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

In the early morning hours of December 26, 2004, a magnitude 9.1 earthquake unleashed a tsunami of unprecedented force in the Indian Ocean, sending it on a collision course with the Nicobar Islands, home to a tribe that had little contact with the outside world. The devastation was immediate and far-reaching: thousands dead, habitats destroyed, ancient artifacts swept away.

Two days later, Simron Singh, an Indian anthropologist who was the world's expert on the Nicobarese, received an urgent message from the islands: "Central Nicobars entirely wiped out. Do something as soon as possible." Singh wanted to help, but what could he do? He had no experience in disaster recovery or rehabilitation work, no funds, and no project management skills.

Singh turned for advice to colleagues at the Institute of Social Ecology in Vienna. As they debated whether it was proper for research scientists to engage in humanitarian relief efforts, offers of aid for the Nicobarese started rolling in. The institute took a wait-and-see approach, but on his first post-tsunami visit to the islands in early 2005, Singh reported that the recovery was starting to create problems of its own: a "second tsunami" of overabundant supplies, cultural misunderstanding, competition among nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and misguided rehabilitation programs. Singh pleaded for the institute to intervene with a culturally appropriate plan.

In April, Institute Director Marina Fischer-Kowalski made the decision: the institute would partner with Caritas Austria, a Catholic relief organization, to create a new, academic-based, special-purpose NGO—the Sustainable Indigenous Futures fund (SIF)—to support sustainable development in the Nicobars. Drawing on approximately €400,000 (about $500,000) in pledged funds, SIF would help the Nicobarese determine their own future, building on their unique history and culture. SIF formally launched in May 2005.

In September 2005, SIF invited a delegation of Nicobarese leaders to Vienna to develop concrete plans. By the end of the year, two projects were up and running in the Nicobars: a student hostel and a network of fishing and horticulture cooperatives. But the Nicobarese struggled with

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paperwork and bookkeeping. Legal and accounting difficulties arose and, by March 2006, Caritas came under pressure from donors for slow results. More seriously, the native culture seemed to be fast disappearing, a victim of the sudden introduction of a cash economy, a glut of Western consumer goods, and the sharp dealings of native "tsunami captains." In June 2006, Singh warned that the islanders were becoming lazy and aid-dependent.

Sustainable development was proving more difficult than expected. Over the next year, SIF tried in several ways to reengage the Nicobarese in designing their own recovery, including a cross-cultural retreat in the Himalayas where a new team of Nicobarese worked with SIF, a band of forest nomads, and SOPHIA, an Indian NGO that specialized in capacity building among indigenous peoples. But six months later, SOPHIA reported that communication with the Nicobarese had broken down completely, and that they had made little progress on any of their stated objectives.

As the SIF Steering Committee gathered in Vienna in November 2007, it faced some difficult facts. Nearly three years had passed since the tsunami, and SIF's work was at an impasse. Donors were clamoring for results, and Caritas was threatening to pull out. Nearly €300,000 remained in the SIF fund, but what should SIF spend it on? In the face of cultural collapse, what did sustainable development mean? Could the scientists and the humanitarians broker a workable solution?

The Islands and the Anthropologist

The Andaman and Nicobar archipelago lay 1,300 kilometers (about 800 miles) east of India between the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. It comprised more than 500 tropical islands and rocky uplifts, all claimed by India. Of these, 24 islands made up the Nicobars, and of these 12 were inhabited. About a third of the islands' population were Indian traders, immigrant laborers, and workers at the islands' several military installations. The rest were an indigenous people called Nicobarese, who numbered about 27,000 before the tsunami.[1]

The Nicobarese were one of six "scheduled tribes" in the islands specifically protected under India's 1956 Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation Act because of the vulnerability of their traditional culture. Under the terms of the act, access to the Nicobar Islands was strictly limited and all dealings with the tribes—whether for trade, social services, aid, or scientific purposes—were mediated by the Indian government, which had its administrative offices in the territorial capital of Port Blair, on South Andaman Island.

[1] Venkat Ramanujam Ramani, "Gifts Without Dignity? Gift-Giving, Reciprocity and the Tsunami Response in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India," dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Environment, Society and Development, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, 2010, p.3., citing 2001 Indian census figure of 26,565.

The Nicobarese were not Stone Age people. They had had contact with passing ships for 1,300 years and sporadic engagement with a succession of colonial administrations. Before the tsunami, they were aware of the outside world and had become partially assimilated. They had some electricity. Their children went to government primary schools. Some wore eyeglasses and rode bicycles. Most called themselves Christians, a handful Muslims. But these were modern accretions thinly layered over an ancient island culture with roots in the Malay-Burmese cultural complex.[2]

Traditional Nicobarese culture was inextricably tied to the island ecosystem. The Nicobarese fished, grew coconuts, and raised pigs and chickens. They planted small gardens of bananas and yams. They lived in coastal villages and built their canoes and thatched houses from materials found along the coast and in the interior rainforest. When cash was needed, to buy rice or kerosene for example, the Nicobarese sold dried coconut, called copra, to the immigrant traders.

It was estimated that in the traditional economy, the Nicobarese worked about an hour a day in productive activity.[3] They put their energy into social relations, artwork, festivals, contests, and ritual expressions that honored their ancestors and the islands' spirits. Outside the Nicobars, the people were perhaps best known for their *hentakoi* and *kareau*, painted effigies of people, animals, and spirits that guarded their homes and their ancestors' bones. The Nicobarese lived in what was widely said to be a tropical paradise. As late as 1998, a visiting scholar was able to say: "As yet there are no signs of any serious conflict within their society between ordinary people and 'modernists.'"[4]

Emotional scientist. In 1999, the Nicobars attracted the interest of a young Indian social scientist, Simron Singh. After earning a bachelor's degree in English literature at the University of Delhi, Singh turned to anthropology. A self-described "misfit" and "black sheep" of a Sikh manufacturing family, Singh had a romantic disposition and sympathy for marginalized peoples.

In 1995, these inclinations took Singh to Dehradun, India, in the Himalayas, where he became involved with the Gandhi social justice movement and worked for an NGO that supported the rights of a group of forest nomads who herded water buffalos. The association ended badly. As the nomads' cause became wildly popular in India, Singh believed that the NGO grew corrupt.

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2 The definitive sources for pre-tsunami Nicobarese culture are Simron Jit Singh, *In the Sea of Influence: A World System Perspective of the Nicobar Islands,* Lund Studies in Human Ecology 6 (Lund: Lund University), 2003 and Simron Jit Singh, *The Nicobar Islands: Cultural Choices in the Aftermath of the Tsunami* (Vienna: Oliver Lehmann and Czernin Verlag), 2006.

3 Lisa Ringhofer, Simron Jit Singh, and Marina Fischer-Kowalski, "Beyond Boserup: The Role of Human Time in Agricultural Development," in Marina Fischer-Kowalski, Anette Reenberg, Anke Schaffartzik, and Andreas Mayer, eds., *Ester Boserup's Legacy on Sustainability: Orientations for Contemporary Research*, Human-Environment Interactions Series, Vol. 4 (Berlin: Springer), 2014.

4 T. N. Pandit, "Ecology, Culture, History and World-View: The Andaman and Nicobar Islanders," in *The Cultural Dimension of Ecology,* The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts: New Delhi, 1998. See: http://ignca.nic.in/cd_07016.htm

Outraged and disheartened, Singh headed for the most unspoiled place he could find: the Nicobars, where he conducted research under a grant from India's Ministry of Human Research Development, Department of Culture. The job came with permission to live in the restricted islands.

Singh spent five years in the Nicobars doing field research for his doctorate, which was awarded by the University of Lund (Sweden) in 2003. During that time, he joined the Institute of Social Ecology in Vienna as a research associate. His work with isolated hunters and gatherers was valuable to the institute and its director, Marina Fischer-Kowalski, who studied interactions between societies and their environments, especially in times of environmental stress and social change.[5]

Though still a young scientist, Singh was respected for his empirical work and empathetic engagement with his research subjects. He forged close personal relationships with many of the Nicobars' most influential leaders, including elders like Jonathan, a traditionalist chief, and younger leaders like Prince Rasheed Yusuf, a member of the highest-ranking clan, who had been educated in India and had modernist dreams for his people. Singh even arranged for Rasheed to visit Vienna in 2003. Singh also worked closely with the Nicobarese Tribal Council and its operational wing, the Nicobarese Youth Association, and understood island administration well.

Singh cared deeply about the future of the islands and its peoples. According to Denis Giles, the editor of a newspaper in Port Blair who sometimes served as his research assistant, Singh was a complicated figure: a populist, a dreamer, a moralist, a scrupulous chronicler, a fiercely loyal friend -- "an emotional scientist."[6]

Tsunami and First Response

On the morning after Christmas 2004, a 9.1 magnitude earthquake off the west coast of Sumatra unleashed a tsunami that thundered north toward the Nicobars, some 550 kilometers (340 miles) away. "It sounded just like a plane, but it was the wave," said a Nicobarese man who survived the eight punishing waves, each 10-20 meters (32-64 feet) high. "I made my family sit in a boat. But the waves came back and the boat sank. They were all washed away. My entire family died, all fifteen of them. Even my smallest child with her mother and my eldest daughter, too."[7]

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5 Kirsten Lundberg interview with Simron Jit Singh on December 5, 2013, in Waterloo, Ontario. All quoted material for Singh, unless otherwise attributed, is from that interview.

