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Sustainable Community Development or Voluntourism: Sustainable Housing in Rural Maharashtra

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Abstract: Volunteer tourism ('voluntourism') packages development and poverty as culturally exotic and ethical experiences for tourists from industrialized countries. Among the various sectors promoting voluntourism, university sector short term study abroad tours network voluntourism agencies, local actors (e.g., NGOs), universities, and government funding to offer students 'life changing' community sustainable development experiences. Alongside the purported benefits for all stakeholders, recent criticism points to the commodification of development and poverty through such tours and multiple pernicious effects of such travel, especially the failure to deliver community impact. Given the significant financial, political, and other interests involved, monitoring and evaluating such initiatives against transparent independent sustainability principles has proved complicated. Case studies employing ethical covert research, fieldwork, and secondary data analysis offer one approach. This case study of a purported sustainable housing project in rural Maharashtra, involving a bilateral university-government-local NGO voluntourism ecosystem lead by an Australian Green NGO (AGC) analyses the multiple gaps between participatory community sustainable development and voluntourism. This case study employs content analysis of project reports, visual data from a field visit, recent village documentary analysis, anonymized email communication, and secondary analysis of contextual data to evaluate the claims of participatory sustainable development and project outcomes of a bilateral NGO voluntourism housing project. The study findings signal lack of financial transparency, incompetent assessment of material needs, limited local participation and control, and failure to deliver on objectives. The conclusion recommends that socially responsible short-term international exchanges should be carefully monitored and exchanges should prefer knowledge exchange.

Keywords: volunteer tourism; sustainable development; participation; commodification

1. Introduction: Voluntourism for SD17

In the current context of the SDG agenda toward 2030, SDG17 in particular highlights the importance of international collaboration towards reducing poverty and increasing well-being. Among the many global mechanisms to achieve this volunteer tourism or 'travelling for a cause' (Luh Sin et al. 2015) is viewed as one way of achieving this goal (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)). Among the different voluntourism offerings, those that promote sustainability and short-term exchanges are popular in the university sector.

2. Voluntourism: Benefits and Challenges

In addition to promoting the SDGs, volunteer tourism experiences are touted to lead to personal transformation (Pan 2017), de-commodify tourism (Coren and Gray 2012), promote poverty reduction (Brown et al. 2007), and social activism (McGehee and Santos 2005). To achieve these laudable objectives

such initiatives require transparent objectives and finances, especially where mediating agencies, e.g., NGOs, speak for rural communities.

Despite enthusiasm for such projects, the motives and outcomes of volunteer tourists taking part in community development projects has recently come in for criticism as 'soft global citizenship' (Bone and Bone 2018), especially in cases where volunteers help in purported sustainable community projects. In a case study of sustainable conservation projects in Zimbabwe and India, Young et al. (2001) found that the need for local ownership, inclusion and development is largely bypassed in foreign controlled NGO lead development projects. The authors note that the financial diversion of funds away from those best able to decide, e.g., local tribals, leads to rhetorical rather than real development.

Where knowledge, resource, and skills exchange is important[1], Devereux (2008) for example questions the long-term effects of such exchanges on changing mutual perceptions about what the South has to teach the North. Others point to the reinforcing of mutual North–South stereotypes through the discourses of helping as a common feature of such programs (Park 2018).

Volunteer tourism globally succeeds inter alia through commodifying development as a package of marketable goods and services (Coren and Gray 2012). The rhetoric of such programs mixes a discourse of sustainable development with life and cultural experience, and revenue for the facilitating organisations (Tomazos and Cooper 2012). Values and objectives may or may not be shared, volunteer capabilities may be minimal, and impacts may be assumed rather than researched (Coren and Gray 2012). This leads some to conclude that "volunteer tourism is less pursuit of a neoliberal development agenda but more a form of moral consumption that has taken the place of macro political outlooks that favour economic growth and social transformation of the global South" (Coren and Gray 2012).

Freidus (2017) in a recent ethnographic study of orphanage volunteerism in Malawi observed misleading concepts of poverty and socio-cultural factors influencing this being perpetuated by young volunteer tourists. The study in particular saw American volunteers believing that the individualist logic of success in their own countries could be replicated in Malawi. The study, like others, points to the need for a real critical engagement by students with local realities and less naïve beliefs in the efficacy of short-term activist visits.

3. University Based Voluntourism

Among voluntourism projects are community development projects that may be embedded in university-based study abroad programs, and a complex ecosystem of funding and facilitating organizations (Sachau et al. 2010). In Australia self-funded, university funded, and national DFAT administered programs, e.g., NCP, package development experiences for students (https://dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan/pages/new-colombo-plan.aspx). Such programs often have an in-country NGO or similar linked to an Australian voluntourism organisation facilitating programs (Melles 2015); it is this particular constellation that is explored in this paper.

