Focus

PUTTING THE POLITICS BACK IN: RADICAL EDUCATION AND ACTION IN THE CAUSE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Within a week of taking office in May 2010, the incoming British government announced that it was cancelling five development education projects funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), with immediate effect. In the same announcement, the government suspended the £6.5 million Global Development Engagement Fund that had been designed to launch later that year as the consolidated funding stream for development awareness projects in Britain, but which was ultimately scrapped before it had even been introduced. Andrew Mitchell, then Secretary of State for International Development, further announced that he would be commissioning a review of the entire programme of development awareness raising that had been funded by DFID over the previous decade.¹

The review of aid funding of development awareness projects was carried out by the Central Office of Information – a government department which was itself destined to be abolished in 2012. The review noted that DFID funding of its 'Building Support for Development' programme had grown from £1.5 million in 1998/99 to £24 million in 2009/10, with a cumulative investment of £116 million over the period (COI, 2011: 12). Following the publication of the review, Mitchell announced in July 2011 that the British government would no longer be supporting any development awareness schemes in the future, and that government funding for public education on

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¹ All references to international development, development awareness and development education are made in relation to the professional sectors defined under those categories and despite the profound problems at the heart of the terminology, as contested in myriad works from such diverse perspectives as Chang (2011), Esteva (2010), Latouche (2001), Gutiérrez (1971) etc.

issues of global poverty would be restricted to work in schools. Any development awareness raising for adults would be a matter for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions and other groups to fund themselves.

That this was a political decision had already been spelled out by the review itself. Its authors had declared themselves confident that 'raising awareness of development issues in the UK has contributed to reducing poverty overseas'. Equally, the review noted that the complexity of causal connections between development awareness and poverty reduction made it impossible to prove conclusively that DFID's funding of such schemes had made a direct contribution to reducing poverty. The authors summarised their findings as follows:

"From the evidence reviewed, we conclude that raising awareness of development issues in the UK is <u>likely</u> to contribute to reducing global poverty but it is not possible to establish a direct link or quantify the contribution made by DFID-funded activity. Therefore, a decision to continue funding activity in this area cannot be entirely evidence-based. Continued funding will, by default, therefore be a matter of opinion and judgement and therefore a political decision" (ibid: 4-5; emphasis in original).

For a Conservative-led coalition, the decision to scrap the British development education programme was an easy one. Any project designed to build public awareness of international development issues automatically includes an examination of how the neoliberal economic policies foisted on the majority world over the past thirty years have failed dismally, condemning millions to long-term poverty while enriching a new plutocracy at both national and international levels. Such a narrative delegitimises the political elite's continuing adherence to such policies, notably its promotion of free trade, market deregulation and privatisation in favour of transnational capital. By cancelling the development awareness funding stream, the Conservative-led coalition was removing an unwanted source of criticism at a time when it was redirecting its own international development programme towards the most

regressive forms of intervention, notably its private sector model of 'output-based aid' (Hilary, 2010).

It would be easy to portray this as a Manichean struggle between the forces of good and evil, the former represented by civil society groups striving to promote better public understanding of the root causes of global poverty, the latter being a right-wing government intent on using the aid budget to underpin its particular brand of free market fundamentalism. The truth, however, is more worrying. Over the past two decades, a highly professionalised NGO sector has increasingly moved to identify international development with overseas aid, despite the numerous critiques of such an elision from the majority world itself (most recently: Tandon, 2012). This trend has been particularly marked in the context of the campaign for countries of the rich world to attain the UN target of spending 0.7 percent of gross national income on official development assistance – a campaign that has been immensely successful in Britain, but at the expense of deeper public understanding of the root causes of global poverty.

