

Viewpoint

AID, NGOS AND THE DEVELOPMENT SECTOR: IS IT TIME FOR A NEW DIRECTION?

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Introduction

An interesting debate has kicked-off in Britain that goes right to the heart of the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in overseas development and in their host societies. It raises important questions for the development sector in Ireland, including development education (DE) practitioners, about our role in civil society and relationship with government. This debate aligns NGOs into two development corners: on the one hand you have those who consider the role of the NGO to be that of donor and aid provider; and, on the other, those who believe that development organisations should have a more transformative role which goes beyond aid provision and addresses the structural causes of poverty. Central to this debate is the *modus operandi* of NGOs and the relationships that inform their practice. Thus, critics of the ‘NGO as donor’ role argue that the sector is unduly led by the agendas of government and largely focused on service delivery in a more depoliticised and top-down model of development. Advocates of the more transformative NGO role suggest that relationships should be forged with society’s grassroots to pursue more radical agendas for change.

This debate about the role of development organisations is mirrored in development education practice and the ‘soft versus critical’ approaches to learning articulated by Andreotti (2006) with the former resulting in paternalistic and charitable forms of activism and the latter facilitating a more politicised and sustained engagement with issues. While soft forms of global education are ‘based on a moral obligation to a common humanity’, critical education focuses ‘on a political responsibility for the causes of poverty’ (Ibid.). This article sets out some of the key arguments advanced in the debate on development NGOs in Britain and suggests that a similar discussion in Ireland is long overdue. It argues that the transformative agenda for development NGOs is consistent with the approach to learning intrinsic to development education practice. In order to achieve the kind of systemic change demanded by the current challenges to development like persistent poverty and inequality, it is suggested that the development sector broaden its agenda beyond the 0.7

percent target for overseas development aid (ODA) and embrace a wider range of policy positions.

Contested Perspectives on the Role of NGOs

The Progressive Development Forum is a new initiative within the development sector in Britain that aims to provide a space for trade unions, NGOs and solidarity groups ‘to discuss concerns related to the sector – particularly the lack of any political analysis and the dominance of the “aid” paradigm’. The Forum convened a meeting on 19 July 2012 in London to discuss the state of the sector which was attended by 50 senior staff members of sector stakeholders which include the World Development Movement and Jubilee Debt Campaign. On 17 August 2012, Mark Tran in a blog for the *Guardian* presented the members of the Progressive Development Forum as being at odds with the ‘larger aid agencies’ who are mounting a campaign on aid and food ahead of the UK presidency of the Group of Eight (G8) summit to be held in Britain in 2013. Tran quoted John Hilary, executive director of War on Want, who appeared to capture the frustrations of the Forum when he said: ‘Far too many NGOs have lost sight of the long-term, transformative goals of international development, and are instead following a donor-led agenda of aid and service delivery’. Hilary added that:

“British NGOs are especially guilty of this – often highly professional and efficient, but lacking the political drive that should be the lifeblood of the sector. If we are to play our proper role in civil society, NGOs need to learn from grassroots movements and embrace a far more radical vision of change" (*Guardian*, 17 August 2012).

Hilary’s critique of the development sector raises important questions about the role of an NGO in civil society in general and the development sector in particular. Bebbington et al. suggest that ‘NGOs are only NGOs in any politically meaningful sense of the term if they are offering alternatives to dominant models, practices and ideas about development’ (2008: 3). This would require that NGOs move beyond donor-driven solutions to poverty to more politicised responses that aim to effect changes in policy and redistributions of power which can address the systemic causes of inequality. This is one of the recommendations of a paper by Nicola Banks and David Hulme which provocatively addressed the role of NGOs in poverty reduction. Among the paper’s assertions is that ‘Their unequal position in the international aid chain means that NGOs have become too close to the powerful, and too far from the powerless’ (Banks and Hulme, 2012: 12). This in turn results in the dominance of the service-driven models of delivery ‘which

assume that poverty can be eliminated by increased access to resources or services' but Banks and Hulme believe make 'no attempt to change the underlying structures and processes underlying limited and unequal access in the first place' (Ibid.: 13-14).