6 Raphael Barth, director, *Aftermath—The Second Flood*, Golden Girls Filmproduktion, 2014.

7 Ibid.

The devastation was shocking: 8,000 reported dead, injured or missing,[8] the fishing reef destroyed, pigs and chickens drowned, houses toppled, coconut plantations felled. One island was broken into three pieces, others had subsided several feet into the ocean, and most had lost long stretches of coastline. Boats and gear were lost, and all but two of the ancestral effigies had washed away.

The news from the Nicobars reached Singh in Lucknow, India, on December 28, two days after the tsunami. The message, relayed via shipboard radio, was from Singh's friend Rasheed: "Central Nicobars entirely wiped out," Rasheed said. "Do something as soon as possible."

Singh could not go to the Nicobars—all transportation to the islands was shut down—so he called a news conference and then called Giles, his journalist friend in Port Blair. Later that day, Giles talked himself aboard the first relief ship to the Nicobars, claiming family there. His photos and video of the disaster told the tale. The once-verdant paradise was now a shattered landscape of dun-greys and browns. Bodies lay bloated in the still-muddy waters, and survivors were dying of hunger and thirst. Military personnel organized an evacuation to inland camps, where blue tarps provided the only shelter. The people were unable to organize themselves; the ocean had swept away many of the old people -- their leaders and ritual masters.

An outpouring of help. The 2004 earthquake and tsunami was one of the deadliest natural disasters in history, killing a quarter of a million people in 14 countries and leaving 2 million displaced. The outpouring of help was also unprecedented: nearly $14 billion in humanitarian aid, perhaps $40 million of which found its way to the Nicobars.[9] The Indian government immediately mounted a massive relief operation, sending medical supplies, clothing, and tons of rations: rice, lentils, potatoes, onions, vegetables, milk powder, sugar, tea, flour, cooking oil, spices—even pickles.

The government also announced immediate relief payments of 2,000 rupees (about $46) per household, with further compensation to come later for loss of life and lost crop land. Aid delivery in the islands was difficult. Some communities were reachable only by canoe or helicopter, and the waters were infested with crocodiles. But the government was resolute; one visiting minister confidently assured a group of Nicobarese that the government could provide them with "anything."[10]

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[8] Death and casualty figures reported by *The Times of India*, December 29, 2004. Later figures suggested that 3,513 lives were lost in the Andamans and Nicobars, most of them Nicobarese; Venkat Ramanujam Ramani, "Gifts Without Dignity?" p. 21.

[9] Ibid, p. 10. The $40 million estimate was provided by Singh, who stressed that the total is difficult to know because most NGOs did not report their spending on the islands to the government of India, despite being repeatedly asked to do so,

[10] Barth, *Aftermath*.

By mid-January, scores of NGOs had taken up residence in Port Blair, including big international players like UNICEF, World ORT, and CARE as well as many Indian welfare and sectarian organizations like the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation and the Jainist charity Bharatiya Jain Sanghatana. But when it came to the Nicobarese, the NGOs' hands were tied. Because the Nicobarese were a protected tribe, the Indian government strictly controlled outsiders' access to the islands; they could contract to provide supplies and help design interventions, but for the most part the government would deliver them.

Only Oxfam India had direct access in the Central Nicobars, having contracted with the Nicobar Youth Association (NYA), a qualified NGO in its own right, to distribute seeds, organize wage work, and provide administrative support to the Tribal Council. The rest of the NGOs were required to render aid from a distance, often without much first-hand information. Not knowing the culture or what might be needed, some NGOs simply sent what provisions they had, and not all of it was appropriate. Cookies, potato chips, ramen noodles, Coke, chocolate, wool blankets, winter clothing—all found their way to the Nicobarese, who accepted whatever was offered.

Wading In

In early January 2005, Singh returned to the Institute of Social Ecology in Vienna from India to talk to Fischer-Kowalski, his mentor, about the logistics of spending an extended period of time in the Nicobars (e.g., who would assume his teaching responsibilities?). He had decided to return to the islands to help in any way he could. He felt it was his moral duty. Fischer-Kowalski was initially reluctant to let Singh go, citing the dangerous conditions and his lack of experience in relief work.

She also had professional concerns. A sociologist by training, Fischer-Kowalski had founded the Institute of Social Ecology and served as its director for 18 years. The institute drew researchers from a wide range of academic disciplines, and while it took an unusually hands-on and problem solving approach to issues of social and ecological change, it also prided itself on its reputation for scientific rigor. Would direct engagement in the tsunami recovery efforts compromise the institute's objectivity? Would it constitute interference? These questions gave her pause.

But events moved quickly and Fischer-Kowalski soon made up her mind. The press had identified Singh as the world's leading Nicobars expert and the only person in Austria to have regular access to the islands. The institute was suddenly in the limelight. Requests for interviews and offers of donations came pouring in, and it was becoming clear that the social ecology of the islands was being radically transformed in fascinating ways. Moreover, Fischer-Kowalski had had a direct request from the Nicobar Tribal Council for Singh to come advise them. In her view, the

tsunami was an extraordinary event that required an exceptional response.[11] The principle of scientific detachment had been trumped by a duty to help the islanders and document the ecological transition.

Other academic institutions evidently felt the same way. Offers of financial support flooded in from the British Museum, Yale University, a Boston anthropologist interested in "urgent anthropology," and the institute's own academic sponsor, Klagenfurt University, among others. Before long, the Institute had pledges of assistance totaling about €40,000 in hand.

Then, in mid-January, the institute got a call from Universal Music, a major international production company that had just finished recording a CD called "Austria for Asia" to raise money for the Nicobar and Andaman Islands. The CD was the brainchild of André Heller, a popular Austrian pop singer and performance artist, who had gathered more than 60 musicians from across the music spectrum for the fundraiser. The CD was expected to bring in about €200,000 in private donations. Would the institute be interested in managing that money?

Yes, Fischer-Kowalski said, but the institute would need help turning the funds to useful work. The word went out and spread quickly. The tele-fundraiser *Nachbar in Not* (Neighbor in Need) offered help with CD sales and donor relations, and Caritas Austria, the Catholic relief agency, came forward to help with project management and financial matters. Caritas also had €150,000 of donations toward tsunami aid to bring to the table. Before long, the institute had pledges nearing €400,000.

Fischer-Kowalski was impressed. This looked like an unusual opportunity, both for the Nicobarese and for the institute. She began negotiations to create some sort of special-purpose NGO that could deliver compassionate, science-based help to the Nicobars. At the same time, she applied to the Austrian Science Fund for a grant to support new research in the Nicobars. Fischer-Kowalski had in mind a new kind of integrated recovery collaboration in which ongoing scientific research would guide humanitarian interventions. Though the incipient partnership did not yet have a name or a mission, it was positioned to make a difference.

Second Tsunami

When Singh arrived in the Nicobars in late January 2005, a month after the tsunami, he found the Nicobarese traumatized. Many were mute. Some sat on the beach for hours, staring out into the ocean. All were disorientated, "at the mercy of little things":[12] mosquitoes, stubbed toes, filthy clothes, unaccustomed foods, the high-handedness of Indian officials who had come to help.

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[11] Material citing Fischer-Kowalski in this section comes from Kirsten Lundberg's interview with Marina Fischer-Kowalski on February 25, 2014, in Vienna.

[12] Barth, *Aftermath*.

Outside that circle of grief and forbearance, the reconstruction effort was already underway. More than 60 NGOs were now camped in Port Blair clamoring for access to the islands, lobbying the government for contracts to supply food, clothing, pigs, boats, seeds, construction materials, teacher training – anything, it seemed, if pen could just be put to paper. The competition for contracts was fierce both because the NGOs had so much money to spend and because many of them had 90-day spending deadlines.

As a result, the Nicobars were awash in aid. Food rations were guaranteed for the next 18 months, and millions of rupees had been promised in cash compensation payments.[13] Roads were being staked out, housing units designed, electric lines laid. Temporary housing had begun to replace the blue tarps in the camps; made of corrugated tin, the shelters were hot and airless—Giles called them "boiling chambers"—but they would keep out the rains in the coming monsoons. Meanwhile, 70,000 metric tons of building materials were on order from abroad to build 7,000 units of permanent housing.[14]

Other projects seemed less well considered. Five huge, 1 million-liter water tanks arrived from Australia, but there was no water delivery system to fill them. Ten thousand families each received 1,000 meters of nylon rope—but for what?[15] An NGO sent saris, but women in the Nicobars didn't wear saris, they wore sarongs (the women sewed the saris into mosquito nets, which were needed but so far not provided). Boats were to be distributed, but only to applicants who held government fishing licenses, and few Nicobarese did. Shipments of communications equipment arrived by the boatload—televisions, radios, CDs, and cell phones – and soon had the islanders' children in thrall. The Nicobarese were receiving aid, but it wasn't always the aid they needed. As Rasheed told a documentary film crew:

> I find outside people never understand our way of thinking and living. They always want to show progress, without looking into the actual needs of the people. Nobody understands that, which hurt me always.[16]

Sustainability and self-determination. Singh was shocked by the deluge of humanitarian aid he saw in Port Blair and in the Nicobars. He called it the "second tsunami" and judged it in some

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13 So full were government coffers that the original offer of 4,000 rupees (about $90) per hectare of lost crop land was later negotiated upward to 94,000 rupees (about $2,135) per hectare. Simron Jit Sing, "Field Report/Evaluation of the Situation in the Nicobars, March-May 2006," in SIF files.