This article will outline the trajectory of public awareness raising on issues of global justice in the British context, which is where I work. It will focus on the major campaign mobilisations of recent years as well as on more general development education programmes, on the understanding that there needs to be the maximum possible overlap between learning and action in the building of any movement for social justice (Ní Chasaide, 2009). It will also explore the potential for new forms of 'solidarity' based not on colonialist intervention on behalf of the Other, which has been the driving force for so much development education and global justice campaigning in Britain, but on the construction of a political project to build awareness of (and action against) a common enemy at home and abroad. The fact that the austerity policies currently being visited upon the peoples of Europe mirror those that have long been inflicted on the peoples of the global South by institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) offers a unique opportunity to join up domestic struggles with those in other parts of the world. I hope that the reflections here may have relevance for the global justice movement in Ireland and in other countries, even if many of the specifics described below are peculiar to the British context. The political debate over the

direction of the global justice movement in Britain has been heating up recently, as described in a previous issue of *Policy & Practice* (McCloskey, 2012). I offer these thoughts as someone engaged at the centre of that debate.

Make Poverty History and beyond

In retrospect, the years immediately before and after the turn of the century seem like a high water mark in the global justice movement. By 1998, a coordinated international campaign of resistance had successfully defeated the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), the treaty that had been designed to provide foreign investors with sweeping new powers in expanding their operations across the world (Deblock and Brunelle, 2000). globalisation movement had burst onto the public scene in demonstrations on the streets of Seattle at the third ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), preventing the launch of a new round of trade liberalisation negotiations in 1999 and sowing the seeds for the WTO's eventual long-term decline. The Jubilee 2000 movement had mobilised millions of activists across the world and secured \$110 billion in promised debt cancellation from the G7 group of the world's leading economies (Barrett, 2000). In the Western Hemisphere, mass resistance from social movements across Latin America had consigned George W. Bush's dream of the Free Trade Area of the Americas to a historical footnote.

International development NGOs had played their part in this 'movement of movements', using development education and outreach programmes to build public understanding of the key issues of the globalised economy, and mobilising millions behind campaigns for policy change by governments of all stripes. It was remarkable to sit in public meetings with trade justice activists at that time and to register just how deeply people had learned of the inner machinations of international trade negotiations and of the effects of globalisation on vulnerable communities around the world. It was equally striking to see how able and willing these activists were to challenge representatives of the British government (at that time, a Labour government) over its insistent promotion of free trade policies that would heap more disaster on industry and agriculture across the global South. This level of deep engagement was the result of many years' concerted effort by international development NGOs to build their members' understanding of the workings of

the global political economy, including technical issues that might traditionally have been considered 'too difficult' for ordinary supporters to understand.

Such was the background to the Make Poverty History (MPH) campaign mounted by a grand coalition of 540 organisations during 2005. While a call for 'more and better aid' was included in the MPH manifesto, structural changes to the global political economy were to the fore in the policy portfolio agreed by all coalition members in advance of the year. In addition to the central calls for trade justice and further debt cancellation, the MPH manifesto demanded new structures of corporate accountability to challenge the power of capital in the globalised economy, as well as a radical democratisation of the World Bank and IMF as the primary institutions of global economic governance. The overall framing of the manifesto in the language of justice rather than charity was an explicit attempt to move the public beyond the regressive understanding of international development as coterminous with overseas aid that had been the enduring legacy of Bob Geldof's celebrity Live Aid concerts back in 1985 (Martin, Culey and Evans, 2006).

In the final event, however, 2005 saw the aid message drown out all calls for structural change in the global economy, not least as a result of the two Live8 concerts organised by Geldof to coincide first with the major mobilisation of the MPH coalition in Edinburgh and then with the march organised by more radical groups to Gleneagles to challenge the legitimacy of the G8. The top line messaging of the MPH campaign itself served to reinforce the framing of poverty as an issue of charity rather than justice, with unprecedentedly high public recognition of the campaign 'brand' coming at the expense of any deeper understanding as to why the coalition had come together in the first place. Powerful though they undoubtedly were, MPH communications became increasingly divorced from the agreed policy demands of the campaign, and the issue of control over public messaging became a source of immense tension for the coalition as a whole (Sireau, 2009). As a result, one important lesson learned from 2005 was that a campaign's policy demands have minimal relevance to its broader impact unless carried through into the outward facing communications encountered by the public at large. Another was that global poverty might still be a powerful cause for concern among the general populace, but that most people's understandings of international development still boiled

down to a combination of humanitarian interventions, aid flows and, at best, debt relief.

