Case Consortium @ Columbia
Columbia University

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The Islanders and the Scientists: Post----tsunami Aid in the Nicobars Teaching Note

Case Summary

This case traces the consequences to the indigenous people of the Nicobar Islands of the massive outpouring of aid that followed the devastating 2004 tsunami. On December 26, 2004, a 9.1 magnitude earthquake sent a tsunami wave racing across the Indian Ocean; when it hit the remote Nicobars off the coast of India, it killed thousands, and left habitat, homes and livelihoods destroyed. The coconut palms on which the local economy depended were wiped out. Before the tsunami, there were some 27,000 Nicobarese; an estimated 3,500 died.

The world rushed to help the tsunami victims, spread across multiple countries from Sri Lanka to Thailand. In the Nicobars, closed to outsiders to protect the indigenous culture and because the islands hosted Indian military installations, the United Nations, government agencies, global aid organizations and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) poured in supplies of food, water, shelter, medicine and other necessities.

Anthropologist Simron Singh, an Indian national who worked for the Institute of Social Ecology (ISE) in Vienna, had been studying the Nicobars for five years before the tsunami. The islanders appealed to Singh for help, and he responded in person. But he was quickly taken aback by what he came to call the second tsunami—an influx of cash, consumer goods and inappropriate products (water tanks in a country with little water; tin huts in a tropical climate) that threatened to undermine Nicobarese culture, sense of responsibility and independence. Many locals were becoming dependent on the cash and goods, yet inevitably the supply would evaporate, leaving them with no means of support.

In May 2005, ISE together with Austria Caritas formally launched a new kind of NGO, one operated by scientists in partnership with an experienced aid organization, which aimed to help the Nicobarese determine their own future, building on their unique history and culture. The Sustainable Indigenous Futures (SIF) fund started with some €400,000 in aid pledges and Singh's zeal to succeed.

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But SIF's ambitions were soon tempered by reality. The Nicobarese organization with which SIF proposed to partner, the Nicobar Youth Association (NYA) was not legally registered and could not accept funds from abroad; Western standards of accountability were difficult for the locals to implement; many tribal members proved reluctant to work on the projects SIF initiated. In fall 2006, SIF contracted with an Indian training organization, the Society for Himalayan Indigenous Activities (SOPHIA), to help the Nicobarese develop management skills. For a year, SOPHIA worked with them—but by November 2007 it, too, declared defeat.

The case ends as SIF's leadership debates what to do about the Nicobar project. Should it simply give up and return money to donors? Could it find an effective local partner? Was it possible, or even desirable, to promote sustainable, self----determined aid projects that would help an indigenous group retain its culture and traditions?

Teaching Objectives

Multinational aid in the wake of disasters, natural and man----made, has become a commendable element of globalization. When disaster victims lose their homes, livelihoods, and family members, aid organizations both national and international organize—first, to prevent further physical hardship, and second to help rebuild the devastated area. Aid organizations by and large have the best of intentions and provide desperately needed supplies against often overwhelming logistical and political challenges.

But aid can have pernicious effects. Sometimes, aid becomes its own justification. Or aid distribution reads like a story of unintended consequences. Too many aid organizations have a narrow window of time in which to spend a certain amount of donated money—leading to thoughtless expenditures on items of little use to the intended beneficiaries. Or they bring in standard supplies, with little regard for the diet, culture or natural environment of recipients.

This case offers students a glimpse into the complex world of international aid with its tangled web of incentives and priorities. It allows them to think about the philosophy behind aid and contrast that with the realities on the ground. Are they in alignment? If not, what factors skew the equation? The SIF experience, in particular, can focus the debate on specifics. If one agrees that aid as commonly practiced can demonstrate insensitivity to local conditions, what kind of aid is beneficial? It's easy to criticize, but what are the alternatives?

Ask students to put themselves in the shoes of the various constituents and try to imagine an outcome that satisfies each of them in turn. You can do this by organizing teams, or assigning roles, or asking for volunteers. What does Prince Rasheed hope for? Simron Singh? SIF board members? The NYA? Then try to reconcile those goals. Is that possible? What compromises might be promising? Is the culture gap between the non----local and native players too wide to be bridged, or are there strategies they could employ to create a common vision and then implement it?

The case also raises for discussion the role of the activist scientist. Many scientists strongly believe that they should not intervene in an area of research for fear of skewing the results. That's fairly easy to do in a laboratory. But are scientists, including anthropologists, required to maintain a professional detachment from the human groups they study? If help is requested, what is the best response? Consider Prof. Singh, his professional history and involvement with his study subjects. Is he a model of professional responsibility or an example of an aberrant, overly emotional scientist?

