



COVID-19 HAS EXPOSED NEOLIBERAL-DRIVEN “DEVELOPMENT”: HOW CAN DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION RESPOND?¹

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the moral vacuum and economic failings at the heart of the neoliberal-driven ‘development’ template that has dominated global economic relations since the 1980s (Monbiot, 2016). It is an ideology that ‘venerates the market and strips away the things that make us human’ (Metcalf, 2017). Rather than placing the economy at the service of citizens, neoliberalism has forced workers to service the needs of the market. At the same time, neoliberalism has rendered public services, particularly healthcare, unequal to the challenges of coronavirus. And, yet, the nature of the pandemic has placed a premium on the kind of public-facing occupations that neoliberalism undervalues and poorly remunerates: nurses, drivers, carers and retail staff. COVID-19 has revealed that the ‘tyranny of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)’ – the metric of choice for neoliberalism – has failed the frontline workers upon which society now depends to negotiate the crisis. This is, perhaps, the starkest reminder that ‘development’, as Sachs (2020) suggests, is no longer a signifier of ‘progress’, but ‘survival’. As a more radical sub-sector of international development with a commitment to critical enquiry and action, development education has an opportunity and, perhaps, a responsibility, to debate how the coronavirus crisis should be negotiated over the short and long-term.

Keywords: COVID-19; Neoliberalism; Gross Domestic Product; International Development; Development Education; NGOs; Inequality.

Introduction

Five months ago, 9,000 nurses from the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) went on strike in the north of Ireland for the first time in the union’s 103-year history (Carroll, 2019). Seeking pay parity with their colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales, the RCN estimated that nurses’ pay in real terms had fallen by 15 per cent over

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eight years and they had ‘had enough’ (Ibid). For any nurse, going on strike is a last resort, but staffing shortages and low pay had created ‘unsafe’ services for patients. Fast forward to the midst of an unprecedented global pandemic, COVID-19, and we see nurses and other frontline health workers feted from their windows and doorsteps by a grateful public in lockdown (Lovett, 2020). The nurses’ strike was one local example of a deeply flawed and unequal neoliberal model of ‘development’ driven by market-based economics rather than the social needs of citizens, particularly healthcare.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the economic shortcomings and moral emptiness of neoliberalism, which, as an ideology driving development, has been in the ascendancy since the 1980s but having deeper historical antecedents (Metcalf, 2017; Slobodian, 2018). This article discusses how neoliberalism’s blunt economic metric - Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – under-values the socially cohesive occupations that have been critical to surviving COVID-19. It argues that the concept of ‘development’ should be revisited in the wake of COVID-19 and the ongoing climate crisis to become detached from neoliberalism and the growth imperative. It will consider how development education should respond to the coronavirus crisis over the short- and long-term.

The ‘tyranny of GDP’

The coronavirus pandemic has placed an absolute premium on public facing occupations that the market economy’s yardstick of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) under-values and poorly remunerates. As Elliott suggests, the ‘tyranny of GDP’ results in a moral vacuum which considers ‘speculation, pollution and gambling as being good for the economy’ because they turn a profit (2017). In 1968, United States (US) presidential candidate Bobby Kennedy said this about GDP in a speech that could have been written for today:

“It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile” (cited in Rogers, 2012).

And so, If GDP dictates what our talent deserves, then what price now should be put on the labour of a nurse, a carer, a driver, a bin man, a supermarket worker or a cleaner, all of whom have been indispensable to our surviving coronavirus? An Oxfam report published earlier this year calculated the monetary value of unpaid care work globally for women aged 15 and over at \$10.8 trillion annually (2020: 6). Using the GDP metric, this labour holds no monetary value and, yet, it is priceless to the elderly, sick and disabled across the world lacking social care.

The COVID-19 pandemic has afforded us a long hard look at the absence of compassion, values, solidarity and inclusiveness in the neoliberal economy, which, of course has been critical to it being so profitable. In describing neoliberalism, the economist Paul Mason said:

“In neoliberal ideology, the market is depicted as an autonomous machine beyond human control which produces the best of all outcomes for human beings. Only when people tinker with it, or try to impose conscious decision-making on it, does it go wrong” (2019: 187).

