

Complex Disasters: The Nicobar Islands in the Grip of Humanitarian Aid

Using the case of the Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, this essay aims to probe into the structural deficiencies of existing humanitarian and development aid within the discourse of sustainable development. It is an attempt to show how well-meaning and good intentioned efforts may contradict and challenge the logic of a sustainable world.

Located in the Bay of Bengal, some 1,200 km from the east coast of India (*Figure 1*), the Nicobar Islands are one of the lesser known parts of India despite the enormous publicity they received during the 2004 tsunami. More than four years after the traumatic event, it is time to evaluate the aftermath in relation to what is termed as the worlds' largest fund-raising exercise. Not only the aid sector, but governments, corporations, academic institutions and hundred of thousands of individuals involved themselves in some way or the other to bring relief and rehabilitation to the victims. In short, very few on this earth remained untouched by the enormity of this disaster.

The Nicobar archipelago consists of 24 islands spread over an area of 1,841 km² and administered as a Union Territory, Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Union Territories in India are administered by the President through an Administrator appointed by him). Of these 1,542 km² are protected tropical forests and the remaining are mangroves, undulating grasslands, coconut plantations and settlements. Relatively flat, the highest point is the Mt. Thullier on Great Nicobar with an elevation of 642 metres. These islands are not only home to a rich tropical biodiversity with several endemic terrestrial and marine species but 12 of the islands are inhabited by an indigenous community, commonly referred to as the Nicobarese. Mongoloid in origin and having migrated from the Malay-Burma coast over 2,000 years ago, the Nicobarese have remained relatively isolated for a long time. However, owing to their geographical location on an important sea route, these islands were often visited by passing vessels with the aim to replenish food and water supplies in the long and arduous sea voyages of colonial times. Consequently, a small amount of barter trade took place where the Nicobarese exchanged food and coconuts for cloth and iron, and later rice, tobacco, and other consumables from time to time.

The British colonised the islands in 1869 and for the first time regulated trade and set up an administrative system under a nation state. In 1947, the islands became part of independent India, and since 1956 the

islands have been protected and access regulated under the legislation Andaman and Nicobar Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation (ANPATR) (*Singh 2003*).

Life on the Nicobar Islands

Largely subsistence, the (pre-tsunami) Nicobarese lived off hunting, gathering, fishing, coconut production, pig and chicken rearing with some maintaining horticultural gardens to grow fruits, vegetables and a variety of roots and tubers. Their link to the market is via the production and sale of copra (dehydrated coconuts) in exchange for rice, sugar, cloth, fossil fuels, toiletries and other consumables. Thus, coconuts comprise an important source of livelihood, both on a subsistence level (a third of their coconut production is fed to pigs) and as an exchange in the market in the form of copra. Living in villages along the coast their population in 2001 numbered 26,565.

As with most indigenous cultures across the world, the various segments of the socio-ecological system of the Nicobars are inextricably linked with each other. In other words, the socio-cultural and economic arrangements of the Nicobarese play an important role in maintaining and regulating the use of resources. Elaborate festivals and ceremonies, some lasting for months, reproduce society in terms of power relations, hierarchies, and access to resources (*Singh 2003, 2006*). Thus, any intervention into the Nicobarese socio-ecological system, if not carefully understood and designed, can trigger off undesired dynamics with severe consequences. In the aftermath of the tsunami, this was precisely what had happened.

The urge for self-help

The tsunami of December 2004 literally turned the world of the Nicobarese upside down. Owing to their close proximity to the epicentre and their flatness, the islands and their inhabitants were subject to immense devastation. In a matter of minutes, thousands had been swept away by the gigantic waves and the villages were either completely destroyed or affected beyond recognition together with their material property, livestock and cultural artefacts – some of them hundreds of years old. Each of the coconut trees (the main basis of the local economy) standing along the coast within a kilometre from the sea were washed away or rendered dead as the sea water passed over. The earthquake and the consequent sinking of the islands resulted not only in the destruction of more than half of the mangrove forests and about 40 % of the coral reefs (that had been a main source of protein-rich sea food) but also large

