

Editorial

Examining development education in testing times

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In times of global crises people yearn for good news, but to be blunt good news have become a scarce luxury, especially to someone working in the area of development education and global justice. This was one of the reasons I was delighted to find an email from a democracy and policy advisor of the Danish non-governmental organisation (NGO) platform IBIS in my inbox the other day. The email read,

“Denmark is planning to increase development aid to 0.83 per cent despite the financial crisis and recession...According to the Minister of Finance (MoF) the financial bill for 2010 will include a proposal for increasing the percentage of GDP (gross domestic product) spent on development aid to 0.83 per cent. The increase compensates the shrinking Danish GDP and maintains the aid at the same nominal value. The argument from the MoF is, that ‘even if the Danish economy shrinks due to the financial crisis, the need for aid is not decreasing. Poor people should not pay for the financial crisis’”.

For those of us living and working in the island of Ireland this sounds a bit like science fiction. At the United Nations’ Millennium Review Summit in 2005, the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern committed Ireland to reaching the UN target of spending 0.7 per cent of gross national product (GNP) on overseas aid by 2012. The government proceeded to set interim targets by which to measure progress. The 2010 target set was 0.6 per cent of GNP. Contrary to many of its European neighbours and despite these past commitments, the Irish government has cut its 2009 projected expenditure for overseas development assistance (ODA) dramatically. These cuts have collectively represented an astonishing and completely disproportionate 21.8 per cent reduction in the aid budget, taking into account that aid represents less than 2 per cent of current government expenditure. The cuts to the 2009 projected budget, already amounting to €222 million, or 24 per cent of the total aid budget for the year, are also well in excess of the proportional

reduction in Ireland's GNP, which was estimated in April 2009 to be around 8 per cent. If the ODA budget was to shrink in proportion to national income (8 per cent) in April 2009, then that would have suggested a regrettable shrinkage in overseas aid of some €71 million. However, overseas aid was hit nearly three times harder than the shrinkage in national income would suggest (€195 million). Ireland is projected to spend 0.48 per cent of GNP on ODA in 2009, down from 0.58 per cent in 2008, which means that the government is moving away from its international commitment to spend 0.7 per cent of GNP on ODA by 2012, a commitment that Gordon Brown has just renewed for the United Kingdom.

In many countries, ODA budgets and contributions to NGOs are under review by national governments, which undeniably puts extra pressure on development educators to establish our work as a crucial component of overseas aid. The current economic downturn is affecting most everyone and everything on this planet, and poor families are in the frontline of the recession struggling to make ends meet. The balance between global solidarity and local needs is being re-negotiated throughout society, especially in the countries of the global North. Politicians have retreated to national or local contexts when deciding how to spend their now heavily limited resources. It seems global solidarity does not have a lot of currency at the moment. For those of us working for global justice this is a major challenge; however, it is a challenge we cannot afford to shy away from. For this reason, the current issue of *Policy & Practice* is a very timely and important intervention as it charts the provision of 'Development Education in Action' north and south of the border in the island of Ireland.

This issue of the journal will contribute to the ongoing challenge of showing how development education impacts on people in the global North. With increased strain on governments and development NGOs to cut their programmes in overseas aid, the pressure for development educators to demonstrate their effectiveness seems to increase manifold. In addition to pleading the cause of global solidarity and justice in the public arena, we also have to ensure that governments and NGOs continue to see development education as a core area of their work in which it is worth investing time and resources. It is our responsibility to demonstrate the results of our work and highlight the fact that development education is having a real impact on its target groups.

A development education response to the current crisis has to be framed as an education perspective that accounts for the seriousness of the current economic state. This crisis has arguably been most devastating for the more affluent people in the global North. It has deprived us of the illusion that the problems of the world are located in some far-away place, the so-called ‘underdeveloped’ world where we send aid to ‘help people to develop’. Furthermore, the crisis has affected people on a subconscious level. People’s confidence in the political, social and economic system in which they grew up has been radically put into doubt by reality. The largely unchallenged assumption of the strength of the capitalist market economy has suddenly been called into question. The economist Amartya Sen recently described the current state of affairs as ‘global confusion’. It is no longer just corrupt governments in other parts of the world that have failed their people but our own politicians, regulators and bankers. This confusion explains some of the frantic efforts of our governments in trying to ‘fix’ the problem without realising that they are using the same means that brought about the crisis in the first place. The confusion could also partly explain why so few people are moved to critically engage with their governments on the merits of their efforts. A silent majority appears to have accepted the limitless intervention of our governments in bail-outs, so long as we are not forced to admit defeat.

