

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE: DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION, NGOS AND URGENT NEED FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Introduction

Social change is the *raison d'être* of the development education (DE) sector. It aims to eradicate social and economic inequalities through a process of learning that supports action as summarised in the following definition from the European DEEEP project: 'It enables people to move from basic awareness of international development priorities and sustainable human development, through understanding of the causes and effects of global issues to personal involvement and informed actions' (DARE Forum, 2004). This is a widely shared approach to development education which also extends to governments. For example, Irish Aid suggests that development education 'seeks to engage people in analysis, reflection and action for local and global citizenship and participation' (Irish Aid, 2006). This article aims to discuss the role of development organisations in effecting social change primarily by reference to the sectors in Ireland and Britain. It argues that the sector has limited engagement with social movements which share many of the values and social vision of development education and could potentially widen its impact on society. A stronger and more radical social base could enable development education to initiate dialogical discussion on issues pivotal to our future like sustainability in the context of the prevailing model of growth.

This article will argue the case for a more rounded and substantial engagement with development education within the development sector itself by examining the deficits of the Make Poverty History (MPH) campaign events in 2005 and missed opportunities arising from the recent financial crisis in Ireland. The article will begin by examining the outcomes of recent research on development education and overseas aid which suggests that cosmetic engagement with development issues, as appeared to be the case for example with Make Poverty History, results in short-term public mobilisation and disappointing outcomes. It is argued that a more radical approach to campaigning that embraces the reflective practice of development education could generate a more meaningful and fruitful engagement with the public. It goes on to suggest that the reluctance of many key constituents in the development sector to engage in the debate around Ireland's recent financial

collapse and loss of economic sovereignty represented a missed opportunity to educate the public about fundamental aspects of development. It arguably undermined the sector's credibility as a critical voice in the non-governmental sector and represented a derogation of development education's role as an agent of *local* as well as global development.

The article concludes that more sustained public engagement with development issues could be generated through stronger links with social movements and a more radical agenda. The sector could become a more vital component of civil society by connecting the local to the global.

Shallow public engagement with development

In a recent briefing on engaging the public in tackling global poverty in Britain, Think Global (formerly Development Education Association) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) suggest 'that public support for development, whilst still widespread, is shallow and that public opinion is increasingly polarised on this issue' (October 2010). Hudson and van Heerde have questioned the assumption that there is an 'overwhelming level of public support for the principle of aid to poor countries'. In fact, they argue that the causal link between public support and development aid 'does not enjoy empirical support from available data' (2010:20). Hudson and van Heerde have found that the level of engagement with development in Britain is 'a mile wide and an inch deep' which supports the notion that public knowledge of development lacks the complexity and depth required to engage sustainably with the issues underpinning global poverty. This shallow public engagement with development arguably found its most visible expression in the Make Poverty History (MPH) campaign and its related events in 2005.

On 2 July 2005, 220,000 protestors convened in Edinburgh as part of a series of events organised as part of MPH, a coalition of charities, civil society groups, and faith organisations formed to campaign on key global issues like debt and poverty eradication. The Edinburgh protest coincided with a Group of 8 leading industrialised countries summit held twenty miles away in Gleneagles. As the protestors completed walking laps of Edinburgh city centre shouting slogans in an upbeat atmosphere, the level of mobilisation was impressive but the outcomes questionable. While big promises were made at Gleneagles including a \$50 billion aid package to Africa, they were subsequently not delivered upon. Among the development agency responses to the Gleneagles summit: the World Development Movement described it as 'a disaster for the

world's poor'; ActionAid complained that 'the G8 have completely failed to deliver trade justice'; Christian Aid described the summit as 'a sad day for poor people in Africa and all over the world'; and Oxfam lamented that 'neither the necessary sense of urgency nor the historic potential of Gleneagles was grasped by the G8' (*Guardian*, 6 September 2005).

Make Poverty History succeeded on the level of clearly communicating the need for change and highlighting some of the key issues that needed addressing but it failed in sustaining the participation of the hundreds of thousands who donned the white wristbands and took to the streets. A Eurobarometer poll in 2005 showed that despite the enhanced media coverage and increased public awareness of global poverty generated by Make Poverty History, Live8 concerts, and Gleneagles Summit, a total of 88 per cent of EU citizens cited no knowledge of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Eurobarometer, 2005). The MDGs are the central plank of development policy for the world's leading industrialised countries and the low level of public awareness of the goals reflected in this poll suggests that development organisations and governments alike have been largely unsuccessful in capturing civil society involvement in achieving the targets.