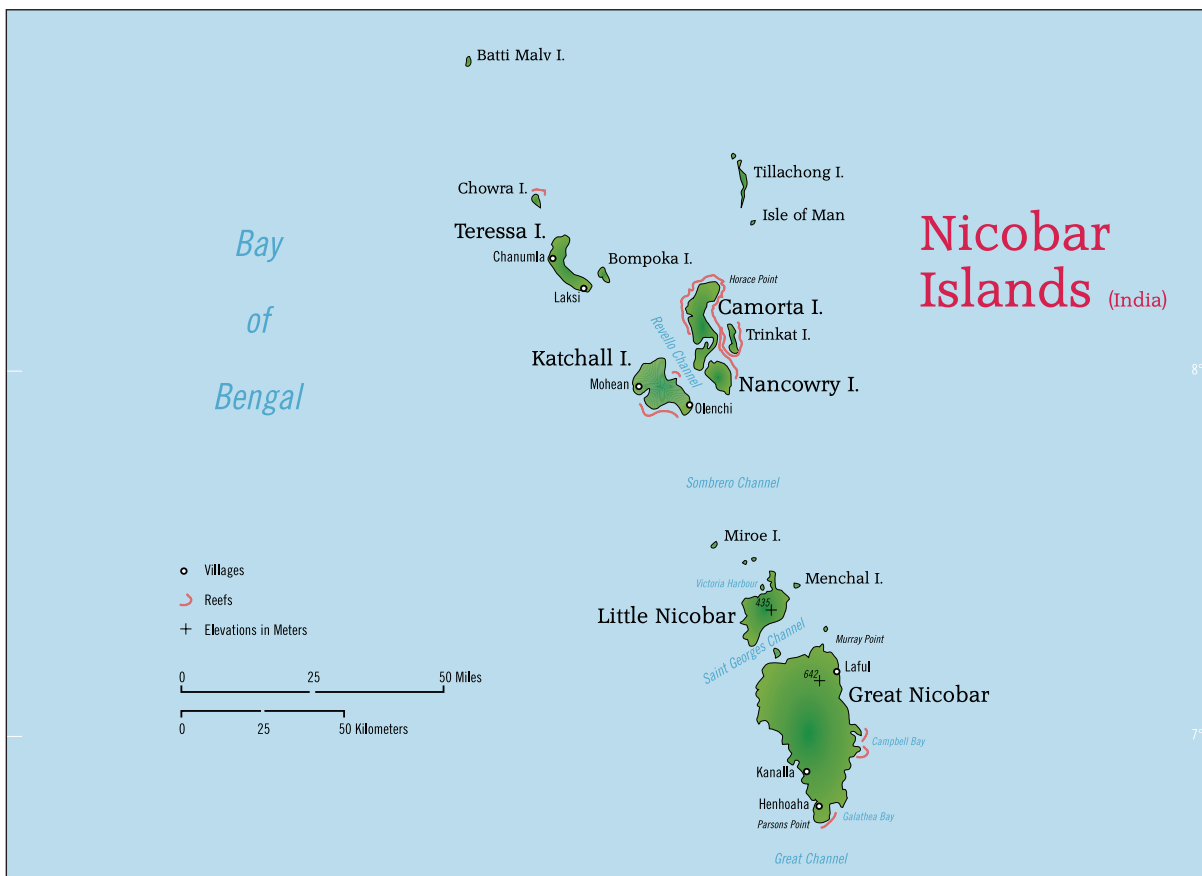
