

Perspectives

ONE WORLD: WHY IRISH DEVELOPMENT EDUCATORS SHOULD COURT CONTROVERSY AT HOME

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Introduction

“Egypt Supports Wisconsin: One World, One Pain” – placard carried by a protestor in Tahrir Square, Cairo (<http://www.alternet.org>, 19th February 2011).

Action from Ireland (Afri) each year holds a ‘famine walk’ in Mayo that seeks to highlight issues concerning global justice and poverty. Willie Corduff – a prominent protestor against the Shell-led Corrib Gas project (also in Mayo) – was one of the walk leaders in 2009. In the promotional literature for the walk, Afri highlighted what it saw as parallels between the Corrib Gas situation and Shell’s activities in the Niger Delta. In particular, it drew what seemed a legitimate comparison between state and corporate abuse of Willie Corduff (he has been both imprisoned and beaten up for his non-violent opposition to the Corrib Gas project; see Siggins, 2010) and the treatment meted out to the late Ken Saro Wiwa (executed by the Nigerian state for his opposition to Shell’s activities). Afri’s position was – and is – that such comparative analysis is good practice in development education because it allows people based in Ireland to better understand, and empathise with, the realities of the global South. When people are able to identify similar processes at work ‘at home’, the issue becomes more real and less abstract, no longer something that is happening ‘out there’. Furthermore, it facilitates a more equal learning process: rather than seeing the global South as helpless and in need of Western knowledge and help, such approaches open up the possibility that the South might have something to teach the West – for example, on resistance to corporate resource exploitation.

However, another development organisation objected to the comparison, seeing the situations in the Niger Delta and surrounding Corrib Gas as qualitatively different in scale and seriousness (and that is true to some extent – for example, no one has yet died because of this conflict in Mayo). But

the objection also centred on the validity of a development education group addressing ‘local’ issues, especially issues relating to Irish government policy. And yet this objection is not evenly raised. The previous year, the famine walk had been led by campaigners calling for a ban on cluster munitions – an issue that also concerned Irish government policy - the difference being that on this occasion the Irish government *supported* the campaign; no objection was raised. Many questions are begged by these events, but the issue I wish to focus on in this short article is that an opportunity is being lost from a development education perspective when issues of struggle, conflict and opposition in Ireland are excised (or an attempt is made to excise them) from the Irish development education agenda. Nowhere is this now more apparent than on issues of debt and economic austerity.

Debt and structural adjustment

For many years, Irish development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have highlighted issues surrounding ‘Third World’ debt and International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank structural adjustment, including the erosion of sovereignty in the global South and the devastating socio-economic consequences to name a few. When the IMF arrived in Ireland in late 2010, it therefore seemed obvious (to Afri at least, and to some other individuals) that the development sector was well placed to provide some analysis and critique of the IMF (and European Union (EU)) programme. This seemed to be especially the case given the striking parallels between some of the more controversial IMF operations in the global South and the Irish intervention.

Specifically, Ajai Chopra, the head of the IMF team negotiating the Irish ‘bail out’, previously worked in the IMF’s Asia-Pacific department and led its ‘rescue’ mission to South Korea after a financial collapse in 1997. In South Korea, state interventions were curtailed and the government budget was slashed (leading to massive redundancies), despite the fact that government overspending had nothing to do with the Korean crisis. Between 1996 and 1999, South Korea’s unemployment rate tripled and the proportion of the population identifying themselves as middle-class fell from 64 per cent to 38 per cent (Klein, 2007:272). Korean trade unions and other forces opposed these policies but they were quickly assured that their opposition would count for nothing, as documented by Naomi Klein:

“...the end of the IMF negotiations coincided with scheduled presidential elections in which two of the candidates were running on anti-IMF

platforms. In an extraordinary act of interference with a sovereign nation's political process, the IMF refused to release the money until it had commitments from all four main candidates that they would stick to the new [IMF] rules if they won. With the country effectively held at ransom, the IMF was triumphant: each candidate pledged his support in writing...[Y]ou can vote, South Koreans were told, but your vote can have no bearing on the managing and organisation of the economy" (Klein, 2007:270).

The similarity with the situation in Ireland is evident, with figures such as EU Commissioner Olli Rehn and European Central Bank president Jean-Claude Trichet insisting that whatever new government the Irish people elected it would still have to implement the previously agreed economic plan. And yet, with exceptions (Afri, 2010), it is not the development or global justice sectors in Ireland that have highlighted the tension between the claimed commitment to democracy and the denial of democratic choice regarding the economy. It has been left to writers such as Fintan O'Toole (2011) to make the point:

"The coalition parties interpret the 'democratic revolution' of February 25th as a popular mandate for a radical renegotiation of the EU-IMF deal. They believe this mandate includes a revulsion against the basic inequity of shovelling billions into the banks while increasing child poverty. But they have effectively nothing to say about how they will implement that mandate. The first two years of the existing fiscal strategy will continue, with no notion of what happens then. The transfer of public resources into the banks will be postponed until after the current stress tests - which are likely to lead to a demand for more, not less, cash. What we're promised, then, is a great new surge of power to the people, with one small condition - that they don't use it in areas such as the economy, fiscal policy or social justice" (O'Toole, 2011).