Palacios (2010) investigated short-term voluntourism placements for Australian university students. The author concludes that despite some positive effects a mixed rhetoric of educational experience and (colonial) development aid in program advertising promoted neither development nor real intercultural competence (and see Zeddies and Millei 2015). Such a mixed rhetoric was a feature of the project described here with the AGC employing a mixed discourse in its recruitment of cultural experience and sustainable development. When I challenged the AGC about the failures in sustainable development of the project the program manger replied that it was cultural experience not sustainable development that they focused on.

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[1]　See for example—The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/volunteer-tourism-whatswrong-with-it-and-how-it-can-be-changed-86701; The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/22/magazine/the-voluntourists-dilemma.html.

Ouma and Dimaras (2013) examined Canadian student experiences with a Kenyan NGO in public health and conclude on the need for more real bidirectional exchanges that challenge thinking. They further argue for flexibility in program activities to allow both parties to engage with critical social and political questions, and that better pre and post-departure reflection and the ability for critical observation are key ingredients of such tours—activism per se will not achieve this.

Park (2018) explored US students on an Engineers without Borders (EWB) study tour in Cameroon, concluding that student attitudes were influenced by the implicit belief in technology fixes and cultural stereotypes about Africans. He notes also opposition to his evaluation study by faculty and students and the less than enthusiastic response of the NGO in Cameroon to his results. The belief in sustainable technology fixes was a feature of this project with the AGC and local NGO moving away from local sustainable materials and choices to bring imported technologies that failed to this project.

4. Research and Evaluation Needs

Taplin et al. (2014) note the pressing need for honest monitoring and evaluation of volunteer tourism projects. They also note the difficulties in achieving this in an independent and transparent manner given the interests involved. The authors observe among approaches, "qualitative, critical approaches which recognise the inherently ethical, political, social and contextual factors involved in evaluation processes" (Taplin et al. 2014, p. 878) are also needed. To contribute to this priority, this study adopted covert research, fieldwork, and secondary sources to address critical questions about this project and the field in general.

Having participated in three government-funded programs facilitating not for profit organizations in India and Australia, I have come to have increasing doubts about the claims of such programs, especially with regard to the purported sustainability benefits for local 'excluded' communities. These doubts, I have subsequently discovered, are shared by others, including with regard to NGO behavior (Ebrahim 2001; Ghosh 2009). I wondered as a result whether I was seeing another example of 'fictitious' sustainability and spectacle (Brondo 2015) through voluntourism and an opportunity arose to examine this. Thus, the primary research question for this case study was as follows:

- To what extent are the processes and outcomes of this bilateral voluntourism project consistent with principles of participatory sustainable development?

5. Case Study Methodology

This study is based on email exchanges with stakeholders, analysis of publicly available project reports, documents and media (form February 2018 to May 2018), as well as a field visit to two villages in Yawal—one the subject of this study and another the base for the local NGO (in April 2018). The case study and discussion provided an opportunity to examine the rhetoric and reality of a sustainable housing project for a tribal community in India.

This illustrative case study attempts to use multiple data sources to develop a holistic account of the purported development objectives (Thomas 2011). Case studies employing ethnographic and related methods have been used to understand student experiences. Stake (1995) identifies the instrumental case study as using a particular case, e.g., organisation, to gain a broader appreciation of an issue or phenomenon, i.e., voluntourism. Case studies in general integrate multiple data sources to develop a holistic account of some phenomenon (Creswell 2008). As Crowe et al. (2011) adds, a critical approach aims to address issues of power and control and the broader social and political context of the case.

The study falls into the category of (informal) covert research, employing publicly available information for general social benefit (Spicker 2015). As Calvey (2008) also notes, current rejection of covert research means that many domains of life remain hidden from view or are reported with the inevitable observer bias. Given the complicated interests in such volunteer tourism projects, covert and unobtrusive research has become one of the few mechanisms for analyzing the complex realities and politics of such initiatives (Li 2016).

In this case study, multiple publicly available documents, e.g., project reports from the Australian facilitating agency, a recent village documentary (Sathyan 2016), external project reports (e.g., Kellerman 2014), analysis of agency website descriptions (e.g., Zeddies and Millei 2015), field visit photos, email exchanges with various actors, and field notes, collected before, during, and after a one week field visit to the project site in April 2018, are referred to. NVivo 12™ Mixed Methods Software was used to develop analysis. To protect the particular identity of individuals, specific details are removed or modified. Although additional conversations with other partners in the project, e.g., discussions with agricultural extension staff, AGC partners, and members, etc., focused on the issues raised here, they were not recorded.