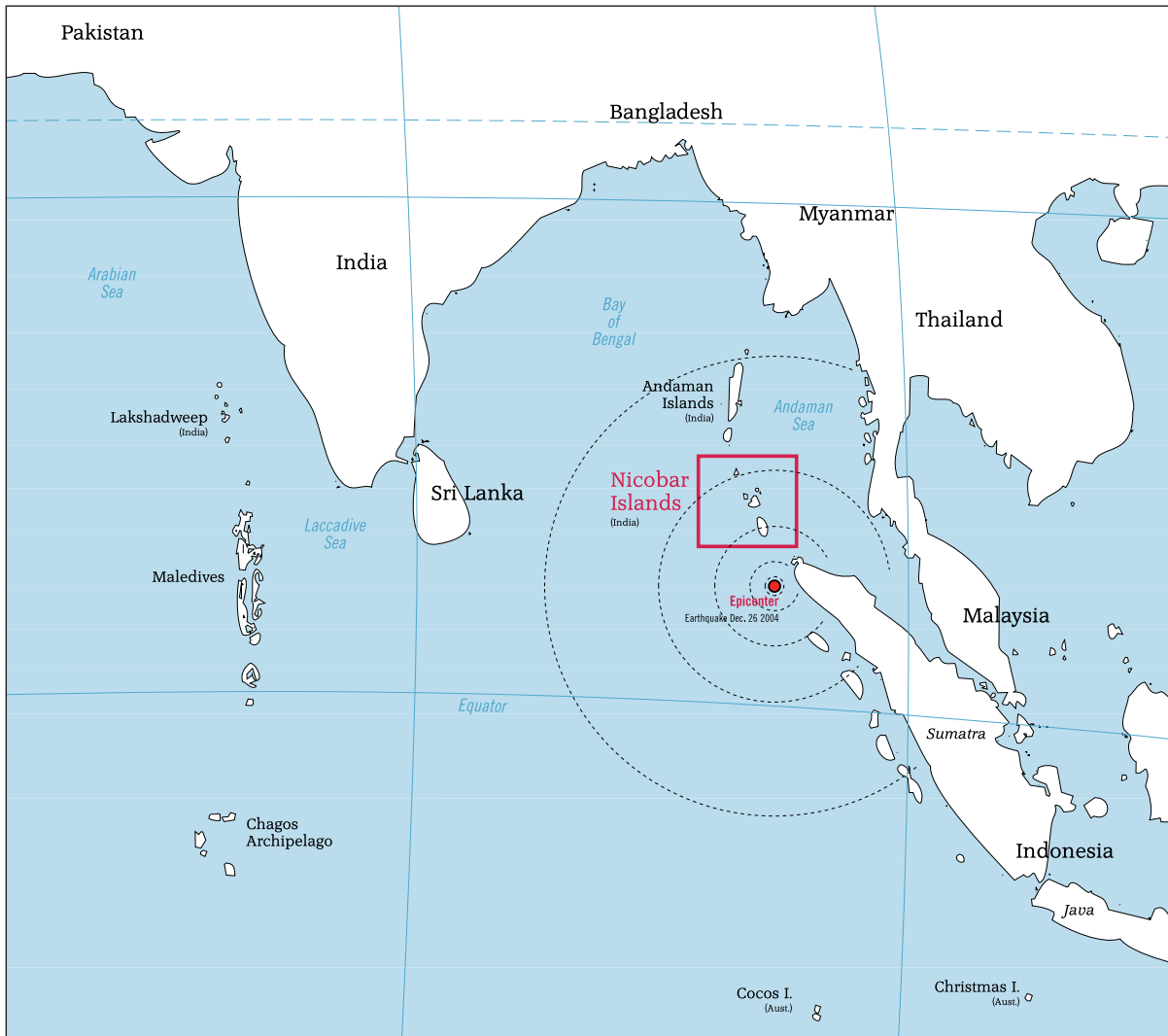


