

A SCHOLAR-ACTIVIST'S HERETIC ATTEMPTS TO "ERADICATE POVERTY" FROM A SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVE, THROUGH DISRUPTIVE GLOBAL YOUTH WORK

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Abstract

This paper mainly addresses the reflections, observations and analysis of a scholar-activist, engrossed in challenging intractable international development issues, through the use of a Global Youth Work pedagogic approach. Using the main frameworks of Global Youth Work, scholar-activism, positionality/situatedness and decolonisation, this paper challenges the "missionary position" and "pornography of poverty" approach of some organisations both in the North and South, consciously or unconsciously working and collaborating towards the amelioration of the human condition.

There are two main factors that influence my situatedness: the structural violence that can be generated by knowledge production and configuration from a universally configured orthodoxy in the Development Education/Global Cooperation field that now requires the reimagining of "epistemologies of the South" as responses, which are "credible and visible" (de Sousa Santos, 2014); the second essential stance is my immersion in practice as a scholar-activist who is not only captivated by the process of theoretical knowledge production, but also in heretic and counter-orthodoxy approaches to challenging and changing the world, in practice.

The focus of the Agenda 2030 on "eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions" and *the reason d'être* of Global Youth Work (Sallah, 2014) of provoking consciousness and taking action, therefore underpins this paper; especially in the promotion of sustainable development. The main focus and lenses through which I do this is the Global Hands project, set up as a charity in The Gambia and a social enterprise in the UK, by former students of De Montfort University in the UK, whose mission is to build capacity and operationalise the dual mandate of Global Youth Work: to provoke consciousness; and to support those affected to take action (Sallah, 2014). A range of Global Youth Work interventions and case studies have been used in this context, such as developing Africa's first solar-powered taxi service; developing a self-sustaining intervention in its capacity building hub in The Gambia by Global Education actors from the UK with collaborators in The Gambia; running a number of public campaigns, for example, on the "backway" ("illegal" youth migration from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe via the Sahara desert).

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In this paper, I will explore collaborations, spaces generated, principles and tensions beyond theoretical considerations and their operationalisation in practice. This paper will uniquely contribute to a greater understanding of the interplay between theory and practice, as well as disrupt the colonial lenses and dependency approaches of some organisations that sometimes disempower, instead of rebalancing power and addressing injustice and structural inequality.

Keywords: *Global Youth Work; Global Education; African Development; Decolonisation; Positionality; Development Aid.*

Introduction

In this paper, there are a number of postulations and contradictory extrapolations that I would like to explore, ultimately linked to the duality of Global Youth Work, as a subset of Global Education/Global Learning, situated in the art of provoking consciousness and supporting young people to take action. Given my focus on the second duality of Global Youth Work (Sallah, 2020a) in this paper, subsumed by the need for the eradication of poverty, it is pivotal that the canvas upon which I weave my tapestry of practice is held up transparently. Hence my preoccupation with centring decoloniality, my positionality/situatedness as a scholar-activist and a more radical interpretation of Global Youth Work, because of my cultural affinity/experiential affinity with the people in whose lives I purport to intervene, through a Global Youth Work pedagogical approach. In doing this, I will attempt to dismantle the false narrative of the “merchants of misery” and “imaging pornography”, which supports the work of significant numbers of those in the Aid industry. I will position my work in practice, principally in The Gambia and the UK, as acts of resistance and heretic attempts against the orthodoxy and “logic of the system” (Freire, 1972) geared towards the “eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions everywhere”. This paper will conclude with a call for a radical reimagination of Global Youth Work, beyond the usual business of placing plasters on broken bones.

Positionality/Situatedness

From the onset, it is imperative that I position myself as a scholar-activist interested in the understanding of phenomena and production of knowledge; and equally in the upending of oppression, leading to the operationalisation of knowledge and enaction of human development towards palpable social justice outcomes (Haq, 1995; Sen, 1999, 2005). Sen (1999) and Nussbaum’s (2000) capabilities approach with a focus on human wellbeing have been central points of reference in both my theory and practice. I have been a lecturer at a university in the UK over the last 16 years, with an overlapping period of 30 years as a practitioner, engulfed in community development, international development and the distinct practice of Global Youth Work, both in the North and South, in addressing intractable development challenges. In this context, I am no stranger to straddling the “creative tensions” of scholarship and activism as complementary bedfellows. Beyond the notion of the public intellectual, the scholar-activist is a different breed, interested beyond just shaping opinion and opening up whole knowledge systems, but also towards a more active reimagination and enaction of social justice.