In the years following the dissolution of the MPH coalition, many of the larger international development NGOs moved away from awareness raising on economic issues such as debt, trade and corporate power towards climate change campaigns or enterprise-driven responses to poverty, thus failing to engage their members or the broader public on the key issues of the global economic crisis that swept the world from 2008 onwards (Metcalfe, 2012). Yet in preparation for the London G20 summit to be held in April 2009, international development NGOs joined forces with all major British trade unions and environmental campaign groups to form the Put People First coalition. The coalition's campaign manifesto situated its demands on 'jobs, justice and climate' squarely within a critique of neoliberalism and its failure to offer any solutions to the global economic crisis, and deliberately addressed the consequences of that crisis in Britain at the same time as the highlighting its effects in the majority world (Put People First, 2009). While the campaign was instructive in uniting a broad range of actors behind an explicitly political message that spanned both North and South, it had none of the public reach of MPH and thus did little to challenge the mainstream public understanding of international development as broadly coterminous with overseas aid.

Reframing the discourse

Growing concern had long been expressed by more radical NGOs at the persistent prioritisation of 'more and better aid' as the international development sector's primary demand on the British government both before and since MPH – notably in the run-up to the 2010 general election, when the call for all parties to honour the 0.7 percent aid target was further intensified out of fear that an incoming Conservative government might abandon it. Yet the most powerful recognition of the problem caused by this reductive agenda came in the form of a research study initiated by Oxfam and published in January 2011 by the international development umbrella group Bond. Based on thinking developed by environmental NGOs into how best to frame complex problems so as to sustain public engagement over the long term (Crompton, 2010), the report *Finding Frames* showed how the portrayal of global justice issues in NGO communications had perpetuated a perverse understanding of

North-South relations inherited from the 1980s (the Live Aid Legacy), characterised by the relationship between 'Powerful Giver' and 'Grateful Receiver'. The MPH campaign was held to exemplify the central paradox facing international development NGOs in that it had succeeded in mobilising unprecedented numbers of people behind its demands on global poverty, but at the same time had 'changed nothing' in terms of the British public's understanding of the issues (Darnton and Kirk, 2011: 6). The report concluded that NGO communications urgently needed to reframe the international development agenda in order to secure deeper engagement from the public over the long term, and suggested a set of possible alternatives as a starting point for further discussion (ibid: 103):

Current (negative) frame	Alternative (positive) frames?
Charity	Justice; Fairness
Charities	Movements; NGOs
Aid	Mutual support; Partnership
Development	Well-being; freedom; Responsibility
Corruption; Aid effectiveness	Good/bad governance; Fraud
Communications	Conversations
Campaigns	Engagements; Dialogues

While there were obvious shortcomings in some of the alternatives suggested in the above table (most notably, the negative connotations now increasingly associated with NGOs themselves), the overall message of *Finding Frames* was important in that it highlighted the long-term problems caused by the regressive framing of global justice issues in terms of charity, aid and philanthropy, and ascribed responsibility for that state of affairs to the international development NGOs themselves. Despite extensive discussion of

the report's findings at the highest levels of the NGO community, however, reaching the 0.7 percent aid target still remained the principal campaign demand made of the British government by the international development sector in the period following the publication of *Finding Frames*. When asked why so little had changed in the wake of the report's publication, one senior manager in one of the largest international development NGOs replied simply: 'It didn't work for us'. Such remarks serve to confirm the charge already made in *Finding Frames* that many larger NGOs have consciously used negative framing in their communications, despite its acknowledged consequences, because of the increased returns it guarantees to their public fundraising efforts.

