From the aims to the achievements of development education: stumbling blocks on the way to political transformation

Written by Barbara Riek, 2015

Translated by Janna Bruins, UN Volunteer

DEEEP
citizens'
Empowerment
for
Global
Justice

European NGO confederation
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DEEEP is a **project of the DARE Forum of CONCORD**, the European Development NGO confederation. As facilitator of the European **development education** sector, DEEEP and the CONCORD DARE Forum aim to be a driver for new transformative approaches to development and education through working towards systemic change and active global citizenship.

We believe that **research has a vital role to play in promoting innovation within the field of education**. We adopt a participatory, cross-sectoral approach to our research which enables us to explore a range of different perspectives and approaches to change. We regularly publish reports and articles with academics and practitioners that stimulate innovative thinking about new paradigms for development and education based on global justice. Our publications target development education practitioners and academics, civil society organisations and anyone interested in education and social change.

We are producing a range of publications under three different categories:

EXPLORATION

- This collection explores new ways of weaving development education into the daily practice of various stakeholders.

- The publications aim to reach a broader audience such as civil society organisations or active citizens, who are interested in global justice and global citizenship and are seeking inspiration to put these concepts into practice.

- 1. *"Barefoot Guide n°4 - Exploring the real work of social change"* by The Barefoot Guide Connection.

REFLECTION

- This collection provides a space to present and reflect on new lines of thinking within the field of development education. The publications are personal, provocative pieces intended to inspire further debate and discussion on a particular theme. Our thinkpieces target predominantly development education practitioners and researchers, as well as anyone interested in the transformative potential of education and learning.

- 1. *"The stories we tell ourselves"* by Rene Suša

- 2. *"Transformation - Reflections on theory and practice of system change"* by Johannes Krause – Translated by Janna Bruins, UN Volunteer

- 3. *"From the aims to the achievements of development education: stumbling blocks on the way to political transformation"* by Barbara Riek – Translated by Janna Bruins, UN Volunteer

RESEARCH

- This collection provides research reports and publications which help to contribute to innovation in development education theory and practice. They act as a tool to stimulate greater critical reflection and learning amongst the development education community.

- 1. *"Development Education and Education in International Development Policy: Raising Quality through Critical Pedagogy and Global Skills"* by Amy Skinner, Nicole Blum and Douglas Bourn in International Development Policy.

- 2. *"Catalysing the 'Shadow Spaces': Challenging Development Discourse from within the DEEEP Project"* by Amy Skinner and Tobias Troll in Policy & Practice.

- 3. *"Journeys to Citizen Engagement: Action Research with Development Education Practitioners in Portugal, Cyprus and Greece"* co-written by Amy Skinner and Sandra Oliveira with contributions from Kerstin Wittig-Fergeson and Gerasimos Kouvaras.

- 4. *"International Volunteering and Development – Learning to be a Global Citizen"* co-written by Amy Skinner, Dr Eleanor Brown, Mark Griffiths, Kristina Kontzi and Maria Koleth in Voluntaris Journal.

- 5. *"Monitoring education for global citizenship: a contribution to debate"* by Harm-Jan Fricke and Cathryn Gathercole with contributions from Amy Skinner.

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'Education for sustainable development cannot end in the transfer of information and insights around sustainability. Rather, this education aims for social change, it is an education in transformation...'

'When considering targets we pursued a decade ago, there is an increasing realization that we have not come any closer to a sustainable global development.'

Both quotes are taken from a 2014 VENRO paper titled 'Global learning as transformative education for sustainable development'. The paper is VENRO's contribution to the debate surrounding the end of the UN-decade themed 'Education for sustainable development'.

There is, mildly put, a noteworthy discrepancy between the ambitious aims set by German stakeholders concerned with development policy, and the level to which these aims have been fulfilled.

Analyses such as the VENRO paper are alarming and prompt a critical review of the supported projects. The following reflections are based on *Brot für die Welt's*[1] experience of processing around 600 applications annually, submitted by various stakeholders in development education[2], awareness raising and campaigning. The analyses have made use of very pointed conclusions and exaggerations. There will certainly be counterexamples that would put theses analyses into perspective. However, the pointed conclusions may help identify certain patterns from a wildly heterogeneous field of study.

To be clear, those in charge at *Brot für die Welt* remain convinced that the commitment demonstrated by information centres, campaign groups, religious congregations, schools, fair trade shops and many others plays an important role in social and political change. It is believed that a development organization concerned with global justice must support such commitment.

Of course we do not support the assertion that the past decades have *not* shown progress toward a sustainable development. Many convictions and values in society have indeed been changed. We do however share the assessment of the authors of the VENRO paper that what has been achieved falls short of what would have been possible and what must be achieved for international development.

