Global Citizenship and grassroots community development in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Background

The problem with the Democratic Republic of Congo is that the transition between where colonisation found us in 1885 and the 21st century has yet to happen. When independence came in June 1960 we were ill-prepared to govern ourselves. The traditional governments we had before colonisation were hardly a preparation for running a 20th or 21st century government and state. The institutions we inherited from Belgium were alien to our culture, our mentality, how we organise our affairs, beliefs, and values. When, for example, the Belgians built roads that habit did not really slip into our consciousness. Road-building was not and never became part of our culture. Life at the lower rungs of the development ladder, where Congo is, can go on with or without good roads just as it would have done before colonisation. How do we change this? Can it be changed? Yes, it can be changed.

Education based on the Citizenship Curriculum, translated in our own languages, can prepare the ground where 15, 25, 30 years later we would learn to link our well-being, physical health with a clean living environment. In the villages where I have travelled, in my own home town in the South-Western Bas-Congo Province, and, in Kinshasa itself people did not have good toilets, or had no toilets at all. This, however we look at it, is a source of disease. For example, when I arrived in Kinshasa in January 2005 two of my relations had been very dangerously ill. They had typhoid. A good friend of mine had died of typhoid a year earlier. Yet, because the belief in witchcraft (kindoki) is so strong the link between typhoid and the lack of clean toilets is not always made. This link is often missing even in those people who have gone to school or have university degrees. What use has schooling been if it has not taught us to link lack of cleanliness with ill-health? How can the same education system act as the engine for meaningful development? How can that same education system equip our communities to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, for example to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger or to ensure environmental sustainability (DFID, 2005-2007)? We now have a choice before us: either, we continue
with the same failed ‘education’, or as the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) put it:

“Education must be improved in quality and in relevance to local conditions...It should impart knowledge relevant for the proper management of local resources. Rural schools must teach about local soils, water, and the conservation of both, about deforestation and how the community and the individual can reverse it...Most people base their understanding of environmental processes and development on traditional beliefs...Many thus remain ignorant about ways in which they could improve traditional production practices and better protect the natural resource base” (The World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.113).

The Oxfam Global Citizenship Curriculum (September 1997) has the potential to “improve the quality of the education we give to our communities and make it relevant to local conditions”. What is education in this context? Education here is about getting people who are located at the lowest level possible to look at their own lives, their immediate living environment and conditions, and, nurture the belief that they owe it to themselves to change how they think and act. ‘Consciousness awakening’, therefore, is the ultimate goal of education for development. Once that has been achieved, the role of education will be to enable communities to sustain it and pass it on to future generations. The Citizenship Curriculum can be the vehicle to ‘awaken our consciousness’.

However, it has to be taught in local languages. In fact, it is my belief that we need to find a way to use the four national languages in the Democratic Republic of Congo as the main teaching languages instead of French. It does not make sense that our children should be educated in French while French children are and will never ever be taught in English, Dutch, Spanish, or German. It is for this reason that my work on the teaching of the Citizenship Curriculum is based on the belief that to be a cornerstone for development it has to be taught in Kikongo. I am aware that we have about 221 languages in Congo (Grimes, 1996). However, we cannot continue to ignore the fact that using a foreign language, as a solution to the multitude of languages spoken in Congo, has not made the education system relevant to ‘local conditions’, and has not embedded itself in our cultural fabric. It has been like an edifice built on sand. Teaching the Citizenship Curriculum in Kikongo may not be the ideal approach to take, but is there any other choice if we want education to be relevant to ‘local conditions’?
The focus of education based on the Citizenship Curriculum

Fundamentally, the aim of teaching of the Citizenship Curriculum would be to create an environment to enable communities to fulfil the requirements that must be met to achieve sustainable development (The World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.65). These are:

1. Effective citizen participation

Individuals need to be educated on the meaning of being a citizen, in the first instance. This is about nurturing a sense of duty to oneself. At the same time, it is about learning that the best way to ensure our own welfare is to engage with neighbours and others around us in order to work out how we could build healthier communities, for example. However, for participation to be the mechanism that enables us to take charge of our lives individually and collectively, it has to be built on the belief that we have both the capacity and duty to change our lives. Most of all, what needs to be understood here is that our communities operate at a level where there is an absence of ‘class consciousness’. That is, that shared experiences do not act as an impetus to bring us together to promote and safeguard our common interests. That must change, otherwise ‘effective citizen participation’ will remain as illusive as development, good government, or lasting peace have been over the last 45 years. In short, Goffaux (1986) argues that “prises de consciences collectives” (translated as “collective consciousness awareness”) has been the key to opening up new horizons and new possibilities, and, bringing about progress throughout recent human history. This ‘awareness’ has to be the foundation upon which ‘effective citizen participation’ is built. The hurdles to overcome cannot and must not be underestimated. The suffering and, above all, the erosion of fundamental human values have been so deep that it will take a long time before we develop a mentality where ‘enlightened’, rather than, ‘narrow and blind’ self-interest is what motivates our behaviour. Participation motivated by ‘narrow and blind’ self-interest is not a recipe for success.