Figure 1: Overview map of the Nicobar Islands

areas of land were lost to the ocean, creating a new coastline and making navigation difficult.

While the disaster was in itself traumatic, the post-disaster phase has been no less. Confronted for the first time with the idea of aid and development, the Nicobarese have found it difficult to grasp its dynamics. Since the islands have been protected under the ANPATR (1956) and entry to them highly regulated, the Nicobarese' interaction with the outside world has been very limited. Now for the first time, they were approached by large donor organisations each of whom gave the impression of fulfilling a large part of relief and rehabilitation needs single-handedly. Originally, this was not what the Nicobarese wanted. Unable to work and rebuild their lives, they were extremely agitated and suffocated in the relief camps that were set up for them. 'Leave us alone. We can manage on our own. We don't need biscuits and chips. We need to make our homes and plant our gardens. Give us tools, if you wish to help us', is what some had started to say. Some were even of the opinion that outside interference and non-indigenous settlers caused the tsunami. 'This is our land. Please leave us alone. Otherwise we are sure to die', was the remark of a leader from Katchal Island.

Time and again the Nicobarese had demanded tools so that they could begin making their shelters and plant their gardens to ensure food for the coming year. *Kephus*, the Chief of Bompooka Island, was unable to

understand why he could not return to his island despite the fact that he and his people had clear plans upon returning. After building their shelters, they would establish a horticultural garden with bananas, pineapples, jackfruits, and various other fruits and vegetables. Unfortunately, what stopped *Kephus* and his people was the lack of boats and the permission to leave the relief camp on Teresa Island.

The same was for the people of Chowra. Yet, in the 18 months of 'exile' on Teresa, the persistent Chowrites built about 100 small canoes (see cover page of this issue) and 10 festive ones. Further, the men made regular voyages to Chowra to plant their gardens well before the monsoons. Within a month of their return to Chowra, it was incredibly touching to see how quickly they had repaired their houses and cleaned the debris. In fact, it was the only island that actually resembled the past. The anxiety to begin a new life and fend for themselves, despite a trauma not so long ago, reflects the resilience of the Nicobarese in the face of tragedy along with the ideology that life must go on, and singularly so, aid or no aid.

Help! The helpers are coming!

In Port Blair, dozens of local, national and international aid organisations had established their offices. Unable to get permission to go to the Nicobar Islands,



Photos: S.J. Singh

Photo 1: After the tsunami 2004: The waves tore the coast line, broke down the infrastructure and threw the boats hundreds of metres inland with insouciant ease. A similar fate to a school in Kakana village where the waves – up to 20 m high – removed the roof with brutish ease



Photo 2, 3 and 4: More than four years after the tsunami, the Nicobarese continue to live in temporary tin shelters. Bada Inaka and Vikasnagar are the new villages where the inhabitants from Trinket Island have been relocated

most of them catered to the few relief camps in town. Despite the fact that the government was providing food to the tsunami victims, aid organisations were keen to provide add-ons such as noodles, cheese, chicken, soups, chocolates and cola, writes *Mohammed Abid* (2006), then Director of Social Welfare, in his evaluation report. Competition among the various NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) was evident. Each wanted to give more than the other. With such good care and no work to engage in, the inmates took to alcohol that triggered several conflicts and cases of eve-teasing in the camps. It was reported that even the female police constables were not spared.

Local people noticed the huge volumes of food and commodities the aid organisations purchased (not all without a hint for commissions), the wastefulness of food supplies rotting in warehouses due to mismanagement, the exorbitant salaries of their staff coming from the mainland, and the extravagant lifestyle in the best

local hotels with extraordinary food bills. It did not take long for the tsunami victims and the local population to build up an impression that aid organisations had an incredible amount of money and their biggest problem is under-spending. On Car Nicobar it was widely reported that NGOs liberally distributed presents to the indigenous leaders to remain on the island and work there. Word went around that the need of an aid organisation is no less than the victims when it came to spending.

In the Nicobars, aid organisations had been mainly engaged in the distribution of relief materials (household goods, tools, clothes, boats, etc.) and organising a few training and capacity building workshops in the first few months after the tsunami. Apart from this, most of the major interventions in the Nicobars are state-driven since aid organisations are not permitted to work directly, except through or in cooperation with the government. This was mainly in the form of contri-



Photo 5: Concrete foundations laid for the construction of permanent shelters in Nancowrie Island. The use of non-traditional material for the construction remains contested, besides the fact that after four years the progress made remains inadequate

tribution to housing and infrastructure costs or undertaking similar projects planned by the government. There were a few exceptions though, such as Oxfam India who was able to strike a direct partnership with the indigenous council of the Central Nicobars. However, a year of working together was unsuccessful and the Council refused to renew the contract that terminated at the end of 2005. According to them, working with Oxfam revealed to them the hypocrisy of the aid sector that while propagating the ideologies of participation, transparency and accountability, do not actually practice these themselves.

