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“ACEH RECONSTRUCTION POST TSUNAMI IN TOURISM REDEVELOPMENT: Opportunities, Efforts & Challenges towards Improving Aceh”

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In mere moments, natural disasters have the power to devastatingly destroy the livelihood, human communities and human cultures built over the generations. The Indian Ocean Disaster of December 26th, 2004, for an example, a powerful earthquake measuring 9.2 on the Richter scale triggered a massive Tsunami disaster, destroying the shores of several countries encompassing Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and other countries along the Asian Pacific rim.

The coastal areas of Aceh, one of Indonesia’s north-westernmost provinces, was also ravaged by the Tsunami. As a result, loss of life and destruction were unavoidable. The Aceh economy with its population of approximately 4.1 million in 2003 was badly affected with a large-scale devastation of physical, human resources and livelihoods.

As the devastation was massive, the reconstruction efforts were mainly aimed at providing humanitarian aid, rebuilding the shattered economy and creating a politically stable environment. In the face of the emergency, Aceh post disaster recovery was not all about stones, cement and other physical issues, but also encompassed other non-physical issues of impacted communities, because they seriously experienced grievous feelings, *such as hopelessness, loss, pressure, fear, anger, sadness, pain, and guilt*.

The feelings eventually resulted in long deep internal traumas that need to be humanly adopted and accommodated in order to help them move forwards and regain their life spirit, not only to sustain and live better economically and socio-culturally, but also to mitigate their life with respect to future unforeseen disaster threats (Rahmadhani, 2010).

Unfortunately, at the same time, Aceh experienced a long serious armed political conflict between the Free Aceh Movement and the Government of Indonesia that lasted a long time and produced a great number of casualties

JITR (Japan Institute of Tourism Research) – Tohoku on both sides since 1976. The situation also worsened and increased pain and trauma for the people living within this period.

After years of successful reconstruction work, which were humanly supported by donor countries, the people of Aceh managed to overcome the catastrophes and continued to recover and rebuild their cities and life in many aspects of their lives.

To our surprise, the catastrophes amidst the difficulties also inspired the central and local government in collaboration with NGOs, communities, and with the support and assistance of donor countries, to rebuild Aceh through tourism, highlighting the local potentials, not only Aceh’s scenic nature and culture, but also Aceh’s other important Tsunami-related sites or remains including *Tsunami Museum, Tsunami monuments, Tsunami memorial parks, Stranded Ship, A Boat Atop the House, Aceh Thanks to the World Park and many others* that were worth promoting for tourists.

Rebuilding Tsunami-related sites in Aceh by engaging all stakeholders was not only aimed to improve the locals’ livelihoods and to remind future generations of the worst impacts of the past tragedy, but also to enhance people’s awareness of disaster risk reduction for future disaster threats.

Nevertheless, reconstructing Aceh post Tsunami through tourism redevelopment was not without any significant challenges. A number of opportunities, efforts and challenges were faced in the efforts to rebuild Aceh better through tourism development in sustainable, inclusive and systematic ways.

a. Opportunities

Rahmadhani, an Acehnese who studied tourism management at postgraduate school in Melbourne, Australia and worked as the director of Aceh Tsunami Museum proposed and introduced ‘Tsunami tourism’ for the first time when he spoke at an international symposium in Osaka Prefecture organized by the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan in 2012. He said in the symposium that the best way to save lives in a Tsunami is not by building sea walks, but by showing residents what happens. It will give knowledge to them, so they can save their lives if another Tsunami comes to their area in the future.

Since then, the local government with various support from related stakeholders in collaboration with local tourism entrepreneurs keenly continued to promote Aceh as a Tsunami tourism destination. More tourists come to Aceh to see the aftermath of the Tsunami firsthand than to explore Aceh’s culture and nature. The Tsunami-related sites have turned into popular tourist attractions.

The locals after participating in many socializations, seminars, FGD, capacity building programs on tourism run by the local government and NGOs, welcome Aceh as a designated Tsunami tourism destination aiming at creating job opportunities for the locals, reminding subsequent generations of the worse impacts of the tragedy and also enhancing people’s awareness of disaster risk reduction towards future disaster risks (DRR). Maintaining and promoting post disaster heritage sites, like Tsunami-related sites for example, have so far become a new significant new niche market for the

tourist destination.

In addition, such tourism promotion has also become an effective medium for the people of Aceh to thank the global community and leaders for their continued solidarity to rebuild Aceh better, to convey the strength, resilience and patience of the Aceh people during the tragedy and to build social togetherness among us.

