DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND – ASSESSING THE PAST AND CHARTERING THE FUTURE

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In this assessment of development education practice in Northern Ireland over the past twenty years, **Stephen McCloskey** examines the funding trends and issues of capacity in the development sector. He examines the influence of the Department for International Development's intervention in the sector in the late 1990s, and considers the importance of local policy and resource support of development education and the prospects for extending development education into new sectors of civil society in the future.

Introduction

A graphic representation of development education activity in Northern Ireland over the past twenty years would reveal a low starting position and a series of peaks and troughs but a steady progression, particularly in the final quarter. In its formative stages, development education activity was marginal to government policy-making, poorly funded and lacked strategic direction which limited its impact on civil society. However today we can detect broad public understanding of the importance of development issues and a greater willingness to become actively engaged with global agendas. In February 2003, for example, over 20,000 people attended a mass rally in Belfast city centre opposing the war in Iraq and in June 2005 a large and successful demonstration voiced local support for the Make Poverty History campaign in the build up to the G8 Summit in July.

The importance of these public manifestations of solidarity with developing countries should not be underestimated in a society where conflict often denied opportunities for engagement with the wider world and created inward-looking perspectives. While these rallies may not tell us much about the depth of public knowledge of development issues or the role of development education in engendering active citizenship, they can be

interpreted as a healthy indicator of interest in international development and a platform for future initiatives. Thus, development education can be offered to increasingly receptive target groups in civil society at a time when local citizens are becoming more aware of their interconnectedness with other countries and their capacity for change at local and global levels.

This paper will reflect on development education practice in Northern Ireland over the last two decades and consider how global awareness has come in from the margins of mainstream education. It will outline some of the opportunities that could extend current practice into new areas of civil society and the challenges in areas such as funding and capacity that continue to hamper progression in the development sector. While the primary consideration here is practice Northern Ireland, the paper will make observations on the relationship between local practitioners and colleagues in Britain and in the Republic of Ireland.

Reflection on Practice in Northern Ireland
From the 1980s until the mid-1990s development education practice was largely concentrated and sustained in the activities of Development Education Centres (DECs); small, autonomous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with the aim of enhancing public awareness of development issues and galvanizing action toward justice and social equality. Around fifty DECs were established in England, Scotland and Wales with two in Northern Ireland (Derry and Belfast) and six in the Republic of Ireland. Most of these organisations shared similar functions and characteristics: they were resource centres with public libraries on their premises; they provided training in the formal and/or non-formal education sectors; they drew most of their funding from the development NGO sector; they were independent organisations rather than subsidiaries of larger entities; they operated with small staff numbers and often laboured under capacity deficits; they promoted active learning methodologies and imparted values, skills and attitudes that equipped the learner to participate in a process of progressive change.

Many DECs were established by development agencies in the 1970s and 1980s when government support was minimal. As Richard Borowski (2005), a development educator with Leeds DEC, recently pointed out in an internal Development Education Association (DEA) discussion paper:

> "During the years of Thatcherism development education was seen as subversive and dangerous; it encouraged people to think for themselves and to challenge the structures and systems that contributed towards global justice and inequality."

In 1996-97, the then Conservative government's Overseas Development Administration (ODA) contributed just £700,000 to support its development education work throughout the UK (DEA, 1996). The larger financial burden for development education was carried at this time by development agencies, many of which supported their own development education activities. For example, Oxfam until the mid-1990s had a Development Education Unit in their Belfast office; they provided resources on site and delivered training workshops throughout Northern Ireland. Moreover, the distance between NGOs and central government in terms of funding and policy issues saw the former maintain a more radical approach to development that was reflected in their resource and conference output.

While the number of DECs in England facilitated the emergence of regional networks of centres, the development community in Northern Ireland largely comprised of development agencies with just two DECs. By the mid-1990s, the Derry DEC had effectively wound up its operations because of financial problems and subsequent efforts to revive it failed. Meanwhile the Belfast DEC, which was founded and supported by eight development agencies in 1985, continued to operate with support from the NGO sector. In fact, some development agencies regarded their grant to the Belfast DEC as their sole contribution to development education while others worked in partnership with the Centre in the course of delivering their own educational activities.