14 The amount of imported building materials would almost triple to 200,000 metric tons before the units were finally built in 2006 and 2007. Ibid; Simron Jit Singh, "General Situation in the Nicobar Islands, March-April 2007," PowerPoint presentation, in SIF files.

15 Parwini Zora and Daniel Woreck, "Tsunami survivors left to suffer on Andaman and Nicobar islands," *World Socialist Website,* January 4, 2006. See: http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2006/01/anda-j04.html

16 Barth, *Aftermath*.

ways more harmful than the first.[17] Not only was much of the aid culturally inappropriate, it was also unsustainable. For example, a well-regarded "organic plantation" plan to rebuild the traditional coconut economy would require more than 20 pounds of imported fertilizer per plant per year, an unthinkable expense for a subsistence economy.[18]

Similarly, government plans for permanent housing called for electric lights, gas stoves, and in-home plumbing. Where would the energy and water come from? How would the Nicobarese pay those bills down the line? Their compensation payments would run out eventually; what source of cash income could they depend on? As a scientist, Singh could see that the coming demands on the social ecology of the islands were unsupportable. The energy load, water demand, caloric intake, and cash requirements all exceeded traditional capacities and would require drastic changes in the Nicobarese way of life.

Self-determination was another issue. Outsiders observed that the Nicobarese had long been treated as second-class citizens. Called *holchu,* or "tribals," they were seen by local Indians and immigrant workers as lazy, backward, uncivilized people.[19] Though the government officially "protected" the tribes, critics charged that it patronized them, seldom engaging them in decisions that affected their wellbeing or future. The tsunami only made matters worse. In the resulting state of emergency, under time pressure and international scrutiny, and with little direct access to the Nicobarese communities, the government and humanitarian aid providers essentially decided the Nicobarese projects among themselves. Though the Tribal Council and NYA met almost daily in the first six months of 2005, most of the reconstruction planning and implementation fell to others. Some Nicobarese were starting to feel like pawns in a game that seemed to benefit donors more than victims, and they didn't like it.

In Search of Axes

Jonathan, chief of the traditionalist community of Chowra Island, was particularly unhappy. Chowra had been especially hard hit by the tsunami, and the government had relocated Jonathan's people to a refugee camp on nearby Teressa Island, where Singh found them living under tarps, eating rice and lentils, and mourning their dead. Though a hastily erected wooden sign bravely welcomed them to "Chowra Camp," Jonathan knew this was no home for his people.[20]

Jonathan's people had lost their pigs, their boats, their ancestors' bones, and their own bearings. They were becoming quarrelsome and they were losing initiative. Jonathan felt they

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17 Ibid.

18 Simron Jit Singh, "Field Report/Evaluation of the Situation in the Nicobars, March-May 2006," in SIF files.

19 Venkat Ramanujam Ramani, "Gifts Without Dignity?" p. 27; also author's interview with Celeste Angus, director of international cooperation for World ORT, February 19, 2014.

20 Information for this section comes from Lundberg's interview with Singh, Singh's book *The Nicobar Islands,* and the documentary film *Aftermath*, op. cit.

needed to get hold of themselves, find their traditional compass, and take action, so he harangued them, and the Chowrites came up with a plan. They would build boats on Teressa, then sail home, rebuild their communal houses and plant their gardens with bananas, pineapples, jackfruit, and vegetables.

In Jonathan's opinion, and that of many of the older generation, the Nicobarese did not need tsunami aid. They could feed themselves and fend for themselves. They just needed to go home. "We may die but we have to go back," Jonathan said. "What will we do here? We need to work."[21] But first they needed tools, because theirs had washed away in the tsunami. The Nicobarese used specialized adzes and chisels to build their boats, and a particular kind of axe to fell and strip the young trees they used to frame their large thatched-roof houses. These were native tools that the Nicobarese had obtained from Malay Burma traders for generations. No others would do, as became clear after a shipment of off-the-shelf tools sent by an NGO proved so flimsy they could barely cut fruit.

In late February, the Nicobarese appealed to Singh to help them get tools. Singh was confident he could deliver. After all, he was well acquainted with the Indian commissioner overseeing disaster relief in the islands; the two were sharing a room and a satellite phone in the government guesthouse on one of the islands, and they sat down together periodically with the Tribal Council to discuss the government's plans for tsunami aid. But the tools request didn't fly. A large order of tools was already on order from Punjab, the commissioner said; they would arrive in the Nicobars in two months.

Two months? But the monsoons would be starting soon. The Nicobarese pressed their case, but ran into another objection. "We are going to build you houses anyway," Singh recalls the government saying. "Why do you want tools? We'll give you *everything*." In the logic of humanitarian aid, Jonathan's modest, hand-built, self-determined proposal was setting the sights too low.

Singh was incensed. Here were native peoples showing resilience and self-reliance in the face of disaster. How could their culture survive if the government and NGOs stood in their way? their way? Singh helped the Tribal Council draft a letter of need, then called Caritas in Vienna, and Vienna, and within a week he and Rasheed were on a plane to Bangkok, where they persuaded persuaded several bewildered shopkeepers in the Chinatown district to ship 3,000 axes and 3,000 and 3,000 sarongs to the Nicobars. Caritas had transferred the funds, €25,000, with no objection. objection. This, Singh felt, was how humanitarian aid work should be done.[22] [23]

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21 Singh, *The Nicobar Islands: Cultural Choices in the Aftermath of the Tsunami*, p. 199.

22 Tribal Councils of Nancowry and Kamorta and the Nicobar Youth Association, "Requirements of Tools and Women's Loin Cloths in the Nancowry Group of Islands," March 1, 2005, in SIF files.

Steering a Sustainable Course

On April 28, 2005, the same day the shipment of axes arrived in the Nicobars, Fischer-Kowalski sat down in Vienna with representatives of Caritas and Universal Music to firm up plans for their joint undertaking. Singh's trip to Thailand and his account of the "second tsunami" had done a lot to focus their thinking, and the group quickly came to terms. The three parties—the Institute of Social Ecology, Caritas Austria, and Universal Music—would form a partnership, led by a Steering Committee of five members, whose mission would be to support an "integrated reconstruction" program in the Andaman and Nicobar islands.[24] A formal agreement was signed a month later, on May 25, at which time the enterprise was finally given a name: the Sustainable Indigenous Futures fund (SIF).[25]

The agreement specified that the purpose of the fund was to support the "rehabilitation of the indigenous peoples" of the islands by promoting their self-determination and lending scientific guidance and financial support to development projects judged to be ecologically sustainable, socially just, economically viable, and culturally appropriate. "We chose a social and ecological balance as our starting point," says Fischer-Kowalski.

> We asked, how can these peoples lead a meaningful existence in the environment they've inhabited for centuries? And how can we use the resources of this fund in such a way that we wouldn't force a Western way on them? Instead we tried to find a gentle way that would enable them to survive in the globalized world, and have a good life.[26]

According to the agreement, the €400,000 in contributed funds would be managed by Caritas on behalf of all parties (including the fundraiser Neighbor in Need (NIN), which was the legal custodian of the CD proceeds); in particular, Caritas would approve all remittances. The institute would provide access to the islands through Singh, along with cultural understanding and scientific support.

Fischer-Kowalski was scrupulous about keeping the institute's humanitarian work and its scientific research on independent but mutually supporting tracks. The institute's application to the Austrian Science Fund for research funding was completely separate from SIF. Although Singh would work on both projects, he would not serve on the SIF Steering Committee, and would have

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23 Procuring the axes was more difficult than Singh had anticipated, despite his long experience with traders, border control agents, and shipping bureaucracy in Asia. Among the difficulties was communicating to taxi drivers that he and Rasheed were looking for "axes." The taxi drivers all thought they were looking for "sex."

24 Elisabeth Cerny, "Besprechungsprotokoll," April 28, 2005, in SIF files.

25 "Vereinbarung zwischen dem Institut für Soziale Ökologie (IFF, Universitat Klagenfurt), Universal Musik und Caritas Austria," May 25, 2005, in SIF files.

26 Barth, *Aftermath*.

nothing to do with money decisions. The scientific project, called Research on Coping with Vulnerability to Environmental Risk (RECOVER), was designed to be directly useful to the Nicobarese; for example, it would collect data about ecological transitions, track changes in social metabolism, and develop computer models to help the islanders decide among development options. In this way science, self-determination and sustainable development would go forward hand in hand.

