

PROFESSIONAL AND RADICAL: THE ROLE OF DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION CENTRES IN DEVELOPING CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

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Introduction

This article will focus upon how development education (DE), through the operation of a development education centre (DEC), can support members of civil society bodies who become actively involved in global North - global South development projects. It will look at the role a DEC can play in North-South development initiatives, particularly those projects whose operational base is located in the centre's geographic catchment area. A centre can encourage people to reflect upon their experience in the light of critical theory and act on the insights gained. Allowing people to reflectively deconstruct and reconstruct their social world enhances the capacity of citizens to bring about more equitable and sustainable development. The opportunities and challenges for a DE centre will be explored and connections between research, advocacy and activism will inform the exploration. This discussion of a DEC's operations is designed to provide food for thought about effective strategies for DEC measures targeted at members of civil society. It will reflect on how and why DE should remain a professional and radical endeavour that does challenge the social and economic causes of inequality and injustice despite the current closer integration with education and government policy and practice.

DE and research on development initiatives can play an important role in the inception and operation of a North-South development endeavour and help ensure that its structures, procedures and intended outcomes are informed by good practice. Some of the opportunities and challenges facing a DEC in engaging with and continuing to provide professional support to such ventures will be discussed.

Civil society and citizenship

Poverty eradication and sustainable development are key concerns for the 21st century in a globalised, interdependent and rapidly changing world. The public is increasingly engaging with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and participating in global activism through campaigns such as the Global

Campaign against Poverty. NGOs are a key component in civil society and its expanding range of social movements. New social movements have been seen by some social theorists as reactions against bureaucratisation, statism, corporatism and technocratic interference in all aspects of civic life and existence (Frankel, 1987:21).

The 'European Consensus on Development: the contribution of Development Education & Awareness Raising' recommends that:

“civil society organisations give explicit attention to the importance of Development Education and Awareness Raising in organisational strategies, budgets and public communication programmes, projects and activities, enabling the public to gain increased critical awareness of development and increased knowledgeable and skilled participation in development - globally and locally” (DEEEP, 2007:12).

A DEC can be a key source of expertise to assist a civil society body to accomplish integration of DE into its operations.

The discourse on 'active citizenship' is quite topical at present and there is much written about encouraging 'responsible global citizenship'. Murray (2006:1) speaks of the challenges of educating people to be responsible global citizens whose ability to impact outside of their national boundaries is growing. She opines that the aim of development educators to produce knowledgeable, informed, skilled and, above all, active responsible citizens can be deemed successful if the end result or outcome of that education is their action for positive change (Murray, 2006:3).

Murray also warns, however, that repeated tales of global poverty can lead to a sense of superiority rather than solidarity (Murray, 2006:1). Finlay observes that citizens should not be encouraged to act in a way that is based upon a charity approach, but rather in a way based on justice and entitlement which overrides issues of borders or nationalities. This is different from the traditional charity/humanitarian approach which does not require any special relationship between the donor and recipient. The justice approach to development implies the recipient's right to dispose of development aid and resources as one sees fit, showing solidarity rather than a pretence of superiority from donors (Finlay, 2006:7).

Ditshego (1994:9) highlighted the 1990 Bulawayo Appeal, a statement by people from the global South on the subject of linking, in which they rejected the word charity and any emphasis on dependency. They called for accountability and an emphasis on dignified human relationships. Echoes of similar sentiments can be found in Irish history, as illustrated, for example in a song of Irish labourers which was written in a colonial political, economic and societal context, 'Do Me Justice, Treat Me Fair', wherein the chorus runs 'Do me justice, treat me fair, and I won't be discontented; do me justice, treat me fair, and I'll not be laughed at anywhere, but highly represented' (Hart, 2005). Controversial viewpoints on development need to be aired and debated and a DEC can contribute to such exploration, thereby enabling critical reflection by actors in civil society bodies.