2. An economic system that is able to generate surpluses and technical knowledge on a self-reliant and sustained basis

In this context, the role of education for development will be threefold: in the rural areas, particularly:
1. Collate traditional technical knowledge village people use to produce food to sustain themselves - what they grow, how, when, where. Very often, education has meant throwing away anything traditional as it is deemed inferior. What happens, unfortunately, is that the new technical knowledge base is not sustainable. When it disappears nothing replaces it because what was there before had been lost. In any case, we forget that no society can develop itself by relying entirely on someone else’s technical knowledge base.

2. Identify with the village people themselves the limitations that their technical knowledge has and what would be the solutions to overcome them; and,

3. Identify from the outset what problems would ‘generating surpluses’ give rise to and assess whether solutions based on their own resources can be found. To generate surplus will have some cost on the environment’s yielding capacity, for example. Education will have the role of anticipating problems and exploring mitigating measures that do not make villagers dependent on outside resources.

3. A social system that provides for solutions for the tension arising from disharmonious development

First and foremost, we need to formulate a definition of ‘development’ which would make sense to us. ‘Disharmonious development’ would not be defined unless there is a definition of ‘development’ to provide the benchmark on which to define either ‘harmonious’, or ‘disharmonious development’. Secondly, we need to identify to whom would development be ‘disharmonious’. From whose perspective? Finally, we need to work out how to go about building that ‘social system’. In some respects, I am not claiming that the Citizenship Curriculum will provide answers to these complex questions. What I am arguing is that it will help change our mentality so that we begin to ask these questions, whether we have the answers or not. In my experience, I am not convinced that we make it our business to ask questions about what ‘harmonious’ or ‘disharmonious development’ is. In Kinshasa in 2005 a large number of people in the streets had a mobile telephone. Yet, I did not see a single landline telephone in the houses I visited or offices where I went. How can we have a proper telecommunication network upon which to build economic development without a well developed landline telephone network? Nobody that I met gave me the impression that they understood that this was an example of
what I would describe as ‘disharmonious development’. A mobile telephone call card cost about $4-$5.00 which could be almost half of someone’s monthly salary. Education’s function in such an instance would be to get people to ask if that was genuine development.

4. A production system that respects the obligation to preserve the ecological base for development

Firstly, we must raise awareness of the environmental degradation already occurring so that we are able to appreciate its consequences. Secondly, we must examine what solutions are possible and thirdly, we need to work out what can be done to ensure that we pass on to our children and future generations ‘a social system’, attitudes, values, beliefs and knowledge that will enable them to ‘preserve the ecological base’ upon which their welfare will depend. In the villages where I went in 2003 and 2005 erosion is a major problem. I had conversations with many people, but I do not recall people expressing concerns about the adverse impact erosion could have on their lives. Perhaps, there was not an awful lot they were able to do. The least we could do is to acknowledge that we have a big problem we must address, and, the obligation to preserve the ecological base demands that we endeavour to do whatever we can to remedy the situation. The present education system has clearly failed to foster a sense of duty to preserve the ecological base. Would it not make sense, therefore, if we try education based on the Citizenship Curriculum?

5. A technological system that can search continuously for new solutions

This will rely on creating conditions to make it possible to develop a culture where villagers would find within themselves the motivation to resolve the difficulties they face. Above all, whilst it makes sense to stick to the same old solutions, however, we need to learn to recognise when these solutions have become ineffective. Here the focus needs to be on “blending traditional and modern technologies” to produce a sustainable technological base which is not beyond the grasp of villagers (The World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.138). This is to avoid what Goffaux (1986) describes as “a cultural void” between the mores and customs they have abandoned when on the one hand, new ways [structures] are introduced, and, on the other hand, the new methods which they are ill-equipped to assimilate, or master with any degree of competence, (authors own translation and interpretation from French). In ‘blending traditional and modern technologies’, however, the task will be to resolve the tension
between traditional ways of doing things and their incapacity to act as an impetus for development, and, the same traditional ways providing a way out of the ever growing and deepening crisis our communities face.

**Conclusion**

Citizenship participation, an economic system able to generate surpluses and technical knowledge on a self-reliant basis, a social system that provides solutions for the tensions from disharmonious development, the obligation to preserve the ecological base for development and a technological system that can search continuously for new solutions will need robust structures which should be embedded and woven into the cultural fabric. If education, in the formal context, is about “le savoir” (knowledge), “le savoir-faire” (what to do with the knowledge) and “le savoir-être” (whether education produces citizens who would make it their business to ensure the welfare of their communities), “le savoir-être” is undoubtedly where the Congolese education system has failed abysmally. This is what education based on the notion of ‘citizenship’ can begin to remedy. It will act as the engine for development which I define here as ‘a change of mentality’ we need in order to be able to provide good government in our communities, to build roads to connect our communities, and, to live in a healthy and well-looked after environment.

**Bibliography and References**


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