A Nicobari leader once remarked, 'They [aid organisations] are fooling both the donors and the community. They are great actors who come, create temporary sets for shooting, like in a film, and once the shooting is over, they leave, and the sets disintegrate. The toilets made by UNICEF fell down in no time, but look at the photo of the toilets in their annual report, they look so beautiful'. Abid notes in his report as well, 'The toilets introduced by UNICEF-OXFAM, have been a virtual disaster since they did not take into account prevalent practices and water resource availability.'

With little leverage to operate freely on the Nicobar Islands, several organisations overemphasised their other role, namely to serve as watchdogs to government activities and to act as a pressure group together with the media. Unfortunately, this role was several times misused in self-interest which not only discredited the aid organisations for what they stand for, but was unjust to those it was intended to help. For example, several dubious surveys were undertaken and results publicised to enhance their bargaining power with the government to implement projects (read products) they

had ready for sale. In most instances it was clear that projects were 'supply-driven' rather than 'need-driven'. The large volumes of money that had been collected had to be spent, no matter how, and tangible results reported back to the donors.

This 'one-size-fits-all' approach has also been criticised in Abid's report, 'These organizations are driven by their own agendas and they have heedlessly introduced new concepts, ideas, schemes and projects without taking into account the socio-cultural milieu of the district.' Sensational news is what the media of the day are after. And who could be better than the present aid organisations to report on the shortcomings of the government. Headings like 'Deadly Administration', 'India Islands relief is denied', 'Anger over two rupee tsunami aid', etc. were splashed in the national and international media thus raising eyebrows against the ruling government. In order to circumvent the ensuing assault from opposing political parties and thereby the risk of giving rise to negative public opinion, the government was placed under much pressure to overemphasize their own role in rehabilitation. Thus, large amounts of money were allocated under various schemes to infrastructure, housing and as compensation to all victims.

The impact of State interventions

The role of the State, thus, came to be overtly benevolent that added another dimension to the problem. Soon after the tsunami, the government announced an immediate relief of Rupees 2,000 (app. 40 US\$) per family. When local officials realised that Nicobarese live in large extended families, they suggested (in good faith indeed) splitting up their families into nuclear

units that could each be entitled to the sanctioned amount. It took quite a while to educate the Nicobarese on the concept of a nuclear family quite alien to them. The list, when finally ready, became the blue-print of all compensation packages that followed. Bank accounts were opened for all heads of nuclear families for the issuance of cheques related to several forms of compensation. This was the beginning of the disintegration of the extended family system and future conflicts.

In compliance with the national policy, the government of the Union Territory announced a package of cash compensation to the next of kin for each person missing or dead due to the tsunami. Another package that was offered was to compensate land and crop loss per hectare. Put together, most families received amounts up to several hundred thousand rupees. Conflicts arose in both cases since traditional rules did not match with the Indian legal framework. For example, in the Central Nicobars, it is the norm that the husband must go and live with his wife as *ungrung* (slave). This being so, he has no right over the wealth of his wife or her family. Now according to Indian law, the next of kin in case of the death of the wife is the husband. Without due consideration of the traditional system, cheques were issued in the husband's name creating conflicts. Indeed, the possibility of receiving large sums of money further spawned greed and jealousy, visible in the conflicts over who is next of kin for those dead.

What's more, compensation for land and crop loss (also payable to nuclear families alone) caused the splitting of land which was previously jointly held, thus leading to conflicts in several households. Traditionally, land is owned by the joint family and only use rights is given to members when they start a new nuclear family. As a rule, only uncultivated forest land can be given away. Plantations are invariably owned by those who planted the trees, but in special circumstances, for example, in exchange for a service, usufruct rights for a period of time may be given. The Nicobarese make a distinction between land-ownership and plantation-ownership. A family may own the land, but the harvest will go to the one who actually planted the trees. In this sense, a family may theoretically own the land, but to all practical purposes the benefits are reserved for those who planted the trees. In this new situation where land had to be translated into cash compensation, the confusion between ownership and usufructs quite often arose.

Last but not least, the overt benevolence of the government in compensating losses with cash was a predicament in itself. Never before had the Nicobarese so much money at a time. Pre-tsunami, whenever something was required from the market, copra was made and immediately sold. In other words, capital accumulation in such amounts among the Nicobarese was rather rare, if not unknown. At the same time, the



Photo 6: Waiting to ring. The mobile network does not have uniform coverage in all the villages. Hanging the phones out increases the chances of connectivity.



