Focus

Popular development, moral justification and development education

The growing sensitivity to the ways that development and developmental discourse can serve powerful interests is often under-emphasised in certain education sectors. In this article Graham Finlay presents an educator’s perspective on the role of popular approaches to development in development education within second level education.

Introduction

In this paper, I argue for the importance of an approach to development that almost anyone concerned with development and development education will be conscious of and in all likelihood sympathetic to, but one that does not always receive sufficient emphasis in development education, particularly in second level education. This is some form of ‘popular development’, in which attention to existing economic, political and cultural institutions, the employment of local people and the granting of democratic control to the people who are understood to be in need of development are viewed as essential to the success of the project and to its justification. I take this term from one of the best known arguments for this practice, (Brohman, 1996) and there are a range of forms such an approach might take. These may vary from consultative roles for the traditional local elites of a particular locale to active democratic control, on the part of local people, over the planning and execution of the project. There are a variety of debates surrounding the concept of popular development, for example, to what extent such a policy can attempt to alter the role of traditional elites and if a democratic, but universalist approach, like Amartya Sen’s, is sufficiently open to local knowledge and approaches. However, for the purposes of this article these critiques will not be the main focus. Further sections of this paper discuss how we must include an awareness of the importance of popular development. In the rest of this paper, I argue that the best reasons for giving development aid and for changing global institutions and practices as a matter of justice all require some form of popular or participatory
development. I then consider the challenge of the ‘post-development’ school and argue that its concerns can either be incorporated into popular development or rejected.

**Popular development**

Popular development is a strategy that rejects formal models of development. That is, a strategy that is opposed to ‘traditional’ or ‘top down’ development and also to post-development in some of its manifestations as well. Despite remaining controversial, popular development - in various forms - is the object of a great deal of agreement, both among practitioners and students of development. All of the major Irish aid agencies take care to involve people from the developing country in question in the practice of development and there is growing sensitivity to the ways that development and developmental discourse can themselves serve powerful interests. Such a sensitivity is, however, underemphasised in the curriculum of the civic education classes of the Republic of Ireland (currently only at Junior Certificate Level) and may or may not be a part of the emerging Leaving Certificate curriculum in Social and Political Studies. For example, such a sensitivity is not supported in the information sheets and action projects provided for Junior Certificate teachers and students. In large part by omitting questions about agency, many of these materials portray the individuals and groups who are to be developed primarily as recipients of aid, skills training and infrastructure.

**Development education and justification**

In many of our activities as teachers, it can be tempting not to emphasise this link between justification and development education. It is often assumed by advocates of humanitarian aid and development that the measurable aspects of severe poverty and inequality make the moral case for development by themselves. It seems obvious that we, the citizens of wealthy countries, should help the global poor when a small sacrifice on our part can make such a difference to their lives. However, further reflection leads many of the students to quickly become critical of the pure transfer of resources. They ask: “Shouldn’t we be teaching them skills, instead of merely giving them food?” or “We’ve spent so much over the last fifty years and things are getting worse. Is there something wrong with their governments or with them that explains why this aid isn’t helping?”. These questions are good for generating discussion, but they necessarily lead to a discussion of what the moral justification of development aid is, what specific kinds of programmes
it requires and to further questions about the power of development agencies, wealthy countries and international institutions.

In his famous discussion of how development aid might be justified, *Humanity and Justice in Global Perspective*, Brian Barry makes an important distinction between duties of humanity and duties of justice (Barry, 1989). Duties of humanity are duties to relieve ‘distress’. They do not require us to be in any special relationship with the recipient of our aid or to be connected through being members of some cooperative or otherwise common institutions. To illustrate this, Barry uses Peter Singer’s famous example (Singer, 1985) of my finding a child drowning in a shallow pond who I can rescue at no morally significant risk or cost to myself. Even if I have no connection to the child, Singer and Barry agree that I have a moral obligation to save her. Singer then goes on to argue that the facts of global poverty and the ease of the transfer of funds means that I have an obligation to do all that I can to help the global poor, as long as it does not require me to sacrifice something equally morally significant or (in Singer’s weaker version) something morally significant at all (Singer, 1985, p.259). Singer’s appeal is a pure duty of humanity: rights, borders, nationalities and cooperative practices are not relevant to the obligations the suffering of the global poor places upon us. Note that these duties are obligations, not a matter of charity. We really must give, or encourage our governments to give if that is the best way to get help to the poor and starving - as opposed to charity, where, as Singer says, “The charitable man may be praised, but the man who is not charitable is not condemned” (Singer, 1985, p.253). As Barry points out, only under this humanitarian model (and the even weaker charity model that does not require us to give) can we justifiably impose conditions on how development aid is used. If development assistance is owed as a matter of justice or entitlement, on the other hand, Barry argues that part of being entitled to some resources is the power to dispose of them as one sees fit. If it is right that I should have something, then it is right that I decide how it is used. This insight of Barry’s practically requires a commitment to giving recipient countries and groups control over the spending of development aid, which requires there to be ways in which those groups can control the process and establish priorities. Although Barry’s discussion takes place at the level of states, it might well be argued that the institutional or social situation is much finer-grained. Regional disparities, ineffective national political institutions, local culture or problems surrounding the activities of traditional elites all may require, as a matter of justice, that control over the use of development aid may devolve to a level below the level of the country and its government.
Development education at second level