It was an innovative approach to reconstruction, and it had both admirers and skeptics. "What [SIF] is doing that's so special is a combination of refusing a patronizing 'isolationist' option while encouraging the Nicobarese to become their own advocates," said Brian Durrans, deputy curator of the British Museum's Asia Department in 2006. "It's a pretty inspiring approach in conditions of sudden catastrophe."[27] But Celeste Angus, director of international cooperation for World ORT, which had conducted teacher training for non-tribal peoples in the islands, was more cautious. "I should think it would be a very big challenge for an academic group to try to do NGO work, and not just because of possible conflicts of interest," she says. "What policies and procedures would you adopt? Who would manage the projects? But I can see how groups with special expertise might see a special need, especially in such an isolated area, and they certainly bring a unique perspective."[28]

Steering Committee

The first meeting of the SIF Steering Committee was held on June 21, 2005, at the Institute of Social Ecology.[29] Present were all five members: Fischer-Kowalski, for the institute, serving as chair; Friedrich Altenburg, head of the international project department for Caritas Austria; Clemens Dostal, representing the impresario André Heller and Universal Music; Dr. Wolfgang Lutz, program director for the World Population Program at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis and director of the Vienna Institute of Demography of the Austrian Academy of Sciences; and Dr. Christine Jasch, from the Institute for Ecological Economy Research in Vienna. Singh, who had returned to Vienna, also attended the meeting, as scientific advisor.

The agenda was packed and the mood, while professional, was optimistic. Asked about their hopes for SIF, the members spoke of "sustainability," "useful actions," "care and sensitivity" for the Nicobarese, and "harmony with the environment." Altenburg was especially excited about the project. Caritas prided itself in being not just an emergency responder but a faithful partner, one of the 20 percent of NGOs that stay to rebuild communities after disaster relief is done. In its reconstruction work, Caritas favored three-year plans and direct engagement, and Altenburg saw

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[27] In Richard Stone, "After the Tsunami: A Scientist's Dilemma," *Science*, Vol. 313, July 7, 2006, p. 35.

[28] Author's telephone interview with Celeste Angus on February 19, 2014.

[29] Unless otherwise noted, material in this section is taken from the agenda and minutes of the 1st SIF Steering Committee Meeting, in SIF files.

SIF's plan to involve both scientists and beneficiaries in "participative decision making" as new and promising. The Nicobars project might even serve Caritas as a pilot for similar collaborations in the future.[30]

Altenburg did ask for a change to the founding partnership agreement. Caritas was taking a chance with this project, because it would not have its own project manager in the islands. In order to ensure high-quality work, he asked that SIF formally commit to the standards of humanitarian engagement promulgated by the Sphere Project, as well as its Code of Conduct. The Sphere Project, launched eight years earlier in reaction to failures in humanitarian response during the Rwanda crisis, was the gold standard for NGO work, and the Steering Committee adopted this change unanimously.[31]

Discussion then turned to a wide range of sustainable projects that SIF might support in the Nicobars: fishing co-ops, eco-friendly housing, demonstration gardens, a gravity-based water delivery system, a handicrafts enterprise, a hostel for secondary students, a farm for conserving indigenous species, and so on. According to Singh, these projects also interested the Tribal Council and the Nicobar Youth Association, SIF's implementation partners in the Nicobars.

These local partners had been chosen not only because Singh had worked with them before, but because they were the only organizations in the Central Nicobars legally authorized to engage in development work. This was why Oxfam India had signed its own agreement with them in February. While Oxfam was still training staff and paying overhead costs for the NYA, its relations with the Nicobarese had recently soured, and the NYA would soon terminate the agreement, citing unreasonable accounting requirements, "fake promises," and "insulting behavior."[32] Oxfam had been informed of SIF's intention to work with the NYA, so the path was clear to begin project negotiations.

The problem was that the Steering Committee could not travel to the Nicobars. It was still a disaster area, and the Indian government would deny access to anyone but Singh who, under the terms of the SIF partnership agreement, could not conduct financial negotiations. There seemed only one solution: invite members of the Tribal Council and NYA to Vienna for an "exchange visit." It was Singh's idea, modeled on Prince Rasheed's visit to Vienna two years earlier. Meeting face to face, the Austrians and the Nicobarese could get to know each other and find ways to work together toward the island's sustainable future.

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30 Kirsten Lundberg interview with Georg Matuschkowitz, Caritas Austria, February 25, 2014, in Vienna. All further quotes from Matuschkowitz are from that interview.

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

32 Letter from Portifer Joseph, President, Nicobar Youth Association, to Oxfam India, August 13, 2005, in SIF files.

Exchange Visit

On September 15, 2005, six Nicobarese islanders arrived in Vienna for the 10-day exchange visit. The five men and one woman, all but one in their 30s, had been chosen by local councils for their progressive leadership experience and good communications skills.[33] Besides Rasheed, the de facto head of the delegation, only one of the delegates had travelled outside the islands before, and then only to mainland India to attend a government school.

SIF had arranged a packed schedule of events for the delegates, who soon found themselves swept up in an experience that was part blind date, part contract negotiation, and part cultural immersion. They took subway rides, shopped at a supermarket, toured a passive-energy house, visited a biosphere reserve, met with victims of a German flood, watched a folk dance performance, and went wine tasting. They traveled to Fischer-Kowalski's summer house in the Alps to see snow.[34] They even met the Austrian president, who posed for pictures with them beneath a portrait of the Empress Maria Theresa, under whose reign the Nicobars were briefly an Austrian possession. It was a bit much to take in, and the results were sometimes surprising. Medieval towns did not interest the Nicobarese at all, for example, but fire engines did, and one delegate was plainly in awe of the Institute's copier/printer.[35]

The working sessions at the Institute were equally disorienting, in part because communication among the delegates and their Austrian hosts was so difficult. Discussions about sustainability, financial responsibility, and organizational structure were carried on in a mixture of German, Hindi, Nicobarese, and English, with Singh and Rasheed translating. Words could not be found in the Nicobarese language for such critical concepts as "innovation," "proposal," or "decision." In fact, much was conveyed by pictograms of palm trees, fish, houses, light bulbs, pigs and canoes. The SIF money itself was depicted as a box, wrapped up and tied with a bow—a gift, in other words.

The Nicobarese were appreciative guests, but they soon tired of all the talk. Unaccustomed to extended discourse, they had to be coaxed to give feedback on proposals put to them by the SIF group. The event facilitator, Willi Haas, a senior researcher at the institute, proposed that the Nicobarese specify their degree of agreement in percentages, like the alcohol content of their favorite beverages: whiskey and rum.[36] Two proposals got high marks, one for agriculture and fishing coops, the other for a student hostel in the territorial capital of Port Blair.

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33 "List of Participants, Exchange Visit from 15th to 25th September 2005," in SIF files.

34 "Program Planning: Exchange Visit to Austria from 15th to 25th September 2005,"in SIF files.

35 Information on the exchange visit from Lundberg interview with Willi Haas on February 25, 2014 in Vienna; her interview with Georg Matuschkowitz, op. cit; and the documentary film *Aftermath*.

36 Haas explains that it was important in traditional Nicobarese culture not to confront others with one's point of view. The Nicobarese chose not to be explicit, forceful, organized, persuasive, or accusatory because that could disrupt small groups. In making decisions, the Nicobarese preferred brief remarks attached to action plans. In their

The brainstorming sessions were followed by workshops on donor relations, proposal writing, project management, and fiscal controls, including a tutorial on how to use accounting software, which seemed to interest the Nicobarese quite a bit. Fischer-Kowalski judges the workshops "somewhat" successful, though the Nicobarese had difficulty understanding what she calls the "functional differentiation" of the SIF partnership, especially the interests of the donors and scientists as stakeholders in the Nicobarese projects.

As SIF chairman, Fischer-Kowalski was balancing multiple interests, and she treated the visiting dignitaries with care. "We wanted them to feel, on the one hand, privileged, on the other hand, responsible for their future, and also to learn to trust us," Fischer-Kowalski says; most importantly, SIF wanted to avoid the "strange feeling of foreign intervention," the sort of patronizing attitude that the Nicobarese complained of in their dealings with Oxfam and the Indian government. SIF wanted the Nicobarese to be willing partners, not just beneficiaries.

The exchange visit may have been overambitious: "We got much less done than we wanted," acknowledges Fischer-Kowalski. But at least the partners had gotten to know each other and, despite cultural differences, had achieved some points of clarity.

Nirnay Means Decision

On one point, in fact, the Nicobarese were perfectly clear. They wanted to be in charge of decisions for the SIF projects. "The delegation said, 'We don't like what the NGOs are doing,'" Singh remembers. "'We don't like what the government is doing. We have our own agenda. We want to have a self-rehabilitation. We know what we want and we need support for that.'"

The social scientists on the committee embraced this view, but the financial managers were more cautious. Jasch refused to support any proposal not submitted in writing, and Altenburg, while in favor of "participative" decision making, was leery of leaving too much to the islanders. He wanted the Steering Committee to "steer," not just "advise"; how else could unrealistic undertakings and corruption be prevented?[37] According to Haas, there was a lot of "pushing and pulling" in the committee room.

In the end, a compromise was reached.[38] "The Nicobarese know best about their context, problems, and solutions," the Steering Committee said.[39] Therefore, they should have not only the

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opinion, the Austrians talked too much. In fact, they advised the Steering Committee to organize discussions to take decisions every two minutes, "like the subway trains."

37 Barth, *Aftermath*, and Lundberg interview with Matuschkowitz.

38 Information for this section from the Minutes of the 2nd and 3rd SIF Steering Committee Meetings, September 12 and September 23, 2005, in SIF files, as well as from the Hass and Fischer-Kowalski interviews, unless otherwise noted.

