

Workshop on
YMCA Global Alternative Tourism Network
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**Setting the Context: Alternatives in Tourism
Concepts, Challenges and Opportunities**

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(ECOT)

Dear friends,

I begin with greetings from the Ecumenical Coalition On Tourism.

Now a word about ECOT. The Ecumenical Coalition On Tourism (ECOT) was established in 1982 under the umbrella of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) in 1982 as a ministry of the worldwide churches to respond to the issues arising from tourism's impact on vulnerable communities.

Some introductory remarks

The Y is well known for over a century and half for providing a whole variety of services including its significant work of hospitality and accommodation. I am also aware that in different countries, including Thailand, it offers exposure programmes and other experiences that could be classified under tourism but are placed under other headings.

We are now gathered here because through the encouragement of the APAY, with support from its members, there is now a move towards a focused engagement with tourism, bringing together what is already being done and the new initiatives and activities that will emerge. The Global Alternative Tourism Network that is envisaged will make the Y a recognisable player with regard to the tourism sector.

I think it is important that, while individual specifics and programmes will come up in the course of this three-day Workshop, we begin with an overview of the tourism industry, what the issues are, what its direction is. This will also assist in providing a context and a sense of the possible points of entry for the Y in this important area of human endeavour.

See, Judge, Act

'See, Judge, Act' is a framework for social action developed by a Christian body known as Young Christian Workers (YCW). Perhaps some of you are familiar with this group and its work especially in Asia and the Pacific.

I will use this format for this presentation.

SEE: Tourism today

If you speak of 'YMCA's meaningful participation in the tourism sector with missional objectives', of 'alternative tourism', you need to take stock of where tourism is today.

Travel has been an essential feature of an evolving human race. In past eras, travel would have been undertaken for reasons of conquest, trade and faith. Starting with recent decades, you have to take note of a major category of movement of people, namely, migration and a search for a better life and employment prospects, and the displacement and uprootedness of people. Today, however, by far the biggest group of travellers is made up of tourists, courtesy of convenient and cheaper travel.

The tourism sector has now grown to become a juggernaut whose outlays according to some calculations amount to some **ten percent of the global GDP!** As an industry, tourism is acknowledged as one of the biggest industries in the world alongside oil, arms and armaments, and pharmaceuticals. Most people would have no problem surmising the hugeness of the last three, but tourism?

Employment relating to tourism around the world is estimated to be around 270 million workers. This would result in tourism employment being estimated to be around ten percent of the global workforce.

Yes, there has been a drop recently in tourist numbers due to the global financial crisis. Before this crisis struck, holiday and leisure trips in a year were projected to reach a billion by 2010! The growth in tourism has now slowed down and some destinations are more affected than others but nevertheless, globally, the number of leisure and holiday trips is still projected at a few hundred millions in a year. A big proportion of this number will head for the Asia/Pacific region. Tourism is still set for modest growth in the near future and stronger growth once the financial crisis eases.

Various forms of tourism have evolved to cater to the desires and demands that define the many niches that exist among travellers. The tourism industry offers experiences grouped under 'family tourism', 'cruise tourism', 'trek tourism', 'heritage tourism', 'slum tourism', 'refugee tourism', 'spiritual tourism', 'pilgrimage tourism', 'gourmet tourism', 'debaucherism tourism', 'medical tourism', 'green tourism', and so on. We have been assailed by a growing tourism lexicon that includes terms such as 'community tourism', 'ecotourism', 'sustainable tourism', 'pro-poor tourism', and the like.

JUDGE: Has tourism been of benefit?

Has the proliferation of tourism been good for the world, for the communities?

Bodies such as the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), the tourism industry and its supporters, and governments generally portray tourism as a boon for the economy, for

development in the third world, and hence make or argue for huge outlays in tourism investment. Tourism is being promoted as an important means of poverty alleviation, and is linked with the Millennium Development Goals. The tourism dollar is perceived as a saviour by poor and not so poor countries.

Well, tourism is not an unmixed blessing, a 'smokeless' industry. Properly formulated, tourism can be of immense benefit to travellers and host communities. But present day mass tourism comes with serious costs, both short term and long term. Tourism has an underside, kept hidden from tourism promotional literatures and programmes, that is destructive to communities.

To quote from the APAY Concept Note on GATN: '...it is a matter of concern that today's trends in tourism are leading towards a consumeristic culture and degradation of the ecological and human values in society'.

