2010.pdf. Golden Girls Filmproduktion, "Aftermath," op. cit. Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Annual Report 2012-2013, Mumbai, May 15, 2013: p. 13. See: http://download.tiss.edu/annual_reports_new/Annual_Report-2012-2013_OnlineVersion_15-5-13.pdf.

⁹ Lundberg interview with Georg Matuschkowitz on February 25, 2014, in Vienna.

¹⁰ Golden Girls Filmproduktion, "Aftermath," op. cit.

Environment (ATREE) in India. Simron Jit Singh moved to the School of Environment, Enterprise and Development at the University of Waterloo (Canada) as an associate professor. He continued to work on an archival record for the Nicobarese but no longer visited the islands. Prince Rasheed Yusuf became a world traveler and wrote a book for the Nicobarese on modern opportunities. He undertook to build a Nicobar-themed tourist resort in Port Blair.

As for the Nicobarese, 10 years after the tsunami their lives were both more modern and more harried. The new coconut plantations were mature. More children attended school on the mainland. While some of the more colorful traditional events, like the festive outrigger canoe races, were still held, traditional religious rites were seldom performed. In a 2009 report, the Institute for Social Ecology predicted that by 2020, the golden age of the Nicobarese relaxed lifestyle would be long gone, with the average tribesman working 8.5 hours a day to maintain the standard of living to which he had become accustomed through humanitarian interventions.¹¹

¹¹ Marina Fischer-Kowalski, Project Leader, “Translational Research Program Final Report,” for Research on Coping with Vulnerability to Environmental Risk (RECOVER), draft, February 2009, in SIF files, p. 7