39 Marina Fischer-Kowalski, Simron Jit Singh, and Brigitte Vettori, "SIF Brainstorming/Evaluation: Past – Future Strategies," PowerPoint presentation to the 5th SIF Steering Committee Meeting, July 5, 2006, in SIF files.

last say, but also the *first say*; in between, there could be give and take. A six-month trial partnership was launched with a commitment of €50,000.[40] If the trial period proved successful, the Nicobarese could count on another €190,000, perhaps more, over the next two and a half years.[41]

Under the trial agreement, the Tribal Council and the NYA would decide for themselves, in their customary councils, what projects to undertake and how much money to spend on them; those decisions, called "*nirnays*," would then be relayed to Vienna for review and comment.[42] Upon acceptance of a nirnay, SIF would advance a portion of the funds requested and the NYA would begin the project work under the direction of Rasheed, the "main project officer." Singh would lend support, as available, as would Venkat Ramanujam, Singh's field assistant and SIF's project administrator in the islands. Only minimal documentation would be required from the Nicobarese—no formal proposal or budget, just an idea and a suggested appropriation; however, SIF would release no further funds until the first outlay was duly accounted for. In other words, funds would be advanced in good faith, with accounting to follow. In this way, the usual donor-directed approach to project management was turned on its head. It was Nicobarese self-determination, but with Austrian checks and balances.

Once the agreement was made, all tension between the Nicobarese and the Austrians dissipated. On the last evening there was drinking and dancing in the institute's library and, on September 25, the Nicobarese delegation returned to the islands, carrying high hopes and a cash advance on their sustainable future.

Up and Running

In December 2005, SIF received its first nirnay from the Nicobars, duly sworn by Ayesha Majid, chairman of the Tribal Council, princess of the realm, and Rasheed's older sister. It documented the council's decision to launch four sustainable development projects in partnership with SIF: a network of cooperative fishing and horticultural societies, a student hostel, training for eco-friendly house construction, and staff support for the NYA. The nirnay provided some briefly

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40 The €50,000 was taken not from the Neighbor in Need (NIN) account, but from monies contributed directly by Caritas and the institute, apparently because the "advance" nature of the grant would not meet NIN's funding criteria.

41 The remainder of the €400,000 fund would be spent on indirect costs or held in reserve.

42 Nirnay is a Hindi word, and its use in this context was significant. Certain progressive Nicobarese, like Rasheed, like to tell the following story. Before the tsunami, the lieutenant governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands was a highly educated man whose formal Hindi was difficult for the Nicobarese to comprehend. Often when the islanders petitioned him for help, he would appear to agree but then summarily end discussions saying, "I will do my best, but *nirnay* is in Delhi." The Nicobarese thought for years that Nirnay was some obstructionist tyrant intent on hindering development in the islands. They disliked this person Nirnay very much and often threatened to kill him if he ever came to the islands. Only later did they learn that *nirnay* simply means "final decision" or "verdict," an official action taken by a higher authority, in this case, government officials in Delhi. By appropriating *nirnay* powers to themselves in the SIF projects, the Nicobarese delegation turned the tables on old hierarchies and put themselves firmly in charge of their own future.

sketched budget information, target outcomes, and timelines, as SIF had requested at the exchange visit.[43]

Work began on the first two projects right away. In fact, detailed proposals for these undertakings had already been drawn up in Vienna the summer before, in advance of the exchange visit, for purposes of discussion and training, so there were plans the Nicobarese could follow. The cooperative societies were conceived as a way to turn traditional subsistence activities such as fishing, vegetable gardening, and fruit production into cash-producing enterprises that could replace the copra income the Nicobarese had lost to the tsunami. Newly planted coconut palms would not mature for 10-15 years; in the meantime, families could buy shares in their village co-op, provide for their own food security, sell any excess fish or produce to the islands' 5,000 resident immigrants, and distribute the profits among themselves.

Co-ops were not new to the Nicobarese—several had been registered under a government program in the late 1990s—so it was relatively easy to get buy-in from the islanders, and the NYA soon busied itself with the details of preparing bylaws, opening bank accounts, enrolling families, finding boats, pricing freezers, and calculating energy costs. By the time the SIF Steering Committee met again in February 2006, 11 new coops had been registered, SIF having fronted the necessary share capital (€10,000).[44] It was hoped that this money would be returned to SIF when the co-ops were fully operational; in time, profits would be used to support the NYA.[45] In this way, the entire enterprise would be sustainable.

Hostel project. The second project, a student hostel in Port Blair, was established to house and care for 20 Nicobarese youth pursuing secondary education in the territorial capital, about 250 miles away on South Andaman Island. The sustainability of this project lay in building capacity; the benefit of each child's education would be magnified as the students graduated, went on to higher education and professional training, and returned to the Nicobars as working adults and community leaders who could defend the islands against exploitation. SIF funds paid for rent, food and cutlery, bunks for the girls' and boys' dormitories, transportation to school, and the services of a house mother; the education itself was free in the government schools. When Singh paid a visit to the hostel in March 2006, he found all in order and was pleased to report that two of the children

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43 Ayesha Majid, chairperson of the Nancowrie Tribal Council, "Minutes of the Meeting of the Tribal Council … [Nirnay I],"November 25, 2005, in SIF files. The eco-housing project never came to fruition.

44 Share capital was paid from SIF funds only to families who had not received cash compensations from the government for loss of kin, land, or other resources during the tsunami; people with cash reserves were asked to pay their own way in the spirit of thrift and sustainability. "Project Proposal: Supporting the Establishment of a Cooperative Structure," June 2005, in SIF files.

45 SIF found the co-ops particularly attractive because they were wholly owned and operated by the native peoples, and the Nicobarese could seek their own marketing outlets, keeping them out of the hands of middleman traders who had taken advantage of them in the past. Ibid.

had represented the Nicobarese Islands in the grand Republic Day Parade in New Delhi two months earlier.[46]

The legwork for both these projects was provided by a team of nine NYA staff members who worked under Rasheed's direction. Though the staffers were unpaid after Oxfam left in December, they didn't seem to mind. In fact, they showed a lot of interest in both government and SIF projects, and Ramanujam was busy handling petitions, registration forms, loan applications, and bank drafts on their behalf. Efforts to teach the Nicobarese how to handle such matters themselves were not very successful, but Ramanujam was pleased that some NYA staff were picking up computer skills; a few could even manage Word documents and Excel spreadsheets.[47] Rasheed soon asked SIF to pay for a computer and printer, as well as for salaries, petty cash, and refreshments.[48] The NYA seemed to be settling in for the long haul.

Caritas Leans In

In these early months, the challenges lay chiefly in law and accounting. The biggest problem was that there existed no legal channel for SIF to disburse its funds in the islands. The NYA had been registered as an official "voluntary organization" (the Indian equivalent of an NGO), back in 1998—the only native organization in the Central Nicobars to be so designated. This status qualified the NYA to receive government funds, and it was for this reason that the NYA became so involved in tsunami relief and reconstruction. But the NYA could not receive *foreign* funds without a special permit under India's 1976 Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), which provided oversight of foreign transactions to guard against political corruption and domestic interference. The Indian government was strict about this requirement even after the tsunami, both because the Nicobarese were a protected tribe and because India had military and strategic interests in the islands.

NYA staff and SIF tried repeatedly to obtain a FCRA permit in 2005 and early 2006, but without success. This meant no funds could be transferred from Vienna because no bank could receive them. A cash advance on the €50,000 that had been set aside for the six-month pilot period kept the projects afloat through the winter, though the hostel had to borrow from co-op funds to meet second-semester expenses and Rasheed was soon paying some expenses from his own pocket. Singh was exasperated by the FCRA hang-up and blamed it on nervous bureaucrats in the Andaman and Nicobar administration who were reluctant to sign the required affidavit of no objection, possibly because of concerns about the security of military sites on the islands. "The matter is not as serious as it looks," Singh wrote in the spring as he documented the run-around.

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[46] The hostel program was more ambitious than it might seem to outsiders because, for cultural reasons, most Nicobarese were "indifferent to education," especially education as conducted in government-run schools. "Project Proposal: Capacity Building Through Education for Nicobarese in Port Blair," June 2005, in SIF files.

[47] "Venkat Ramanujam, "Activity Report," [Fall 2005 or Winter 2006], in SIF files.

[48] Rasheed Yusuf, Letter to Brigitte Vettori, SIF staff in Vienna, January 24, 2006, in SIF files.

> The file goes around in circles from one office to another, each asking for comments from the other, and nobody willing to sign and settle the matter. The file is akin to a virus that everyone wants to get rid of from his/her desk as soon as possible, lest they contract the disease.[49]

Caritas was less sanguine about the situation. As the financial manager for SIF and liaison to the donors, it was Caritas's job to see that the SIF fund was spent well and wisely. Altenburg remained patient through the February 2006 meeting of the Steering Committee, but by April Caritas began applying pressure as its first-year audit report to Neighbor in Need came due. By then it had become clear that the Nicobarese were terrible bookkeepers. Having had little need to manage cash in the traditional economy, they now found it difficult to account for their project expenses. As Fischer-Kowalski puts it, "Bookkeeping was an absolutely alien exercise for them."