I would like to unpack this a bit, in the process enabling YMCA to visualise possibilities of responding.

Let me take a few lines from one of our recent ECOT documents in which we wrote:

The tourism footprint is obvious. Tourism is proving to have severe social costs in the developing world and elsewhere. It ignores the need and protection of host communities. It violates their dignity and their rights. It disregards and 'commodifies' their culture. It abuses their women and children and upsets the balance of their natural surroundings. It exploits workers and is based on patterns of global relationships and transactions that are just and inequitable.

...Tourism is a story of the displacement of farmers, fisher communities, indigenous people and other communities to make way for the arrival of a tourism enterprise in the form of a five star resort or hotel, a golf course, or a new amusement park. It is the story of diversion of essential resources such as land, water, and other resources from the local communities to tourism enterprises. It is the story of ecological damage that leaves the local communities the worse off for it. Modern day tourism is the story of abused hospitality, of people misled by unscrupulous interests that are profits driven with a disregard for the social consequences on Third World communities including women, girls and boys forced into prostitution on account of their poverty.

The experience in the developing world, the setting for most of APAY, suggests that tourism, in its own way, is as much a factor in the impoverishment of communities as are the other acknowledged factors such as war, ethnic conflict, corruption, inequitable distribution of wealth and resources, trade injustice, lack of infrastructure, lack of educational opportunities, and so on. While the elites and a few others benefit, the experience shows that tourism can hurt more than benefit local communities. The different ways by which South or Third World communities are disadvantaged, and evidence of which we would have come across in our travels and other encounters, include:

- The diversion of essential peoples' resources such as land, water, electricity, other infrastructure to entertain tourists and support hotels, resorts, golf courses, amusement parks, etc
- The social and economic impact of displacement caused by tourism infrastructure development;
- The social costs through the abuse of women and children, and trafficking;
- The costs entailed in the commercialisation, commodification and denigration of indigenous and local culture;
- Ecological damage and loss incurred in developing countries in the course of sustaining a tourism enterprise through inappropriate development;
- Climate change concerns and implications through air travel and destruction of natural resources;
- The cost to host communities through health hazards, arising from tourist activity involving HIV/AIDS, drugs and narcotics, etc;
- The loss of revenue to host countries as a result of the financial advantages gained by foreign and domestic business interests through tax concessions and holidays, subsidized land and other costs, import advantages, reduced wages and worker conditions, etc
- The human rights violations that occur in the name of tourism.

I would like to illustrate some of the above with examples from

- India
- Thailand
- Philippines
- South Korea

ACT: The role and response of YMCA

The description above describes the state of tourism today, especially its other face. Given that modern tourism's footprint does affect communities, it relates to the focus of the YMCA on Global Citizenship in a globalised world.

The way tourism is structured today makes it truly a globalised industry, and hence an expression of globalisation. Tourism decisions are taken miles away in distant capitals and cities and yet have an impact on the local village.

To quote from the YMCA Tokyo Statement on Global Citizenship in reference to globalisation: '... the threats of exclusion and greater fragmentation of peoples and nations are today also made more real. The primary focus for the exercise of global citizenship is the community and its practice includes an appreciation of the globalization in issues of development, livelihoods, education, health and advocacy'.

In the light of what we have seen regarding the negative side of tourism, there is clearly a call and need for Alternative Tourism. We cannot see this being taken up by the tourism

industry with great enthusiasm. It has to be institutions such as the YMCA that can and should take up such a challenge. It can respond by 'making tourism a meaningful opportunity for the local community as well as a pilgrim experience for the visitors'.

Such a tourism will need to satisfy the following criteria:

- Just and equitable
- Participatory
- Culturally sensitive
- Ecologically sound and sustainable
- Gender just and child protective
- Moral

Now to turn to some specific foci.

Looking at the region under the purview of APAY, namely Asia and the Pacific, a few areas come to mind that delineate some aspects of Alternative Tourism for the YMCA to consider. Note that the concerns featured herein – concerns largely from the perspective of affected communities - do not interest the tourism industry.

The criteria referred to earlier can be viewed through the window of the areas highlighted below.

