

# WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FOR DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION ARISING FROM THE MERGER OF THE UK DEPARTMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE?

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**Abstract:** In June 2020, the United Kingdom (UK) government announced the merger of the Department for International Development (DFID) with the Foreign Office. This decision has potential major implications for development education in the UK which has been funded by DFID since 1997. Around Europe, development education whilst primarily funded by Foreign Affairs ministries, has in some countries been closely related to development agencies. To keep governments supportive of development education requires a strong network of civil society organisations. A concern for development education is that a result of the merger of the two UK government departments could mean a move towards projects being directed towards servicing UK government foreign policy objectives rather than international development goals. A future development education strategy should aim to engage all key stakeholders including relevant ministries and civil society organisations plus academic and research bodies.

**Key words:** Department for International Development; Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Development Education; Global Learning; International Development Policy; Overseas Development Aid.

## **Introduction**

On 16 June 2020, the British prime minister, Boris Johnson, announced the merger of the Department of International Development (DFID) with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). This has been a goal of the government for some time and, whilst coming as no surprise, its announcement in the middle of the world's largest ever global pandemic which is hitting the

poorest people hardest, has been regarded by many as rather insensitive. This article reviews the impact of this decision on potential support for development education (DE). It also compares the merger with similar initiatives elsewhere in Europe and makes some recommendation as potential ways forward for individuals and bodies committed to supporting DE and global education (GE).

### **Development versus foreign affairs policies**

The United Kingdom (UK) government claims that the merger of DFID and the FCO will enable Britain to have a greater impact and influence on the world stage and ensure greater coherence over its international policies. According to the merger announcement:

“the Foreign Secretary will be empowered to make decisions on aid spending in line with the UK’s priorities overseas, harnessing the skills, expertise and evidence that have earned our reputation as a leader in the international development community” (UK Government, 2020).

There may be good arguments for closer alignment of foreign policy, multilateral commitment and global engagement – and these arguments play out in different institutional arrangements in different countries. Over the past decades, the distance between Ministries and Agencies might be characterised as a minuet – as the Ministries and Agencies move closer to each other, or farther away, depending on the country and political context. Some European countries have moved to merging their independent development agencies into the work of their ministries of foreign affairs (MFA) (e.g. Danida in Denmark in the 1990s), based on the rationale that the national contribution to global justice international development was a central pillar of (but not subservient to) foreign policy. Others have moved to strengthen and further integrate an existing development co-operation division or unit while giving it higher visibility (e.g. Irish Aid). Some, such as Austria, have moved in the opposite direction – establishing an independent agency, under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In Austria, as in Sweden and Norway, there is a strict delineation of roles between the Ministry (policymaking) and the Agency

(implementation). Other models (e.g. the French Development Agency) operate under the joint auspices of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Finance.

Throughout these differing models, it is clear that it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Development Cooperation, or their Agency, to engage in policy leadership, leadership of inter-ministerial coherence, and funding support for development education. There is no particular or clear evidence that a particular institutional arrangement works best for development education. However, institutional re-arrangements can have a negative effect on the continuity of work such as DE which needs long-term commitments to demonstrate impact. What is clear is this – a government cannot credibly claim commitment to international development without a clear policy and strong commitment to development education. While national situations and contexts differ, what is clear, from the perspective of development education, is that whether it resides in a Ministry of Foreign Affairs or a Development Cooperation Agency, a measure of the usefulness of the institutional arrangement is whether or not it can deliver sound policy and funding support for development education; and thereby enhance critical public knowledge of, understanding of, and engagement with, issues of global concern.

What this announcement ignores is that development and aid programmes are not based on supporting foreign policies, but on internationally agreed goals for combating global poverty and inequality, most recently the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). It is not the place here to review the work of DFID but there is no doubt that its development policies and programmes have been highly regarded for many years.

### **Development education under DFID**

Prior to the creation of DFID in 1997, development education received minimal support from the then Overseas Development Administration (ODA) which was part of the Foreign Office. With a new department being established, development education quickly became recognised as an

important component of government development policy. The 1997 White Paper from the Department (DFID, 1997) made specific reference to building awareness and understanding of international development issues and to build a public constituency in support of eliminating global poverty. This was certainly helped by having a separate department with a decent budget through a fund primarily aimed at civil society organisations. Development education as a field of practice quickly expanded. Its impact could be seen in the extent to which educational policies in all four nations of the UK made reference to global and development issues and themes within the school curriculum. There was a flowering of activity also in youth, further, higher and adult education (Bourn, 2015). Whilst criticisms could be made of the agendas of DFID's work on development education during the period from 1997 to 2010 (Cameron and Fairbrass, 2004; Biccum, 2010) there is no doubt it led to a range of creative and innovative initiatives whose legacies can still be seen today. This, for example, can be seen in the continued influence of post-colonial perspectives within development education practice as a result of the Open Space for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) project led by Vanessa Andreotti which was part-funded by DFID (Andreotti, 2011; Bourn, 2015).