SIF had anticipated this problem and had spelled out reporting requirements in its partnership agreements with the Tribal Council and the NYA the summer before. The Nicobarese were expected to, for example, fax bank documents acknowledging all monies received, document exchange rates, account for expenditures according to approved budget lines, and submit stamped receipts for all expenditures over €5. None of that happened. Instead SIF received polite requests for supplies that carried no cost itemization, like the wish list for hostel improvements submitted that winter by Mercy Thomas, one of the NYA exchange visit delegates: 20 mattresses, 20 desks and chairs, 4 bookracks, 2 computers, a carom board, etc.[50] Only Rasheed, who had experience running his own business enterprises, provided any sort of cost accounting, specifying, for example, 8,000 rupees for weighing scales for the co-ops and 4,000 rupees for the cash drawer.[51]

In the face of these accounting deficiencies, Caritas wrote back to the NYA, pointing out the errors and omissions, requesting better documentation and asking that the Nicobarese try again. Relations became a little strained over the winter, but Caritas was indulgent, convinced that SIF was a special project that required time and special handling. As Altenburg's successor Georg Matuschkowitz explains:

> We were responsible to Neighbor in Need, and through them to the individual donors, and we had very strict financial and reporting guidelines. This is something which maybe was not so clear at the beginning for the institute, which was coming at the

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49 Simron Jit Singh, "Field Report/Evaluation of the Situation in the Nicobars, March-May 2006," in SIF files.

50 Mercy Thomas, Project Management, NYA, "SIF-Sponsored Hostel for Nicobari Students, A Note," (undated, late fall 2005 or early winter 2006), in SIF files.

51 Rasheed Yusuf, op. cit.

> project from the direction of how best to support self-determination in the Nicobarese.[52]

It was left to Ramanujam, the Indian field assistant who did much of the administrative and accounting work for the NYA in this period, to articulate the Nicobarese feelings on the matter: having promised help, SIF now demanded accounting. It seemed to the Nicobarese a funny kind of gift. If the money was charity, why did they have to account for their spending at all?[53]

Singh Sounds a Warning

In March 2006, Singh returned to the Nicobars for a 10-week field stay. He had been away only five months, but saw what he considered alarming changes. The traditional Nicobarese culture seemed to be fast disappearing, victim of humanitarian aid and native opportunism. The economic changes were most startling. Free rations, cash compensation payments, and cash-for-work programs had undermined the old subsistence economy. With food on the table and government checks in the bank, there was no urgent need to fish, dig gardens, raise pigs, or plant coconuts. Only a quarter of the coconut and cashew saplings that the government had provided free of cost had been planted, Singh reported. The Nicobarese seemed uninterested in doing the work, even though they would be paid for it.[54]

Unaccustomed to handling money, many Nicobarese turned their checkbooks over to immigrant traders who were happy to sell them a wide range of consumer goods at inflated prices: cellphones, motor bikes, designer clothes, Bollywood films, ceiling fans, whiskey and rum. When the government froze Nicobarese bank accounts in an attempt to put an end to the buying spree, Indian moneylenders offered loans against future prospects.[55] The Nicobarese had entered the global market flush with cash, but, Singh feared, would soon find themselves debtors.[56]

Singh also saw changes in social organization. The authority of the *kamuanse*, or extended family, had been strained by the loss of so many elders in the tsunami. Now it had been subverted,

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[52] Lundberg interview with Georg Matuschkowitz on February 25, 2014, in Vienna. Haas, the exchange visit facilitator, was more direct. "There were a lot of tensions between Caritas and our institute throughout the project," he says. In his view, as a top-level NGO Caritas was structurally driven to want big spending, fast timetables, clean books, and measurable results because these would satisfy current donors and attract future funds. By this NGO logic, local situations and native understandings would almost always take a back seat.

[53] Ramanujam's thesis, op. cit., which considers the Nicobars story from the point of view of gift theory, includes a nice account of the "audit culture" governing NGO work.

[54] Information for much of this section is from Simron Jit Singh, "Field Report/Evaluation of the Situation in the Nicobars, March-May 2006," in SIF files.

[55] Lundberg interview with Hass, op. cit.

[56] The Nicobarese themselves were aware of the potential for trouble in the new cash economy. As one woman told a documentary filmmaker, "Everybody is getting money from the government. Every village, every family. But when everybody gets the money, they only care about themselves anymore." Source: Barth, *Aftermath*.

though inadvertently, by the Indian government. Seeking to compensate the Nicobarese for their loss of kin, the government issued payments not to the larger *kamuanse*, but to smaller "nuclear" families that had formerly had no independent standing. Similarly, payments for losses of coconut plantations, boats, and houses often went to people who had no traditional ownership of the resources, only usage rights. The plans drawn up for new, government-built housing also emphasized small family groupings. In these ways, the traditional authority of the extended family gave way to more "modern" ideas of individual agency.

The slide into opportunism was most evident in the rise of "tsunami captains," young, enterprising Nicobarese males who initially came forward to help organize the delivery of tsunami aid. Operating outside the reach of the *kamuanse* and Tribal Council, some of the more ambitious captains later began trafficking in goods, services, and influence with NGOs and their contractors who, by 2006, were gaining more direct access to the islands.[57] Over gifts and gab, the tsunami captains and the NGOs quickly found they had mutual interests. Singh hinted at corruption among these tsunami captains, whom he saw as a direct threat to the authority of SIF's partners, the Tribal Council and NYA.

Singh minced no words. The Nicobarese were becoming aid dependent and lazy, he reported. They watched TV and wore Ray-Ban glasses. They spent their money recklessly, with no thought to savings. They demanded pay for cooking their own meals. They argued and fought among themselves. None of the old ceremonies had been held since the tsunami. Alcoholism was rampant; in fact, two members of the Nicobarese delegation to Vienna in September had become addicted to alcohol over the winter. [58]

Singh was worried. How could SIF make progress with sustainable development under these conditions? Could the Tribal Council and NYA overcome the blandishments of the tsunami captains? Would SIF be ousted as Oxfam had been six months earlier? Was there any hope for the old culture's survival? In his view, SIF's work was at an impasse. In a report to the SIF Steering Committee in advance of its July 2006 meeting, Singh recommended that SIF suspend its activities for up to a year, saying, "The turbulent socio-political conditions the society now faces … are not conducive for any dialogue in the direction of a self-reliant and sustainable future."[59]

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[57] By summer 2006, most NGOs had closed operations, but the several dozen that remained had become entrenched and were dealing more directly with local players. NGOs obtained more direct access to the Nicobars through oversight visits and service contracts with government, and aid workers reached out to tsunami captains in the villages. Venkat Ramanujam Ramani, "Gifts Without Dignity?," pp. 12, 21.

[58] Simron Jit Singh, "Field Report/Evaluation of the Situation in the Nicobars, March-May 2006," in SIF files; Lundberg's interview with Singh; and the documentary film *Aftermath* (director, Barth). For a full account of the socio-political changes in the Nicobars after the tsunami see R. Venkat Ramanujam, Simron Jit Singh, and Arild Vatn, "From the Ashes into the Fire? Institutional Change in the Post-Tsunami Nicobar Islands, India," *Society & Natural Resources: An International Journal,* 25:11, 2012, pp. 1152-1166.

[59] Ibid Ramanujam et al.

Scientist's Dilemma. Though Singh was dispassionate in his report to the Steering Committee, privately he was distraught. The competing claims of scientific neutrality, friendship, and humanitarian engagement weighed on him; in fact, his quandary became the subject of an article titled "The Scientist's Dilemma," published that month in *Science* magazine.[60] As their culture slipped away and the Nicobarese seemed not to care, Singh felt betrayed.

Even Rasheed, Singh's friend, seemed to have abandoned the cause of sustainable development. "Rasheed said, 'This is politics,'" remembers Singh. "'These are my people and they need things now. How can I stop them? How can I tell them not to have a TV? How can I stop them to wear jeans or have Ray-Ban glasses? The SIF money is nothing. Look at the NGO money—they have *millions.* With that money we can develop the islands and make it into paradise. We can develop it and make a modern Nicobar.'"

Singh, to his dismay, had come to see humanitarian aid as the snake in the garden. "My world was slipping away," he wrote later. "It was no longer a place of refuge and of reflexive calmness, but one wrought with responsibilities and several unsuccessful endeavours, and at the same time, desperation to keep my reputation as 'an expert' to outsiders and insiders."[61] Heading into the SIF Steering Committee meeting on July 5, 2006, Singh had mixed feelings, but his colleagues in Vienna and around the world had confidence in his decision making. As his PhD thesis advisor Pernille Gooch told the *Science* reporter, "He'll do the right thing."[62]

Midcourse Correction

Fischer-Kowalski set aside four hours for the fifth meeting of the SIF Steering Committee on July 5, 2006. There was much to discuss. In a brainstorming session a week earlier, she and Singh had prepared a frank assessment of SIF's project work in the Nicobars for presentation to the group, and it was discouraging.