Education on the margins

Development education practice, in its earliest stages of progression, was characterized by under-capacity and limited outreach. In 1996, Ann McCollum, a development education consultant, delivered a paper titled 'Bridging the gap between theory and practice' at a conference for practitioners in Dublin. McCollum delivered a sharp critique of the sector that prompted in some quarters a reassessment of its role in mainstream education and impact on target groups. She suggested that the sector was largely talking to itself and failing to engage at a strategic level with key stakeholders in formal and non-formal education. While acknowledging that funding constraints limited the 'conceptual space' available to practitioners to strategically plot the development of their practice, McCollum argued that the sector had departed from its theoretical underpinnings found in the work of Brazilian philosopher, educationalist and activist Paulo Freire.

While Freire regarded education as a means of empowerment and social transformation, contemporary development educators had absorbed the Freirean concept of active learning within 'the dominant liberal ideology'. McCollum suggested that 'Freire's ideas have been misappropriated by development education leading to dilemmas in relation to the theory and practice of development education which must be recognised and resolved' (1996). She suggested that assuming social action would naturally follow awareness raising activities was fundamentally flawed as it concentrated on the individual rather than wider society. McCollum went on to address other key aspects of practice such as evaluating the impact of activities on learners and the reactive rather than proactive positioning of the sector in regard to key policy and funding. Thus, McCollum saw 'DEC activities as dominated and circumscribed by government whether it be in terms of education, policy or practice' (1996). Of course, some practitioners challenged McCollum's concept of marginalisation within development education which was specifically couched within the practice of DECs. Some of the larger development organisations in Ireland such as Trócaire were establishing strategic linkages within the broader education system toward creating new opportunities for global awareness. Trócaire established a partnership with the

Curriculum Development Unit in the Republic of Ireland which resulted in the development of a new curriculum area called Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), an innovative programme that was welcomed by teachers and students alike.

While such initiatives were the exception rather than the rule, they at least pointed to the possibilities of strategic alliances between the NGO and governmental sectors in areas such as education and development. However, these examples of good practice also accentuated the unevenness of development education practice and the dangers in trying to consider the sector in homogenous terms by attaching to it general characteristics. Just as some of the smaller DECs struggled with basic capacity and infrastructural issues, many of the larger centres were producing quality resources and introducing dynamic working practices with target groups. The Teachers in Development Education (TIDE) Centre in Birmingham was and is a good example of a centre that directly involves learners in creating materials and incorporating development education methodologies into their practice.

The unevenness of development education practice also extended to its geographical coverage within the island of Ireland and Britain. Most DECs and development organisations are located in large towns and cities which create obvious problems for learners outside urban centres in accessing training and resources. In Northern Ireland, the problems related to capacity and funding were exacerbated by the low number of practitioners. With just one DEC and a small number of educationalists working in development agencies, the level of development education practice outside Belfast was minimal. Moreover, many educators, particularly teachers, found it difficult to visit the Belfast DEC during working hours to access materials. While this is a persistent problem for development educators today, it has been eased somewhat by information technology and the capacity to promote training opportunities and resources on-line. It is also heartening to see more development agencies in Northern Ireland create positions in the area of education, even if at times they are related to either fundraising or campaigning.

However, development education activity and resources have been concentrated in the head offices of development agencies over the past two decades with the Northern Ireland offices often largely preoccupied with fundraising. Relatively few resources have been produced in Northern Ireland and although the Northern Irish public has traditionally responded generously to fundraising appeals and campaigns, expenditure on development education remains relatively low compared to other organisational activities. There are always notable exceptions, but Northern Ireland has been squeezed between Dublin and London in the allocation of resources and it is hoped that recent education appointments in Belfast signal a more fulsome contribution to awareness raising activity. In addition to human and financial resources, Northern Ireland requires development education outlets outside Belfast that can cater for the needs of learners and educationalists and development agencies are better positioned that most to provide such a service.