Moreover, under neoliberalism, the market becomes a validator of truth which means ‘all other values have the status of mere opinions; everything else is relativist hot air’ (Metcalf, 2017). Despite having a human hand guiding their operations, the markets are often discussed in ethereal terms – akin to temperamental gods – leaving us to speculate as how they might ‘react’ to human-made crises. And, yet, ‘neoliberal policies are everywhere beset by market failures’, with the state forced to intercede when the market comes a cropper as it did spectacularly in 2008 (Monbiot, 2016; Chu, 2018). The coronavirus pandemic, therefore, is more evidence that the ‘zombie’ ideology of neoliberalism has to be jettisoned and the shrunken state, much of it hollowed out since the 1980s, restored to full powers of economic governance.

Rethinking ‘development’

The pandemic should represent a line in the sand where we resist and rollback the marketisation of services that have no business in private hands; healthcare, education, utilities, and transportation. At the same time, we need to invest in the jobs that make these services central to our lives and wellbeing. The phoney neoliberal mantra that a rising sea of prosperity raises all ships has been cruelly exposed in the worst possible way as health sectors across the world, reduced in capacity by neoliberalism, have been overwhelmed by the scale of the pandemic (Gutiérrez, 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) has described ‘an alarming failure’ in the global supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and coronavirus tests for nurses operating on the frontline of the virus at great personal risk (UN, 2020).

The concept of development first loomed into view in US President Harry Truman’s inaugural address in 1949 when he coined the phrase ‘undeveloped areas’ (Sachs, 1992) to describe half the world’s population. US post-war economic buoyancy and supremacy represented the template for ‘development’ and American economist and ideologue, Walt Rostow, described the five ‘stages of economic growth’ that developing countries needed to implement to reach the apotheosis of development; ‘high mass consumption’ (1959:1). The ‘development age’ lasted around forty years and succumbed to rapid globalisation driven by neoliberalism’s recklessly deregulated capitalism in the 1980s which spectacularly unravelled in 2008 (Rogoff, 2020). The post-2008 period of austerity, the gig economy, stagnating incomes and social polarisation has spawned a new era of nation first populism. This was a rejection of globalisation and multilateralism, and an assertion of ‘national neoliberalism’ designed to retain wealth within national elites (Mason, 2019: 23-24).

The populists’ response to COVID-19

It is no accident that states controlled by populists have been found wanting in their response to the COVID pandemic. Their first instinct is to prioritise the needs of the market and reduce the capacity of the state. A public survey carried out in the United Kingdom (UK) by Ipsos Mori found that ‘two-thirds of the public think the government acted too slowly to control the spread of coronavirus’ and forty per cent regarded the government’s response as ‘confused and inconsistent’ (Hill, 2020). In the US, it was revealed that in 2017 the Pentagon not only anticipated a ‘novel influenza disease’ but warned about a shortage of ventilators, face masks, and hospital beds which the Trump administration did nothing about (Klippenstein, 2020). And, in Brazil, populist president Jair Bolsonaro has dismissed coronavirus as ‘just a little flu’, encouraging Brazilians to ‘get back to normal’ in a reckless and irresponsible prioritisation of profits over people (The Guardian, 2020). Meanwhile, in another

economic powerhouse in the global South, India, prime-minister Narendra Modi asked the ‘nation’s poor for forgiveness’ when lack of forward planning over a 21-day national COVID lockdown forced millions of migrant labourers to flee the cities to walk home to their native villages without food or shelter (Aljazeera, 2020). In all of these countries, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths are high, particularly the US which is now the country with the highest number of cases/fatalities (Kommenda, Gutiérrez and Adolphe, 2020). Perhaps, an outcome of the COVID outbreak will be a political reckoning for tardy and irresponsible decision-making during the crisis and under-investment in key public services before it. It might also prompt a re-evaluation of what ‘development’ means in increasingly centralised states that relegate the needs of people behind those of the market.

Survival not progress

‘Development’, argues Wolfgang Sachs, editor of *The Development Dictionary* (2019), is ‘a plastic word, an empty term with no positive meaning’ (2020: 67). It is more ‘about survival now, not progress’ (Ibid: 68). While it still bears the imprimatur of the United Nations (UN) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ‘development’ in the post-COVID era will have to mean de-growth if we are to limit global warming to 1.5°C. above pre-industrial levels (IPCC, 2018). It will have to mean job security and decent wages in the low-paid occupations that we have learned we depend on so heavily. It will need to mean investment in public services that were shamefully denuded in the last ten years of austerity to disastrous effect. Should national governments respond to the post-COVID economic crisis with another belt-tightening decade of austerity and cuts to services it is likely to be met with widespread anger and resistance.

