

# CLIMATE CHANGE: THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION PRACTITIONERS

**Grace Walsh**

**Abstract:** This article outlines the challenge of climate change for society, the role of development education (DE) in meeting that challenge, and the opportunities available to DE practitioners in addressing this issue. It outlines potential lessons and examples for DE practice that have arisen from experience of DE programmes taking place in an Ecovillage project in Co Tipperary, and suggests some elements for DE practice when tackling the topic of climate change. The article argues that the development education sector is well placed to create educational and learning spaces that can deal with the radical approaches and attitudinal shifts that are needed to face the challenges of climate change.

**Key words:** Development education; climate change; Ecovillage; place-based learning; sustainable living; community resilience.

“The future is not about tinkering with the surface of structural change. It is not just about replacing one mindset with another that no longer serves us. It is a future that requires us to tap into a deeper level of our humanity, of who we really are and who we want to be as a society. It is a future that requires us to shift from an ego-system awareness that cares about the well-being of oneself to an eco-system that cares about the well-being of all, including oneself. Pioneering the principles and living the personal practices that help us perform this shift from ego to eco may well be one of the most important undertakings of our time” (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013: 1).

The challenges we face as a result of climate change are monumental, as current debates and government-led negotiations have demonstrated. There is cynicism and optimism in equal measure over the possibilities of

governments, nations and communities being able to embrace the necessary lifestyle changes to reduce carbon emissions, and to implement adaptation measures needed to manage the transition to a low carbon or carbon neutral society. It is a daunting task, one met with fear and apprehension. Campaign groups, and to a lesser extent the media, are broadcasting warnings of the potential crisis ahead. The development education sector is well placed, however, to create educational and learning spaces that can deal with the radical approaches and attitudinal shifts that are needed to face these challenges. It has become clear though that the general public, and indeed practitioners, are overwhelmed by the task at hand. There is a fear that modern conveniences, quality of lifestyle and our very existence is threatened. There is a need to approach this challenge from a different angle, to inspire and to present opportunities for change that will in fact contribute to a more just and equal society, while also meeting the physical, social and personal needs of individuals.

Cloughjordan's Ecovillage in Co Tipperary, has been the location of a number of development education programmes over recent years, and offers a contextual learning base and new perspectives in how we can, as practitioners, engage with this issue. With recent research from the University of Limerick concluding that a household in the community has an average world footprint of 1.1 planets (Kirby, 2014a: 16), far below the national average, this is an exciting time to explore the implications of this experimental community for development education in relation to climate change. Not only does Cloughjordan provide examples of reducing carbon emissions at a community level, it presents concrete examples of adaptation, which can improve quality of life, community resilience and local livelihoods. The direct connection between theory and practice can inform a different approach to the issue for practitioners.

This article will connect with a previous contribution to this journal from Peadar Kirby (2014b), on paradigm shift, as well as practical experiences of programme implementation with a range of organisations in the sector. It will connect the experience of working with young people from

the global South, as well as other marginalised groups, student groups and returned development volunteers. In doing so, it will outline the possibilities for place-based learning in relation to developing a greater understanding of how we tackle climate change, and how the possibilities it can present, connect with wider development education concerns of social justice and equality.

### **The challenge of climate change**

According to the 2014 IPCC report, climate change will be a likely catalyst for a wide range of social and environmental issues such as mass migration, growing inequality, resource shortages and a greater number of conflicts arising from the culmination of these pressures (Field et al., 2014). The World Bank warns that ‘we’re on track for a 4°C warmer world marked by extreme heat waves, declining global food stocks, loss of ecosystems and biodiversity, and life-threatening sea level rise’ (Klein, 2014: 13). These impacts will be dispersed unequally, with younger people and future generations, people in certain regions and those already vulnerable through poverty or resource shortages feeling the brunt most forcibly. Climate change and its impacts are therefore enmeshed in the struggle for a more socially just world. The latest round of negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their emphasis on sustainable agriculture, the development of sustainable energy sources, sustainable consumption, food security, bio-diversity loss and other areas of sustainable development speak to this. And note a growing sense of urgency amongst the world’s leadership (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). It is also clear that cooperation between the global North and South is essential, and old concepts of linear development are no longer relevant or useful – if indeed they ever were. Nations, communities and individuals stand at a crossroads of potential collapse or transformation whereby adaptation and mitigation are crucial to meeting the challenges faced. New ways of thinking, living and co-creating the futures we want are necessary.

