

Viewpoint

FROM CHARITY TO UNIVERSALITY?

Hans Zomer

Abstract: Recent issues of *Policy and Practice*, including this one, have carried articles reflecting on the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be agreed at the United Nations (UN) in September 2015. Many of the articles have pointed at the failings of the Goals' predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), while others focused on the sector's focus on aid to the detriment of a more fundamental critique of development discourse. In this article, **Hans Zomer**, Director of Dóchas, argues that the new SDGs will have a bigger impact on development education (DE) practitioners than they might expect. He suggests that DE and the wider development sector should take the more universal approach adopted by the SDGs to press for sustainable solutions to long-term poverty that move us away from the more dominant and short-term charity model.

Key words: Sustainable Development Goals; Millennium Development Goals; aid; charity; universality.

It has been said many times before in *Policy and Practice*, but it bears repeating: 2015 is a crucial year for anyone remotely interested in global development. In September, world leaders will agree a new global compact to end extreme poverty and fight inequality, while in December the world is set to agree a new strategy to halt climate change. The importance of these summits prompted the European Union to declare 2015 the 'European Year for Development' and at the Irish launch event for the 'Year', Irish President Michael D. Higgins spoke of his belief that '2015 is on a par with 1945 in terms of the potential that it has to reshape how humanity deals with the challenges we face' (2015).

In his speech, the President also said that:

“Too often has the term ‘development’ been used interchangeably, in public discourse, with the terms ‘aid’ or ‘charity’. Development was presented as something that needed to happen in the so-called ‘developing’ world, outside of the sphere of industrialised nations, and remote from the daily existences of Western citizens. Such a binary view of development can all too easily slide into a sense of condescension grounded in unspoken feelings of superiority. At the very least, it divides the world in two, with one side depicted as helpless victims, and the other as their well-meaning saviours ... We can only rejoice, then, at the universal scope of the development goals currently in the making at UN level. Contrary to their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals, which were targeted at poorer countries, these new post-2015 goals are not about some of the world’s nations only; they are about the crucial task of building new forms of living together, here and there. It is an agenda everybody can own and contribute to.”

These words must be music to the ears of any development education practitioner. And they point at the very essence of the new Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting their distinguishing factor: their universality. Not only do the new goals highlight that ‘Sustainable Development’ isn’t something that only ‘developing’ countries should work towards, but that each UN member state needs to find a model of progressing in a way that respects the needs of current generations as well as of future generations and of the planet that we live on.

Bringing the SDGs to Ireland

The Sustainable Development Goals provide an internationally agreed framework, setting out what matters if we are trying to build a better, fairer society. They are a recognition of the fact that the world economy is doing well in the generation of wealth, but is failing to do so in a sustainable way and in distributing the wealth equally or equitably. And Irish diplomats have played a crucial role in shaping this new framework; the final and crucial phase of the negotiations was coordinated the Irish and Kenyan ambassadors

to the UN, David Donoghue and Macharia Kamau. And Irish non-governmental organisations (NGOs), too, played a role in the negotiations. Throughout 2013 and 2014, the members of Dóchas, the Irish association of non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs), worked with domestic environmental and anti-poverty groups to come up with shared priorities for a better world and using this vision of ‘The World We Want’ to inform their international lobby. A lobby which connected well with domestic civil society groups, because the themes being discussed at UN level resonated closely with many of the challenges experienced in Ireland.

Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland is in a funk. The financial crash of 2008 not only damaged our economy, but also our national confidence. The crash not only burst the bubble of the speculative economy, it also shattered a view of Ireland and the Irish, symbolised most dramatically in the handover of our economic sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank officials. With the death of the Celtic Tiger a sense of who we are as a nation and what our future would be like died with it – and this vacuum has still not been filled. Ireland is facing stark choices. In the words of Michael D. Higgins, post-Celtic Tiger Ireland must ‘close the chapter on that which has failed, that which was not the best version of ourselves as a people, and open a new chapter based on a different version of our Irishness’, something which ‘will require a transition in our political thinking, in our view of the public world, in our institutions, and, most difficult of all, in our consciousness’ (ibid).

This is very similar to the sentiments expressed in the Declaration for the SDGs, which include these words:

“We are meeting at a time of immense challenges to sustainable development. Billions of our citizens continue to live in poverty and are denied a life of dignity. There are rising inequalities within and among countries. There are enormous disparities of opportunity, wealth and power ... The survival of many societies, and of the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk” (2015: 4-5).

In other words, what world leaders are saying is that, like Ireland, the world must re-think its priorities and come up with new answers to the question of what type of society we are trying to build. How do we ensure prosperity for all? What does an education system that delivers for everyone look like? How can we build an economy that pays people a living wage and that respects the environment? What do we need to build cities that are healthy and wealthy?