For development educators, the coronavirus lockdown has meant rapidly adapting our activities to online delivery, which is challenging for a sector that supports interactive learning and debate. In addition to the question of pedagogy is how we respond to the coronavirus crisis as a sector in the short and long-term. Some suggestions are proposed below.

1. Campaign for Debt Cancellation

There is an immediate, practical and hugely beneficial step that development educators can take to support low income countries lacking the capital and health infrastructure to tackle the COVID contagion. More than 200 civil society movements from the global North and South – including twelve from Ireland – have called for the cancellation of external debt payments in 2020 for 69 countries classified by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as Low-Income Economies (JDC, 2020). This would save those countries \$19.5 billion in external debt payments to bilateral and multilateral lenders in 2020 and, if extended to 2021, would save a further \$18.7 billion (Ibid). Cancelling debt payments would free up valuable resources to ‘tackle the urgent health, social and economic crises resulting from the Covid-19 global pandemic’, and potentially benefit tens of millions of people (Ibid).

2. Challenge the myths of coronavirus

One of the great myths of coronavirus is that we're all in this together. It goes something like this: coronavirus is a great leveller that has plunged rich and poor into turmoil, insecurity and isolation. We are all equally susceptible to contracting the virus which doesn't distinguish between its victims in terms of class, race and occupation. The reality is a lot different. The better-off may actually increase their savings during the crisis as spending on forbidden activities falls. But poorer households spend much more of their limited income on necessities, leaving them vulnerable to sudden falls in their incomings (Jones, 2020). So, as development educators, we need to challenge this 'sickly myth' that we are all in this together. The poor are more vulnerable to the economic shocks of coronavirus and more likely to be working in an occupation that puts them at risk of exposure to the virus. At the time of writing, 181 health workers have died in the UK after contracting the virus.³

3. Let's talk about Neoliberalism

It's striking how much of our work in development education is invested in the SDGs and how limited is the discourse in the sector on neoliberalism. If, as Monbiot (2016) suggests, neoliberalism is 'the ideology at the root of all our problems', shouldn't we at least discuss it? It is challenging as a sector to take aim at an ideology which has so much traction in the Irish society, particularly in the education sector, but, as Mahon and Bergin (2018) suggest: 'We cannot write about social justice without working for its everyday implementation. We cannot critique neoliberalism and return to neoliberal practice behind our office door'.

4. We need to reset development

Sachs suggests that 'shaping our destiny beyond development is the task that lies ahead of us' (2020: 71). With that in mind, civil society groups, governments and international NGOs need to look beyond the short-termism of overseas aid, emergency appeals, public 'clicktivism' and SDGs to focus on the long-term needs of humanity (McCloskey, 2019). Economies, to function properly, need to be put at the service of society's needs, not the needs of the market. The focus of development organisations in the future should be managing to make this possible and being advocates of de-growth to mitigate the climate emergency. That means critically interrogating the concept of 'development' in the light of coronavirus to debate what it means in a future that is likely to be clouded by recession, increased inequality and an ever-looming climate crisis.

5. Climate and COVID-19

Owen Jones (2020b) has posed a prescient question: 'why don't we treat the climate crisis with the same urgency as coronavirus?' The climate emergency has 'killed on a mass scale and threatens to send millions more to early graves. As its effects spread, it could destabilise entire economies and overwhelm poorer countries lacking resources and infrastructure' (Ibid). Yes, the coronavirus is amongst us as a terrible and immediate threat but we still, as Jones suggests, tend to present the climate crisis 'as an abstraction whose consequences are decades away' (Ibid). Yet, for countries in the global South, particularly, the climate emergency is very real. As Paul and Singh (2019) suggest about countries in the South: 'those who have done

³ <https://fullfact.org/health/we-dont-know-exactly-how-many-nhs-workers-have-died-covid-19/>.

the least to cause the climate crisis are paying the greatest price'. The response to the coronavirus crisis has demonstrated that government resources can be mobilised, and public behaviour can be modified in an emergency. We need to respond to the climate emergency in the same way.

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