Although funding was drastically cut after 2010 with the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition and later Conservative governments, a commitment remained to support development education through the Global Learning Programme (2014-2018) and more recently the Connecting Classrooms Through Global Learning (2018-2021) programme. There is however a concern that, with the impact of COVID-19 on the UK economy, and as funding for aid and development is linked to gross national product (GNP), all development programmes will come under review. The UK government has already announced a cut of £2.9 billion to the overseas development aid budget (BOND, 2020).

### **Location of development education within European ministries**

In most European countries that have provided support for development education type initiatives, the resourcing for this has come through Ministries of Foreign Affairs. Some countries have development agencies which have a

semi-autonomous role but, whatever the institutional configuration; it is through the aid budget that development education has primarily been funded. This is also recognised by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), whose Peer Reviews (OECD/DAC, 2014) of Official Development Assistance (ODA) programmes include detailed and growing emphasis on global public awareness and development education, and whose reporting mechanisms include space for recognising funding for development education at home as a valid budget priority (GENE, 2020a).

While there are examples, such as in Finland and Portugal, where there is a more of an inter-departmental approach with a strategy involving a range of ministries (Lehtomaki and Rajala, 2020; Teotonio-Pereira, 2016); nevertheless the most common approach is through funding programmes led by Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Development Co-operation or their agencies, and aimed at a range of NGOs combined with a number of strategic initiatives (Hartmeyer and Wegimont, 2016; Kuleta-Hulboj, 2020; McAuley, 2018). What has also been evident, however, is that where there is clear cooperation between the ministries and agencies responsible for development cooperation and ministries of education, there is support for raising the profile of development education within the curriculum (Tarozzi, 2020).

Historically, development education across Europe has always been susceptible to the changing political climate. If there are any lessons from these European examples for what now happens in the UK, the main one is the strength of the development education community, the engagement and support of a range of stakeholders and ideally some form of strategy that is clearly resourced. Where development education funding has come through a development agency there is some evidence of a less directive policy, leaving it to the NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and key organisations to deliver programmes. This ‘right of initiative’ and ‘free market of ideas’ when combined with strategic partnership approaches to the funding of development education, has been effective in integrating development education perspectives into education systems, and increasing critical public engagement

in a number of countries (Concord, 2016; McAuley, Hartmeyer and Wegimont, 2017).

There is also evidence that in some countries funding for development education has been influenced by broader government agendas including impact of migration and refugee issues and priority given to sustainable development (McAuley, 2018).

### **Implications of merger for taking forward development education in the UK**

The merger of DFID and the FCO in the UK as already noted, has come at a difficult time with the global pandemic and general reduction in government funding for aid which may well have consequences for any development education initiatives. At present with the main CCGL programme being also part funded by the British Council, it is likely this programme or a revised iteration of it will continue in the future. But what is more concerning is that, whilst up to now, the programme has been effectively managed by the Council there is the potential danger that with a greater emphasis on meeting UK foreign policy objectives, there could be a move towards a more restrictive and top-down approach.

What is equally worrying is that the UK development education community is not at present in a strong position to counter potential changes as a result of the merger. Whilst the Centre for Global Education remains strong in Northern Ireland, elsewhere in the UK there has been a noticeable decline in engagement from civil society organisations. Oxfam is making major cuts in its global citizenship education programme and the only international NGO that appears to be continuing its commitment to the sector is CAFOD, the Catholic international development charity. The largest player is now UNICEF (United Nations Children Fund) with its Rights Respecting School Award programme (UNICEF, 2020) which continues to be very popular. There are examples of practice such as Fairtrade Foundation's Award programme (Fairtrade Foundation, 2020) to *Send My Friend to School* (2020) and *The World's Largest Lesson* (2020) which demonstrate continued interest

from schools, teachers and young people about global issues. Several Development Education Centre (DECs) still exist and operate a valuable network in the Consortium of Development Education Centres (CODEC, 2020) but they have been heavily hit by lack of funding and are also likely to suffer from the impact of COVID-19.

The lack of access to funding opportunities through the European Commission for UK organisations following the UK's exit from the European Union has also been a major blow. Brexit has also meant that some of the wider opportunities and initiatives for mutual learning and sharing, such as the Erasmus Programme (2020), are also likely to disappear. On the more positive side, Oxfam before its cuts had been a major supporter of the Our Shared World initiative, which aimed to bring together civil society organisations under the umbrella of SDG 4.7. This had generated a lot of movement in England and engaged organisations from peace, development, human rights, environmental and arts-based groups to develop an advocacy strategy around SDG 4.7. However, the extent to which this network will continue without major resourcing and engagement from Oxfam at the time of writing this article is unclear.

