

Child Welfare and Tourism

When we rejoice with the dawn of peace and the potential increase of tourism in Sri Lanka, we are bound to see an exponential increase in tourism in the next few years. We need to take into account not only the end of the war, but also the visible improvements in the economy, including increasing and likely foreign investments. Sri Lanka's potential to develop the tourist industry is not only related to the beauty of the country and the wonderful beaches, but also the ancient history and archaeological sites, wild life, hand crafts and the multi-cultural attractions, including dance and music. In short, the scope is enormous with unprecedented potential contributions to the economy.

Sri Lanka has been well-known as a tourist destination for about four decades. Initial unrestricted inflow of tourists in the seventies and the early eighties and cheap accommodation as well as low priced flights led to the influx of undesirable tourists including 'Hippies', drug addicts, 'sex tourists' and paedophiles (those seeking sex with children). Very soon, Sri Lanka became a "paradise" for paedophiles, especially on the Southern Coast with beautiful beaches and new hotel complexes that came up with the flourishing trade. Although a majority of the tourists would not frequent the country for paedophilia, a certain amount would do so. It is important to realise that even if a small number of undesirable tourists came into the country, the damage caused to society may be significant. Those identified previously were from Europe, mainly from Germany, Switzerland, the UK, and Scandinavian countries, Belgium, France and Holland. A few

have been identified from Australia and the USA. During the Seventies and the early eighties, the use of children was quite open on the beaches and hotels. Subsequently, following new laws, especially the 1995 penal code amendment and protests by activists as well as the establishment of the National Child Protection Authority in 1999, a statutory body, reduced the incidence significantly, but swept some of these activities to a 'covert' state. However, many people ranging from guest house owners, traffickers, parents, three wheeler drivers to officials were benefiting in many ways, and therefore, sustained the operations covertly and continue to do so even today.

With the advent of the internet and popularisation of it resulted in the sale of children, including pornography on the net. Easy access to internet, even not so developed in tourist areas, but, has become a menace. The internet may have sites such as 'sex teens Sri Lanka', 'gay teens Sri Lanka'. When teenagers type key words such as teens + sex or Gay + teens, they end up in sites like these and may be tempted to experiment by replying these mails. The promises by the paedophile on the other side may be tempting for the child or teen to go on with the dialogue. The paedophile at the other end may indicate that he too is a teen, while he may be a 50-year old man. Sometimes, they may write as women just seeking companionship and may not even talk about sex. The man on the other side may promise expensive gifts, trips and other benefits. Sometimes, the parents themselves may be fooled, especially when the person promises to support foreign education for children which parents cannot afford to, and this

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tourist may even take the parents along on trips, but abuse the child without their knowledge. Even outside the internet spectrum, paedophiles may build and renovate houses and is another ploy by him, since he would stay in the house with the family and continue to abuse the child with or without the knowledge of parents. Language is fortunately a limiting factor in the communication process, although middlemen, often traffickers, may get involved.

Unfortunately, the December 2004 Tsunami too struck these poverty-stricken areas, previously frequented by sex tourists, making the children more vulnerable. However, the National Child Protection Authority acted swiftly to prevent the objectives of some of these visitors.

There are undoubtedly many benefits of tourism to children, especially, by improving the economy of the community, individuals and families. Through improved economy, their standards of living and hygienic conditions would improve. The contribution to their education and health would be enormous. However, in the rush for 'gold' we cannot forget our precious and innocent children, especially the poor children in the surrounding communities such as fishing villages.

In any country, another industry that goes hand in hand with tourism is the sex industry. Although a country may be able to

minimise this aspect, it is almost impossible to eliminate it, since sex is one aspect of 'enjoyment' expected by tourists. It is related to night clubs, night entertainment, such as strip tease, ending in prostitution. This would mostly affect the poorer villagers in the surrounding areas or far away rural places from where women may be trafficked on false pretence of employment, money and a better life. It may not be limited to women, but also to young men and adolescents for homosexual activity or male prostitution. However, unscrupulous adults would not stop at selling children for their monetary gain. This would also include trafficking of children and adolescents to the tourist areas into small guest houses and brothels.

