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THE LOCAL IMPACT OF UNDER-REALISATION OF THE LUMBINI MASTER PLAN: A FIELD REPORT

Kate Molesworth and Ulrike Müller-Böker

Introduction

Before 1967 when U Thant, as Secretary General of the United Nations visited Lumbini, very little action had been taken to preserve or develop the nativity site of Siddhartha Gautam, the Buddha.¹ As a consequence of Thant's distress at the state of the site and his drive to address the situation, the UN formed an international committee for the development of Lumbini in 1970. In 1972 UNDP commissioned Japanese architect Kenzo Tange to design a master plan for the development of Lumbini (Coningham and Milou 2000:18) with a budget of US\$ 6.5 million (LDT 2000). Tange submitted his completed master plan for the extensive development and preservation of the site as a centre of Buddhist pilgrimage and world tourism in 1978.

As a spiritual, historical and archaeological site, Lumbini is unique. It is of major global interest and importance, and was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1997 (UNESCO 1998:46). As such it has the potential to draw a substantial influx of visitors and revenue to this poor and under-developed area of Nepal. Indeed, one of the objectives set out in plans for developing the site was to encourage local economic development (Tange and URTEC 1977:7) by increasing the inflow of tourists and pilgrims into the area.

Although the development of the site was due for completion within seven years of its inception, almost a quarter of a century later, only some 20% of the master plan has been realised (Shrestha 2000:1). The slow rate of progress of the Lumbini development project has been linked to poor institutional organisation and inadequate funding (Lawson 1999). While reported patterns of changes in visitor numbers are unreliable due to a lack of credible recording, the development of tourism and pilgrimage has not met expectations.

The development of Lumbini has not been without controversy, both at the local and international level (Tripathi 2003; *Katmandu Post* 2001; Poudel 2000; Lal 1999). While much of the literature concerns the project's lack of progress, its overall impact on local people has been neglected. This article examines the impact of the partial development of Lumbini on local people, in particular, those who originally lived within the area that now forms the master plan. It appraises the social and economic consequences of the master plan development on local livelihoods and access to natural resources.

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