Ask students to discuss how SIF should proceed. It has worked through Nicobarese leaders—were they the right ones? It brought some to Vienna for training—was that wise, or successful? It then hosted the meeting in the Himalayas to introduce the Nicobarese to another indigenous society; discuss the merits of that approach. SIF also partnered with Caritas Austria, an aid organization SIF knew had to abide by legal reporting standards and manage relations with donors. Was the partnership an advantage for SIF? For Caritas? Students should consider the benefits to scholars of running an assistance program. What are the advantages/disadvantages?

Finally, SIF is operating in a place which is geographically, culturally and linguistically distant. Ask students to enumerate the special challenges created by distance and what specific measures could alleviate each one. Assemble a list of guidelines. What kind of project might best lend itself to an NGO/research partnership, and what terms and conditions would make most sense for both sides?

Class Plan

This case can be used in a class/course on sustainable development, nonprofit management, scientific ethics or international aid.

Study question. Help students prepare for discussion by assigning the following question in advance:

1) In November 2007, should SIF give up? Why or why not?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to the question in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class discussion. The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions in order to promote an 80----90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) What does a community require immediately post----disaster? What does it need for a recovery? List on board and contrast. Are the needs of an indigenous community different from a "modern" community?

b) Should aid agencies *not* provide contemporary consumer goods and food to non---modern societies, or is it a positive to introduce those products? How would you decide what to deliver and to whom?

c) Simron had a vision of restoring a Nicobar society that used coconuts as currency and revered pigs. Was that realistic? Patronizing?

d) Institute Director Marina Fischer----Kowalski and her colleagues wanted to provide the Nicobarese with "compassionate, science----based help" (p.7). Others talked about self----determined sustainable development. What might this look like? What made it hard?

e) One of the challenges in delivering aid to the Nicobars was the islands' protected status. Discuss the role and motivations of the Indian government in the aid effort, especially its cash payments to families and insistence on maintaining physical access restrictions.

f) Scientists typically abstain from involvement in a research project. What do you think about the Institute of Social Ecology's decision to participate in recovery operations in the Nicobars? To endorse Simron Singh's role?

g) From the Nicobarese point of view, what—if anything—distinguished SIF from any of the other international aid organizations?

h) Even after years of effort to train the Nicobarese in accountability and record----keeping, they had trouble complying. How can international aid organizations adhere to prevailing laws and regulations and simultaneously accommodate the abilities of aid recipients?

i) Did Caritas Austria err in partnering with the Institute on SIF? Did the Institute err in partnering with Caritas on SIF?

j) What is your verdict on the ability of international aid to help indigenous people? Discuss.

Suggested Readings

Simron Jit Singh, *The Nicobar Islands: Cultural Choices in the Aftermath of the Tsunami* (Vienna: Oliver Lehmann and Czernin Verlag), 2006.

SYNOPSIS: The book gives Singh's point of view on the situation he encountered in the Nicobars after the tsunami. It is a well----researched description, but does have an emotional element reflecting the author's opinion on what the islanders should do.

http://www.uni-klu.ac.at/socec/downloads/NicobarBook_en_SocecSite.pdf

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

SYNOPSIS: This documentary was not yet released to the public as of the publication of this case study. Once it is available, however, it will make an invaluable companion to the case for students and casual readers alike. It followed Simron Singh and SIF for several years of their work and provides a graphic view of the islands, the players and the challenges.

Richard Stone, "After the Tsunami: A Scientist's Dilemma," *Science*, Vol. 313, July 7, 2006.

SYNOPSIS: This article addresses head----on the question of whether a scientist should allow himself to intervene in the affairs of a society or project he is studying. Stone interviews Singh, so case readers will have another source from which to judge Singh's motivation.

http://www.sciencemag.org/content/313/5783/32.full

The Sphere Project, *The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*, The Sphere Project: Geneva, 1998.

SYNOPSIS: This publication provides a baseline set of principles and minimum standards for delivering a quality humanitarian response. It promotes the participation of affected populations in humanitarian action. The standards cover four key areas of aid: water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion; food security and nutrition; shelter, settlement and non----food items; and health.

http://www.sphereproject.org/handbook/

S. Anand, "Everybody Loves a Good Tsunami," *Outlook India*, November 21, 2005.

SYNOPSIS: This article is an overview of post----tsunami aid to India. An investigation by the independent, weekly English----language news magazine found wasted money and resources, a reluctance to share important information, abuse and misuse. It does not speak specifically about the Nicobars, but provides a national context for what was happening on the islands.

http://www.outlookindia.com/article/Everybody-Loves-A-Good-Tsunami/229321