All of the conclusions and claims identified in this paper were raised with AGC especially in a follow up email assessment and none of these criticisms were answered or refuted. More broadly, the factors identified, mixed development and experience discourses, non-transparent budgets, mismanaged project developments and materials, lack of meaningful knowledge exchange, and a non-participatory approach to sustainable development, have been identified in the literature as common denominators of such initiatives. It is also worth noting in passing that multiple recommendations for a focus on infrastructure and development to the local NGO and AGC were ignored (Kellerman 2014).

6. Case Study Analysis

An opportunity arose in early 2018 to evaluate a sustainable housing project in Maharashtra that combined an ecosystem of Australian (i.e., DFAT) funding, Australian Green NGO (henceforth AGC), Australian university students and staff, and Indian partners, e.g., local NGOs coordinating development in rural Maharashtra. The AGC, in collaboration with the local NGO and university cohorts of IT, trades, and other students, was working with three of the five villages in the YAWAL region (Kellerman 2014). Jamnya—the subject of this study, was the village most clearly typified by an indigenous population and lack of infrastructure.

The contextual description which follows is important to appreciate the development potential and needs of the village. This can be compared to the claims and voluntourism initiative developed by the Australian Green Charity (henceforth AGC) in association with the domestic NGO SVM and other actors, e.g., Earth Institute (Tamil Nadu), Swinburne University, etc.

Unfortunately, due to national statistics limitations there is limited or no reliable data for the period following the 2011 census, when this project took place. Hence, it is difficult to see the effect of the presence of this project. Based on the documentary of 2015 (Sathyan 2016), and other secondary sources there seems to have been limited change. For example, the analysis of the potential for small enterprise reported in 2014 (Kellerman 2014) has not been acted on to any extent based on field visits and discussions with the local agricultural extension organization responsible for this.

6.1. Precarious Indigenous Livelihoods and Exclusion

The villages and communities in the Yawal Widlife Sanctuary Maharashtra, bordering to the North with Madhya Pradesh, have precarious livelihoods. Jalgaon District in Maharashtra consists of 15 administrative units (Talukas), including Yawal—the location of this case study, which has a population of approximately 4.5 Million. The wildlife sanctuary located in Satpuda ranges and other aspects of Yawal are managed by the State Forestry Department, who are present in the town of Pal where they operate a small complex of 'rest houses' for visitors, including for training and children. The village Jamnya is one of five communities in this area (Figure 1 below), three of which are objects of AGC projects.
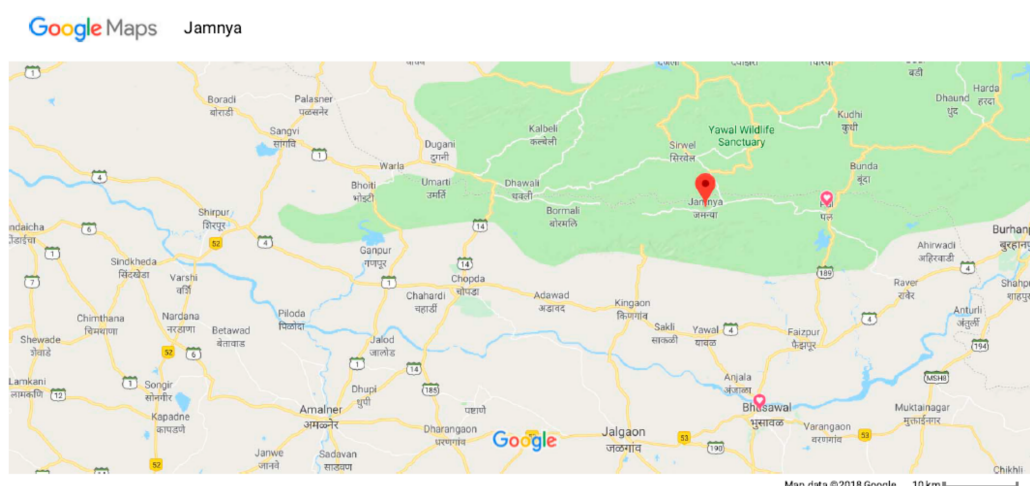
Figure 1. Study site location—Google Maps.