The paper accepts that 'Challenging the state can lead to hostile government-NGO relationships and threaten prospects for sustainability' (Ibid: 9) but argues that the increasing distance between NGOs and the low-income communities they claim to represent undermines their credibility and legitimacy. Banks and Hulme recommend that NGOs reconnect with civil society, where 'ideological hegemony is contested', (Ibid.: 22) which entails 'moving from a supply-side, service-based approach, to a "demand-side" approach that assists communities to articulate their concerns and participate in the development process, keeping NGOs bonded and accountable to civil society' (Ibid.: 24). This would involve moving from a 'big D' development which is project-based and effecting limited foundational changes to a 'little d' development that 'seeks different ways of organizing the economy, social relationships and politics' (Ibid.: 8).

Unsurprisingly, the critical perspectives wrapped in this paper stirred a reaction in the development sector with Oxfam's strategic adviser Duncan Green describing it variously as 'ill-informed', 'annoying' and 'generalised' with 'dodgy stats' and promoting the view that 'all NGOs are evil/incompetent pawns of imperialism' (Oxfam, 2012). Green, with some legitimacy it seems, argued that the paper cast all NGOs in the same light in a sector that is highly differentiated with organizations performing a range of activities in very differing contexts. Moreover, the authors failed to interview NGO personnel preferring to draw upon a review of available literature and, perhaps crucially, did not include case studies of NGOs engaged in the kind of bad practice alluded to in the paper.

However, notwithstanding the perceived shortcomings of the paper highlighted by Green, some of the findings presented by Banks and Hulme are consistent with issues raised in recent articles in *Policy and Practice*. Andy Storey (2011), for example, drew attention to the fact that 'issues of struggle, conflict and opposition in Ireland' were excised from the agenda of the development sector, particularly the loss of Irish economic sovereignty resulting from the intervention of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2010. Selby and Kagawa (2011) similarly discerned a lack of engagement with the effects of neo-liberalism in the development education and education for sustainable development sectors finding either a 'falling in with the neo-liberal

marketplace agenda or a reluctance to directly, overtly and critically engage with that agenda'. Staying with the economic theme, Andy Egan (2012) highlighted the contradiction between the radical origins of development education practice and its failure to address the issue of corporate power in theory or practice. The global economic crisis of 2008 and its questioning of the legitimacy of neo-liberalism have therefore prompted a lot of reflection in the sector on the efficacy of the service-driven model of development and lack of wider transformative change. The next section considers the role of aid in this new reality.

Aid and Development Policy

The target of committing 0.7 percent of Gross National Income (GNI) to overseas development aid was first agreed in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1970 and over forty years on it remains a central plank of development policy making for many NGOs and governments alike. In Ireland, the Act Now on 2015 campaign has been mounted by the member organisations of Dóchas, the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations and its supporters, and aims to 'ensure Ireland keeps its promise and invests 0.7% of national income in overseas aid by 2015'. But is aid central to the development of poor countries even in the context of the global economic downturn? According to the European Commission, 'Domestic revenues tend to be the most important source of development finance directly available to governments' in the global South (2012: 6). However, beyond domestic revenue the most important source of income for developing countries are remittances – the money sent home by migrants – which the World Bank (2011) estimated to be \$372 billion in 2011, an increase of 12 percent over the previous year. The remittances total is almost three times that (\$133.5 billion) provided in overseas aid in 2011 by member countries of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). While the aid figure represented a drop by 3 percent on the previous year and 'is expected to stagnate between 2013 and 2015' (UN, 2011: xii), the remittances total is expected 'to grow at a rate of 7-8 percent annually' (European Commission, 2012: 8).

So what do these reduced aid projections mean for international development policy? Niels Keijzer, from the European Centre for Development Policy Management, believes this demands 'a much stronger focus on actions in policy areas beyond aid' including the monitoring of national and international policy positions in areas such as 'visa facilitation, banking secrecy, arms export, agricultural subsidies, fisheries and renewable energy' (*Guardian*, 2 August

2012). Keijzer advocates the measurement of each country's development policies by ranking them on an existing 'Commitment to Development Index'. This index has not yet been enshrined in international development policy-making but potentially offers a practical means of holding countries to account on the basis of how their policies impact on poor countries.