When there is a demand from the tourists for sex, the supply line will get activated. Unlike in places like the Maldives, where the island resorts are isolated from the community, we have a disadvantage of being able to mingle with the tourists. There may be advantages, since the tourists will be able to understand the culture, religious practices and visit other places independently, while the locals may be also able to sell their wares to the tourists directly benefiting both parties. The tourists also will have another advantage of buying things, such as, Coke, fruits, etc. from shops, thus avoiding higher hotel rates. This process of mingling also opens another opportunity of being able to buy sex in the 'open market' either through touts or direct access. It would be the tout who will promise safety from law, and be able to manipulate the system through bribes and other incentives. In this market of 'flesh' trade, the profits are enormous without too much of investment and the risk is worth if the implementation of the law and surveillance is in question.

However, this activity is unlikely to happen in places that are isolated such as in island resorts in the Maldives.

Another evil facet of tourism is the trade and use of narcotics. Again the demand would pull the drugs into the area and the people waiting to profit would get into the orbit. Here too, adolescents are mostly at risk, partly because of poverty, little scope for education, ignorance and the idealistic mind wanting to experiment.

The culture of some of these tourists encompass fun, sex and drugs, and the guides, often adolescents and sometimes children, are obliged to partake in these activities, and may be deprived of monetary benefits if they do not accommodate. The long-term effects are enormous to the individual as well as the community, unless precautionary steps are taken.

When this malicious web of fun, sex and drugs is spun another 'Tarantula' steps into spread sexually-transmitted diseases, including the potentially fatal HIV(Human Immunodeficiency Virus)/AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome). We have to be conscious of the health hazards that come with the great

success of tourism and the ultimate negative results, especially on society, should not negate the positive aspects of tourism.

One of the main problems that lead to exploitation of children is the abject poverty prevalent in the areas. Figure 1 summarises the "push" and "pull" factors that contribute to the problem.

Why is that children or adolescents should not take part in sexual activity? The definition of sexual abuse makes it clear. Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not

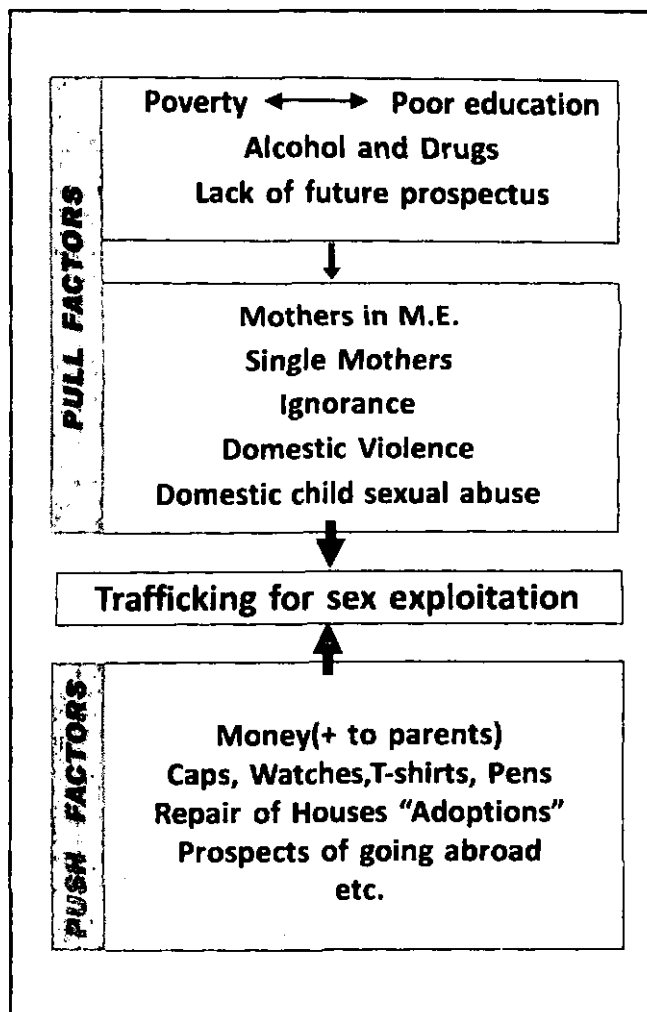


Figure 1: Object poverty in the surrounding fishing community villages and the vulnerable children with little education and not prospects for a future or jobs who are subjected to abuse, exploitation and trafficking

developmentally prepared and cannot give consent. It includes:

- The exploitative use of a child in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices.
- The exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials.