Rural tribal village embodies multiple development tensions in India Jamnya village is one of five villages located within Yawal wildlife Sanctuary. The 2011 Census (Directorate of Census Operations Maharashtra 2014) suggests over half the population describe themselves as non-working and the literacy rate is about 50% (64% M and 38% F). The population is almost entirely tribal—99% (n = 965 2011 Census). The official data source reports no primary or community health care facility nor other facilities[2]. Thus, this is a typical excluded population whose future is managed by a local NGO, government, and other external actors.

6.2. A Context of Exclusion and Misrepresentation

The recovery of wildlife and flora in Yawal has been the result of a combination of efforts between the scheduled tribe (ST) located in the area and the Forestry Department backed by the Foresttry Rights Act (2006) (See Sharma 2017) and other institutions, e.g., the Forestry Department. The FRA is seen by some as a tool for a reconfigured relationship between tribal (adivasis) and government (Chemmencheri 2015). However, there have been efforts to relocate five villages in the area—including the focus of this study on the assumption of misuse of forest by tribals—leading to further uncertainties and underlying the tenuous issues of property rights. The false view of the misuse of forests by locals, perpetuated also by the local NGO (SVM) was also cited by AGC in their initial report as an additional reason to import 'sustainable' materials and technologies to the site that ultimately failed.

6.3. Gender and Village Politics

The Panchyati Raaj Act 2nd Amendment—the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA, 1996)[3] extended local rule to scheduled tribal areas (Ray 2009). Jamnya village is administrated by Sarpanch (Head of Village), who is the elected representative of the village. As part of broader affirmative action, women have increasingly been elected to such positions although there actual power and status in village micro-politics is debatable (Jayal 2006). As the recent documentary on the community makes clear the female Sarpanch is a figurehead and replaced by her husband for key decisions and functions (Sathyan 2016). Thus, the political, environmental, and demographic characteristics of the village make it an ideal candidate for development initiatives.

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[2] See Mapping village census data (by district) for Maharashtra. https://bnamita.github.io/Village_Mapping_v2/.

[3] The amendment and coverage, in relation to Maharashtra, can be seen at मा.राज्यपाल यांच्या भूमिका व जबाबदा-या, http://rajbhavan-maharashtra.gov.in/rajbhavan/pdf/3_SRAS.pdf.

The recent documentary (Sathyan 2016), conversations during my 2018 field visit, and other sources point to high absenteeism of the primary and middle school children as they work on the family farm, early and frequent marriages, lack of resources and infrastructure for learning, alcoholism on the outskirts of the village, and lack of enterprise or similar development opportunities for women. Despite the generally flimsy state of housing (Figure 2) no village level initiatives are being undertaken to improve construction. There is informal small enterprise in houses (see Figure 3) but as per prior discussions (Kellerman 2014) and conversations during the recent field visit with the agricultural extension organization in Pal—no systematic development of enterprise and livelihoods opportunities.

Figure 2. View of local housing in Jamnya.

Figure 3. Informal domestic enterprise inside private home.

6.4. Schooling

The local agriculture extension (KVK) integrates a senior school focused on agriculture subjects, and this is an avenue for successful middle school Jamnya students. Both KVK and an earlier report (Kellerman 2014) identified enterprise possibilities for the village, e.g., soya bean products, and women appear to be organized into self-help groups (SHG) for loans. However, there is no evidence of current development of such livelihood opportunities in the village, a state of affairs confirmed in discussions with KVK during my visit.

The combined primary and middle NGO-run Ashram School in Jamnya is coeducational and (originally) catered for years 1 through to 10 although accurate information about buildings and resources are impossible to find. The medium of instruction is Marathi and the school is managed by the Tribal Social Welfare Department (TSWD). The local NGO claims that they manage the school with limited input from government, e.g., provision of teachers. Hence the school is registered as an 'aided school'.

The school was established in 2004 with 45 students and now has nearly 400 and combines a primary and middle school. Resources are limited although some recent concrete and brick classrooms have been built. The local university—the North Maharashta University also appears to have visited the village to conduct their own study tour! Thus, in 2014 in collaboration with another organization they ran a sevenday residential camp for their first year students on (a) Microplanning; (b) PRA tools & techniques; and a (c) Lab to Land Programme. This 'academic' intervention has had no apparent effect in the village.

Ashram aided schools generally have a mixed reputation in the state for mismanagement of funds, child abuse, and other deficiencies (e.g., Thadathil and Danane 2017). The school appears from local and government reports to be typical of the parlous state of tribal education for children in Maharashtra, e.g., low literacy, reducing government provision, poor quality teaching and pedagogy, inadequate infrastructure, etc. (Centre for Budget and Policy Studies 2017). Thus, while the village suffered from multiple infrastructure deficiencies, the local NGO (SVM) and AGC chose in 2013 to design and build a teacher house using imported technologies.