Frustrated at the unwillingness of the larger NGOs to follow through on the recommendations of *Finding Frames*, a group of senior representatives from campaigning NGOs and trade unions formed the Progressive Development Forum in 2012 so as to create a space to challenge the dominant discourse on global justice issues in the British context. At the Forum's first meeting, held under the banner of 'Beyond Aid, Towards Justice', several participants highlighted the importance of renewing education and outreach programmes around key economic and political issues in order to rebuild the movement for global justice in Britain; the Forum itself was followed by two public meetings in London and Manchester on the same theme. Equally, participants spoke of the need to join forces with new movements for social justice in the domestic context such as Occupy, UK Uncut and local antiausterity coalitions, and to break down analytical barriers between North and South (PDF, 2012). With a view to the continued framing of the global justice agenda in the British context, the forum expressed particular concern at the revival of the most negative imagery in NGO fundraising communications, in flagrant breach of the various good practice guidelines on depictions of global poverty agreed over the years - most recently, the code of conduct developed by the Irish NGO platform Dóchas and eventually adopted at the European level in 2007 (Concord, 2006). Examples of the most degrading images, notably those of emaciated and helpless infants awaiting sponsorship or other acts of mercy from Western donors, were subsequently posted on the Progressive

Development Forum website in order to start a broader discussion on how to eradicate their use once and for all.²

The IF campaign

There had long been discussions as to whether another campaign coalition similar to MPH should be formed for when the G8 returned to UK territory in 2013. While those discussions had largely stalled within the international development sector's official coordination structures, the five NGOs that constitute the British Overseas Aid Group (BOAG) - Oxfam, Save the Children, Christian Aid, ActionAid and CAFOD - had engaged in exploratory discussions with the British government over the possibility of mounting a campaign on food and hunger during 2013. The campaign, trailed in the media from as early as April 2012, was eventually launched in January 2013 as the IF campaign - or, to give it its full title, Enough Food for Everyone IF. The policy demands of the campaign would be threefold: more aid for nutrition and food interventions; more transparency from governments and corporations, including on tax issues; and an end to land grabbing. According to internal documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, the British government had been coordinating its plans with the BOAG agencies over the IF campaign since 2011, and sought to use the campaign to create a 'golden moment' prior to the G8 summit that would promote British prime minister David Cameron as a leader in the fight against global hunger (War on Want, 2013).

Several NGOs and trade unions that had previously been active members of the MPH and Put People First coalitions declared themselves unable to join the IF campaign. For some, the prospect of supporting an image of Cameron's government as a force for social justice was politically unthinkable at a time when its policies were sending unprecedented numbers to food banks at home and having a profoundly negative effect on the poorest and most vulnerable abroad. For others, including the UK Food Group (the body responsible for coordinating civil society action on global food issues), the IF campaign's refusal to align itself with the worldwide peasant farmers' movement

² The website is at: http://progressivedevelopmentforum.wordpress.com/.

La Vía Campesina, and especially its call for food sovereignty, was equally unacceptable – not least because those farmers were supposed to feature high among the campaign's ultimate 'beneficiaries'. The absence of any engagement with Southern partners had already been identified as a failing of the MPH campaign eight years earlier (Hodkinson, 2005); by now, international development NGOs' almost total disconnection from grassroots social movements had called their very legitimacy into question (Banks and Hulme, 2012). The IF campaign suffered from this crisis of legitimacy from the outset, with many individuals within the member organisations of the coalition expressing their profound unease as to its politics before, during and after the termination of the campaign.

In the end, the IF campaign claimed success for securing new aid for global nutrition initiatives and for seeing the issues of tax and transparency appear on the agenda of the G8 summit held in Fermanagh in June 2013. Yet in terms of public framing of global justice issues - the outstanding challenge identified in *Finding Frames* - the IF campaign further reinforced previous stereotypes of the 'Grateful Receiver' awaiting generosity from the hand of the 'Powerful Giver'. Media coverage of the government hunger summit that was held to coincide with the IF campaign's main rally in London's Hyde Park focused almost exclusively on the \$4 billion pledged to nutrition projects around the world, and IF campaign representatives welcomed the new aid sums as a 'historic breakthrough in the fight against hunger'. David Cameron was duly rewarded with his 'golden moment' when he was heralded as a leader in the fight against global poverty by billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates at the IF campaign rally. Food sovereignty activists mounted a demonstration outside Cameron's hunger summit in solidarity with African farmers' movements protesting against the G8's pro-corporate New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition; however, despite agreeing in their own policy analysis that the New Alliance represents a profound threat to the future of farming across Africa, IF campaign members did not join the demonstration (Hall, 2013).