Tourism and development. Governments of developing countries, with the strong endorsement of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, often look at tourism as a godsend for development and poverty alleviation. While their agencies can provide economic information such as tourist arrivals and revenue earned, often no social indicators on tourism's impact on people and on whether they benefit at all are available. How can communities be empowered to assess how tourism affects them at the grassroots level? What role can YMCA play in this regard? What should be the type of projects YMCA promotes and implements in grassroots communities that can serve as models for governments and other related entities considered on the basis of delivery of genuine benefits, creativity, accountability and transparency, participation of the community, and ways of assessing their effects? How can the YMCA enable local communities to become intricately and profitably involved as hosts and leaders of tourism activities in their midst? What training could be provided?

Tourism and indigenous peoples is another area of serious concern. A major consequence of globalisation for indigenous peoples is the growing loss of culture, and tourism plays a significant role in this regard. The commercialisation of indigenous dress, song, dance, sacred sites and rituals is well known. Indigenous communities are faced with the prospect of loss of their language which in turn is associated with losing traditional wisdom and heritage. Many indigenous communities fear the growth of 'eco-tourism' as a Trojan horse which enables tourism interests to exploit their resources and sites. Much work still lies ahead in realising the aspirations enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

How does the YMCA ensure that its projects reflect these concerns? For instance, how can indigenous and tribal communities be given opportunities to raise income through producing handicrafts, art work and other material without themselves becoming a commodity for tourists and others? How can the YMCA ensure that the products are made with labour that is not exploited.

HIV- AIDS The growth of both HIV-AIDS, and of the tourism industry is well documented. Anecdotally, a strong correlation can be seen between the two. Yet, fearing a loss of income, often both governments in developing countries, and the tourism industry, are reluctant to acknowledge this link. Given the spread of the disease, this is an area of social concern that presents a challenge. Would YMCA help in this area through projects and encounters that will benefit affected people and their families, and in turn provide the groundwork of experience to advocate for better policies from governments and the tourism industry? Education for prevention is a dimension that needs real support.

Climate change, global warming and tourism. As the number of leisure travellers grows, the issue of carbon emissions through air travel is a significant one. We have also to consider the effects of vast numbers of travellers visiting and damaging fragile environments. These are major issues affecting the life of the planet, especially the Third World, yet generally the response from communities and tourism networks in the developing world has been limited. YMCA can assist by designing and implementing genuine eco-tourism projects that respect the environment and contributes to sustainability.

Peace, conflict and tourism Tourism can exercise its potential in providing the groundwork for peace and peace building by ensuring that tourists and other travellers are exposed to the culture, history, spirituality and of course the enjoyable moments during the visit. If a particular area is suffering from political and other conflict, YMCA through its projects and work can aid the process of understanding.

Concluding thoughts

As an expression of its self-understanding to be a force for change, YMCA can offer its numerous visitors, participants in meetings and other travellers a taste and an experience of Alternative Tourism. Within the structure of the YMCA, each Y can establish a programme of Alternative Tourism options for the visitor to choose from and participate in.

Given the position enjoyed by the YMCA at the local, national and regional levels, it is well placed with the opportunities and linkages to contribute to public debate and experience regarding a number of concerns that touch people and communities. It can use its good offices to influence and collaborate with governments, the tourism industry and other stakeholders in the direction of better, healthier, just and fair tourism. Given the links with the community, it can assist as a watchdog on tourism practices that are not right. Reflecting on its experience, it can develop guidelines on good alternative tourism for itself and share them with other relevant leaders in the community and beyond.

A Global Alternative Tourism Network based on such efforts and nourished by the sharing of varied experience from the ground will, as I said earlier, render YMCA a recognised player vis-à-vis tourism, a major enterprise of our times. This can only be of benefit to both the YMCA visitor and traveller, and the community. In this sense, the YMCA will be seen to be engaged in ‘solidarity tourism’.

And this would be in line with the mission imperatives expressed in Challenge 21. Like the World Council of Churches, and other ecumenical entities including ECOT, the theoretical and theological starting point of YMCA’s ethos and self understanding is encapsulated in the words from the Gospel according St John: ‘that they may be one’ (John 17:21). These words are an invitation to unity and togetherness which, in a world that is in conflict and division, calls for ‘a fundamental challenge to the structural causes of present day realities’ (Tokyo Statement on Global Citizenship).

In responding to our world, the YMCA is not only gifted and resourced with the strength of its theological and missional objectives.

The YMCA is also blessed with its history – an involvement with hospitality and related services for over more than a century and half! The YMCA has the standing, the people, the links, and the networks to make a difference with regard to the tourism sector and become an instrument of service.

I hope this meeting will throw much light, offer many insights and suggest ways forward as YMCA crafts a Global Alternative Tourism Network.