6.5. Sustainable Development Rhetoric and Reality

The AGC website is currently recruiting for new volunteer tourists and talks about the 'completion of the first phase' and the use of 'quality sustainable technologies'. Both claims—completion and quality—on closer examination do not stand up to scrutiny. Following my pre-departure comments on sustainability failures the manager of the AGC (email 8 April 2018) suggested "you'll see on your upcoming visit the level of community engagement and bottom up sustainable development going on".

During my visit, I saw no evidence of community engagement and (as explained elsewhere) no evidence of 'bottom up sustainable development', particularly with respect to participatory empowerment. I also found evidence in AGC reports of the same, e.g., comments on the fact that except for occasional activity during visits by Australians little or no activity took place on the site—with villagers being observers.

6.6. Obscure Finances and Revenue; Commercialising Failed Help

In this project, the global voluntourism operation of an Australian environmental enterprise (AGC) had developed a business model whereby university students and other volunteers pay generous fees for cultural experiences of sustainable housing, schooling etc. in a range of locations. The current (2018) local costs per participant for this experience are AU$1000 per week to stay in local accommodation. Thus, costs in the range of $140 per day were charged for local accommodation and meals, where actual costs are easily closer to $20 (or less).

Even given some additional costs for local transport there was no evidence I could find in the different AGC budget reports for this project that the surplus from the fees paid by the many voluntourists were being returned to community to fund development. Funding moved between the Australian enterprise and the local NGO without any direct participation by community in deciding on needs and goals.

Given the cohorts of foreign fee-paying voluntourists reported in their annual report, I calculated the personal budget for an individual including personal travel costs (flights, visa etc.) and domestic tour costs for two weeks in rural India would sum around $5000. Thus, a typical cohort of ten students attending one tour would spend $50,000 to offer two weeks of debatable 'help'. This converts into 2,500,000 INR (Indian 25 INR Lakhs), which at one estimate would build 25 basic rural homes[4].

Attempts to get clarity on obscure budgets was difficult. In the 2015 AGC report on 2014 contributions, it was reported that AGC has directly contributed about $9000 to expert airfares and documentary filming while approximately double this came from further donations. Given the numbers of volunteers and fees (and lacking any transparent budget)—they reported 72 students traveling to India—(assuming $2000 per visitor for two weeks) this would indicate $144,000 in income to AGC for three projects. Assuming they were similarly generous to other projects one could subtract $27,000 from this income and still have a significant surplus to account for local costs.

6.7. Architectural Visions and Reality

An ambitious aspirational 'master plan' for the village, including a water plan, was developed by a pro-bono Australian architecture firm in 2013, which aimed to 'way to construct affordable, sustainable housing from locally sourced materials'. The eventual construction choices of bamboo,

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4   Using a conventional on-line calculator and inputting a basic home of 120 square Feet for Maharashtra Jalgaon District, 61000INR was the unit cost, e.g., about AU$1300, e.g., the costs for a single tourist for a single week domestic costs. http://www.acchelp.in/home_builders_calculators_cost.aspx. If we add 30–40,000 INR for basic services we end up with say 100,000 INR per unit then a single visit of 10 students is equivalent to the budget for 25 homes being built. Other options are mudbrick (already familiar technique at RS 215/sqm)) versus concrete. https://www.downtoearth.org.in/indepth/mud-housing-is-the-key-30237. This estimate also compares favourable with cost for modern prefab houses. https://dir.indiamart.com/navi-mumbai/prefabricated-houses.html.