Unfortunately, however, people are not known for embracing radical change unless it is urgently needed. As Oliver Burkeman (2015) asserts,

threats that are distant and abstract are difficult for us to respond to, and we are not good at making small sacrifices in the present to avoid vast ones in the future. Daniel Kahneman, consistently pessimistic about our prospects as a species to stand up to the challenge, spells out his reservations clearly when he suggests that: ‘No amount of psychological awareness will overcome people’s reluctance to lower their standard of living’ (Marshall, 2014: 58). Notwithstanding our apparent limitations in dealing with change, the sheer scale of the system which maintains and perpetuates the gap between human consumption and planetary capacity, presents its own predicament. The culture of mass production and consumption, which is so embedded in our definitions of development and societal wellbeing, is of course deeply entrenched in the current paradigm, which upholds ‘the profound inequalities being generated by a free market system and the ways in which political authority has become deferential to the power of these markets (namely powerful economic corporations)’ (Kirby, 2014b: 177).

### **Development education and climate change**

Given the deep social challenges climate change presents, some educators have questioned the adequacy of traditional pedagogical methods and argue that novel approaches to facilitate transformation along both individual and broader community levels are needed. As Peadar Kirby suggests:

“What can make the difference between collapse and transition is education; perhaps never before have educators been more challenged to provide spaces for society to grope towards a new future...” (2014b: 186).

DE offers a learning experience that develops understanding and awareness, engages learners with social justice issues, and inspires shifts in perspectives. However, there are profound challenges for DE in translating these shifts in perspective into meaningful action. Contributing to this, are deeply imbedded fears and a reluctance to embrace the kind of changes necessary, exacerbated by the sheer scale of the problem at hand. Another challenge lies in our entrenched assumptions reflected by the way in which the term

‘development’ is understood with its underlying association with linear ‘progress’. Some educators speak to the power of language as a tool for framing the world we live in. Dawson, for example, explains how we are using nouns to define ever-changing realities, not language that is compatible and suitable for the uncertainties we face into. He describes the:

“fabulous mosaic of beautifully attuned human adaptation to the specificity of place in which those who live in the desert, those who live in the forest, those who live on mountainsides, have each found stories, governance systems, material cultures, ideally, beautifully attuned to the specificity of the place, but this gets steamrolled under the linear progression of first world to third world, creating enormous damage” (2015).

### **Climate change as an opportunity for paradigm shift**

“Rather than asking ‘how do we solve climate change’ we need to turn the question around and ask ‘how does the idea of climate change alter the way we arrive at and achieve our personal aspirations and our collective social goals?’” (Hulme, 2011: xxviii).

The sheer scale of some global justice issues can present themselves with an apparent immediacy and urgency that eclipses the threat of climate change which can appear distant or abstract in contrast. The topic of climate change can seem overwhelming and frightening to navigate with youth or community groups, or school children, in a way that doesn’t leave people paralysed with fear, defensive, or in denial. This apparent disconnect between global environmental change and social justice issues can, however, be bridged by understanding them as products of the same economic and social systems. More importantly, for the DE sector, solutions to create more equal lifestyles and communities are, arguably, intimately linked to mechanisms tailored to addressing and adapting to climate change. These include local, indigenous economic models such as cooperatives and collaborative consumption models that sustain local livelihoods, build strong community connections, reduce carbon emissions and offer opportunities for

greater food security and resilience. Other positive steps towards more sustainable and equitable societies and communities include:

- Urban design that includes safe, efficient modes of transport that are economically sound and produce physical health benefits, as well as reducing commuting time;
- Housing and infrastructure design that is people-friendly, using ecological materials, renewable energy sources and designed to foster healthy, thriving community spaces, and not the isolated, inefficient and often poorly designed housing that many urban dwellers reside in;
- Local food production systems such as city farms, food cooperatives, urban green spaces to promote biodiversity and offer opportunities for edible landscaping, support small producers and make local, seasonal food accessible to all, again bringing benefits in the area of nutrition and challenging food poverty;
- Developing and fostering equitable relationships between global North and South nations, that allows a sharing of best practice in these areas, with a redistribution of income and resources that allows for sustainable, equitable, trade relationships which exist alongside healthy, local, indigenous economies.