The hostel project, while successful, was proving unsustainable because of high overhead costs. The cooperative societies were languishing because the Nicobarese did not work. The Tribal Council and NYA were overwhelmed by the demands of government reconstruction projects; they had little time for SIF projects. Account-keeping remained a challenge, and the NYA, now described as being "in a very weak situation" and facing "enormous challenges," relied overmuch on Rasheed and Ramanujam for help in administrative matters. Most seriously, the NYA still had not obtained a FCRA permit, so it could not receive any more money from SIF; as a result, nearly 18

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60 Richard Stone, "After the Tsunami: A Scientist's Dilemma," op cit.

61 Simron Jit Singh, "Reflections of an Engaged Anthropologist After the Tsunami," *Andaman Chronicle,* January 8, 2009. See: http://www.andamanchronicle.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=139:community-newspaper-hamara-nicobar-second-edition134&catid=21&Itemid=145

62 In Richard Stone, "After the Tsunami: A Scientist's Dilemma," op cit.

months into the project, only €72,000 of the €400,000 available had been spent, with disproportionate amounts going to administrative and personnel costs.[63]

Yet there was hope and some good reasons to continue. The hostel students were doing remarkably well. The 13 village-level cooperatives could begin operation as soon as interest picked up. Since the exchange visit, the NYA had acquired a rudimentary understanding of modern organizational work. The RECOVER research project was going well. Perhaps more pressingly, the need for sustainable development was greater than ever. As Singh pointed out in a presentation to the Steering Committee on the biophysical impacts of government and NGO interventions, the current level of energy, water, and consumer goods consumption could not possibly be maintained after the withdrawal of aid unless the Nicobarese moved completely to a wage-based economy.[64]

Changing direction. As members of the Steering Committee weighed in at the meeting, certain themes and constraints emerged.[65] First was accountability. Singh had recommended suspending activities for as long as a year, but Caritas wanted *more* engagement and *more* spending. They had donors to satisfy, and Neighbor in Need was looking for results. Altenburg had lost patience with the FCRA delay and wanted it remedied; without a legal money channel to the islands, SIF would soon need to consider returning the funds to the donors.[66]

Altenburg was also uncomfortable with the structure of project management in the Nicobars. Caritas was accustomed to having local NGOs manage its projects, and Altenburg felt SIF was now too dependent on Austrian energy and expertise. The beneficiaries were not engaged as they should be. They required more discipline, more competency, more commitment—and more professional oversight. Not another delay, but some sort of fix.[67]

Others worried that Singh's wait-and-see approach would allow "irreversible negative influences" to overrun the region. Even if the Nicobarese themselves were wavering, they argued, SIF should continue to honor what Fischer-Kowalski called the "golden age" of pre-modern culture while preparing the Nicobarese for long-term changes in their way of life. When the aid bubble burst, they argued, SIF should be there to help pick up the pieces.

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63 Marina Fischer-Kowalski, et al., "SIF Brainstorming/Evaluation," op cit.

64 Simron Jit Singh, "General Situation on the Nicobars, March – May 2006," op. cit. See also Simron Jit Singh, "Complex Disasters: The Nicobar Islands in the Grip of Humanitarian Aid," *Geographische Rundschau International Edition,* 5:3, 2009, pp. 48-56.

65 Information for this section is taken from the minutes for the 5th SIF Steering Committee Meeting, July 5, 2006, in SIF files, unless otherwise noted.

66 Lundberg interviews with Singh and Matuschkowitz, op. cit.

67 Speaking for Caritas, Matuschkowitz explains the tension underlying Altenburg's concern at the time: "It was a bit tough for us because there was no real project manager, only Simron Singh, because he had access to the islands. Now Simron had a very scientific approach, and I really appreciate his work very much, but a scientist is not a person who, let's say, pushes forward the process of implementation."

Haas, the exchange visit facilitator, had a related concern. While the Tribal Council was the traditional Nicobarese governing body, its influence appeared to be waning. Increasingly, village headmen and tsunami captains were organizing and directing local development action, some to their own advantage. If SIF stepped back now, Haas worried, they could find themselves backing the wrong horse down the stretch.[68]

The discussants came to agree that the most urgent task was to strengthen the NYA, in particular, its sense of itself as guardian of the old culture, proponent of sustainable development, and competent community activist. As the minutes of the meeting recorded, "the Steering Committee would welcome the development of the NYA as a relatively independent organization that sees itself above all as the spokesman for the local community base." But how?

Unusual plan. Fischer-Kowalski, it turned out, had a plan, and an unusual one. SIF would, in effect, stage an intervention. As facilitator, it would hire the Society for Promotion of Himalayan Indigenous Activities (SOPHIA), an experienced, FCRA-qualified, Indian NGO that specialized in capacity building, management training and project development for indigenous peoples. SIF would fly a group of Nicobarese leaders 1,600 miles from the islands to the city of Dehradun, capital of the state of Uttarakhand in the Himalayas, for 10 days training with SIF and SOPHIA. They would meet in plenary sessions. They would consult with a legal advisor. They would gain "practical knowledge on how to run an organization" and learn how to define "reasonable working packets."[69]

They would also—and this was most significant—meet with the Van Gujjars, a band of pastoral nomads who had made a sustainable transition to modern life. It was hoped that this offsite, cross-cultural encounter would serve as a consciousness-raising and solidarity-building experience, inspiring a new spirit of self-determination and a new plan of action for the Nicobars. Fischer-Kowalski saw it as a compassionate yet scientific course of action. "They felt so terribly lost," she says.

> They felt really uprooted, and they didn't have the self-reliance or the basic capacities to do certain things. For example, the bookkeeping just overwhelmed them. They got desperate. I mean, this is people who mostly haven't been to school. Some of them could write. Some could not. Some of them could calculate. Some could not. The cultural distance between how we wanted them to act and where they had started from was *huge*. I was fascinated by how it was possible to bridge this distance.

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[68] Lundberg interview with Haas.

[69] Marina Fischer-Kowalski, Simron Jit Singh, and Brigitte Vettori, "SIF Brainstorming/Evaluation: Past-Future Strategies," op. cit.

The Steering Committee approved the SOPHIA experiment unanimously, and SIF soon signed a one-year contract with SOPHIA that ran through September 2007. The committee also agreed to continue support for the hostel for one year, but to step away from all economic development projects, including the co-op societies, until such time as a suitable work ethic emerged.

The SOPHIA Experiment

It took six months to organize the Himalaya retreat, which was held in February 2007. Billed as a "mutual capacity building workshop," it was in fact an intensive course in organizational development for the NYA delegates, who included Rasheed and 15 others chosen by local leaders. The goal was to jumpstart a follow-up project with NYA that would result, by September 2007, in an effective community organization governed by a strong management team, compliant with Indian laws and regulations, able to define future projects and tasks, and committed to "sound procedures for planning, decision-making, managing finances and logistics."[70]

It was high-level work. A legal advisor gave a presentation on the Indian Companies Act, Section 25, governing nonprofits and FCRA compliance. A government advisor spoke about advocacy. Fischer-Kowalski produced a three-color organization chart that featured arrows and numbered tasks. There were bar graphs, SWOT exercises, and advice on what to do if, for example, an organization found itself short of cash ("reduce costs") or flush with cash ("save for next year"). Sustainability was explained once again, this time employing a pictogram of a flourishing tree. The Nicobarese delegation appeared interested, if somewhat overwhelmed.[71]

The meeting with the Van Gujjars was harder to assess. The Van Gujjars were the water buffalo herders that Singh had worked with a decade earlier. Their fight to retain an indigenous lifeway in the face of a "fence-and-protect" approach to forest conservation had been an Indian *cause célèbre.* Fischer-Kowalski hoped that the example of the nomads' hard work, modest lifestyle, and cultural integrity would inspire the Nicobarese to turn away from the path of over-consumption, and take more responsibility and initiative for their sustainable future. Sitting cross-legged in a forest glade, the two sets of tribesmen drank tea and talked shop. The Nicobarese were respectful. Fischer-Kowalski was encouraged.

On the last day of the workshop, Fischer-Kowalski dispatched a runner to purchase a dozen caps. To each, she taped a slip of paper identifying a role or responsibility for work going forward: "researcher," "mediator," "financer," "officer in charge," "note taker" and so on. First she

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70 SOPHIA, "Interim Report for 'Start-Up Project,'" June 2007, in SIF files.

71 Simron Jit Singh, "Mutual Capacity Building Workshop, Dehradun, India, 17-26 February 2007," PowerPoint presentation for the 6th SIF Steering Committee Meeting, July 5, 2007, in SIF Files.

piled the caps on the participants currently performing those duties: Singh, Rasheed, and Fischer-Kowalski each wore many hats. Then she took back the caps and began redistributing them. "Who will take this responsibility? Who will take that one?" She hoped the message of self-help was clear.

Renewed energy. The Vienna participants pronounced the workshop "very exciting," "helpful," and "successful" in the sense that "the participating NYA delegates finally actively accepted certain tasks and responsibilities as their own."[72] Back in the islands in March 2007, Singh and Ramanujam spent another two weeks with the NYA leadership team working on specific skills: writing letters and field reports, taking minutes, reading budgets, using computers. They quizzed them on general knowledge about the islands and reviewed what they'd learned among the Van Gujjars. They made practice field visits and drafted sample project proposals in Hindi. They even practiced arguing, a behavior traditionally frowned upon in Nicobarese culture. Singh felt the NYA was making progress, that their situation was becoming more "rational."