tetrapak roofing, CSEB bricks, while technically local were all imported technologies that lead to structural and human failures. This broad vision quickly receded to the background to be replaced by the (purported) community need for teacher accommodation. In contrast to the master plan there was clear evidence of building activity in the school with government subsidies school buildings (see Figure 4) built using conventional brick and concrete and integrating local features such as sheltered veranda and window shades. The interior of these buildings was cool during my field visit. I found it difficult to understand why imported technologies and techniques were being used to construct a teacher housing unit, especially given its failed construction (as explained elsewhere).
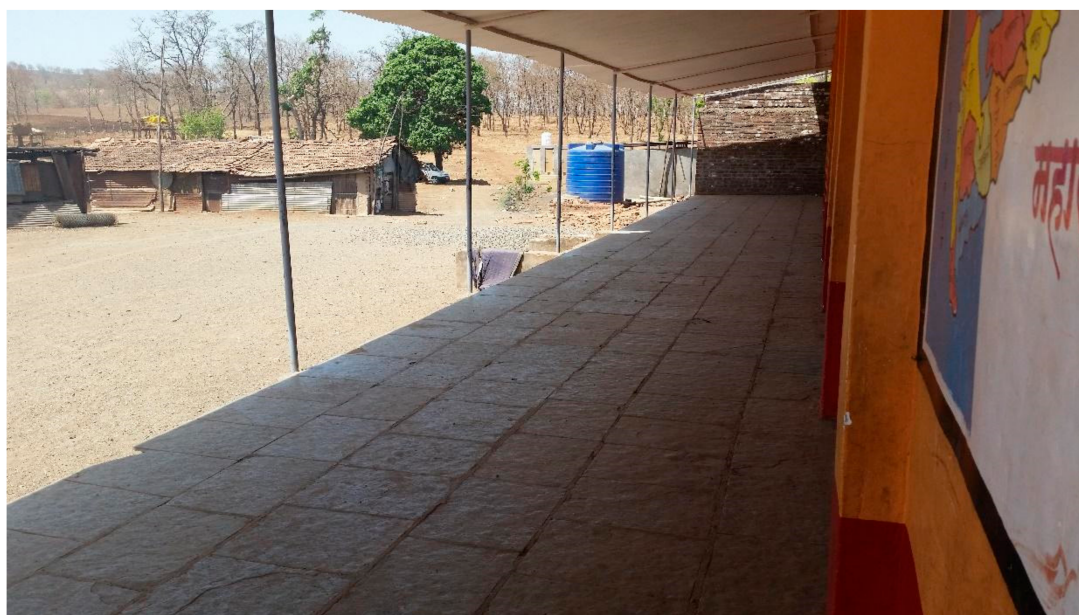

Figure 4. Contrasting government funded school building.

Despite drawing up a visionary construction plan for the village in 2013, following multiple visits the project had only managed to deliver one flawed construction in five years (2013–2018), requiring major repair (see Figure 5 below). This outcome was thus even less convincing than reviews of more competent construction projects in the aid and volunteer tourism sector, e.g., Habitat for Humanity (Obeng-Odoom 2009). I note in passing that the 2015 project report suggested teachers would occupy the finished buildings that year and prior to monsoon rains—as noted this was still not the case three years later.

Figure 5. Interior of 'completed sustainable house' showing borer infested roof structure, imported Tetrapak roofing, and windows without external overhang shading (as in adjoining school building).

Reports available on the project suggested that public and private donations both pro-bono and cash and special fund-raising events rather than visitor surpluses were paying for new materials or machinery, e.g., compressed stabilized earth brick (CSEB) brick making machinery. So again it was completely unclear where the obvious surplus from fees was going—not to fund construction!

6.8. Consultation on Predetermined Objectives

As noted above the indigenous community already faces numerous barriers to inclusive participatory development. The principle of local determination of sustainable development priorities and outcomes has long been mainstreamed in the field. Very few if any such principles were employed in the project. Given the multiple infrastructure and development issues in the village, and early identified enterprise and other opportunities, it was illuminating to discover how this priority was determined.

The project report documenting the 2013 visit suggested that 'Based on conversations with teachers and the local community, the lack of adequate and permanent accommodation for teachers is a barrier in attracting female teachers' was identified as a key element in improving education. However, a careful reading of the interim report makes it clear the architects, AGC, and other officials conducted limited consultation on the details of an already determined construction project.

Teachers at the school were not locals, and hence the housing solution had limited significance to the community, who had been ignored in establishing development objectives, despite rhetoric to the contrary. Thus, despite occasional photos of locals carrying bricks during short volunteer visits, reports and evidence on the ground showed the local community had limited or no interest in the project, which itself was subject to other obstacles as noted. As reported (2014) by another university group working in ICT4D nearby, in workshops and activities locals "cheered on rather than actually participating in the brick-making".

All teachers currently travel from other home locations to the school, i.e., are not locals. The decision for better accommodation assumed that teachers would move to a village where 99% of the population were a presumably networked tribal group. In addition, the modus operandi clearly had to fit with the foreign NGO mid-term goals for on-going tour experiences and income as well as their preferred technologies and expertise. The pilot project was expected to be completed in 2014 according to available stakeholder reports, but during my visit in April 2018 the pilothouse that had recently been 'completed' according to the AGC website would require significant roofing and wall repairs and was unoccupied.

The stated aim of the pilot project was that the prototype house would serve as the beginning of—and inspiration for—further construction of safe, sustainable housing throughout the village. None of this was immediately likely as the building was unoccupied, had serious structural problems, and there was limited engagement of locals on the project. Thus, there were multiple knowledge and sustainability failures that continue to be glossed over.