In considering the question of aid in the context of the international policy framework that will follow the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Dani Rodrik from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, shares the view that a new global compact should emphasise policies beyond aid and trade. Suggested policies include:

“[C]arbon taxes and other measures to ameliorate climate change; more work visas to allow larger temporary migration flows from poor countries; strict controls on arms sales to developing nations; reduced support for repressive regimes; and improved sharing of financial information to reduce money laundering and tax avoidance” (Rodrik, 2012).

This manifesto for change could ameliorate existing, harmful policies directed at poor countries by donors and arguably achieve more than an increase in aid flows to the global South. However, committing donors to a principal of 'do no harm' demands rigorous monitoring of government activity and gathering evidence on the impact of harmful practices. It also means shifting the development focus beyond aid to the wider policy landscape and development education should assist this process.

Development Education and the Aid Agenda

Shifting the focus of development agencies from aid to a broader range of national and international development policies would, on the face of it, represent a backward step for development education which, after all, is mostly resourced in Ireland and many other European Union member states from the ODA budget. However, development education could and should support a more demand-driven policy approach within the sector given its focus on sustainable solutions to poverty and building support for development within civil society. Moreover, development education is a transformative process of learning that was moulded in the global South in the radical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1972) and persuasive voices in the developing world have questioned the efficacy of aid dependence. Benjamin Mkapa, the president of Tanzania between 1995 and 2005, for instance, supports an exit strategy from aid dependence suggesting that it requires 'a radical shift both in the mindset and

in the development strategy of countries dependent on aid, and a deeper and direct involvement of people in their own development’ (2008: v). Yash Tandon, director of the South Centre, argues that aid can result in a loss of democratic accountability in aid dependent countries and is often mired in the political and economic agendas of the global North. He suggests that:

“Debt relief and swaps, inflated transaction and administrative costs, overvalued technical assistance, politically motivated aid and military aid, domestic costs linked to refugees are all considered as parts of ODA” (Tandon, 2008: 2).

What should bind aid cynics and proponents together is a shared desire to reach a point where aid becomes redundant and all nations can end their dependence on development assistance. Development education is well positioned to support this process by engaging the public in learning programmes that probe the systemic causes of poverty and agitate for action toward positive social change. A more independently funded development education sector, less dependent on government sources, could support an NGO shift away from the aid agenda toward addressing the factors that underpin poverty. These factors include: debt, unfair trade rules, restrictive migration policies, arms exports and climate change. The first step in this process, as Mkapa sees it, is the most difficult: ‘that of transforming a mindset anchored in aid’ (2008: vi).

Conclusion

The debate within the development sector in Britain, between traditional advocates of service-driven development largely focused on overseas aid and those arguing for more transformative, demand-driven activities that address the structural causes of poverty, should prompt Irish NGOs and development networks to follow suit. This debate in Ireland is long overdue given the depth of policy formation around the 0.7 percent target and the lack of engagement with domestic policy-making beyond the state’s contribution to overseas aid, particularly in regard to the Irish financial crisis (McCloskey, 2012; Storey, 2012). The sector should reflect upon the findings of Trócaire’s *Leading Edge* report, which identified future trends in international development and suggested that ‘Power and politics are central to the work of INGOs [international non-governmental organisations] at home and abroad’ (2011: 63). It added that INGOs ‘need to engage more directly with the political implications of their work in the countries where they operate’ (Ibid.). The notion that we can disconnect domestic decision-making and development deficits at home from international development policy and practice should be

consigned to the dustbin. It was encouraging to note that Save the Children (2012) recently launched an appeal in Britain for the 3.5 million children living in poverty in the UK which suggested a joined-up approach to development that recognised the need to engage with local development deficits and the policies that underpin poverty at home.

For development education, a more demand-driven, transformative role for the development sector would be entirely consistent with DE's approach to learning based on critical thinking skills that support sustained engagement with issues and action toward social change. The sector should support moves away from the traditional development focus on aid delivery toward a more integrated and rounded menu of policy objectives that address the factors that underpin a dependence on aid in the global South. While this debate is underway in Britain, in Ireland it has yet to begin and development education can help initiate this discussion.

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