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1   *Brot für die Welt – Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst* is a German protestant development service. It is the largest funder of education and information around international development after the federal government. It is not an educational institution but a development organization carried by the Protestant church. The promotion of projects educating and informing the German public in international development is aligned with the organization's interests and is anchored in its statute. This commitment is rooted in the expectation and trust that the projects will encourage and enable people to advocate justice, peace and the protection of creation and thus to contribute to a globally sustainable development.
2   The terms 'global learning' and 'development education' are used interchangeably as this represents the reality of working with diverse projects and funding applications

So what needs to be done?

Assessment of the current situation: who are we and what is the issue?

Those who aim to drive social change have to understand social and political contexts and be clear of the circumstances educational efforts or political intervention will encounter. This includes, naturally, an understanding of essential international development issues. Most stakeholders do not lack such an understanding; they are able to describe the issue which must be addressed at great length.

In so doing, the motto appears to be that the proposed project, and the issue it addresses, are at their most compelling if the description is drastic and unambiguous. The consequence is that necessary differentiations are neglected or that outdated paradigms are repeated perpetually.

A practical example may be found in the economic and political realities across the globe, which have changed radically over the past decades. Formerly poor 'developing countries' have advanced to strong emerging economies, which wield influence in both economic and political spheres. Pockets of wealth have emerged in even the poorest countries and do not quite fit conventional definitions.

Making these distinctions is a great challenge for development education and awareness raising. Some education providers struggle to part with the supposed unequivocal notions and paradigms of the 1970s and 1980s, for example clear-cut North-South opposites or distinctly ascribed roles of beneficiary or exploiter vs. victim.

And they struggle to adapt to entirely new questions, such as what does Germany's and Europe's changing political and economic weight mean for international development activities? What does solidarity look like if the poor are fighting their own way out of poverty and are no longer merely victims?

What if this group even contributes to fresh injustice through its economic activities or political goals? What should be done when voices from the South no longer need to be amplified, but gain attention of their own accord? Or if partners or initiatives in the South wish to solve issues in their own right and prefer to forgo help, empathy and solutions proposed by the North?

Part of assessing the current situation is clarifying the roles of all stakeholders. Defining target groups is a basic element in global learning and every provider of educational projects knows they need to specify their target group. However, there is not always sufficient reflection on what role each target group has or can have.

Many international development stakeholders run the risk of confronting their target groups indiscriminately with issues and ill-developments from across the globe -often including implied finger-pointing- and expecting contributions to solve these wrongs. This is colossally overwhelming on the one hand, and leads to misperceptions on the other hand. The responsibility for global issues and their solutions cannot be evenly placed on randomly accessed target groups.

For example, a women's group doesn't have an equal share of responsibility in unjust working conditions in Bangladesh's textile industry as H&M managers do who tie up suppliers in harsh contracts. Quality in education means having a sense of why the issue at hand is relevant to the target group. Target groups should learn to analyse precisely where responsibility for a given issue lies and where a solution should thus be anchored.

Action? Or redirected activity?

Identify – assess – act are the three steps forming a framework that is widely approved by global learning stakeholders and that serves to structure education programmes. Many projects, however, rush through these three steps to reach the final 'act' stage. It is considered a fact that people of all ages dealing with development topics instantly wish to act -and are able to act- to correct the issue before them.

For this reason, many projects lead to a set of recommended actions which are usually predetermined and do not build on the project development or the creativity of a target group. Fair Trade concepts are noteworthy here. Buying fairly traded products is easy to do and politically unobjectionable. However, there is a risk that once the purchase is concluded, so is the educational process – after all, the target group did what was asked of them.

There is no doubt that individual consumer decisions are an important element for a society seeking to change its course. These decisions highlight alternative behaviour, increase the persuasive power of stakeholders and are an invitation to dare to change.

However, consumption is not a sufficient means to change the world for the better.

Consumer or citizen

As discussed, a number of development education measures end, in one shape or another, in the recommendation to consume in a different, better, more ecological or more equitable way. They address those in possession of a wallet and appeal to their choice of individual behaviour.

Responsible consumption by individuals is important, but it cannot be all there is to the solution.

'*As I was born a citizen of a free State, and a member of the Sovereign, I feel that, however feeble the influence my voice can have on public affairs, the right of voting on them makes it my duty to study them.*' This assertion by J.J. Rousseau in his work 'The Social Contract' is a clear rationale for education in international development and for global learning.

We can conclude:

- Target groups are not merely consumers making individual purchasing decisions but citizens as well.

- Citizens have to be aware what the '*influence*' their '*voice can have on public affairs*' means in a given context: Political influencing, participation in the political discourse, taking a critical view of matters, acting with integrity etc.

- Being a citizen in the true sense of the word has to be learnt and practiced. Practicing this art is therefore an important task in global learning projects. This could include information gathering, forming an opinion, constructive debate culture, political speech, dealing with the media, communicating with elected officials, means of political participation and intervention, acting in a sustainable manner etc.