Vanessa Andreotti (2006:48) refers to 'soft and critical' models of citizenship education and stresses the need for educators to be 'critically literate' in order to avoid the pitfalls of the soft approach. She explains the goal of global citizenship from a 'soft' perspective is to 'empower individuals to act (or become active citizens) according to what has been defined for them as a good life or ideal world' whereas critical global citizenship education aims to 'empower individuals to reflect critically on the legacies and processes of their cultures, to imagine different futures and to take responsibility for decisions and actions'. Critical approaches promote engagement with global issues and perspectives and an ethical relationship to difference, addressing complexity and power relations.

Andreotti highlights possible benefits of the soft approach, such as a greater awareness of the issues, support for campaigns, greater motivation to 'do' something, and a feel-good factor. The critical approach, however, can engender independent/critical thinking and more informed, responsible and ethical action. Action is defined by Andreotti as a choice made by an individual after careful analysis of the context of intervention, of different views, of power relations (especially the position of the intervener) and of short and long term positive and negative implications of goals and strategies (Andreotti, 2006:48).

Importantly, if educators are not critically literate, it follows that they run the risk of reproducing the systems of belief and practices that harm those they want to support (Andreotti, 2006:49). Hence, a current challenge for DE practitioners and DECs is to ensure learners maintain a radical edge of critical literacy within the current context of closer integration with education and government policy and practice.

Development NGOs

Development NGOs have been depicted by Korten (1990:117) as having been engaged in a gradual transition from naïve to sophisticated conceptions of their work. His 1990 four generation model for strategies of development-oriented NGOs saw the first category as: ‘a relief and welfare approach, the second generation focusing upon community development, the third category as sustainable systems development and the fourth as people’s movements’.

Ditshego (1994:9), as a ‘Southern voice’, described the residual effect of the hegemony of colonialism where some Southerners see ‘West as best’ and conversely, others distrust everything associated with the global North. He criticises the patronising approach of much development aid, which exemplifies the modernisation theory where one part of the world feels it can develop the other. He asserts that Northern money and material should be used on projects developed by African peoples and initiated on the basis of locally generated resources, with the North taking a back seat and playing a supportive rather than leading role. A DEC can facilitate the circulation of perspectives such as this in a spirit of critical reflection upon the process and procedures of a development/aid undertaking.

Connolly observes that ‘most Irish NGOs are shifting their primary focus from direct service delivery to supporting Southern civil society either through funding service delivery or through capacity building and support for advocacy’. However, she observes that there is ‘little evidence of widespread internal debate by Irish NGOs about the power relationships involved in working in partnership with Southern civil society organisations and formal policies and strategic management remains underdeveloped in this area’ (Connolly, 2007:17).

Sen (1987:166) comments that in addition to measuring their work in terms of impact and efficiency, there is a need for ongoing implementation analysis and critical self-evaluation by NGOs of their role and work in the overall development and societal context as an important exercise to remind themselves of their original purpose. Of course, no organisation wants to be classified as what Handy (1988:7) describes as a ‘disabling organisation’; he credits Ivan Illich with identifying it as disabling its clients in order to enable them, creating thereby a spurious dependency. Some voluntary organisations, sure of themselves and what they offer, need opportunities to help people and people to be helped. And, as Johnson (1992:296) has emphasised, DE cannot

leave it all to Northerners to articulate and interpret global development issues. It is easy to know what Northern NGOs think they are doing, but not what Southerners think of NGO efforts and their effects.

Challenges for development education centres

DE grew from a charity vision which initially generally ignored 'Northern' involvement in creating 'Southern' problems, whereas current socially critical forms of DE try to identify and tackle misconceptions and prejudices inside and outside of the sector, as part of the process of 'liberating education' (Yarwood & Davis, 1994:132). A DE centre can undertake social education in what Giroux (1983 in Huckle, 1991:54) has described as the emancipatory model, which seeks to empower people so that they can democratically transform society. It can do this by encouraging learners to reflect upon their experience in the light of critical theory and act on the insights gained. As a form of praxis it allows people to reflectively deconstruct and reconstruct their social world. This assists in the development of critical and active citizens capable of bringing about more equitable and sustainable development.

