

Connecting communities: The LYCS experience of integrating development education into community development

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Lourdes Youth and Community Services (LYCS) is in the somewhat unusual position of being a community development organisation with a history of development education practice. The organisation has been bringing a global perspective into its work for well over a decade. An important part of our mission involves the provision of opportunities for people to come together and explore the issues faced by their community and how they can be addressed. Opportunities for collective education where people can share experiences and, through that process, develop a better understanding of the world we live in, the forces that affect our lives and the possibilities for change, are central to community development as we see it.

We have discovered that using a development education perspective in this work enables learners to begin to develop a broader perspective on the root causes of the issues they confront in their everyday lives and to learn from the experiences of other communities across the world. It challenges attitudes and ideas, fosters a sense of shared experience and solidarity and an appreciation of diversity. Through LYCS groups as diverse as older women, drug users, street traders and community workers, issues such as housing, human rights, world trade, health inequality, violence against women and poverty culture have been explored from both a local and global perspective.

In more recent years it became obvious that LYCS had much to offer other community organisations and indeed development education practitioners in sharing our understanding of how the barrier between two fields that share such similar values and practices can be overcome. With that in mind the organisation delivered an innovative pilot course on introducing development education into community development work for local community workers. Following the success of the course LYCS with the support of the then National Committee for Development Education, hired a part time, development education outreach worker, to promote and support the use of development education in the local area. Since then the work has become full time and over 40 local organisations have been involved in development education activity of some kind.

Most recently LYCS published a resource for facilitators and tutors interested in using this approach in their work *Connecting Communities: A*

Practical Guide to Using Development Education in Community Settings aims to encourage uptake and good practice in development education among community education and community development practitioners. Two Further Education and Training Award Council (FETAC) accredited modules in local and global development were also devised and a second development education worker has been employed to act as a support to community organisations around the country wanting to integrate the global perspective into their work.

Development education and community development

As Maureen Bassett has argued, development education and community development:

“share many core principles, such as equality, justice, empowerment and participation. They share a commitment to human-centred development, an understanding of the structural causes of poverty, radical educational models and a belief in action to bring about change. Given these similarities there is a strong rationale and much potential for greater collaboration between the two fields”

(Bassett & Hayes, 1998).

Crucial to bringing a global perspective into community development is an understanding that the communities involved in that process experience enormous development needs themselves. Dublin’s North East Inner City, for example, home to LYCS, is one of the poorest communities in Ireland. Low income, poor housing, early school leaving and social exclusion are part of everyday reality.

While community development is primarily concerned with realities at local level, the root causes of the problems confronted on the ground everyday are often located outside of the community in broader national and increasingly international economic and political contexts. This is where the global perspective of development education comes in: it gives us opportunities to develop an understanding of this broader picture and to learn from the strategies for change employed by other communities around the world.

Breaking through barriers

For many projects busy confronting the sometimes harsh realities of

everyday life in marginalised communities, this depth of analysis can seem like a task that can only be an optional extra and conducted on an ad hoc or occasional basis. Pressing needs on the ground, funding constraints and the perception of development education as being ‘only about the Third World’ are just some of the barriers we have encountered. The issues confronting marginalised communities can sometimes seem so overwhelming. Asking people to consider those experienced by the peoples of the majority world can be seen as asking them to take on an extra burden.

What has worked for LYCS is operating from a community development perspective, recognising that groups and organisations have key concerns in terms of their local realities and working with them to identify and draw out the links globally. Whether working with groups of learners or with organisations, their needs and concerns are always the best starting point.

LYCS uses development education because it works. Exploring issues confronting the community from a global as well as a local standpoint enables participants to reflect on their own lives, to compare their own situation with that of others, to understand better the root causes of problems and to learn from strategies used by other people and communities confronting similar problems. In practice, this often means that people feel less isolated both as individuals and as members of a community, and more able to take action.

The approach taken by LYCS with learning groups

(A circular process)

A. Individual and group knowledge and experience: The group starts by reflecting on individual and group experiences of an issue.

B. Community: The group begins to examine how the issue affects their community and questions such as why, what is being done, who is making decisions and what could be done.

C. Other communities in the world: The group looks at how the issue impacts on other communities in countries of the majority world.

D. Action: The group explores/plans what action can be taken on the issue at local and global levels.

A. The process of learning does not stop here but is potentially a continuous one with the group reflecting on new knowledge and experience gained.

What does development education of this kind contribute to global development? How much impact does development education have on the lives of people in the majority world? These are difficult questions for development educators. What can be said is that development education at LYCS has resulted in considerably greater awareness of the issues of injustice and inequality in our world among the people we work with. Participants have been involved in activities for One World Week, Latin America Week and International Day Against Racism and in campaigns around violence against women, debt cancellation, child labour and war. Development education has contributed greatly to an understanding of racism in an area of rapidly increasing diversity.

LYCS is currently involved in an innovative programme of training and capacity building among a group of women from ethnic minorities (including many immigrants) and a group of inner city women around equality and anti-racism. The women from ethnic minority backgrounds are getting to grips with principles of community development and the development context in the local community and in Ireland as a whole. The inner city women are learning much about the relationship between the North and the Global South including the history of colonialism and slavery as well as the current major issues of debt and unfair trade. Ultimately the two groups involved in the 'Women As Leaders in Equality Programme' will come together to work on issues of common concern with a greater understanding of the shared nature of these issues beyond themselves, and of the interconnectedness and interdependence of people in different parts of the world.

We believe that communities all over the world have much to learn from each others' struggle to achieve the kind of development that they want, the kind of development that can bring hope and security to people's lives.

References

Bassett, M & Hayes, L (1998) *Worlds Apart, Same Issues: Promoting Interchange between Development Education and Community Development*, NCDE, Dublin.

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