It may appear that Rousseau places a burden on citizens by reminding them of their responsibilities. What he does though is describe a process of emancipation. Many global learning and development education projects are missing the idea that participation, shouldering responsibility or a creative quest for helpful contributions to international development is experienced by many as something very positive. It may change people and their role in society.

No arguing, please

Global learning aims to enable target groups to form an opinion, to maintain their opinion in a political debate and to exert influence on political developments.

However, many projects neglect the fact that political opinions are formed while engaging with other viewpoints and in the battle of contrasting positions. Opinions contrary to one's own are often discarded as vested interests and not scrutinized in their essence.

This frequently 'saves' weighing up and looking into different opinions in depth.

There is great reluctance to invite contributors to seminars or panels who do not share one's own views or are somewhat close to doing so. This means that debate remains in closed circles and evolves around minutiae rather than fundamental questions.

The merit in political controversy is not that the truth lies somewhere in between – it is that controversy helps to hear and take seriously different positions. It helps hone one's own opinion in constructive debate and it helps gain confidence in joining political discourse spiritedly.

The goal of educating citizens in matters of politics and international development should really be to debate intelligently and constructively, providing target groups with the courage and the essential skills to move beyond their group of like-minded peers.

Politics – the great unknown

In the search for ways to participate in the political process, the activities of political parties are largely disregarded. The parties' duty to support citizens in forming political views is anchored in the German *Grundgesetz* or constitution. Yet, in the context of development education, is overlooked as an opportunity to request and challenge elected officials to fulfil this duty. Similarly, the opportunity to influence political processes from within by joining a political party is usually not on the radar.

Many projects give a rather undifferentiated view of politics or current governments, or characterise the two as incapable or unwilling to solve issues. In a large number of cases, this analysis may be accurate. It is, however, unhelpful. Often, demands made of politics and politicians are diffuse, which highlights the fact that citizens do not fully understand political processes and negotiations, or are not aware of different levels of decision-making:

For example, citizens may direct their expectations or their disapproval toward Berlin, when responsibility may have shifted to Brussels. The challenge for educators and target groups is to analyse the existing political system and to identify suitable approaches to impact upon it.

This may be a conversation with the local council, or inviting a member of parliament to a panel discussion. It may be supporting national campaigns or demonstrations against unfair trade regulations or other development topics. Or it may be attending lobby talks with parliamentary commissions or government ministries.

'Things are not what they used to be.' Were they simply different, but no better?

Many of today's information centres or educational institutions have a long history.

They have evolved from loosely organized demonstrations of solidarity -German civil society formed particular bonds with Central American countries, South Africa, and the Philippines in the 1980s- or from more rigorously structured political campaigns.

Those activities originating in the 1970s, 1980s or 1990s[3] were louder, more colourful, more radical and more pro-

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3 This statement relates to Western Germany only.

vocative than current information centres or campaign groups. Whether they were also more effective, remains an interesting question.

Depending on one's point of view, today's tamer activities can be viewed as a consequence of diminished audacity - or of a process of political maturing.

Campaign groups and initiatives which used to be based on voluntary capacities, largely fluctuating staff, and sometimes non-committal views, have evolved into information centres, institutions and education facilities. They have fixed addresses, office hours and in many cases permanent staff.

They were able to build expertise over the past years and have become reliable sources for journalists, dialogue partners for politicians, and centres of information for those interested in development matters. However, the gain in more permanent set-ups and in dependability has been traded for a dependency on third-party funding and an alignment with the priorities of funding institutions. Those in charge of an organisation won't risk the existence of that organisation by assuming radical political positions, making stringent demands, or being overly bold in experimenting with new ideas.

Over the past few decades, we have come to the realization that well-meant does not equal well-made, and that tireless action doesn't necessarily lead to the desired result; especially if that result may be illusory. Actors in education have thus learnt to plan based on the impact they can achieve. As a result, expectations of their own work have become more realistic. Accountability of goals achieved, and not achieved, and of new goals in planning is more readily accomplished.

As another result of this more sober approach, projects tend to be designed to produce outcomes that are above all workable and measurable, yet rather unexacting. Regrettably, these projects avoid political activism and longer and potentially contentious political processes, or any attempts with uncertain outcomes.

What next?

VENRO, *Brot für die Welt-Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst* and numerous other actors in the international development field in Germany expect their education and information efforts to contribute to social and political change. For this reason they are right to maintain the ambitious aims stated in the VENRO paper as quoted above.

However, volunteer and professional educators working with civil society, as well as their funders, must profoundly think about how they wish to reach these aims.

They will need to consider whether the professionalisation of development work, secured arduously and over many years, and its impressive and broad impact has to go hand in hand with the uniformity of projects that are all largely similar. These projects do not have the power to mobilise stakeholders and they lack political fierceness: in consequence, they fall short of what must be achieved in international development.

About the author

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Barbara Riek works as head of the Development Education desk of Brot für die Welt-Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (Bread for the World-Protestant Development Service). She is responsible for support to development education and awareness raising programmes and has been in this position since 1998.

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