Beyond colonialism

Despite periodic efforts to redirect it towards the structural failings of the capitalist world system, the dominant NGO discourse on international development is firmly locked in a colonial mindset. The demand for

humanitarian action 'on behalf of the peoples of the majority world draws its inspiration from the same wellspring as the original 'civilising mission' that provided justification for nineteenth century colonialism, in which the Other must be effaced or silenced in order to be granted salvation (Said, 1995; Spivak, 1988). This sacred duty on the part of the colonial subject reflects a particularly British form of narcissism stemming from an imperial history that is yet to be properly deconstructed in the popular imagination, and one which finds its fullest expression in relation to that most potent symbol of indigence in the modern era, the homogenised construct that is 'Africa' (Harrison, 2013). Fundraising images of emaciated African children awaiting rescue by Western donors, already noted above, represent a direct revival of the imperial tradition by way of the 'colonial gaze' (Dogra, 2012). The religious undertones of the project are never far from the surface: while colonial missionaries sought to save souls, today's aid agencies, according to their own preferred formulation, 'save lives'.³

Appeals to this tradition have been highly successful in the British context, not only in sustaining the fundraising income of international development NGOs over the years but also in mobilising large numbers of people behind global poverty campaigns, most notably the MPH campaign of 2005. It is unclear whether such levels of support can be sustained indefinitely: new surveys of public opinion reveal a growing scepticism as to the credibility of NGO messaging on international issues, and in particular the exaggerated claims made by aid agencies for what the 'transactional' model of shallow engagement by donation or child sponsorship can achieve in ending world poverty (Glennie, Straw and Wild, 2012). More importantly, however, the past few years have seen British international development NGOs increasingly distance themselves from any challenges to the power structures or ideologies that cause poverty, inequality and injustice, whether at home or in the majority world. This abdication of any political agenda ensures that mobilisations on issues of global poverty are not just tolerated by British politicians but actively welcomed as useful distractions, especially when they offer a ready source of

³ The classic statement of the continuity between missionaries and international development NGOs remains Manji and O'Coill (2002).

positive public relations for an undeserving government, as the IF campaign did. Driven by the metrics of donor relations, international development NGOs have calculated that it is in their interests to work in active collaboration with the powerful – whether G8 governments or transnational corporations – in order to achieve tangible advocacy 'wins' (however illusory) which can then be reported back to supporters as proof of continuing influence. By contrast, mounting long and difficult challenges to power holds little attraction in such calculations.

The decisive rupture that needs to be made is political and radical. International development NGOs must engage once more in political analysis that goes to the heart of the continuing scandals of global poverty, inequality and injustice, articulating a transformative agenda which is consonant with the demands of social movements across the world, not (as at present) in opposition to them. Action on the basis of such analysis will allow NGOs to reclaim their place as allies in the broader global justice movement, from which they have been largely absent for many years. Taking on the structural issues of the global economy in turn means building new communities of activists by means of political education programmes that connect the global with the domestic and explore the myriad alternatives to capitalism from across the world. This entails linking up with new social movements as they appear in our own political contexts - as a number of more radical NGOs did, for example, in contributing to the Tent City University run by the Occupy London movement outside St Paul's Cathedral in 2011, or with the Bank of Ideas discussion space set up in the occupied UBS building in the City of London that same year. Linking with our earlier work in partnership with grassroots anti-eviction movements in South Africa and their actions around the FIFA World Cup in 2010, War on Want also joined in community protest actions around the London Olympics, bringing a global perspective to the day of debate on housing rights in the context of mega-sporting events held in the empty Georgian mansion owned by sculptor Anish Kapoor and occupied by the Bread and Circuses collective in June 2012 (Walker and Jones, 2012).