A Department for International Development (DfID)-commissioned poll in 2010 measuring public (adults over 16 years) attitudes to development shows that the proportion of the public who say they are very concerned about global poverty has declined from a peak of 32 per cent around the time of Make Poverty History to 25 per cent today. The percentage of the public describing themselves as 'active enthusiasts' in the area of international development declined from 18 per cent in 2008 to 14 per cent in 2010 while, in the same period, the percentage of respondents who thought 'most aid is wasted' increased from 47 per cent to 53 per cent. The percentage of respondents concerned about global poverty remained solidly high (74 per cent in 2008 and 73 per cent in 2010) which suggests that the public lack the knowledge and understanding of international development to meaningfully address relevant issues and move from a position of concern to one of individual or communal action (TNS, 2010).

Make Poverty History appeared to be an example of what Freire (1972) described as pure activism (action without reflection) rather than the more sustained engagement with the learner inherent in *praxis* (reflection *and* action) which had the power 'to negate accepted limits and open the way to a new future' (ibid.:11). Key questions arising from the recent surveys on public

attitudes to development are how to engage civil society at the kind of level likely to result in dialogical action, and what role development NGOs can play in this process?

The Irish financial crisis – where was the development sector?

Bebbington et al. suggest that ‘NGOs are only NGOs in any politically meaningful sense of the term if they are offering alternatives to dominant models, practices and ideas about development’ (2008:3). This more politically-oriented role is problematic for many NGOs, particularly in the development sector where they tend to focus on the domestic policy arena only insofar as it impacts on overseas aid and development policy. Economic policy-making and social development in the national context is largely devolved to NGOs with a local or specialist focus in the domestic arena. However, the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent sharp contraction of the Irish economy resulting in an €85 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB) shows how the national and global frequently collide (*Irish Times*, 28 November 2010). For example the same economic mismanagement that cost the Irish taxpayer between €29 and €34 billion to bail out Anglo Irish Bank (*Guardian*, 30 September 2010), also resulted in cuts totaling €224 million from the overseas aid budget in 2009 (Dochas, 10 December 2009).

While the development sector launched a campaign to engage public support for the aid budget and prevent further cuts (www.actnow2015.ie), it has stopped short of locating the cuts within the wider economic malaise impacting on Irish society. To critique the cuts in aid without analysing and attempting to address the underlying social, economic and political crisis underpinning those cuts severely limits the role of NGOs as critical friends of government and active agents of social equality at home and overseas. Bebbington, et al. believe that:

“NGOs can and must re-engage with the project of seeking alternative development futures for the world’s poorest and more marginal. This will require clearer analysis of the contemporary problems of uneven development, and a clear understanding of the types of alliances NGOs need to construct with other actors in civil society if they are to mount a credible challenge to disempowering processes of economic, social and political development” (2008:3).

One of the lessons of Make Poverty History is that the alliance of civil society movements involved in the campaign lacked a development education component that could have supported a more critical analysis of the issues tackled by MPH. Similarly, development education organisations with the capacity to provide critical literacy skills and a deeper understanding of development did not sufficiently engage with the campaign and its mobilisation of the public.

However, there is a striking recent example of an organisation that has attempted to connect the current economic crisis in Ireland to the global South. In December 2010, Action from Ireland (Afri) published a paper on the IMF's intervention in Ireland 'based on the experience of global justice organisations that have long monitored the impact of IMF policies in the Global South'. The paper argues that the IMF deal '[L]ocks Ireland into a very specific neo-liberal economic model dominated by policies which impose suffering on the less well off in Irish society'. Drawing upon examples of the IMF's – arguably disastrous – interventions in the global South, the paper argues for a defaulting on the bank debt, 'an option that it is imperative be exercised on the grounds of both justice and economic sustainability' (Afri, 2010). Thus, Afri is squarely addressing a fundamental and momentous generational question for the Irish people based on compelling evidence from the global South.