Throughout the UK there is evidence of continued support and interest in global issues from educationalists, particularly teachers. The climate emergency initiatives launched in 2019 have created a legacy of awareness raising, learning and advocacy around sustainability issues by young people (Global Climate Strike, 2020). The global pandemic has demonstrated that we live in an interconnected world and that it is the poorest in the world who are being hardest hit. The need for development education has never been greater and nor has there been such a positive interest in learning about global and sustainability issues. The impact of the Black Lives Matter (2020) initiative around the world has shown a commitment to seeking a more equitable world within many societies. It has shown that discrimination and racism is ever present. That is why there is a need to learn lessons from such initiatives and to encourage educational programmes that move from a

‘multiculturalist’ approach which can all too easily ignore power relations to one of anti-oppressive practices.

The challenge is where does this leave UK government and what should be the demands of all those who wish to see a greater recognition of learning about global and sustainability issues?

### **Building a coalition of stakeholders**

There is a need to lobby the UK government to continue to support development education. What I think the Our Shared World initiative has shown is that central to moving forward is the building of broad networks of organisations, educational bodies and individuals who can help to build and sustain a vibrant network to promote global learning and sustainable development throughout the UK.

When the Development Education Association (DEA) was launched in October 1993, over six hundred organisations attended and from this more than two hundred of them joined the organisation. This was at a time when there was minimal support for the field. What I remember as being at the heart of that launch was the breadth of interest there was in development education. Today that interest, although it may use different terms such as global citizenship and sustainability, is even stronger than it was nearly thirty years ago. To move governments to recognise the value of such work comes from evidence, support from a wide range of bodies and an ability to make connections to current societal and educational needs (Bourn, 2016). There is now a wealth of academic publications (see Hartmeyer and Wegimont, 2016; Yemini, 2016; Davies et al, 2018; Ellis, 2016; Gaudelli, 2016; Maguth, 2015; Tarozzi and Torres, 2016; Torres, 2017) as well as reports from the Development Education Research Centre (DERC) (UCL, 2020). There have been over 250 publications addressing the field of development and global education over the past two years. These include academic articles, books and doctoral theses (DERC, 2018). In 2020, the first major international Handbook on global education was published with contributions from authors from more than 20 countries (Bourn, 2020).

An important body that can advise on how to take these ideas forward is Global Education Network Europe (GENE, 2020b), the network of government ministries across Europe who have worked with policymakers within Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Development and Education to develop nationally appropriate structures for the funding and support of global education, including development education (Hartmeyer and Wegimont, 2016; GENE, 2017).

### **Focus of development education**

Throughout my time as Director of the DEA and since then at DERC, I continually made the case to the UK government that development education could make a contribution to building not only an understanding of development issues, but could demonstrate how civil society and the UK public in general could support initiatives towards a more just and sustainable world. I felt that during the period 1997-2010 this was possible and there has clearly been some evidence (Bourn, Hunt and Ahmed, 2017) that engagement in global and development issues would today have not reached the support it has without the legacy of the previous twenty years. But to what extent should development education organisations be drawn into potential initiatives whose main purpose is to further British foreign policy agendas? If they do, educators will rightly resist. So, I would advise any emerging structure for DE within the FCO to take a broader view and consider the importance of development education within the context of wider international policy objectives including the SDGs.

At present, the CCGL programme appears to have a strong global learning focus and there is little evidence to date of the international partnerships component being seen as furthering government policies around trade for example. This suggests that it is essential over the coming period that organisations who wish to see progress on the Sustainable Development Goals and are supportive of global learning, develop a critical approach that offers alternatives to those that promote a ‘Global Britain’. This means emphasising themes such as global social justice and encouraging learning across all sectors of education and society that demonstrate the value of promoting an ethos of

global citizenship that challenges the economic nationalism that is becoming so much part of UK government policies.

There, of course, remains the challenge of funding and resourcing these approaches. The UK has varied and strong traditions of DE, variously understood; traditions that other countries in Europe have drawn upon and learnt from. Any European country that wishes to state that it engages in leadership in this field is characterised by:

- Strong policymaker engagement in and support for GE / development education and awareness raising (DEAR);
- Inter-ministerial coherence and cooperation in the field;
- A strong multi-annual commitment to funding, including funding of civil society, social partner, local authority and ‘right of initiative’ approaches, along with strategic partnerships in GE/DEAR;
- Commitment, where there is a dearth of such funding, to a staged series of increases, commensurate with ODA commitments so that public understanding, engagement and critical ownership keep pace with development commitments;
- Willingness to engage in review processes by international bodies to assess such commitments.

It may be premature to judge whether or not the merger between DFID and the FCO is about the UK’s role as a champion for poverty reduction in a new global international architecture; or whether it is just a fudge, a charlatan’s trick, an attempt to downgrade a national commitment to global justice in favour of a narrow self-interest and a return to a dream of past colonial ‘glory’. Time will tell. But for development educators, and those committed to a world of greater justice, the bullet points mentioned above provide a means of measuring commitment and support from government.

Civil society organisations, I believe, are still key to the delivery of development education type initiatives. But they need to consider their role and give attention to building alliances with a wider range of bodies including

think-tanks, academic institutions and bodies. There also needs to be a commitment from all sectors of society to call on policymakers to demonstrate how they are resourcing and supporting the moves towards a more just and sustainable world as suggested by the Sustainable Development Goals.

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