Whilst scholarship often eschews objectivity as a central tenant, I have, as a scholar of Southern origin, been often gagged by the negative neutrality (Sallah, 2014) of the academy; to silence or disregard my cultural affinity,

which underpins my marriage to social justice. Simultaneously, steeped in both scholarship and activism, the cultural/experiential affinity (Boushel, 2000; Oakley, 1981) that imbues my practice significantly informs my positionality/situatedness. Having spent my mid-teens to my early 20s volunteering and working with Aid/Development organisations, as well as the last 20 years developing and designing counter hegemonic solutions to intractable development challenges, mainly aimed at the South, I am constantly drawing on my experience of development, which was often a simulation of under-development. From the more formal/structured of the IMF/World Bank in the mid-80s (Economic Recovery Programmes, Structural Adjustment Programmes, Programme for Sustainable Development) that saw massive redundancies, currency devaluation, removal of state subsidies, de-nationalisation, deregulation and privatisation, which resulted in untold suffering that was manifested at the personal, local, national and global levels. These were not only neoliberal and capitalist deregulation theories and policies that I read about in the works of Skosireva and Holaday (2010), but lived realities that generated untold suffering that I experienced with my own eyes, and felt the pain in my own stomach. Development initiatives, for me, then were not fashion accessories or theoretical public masturbations; intractable development challenges are real and palpable, they have teeth that bite and also have a stench, and human faces too. Equally, I was situated at the centre of initiating change through NGOs like The Gambia Red Cross society whose work centred on “alleviating human suffering” guided by its 7 Basic Principles. I also had the opportunity to witness and observe at close quarters the intervention of Action Aid and other international NGOs, as well as local NGOs and community groups. In fact, these experiences led to me setting up the Youth Association for Advancement (YAA), which focused on capacity building at the local and national levels in The Gambia; and later setting up Global Hands, to also initiate development through capacity building, placing those most affected at the centre of intervention, as a charity in The Gambia, and as a social enterprise in the UK in 2012. These organisations I have engineered were acts of resistance, attempts to combine scholarship and activism, towards social justice. Equally, my scholarship and research has been hugely influenced by a transparent social justice agenda, predicated on my anger against exploitation and human suffering. Angry that people could die of preventable diseases, angry that naked exploited can go unchecked for so long, angry at what can be considered hypocrisy by some of the leading INGOS who can often be considered as “merchants of misery”! The rationality of the scholar often situated in the proverbial Northern Ivory Tower, who can often afford to be detached, “neutral”, “objective” is what I straddle to reconcile with the “fire in the belly” of the activist who is “morally outraged” (Oxfam, 2015).

Decoloniality

Development paradigms continue to be colonised and imprisoned by Western thought and knowledge systems. De Sousa Santos' (2014) exposition of “cognitive injustice” and the need to cultivate “epistemologies of the South” to make our knowledge systems, ways of knowing and ways of being “more credible or visible” is quite instructive. Post-development theorists (Escobar, 1995, 2000; Sachs, 1992; Thomas, 2000) have launched scathing attacks on the orthodoxy that does not demonstrate respect for the aftermath of slavery and colonialism; in a historical loop, the past continues to influence present and the future in a symbiotic interaction and reaction. In my efforts to initiate development projects in a country like The Gambia, I often encounter a deep-seated resistance of post-colonial and decolonial knowledge systems where the education system, administration, and economic paradigms are propped up by colonial relics and neo-colonial pillars of extraction.

Whilst the decolonisation of the mind (wa Thiong'o, 1986) is a start to repeal this catharsis, decolonisation of institutions and development paradigms must also be seen as priorities. In this context, Development Education /International Aid paradigms must also be decolonised and the “missionary position” of Christianising and civilising the native (Sallah, 2008) based on the dual mandate of colonial subjugation should be renegotiated and reformulated. Eurocentric formulations of what Southern countries need and its enactment need deep cleaning and complete reconfiguration. The fact that Development Education, as a precursor for Global Education, originates from colonial notions of indirect rule (Sallah, 2008), calls for a complete overhaul, with Southern scholar-activists leading this process as they have seen the flow of blood and have been in the trenches long enough to understand the cartography. I would like to posit that anything less than this is the promulgation of the “missionary position”! This exposition has been cardinal in how I have straddled the scholar-activist continuum, but also equally in how I have imagined and reimagined development interventions through the art of Global Youth Work.