It is regrettable that key constituents in the development sector remained silent on Ireland's financial problems and refused to engage in the debate that enveloped Irish civil society. Here was an opportunity to mobilise stakeholders at a grassroots level against the IMF/ECB loan and educate the public on alternative economic models drawing upon the sector's links with the global South. Rarely has the local been so clearly intertwined with the global in an issue that impacts on all of us and beckons a contribution from development organisations and development educators. This required the sector to leave the more comfortable terrain of commentary on the global to become more visibly and actively engaged with the local and it largely refused to do so. As Storey suggests: 'if an opportunity for education *from* the South is being lost here then so also is an opportunity to learn *about* the South' given that the Irish people are confronting similar processes of structural adjustment to those faced by many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America (2011). The sector could, for example, have shared the experiences of Argentina at the start of the last decade when popular resistance to an IMF lending programme and its resulting austerity measures forced a partial defaulting on its debt which helped to set the country on the path toward economic recovery (ibid).

Alas, the Irish development sector, with honourable exceptions, missed this opportunity to bring global experiences to bear on a local issue of far-reaching consequences which begs the question why are development organisations so reluctant to enter the political fray at a domestic level beyond the area of international development?

Ducking the domestic agenda

The Irish development sector has yet to open the kind of debate proposed by Bebbington, et al. on ‘alternative development futures’ rooted in sustainability and driven by social needs rather than a high-growth, neo-liberal ideology. And yet the development sector has considerable public support which could provide a platform for meaningful debate on alternative futures in Ireland informed by a global perspective. According to a 2006 Dochas survey of its members there are 854,613 supporters of its development sector affiliates, 77 per cent of which are drawn from the ‘general public’. If this substantial section of civil society could be engaged in development education activities linking the local to the global then it would undoubtedly enhance active citizenship on development issues and strengthen public support for positive interventions in the global South. However, for the most part, development organisations will only engage in the domestic political arena when it addresses policy issues directly related to the area of international development. Thus, local development issues with a firm global connection like the economy, unemployment, asylum-seekers and refugees, and migration are deemed off the radar of key development constituents. So, why is there reluctance among development organisations to intervene in the public debate on issues to which they could usefully contribute?

Part of the answer lies in how development NGOs are funded, particularly in the development sector where the larger development agencies have traditionally acted as government partners in delivering aid programmes in the global South. For example, the 2009 Irish Aid Annual Report stated that ‘[a]pproximately one third of Ireland’s bilateral ODA (Overseas Development Assistance) was delivered through non-governmental organisations’ (2009:66) with Ireland’s total aid budget in 2009 amounting to €722.2 million. These NGO partners include overseas agencies but five Irish NGOs alone – Christian Aid, Concern, GOAL, Self Help Africa, and Trócaire - received core programme support in 2009 totaling more than €56 million (Irish Aid, 2009:46). This is not to critique development organisations for working in partnership with government or to criticise Irish Aid for disbursing aid through NGOs; we need

a well-resourced aid sector and a government committed to international development. However, the relationship between the NGO and government sectors goes beyond that of donor and aid partner to, for example, joint missions to multilateral development gatherings which can arguably result in a blurring of roles, policies and agendas. When the stakes are so high in terms of financial support, policy formation and government access, development organisations may be reluctant to overtly criticise government policy, particularly in areas beyond international development.

Similarly, the development education sector is highly dependent on Irish Aid as development agency support for the sector has weakened. In total, Irish Aid expenditure for development education in 2009 was over €5 million which is high relative to other Western European states (2009:58). A trend in development education since the mid-1990s in Britain and Ireland has seen a reduction in support for development education from the NGO sector as government support has increased. This has resulted in traditionally small development education organisations becoming increasingly vulnerable to changes in government policy like, for instance, the decision by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID) to reduce its grant support for development education following the May 2010 election (DfID, 17 May; 2 July 2010). In such a government-dominated funding environment it is possible that some development education practitioners may either tailor their programmes to correspond with official development agendas or avoid tackling controversial issues that could possibly antagonise official funders.

Other factors that may explain why development organisations are reluctant to intervene in domestic policy matters includes the suggestion by some that 'NGOs can be more accurately seen as corporate entities acting according to the logic of the marketplace, albeit a marketplace in service provision' (Bebbington, et al.:6). As larger corporate entities they may have a stronger orientation toward fundraising and campaigns than education and a more international rather than local policy focus. There is also the question of public support and the perceived danger that adopting an overtly political role in domestic affairs which courts controversy may result in reduced donations and public goodwill. On the other hand, it is arguable that development organisations could augment their public support and strengthen their connection with local communities by speaking to domestic issues which have a strong global resonance. This is certainly an area of activity that development

organisations could usefully reflect upon particularly in the context of Ireland's worsening social and economic performance as outlined in the next section.