### **Cloughjordan's Ecovillage: A living campus**

The ecovillage Cloughjordan presents a unique living campus for educational programmes on climate change and sustainable development. The community, located in North Tipperary, Ireland, was established by a collective of people interested in sustainability and co-housing models. The first houses were constructed in 2009, and it currently consists of fifty-five households on a 67 acre (27 ha.) site. The development is divided between housing, farmland and amenities including more than 17,000 native trees and a varied edible landscape of fruit trees, herbs and edible plants. There is a

community district heating system that optimises renewable energy sources to heat homes and provide hot water, and houses are designed to the highest ecological standards, many maximising solar gain and insulation techniques. Some are equipped with rain water harvesting systems, as well as using a range of ecological materials – from the hi-tech passive homes to natural materials used in other models of housing. Seasonal produce is provided through local growing initiatives including the Cloughjordan Community Farm, which is based on the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model. A local baker makes bread in his wood fired oven while clusters of houses keep hens and share the responsibilities of ownership. Livelihood generation is supported and encouraged through work-live units, shared co-working spaces, a green enterprise centre, and the number of local companies and organisations based in the community. In 2014 a survey was distributed to the households of the Ecovillage for the purposes of estimating the community's Ecological Footprint (EF). It was estimated the Ecovillage's EF was approximately two global hectares per person, the equivalent of 1.1 planets per person (Kirby, 2014a). This compares well with the national average as well as the renowned Findhorn community in Northern Scotland.

The structures of the community, from decision-making to social spaces offer innovative approaches to all elements of community living, that challenge some of the more hierarchical and traditional structures elsewhere and allows for innovation and participation in a variety of ways. The community has essentially taken the challenge of climate change and sustainable living, and created a living lab of experimentation that offers insights, experiences, examples and lessons in the area of mitigation and adaptation. The company which first set up the project in 1999, Sustainable Projects Ireland Limited (SPIL), is a registered educational charity, and identifies as its purpose to build an ecovillage, which 'will serve as a model of sustainable living into the twenty-first century and will serve as an education, enterprise and research service resource for all' (Kirby, 2014a: 11). The Village Education, Research and Training (VERT) group coordinates activities and events for organisations and individuals who want to access learning opportunities in the community.

## **Experiences from the Ecovillage**

Through my role as Youth Programme Coordinator for a Dublin based organisation, and as a freelance facilitator, I was involved in a number of educational programmes taking place in the Ecovillage from 2012 to 2015. These programmes varied from three- to ten-day learning experiences, mostly a combination of practical, voluntary based activities and non-formal education workshops, including those that specifically address topics such as climate change, sustainable development and community resilience, as well as wider social justice and development topics such as gender and migration. The programmes included young people from a variety of cultures, ethnicities and backgrounds, as well as adult volunteers, youth-workers and returned development workers. All of the activities included formal educational inputs from the Ecovillage, as well as opportunities to take part in educational tours, and a good deal of informal interaction with residents of the project. In total, these programmes have seen approximately 400 participants which does not include programmes run by additional educational providers based in Cloughjordan. Feedback from projects regarding the impact of the learning programmes in the community was consistently positive, with regular conclusions that participants' ability to take action in their own communities increased as a result of the experience. In limited surveys carried out after the experience of participation, all of those who took part said the experience 'made them feel more positive about making an impact' on the issue of climate change.

What made these learning experiences unique from a pedagogical point of view was the immersive element of so many of the activities. Programme participants didn't just learn about the theory of collaborative consumption, sustainable architecture, resilient communities and cooperative models of production, they experienced them directly in a variety of ways. This included: volunteering on the community farm to produce the food that they would later harvest and use to prepare meals; interacting with the residents of the community and hearing their personal experiences and stories of living there during weekly community meals; taking part in informal

learning events with residents when visitors came to Cloughjordan; benefiting from the warmth and comfort of the eco hostel and the district heating system; and encountering the rich diversity of projects, organisations and initiatives on offer within the wider community. Another added benefit to this ‘immersive’ approach was that participants often had prejudices, assumptions and misconceptions about ‘eco’ living shattered. By encountering people with a variety of interests, backgrounds and skill-sets who had chosen to make Cloughjordan their home, the concept of sustainable living could appear less exotic or abstract. The opportunity to live in, witness and experience an alternative system in action, enabled participants in our programmes and workshops to enter into ‘emphatic engagement and identification’ (Dawson, 2015) with notions of sustainability. It is this element that is crucial for us to move forward in DE, and to develop truly innovative and creative educational responses to the challenges of climate change.