No monopoly on wisdom

This recognition of shared challenges and universal responsibility is what sets the SDGs apart. As Michael D. Higgins said in January of this year (2015), ‘there is no single correct model of development ... The idea of a linear path to progress and modernity is one that has created much damage in the past’. He also said that ‘we are invited to piece together a new narrative telling us of humanity’s shared future on this fragile planet’. And development NGOs are extremely well placed to lead the discussions on such a new narrative. Their experiences in communities around the world provide them with an opportunity to see things differently, and to experience alternative solutions to our shared problems. As organisations with a global remit, we should be the ones with the ability and courage to comment on issues at home – on the basis of our experience abroad.

Instead, says Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah of CIVICUS (2014):

“our conception of what is possible has narrowed dramatically. Since demonstrating bang for your buck has become all-important, we divide our work into neat projects, taking on only those endeavours that can produce easily quantifiable outcomes. Reliant on funding to service our own sizeable organisations, we avoid approaches or issues that might threaten our brand or upset our donors. We trade in incremental change.”

All too often therefore, instead of producing the ‘new narrative’ required, we have used a language that is part of the problem, not the solution. An analysis by Dóchas of the public communications by a handful of Irish NGOs

showed that the dominant message was one of ‘charity’ and that the most common solution suggested by Irish NGOs was a financial donation to charities, rather than political or personal action. Dóchas’ *Finding Irish Frames* (2014) research report suggests that, by and large, Irish NGOs have focused their efforts on fundraising from the Irish public, rather than on supporting social, political or conceptual change. And their portrayal of people living in poverty in passive, recipient roles, rather than as agents of change or sources of innovation, is not helping either.

That our communications habits have an impact is clear. Research undertaken by Dóchas in 2013 and 2015 shows that, for a majority of people, the Irish public’s understanding of global poverty and development has not changed since the 1980s: 60 percent of respondents in the research survey did not think that the countries in Africa are any better off now than they were twenty years ago and 49 percent of respondents agreed with the sentiment that ‘my day to day actions don’t really affect people in the third world’ (Dóchas, 2014). The vast majority of people in Ireland surveyed said the causes of poverty reside within developing countries themselves and 25 percent felt there was nothing they could do personally to reduce poverty. These findings suggest that the message about global change is not being heard above the din of media headlines and NGO fundraising – and that the emphasis on ‘urgent and dramatic’ stories overshadows efforts to educate and convey more complex messages. The dominant ‘charity frame’ highlights the importance of the Irish entities and downplays the everyday heroism of countless people in developing countries who are working hard to make their countries healthier, wealthier, safer and more democratic.

What’s more, if this research is to be believed, we have failed to ‘link the global and the local’. Why have we not linked the Irish financial crisis with our experience of austerity in developing countries? Why have we been silent on the challenges of Irish oil and gas, when we have first-hand experience of similar situations in Nigeria, Uganda and Venezuela? Why don’t we use our experience of organic community farming in Africa to inform the debate on this issue here at home? Why don’t we work to get the

voices of people working in refugee communities in the global South to be heard in the migration debate in Europe? Are we ourselves too caught up in the ‘binary view of Development’ to realise that social movements in places like Egypt, Kenya, Brazil or Burma can enrich our political debate here? And most of all: why have we not learned to use the power of social media and mobile video to let people in developing countries make their own voices heard, and be relevant in their own way?

It may well be that the biggest impact of the soon-to-be-agreed SDGs will be that they give us one common language, that will help us break out of our silos and teach us the true meaning of universality.

References

Dóchas (2014) *Finding Irish Frames: Exploring how Irish NGOs communicate with the public*, available: http://www.dochas.ie/Shared/Files/4/Finding_Irish_Frames_2014.pdf (accessed 24 August 2015).

President Michael D Higgins (2015) Speech at the launch of the European Year of Development, Dublin, 22 January, available: <http://www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/speech-by-president-michael-d.-higgins-at-the-irish-launch-of-the-european> (accessed 24 August 2015).

Sriskandarajah D (2015) ‘NGOs losing the war against poverty and climate change, says Civicus head’, *Guardian*, 11 August 2015, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/aug/11/civicus-open-letter-civil-society-professionalisation> (accessed 24 August 2015).

UN (2015) ‘Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, available: http://www.un.org/pga/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/08/120815_outcome-document-of-Summit-for-adoption-of-the-post-2015-development-agenda.pdf (accessed 24 August 2015).

Hans Zomer is Director of Dóchas, the Irish national platform of Development NGOs. Dóchas provides a meeting place and a leading voice for organisations working on global justice. Dóchas coordinates the Irish programme of activities under the European Year for Development, including initiatives such as ‘The World’s Best News’ which aim to change public discourse about global development.