

TWENTY FIFTEEN: THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL

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Twenty Fifteen: A book and a learning process

“Every person in Ireland will have access to educational opportunities to be aware of and understand their rights and responsibilities as global citizens and their potential to effect change for a more just and equal world” (Irish Aid, 2006).

Development educators are often pre-occupied with the question, ‘how should we facilitate learning?’ We have moved on from the task of imparting knowledge about the geography, economics or history of development and now tend to focus on how to encourage people to undertake learning or campaigning initiatives themselves. Most would agree that the focus of development education is on empowering people to become aware of issues and to act to change things for the better. As educators we should provide the tools for people to engage with the issues, or better still, we should encourage them to develop the tools best suited to their needs. The book *Twenty Fifteen*, and how it came to be, is an excellent example to how development educators might empower people to take control of tools for change.

I participated in the creation and publication of *Twenty Fifteen* as Self Help Africa’s Development Education Coordinator, a role that involves enabling students and teachers in Irish secondary schools to engage with sustainable development issues in the context of rural sub-Saharan Africa. From this premise, we delve into issues of human rights and development on a wider scale. Indeed, looking at the bigger picture of development education in Ireland, it is important to encourage development NGOs and development educators to work cooperatively to provide a comprehensive and professional service to all schools (as well as those other interested and interconnected community-led groups) across the whole of Ireland. At present, development education provision is fragmented and disjointed and much work is needed to coordinate our efforts into a more effective service delivery for learners to support their capacity for development at local and

global levels. Can we empower students and teachers to take on the responsibility of educating themselves and their peers? Having been through the process of creating this book, I believe we can – but it is a soul searching task and not one for those who believe they already know the answers. To really ‘empower’ is a humbling process and an education in itself. It involves relinquishing control, questioning your own knowledge and beliefs, trusting in others, re-ordering the usual power structure of teacher/educator/student and acknowledging abilities and expertise beyond your own experience.

Twenty Fifteen: The process

The *Twenty Fifteen* project began in September 2008 with the aim of understanding and engaging with the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG), which focuses on the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. School visits and workshops were held between St. Peter’s Community College in Dunboyne, Co. Meath, and Colaiste Bhríde Community College in Carnew, Co. Wicklow. Teachers Aideen Flood and Eleanor Lee, respectively, and Transition Year students from each school also participated. Joint workshops were held by Self-Help Africa and Joe Clowry of the Combat Diseases of Poverty project in National University of Ireland Maynooth.

For two schools separated by 127 km or two hours travel time, the project was never going to be straightforward. It involved principals’ support, teachers’ free time, students’ time and dedication, and real and virtual communications and partnerships with interested supporting organisations. With a limited number of face-to-face meetings available, Skype was often utilised in the process. As all students and teachers were unable to attend every meeting, individual delegates were entrusted to bring their classmates’ views to the creative process. The skills developed through the year included written and oral communication, delegation, cooperation, decision-making, compromise, innovation and meeting deadlines; these skills constituted an excellent list of learning objectives for any development education project.

As the book aimed to address issues of poverty, the schools held a ‘Poverty Week’ to give students an experiential background before they wrote their submissions to the book. Each of the students and teachers involved

began their journey to understand and fully empathise with the subject matter by living for one week without the electronic lifelines of information technology (IT), including mobile phones, television or radio. Basic food and shelter needs were met at home and teachers and students attended school as usual. The reflections of this experiment are recorded on the inside cover of the book beginning with Zoe Horan's comment, 'Ni thuigeann an sach an seang. The well fed do not understand the lean'. This activity was an effort by the group to 'understand' and more information on this activity can be found in the Poverty Week publication.

To compile contributions for the book, students developed a standard letter for submissions and used their own contacts from home, school, etc to distribute the letter. Returns were slow at first but a few high profile connections kept morale high within the group. The project grew in stature with support and submissions by Sebastian Barry, Seamus Heaney and Anne Enright, among others. The original deadline was extended and successful funding sought from Irish Aid for design and print costs. Alan Davis was brought into the team to bring the design and publication needs to a professional standard.

The process did not just include the publication of the book but also extended to its marketing. When the project won the overall prize at the 2009 Young Social Innovators Showcase at the Royal Dublin Society, another phase of the project began. The group turned their energies to getting the book into bookstores, direct selling, publicity drives, print runs, delivery dates and more. Since May 2009 the book has been on sale in Eason's in Dublin, Byrne's bookshops in southeast Ireland and other local bookshops and newsagents; available on the Self Help Africa web site; and sold to family and friends. Copies have been presented to many key people in international development, the most recent being United Nations' Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon on a recent visit to Dublin in July 2009.