If this crisis has given us something positive, then it is the opportunity we have to stop and reconsider how we do things, how we live our lives and – as educators – how we teach, learn and think about the world in which we live. Educating citizens on social and global justice issues should always be an important part of any education (and for that matter of any development cooperation programme run by a state) because real involvement of the public only comes through a better understanding of the issues at hand. However, it is not necessary to re-invent the educational wheel to adapt the way we teach people to deal with 21st century challenges. As educational responses to the need to empower citizens in a globalised world, development education and global learning have already pushed learners in different educational settings to think critically, independently and systemically about the (often unequal) state of our world and the society in which we live. With a strong emphasis on a critical examination of cultural values, assumptions and perceptions, they have also prepared learners in all areas of society to participate effectively in society, both locally and globally, so as to bring about positive change for a more just and equal world.

Additionally, with its focus on active participation and process, development education has over the years empowered learners to be more active and engaged in democratic processes.

From an Irish perspective there is a lot to be proud of: the widespread exposure of young people to development issues is quite remarkable, as is the level of integration of global and social justice issues in third level. In recent years there have been major achievements in advancing development education in terms of research, integration into different areas of civil society and in youth work in general. At a European level, the island of Ireland is often quoted as an example of good practice in many areas of global learning and our educators are often asked to share their experiences abroad. One of the challenges, however, is how all these achievements in the educational field are translated into the public sphere. In other words, development education has to find new and more creative ways to reach the wider public. Both challenges will be increasingly difficult to address in the current climate of the economic downturn and budget cutbacks.

In his book *The Bottom Billion* in which he analyses the effectiveness of foreign aid, Paul Collier writes about the importance of a global dimension in education:

“To build a unity of purpose, thinking needs to change, not just within the development agencies but among the wider electorates whose views shape what is possible. Without an informed electorate, politicians will continue to use the bottom billion merely for photo opportunities rather than promoting real transformation” (Collier, 2008:xii).

Transformation is the key word here and Collier reiterates the importance of an educational approach to global justice that goes beyond simple public information about development issues. To put it bluntly, the Irish citizen is entitled to be educated as a global citizen and our governments would fail their people if they curtail this service.

Globally, investment in global citizenship education could create an environment in which a necessary debate on the prevailing model of development and growth could take place. Such a debate would have to concentrate on key issues such as the effectiveness of aid and how

development cooperation will look after 2015 - the target date for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (a discussion which has already started worldwide, and with which Ireland needs to engage). Furthermore the debate has to focus on the necessity to achieve real transformation by placing justice (rather than charity) at the heart of our thinking. For such a debate to happen both a healthy civil society and an investment in education are needed. The yield of such an investment would be immeasurable, as it could start a conversation free of domination from vested interests (for further elaboration on this point, the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) has developed a Thinkpiece available on www.ideaonline.ie).

A central problem for global citizenship has been that it is too elusive as a concept to ensure a sense of belonging for citizens. A strong civil society could provide such a structure and allow citizens to be grounded as citizens of a particular state and yet, at the same time, as global citizens that are interconnected with the hopes and concerns of others around the world. If our governments are serious about their involvement in development cooperation, ensuring a healthy civil society that has the means to engage in an open and honest discussion then this kind of citizenship should be a key priority. But there is also a job to be done for civil society actors in Ireland. We have to start making serious connections between the various educational sectors that work towards creating a just and equal world. We have to start communicating with the view to create a public sphere that allows a structure in which an open discussion on how we can react to this global crisis and how we want our government to respond to it. Such a structure would allow us to become active as a civil society again. However, this means that we first have to reclaim the public sphere that we have handed over to the media and the politicians in recent years. The absence of such a public sphere in which a civil society can thrive is part of our problem in communicating with the public.

What we have to show is that development education works. That it contributes to educating active, critical and conscientious global citizens. This is why the kind of good practice such as that profiled in the current issue of *Policy and Practice* is of paramount importance for our work. The articles are a testimony of the fact that development educators – with all their expertise and knowledge about global and social justice issues – can and

should play a key part in what I would call the intellectual recovery from the global crisis.

References

Collier, P (2008) *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Matthias Fiedler is the Director of the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA). IDEA's main goal is to advance and support a professional, cohesive and creative development education sector in Ireland. Prior to IDEA, Matthias worked for two years for the DICE (Development and Intercultural Education) project, an Irish Aid-funded project that aims to integrate development education and intercultural education in initial teacher education in Ireland. Originally from Germany, he moved with his family to Ireland in 2001. From 2001 to 2006 he was a Lecturer of German at University College Dublin. He studied German, history and anthropology at the University of Göttingen, Germany and holds a doctorate in philosophy with a thesis on German colonial discourses in the 18th and 19th centuries. He has worked as a teacher in Germany and Cameroon. He has published articles on development education, intercultural education, postcolonial theory and German colonialism.