By promoting this type of tourism, the local government and the locals will hopefully seize the opportunity to develop the local economy and get benefits as well as generate their incomes participating in the tourism of their respective areas.

b. Efforts

Although the disaster has been considered catastrophic and massive, it eventually proved to be a *“blessing in disguise”*, which transformed the tragedy into an opportunity for the people of Aceh to lead a better life in promoting Tsunami or “memory tourism”. Some efforts towards the reconstruction were made in order that Tsunami tourism can successfully be conducted and bring about positive impacts for the locals economically, socio-culturally and environmentally.

As many countries might have experienced tragic wars or devastating disasters in the past, which eventually resulted in massive loss and devastation, they have left us not only scars and traumatic feelings, but also a number of diverse devastating remains or remnants, including heartbreaking stories for its people as living memories to remember. They may include *the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake Disaster, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, the Great East Japan Earthquake Disaster, Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster in Japan, Auschwitz Birkenau in Poland, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia, Robben Island Prison Museum in South Africa* and many more.

The past Indian Ocean Tsunami also left the people of Aceh not only scars and trauma, but also tangible and intangible Tsunami remnants that eventually become Aceh’s Tsunami heritage that are worth safeguarding for future Tsunami tourism, disaster education and other scientific purposes. The tangible heritage includes *Stranded Ship, A Boat Atop the House, the Grand Mosque of Baiturrahim, Thank World Park, Aceh Tsunami Museum, Mass Graveyards, Inundation monuments and many more*. Meanwhile, the intangible heritage includes Tsunami Survivors’ story-tellings, Smong or indigenous knowledge on disaster risk reduction, songs, poems, images, stories and annual Tsunami commemoration.

The Aceh Tsunami Museum, for example, has so far been a center for mitigation, recreation and evacuation. As a symbol of strength, patience and resilience of the people of Aceh in the past catastrophic disaster, the museum has served not only as a 2004 symbolic reminder, a civic pride of past living memories, but also as a fundamental medium for education and reconstruction in preserving and disseminating the living stories and lessons learnt as TeLL-Net (*Transferring live lessons network*) from past disaster experiences by always engaging the survivors and visitors <http://www.tell-net.jp/>

JITR (Japan Institute of Tourism Research) – Tohoku Past Tsunami remnants have become important symbolic reminders of the 2004 Tsunami disaster that need to be listed and safeguarded from future loss, damage and vandalism. They will be an important legacy for future modern communities to learn, unlearn and relearn past human tragedies that created massive loss and devastation.

c. Challenges

As mentioned above that promoting Aceh as a Tsunami tourism destination or “memory tourism” after the human tragedy is not without any challenges, a number of challenges were also faced due to the serious disaster impression, and the emotion and psychology of people to the past catastrophic events.

As the Acehnese people just experienced grievous feelings in the aftermath of the disaster, it was impossible to discuss or debate on tourism issues or promote Aceh as a disaster-based tourism destination. Also, it took some time to plan and rearrange those catastrophic sites as sustainable tourism attractions.

Pros and cons arose when the concept of Tsunami tourism was publicly introduced. Many criticized that disaster-based tourism was an exploitation of human misery or a practice that demeans and humiliates local residents, especially the survivors. Meanwhile, others also argued that such tourism to devastated areas can offer a boost to the local livelihood and raise awareness of the incident.

In short, by ensuring all reconstruction efforts were running successfully in terms of humanitarian aids, economy and politics and accommodating the feelings of the local people, the “memory tourism” has now become popular in Aceh, and the Aceh Tsunami Museum is an iconic reminder of past Tsunami that will generate incomes for tourism industry participants, surprisingly many of whom are Tsunami survivors.

To sum up, the past devastating disaster events should not remain as they were. They should be important lessons for everyone to learn from. Visiting the post disaster sites associated with “dark tourism” will also be of importance for tourists to reflect upon and learn not only about the history and the dark side of human beings living within the disaster periods, but also to recall and enhance individuals’ resilience from future disaster threats.

The disaster eventually turned from a heartbreaking tragedy into a heartwarming opportunity as a *“blessing in disguise”* for the people of Aceh helping them to lead a better life in peace by doing things like promoting Tsunami tourism or “memory” tourism. This type of tourism will be a medium to attract tourists and will finally impact on creating job opportunities for the locals, reminding subsequent generations of the worst impacts of the tragedy and enhancing people’s awareness of disaster risk reduction. Amazingly, the tragedy also paved a way to end the prolonged political conflict between the parties that has eventually become an important beginning to historically mark Aceh’s reconstruction process with the popular taglines “No peace without reconstruction and no reconstruction without peace” and “Let’s build Aceh back better”.

*昨年10月17日の遠隔方式研究会講演の要約