Twenty Fifteen: The book

Twenty Fifteen is a beautiful collection with wonderful reflections, housed in a format that invites the reader to participate by picking up the book and engaging with its contents. This is something that development educators need to remember if we are to reach out beyond our usual audience.

Twenty Fifteen is a collection of comments, reflections, pleas for action, statistics, visual artistic expressions and remembrances – all connected by a wish to express a view on the first Millennium Development Goal: the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. The strength of the collection is its variety of submissions and the honesty of the contributors. Additionally, the book is supplemented by a ‘Poverty Week’ activity manual for schools. Considering the book began as a school project, and had no expectation of ever reaching a wider audience, the contributions are personal and sometimes parochial. Alan Rickman (2009:20) simply expressed his feelings by looking to a nearby town, Bray, and comparing the loss of life to hunger in the world to that town’s population – real people not just statistics. Betty Brown thought back to a childhood of having little – ‘My mother bought a sheep’s head and pluck from a small butcher who came around once a week’ (2009:25). Senator David Norris measured the statistics against his own life stating that ‘The population of this small planet has doubled since I did my leaving certificate’ (2009:64).

The book features writers of great stature and fame, like Seamus Heaney, and those of lesser renown, like Aaron Naylor (3rd class, All Saints NS, Carnew). It acknowledges the validity of each contribution and unites them in their concern for the poor and less fortunate of this world. Students are united with their teachers, principals and the chief executive officers of their county vocational educational committees in voicing their concerns on this issue. Africa is united with Ireland.

The contributors are from all backgrounds, professions and experience – children, teenagers, adults, politicians, film and television personalities, poets and novelists, men and women, singers and sisters, young and old, professors and doctors, Irish, Africans and others – and each one makes this issue their own and expresses their feelings in the form that is best for them. One look at Jakub Galka’s art work (2009:32/33) begs the question: ‘is this not what development education seeks to achieve?’ The book is a testament to people who are challenging the persistent problem of poverty and hunger in this world. Some of the contributors have been tireless campaigners for justice yet for others this publication marks the beginning to their campaigning experience.

Twenty Fifteen: The audience

Who could benefit from having this book?

- Everyone with a real concern for achieving the MDG deadline of 2015 for halving the number of people living in extreme poverty;
- Everyone working in development education who wants to be inspired to maintain their best efforts;
- Everyone who thinks that school text books are written by people who know everything for people who don't know everything;
- Everyone who judges a book by its cover – they won't be disappointed;
- Everyone who likes a surprise when they open an unknown book;
- Everyone who thinks we don't make a difference;
- Everyone who knows we do make a difference;
- Everyone who knows the contributors; and
- Everyone else.

The project will proceed with a second volume on the second MDG target - to achieve universal primary education. Some of the issues raised by the first volume could be addressed by this next phase of the project, such as the obstacles to wider participation, how to best display our work and how to best engage a wider audience with the project..

The participation of those that will be directly affected by the achievement of the MDG targets is a major issue and will prove a more difficult obstacle than the two hour road trip from Carnew to Dunboyne. To simply ask for contributions from Africa or elsewhere is too much like the development model that has been promoted in the past and still dominates today. There are 1,200 people employed in the development industry in Ireland today, who run the national development agenda. It remains to be determined whether this project, along with other development and development education programmes, needs to place some of the editorial control directly into the hands of a partner African school, and what logistical challenges will arise if this path is followed.

Like the Poverty Week activities and publication included with *Twenty Fifteen*, the second phase will have to address the needs of schools who want to participate in a similar action or awareness programme. The project developers will need to decide whether these school activities would

be most beneficial to students here in Ireland or those in countries where primary education is least developed. They will then need to identify which aspects of the project should differ according to the target groups.

The projects workers also need to agree on whether it should serve to initiate a campaign for change in primary school provision in Ireland. Given the number of ‘universal education for all’ campaigns already in existence, they would have to direct the project and its publications to highlight the work done by NGOs and by those aiming to achieve the MDG targets described.

Twenty Fifteen has been an outstanding success as a project. It has produced a publication that is relevant and inspiring, and has shown that development education can empower people and support change across a wide constituency in our society. It is especially relevant and powerful as it was compiled and published by students and young people, an important constituency for development education, and I believe that it has set a standard to which other development and development education publications must aspire to.

Twenty Fifteen is published by Self Help Africa on behalf of St. Peter’s College, Dunboyne and Colaiste Bhríde, Carnew. It is available on the Self Help Africa website at a price of €11.19 which includes post & packaging (www.selfhelpafrica.com).

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