The problem with much of the development education curricula for second level in Ireland is that it seems to presume that our obligations are purely humanitarian, or worse, merely obligations of charity. This is, perhaps, more true of many of the projects and information cards provided by development charities than the textbooks. While one of the textbooks consulted (Harrison & Wilson, 2001) seems guilty of this, another (Quinn, Mistéal & O’Flynn, 2003, pp. 140-146) acknowledges the importance of “making people the center of development” and notes that some development charities criticise established trade practices. This approach has the effect of highlighting the problems of recipient countries’ governments and weakening critical scrutiny of the practices, especially aid and trade practices, of our own governments. This uncritical attitude is part of a broader problem surrounding Junior Certificate Civil, Social and Political Education (CSPE), which is the failure of this curriculum to encourage critical scrutiny of the practices of the powerful and critical evaluation of the policies of the government of the day. To take such an uncritical approach to development is also false to one of the key lessons of any course in CSPE, the importance of the ‘interdependence’ between countries and between individuals (Harrison & Wilson, 2001, ch.7), (Quinn, Mistéal & O’Flynn, 2003, p.114). However, beyond its role in limiting critical scrutiny, the pure humanitarian perspective is unsustainable as a moral response to global poverty and inequality. This is partly for a reason emphasised by Barry: justice establishes what resources states properly own and so can properly give as part of humanitarian aid. As Barry says, “To talk about what I ought, as a matter of humanity, to do with what is mine makes no sense until we have established what is mine in the first place” (Barry, 1989, p.461). Establishing what a just distribution of resources would be and what institutions would regulate such a distribution will vary considerably depending on your theory of justice, but students do not need to develop a complete theory of justice to appreciate Barry’s point. Discussions of colonialism, international trade and interdependence will naturally prepare students for an understanding of our duties as ‘global citizens’ that goes beyond mere humanitarian assistance. In a world in which the items of a student’s lunch may come from Israel, Mozambique and New Zealand, the pure humanitarian model does not describe the world in which we live.
Development education and duty

Barry elaborates on the distinction between duties of humanity and duties of justice by claiming that duties of humanity are “goal-based” and duties of justice are “rights-based” (Barry, 1989, p.456). I think that Barry makes too much of this distinction, because moral theories that focus on goals can justify, without too much work, the structures of local control that characterise just institutions. In the practice of justice, and of development education, the most fundamental level of ethical justification will be less relevant than the considerations that might be advanced for a particular set of policies and institutions. To illustrate this, consider utilitarian approaches to development. Good utilitarian considerations quickly move us beyond the crude goal of reducing suffering that characterises Singer’s approach. Once we see justice as a matter of institutionalising a particular distribution, we see that great utilitarian benefits flow from making the redistribution of resources a matter of entitlement rather than mere transfer or donation. Setting up an aid programme as something recipient individuals and groups can reasonably expect, rather than a series of gifts a donor can abruptly stop, provides palpable benefits in terms of reduced anxiety and an increased ability to plan and brings with it all of the powers of agency Barry’s entitlement model demands. I argue that more than enough benefits to tip the utilitarian scale in favour of a rights-based approach to development flow from institutionalising a popular form of development. This is through the empowerment of communities, the increased ability to respond to changing conditions and the reduction of bad consequences from a failure to understand the cultural and economic situation of the people in need.