6.9. Imported Sustainability Technologies

It was also apparent from the report that the earliest intention was to implement sustainability approaches, which appealed to the Australian agency and architects. The subsequent failure of materials, poor delivery, and inadequate assessment, were indications of an 'imported' sustainability initiative that appealed to the AGC and potentially to the local NGO based in a nearby town. Interestingly in the 'consultations' about the project in a village with significant infrastructure problems, poor housing, and under- and unemployment no consideration was given to the effect of using imported technologies with either no employment opportunities or competitive outcomes with local conventional brick making livelihoods. Several local features, e.g., window ventilation and the use of timber for roof structures were ignored in the new project.

Three technologies favoured by the Australian agency to achieve the above aim, compressed stabilised earth bricks (CSEB), which were introduced based on experience and expertise at the Auroville Earth Institute (AVEI) in Tamil Nadu. CSEB was a new technology for the village, and competed with 'unsustainable' local brick-making, and contrasted with the two dominant types of housing in the village, e.g., brick and concrete or wattle and daub, including with wood (forest teak) roofing. The manual CSEB brick-making machine purchased with donations and transported in 2014

proved to be too demanding physically to produce bricks and funding was being sought for another automatic brickmacker.

Bamboo, which grows locally was also chosen for constructing roof framing while in the village conventional houses used forest (teak) wood although Bamboo strips were used for wall and roof cover. While there was a moratorium on new teak harvesting, redressed and reused beams were available and traded in the village. Bamboo that was harvested and used was neither treated nor properly stored and thus was riddled with borer by the time the one teacher unit was completed.

An independent assessment report by email from a local bamboo and sustainability expert noted (1) oil treatment dripping; (2) building not functional; (3) government skepticism including about financing; (4) questions about use of bamboo; (5) lack of local consultation. When I raised these issues with the AGC project leader as an indication of failed planning his comment was the consultant had not been involved with the project and that I would see the deep engagement and commitment myself when I visited. Particular queries from the external expert (quote below form email) were as follows:

> 1. Termites eat cellulose, bamboo contains cellulose. I wonder why was untreated bamboo used in the construction primarily?

> 2. The Jamnya and neighbouring villages don't use bamboo for construction due to the abundance of other timber in the forest. So there is no local knowledge of the species that provide natural durability. There are around 148 species in India and not all these are suitable for construction.

> Has SVM or CERES contacted any expert advice in the state of Maharashtra or in other parts of India about the right bamboo species for construction?

> Has there been any effort to identify the suitable one for the region and transport them there?

> I hope there will be some solution to the current challenges so that maintenance doesn't become expensive and labour intensive.

> I am available on Skype for any other update.

> Regards,

During my field visit, the local NGO (SVM) CEO on site expressed a desire for new construction to use steel framing to avoid further problems; the long delays and failures of the construction had likely lead to loss of his reputation, which he was keen to avoid. This together with the evidence above of clear lack of expert consultation and other basic failures additionally confirmed the evaluation of this report.

6.10. Tetrapak Introduced and Vernacular Building and Architecture Ignored

Imported Tetrapak roofing was used instead of standard tin roofing, as used in recent classroom construction; this was a third new technology for the village. Tetra Pak is very expensive and had to be imported. This despite the fact that original designs developed by the pro-bono Architect identified sheet metal roofing and clay tiles as the design choice and wooden framing, choices would have matched vernacular construction in the village. Although there is generally enthusiasm for the environmental qualities of Tetra Pak roofing, in one of the few studies of its effect as a thermal insulater both polished aluminium foil and a commercial insulator performed much better (Michels et al. 2008).

Toilet blocks for male and female students had been built and designed but I learned fromdiscussions during my visit that they were likely to be demolished or repurposed as girls would not use them and the blocks were culturally a problem. More generally, the overall building materials and approach completely ignored vernacular building choices. Thus, for example the (failed) use of bamboo for the roof structure, the introduction of CSEB bricks, and the use of Tetrapak roofing, all signaled an inability to take into consideration local techniques and materials. Teak was used for vernacular housing (although due to government restrictions on harvesting had to be recycled),

windows in the concrete and brick school classroom had external shade and shutters for windows that were also ignored in the new construction. In-house above ground storage techniques were also ignored.

6.11. Failed Enterprise Development and Innovation

Earlier visits and a report (Kellerman 2014) that had established a broader framework and program of development possibilities for three of the villages has not been acted on. Rather, village development has been reduced to a range of unfinished or abandoned projects, e.g., the decoration and repair of toilet blocks, which are not used and scheduled to be converted or demolished. A report from 2014 of visits to Pal and Jamnya by university exchange students identified multiple business, product design, and enterprise possibilities, including through a self-help group (SHG) (Kellerman 2014).

