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2/10/05 ✓ (20)

Why Do We Need an Alternative Code of Ethics for Tourism?

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The member countries of World Tourism Organization (WTO) at its 13th General Assembly in Santiago, Chile adopted the new Global Code of Ethics for Tourism on 1 October 1999. Acclaimed for its lofty goals and coverage, the Code soon became the reference point for debates on a wide spectrum of issues relating to tourism such as sustainable development, equity and protection of local cultures. The formulation of the Code was the culmination of a process of debates and deliberations within the global civil society as well as tourism industry on the negative impacts of tourism on environment and on cultural heritage and growing doubts on the claims that tourism benefits the residents of tourism destinations.

According to the Secretary General of WTO, "the Global Code of Ethic for Tourism sets a frame of reference for the responsible and sustainable development of world tourism at the dawn of the new millennium. It draws inspiration from many similar declarations and industry codes that have come before and it adds new thinking that reflects our changing society at the end of the 20th century". He also describes the process of formulating the guidelines. The code was first called for in a resolution of the WTO General Assembly meeting in Istanbul in 1997. Subsequently, a special committee for the preparation of the Global Code of Ethics was constituted. The Secretary-General and the legal adviser to WTO in consultation with WTO Business Council, WTO's Regional Commissions, and the WTO Executive Council prepared a draft document. The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development meeting in New York in April 1999 approved the concept of the Code. WTO was also asked to seek further inputs from the private sector, civil society organizations and labour organizations. The Secretary-General remembers, "Written comments on the code were received from more than 70 WTO Member States and other entities. The resulting 10 point Global Code of Ethics for Tourism - the culmination of an extensive consultative process - was approved unanimously by the WTO General Assembly meeting in Santiago in October 1999."

A close look at the process of formulation of the Code, however reveal that the role of the civil society has been marginal. It was initially drafted by entities known to safeguard the interests of the industry and at the instance of CSD, a notional participation was elicited from member states and civil society organizations. This is not surprising given the fact that the structure and processes of international consensus building often undermine the essential principles of democratic debate.

Nevertheless, if we consider the fact that the overwhelming demand for restructuring tourism practices had in the past and present emerged from individuals and organizations of the global the civil society, it is remarkable how hard it is to find their imprint in the text of the Code. WTO has in its turn tried to project that the Code is a comprehensive document capable of addressing the complex web of tourism issues both in the developed and in the underdeveloped world. According to them, the formidable challenge is in the implementation of the Code and they refuse see any whiff of tensions or contradictions within the Code that could come in the way of its easy acceptance and implementation. Hence, it is suggested by the secretary General of WTO that it "is intended to be a living document. Read it. Circulate it widely. Participate in its implementation. Only with your cooperation can we safeguard the future of the tourism industry and expand the sector's contribution to economic prosperity, peace and understanding among all the nations of the world".

The civil society organizations at the local and global levels have been upholding an unequivocal opposition to the processes and practices of mass tourism in the past decades which had resulted in the massive destruction of local cultures, livelihood of Indigenous People, deterioration in environmental quality and depletion of natural resources, uneven economic gains, growth of exploitative commercial sex, child abuse, trafficking and an overall escalation of resource drain from the third world through under pricing as well as surplus extraction. The need for a code of Ethics in Tourism emanated from

the urgency of combating these maladies as well as setting new rules of the game for the industry practitioners. Nonetheless, it is surprisingly clear that the text of the Code does not reflect the wide set of concerns and issues that triggered the demand by the civil society organizations to set new rules.

It appears that the Code was formulated simply to provide legitimacy and to shore up the ailing travel industry whose global operations still smack of the very same nefarious practices condemned by the civil society. The acceptance of the Code by 106 member countries have not, according to reports from various local and global organizations working the area of sustainable development, equitable tourism, trafficking and child abuse, resulted in any mitigation of the exploitative character of tourism industry particularly in the developing world. When confronted by this contradiction, the official response is profoundly indifferent to the conflicting and contradictory nature of the text of the Code itself. Instead these problems are often counted as emanating from floppy implementation of the Code of Ethics. The failure of the respective national, regional or even local governments in sincerely adhering to and implementing the Code of ethics is highlighted as the major reason for the continued ill effects of tourism in the third world. However in this discourse, the most important fact that is overlooked is the failure of the Code to reflect the aspirations and concerns of the marginalized communities and political and economic questions raised by the civil society. As a consequence of this official indifference to the larger questions of development, redistribution and ethics in the process of formulation of the Code, there are at least two important aspects of the Code that calls for a critical reassessment of its usefulness. One pertains to the limitations of the assumptions and principles of the code. Second pertains to the tension between the assumptions and principles of the code. We shall here discuss these two points. These conflicts are rooted in the gross negligence of the issues raised by the civil society as incorporated in the "Position Paper for further discussion on the issue of a Global Code of Ethics for Tourism" submitted to WTO by Equations, Tourism European Ecumenical Network (TEN) and Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism (ECTWT).