Under-development in Ireland: the case for local interventions by the development sector

Ireland is a society ill-at-ease with itself as evidenced by public concern at the sweep of cuts resulting from the state's lending to banks and acceptance of an €85 billion loan from the IMF and ECB. Commentators and readers alike have vented their anger on the pages of the *Irish Times* at the 'surrender' of Irish sovereignty and loss of political credibility and independence of action (18 & 19 November 2010). Around 50,000 people attended a public rally opposing the cuts organised by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions on 27 November 2010 in one of the largest demonstrations seen in the capital for many years (*Irish Times*) in addition to smaller but significant rallies by nurses, pensioners and other sectors of civil society targeted by austerity measures.

Since 2008, Ireland has been experiencing indicators of social under-development most recently associated with the economically stagnant 1980s when high unemployment forced many young people to emigrate to more buoyant economies overseas. There are currently 439,200 people claiming unemployment benefits in Ireland, some 13.7 per cent of the population (up from 3.7 per cent in 2000) which in turn is pushing up the number expected to emigrate over the coming years estimated at 100,000 between April 2010 and April 2012. In the area of education, there are worrying indicators of social polarisation and under-achievement with 24 per cent of 15 year olds 'effectively illiterate' and Ireland slumping to 17th position on the world's international league table on literacy and 30th (out of 34) on the league table on education spending. Statistics in the area of health are equally worrying with 47, 587 patients waiting for elective procedures and €1.4 billion slashed from the health budget from 2011-2014 (*Irish Times*, 12 February 2011).

These statistics indicate a deeper, long-term malaise in the Irish economy, political system and wider society resulting from the more prominent role of the market in public life. In considering the impact of neo-liberalism on education both locally and internationally, the Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) identified three key features in the external environment that impacted on its work: 'globalisation, marketisation and individualisation'. It added that '[t]he influence of the market has also been keenly felt in higher education, where individual schools and departments of

universities are increasingly viewed as the components of an internal competitive market'. As a result of accelerated globalisation, education in liberal democracies is becoming increasingly commodified and a significant outcome of this process is the 'trend of individualisation' and 'the atomisation of the individual in an increasingly consumerised and consumer-led world' (NCCA Strategic Plan, 2006-08:11-13).

This increasing commodification of the education system and other vital public services like health and utilities combined with the economic turmoil already besieging Irish society demands social change that extends beyond the current tried and failed model of untrammelled neo-liberalism. In order to engage in this debate both within the development sector and with social partners, development NGOs need to adopt a more overtly political role in society and align themselves more strategically with civil society groups that share their vision for a more egalitarian and just society. In assessing their findings on public attitudes to development and the role of NGOs, Hudson and van Heerde pose this question:

“Should building support for development seek to work through accommodating existing policy preferences or aim to actively shape preferences? The answer to this will depend upon what the true goal of a communication and public awareness strategy is: whether it is to maximize support for poverty alleviation or to foster critical civic engagement with poverty alleviation itself” (2010:22-23).

The current financial crisis in Ireland and erosion of public trust in political institutions as a means toward equitable social change demands that development organisations raise their voices in the debate on how we move forward as a society. Development education is particularly well positioned to contribute to this debate given its local-global dialectic as outlined in the aforementioned Irish Aid definition which regards DE as supporting 'reflection and action for *local* and global citizenship and participation'. The local component of development education practice involves drawing upon the learner's experiences in the local community and relating those experiences to wider concepts of social and economic development. The next section offers some proposals as to how development education and the wider development sector can contribute to this debate on social change.

How do we rise to the challenge of urgent social change?

Firstly, development organisations of all stripes need to establish meaningful partnerships with the civil society organisations that represent the poor, marginalised and disempowered within Ireland as well as overseas. By creating new horizontal coalitions and alliances, development organisations can operate with renewed credibility and energy. Far too often development educators debate issues among themselves, rather than engaging with wider society and in the current social and economic context we no longer have that luxury. Trade unions, community groups, minority ethnic organisations, unemployed groups and campaigning organisations like social movements and human rights groups all represent potential partners of the development education sector. These horizontal rather than vertical alliances represent the natural constituency of development education.

