

The Responsible Future We Want: Post-Rio+20 Summit

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In this issue of the editorial I would like to make an anecdote of the much hyped (and failed) Earth Summit (also known as Rio+20 Summit) that concluded in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil recently.

With more than 190 heads of government attending, this was indeed the ultimate event to determine the future and survival of our planet. And what did we get out of this event? A high series of "R" words document called, "The Future We Want" – Recognize (the word appeared 148 times in this 253 paragraphs of affirmations and entreaties), Reaffirm (59 times), Resolve (16 times) and Renew (10 times). The document is just full of "Rhetoric"!

Indeed the *United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development* also known as the Rio Earth Summit, was doomed to fail long before all the world leaders gathered and restated to save planet Earth. Europe is in deep economic crisis, USA, who is not a signatory of the Kyoto Protocol (or other such agreements) is in election fever, China (the largest greenhouse gas emitter) is still hiding behind the garb of "we are developing nation and are victims of policies of developed country" rhetoric, and India is still sticking on to "common but differentiated responsibility" clause of Rio 1992, whereby developed countries to cut back on emissions and transfer funds/technology to developing countries to check the problem. On the whole, leaders of all (most) are embroiled in their own domestic issues and are fighting for their own political survival. What about the survival of the planet.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stressed that, "At Rio, we must begin to create a new model for a 21st century economy that rejects the myth that there must be a zero sum trade-off between growth and the environment". In reality, is this conceivable?

Before the Rio Summit commenced, the list of priorities for the ailing planet was determined for debate. Looking at the list, can the growth and the environment co-exist? The top 10 issues that were in the priority list included: (1) Deforestation; (2) Overpopulation; (3) Endangered Species; (4) Climate Change; (5) World Hunger; (6) Water Scarcity; (7) Global Poverty; (8) Renewable Energy; (9) Oceans; and (10) Air Pollution.

From this priority list, it is obvious that tourism has a responsible role to play in almost all the issues listed. Tourism can contribute to the three pillars of sustainability (economics, social and environment). Analysing the ten issues, tourism is one of the biggest industry that provides employment and supports the livelihoods of millions, particularly women and young people. This is central to the three pillars of sustainability, underlining tourism's multiplier effect as for every job created in tourism, many more jobs are created in other sectors.

Tourism's contribution to the sustainable economic growth and development can be further advanced via United Nations (UN). The UN machineries can be used to ensure an integrated and more effective international cooperation for tourism. This will further accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

At the Rio+20 Summit, delegates deliberated the important role of sustainable tourism in creating decent employment in the industry, stimulating trade and linkages, and thus eradicating poverty. Using tourism as well, linkages between local communities and tourism

attractions can be further enhanced. Hence, tourism can play a more effective tool in the fight against poverty and to advance awareness-raising among tourists of their obligation and responsibility to respect and protect the environment considering that it is tourism's prime interest and responsibility to protect natural resources. Thus, there is clear potential for igniting the concept of "Green Economy" as its assets are the ones we (tourism industry) need to preserve, enhance and rely on.

Hence, "Green Economy" is certainly the current buzz word. The concept has been put forward to bring growth and development in a sustainable manner, bringing social equity and well-being without affecting the balance in the environment and ecology. But is this going to be another pipe dream if maximising profits at the cost of anything seem to be the agenda for all private corporates in the tourism industry. Can the Heads of the Government play a more effective role to abate the problem we are all facing as inhabitants of this planet and concurrently regulate the industry towards sustainability?

In addition to all that, tourism is also interlinked with the seven key themes discussed at the Rio+20 Summit - jobs, energy, cities, food, water, oceans and disasters - and can be a factor of development for developing and developed countries alike. These are key themes that will determine the quality and sustainability of the tourist destinations.

Nonetheless, what is more disturbing aspect of all these mega Summit is the derailment of any commitments made by the developed countries. Shifting the blame to the developing countries without actually looking at the per capita impact seems the easy way out for this rich developed nations while boosting the growth of their economies at the cost of nature and its resources.

Comparing the countries with high CO₂ emission and high CO₂ emission per capita, it is obvious that countries like USA, Russia, Japan, Germany, Canada and UK are creating more damage to the environment, than countries like China, India and Brazil. That explains why the latter countries protested for being unfairly treated by the more developed countries in all the recent environmental summits.

In conclusion, tackling environmental issues globally seem impossible (at least for now). So, do we just ignore those facts that we may be reaching the tipping point? We should at least use our resources intelligently by taking the attention and money that goes to fight climate change (which seem too macro and unconceivable) and instead put it towards micro issues like environmental threats that are killing people

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right now - namely, the lack of clean water and sanitation, as well as ordinary air pollution. As a globalised industry that cuts across many of the environmental issues, tourism can make a difference. We need to educate all stakeholders - tourist, local community, tourism/hospitality

operators, government, non-governmental organisations - from all ages on their role (no matter how minor it may seem) to protect the environment and create a responsible future that we want.