



มูลนิธิเอกสัมพันธเพื่อการท่องเที่ยวที่ยั่งยืน

## **Ecumenical Coalition On Tourism [ECOT]**

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### **Shillong Declaration on Development and Tourism**

addressed to the church and wider community

*When the mountain disappears, what will be our identity?*

**The Shillong declaration is issued by the participants of the joint consultation on "The North East Indian Churches' response to development and tourism" organized by the Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism, (ECOT), National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), Presbyterian Church of India (PCI), and the Martin Lutheran Christian University (MLCU) on 29-31 March, 2011 at the PCI Centre, Shillong, Meghalaya, India.**

Tourism is one of the four largest industries in the world, alongside oil and fuels, arms and armaments, and pharmaceuticals. It is growing at a fast rate, and according to estimates, its outlays amount to some ten percent of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

In India, tourism is considered to be the largest service industry. It is estimated that, annually, more than five million tourists arrive in the country. The number of domestic tourist arrivals is estimated to be in the region of some 600 million.

North East India with its rich flora and fauna, exotic cultural and ethnic mosaic, and the fresh and unexplored ecosystems holds immense attraction for the tourists whose numbers will increase.

The income generated from tourism is perceived as a panacea for the problems of the poor countries in the world. This perception is based on an assumed understanding that the profits from tourism industry will trickle down and benefit the poor communities.

But experience points to tourism being a major factor in the impoverishment of communities, as are war, ethnic conflict, corruption, inequitable distribution of wealth and resources, trade injustice, lack of infrastructure, lack of educational opportunities and so on.

The phenomenal growth in tourism always comes with huge social, economic and environmental costs.

The tourism industry is known to offer what has become known as "Sun, sand and sex tourism". It thrives by marketing nature-- the sun, sea, mountains, rivers, landscapes -- in a way that is an affront to God's creation.

Among the many dimensions of modern mass tourism that disadvantage the poor the world over are:

- The diversion of essential people's resources such as land, water, electricity and other infrastructure to entertain tourists and support hotels, resorts, golf courses, amusement parks and so on;
- The social costs through the abuse of women and children, and their trafficking;
- The costs entailed in the commercialization, commodification, and denigration of indigenous and local culture, and the resultant threat to cultural identity;
- The loss of revenue to host countries and communities 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 working conditions;
- The social and economic impact of displacement of people and communities caused by tourism development;
- Ecological imbalance and loss incurred in developing countries in the course of sustaining inappropriate tourism enterprises;
- The climate change implications through air travel;
- The cost to host communities through health hazards, arising from tourist activity involving HIV/AIDS, drugs and narcotics, among others;
- The human rights violations that occur in the name of tourism;

The media do not seem to take much notice of the negative impact of mass tourism promoted by the government and the market, whose sole objective is making profit.

### **Questioning the development model**

We, the participants of the Shillong consultation, demand that the development model considered and implemented in North East India, promising peace and prosperity for all, should be revisited by the churches, relevant communities, civil society organizations and the relevant governments.

There is a dominant view that tourism can 'boost' development in the society. In a world driven by neo-liberal economic philosophy, tourism is seen as a major player for economic growth. This is not the kind of tourism that we envisage for a region like the North East India. What we want to promote is a kind of tourism that is fair, sustainable, and community-based.

We believe that the development – of which tourism is seen as an integral part – that is being imposed on the people of this region will undermine the traditional productive and natural systems, and increase the gulf between the rich and the poor. It is often associated with much displacement and uprooting of people and terrain, prompting a participant in the light of his experience to exclaim: "*When the mountain disappears, what will be our identity?*"

As responsible people grounded in the call of the gospel and its values, we reject the kind of development that is being touted as good for the people of this region.

Many churches in the region seem to follow the various forms of prosperity theologies which promote the belief that money is the indicator of prosperity, and God is blessing them with such prosperity.

We call the churches in the region, which has a Christian population of some 4 million, to address in response of tourism their theology of development and the Christian basis for it. Tourism growth in North East India is in its early stages, and hence there is a God-given opportunity to look ahead and consider the kind of tourism that will come to the region if unchecked.

We express our concern over the possible exploitation and commodification of indigenous people and their culture arising out of the introduction of the so called development and mass tourism enterprises.

We urge the churches to critique responsibly the development and tourism policies and programs of the government and the market in the region, and to initiate interfaith responses to the relevant issues.

We also urge the churches to make their members realize that critiquing and campaigning on issues like development and tourism is part of their Christian duty and mission and not to be treated simply as worldly matters.

We recognize that tourism leads to environmental problems especially in places where masses of people descend and use and exploit the fragile ecosystems.

We express our concern over the potential of tourism to destroy the traditional and cultural values of local communities, and the exploitation of the local people, including women and children.

We acknowledge that responsible and community based tourism will help ensure that the local environment, culture, values, ethos and heritage are not adversely affected, and the local communities, invariably poor, are economically benefitted.

We call upon the churches in the region and outside, human rights organizations, and the civil society movements to work for a tourism model which is based on ethics, human rights, community and sustainability.

We urge the print and electronic media to disseminate tourism-related stories which are alternative viewpoints to mainstream tourism practices, because media have a social responsibility to make people aware of the livelihood of travel destinations and the local populations.

## Action plans

1. The National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) to organize a similar consultation for personnel working in the media
2. The Presbyterian Church in India (PCI) to disseminate the outcome of the consultation among its eight synods in the region, and help them organize at least two consultations in each synod within a year.
3. The PCI to take the lead in motivating the church and wider community to debate the issues arising with the assistance of relevant denominational and ecumenical bodies including the NEI Council of Churches.

4. The PCI women's fellowship to conscientize its members and empower them to become sensitive to the issues related to development and tourism.
5. The PCI Youth Fellowship to pick up the concerns emerging out of the consultation, and include them in their International Year of the Youth activities.
6. To develop a contextual "theology of development," and urge the Senate of Serampore College to create a curriculum on just tourism.
7. To use terms like "Solidarity visits," "living epistles," or "learning pilgrimages" in the church and ecumenical deliberations, so that it will give a different perspective and meaning to tourism.
8. The NCCI to disseminate the outcome of the consultation among the member churches, councils, related bodies, organizations and media.

**For further information:**

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