Mainstreaming Development Education

From the 1980s through to the mid-1990s, development education was largely under-funded and resourced with development organisations shouldering the support of DECs with minimal resources coming from government. As the Department for International Development's (DFID) strategy document on development education, *Building Support for Development* (1999) suggests:

> "For much of the last 20 years, the UK government has attached little importance to development education work in the UK, leaving others, particularly the network of Development Education Centres and others in the voluntary sector, to take the lead in promoting greater awareness and understanding."

However, in the mid-to-late 1990s, the development education sector underwent considerable change that resulted in both positive and negative outcomes for practitioners. As Borowski (2005) suggests 'The whole environment in which DECs operated changed; no longer were they seen as organisations on the fringe but central to supporting statutory bodies effecting

social change'. The main source of change in the sector was the election of a Labour government in 1997 and the supplanting of the ODA by DFID, the government ministry responsible for overseas aid and development education. Shortly after the election, DFID published a White Paper on international development, *Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century* (DFID, 1997), which included a section on development education that said: 'Every child should be educated about development issues so that they understand the key global considerations that shape their lives' (DFID, 1997, p.77). The White Paper commissioned the establishment of a working group to write a strategic plan for development education which resulted in the publication of *Building Support for Development* in 1999. In tandem with this strategic intervention by DFID came greater financial support for development education in the UK which increased to £5.4m in 2003-04. This renewed funding of the sector marked a considerable shift in support compared to the years of neglect under the Conservatives and was complemented with the introduction of small grant schemes in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland designed to encourage new initiatives in development education from non-traditional practitioners. Moreover, the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 created a local Assembly with ministries occupied by locally elected politicians and facilitated the formation of an All Party Group on International Development (APGID); a group with genuine cross-party consensus on global issues. Meanwhile devolution processes in Scotland, Wales and England – as well as Northern Ireland – meant that development NGOs could develop direct relations with British government ministries like DFID rather than funnel their agendas through UK-wide networks that had previously interfaced with government on their behalf.

Enabling Effective Development Education
Therefore post-1997, development organisations could cultivate direct relations with DFID civil servants and ensure a deeper understanding at their end of the policy and funding scenario that prevailed in Northern Ireland. With this greater mutual understanding came additional financial support for development education projects and a stronger strategic direction in policy-

making. This became most evident in 2003 with DFID's introduction of Enabling Effective Support (EES), a five year formal sector initiative with the aim of providing teachers 'with more effective and sustained support to incorporate the global dimension into their teaching'. This would be achieved through the 'development of locally owned strategies' with each strategy focusing on 'how global perspectives in the curriculum can be effectively delivered and supported, particularly through new partnerships and co-operative ways of working' (DFID, 2003).

Launched in eight regions in England and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, EES aims to bring together key stakeholders in formal education to take ownership of a strategy that will permanently mainstream development education. In Northern Ireland, EES has so far comprised the commissioning of research into existing development education in schools (CADA, 2004), and the establishment of a broadly representative Steering Group to oversee and inform the writing of a five year strategic plan for development education. Although still in its earliest stages of development, EES offers a real opportunity to ensure 'buy in' to global education by the main policy-makers and training providers in education and, if successful, may serve as a template for strategic engagements into other education sectors (youth sector, adult education, trade unions, and voluntary sector).

EES is a particularly welcome initiative given past difficulties in Northern Ireland in securing a statutory policy environment for development education. The development sector anticipated a local response to the challenges for global education outlined in the DFID White Paper. However, overtures to the main education policy-maker in education in Northern Ireland, the Department of Education, have not thus far resulted in additional resources or the writing of a statutory statement that provides guidance to educators on the pedagogical value of development education and its urgent requirement in the current era of accelerated globalisation. Moreover, we currently lack a fixed reference point in the Department for queries or policy matters related to international issues. The current Department position in relation to funding

appears to be deference to the support offered by DFID and in regard to policy is one of reference to the Northern Ireland curriculum.