It should surely be those organisations who have long been monitoring such situations in South Korea and elsewhere that would have been best placed to draw attention to such matters and help Irish people understand what is happening to them. Instead, a representative of an Irish development NGO told a (private) meeting on the issue that 'I don't think the IMF in Ireland is the same as the IMF in developing countries'. If an opportunity for education *from* the South is being lost here, then so also is an opportunity for education *about* the South. A perennial problem facing development educators is the difficulty of getting Irish people to place themselves in the shoes of those

in Africa, Asia and Latin America, to make the imaginative leap necessary to truly understand their situations. The fact that similar processes of structural adjustment are occurring now in Ireland should surely allow that leap to be more easily made. Conversely, ignoring what is happening in Ireland and interpreting one's mandate as to exclusively focus only on the South is to pass up a massive opportunity to better educate Irish people on global justice issues.

Learning about resistance

To return to the theme of integrating the 'local' and the 'global' in such a way as to open up a more equal learning process through which the South might have something to teach the West, the current crisis is also an opportunity – especially with respect to innovative strategies of resistance to economic austerity. For example, the process whereby democratically organised projects of popular power forced the Argentinian government to default on part of its debt in the early 2000s is one that could prove highly instructive for Irish people (Sitrin, 2006). At a time when Irish civil society remains strangely quiescent about the costs being imposed upon them by debt repayment, such examples of successful resistance might prove invaluable. The Latin American Solidarity Centre has been drawing attention to these parallels, but few others in the Irish development sector have attempted to do the same.

Another such parallel concerns debt audits, which have been used across the global South to allow civil society to hold to account those responsible for the damage caused by their countries' indebtedness. The example of Ecuador is perhaps most striking here (McWilliams, 2011). In 2007, Ecuador's President Correa established a debt audit commission, which reported in 2008 that a portion of the country's debt was 'illegitimate' and had done 'incalculable damage' to Ecuador's people and environment. Ecuador then defaulted on the 'toxic' (illegitimate) portion of its debt. Despite predictions of economic disaster, the country registered 3.7 per cent economic growth in 2010 and the forecast is for growth in excess of 5.1 per cent growth in 2011. Indeed, there is now strong demand for Ecuadorean bonds again which means that the country can access the international financial markets despite a repudiation of its past debt. The salience of this example for current public debates in Ireland is glaringly obvious and the ability of development organisations to bring that experience into the domestic discourse equally obvious, and yet, for the most part, it is happening in only a very marginal way (Storey, 2011).

A call for a debt audit *has* happened in Greece. As one of the organisers of that call puts it:

“Can we be certain that the bulk of Greek public debt is legal, given especially that it has been contracted in direct contravention of EU treaties which state that public debt must not exceed 60% of GDP? The creditors – mostly core European banks – were fully aware of flouting this legal requirement when they lent to the Greek state. Is Irish public debt legitimate, given that much of it is speculative bank lending with a public tag placed on it? Is debt in both countries ethically and morally sustainable if servicing it implies the destruction of normal social life?”(Lapavistas, 2011).

A number of prominent Irish academics, writers and activists have backed the call to audit Greece’s debt, and there have been suggestions that such an audit might also be required in Ireland (*Irish Times*, 4 March 2011). Development organisations that have monitored, or even participated, in such audits in the global South are surely ideally placed to lead such an initiative. They would thereby place themselves at the heart of debates on public policy in Ireland, could simultaneously raise awareness among Irish people of the lived realities – the setbacks and the victories – of people in the global South.

Conclusion

This article began with an account of an NGO being chastised for tackling a ‘divisive’ issue in Ireland. But it is precisely when such issues are tackled – and precisely because they are ‘cutting edge’ and conflictual – that the greatest space is opened up for real development education. By integrating such ‘local’ perspectives into development education and advocacy work, opportunities are created to truly educate Irish people about what people in the global South are going through (precisely because it is not that dissimilar to what they themselves are experiencing) and to learn *from* the global South instead of following the common, patronising pattern of ‘them’ learning from ‘us’. This article therefore endorses the argument made by McCloskey that ‘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’ (2011).

The article began with an example drawn from the Corrib Gas saga, and will end with another. Development organisations are acutely aware of the

phenomenon of the ongoing ‘enclosure of the commons’ in the global South, including the opening up of sectors that were (typically) not previously subject to market forces – education, health, transport, water supply, and public services in general (Harvey, 2003). The structural adjustment programmes imposed on Africa, Asia, Latin America and the former Soviet Union through the auspices of the World Bank and IMF were key mechanisms of this transformation. And now the process extends to life forms themselves – genetically modified plants, even the human genome itself, an enclosure movement in which the World Trade Organisation (WTO), through its protection of the ‘intellectual property’ of corporations, plays a vital role (Shiva, 2007). Many development NGOs devote considerable time and effort to trying to educate Irish people about these trends and their negative consequences, and urging Irish people to take action against them. But those efforts are inevitably limited by the perception that these things, awful as they are, are happening to other people in other places.

But the Corrib Gas affair brings these concerns much closer to home. The ‘new dispossessions’ – including the commodification of life itself – generate revulsion and a fierce energy to ‘reclaim the commons’; this, among other things, is at the heart of the opposition to the project, a feeling that certain things should *not* be for sale. Fisherman and protestor Pat O’Donnell (who, like Willie Corduff, has been imprisoned and assaulted) explains his refusal to accept money from Shell to stop fishing in Broadhaven Bay:

“The sea was there for me all along, I’d like it to be there for my children, you know? And for me to put a price on letting them f*****s in now, let it be a million or more, it’s not up to me, leave it, I’ll be gone out of here, God only knows when, but it cannot be said that I destroyed what nature, what God left us” (O’Donnell, quoted by Storey, 2010).

By integrating Pat O’Donnell’s experience into development education work, Irish development organisations could make the experience of the global South more readily accessible to Irish people and also allow them to feel a real relationship with people in the global South – as joint participants in common struggle. One world, one pain, one struggle.

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