Straddling the scholar-activism continuum

As an academic, I am steeped in the search for knowledge production; as an activist, I am motivated by the desire to operationalise produced knowledge, towards social justice. There is often a palpable tension between knowledge production and operationalisation, which is often positioned as diametrically opposed and unrelated. However, I often find peace in the symbiosis between these two, at times seemingly contradictory stances. It has been argued that “at its most simple (scholar-activism) it's the informed thinking and critical appraisal of social issues combined with strategies and actions that better the social conditions in which people live in pursuit of a social justice goal” (C. Kagan, personal communication, n.d.).

Dewey argued that scholars should “shape reality toward positive social goals, not stand aside in self-righteous isolation” (1969, p. 91). Gramsci (1971, p. 68) implores us to go beyond intellectual eloquence and calls for “active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer [and] ‘permanent persuader’”. A significant number of other authors (e.g., Alinsky, 1971; Freire, 1972) have attempted to situate their work in the transformative impact of their thoughts and actions on the communities they worked with.

Whilst there are clear reward mechanisms for scholarship, perhaps the ones for activism are not the clearest: scholars are often rewarded with “tenure and promotion and research monies, while work connected to activist leanings, can be construed as taking time away from or interfering with scholarly endeavours” (Tilley & Taylor, 2014, p. 54).

However, Conway (2004) recognises the immense contribution of activism, which, as argued, is that “The knowledge arising from activist practice is a perspectival/situated knowledge, one which is essential and privileged in formulating and addressing the problematics of social change”. Piven perhaps captures this more incisively in relation to the personal level linked to the sense of gratification, as a counter measure to the purely scholarship rewards:

“We are activists because of the joy political work gives us, because even when we fail, working to make our society kinder, fairer, more just, gives a satisfaction like no other, because the comrades

we find in the effort are friends like no other, and also because our activist efforts illuminate our social and political world in ways that scholarship alone never can” (Piven, 2010, p. 810).

From the above section, it is imperative to recognise the inherent tension between academia and activism, the significance of what motivates the scholar-activist and how these tensions are straddled: “the contest between scholarship and activism, the personal commitment to activism must be passionate and paramount if it is to survive the tension created by the dual path” (Piven, 2010, p. 808).

The symbiosis between academia and activism can be manifested in four ways (Downs & Manion, 2004; Zerai, 2002, as cited in Flood, Martin, & Dreher, 2013): knowledge as a means of engendering social change; as research to produce social change; as a site to produce teaching and learning strategies; as a means of challenging and reconstructing power relations within a given institution. Whilst there is a lot of literature highlighting these motivations and rationale for engaging in scholar-activism, a critical dimension often neglected is that of my cultural/experiential affinity (Boushel, 2000; Oakley, 1981).

Scholar-activists must be cognisant of the fact that “we must first negotiate how we may be differently positioned in terms of privilege, power, resources, race, identity, history of colonialism, and personal and national identity” (Tilley & Taylor, 2014, p. 53). In this conundrum that is Global Education, Global Learning and the Aid industry, those who bear a disproportionate responsibility for righting the underdevelopment wrongs in the South and theorising knowledge production are either from the North or situated within Northern institutions; whilst motivated by the need to enact social justice, there is often a disconnect with those who are at the frontline and inhaling the toxic fumes of deprivation on a daily basis, as opposed to those who have the luxury of retreating into shelters of Northern Ivory Towers or orthodoxy. My affinity to the dispossessed in the South cannot be a fashion accessory that can be switched on and off at will; it is a matter of relative distance (the closer you are to the shit, the smellier and more uncomfortable it is). Those people, as argued in the positionality/situated section, are my mothers, my brothers, my sisters and my people. Having been in the trenches with them, I understand their struggle as an insider but I am also now able to see the convoluted nature of their struggle as an outside observer. As a scholar-activist, my affinity with the people in whose lives I purport to intervene in is key to understanding the interventions I will propose here.