Sri Lanka is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and is obliged internationally to safeguard the rights of the child. Under the convention, there are some articles related to tourism, sex trade and child rights, the State has an obligation to protect children from the following:

Article 33 Drug abuse

Article 34 Sexual exploitation

Article 35 Sale, trafficking and abduction of children

Denial: When incidents of child abuse stigmatise our society, neither the society nor the individuals would like to belong to that society, and it would be not surprising for them to reject reality. It is also easy to justify this denial because of the hidden nature of abuse. At the same time, this denial, which is also partly responsible for stigma, becomes an important factor that makes the issue a hidden phenomenon. There have been many justifications in society, especially concerning abuse of male children such as: "Ships do not leave tracks on water" in relation to virginity while they also say "Boys do not get pregnant".

What are the bad effects of sexual abuse?

The major effect would be psychological, with loss of self-esteem (How you value yourself) that would affect their education with sudden deterioration of school work, and interactions with family members and friends. They may run

away from home or even attempt suicide. They also will have a tendency to get abused more and more without resistance, ultimately leading to prostitution (female or male). They are also likely to be attracted to drugs, tobacco and alcohol as well as risk-taking behaviour. It also causes the victim to become an abuser later on in life.

The issue of the risk of sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs), including gonorrhoea, syphilis and HIV/AIDS, are huge in this segment of society. Juvenile delinquency (now referred to as children in conflict with the law) and violence are other detrimental effects on society.

Considering the malicious effects on individuals and society, especially the long-term effects, one should be extremely concerned in preventing childhood sexual abuse and exploitation. Apart from creating awareness at different levels, it is essential to implement the legal process in making it a deterrent to the offenders. The present laws in the country are more than adequate if the law is implemented properly to prevent paedophiles.

How can we make use of the economic benefits of tourism while safeguarding our children?

Accountability to the legal system is extremely important with proper implementation of the law making both the perpetrator and the legal officers are accountable. Extra territorial prosecutions in most Western countries are possible and awareness as well as sensitivity and cooperation of the foreign services and the Attorney General's Departments on both sides are extremely important.

Internet surveillance systems should be implemented with the

police and active physical surveillance of the tourist areas as opposed to passive surveillance (Take action only when a complaint is made) is essential. The present law in Sri Lanka makes it possible to prosecute a violator for soliciting.

The most important would be education of the population of the long- and short-term evil effects of child abuse, especially sexual abuse. This can be done at national level using the mass media and organisations, such as, the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), the UN bodies like UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), WHO (World Health Organisation) and UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) as well as local and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). However, grass roots-level awareness building is much more effective using NGOs and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs). School child Protection Committees can be used to impart this knowledge very effectively.

We have used CBOs funded by international NGOs by having drop in centres for children that would provide protection to them and facilitate knowledge and skills building to protect themselves. These are not residential institutions, but centres that would provide the facilities to the children to learn, enjoy and develop skills. Summary of some of the activities is described below:

(i) Use the centres as a focal point for psycho-social rehabilitation, using art therapy, music/drama, group therapy, etc. as a medium to address trauma of the traumatic situations faced in life either before or after the Tsunami. Other resource persons would conduct the training.