Let me begin by taking a close look at some of the major the assumptions of the Code. These assumptions are detailed in the preamble of the code. In its eagerness to paint an exceedingly rosy picture of tourism practices

the code at the outset itself argues a case for understanding tourism as an instrument for peace. The preamble of the Code asserts, "Through the direct, spontaneous and non-mediated contacts it engenders between men and women of different cultures and lifestyles, tourism represents *a vital force for peace* and a factor of friendship and understanding among the peoples of the world". While we have reports from the grassroots about the conflicts over resources and cultural practices consequent on the increased flow of tourists into relatively quiescent regions of the world, the case for tourism as a tool for peace or conflict resolution has been very weakly argued. Its role in mediating for increased international understanding has never been worth considering. The geo-politics of the evolution of many of the tourism destinations is intertwined with economic aggression, occupation, colonization and war. As Eredric Jameson points out in his *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, "the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and horror".

Another major assumption of the Code of ethics is regarding the free market economy and its benefits. The code looks at the issue of marketization from the perspective of the industry and ignores the diverse views of local communities and the pangs of their integration into its fold. Hence it is argued, "World tourism industry has much to gain by operating in a market economy and environment of free trade". The Code is callously insensitive to the enormous problems created as a result of the incorporation of local communities into the market economy.

As a corollary to this, and in gross violation of the position held by the representatives of the civil society, the Code asserts that tourism is compatible with the liberalization of the conditions governing trade in services. In one stroke it disowns the concerns of the local communities and takes a pro-GATS approach while it is denounced by majority of the developing countries and the global civil society for its exploitative character. The Code hence argues that 'responsible and sustainable tourism' is *"by no means incompatible with the growing liberalization of the conditions governing trade in services and under whose aegis the enterprises of this sector operate and that it is possible to reconcile in this sector economy and ecology, environment and development, openness to international trade and protection of social and cultural identities"*. The worldwide practice of mass tourism has in fact been a telling ex-

ample of the failure of the modern sectors of the economy to achieve this blissful state of harmony so easily claimed by the Code.

The major Principles outlined in the code also fail to do justice to the set of issues that the civil society had been careful enough to take up with WTO. The Code at its best is trying to translate an ideal average of imagined benefits of tourism into its Principles. Thus it is varying presented as providing a platform for mutual understanding and respect between peoples and societies, a vehicle for individual and collective fulfillment and an important factor of sustainable development. These goals are never met and the likelihood of such harmony and peace are increasingly challenged in the new context of globalization and market liberalization that WTO uncritically embraces.

Some of the Principles of the Code such tourism ought to be a contributor to the enhancement of cultural heritage, it should be a beneficial activity for host countries and communities; stakeholders have obligations in tourism development etc., do emphasize the need for upholding an equitable approach and perspective in tourism promotion activities as well as tourism practices. In this sense, the Code has been successful in appealing to the various actors in the field to mitigate the negative effects and strive to maximize the benefits. Nevertheless, the Code openly legitimize the excessive urge of the global capital to explore and exploit the quiescent areas and integrate them fully into market economy when it argues, "the planet's resources are equally open to all the world's inhabitants". Moreover, this line of reasoning also undermines the right of autonomy and self-determination of local communities. In the name of a vague and inept concept of "Tourism Rights", the Code strikes at the very core of the demand of the marginalized and underprivileged communities for the rights to exercise their control over their own land and resources. Another principle, which runs as a corollary to this position, is the demand for liberty of tourist movements that states, "visitors should benefit from the same rights as the citizens of the country visited". Redistributive policies such as differential pricing for tourists from developed countries etc., which forms the core of the resource management and sustainable strategies of many of the third world destinations, are threatened by this principle.

The Code is very eloquent about the rights of permanent workers and entrepreneurs of the tourism industry.

It appeals to the Multinational Corporations that they "should not exploit the dominant positions they *sometimes* occupy; they should avoid becoming the vehicles of cultural and social models artificially imposed on the host communities; *in exchange for their freedom to invest and trade which should be fully recognized*, they should involve themselves in local development, avoiding, by the excessive repatriation of their profits or their induced imports, a reduction of their contribution to the economies in which they are established". The Code, which thus carefully details the rights of permanent workers, small entrepreneurs and MNCs, however, silent about the informal sector and informal sector workers, who are mostly women and children in the third world. This is a painful neglect when we consider that the informal sector jobs are, more often than not, taken up by workers displaced from their traditional occupations that disappear consequent on the aggressive incursion of the tourism industry. Histories of many of the third world tourism destinations are littered with the stories of displacement and inadequate rehabilitation of marginalized communities. The Code of Ethics offers no perspective on this important question.

The failure of the Code of Ethics to address satisfactorily the issues and concerns raised by the civil society appears to be ignored in the contemporary discussions on the topic. The mistaken emphasis is often on the 'implementation issues'. The inherent limitations, tensions and contradictions of the text are invariably overlooked. The Code in its present form is essentially a document that serves the interests of the industry while ignoring the rights of the marginalized and the oppressed. It attempts to legitimize the economic exploitation perpetuated by market-oriented policies of liberalization and globalization. In this context, I strongly feel that it is necessary to formulate an alternative Code of Ethics for Tourism, which would incorporate the ideals and aspirations upheld in the position paper of the civil society organizations.

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