Photo 7: Separated by the ocean, young boys and girls enjoy the new form of communication

concept of investment and savings for future needs is also incomprehensible. Where large amounts of cash are made available at once to a society where the concept of time is compressed to the present, there certainly would be some repercussions.

What we see immediately is an increase in the purchase of consumer goods such as motor-bikes, TVs, DVD players, mobile phone, music system and junk food. The Nicobarese have a special liking for “red alcohol” (whisky and rum) and large amounts of money is used to purchase cheap “red alcohol” at exorbitant prices due to the fact that these bottles must be brought

into the islands illegally. Besides the damage it does to health, the money has been a burning hole in the tribal pocket as Nicobarese ended up paying two to three times the going price to immigrant traders.

After the aftermath

The word ‘aftermath’ has its roots in agriculture, meaning ‘a second mowing’ of grass or crop. Indeed, the aftermath of the tsunami is characterized by a second mowing of what has survived the disaster itself. The Nicobarese are least aware that they are not only subjects of a catastrophe, but of an aftermath, a phase dominated by the aid industry that thrives on it, a phenomenon that *Naomi Klein* (2007) aptly calls ‘disaster capitalism’. The issue here is not reconstruction, but re-shaping everything, using the desperation and fear caused by a catastrophe to engage in radical social and economic engineering. The major concern is not so much the material remains such as buildings and streets, but the immaterial attributes inherent in nearly all societies, that is the ability to reorganize and rebuild one’s future.

Unfortunately, the logic of aid not only underutilized these attributes, but contributed to their systematic elimination. Instead of providing the Nicobarese with tools to reconstruct their homes as they always had done, they had been made to wait under the promise of an expensive modern house, each in settlements away from the sea. The former anxiety of taking control over their lives and of rebuilding their future is now hardly visible among the Nicobarese. Instead, the focus has shifted on acquiring more and more through aid, and in the continued experience of reckless spending.

Increasing dependency on aid and the new affluent lifestyle does not come without consequences on the society and the environment. Comparisons in the material and energy consumption of the Nicobarese before and after the tsunami reveal an enormous increase (for the pre-tsunami biophysical profile, see *Singh et al.* 2001). Materials for construction of permanent houses



Photo 8 and 9: Nicobarese children watching a cricket match. Television sets are now common in Nicobarese homes. As a result children now spend more time in front of the television as compared to outdoor activities



are imported from the neighbouring Andamans or from the mainland, which amounts to an estimated 200,000 metric tonnes, an eight times increase in the amount of built stocks per capita as compared to pre-tsunami figures. Needless to say, the maintenance of these houses will also require a ceaseless flow of materials in the future – at the expense of the Nicobarese.

Once the permanent houses are complete, the per capita demand for water and energy will rise substantially. Water consumption is likely to go up to 70–100 litres per capita per day (as compared to the Indian average of 40 litres). Energy load is estimated to increase from the present 300 kWh (kilo Watt hours) to 500 kWh by 2011. Preliminary calculations reveal that there is already a 30 times increase in the consumption of fossil fuels as compared to pre-tsunami figures, much of it used to produce electricity, and remaining for motor-bikes, cooking gas and boats. Last but not least, there is a six times increase in the import of biomass (mainly food) as compared to pre-tsunami.

Four years of incessant aid flow have led the Nicobarese to adopt a new way of living based on a much higher consumption than before. The issue here is that hardly any of this is locally produced but must be obtained from outside as aid, subsidy, or trade. Change in lifestyle is thus accompanied by an increased dependency on resources from outside the islands. It has been made clear by the administration that the Nicobarese will have to begin paying their electricity bills once they occupy their houses. This concern is further augmented considering what actually their new economy will be. As mentioned previously, the Nicobarese are a hunting-and-gathering society producing copra for the market only when there is a need for commodities. An economic activity such as this demanded a little more than an hour a day per person (*Fischer-Kowalski et al.*,

submitted). Coconut trees once planted provided fruit for nearly a hundred years all the year round without much maintenance and without having to worry about seasons. The pigs scavenged the forest for three-quarters of their diet, and hunting and fishing were combined with leisure. Most of the coconut trees, the main source of cash, were lost to the waves.