During my field visit, I had similar discussions with the agricultural extension and secondary school organisation (KVK) in 2018 and it was clear that no progress in Jamnya had been made on SHG based enterprises. There were also allusions to curriculum renewal by which schools would adopt the environmental principles and training of the environmental charity facilitating. Although nothing was achieved, such an approach bypasses all the realities of schooling context, resources, and curriculum in the Ashram-type community schools operating in the area.

6.12. ICT for Education Opportunities

Tours by a cohort of IT students on a related study tour, including in Jamnya found limited capacity, e.g., internet connections, curriculum, and pedagogy responsive to digital resources, to respond to real education quality needs. Given the complete absence of internet connections in some villages, lack of teacher capability, and intermittent power and internet connections, allusions by the Australian NGO pedagogy on its website to education initiatives are another aspirational claim. Also, while the energy and commitment of the university IT staff and students in collaboration with the local NGO managing the Ashram Schools is clear, this ICT initiative nor the supervising NGO has made connections with existing domestic initiatives for rural education in India that have proven successful, such as AmritaRITE (Nedungadi et al. 2017).

7. Discussion

In her review of 30 years of volunteerism, McGehee (2014) reflects also the sentiments of this paper that in addition to criticizing voluntourism, scholars must find ways to suggest improvements to such initiatives to promote transformation. The good will and energy of cohorts of visiting students and faculty to this project, and the in-kind and cash contributions of multiple stakeholders is not in question here, rather the extent to which the project meets a set of sustainability or sustainable development standards in a context of obscure financial accounting.

As I noted above this experience of finances being diverted from potential community benefit was already discussed in the literature. As Tomazos and Cooper note although financial transparency does exist in this sector it is relatively rare (as in this case) to have a full disclosure of where funds end up (Tomazos and Cooper 2012). In fact, public and other donations were used for the purchase of resources and the funding of facilitator flights. The project has failed to deliver its proposed outputs, model housing, sanitation, employment opportunities, renewed education programs, over a five year time frame, including to develop any meaningful contributions to sustainable livelihoods.

Assumed rather than researched impacts and inadequate financial transparency are typical of volunteer projects, such as described here. Thus, "whilst volunteer tourists can get involved in building homes or schools, or engaging in conservation work within the local community, they have usually paid a significant fee for the opportunity to be involved in this work . . . money that, if donated to a local community directly, could potentially pay a greater amount of labour than the individual volunteer could ever hope to provide. This is especially so in the case of gap-years, in which the level of technical skill or professional experience required of volunteers is negligible" (Butcher and Smith 2010, p. 35).

8. Conclusions

Voluntourism functions inter alia by developing a mixed discourse of sustainable community development and cultural tourism, but actually commodifies development and poverty to service neoliberal needs for moral consumption and NGO income. As Coren and Gray (2012) note full disclosure of fund allocation and return to community is required by responsible agencies (and see Smith 2014). This was also the case in this project, i.e., there was no transparent financial account documenting inputs from all funding sources, including student fees, into these projects and the return on investments and surplus generated and where this was directed. Projects are developed in-country through networks of actors whose financial transparency, competence, and motives are difficult to examine in detail.

By any objective measure, the (ongoing) 'sustainable housing project' in this study is a typical mismanaged product promoted by a network of actors with little capacity in achieving sustainable (tribal) development although evidently able to generate significant financial inputs into their own operation. As Smith (2014) points out voluntourism is motivated by the well-meaning desires for self-development and exploration (including perhaps CV building) of development tourists. Such projects and the ventures that support them are based on business models that generate funds that could be well spent on locally-defined development needs, including employment, enterprise, and other sustainable livelihood initiatives.

Several authors of studies in this area point to the difficulty in investigating such topics and the multiple barriers to transparency (McWha 2011, p. 38). Hence, this project resorted to secondary data analysis, covert research, and case study to evaluate and contextualize the author's experience. From objective setting to delivery, this so-called sustainable housing project failed in multiple respects to deliver in five years on a visionary plan although it is clear that it generated significant revenue for the Australian agency. An uncharitable reading of motives would suggest that a project was developed as a vehicle for revenue generation by the Australian agency.

The local NGO leading developments and networking with the Australian agency reflects in its motto ("Enlightening the masses, providing hope for those in darkness" a typical 'paternalistic and authoritarian' approach to tribal development of such organisations (Ghosh 2009). Given the lack of participatory needs assessment and local politics that placed little value on indigenous knowledge, expertise and needs, it is little wonder there was limited actual engagement from local people.

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