A major challenge for a DE centre is to create what Andreotti (2007:49) describes as an 'ethical relationship' with learners (and with the South), wherein development of critical literacy occurs. This criticality, she emphasises, does not judge something to be right or wrong, but is an attempt to understand the origins of assumptions and the consequent implications. A DEC can provide the space for those involved in a project to reflect upon and explore how they came to think/be/feel/act as they do and the impact of their systems of belief locally/globally vis a vis issues of power, social relationships and the distribution of labour and resources (Andreotti, 2007:49).

DECs need to encourage their target groups to be aware, as Ponting (1991:222) has highlighted, of the consequences of unbalanced development effects for industrialised countries in the North and those of the South. Political and economic control of a large part of the world's resources has enabled the industrialised world to effectively live beyond the constraints of its resource base.

For Freire, being fully human implied being active and reflective. People who are passive and unthinkingly accepting of their situation are often subject to oppression, and education has a potential to liberate them from this mindset so long as it is 'dialogical' and problem posing. DEC's can stimulate problem posing for those involved in overseas development activities and

thereby help to ensure that reflection on actions is undertaken in a critically reflective manner here in the North. Also, as Finlay (2006:11) remarked, thinking about criticisms of development that emphasise the ways that developmental discourse controls and constructs ‘undeveloped’ countries and subjects as inferior helps to stimulate critical discussion and can instil a heightened awareness of the role of language and discourse in many aspects of our lives.

DECs can support people to become increasingly conscious of the impact of any overseas aid measures, be they those of their government or of their own locally-developed NGO or charity. Even if the aid does not have strings attached in terms of trade or economic conditions, it may be structured in such a way that it creates needs and destroys ‘normal’ social patterns of behaviour in the host society and even in the donor society where a paternalistic mentality may be engendered or further reinforced. One international debt cancellation activist described her recommended tactical strategy as a two handed ‘pair of gloves’ approach, wherein it can be effective to donate urgently needed aid, while ensuring the other hand is also covered, i.e. addressing structural change issues through campaigning/advocacy measures resulting in effective action (Reilly, 2007).

Key questions for a DE centre when engaging with civil society bodies include:

- How can DE and DECs support members of civil society who become involved in actions addressing global development issues?
- How does a DEC translate relevant academic discourses into comprehensible concepts and constructs in order to increase dialogue and ultimately understanding of the challenges and dilemmas of any North-South endeavour?
- How can a DEC assist members of civil society involved in North-South actions to engage consciously and respectfully with their fellow human beings in a country in the South?
- How can a DEC effectively include Southern voices and perspectives in its education work?

A DEC must strive to ensure that local NGOs are aware of relevant research and conscious of the potentially positive and negative impact of twinning, linking, or aid actions as they take their projects forward. It is necessary, of course, that there is adequate understanding of and respect for the

work of DEC's by NGOs in order for DEC's to effectively reach and engage with these bodies. Good working relationships need to be developed and maintained with its target groups and funders and effective methods of communication and education must be employed. Challenging assumptions and creating space for debate can be difficult, but not impossible.

Conclusion

Development education centres must vigilantly question their frames of reference and examine the assumptions operative in their organisational structures, policies and practices and encourage the local NGOs with whom they interact to do the same. There is a tension in the social sciences between discussion of abstracted social processes or metanarratives and discussion of lived experiences or small scale examples. Ultimately, it is effective to start on a small scale and develop strategies and alliances that address over-arching structural problems (Redclift & Benton, 1994:5-6). This discussion of a DEC's operations provides food for thought which can result in further debate and research into effective strategies for DE measures with members of civil society. This debate can result in recommendations for positive action in the future, ensuring that DE remains a radical endeavour that challenges the social and economic causes of inequality and injustice.

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