Any such political action will necessarily entail a radical break with the colonial mindset that has for so long afflicted the communication of global justice issues in the British context. By establishing a continuity between the

neoliberal economic policies visited on the peoples of South and North alike, we can at last dispense with the idea that action in solidarity with the oppressed in the majority world is a sacred duty towards the Other, rather than part of a global fight against a common enemy. This latter conception of solidarity as a commonality of interests which unites people across geographical divides is the dominant understanding of solidarity in the socialist tradition, and requires a heightened (and constantly renegotiated) political consciousness of the root causes of oppression if it is not to become a purely metaphorical device (Hyman, 2011). NGO engagement with such forms of active, reciprocal solidarity could in turn unlock the potential of joining with movements for transformative social change in our own societies, rather than existing in the sealed ghetto of 'international development', as has so often been the case up to now.

As mentioned at the start of this article, the advent of perma-austerity in the countries of the rich North offers a unique opportunity for international development NGOs to accomplish this radical shift by means of a political analysis of the driving forces behind the imposition of neoliberal doctrine, For European countries that have had their austerity North and South. programmes visited upon them as the condition of IMF or Troika bailouts, there is an obvious continuity with the structural adjustment programmes imposed on the countries of the majority world by the IMF and World Bank as conditionality for new loans and debt relief during the 'lost decades' of the 1980s and 1990s. Making this connection in no way seeks to equate the experiences, or to suggest that neoliberal attacks on the state in the rich North have an equivalent human impact to the wholesale destruction of economies and livelihoods caused by the institutions of global economic governance in the The point of linking the different instances of capitalist global South. aggression in various parts of the world is to raise awareness of the political

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⁴ Rather than revitalising this traditional conception of solidarity by means of a higher order statement of shared interests, Hyman argues for trade unions to adopt a new form of solidarity based on 'mutuality despite difference', understood in humanitarian (and, in my view, highly unsatisfactory) terms as 'an obligation for the strong to support the weak'. He does, however, concede that this approach risks turning solidarity into 'a synonym for charity, implying pitying support for passive victims' (Hyman, 2011: 26).

programme behind them, and to sharpen people's understanding of the ultimate adversary in the fight for change.

Such was the intention of the 'Austerity is Working... for the 1%' conference run by War on Want, the public services trade union PCS and a number of other international development NGOs in March 2013, linking up experiences of resistance to austerity in Europe with the struggles against privatisation and market liberalisation that have been sustained for so long in the majority world. Such also is the aim of the programme of trade union education we are currently running with PCS on the importance of tax justice as a precondition of equitable social models in both North and South - a programme due to be rolled out through trade union structures in Ireland and Sweden in its second year, and then to the rest of Europe through the public service trade union federation EPSU. We have also engaged in similar linking of the domestic and global on issues of food sovereignty and militarism, as in the workshops we ran in The Spark in central London during June 2013, an open space organised with the Jubilee Debt Campaign, London Roots Collective and People & Planet in order to raise awareness on a range of economic justice themes and as a hub for sharing information about protest actions in the week leading up to the G8 summit in Fermanagh. Following on from the demonstration against the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, mentioned above, this included participation in actions held in the heart of London's financial district at Canary Wharf, linking up struggles against austerity and debt from around the world under the unifying banner: 'They Owe Us!'.

If the NGO community across Europe were to unite behind a coordinated programme of radical education and action that challenged national leaders and EU institutions to abandon their promotion of pro-capitalist policies in Europe and across the world, we could make a significant and genuine contribution to the cause of social justice. Such a programme would of necessity take us into the political arena, including an honest examination of whether the structures of the European Union itself are compatible with social justice and democracy in the longer term. In this exercise, international development NGOs have the advantage of using their privileged connections to global information networks to draw on many positive challenges to existing

systems from other parts of the world, most notably the inspiring example of social movements rising up in successful political opposition to entrenched elites in Latin America over the past decade – and the extraordinary shift in international relations that this has effected within the Western Hemisphere (Boron, 2012; Burbach, Fox and Fuentes, 2013). While NGOs cannot pretend to command the legitimacy or power to effect such revolutions in their own right, they can form part of movements for transformative change and engage in partnership with others in those movements by means of the particular contributions they have to make. Action-oriented education programmes and resources have an important role to play in building social justice movements and informing the next generation of activists – which is why the Conservative-led government had no compunction in scrapping state support for such programmes when it came into office. International development NGOs have the potential to make a genuine difference in the fight for a better world, but only if we choose to do so.

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