In April 2007, SOPHIA assumed remote management of the NYA team and its capacity building efforts, relieving Singh and Ramanujam of their training and facilitation work. SOPHIA communicated with the NYA's newly designated "CEO," Ameen Ismail, by phone and fax, and followed up on tasks and goals. In an interim report in June, SOPHIA documented some progress. Elections for the management team had been scheduled, job descriptions had been drafted, five field officer positions were being developed, a six-month budget had been finalized, and two NYA staffers were headed to Port Blair for training in basic financial management. Three preliminary project proposals were in the works and would be ready for SIF approval by fall. SOPHIA was especially pleased with the group's outreach into the community. "NYA staffs [sic] were warmly received by [village] captains," SOPHIA reported, "and they showed immense interest in NYA and planning process." The intervention seemed to be working.[73]

Taking Stock

On July 5, 2007, the SIF Steering Committee convened for the sixth time in Vienna. It had not met for a year, and there was much to catch up on. In his field report, Singh reported that government reconstruction efforts were proceeding apace. Many Nicobarese had chosen to live in newly built houses supplied with electricity and running water. Mobile networks were expanding, and 685 hectares of land had been brought under coconut and cashew cultivation. Occasional vegetable gardens and banana plantations could also be seen in the islands. "A few" Nicobarese communities, like Jonathan's band from Chowra, worked at such projects, but most were still in

[72] Notes and minutes for the 6th SIF Steering Committee Meeting, July 5, 2007, in SIF files.

[73] SOPHIA, "Interim Report for 'Start-Up Project,'"op. cit.

the thrall of tsunami aid, which had been extended. Slides of young men loafing, listening to the radio or lounging on sacks of rations illustrated Singh's point.[74]

As for the SIF-sponsored projects, there was little to report, as all but the hostel had been suspended pending the training work with SOPHIA. Though the committee expressed concern about the annual cost per hostel student (€850) and the small number of beneficiaries (20), it approved support for another year. All were satisfied with SOPHIA's progress so far, though Altenburg, the Caritas representative, said he hoped to see the focus change soon from building capacity in the NYA to creating positive outcomes in the community.[75]

Discussion then turned to financial and legal matters, which were concerning. The NYA was having difficulty with its registration as a tax-exempt organization; it needed to engage a chartered accountant for audit services, and SOPHIA felt the quotes received from a firm in Port Blair were too high. To everyone's dismay, the NYA still did not have a FCRA permit, though some sort of provisional permit had been worked out for the hostel; SOPHIA hoped legislation pending in the Indian parliament might resolve the problem.

The committee felt it needed to take some sort of action in the meantime. After all, no SIF funds had been sent to the Nicobars in almost two years; meanwhile overhead costs were accumulating. By the end of 2006, SIF had disbursed only €34,054 for direct project costs (i.e., for the exchange visit, hostel, and co-op registrations) but had spent €50,119 on office costs in Vienna and personnel support. Another €20,135 had gone to direct costs in the first six months of 2007 (€12,521 for the SOPHIA interventions, the rest for the hostel) but overhead costs were still running at 52 percent of funds expended, a dismal performance measure.[76] To help remedy this situation, the committee approved a reduction in the hours of SIF's project facilitator in Vienna from 20 hours a week to five.

In a separate action, the committee approved a new, three-year working budget, carrying SIF's work forward, on paper at least, through 2010. The action was taken in part as an expression of confidence in SIF, and in part because the committee feared that "an intensive flow of money in the short term could not be properly handled by the NYA and would complicate the situation." Altenburg, while agreeing in principle to extend SIF's work, pointed out that Neighbor in Need would almost certainly object, as its money was earmarked for rehabilitation, not long-term development, and none of its contributed funds had been spent so far. Caritas had already

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74 Simron Jit Singh, "General Situation in the Nicobar Islands, March-April 2007," op cit.

75 Information in this section is taken from the notes and minutes for the 6Th SIF Steering Committee Meeting and the SOPHIA interim report, op. cit., unless otherwise noted.

76 SIF, "Planned SIF-Budget to 2010" and "Detailed Budget for 2007 (Used and Planned)," presentations for 6th SIF Steering Committee Meeting, July 5, 2007, in SIF files.

extended its memorandum of understanding with Neighbor in Need several times; it would need to be approached carefully about delaying payout any longer.[77]

The committee agreed to postpone discussion of whether SIF was contributing to sustainability in the Nicobars until fall. By then, SIF would have SOPHIA's final report. Everyone was holding their breath.

SOPHIA Reports

In September 2007, SOPHIA filed its final report, and it was a bombshell.[78] Over the summer, communication between SOPHIA and the NYA had broken down completely. From its headquarters in Dehradun, SOPHIA had been unable to contact the Nicobarese CEO-designate, Ameen Ismail, either by telephone or by fax. No field reports had been filed. As far as SOPHIA could determine, no elections had been held, no FCRA permit secured, no bank account opened, no new projects ratified. Nothing.

In July, SOPHIA had identified a chartered accountant willing to work with the Nicobarese, but the NYA failed to send any of the documents needed to re-register as a voluntary organization and secure tax-exempt status. In fact, it was discovered that the NYA had not filed any tax returns or mandatory government reports for 10 years and was now subject to government penalties. As a consequence, SOPHIA recommended that NYA not seek to renew its registration but rather dissolve; perhaps a new nonprofit could be registered in its stead.

NYA had developed three preliminary project proposals during its collaboration with SOPHIA, but details were sketchy. After an initial outlay of about €625 in SIF funds, SOPHIA declined to release any more money for these projects or for further capacity building. At the end of the contract period, in September, SOPHIA declined even to send an evaluation team to the islands as there was "nothing to be evaluated." "The objectives of the start-up project," SOPHIA concluded drily, "have not been met."[79]

In a separate report, Ramanujam related the many excuses for the breakdown in relations given by Ismail and his deputy: the phone and fax were broken; people had lost enthusiasm; team members lacked confidence to speak to elders and government officials; important documents may have been lost in the tsunami. But Ramanujam reported a bigger problem:

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77 According to Matuschkowitz, Caritas typically set a three-year horizon on "long-term rehabilitation" projects, and SIF's work in the Nicobars was fast approaching that mark, never mind the three-year extension. University money seemed to operate on "a different time cycle" than NGO money, Matuschkowitz observes, and came with fewer strings attached.

78 SOPHIA, "Final Report for 'Start-Up Project," September 2007.

79 Rasheed was dismayed by SOPHIA's assessment. Its expectations were unrealistic, he told the documentary film crew, and the Nicobarese were hurt by the insinuations of slacking. "A Nicobari cannot become a project officer within 10 days," he protested. He felt SIF should rededicate its efforts.

> On his experience as CEO, Ameen said that he had come to realise that it was a tough job that required immense hard work, and that he had underestimated the extent of effort required. It was a new experience for him for hitherto he had been used to following instructions rather than working as the leader of a team.

As for the management team, "it appears that the team was unable to develop a professional outlook, and functioned, where they did, more as diffident students preparing for a test rather than as enterprising citizens working together for a loftier aim," Ramanujam said.[80] He relayed Ismail's assessment that NYA could not go forward without the help of an onsite "mentor" or "guide" to help with capacity building. Ramanujam himself was skeptical, remarking that the aid dependency and cultural malaise Singh had noticed a year earlier still held the Nicobarese in its grip. The people seemed unable to conceptualize their own future, he reported.

Next? As the Steering Committee gathered around the conference table at the Institute of Social Ecology for the seventh time, on November 30, 2007, the committee members and guests were circumspect.[81] Altenburg was troubled by his financial responsibilities. SIF was fast coming up on its three-year anniversary, and while Caritas prided itself on its long-term engagements, the Nicobarese situation seemed hopeless. He had lost confidence in the NYA and preferred to make no more investment in that organization; he was also uncomfortable with the lack of professional oversight on the ground. But what was the alternative? There was about €300,000 still unspent in the fund. How could SIF get something accomplished?

Fischer-Kowalski was sympathetic and exasperated by turns. The Nicobarese were starting from scratch, she reminded everyone. Small steps were a start. Yet it seemed that the islanders might never be able to satisfy international accountability requirements. Singh, whose passion had launched the SIF endeavor, now seemed beyond caring. His strained relations with Rasheed had become an open rift, and he was distressed by recent incidents of profiteering and personal attacks against him in the islands. Though he believed that scientific research should continue in the Nicobars, he felt that his direct engagement should stop. "The motivation, the inspiration, and the action has to come from within the community," he told a documentary film crew. "It's their battle and they have to fight it."[82]

Was this just a temporary setback, or had SIF foundered? Should it simply close down and return the money to donors? What exactly constituted locally engaged sustainable development and could it be achieved? Was an academic institution able to sponsor development projects? Had Singh behaved responsibly or rashly in coming to the assistance of the Nicobarese? What about the

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80 Venkat Ramanujam Ramani, "Independent Verification of SOPHIA's Report on the Start-Up Project," November 27, 2007.

81 Information in this section taken from Minutes of the 7th SIF Steering Committee Meeting, November 30, 2007, in SIF files, and from interviews.

82 Barth, *Aftermath*.

RECOVER research? If SIF failed, could the scientific research proceed? The SIF Steering Committee remained committed to self-determined, sustainable development in the Nicobars—but how?