While funding from central government has increased, it is neither guaranteed in future years given the potential for policy changes nor a viable alternative to local, sustainable sources of support. Similarly, the recent curriculum changes in Northern Ireland and, in particular, the introduction of Citizenship Education, have been welcomed by the development sector but do not in themselves represent a policy context for development education. A policy framework underpins curriculum change, outlines the importance of development education to learners and educators, sets out the values that inform global awareness and, importantly, commits the Department to fixed objectives that drive forward its own work in this area while giving confidence to others to do the same. Perhaps the EES process will enable the Department to arrive at this position and fulfil a recommendation in the EES research document which stated that 'The Department should devise a policy position on the global dimension in education and channel more resources into supporting it' (Coalition for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, 2003, p.56).

In other areas of statutory provision in the formal sector, development NGOs have entered into effective partnerships: for example, with the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) responsible for teacher support services and the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the body charged with curriculum development. Development organisations are called upon to support these statutory agencies in the production of materials, in the development of teacher guidance and delivery of teacher training. These are indicators of the mainstreaming of development education in formal education and evidence of the kind of strategic engagement that McCollum identified as missing in the operations of many NGOs in the 1990s.

Critical Distance

Thus from being perpetual outsiders from the 1980's to mid-90's, development organisations have found themselves operating within the sphere of government and closer to the decision-making process. This has raised other issues concerning the independence of the non-governmental sector and its role in monitoring and critiquing government activities when necessary. Mark Curtis, the former director of the World Development Movement, has suggested that 'Most (charitable) organisations are frightened of criticizing government beyond certain limits even when the facts warrant it – and these limits are very narrow. These organisations play the role of containing wider, radical opposition while appearing to be genuinely independent' (2005). This question of critical distance when aiming to influence government policy needs to be addressed by the sector at a time when popular mobilization around development issues has never been greater and the NGO-government relationship never closer.

The independence of the development education sector is also being compromised by a general trend of reduced support for global awareness work from development agencies. This concern was raised by Borowski when he stated that:

> "Unfortunately reorganizations within development agencies, the pressure to market and promote the agency 'brand' and the increased involvement of DFID in supporting DECs led to a reduction of unconditional support." (2005)

It is regrettable that some agencies regarded the government's engagement with development education as an opportunity to reduce their financial commitment to both their own educational work and that of some DECs. The main outcomes of this trend include an increasing reliance on government support which may impede independent action and enhance vulnerability in the event of a downturn in spending. The development sector should recognize the long-term benefits of an increasingly aware and active public in the context of global issues and move to restore its support for development education to pre-1997 levels.

Challenges for Development Education

In its post-conflict stage of development, Northern Ireland has been confronted by a previously latent and, now, prevalent and escalating racism problem. With its focus on multiculturalism and values espousing respect and inclusivity, development education is well-positioned to support educational initiatives to address the root causes of racist behaviour. An obvious starting point is the development of partnerships within the black and minority ethnic (BME) sector in global awareness work targeted at BME groups and the education sector. The number of BME communities in Northern Ireland has increased in recent years and the resulting multiculturalism in our society affords new opportunities for learning about other cultures, traditions, faiths and lifestyles. There is also an impetus from within the BME sector to engage in development education activities but many BME organisations are new entities that lack organizational capacity and funding, and expertise in the area of global awareness. Development organisations and statutory funders in the area of education and equality need to nurture the emerging BME groups and enable them to develop the capacity they need to become effective players in the process of societal change.