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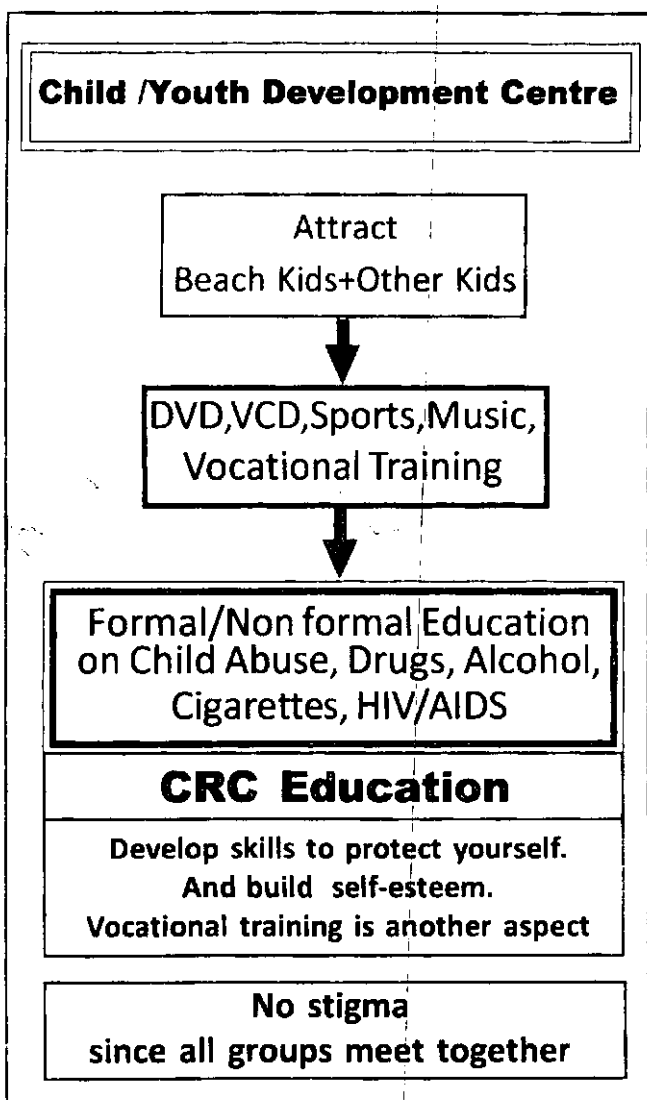


Figure 2: Concept of Child Protection

(ii) Educate vulnerable children and youth in high-risk areas on the following subjects: Sex education, sexual abuse and exploitation, HIV/AIDS and other STDs, drugs, alcohol and tobacco use.

(iii) Provide facilities to youth and children so that they have access to educational material and entertainment. The facilities provided are instrumental in keeping the children/youth away from the risks of the environment which they live in.

(iv) Provide resources for entertainment, play and leisure for children as a child right and also attract these children and youth through these

resources for formal, non-formal, sex and health education.

(v) Provide facilities for relevant vocational training educate and provide incentives for saving introduce concepts of investment and entrepreneurship skills.

(vi) Address specific issues concerning individual children who have been abused or who are vulnerable to abuse, especially in relation to sexual exploitation both by locals and tourists and trafficking of children for exploitation, especially sexual.

The above objectives contribute to the goal of empowering children/youth to deal with situations, which are a threat to their well-being. Figure 2 shows this diagrammatically.

These programs could be started as Cooperate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects sponsored by the companies that benefit from tourism, such as, tour companies and Hotels. It is important that the project is monitored by knowledgeable persons. The companies should not take undue advantage of this project and tourist visitation should not be allowed, since it may lead to other issues. Previously, we have seen officials being part of an abusive process when tourists were allowed inside orphanages.

Footnote:

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Definitions of some Selected Categories of Tourism

International Tourism: Temporary movement of people from the resident country to another country for recreation, health, business or any other reason.

Domestic Tourism: Travelling within own country, i.e., travelling from one location to another within own country.

Sustainable Tourism: Tourism that ensures development of the tourism industry with minimum/no adverse impacts on the environment and local culture.

Cultural Tourism: Tourism concerned with the culture of a country or a region, specifically the lifestyle of the people in those geographical areas, the history of those people, their art, architecture, religion(s), and other elements.

Wildlife Tourism: Travelling to watch wild animals in their natural habitats.

Medical Tourism (health tourism): Travelling across international borders to obtain healthcare.

Sport Tourism: Travelling for either viewing or participating in a sporting event.

Religious Tourism (faith tourism): Travelling people of faith individually or in groups for pilgrimage, missionary, or leisure (fellowship) purposes.

War Tourism: Recreational travelling to war zones for purposes of sightseeing and superficial voyeurism.

Sex Tourism: Travelling primarily for the purpose of effecting a commercial sexual relationship by the tourist with residents at the destination.

Drug Tourism: Travelling for the purpose of obtaining or using drugs for personal use that are unavailable or illegal in one's home jurisdiction. Compiled with information from *wikipedia.org*.

Eco Tourism: Responsible travelling to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people. Compiled with information from *ecotourism.org*.

Education Tourism or Edu-tourism: Travelling to a location as a group with the primary purpose of engaging in a learning experience directly related to the location. Compiled with information from *education-tourism-paul*.