Secondly, development educators need to become more proactively and overtly political in their operations. For the majority of development organisations political advocacy begins and ends with international development policy and how it is resourced. The development sector, for the most part, does not address domestic policy issues or consider the relationship between Ireland's national growth strategy and the well-being of Irish society as well as overseas aid. The cuts in overseas aid are on the same continuum as other reductions in government expenditure which are severely impacting on the poor in Ireland. The development sector has a large public base that could be mobilised in support of a domestic social agenda rooted in justice and equality and informed by a global perspective.

Thirdly, the development education sector needs to formulate its own agenda for change based on debate among practitioners and with social partners. The sector has traditionally operated within the strategic priorities of funders and statutory education bodies rather than identifying its own priorities for social change. A national development education strategy plan that has buy-in and support from the wider development sector and grassroots social movements, could enable the sector to chart its own course to development based on its strengths as a practitioner of education toward social change.

Fourthly, Irish development organisations need to immediately engage in a process of imagining and cultivating alternative futures that can steer our society toward a more sustainable model of development imbued with the kind

of values and community ethos that has been lost over the last two decades. As the NCCA suggests:

“In Ireland, the traditional family and the role of the family within a community are changing. The tradition of individuals volunteering to participate in initiatives for the benefit of the local community appears to be in decline, as this time is increasingly devoted to children and family and activities that directly benefit *my* family and *my* children” (NCCA, 2006:13).

In considering how the formulation of alternative futures might work, Bebbington, et al. believe NGOs should reach out ‘far more assertively, open-mindedly, but also critically to social movements. Indeed the imperative seems to be for NGOs to think consciously of themselves as part of a social movement in which the different constituents are equally important, and therefore in which relationships of power have to be thoroughly re-worked and made more horizontal’ (2008:32).

Fifthly, the leading development agencies need to re-engage or enhance their support for development education both internally and externally by way of financial support to the wider sector. A more independent financial base is imperative for the long-term sustainability of the sector and development agency support is necessary if development education is to be delivered to new audiences and social partners. Finally, and connected to the previous points, is the need for development education to formulate its thinking and positions on the key global issues impacting on our lives.

In a seminar on climate change for the Centre for Global Education (2010), David Selby posed some challenging questions for development education practitioners: is the sector critical enough of economic growth and its effects? Is development education offering a sufficiently root and branch critique of consumerism? Is development education helping to break through the cognitive dissonance surrounding what is happening to the planet whereby we acknowledge the threat posed by climate change but prevaricate from responding accordingly? (Centre for Global Education, 2010). Development education needs to place its focus on debating these questions and considering the role it wants to play in moving society towards a more sustainable and equitable future.

Conclusion

Recent surveys and polls commissioned by development organisations in Britain suggest that support for overseas aid is weakening and the level of public knowledge of development issues is ‘a mile wide and an inch deep’. The Make Poverty History initiative was extremely successful in mobilising the public for actions on development issues but unsuccessful in sustaining their engagement with global poverty over the long-term. The MPH example suggests that social movements and development education practitioners have a mutual need for support and collaboration to ensure that the public have the requisite depth of learning and skills needed to engage in meaningful actions on development issues.

The development sector needs to rise to the challenge of the global financial crisis and its impact on the Irish economy together with the festering undercurrents of social inequality. The sector has an opportunity to apply its global learning to local problems based on new partnerships with grassroots social movements. The sector can no longer afford to limit interventions in local policy-making to overseas development issues. It is no coincidence that the five countries that have reached the United Nations’ target of 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) for overseas development assistance – Norway, Sweden, Luxembourg, Denmark and the Netherlands – are also countries that have traditionally performed well in domestic social indicators like health and education (OECD, 2008; UN, 2011). Therefore, building social partnerships in civil society that help to address domestic deficits in social and economic development will also enable development organisations in Ireland to strengthen public support for overseas development.

In *The Spirit Level*, Wilkinson and Pickett suggest that mainstream politics ‘has abandoned the attempt to provide a shared vision capable of inspiring us to create a better society’ (2010:4). Development organisations in Ireland now have a significant opportunity to move beyond their traditional terrain and intervene more overtly in domestic policy issues to build a better society in Ireland and, at the same time, build support for development overseas.

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