

# Editorial

## GLOBAL LEARNING IN A VOLATILE WORLD

### Gerard McCann

International development and development education are facing some of the most serious challenges to confront the sectors in a generation. With ongoing questions being placed on the legitimacy of democratic processes and policy transparency, and with constant undermining of the core development principle of ‘interdependence’, the theoretical discourse underlying global inter-connectivity has been brought into sharp focus. Delegitimising the post-war consensus on global partnership, solidarity, integration and harmonisation has become so commonplace across the political establishment and media that, arguably, it threatens the nature of democratic engagement itself. Re-energised xenophobia, populism, micro-nationalism and economic protectionism have brought forward not only a widespread rejection of internationalisation and interdependence, but this combative political environment has exposed threats to the very concepts of interculturalism, rights, freedom, tolerance and refuge – concepts that are central to the outworking of the international development and development education sectors.

In recent years disregard for the work of development organisations and the processes of international development have led to oppositional political and media interventions that have questioned the sector’s very existence. These interventions have generally revolved around dismissive commentaries based on ill-informed prejudices and ideology. International development was a product of peace-building, a collective conscience on rights based development and attempts at ending global poverty. Giving purpose to the alleviation of poverty, enacting the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, facilitating transnational cooperation and peace-building, creating tolerant multicultural societies

and engendering democratic expression are all core to the sector's work. While accepting that recent scandals within development non-governmental organisations have not helped in the defence of the sector and indeed have given added ammunition to those who would seek to distort the role of the sector, international development is essential and would not take place if it were not for the heroic work of the tens of thousands of people - mostly volunteers - who build futures for millions of the world's most vulnerable people.

At this point, those working in the sector have been forced to justify their work against immense external pressures, yet globally the issues being dealt with are more complex than ever. In a world where slavery is again commonplace, where rights are being abused by just about every administration, where children are still dying needlessly, specialists in international development and development education are needed more than ever. To highlight one example, the international reaction to the plight of hundreds of thousands of persecuted families and individuals who have sought refuge in other countries has been alarming. In an era of 'fake news', distrust and untruths – to defend the idea and place of sanctuary is critical. Destabilising this work highlights in stark terms the series of issues that have become so toxic to the very understanding of human interdependence. On many fronts we can see a process of legitimating xenophobia through demands for foreign nationals to leave or to be placed in centres for deportation; the call to 'take back control' has reignited long discredited theories of isolationism and malign nationalism. In the denial of international solidarity with our neighbours and respect for 'others', recent political shocks have broken the trust of people across the world, a trust that has promised peace and prosperity through international development for a generation and more.

Xenophobia cloaked in populism, a distrust of dialogue, security as the first role of government and the frustrating of democratic processes have all re-emerged seventy years after international consensus on the United Nations' Universal Declaration on Human Rights – for many a

testament to international solidarity and the beginning of a global pact that, arguably, provided a bedrock for relative peace, economic and political stability. The political challenge to this post-war consensus demands a return to Article One: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'. For educationalists the direction from the Declaration comes even before this first principle:

“...as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance...”

This historical testament echoes in stark contrast to the malaise that some would seek to shock the world into today.

The disintegration of the post-war consensus can be seen nowhere more poignantly than in the European Union, although the same problems have global reach. Anthony Giddens, in *Turbulent and Mighty Continent*, reflected on the scale of this delegitimisation process: “The fate of the Union matters, it *matters* a great deal. Over 500 million people live in the EU states. What happens in Europe is world-historical in terms of its importance. The stakes are high indeed’ (Giddens, 2014: 5). Loukas Tsoukalis, in his 2016 polemic *In Defence of Europe: Can the European Project be Saved?* suggested the crux of the issue in his title question. Arguably this demos, this global consensus, is fighting for its very existence for the first time since 1945. ‘Europhobia has been replaced by Euro-pessimism, plans of further integration and more members by fears of a break-up’ (Tsoukalis, 2016: 8). Others working in international studies have set the tone for the coming years: John Gillingham, *The EU:*

*an Obituary* (2016); Stephen D. King, *Grave New World* (2017); James Kirchick, *Dictators, Demagogues, and the Coming Dark Age* (2017); James Kwak, *Economism: Bad Economics and the Rise of Inequality* (2017); Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (2017); and Giles Merritt, *Slippery Slope* (2017). It gives an indication of the positioning and language which we will all be having to deal with, and gives some suggestion of the context within which practitioners of development education and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) will have to adapt and respond.