## **Conclusion**

Peadar Kirby’s call to the development education sector ‘to provide spaces for society to grope towards a new future’ has yet to be answered (2014: 186). We can no longer educate without engaging in new frames and value systems if we are to promote a shift into fresh ways of seeing things or the new stories for our time (Macy and Johnstone, 2011). The DE sector is uniquely placed to trail-blaze in such a shift, if practitioners and organisations are courageous and daring enough to take these steps. This new approach to DE might incorporate the following elements:

- Creativity and experimentation in its methodologies and approaches;
- Promotion of immersive and experiential learning experiences;
- Critical analysis of the current paradigm and dominant notions of development, while allowing for the development and showcasing of community led initiatives that present solutions;

- Fostering of deeper links with local community initiatives and innovations that give practical, transferable examples of action, while supporting local and global sustainable development;
- Collaborative approaches to climate change creating opportunities for connections and a sense of common cause while pooling experiences and best practice in this area.

The Ecovillage project presents an opportunity, not to inspire others to replicate the project in its entirety, but rather to demonstrate and allow exploration of models, solutions, and shifts in thinking that can be applied to other communities in their contexts. By fostering critical analysis, prompting questions and facilitating the critique of economic and social constructs, DE practitioners can make critical steps ‘to create the space to begin incubating a new social paradigm’ (Kirby, 2014b: 182).

## References

Burkeman, O (2015) ‘We’re all Climate Change Deniers at Heart’, *Guardian*, 8 June, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/08/climate-change-deniers-g7-goal-fossil-fuels> (accessed 8 June 2015).

Dawson, J (2015) ‘Bringing the Classroom to Life’, TEDx, Findhorn, available: [https://youtu.be/q3jxrT9VQ\\_w](https://youtu.be/q3jxrT9VQ_w) (accessed 19 June 2015).

Field, C B, Barros, V R, Dokken, D J, Mach, K J, Mastrandrea, M D, Bilir, T E, Chatterjee, M, Ebi, K L, Estrada, Y O, Genova, R C, Girma, B, Kissel, E S, Levy, A N, MacCracken, S, Mastrandrea, P R and White, L L (eds.) ‘IPCC, 2014: Summary for policymakers’ in *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, available: [https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg1/WG1AR5\\_SPM\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg1/WG1AR5_SPM_FINAL.pdf) (accessed: 8 July 2015).

Hulme, M (2011) *Why We Disagree about Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kirby, P (2014a) 'Cloughjordan Ecovillage: Modelling the Transition to a Low-carbon Society', available: <http://www.thevillage.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Cloughjordan-Ecovillage-Modelling-low-carbon-society.pdf> (accessed 21 June 2015).

Kirby, P (2014b) 'Groping Towards a New Future: Educating for Paradigm Change' in S McCloskey (ed.) *Development Education in Policy and Practice*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Klein, N (2014) *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, London: Penguin.

Kaufer, K and Scharmer, O (2013) *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-system to Eco-System Economies*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Macy, J and Johnstone, C (2012) *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*, California: New World Library.

Marshall, George (2015) *Don't even think about it: Why our brains are wired to ignore climate change*, New York: Bloomsbury.

Strachan, G (2014) 'Development Education and Climate Change' in S McCloskey (ed.) *Development Education in Policy and Practice*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2015) 'Open working group proposal for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Introduction', available: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgsproposal> (accessed 20 June 2015).

**Grace Walsh** was until recently the Youth Programme Coordinator for Voluntary Service International (VSI) where she ran non-formal education programmes for more than 8 years and has worked with Comhlámh, the National Youth Council of Ireland, Cultivate and others on a freelance basis. She was a resident of Cloughjordan's Eco Village project for the past two

years, but is now taking some time out in rural Tasmania, while developing her freelance practice.