However, development education can only effectively address racism and wider global problems such as poverty and inequality if we have a schools' curriculum that provides the opportunities to do so. The recent curriculum review has taken a significant step in that direction with the introduction of Citizenship Education but there is a danger that we could limit development education to the boundaries of this new area. Development education content and practice extends across all subject areas and international development requires that all of our young people have the opportunity to learn about global issues irrespective of their vocational choices. We need to pursue imaginative curriculum development that places the demands of the economy in the context of fundamental educational values that address the many social problems that confront us locally and globally.

In terms of effective curriculum implementation, teachers require professional development opportunities that equip them to deliver the global

dimension in schools. EES research in this area (Centre for Global Education, 2004) suggests that current provision is not adequately preparing teachers in terms of training and resources for effective delivery of development education. The ELBs and NGO sector needs to consider the introduction of short courses and accredited training in the area of global awareness that will support career development and facilitate significant participation. Similarly, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses should encompass a global dimension in their content and shape student teacher practice from its earliest stages of development.

New initiatives in ITE suggest that teacher training institutions recognize the importance of adding a global dimension to training programmes and ensuring student access to development education resources. St. Mary's University College (Belfast) and the University at Ulster (Coleraine) have successfully secured DFID support for three-year programmes that reflect an institutional commitment to development education and have facilitated the appointment of new staff with the specific remit of resourcing the global dimension through teaching input, staff development and the provision of on-campus resources. These initiatives suggest that management 'buy-in' and a whole college approach to development education are essential to ensuring the sustainability and visibility of the global dimension in teacher training institutions. As with the schools' curriculum, development education should pervade all aspects of ITE training rather than become ring-fenced within specific courses or subjects.

University courses could also benefit from a more multi-disciplinary approach to development issues. While many under-graduate courses carry a global dimension through standalone modules and their coverage of specific issues and countries, post-graduate entry points into development studies are extremely limited in Northern Ireland. This may result from the closely guarded boundary lines of university schools and faculties that can hamper the inter-departmental collaboration necessary for the provision of multi-disciplinary courses. Nonetheless, the level of co-operation between NGOs and the university sector has increased significantly in recent years with the

former regularly called upon to resource courses and provide expert input on various aspects of development work. Some students are also being offered work placements within NGOs as part of their under-graduate studies which enhances their capacity for critical awareness and active engagement with issues beyond their university studies. These initiatives suggest the possibilities that a more integrated approach to development issues in universities could offer students, academic staff and NGOs in Northern Ireland.

However, the broader challenge of introducing development education into other educational arenas in civil society such as community education, adult literacy, the women's sector, trade union and business sectors, faith / church groups, and the youth sector requires a much greater capacity in the development sector than that currently available. It is unrealistic to expect these sectors to generate capacity in global awareness without outside support in the form of training and resource provision. Such capacity needs to be nurtured through a combination of integrated NGO support services and enhanced NGO/ government funding for the development education sector. Development education practitioners may find themselves playing a more consultative role in the future with the aim of broadening support for development in wider society. However, this will be dependent on a general strengthening of the development non-governmental sector in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion
The Development education practice in Northern Ireland, like that in the Republic of Ireland and Britain has moved in from the margins of mainstream education toward a position of strategic engagement with policy-makers and government civil servants. Capacity problems persist in the development sector and it remains heavily and, perhaps unhealthily, reliant on government support. This underlines the need for renewed NGO support for education work within the development sector itself and a greater level of global awareness activity Northern Ireland, which has tended to lose out in the concentration of development education resources in London and Dublin.

While the introduction of local government has faltered since the signing of the Belfast Agreement, there has been broad and sustained political consensus in the areas of development and global awareness, which could perhaps herald a positive political context should devolution be successfully restored. In the meantime, the EES initiative has the potential to engage key stakeholders in plotting a way forward for development education in the formal sector and ensure the development of a policy framework for global awareness within the Department of Education. The EES research conducted to date suggests that sustained local support for development education and an addressing of the current policy vacuum are prerequisites for the more effective delivery of the global dimension in schools. In fact, greater capacity within the development sector in Northern Ireland has the potential to carry a positive global message into wider civil society and deepen its engagement with the developing world.

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