The key challenges which educators of international issues face revolve around three movements that are actively undermining interdependence. First, xenophobia: what Martin Buber, the Austrian-Jewish philosopher, labelled the 'denial of otherness'. From an educational point of view, racism needs to be confronted at every moment of communication, with the internet the most pernicious and dangerous forum for such ideas. Hatred of 'otherness' denies the life-blood of community and the generation of any society. To return to an idea from the past, 'unity in diversity' can be the only option for such complex societies as these, or we will be forced to withdraw into a world where camps and security become the measure of policy success. Irish President Higgins put it starkly: 'Is our response to be defined by barbed wire, tear gas and rubber bullets?' Hannah Arendt, the German-Jewish thinker and a conscience on behalf of twentieth century refugees, spoke to confront such dysfunction, to warn that - even in so-called enlightened times - we could slip back into 'the banality of evil'. Her warning stands:

"Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their people – if they keep their identity.... The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted" (Arendt, 1943: 119).

Arguably, in 2015, with the imprisonment of refugees worldwide, we slipped back into exclusion and persecution.

Second, there is protectionism and micro-nationalism. The whole post-war economic system has depended on open borders, the free movement of people, goods, services and finance. Undermining movement in a structural manner destabilises pluralism and transnational cooperation. Such interventions are primarily about breaking up relationships, creating the opportunity for less democratic voices to profit from division. To address this type of disregard, Jean Monnet viewed the international rule of law as the basis of interdependence, 'community', the primary way to enhance peace-building across hostile borders and combusive political environments. The common entity, he suggested, is where the strength of internationalisation lies. Breaking partnerships down - the direction of many governments today - will only facilitate disintegration and heighten nationalistic tensions, and everything that comes with that. As we can see across the globe, by questioning solidarity among peoples, the manufacturing of division remains mischievous, opportunistic and dangerous.

Third and finally, as early as 1992 Steve Tesich, the Serbian playwright coined the phrase 'post-truth world' in the magazine *The Nation*. Ralph Keyes reintroduced the term with his 2004 book titled *The Post-Truth Era*. In the journal *Grist* on 1 April 2010, blogger David Roberts examined the term 'post-truth' in relation to a nascent political culture that was increasingly denying factual evidence and reality to appeal to manipulative disconnected emotions. Fact denial reflects a pre-enlightenment mentality, minds moved by fear and suspicion. By 2016, the word 'post-truth' was selected by the *Oxford Dictionary* as the 'word of the year', and has come to sum up our times. Joseph Stalin once commented: 'A lie told often enough becomes the truth'. Truth needs its defenders and education in particular remains at the front line of this defence - including development education. Truth, and the right to explore ideas around the truth, should be at the heart of this defence of positive life experiences. Agreeing is how democratic society breathes;

creating habits of interdependence that pass from generation to generation. In the current malaise of dishonesty, a new discourse is needed, a new sense of purpose demands its day, a generational shift, in which education holds its role.

In this most topical of issues of *Policy and Practice*, our uncertain times are examined by looking at the implications for development education of current global justice issues, activism, groupthink, recurrent crises and rapid political change. The Focus articles begin with colleagues from Vancouver, Idaho, Manchester and Nottingham (Vanessa Andreotti, Sharon Stein, Ali Sutherland, Karen Pashby, Rene Suša, and Sarah Amsler), and the international *Gestering Towards Decolonial Futures Collective*. Patterns of representation and engagement are explored with reference to social cartography as a means of diagnosing crises. Re-evaluating global justice education, the article analyses narratives of justice as a complex of overlapping dimensions. They leave us with the exercising thought that: 'Often in the moments of crisis, people look for solutions that are available within our existing system. Within our diagnosis, however, the existing system is itself the root of many contemporary problems'.

In their article, Stephen O'Brien and Gertrude Cotter look at how teachers experience new critical research practices and identities, surveying the new multicultural environment which many Irish teachers are now involved in. Critical Multicultural Education (CME) is introduced and there is an interesting commentary on how Ireland has recently transformed from being a country of emigrants to a country of immigrants. Stephen McCloskey's Focus article explores the relationship between development education and activism with reference to his own experiences in the Middle-East. In this he sees a definite link between the role of social justice activism and learning about global issues. He draws from Freire to speculate on the relationship between practical experience and understanding, using the idea of speaking 'truth to power' as a means of generating positive change. Crucially he warned against inertia - a particular lesson for educators.

Further into the issue, Madeleine Le Bourbon engages with the concept of ‘informal spaces’ in citizenship education, while Silvia Gallagher evaluates the importance on online courses with reference to a substantial initiative on sustainable education. Chahid Fourali in a Perspectives article assesses the disciplines of social marketing and development education with a view to finding common purpose. Finally, in the Viewpoint section of the journal the thorny issue of criminal activity within the international development sector is tackled head on by Michael Edwards. This is an issue which we are sure to hear much more about, acknowledging that perspective is needed and justice for those who have been affected. Martin Pollard finishes this rather controversial issue with a commentary on the key political issues of the day, including Brexit.

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