So how will the Nicobarese sustain a newly-adopted lifestyle once the compensation money is utilized and food aid stops, given the fact that to replace lost plantations with new ones will take about 10 years before copra trade can resume. The only means of livelihood that is readily accessible is selling a variety of vegetables, fruits and fish for the local market. Unfortunately, very few know how to grow vegetables and fruits, and this will entail not only learning how to do that, but also a subsequent investment of time and working with seasons. Another problem is that of the market. Local consumption (by non-Nicobarese) can potentially absorb only 1,000 kg of vegetables and 500 kg of fish per day. Assuming the Nicobarese do produce all of that and manage to sell it, it would still meet only 40 % of the total household income and require a time investment of 3 hours/adult/day. Once the coconut palms begin fruiting in 2015, the Nicobarese can actually meet their entire household income from the production and sale of copra, albeit at a high working time investment – 8 hours/adult/day. This is equal to the maximum disposable working time (leaving no time for festivities and rituals), and a six to eight times increase in the working time as compared to the pre-tsunami scenario (*Wildenberg and Singh 2009*).

Another issue is the impact on the environment as a result of this new lifestyle. Modelling results indicate that to meet present household demand (of cash and subsistence) would require between 3,500 to 4,000



Photo 10: Free food and rations continue. There is enough to let some of it rot, or sell it back into the open market

hectares of land on Kamorta Island alone for coconut plantations. Consequently, forest and grassland would reduce by 15% and 10% respectively over the next 30 years with a high level of forest fragmentation. The combined effect of this is a negative impact on drinking water quality and quantity, on soil erosion leading to lower productivity, on the availability of forest products and the conservation status of some of the endemic fauna and flora elements found on the island. The water situation could get even more critical if we consider the decline in water availability with a scenario where water demand is likely to increase due to population growth, and that agriculture would have to move from being rain-fed to artificial irrigation due to climate change predictions. Finally, the erosion of the top soils might not only lead to land degradation but also have an undesired effect on the coral reefs surrounding the islands (ibid).

Concluding reflections

Disaster affected areas are now increasingly viewed as locations where long-term development programmes could be initiated. Already in the 1980s, it was argued that the magnitude of impact by a natural event depended very much on the social characteristics of the population being affected. In other words, disasters began to be seen not as accidental events, but as consequences of structural factors such as poverty, social organisation and overall vulnerability. International disaster management agencies and scholars agree that the key to reducing vulnerability to natural disasters is to focus on prevention, mitigation and preparedness. There is growing consensus among practitioners that the root cause of vulnerability is poverty and underdevelopment. As a remedy, development programmes with a long-term focus on structural changes and economic growth are proposed, which in their current form remains a major driver of complex disasters.

Aid programmes of the government and international aid organizations in the Nicobar Islands have changed the traditional social and power relations, leading to an erosion of traditional institutions, values and rules of resources use. Aid money has accelerated the transition from a formerly hunting-and-gathering subsistence based economy towards an economy linked more to the global market and dependency on aid money and goods. While on the one hand this entails changes in land-use, at the same time we are faced with serious cultural constraints in terms of willingness to work. In other words, the only way to maintain a higher consumption lifestyle would be to establish new patterns of society-nature interactions that can provide higher productivity (from land and sea) by introducing new technology, establishment of a functioning market, while at the same time cope with the 'willingness to work' constraint on psychological and physical levels. Whether this is possible or not, and how long it takes, is yet to be seen.

In any case, the original affluence of the Nicobarese with their 'limited wants and unlimited means' (Gowdy

1997) seems to be replaced by a condition of unlimited wants and insufficient means; from abundance to scarcity. Seemingly, the Nicobarese now tread on a ceaseless quest to overcome a state of permanent scarcity, the starting point of all modern economic activity. For the moment we can only observe the hopelessness of the Nicobarese with their 'bourgeois impulses and Palaeolithic tools' (Sahlins 1972) as they attempt to pull themselves out of a complex disaster. ■

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