Rights-based theories of justice

When we consider, however, the school of thought usually opposed to consequentialist or utilitarian views, Barry’s rights-based theories of justice, we see that it also requires that we treat people as agents and allow them to participate, democratically, in development activity that is focused on their situation. In these cases, we have good reason to radicalise Barry’s call for countries to be given aid without conditions being attached. If the entitlement or rights-based model is to be fundamental, then control over the resources that are being redistributed must be granted at levels well below that of the nation-state. This is what we find when we consider the most developed rights-based approaches to development. The most successful rights-based strategy for identifying our duties to others is, of course, that of human rights and people’s rights, as embodied in various international
covenants and declarations. A commitment to human rights is also an essential component of almost all citizenship education and is, accordingly, emphasised in the standard textbooks for civic education in Ireland (Quinn, Mistéal & O’Flynn, 2003, pp.7-10; Harrison & Wilson, 2001, pp.22-30). Whether we focus on individuals’ economic, social and cultural rights - the so-called second generation of rights - or the rights of peoples or ‘third generation’ rights, including the ‘right to development’, we encounter the same commitment to human agency that grounds a commitment to popular development. It might be thought that, because the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights specifies rights to various goods that all human beings should receive, that the strategies that provide such goods to individuals need not necessarily take into account the views of the individuals affected. At least not in a way central to how the project is carried out. This does not describe our moral understanding of human rights. Even if human rights are often held to be inalienable - so that individuals cannot be forced to renounce or barter away their rights - they still have the right to waive their rights in particular cases. Just as I can waive my right to bodily integrity so that a surgeon can operate on me, so I can waive my right to a particular good if the provision of that good conflicts with other goods. For example, like cultural values, or if the way the relevant good is being provided is not within my control. The particular good may simply be something the individual does not want right at the moment, like food when an individual is fasting (Sen, 2001; 2004) or it may be a good that they believe to be harmful, like vaccination. In all of these cases a human rights approach requires the opportunity to refuse the provision of that good and control over the conditions under which one is provided with that good.

Democratic participation

Beyond the individual level, however, bearers of the human rights that feature in international covenants have the right to democratic participation in the public life of their society and collectively, as the peoples that constitute those publics, have the right to self-determination. Article 5 of the Vienna Declaration of 1993 affirmed that “All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated” (UNHCR, 1996). This includes all of the rights that feature in the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that all individuals have the right “To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives” through “genuine periodic elections” (UNHCR, 1996). Further, both international covenants begin with
the claim that “All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (UNHCR, 1996).

All told, the Vienna Declaration’s claim about the necessarily democratic character of the provision of these rights follows naturally: [Article 8] “Democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing”. The importance of individual democratic participation is also spelled out in the Declaration on the Right to Development, which states that [Article 2.1] “The human person is the central subject of development and should be the active participant and beneficiary of the right to development” (UNHCR, 1996; see also Orford, 2001).

This emphasis on individual participation - which I argue requires robust, and ultimately local, democratic control - is fundamental to any rights-respecting process of development. Nor should it be suggested that I am arguing for a particular moral position merely from the existence of particular international covenants. Such covenants represent the best attempt by a large majority of the world’s nations to enshrine rights-based morality in international law. The ‘global majority’ has succeeded in making a number of these covenants, if unfortunately not all, enforceable under international law. To no small extent, these covenants represent recognition of the salience and benefits of agency by all the countries of the world and the justice-based demand, on the part of poorer countries, for some chance to participate in their own development.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, I want to consider the objections mounted against development under the rubric of ‘post-development’. Thinking about criticisms of development that emphasise the ways that developmental discourse controls and constructs undeveloped countries and subjects as inferior others helps to stimulate critical discussion in a classroom situation at any level and can be widened to include a critical awareness of the role of language and discourse in many aspects of students’ lives. Nevertheless, there are distinctions to be made within this literature, in terms of the import of the accounts they give of the failures of development. James Ferguson’s description of the failures of top down development in Lesotho (Ferguson, 1994) provides a compelling account of how development carried out in the absence of the participation and understanding of the people who are to be developed can go radically wrong, whereas post-development discourses that reject all ‘Western’ involvement (e.g. Apfel-Marglin, 1990) are too uncritical of local
elites. Once we focus on the role of local people’s agency in controlling development, concerns about how this emphasis serves Western interests are allayed to no small extent. This is because local groups and impoverished individuals are to be given the power to renounce any developmental intervention that they see as threatening local customs or institutions. Although problems and conflicts can, of course, still arise, discussion of this possibility can aid students in thinking about various ways of resolving or coping with inter-cultural conflict.

I have been arguing throughout this paper that development education is of a piece with a critical scrutiny of the practice of development, from a discursive, institutional and rights-based perspective. As discussed, an awareness of the importance of popular development is essential. Not least because the main justifications for the development of ‘under-developed countries’ require it and because the justification of development programmes is essential to development education. These considerations may amount, in the end, to the demand that the normative - moral scrutiny of both our actions and the actions of our governments - has an essential role in our civic education. After all, how can we encourage Irish students to become active citizens if our development education refuses that opportunity to the citizens of the developing world?

References and Bibliography


Information on the Vienna Declaration of 1993 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights retrieved from:

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