

TURNING INK INTO WATER: AN ECO-DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

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Over the past fifty years, humans have changed eco-systems more rapidly and extensively than in any other comparable period of time in human history, largely to meet rapidly growing demands for food, fresh water, timber, fibre and fuel, which has resulted in a substantial and largely irreversible loss in the diversity of life on earth. These changes that have been made to the earth's eco-systems have contributed substantial net gains in human well-being and economic development, but these gains have been achieved at a growing cost in the form of the degradation of many ecosystems, increased risk of nonlinear changes, and the exacerbation of poverty in many developing countries. These problems, unless addressed, will substantially diminish the benefits that future generations will obtain from the earth's natural resources. In parallel with these changes, there has been an ever increasing number of people worldwide who have been excluded from the growing global prosperity of recent decades and who lack the basic ingredients for a decent life, such as access to an adequate supply of clean water and freedom from avoidable diseases. What is most striking about these growing numbers of people is that they are the most vulnerable to the earth's deteriorating natural resources.

Protection of the environment can no longer be seen as taking second place to issues such as wealth generation and national security. Current public trends and perceptions particularly in the developed world, view the earth's natural resources as free gifts, with their supply limited, only by technology and effort needed to capture more for our use. Water plays a key role in the development and functioning of any society by serving as a basic resource for activities such as irrigation, livestock production, hydroelectric power. Adequate water use in households, businesses and manufacturing is a prerequisite for economic growth. However, more significantly, water provides habitat and sustenance for the rich diversity of plant and animal

species that make up aquatic and riparian eco-systems, which provide the basis for much of the food needed by society.

The earth's system behaves as a single, self-regulating system comprised of physical, chemical, biological and human components with water as one of its most important mechanisms. There are currently thirty countries worldwide that have water shortages, estimated to be using up fifty per cent of their reserves. Therefore, water resources must be viewed globally and as a single global water system which is being transformed by major syndromes including climate change, erosion, pollution and salinisation and also human induced conditions such as ground and surface water used for irrigation. To underscore this importance, water is central to the fulfilling of the 'Millennium Development Goals' and a prerequisite for achieving the other goals.

In Ireland today, many assume that water resources are unlimited and free and that having access to clean water is their fundamental human right. However, access to clean water is neither treated as a basic human right nor is its distribution considered public and free. Consequently, more and more, water is viewed as a commercial product leading to a 'co-modification' of economic, social and cultural rights.

The environmental education strategy and programme of Wingspread 'Turning ink into water', which is an Eco Development Initiative, is being developed as a tool for the dissemination of information on key themes such as environment, north-south relationship, poverty reduction, human rights energy, climate change, new technologies, micro credit systems, and global governance. Using water as the starting point and presenting the world ecosystems as a single, self-regulating system will communicate to project participants the idea of a new planetary identity and that there exists for the environment only one possible future, a common one for all.

Wingspread understands and holds that development education is absolutely vital to the development process if sustainable development is to be achieved. It is important that local communities everywhere should take

responsibility for their own local environment, through local action programmes and by doing so empowering themselves to transform unequal relations.

At the heart of the programme is the plan that schools in the midland counties of Ireland will collect used ink, laser and toner cartridges and from the money raised from the recycling of the cartridges will sponsor a well in Chad, North Africa.

By taking this action, Wingspread is developing through the programme the concept of a shared vision for sustainable development between schools in Ireland and Chad. By participating in the schools cartridge recycling initiative, schools in Ireland are actively contributing toward capacity building, through an increase in clean water supply for children, their families and community in Chad.

Wingspread is also seeking to promote through the programme a “Schools Knowledge Exchange”, in order to enable teachers and pupils to participate in the development of their own community, by increasing critical awareness of their local environment and the interdependence shared with other parts of the world i.e. Chad.

The implementation of the programme is based on a schedule which is a two-year rotation programme. This is to facilitate the movement of the classes in the primary schools (5th and 6th grades) targeted by the programme. The schedule is based on a sequence of workshops carried out in conjunction with a series of Practical Activities and supported by a knowledge exchange process that starts at the beginning of the programme. By developing the concept of a ‘shared vision of sustainable development’ between schools in both countries, this will lead to a more meaningful and focused knowledge exchange. The idea is to let the schools take the lead to facilitate agreement about what they want to achieve together.

Wingspread believes that by using the methodology of ‘learning while doing’, children are stimulated by their own natural curiosity, the most powerful driving force in any learning process. This innovative approach will be an effective tool in fostering in children a greater self-awareness and understanding of their relationships with their families, communities and the wider world. The approach will encourage participants to ask some fundamental questions about the local and global worlds in which they live, such as - Who benefits? Who Loses? Who Decides? What Needs to Change? Where do I Stand?

The project also seeks to create a human rights framework for dealing with development issues by empowering people. Wingspread recognises that empowerment cannot be given, but that it must be self-generated. The project also seeks to show that global issues are not just about aid and governments but about issues that involve and challenge each and every one of us on a daily basis. Choices have to be made and they cannot be made by Governments and international institutions alone without public ownership and engagement.

Brendan Nolan is the founder and project co-ordinator of Wingspread International.