Agenda 2030 and the eradication of poverty

It speaks volumes that the first of the 17 sustainable Development Goals focuses on the “*eradication of poverty in all its forms everywhere*”. Whilst the number of those said to be living in extreme poverty has dropped from 36% in 1990 to 10% in 2015, this number still remains high and unacceptable. This is further compounded by the fact that the majority of these people live in sub-Saharan Africa; additionally, 17.2 % of those living in the rural areas are equally affected. It is further worth noting that 8% of those employed are still affected by extreme poverty, as well as 20% of children who are disproportionately affected (United Nations, 2015).

The poverty and the harrowing statistics for those in sub-Saharan Africa are well documented (e.g., Fosu, 2015; United Nations Development Programme, 2019) and do not need further elaboration here. However, what has been established beyond any reasonable doubt is the fundamental impact extreme poverty has on a disproportionate number of people in this area in relation to all facets of the 17 UN SDGs. “Among the 736

million people who lived on less than \$1.90 a day in 2015, 413 million were in sub-Saharan Africa". For sub-Saharan Africa, the stats for the working poor stands at an alarming rate of 38%. In relation to social protection systems, whilst 92% are covered in Europe and North America, only 13% are covered in sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). It is estimated that nine out of every 10 people classified as extremely poor in the world by 2030 will live in sub-Saharan Africa (Wadhwa, 2018).

In this context, whilst all the 17 goals and their subsets have relevance for the work I do, the three below speak more directly and more specifically to the work I will be presenting here:

1.1 By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day.

1.5 By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters.

1.A Ensure significant mobilization of resources from a variety of sources, including through enhanced development cooperation, in order to provide adequate and predictable means for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, to implement programmes and policies to end poverty in all its dimensions (United Nations, 2015).

In trying to address the above goals and meet them, it is important to reflect on the number of actors who play pivotal roles in their realization, ranging from governments/state actors, UN bodies, INGOs, national and local actors/organisations and individuals. I do not intend to explore the role of governments/state actors in this paper or even that of UN bodies, but I would like to more specifically focus on the work of NGOs/INGOs and other related organisations who use a range of development interventions, especially in the area of experiential learning and Development Education/Global Education, in its widest remit.

Thomas (2000) perhaps captures the frustration of many in sub-Saharan Africa when it comes to existing development paradigms as a panacea for intervention: "Voices from the 'post-development' claim that, at best, development has failed, or at worst it was always a 'hoax', designed to cover up violent damage being done to the so-called 'developing' world and its people" (p. 3). A recalibration of this approach calls for a disruption of the "holds of westernization" (Elliot, 2013), both in terms of Western capital and the Aid industry. My work, within this context, centres on the human development approach:

"Human development is the expansion of people's freedoms to live long, healthy and creative lives; to advance other goals they have reason to value; and to engage actively in shaping development equitably and sustainably on a shared planet. People are both the beneficiaries and the drivers of human development, as individuals and in groups" (United Nations Development Programme, 2010, p. 2).

Ultimately, my work, unapologetically, is geared towards the realisation of the expansion of people's freedoms and how we equip them with the human capabilities and agency to be at the centre of development

interventions that attempt to lift them from all forms of poverty; the imperative is to support them to be catalysts at the beginning of any action to eradicate poverty.

Beyond campaigning: A disruptive Global Youth Work approach

A huge Aid industry envelops attempts to redress extreme poverty, which often comes from a very good place; however, the Aid industry can also be critiqued on many fronts in their pursuit of operational survival. A key criticism directed at the industry is that of “pornography of poverty” (Canadian International Development Agency, 1988, p. 7) or “development pornography” peddled by the “merchants of misery” (Hilary, 2014), which often positions “The image of the starving African (which) is said to edify us, sensitise us, mobilise our good will and awaken us from our apathy” (Maren, 1997, p. 3). This use of imagery (Lamers, 2005; Ruddick, 2003) to grab and possibly “guilt” Western audiences has the potential to raise a number of ethical considerations. This has also been characterized as the “starving baby appeal” (Fine, 1990, p. 154), which aims at generating a “societal attitude characterized by guilt, helplessness, charity, paternalism, and even racism” (Canadian Hunger Foundation, 2002, as cited in Nathanson, 2013). More aptly and in greater graphic detail, Nathanson reasons that:

“One cause of these perceptions may be fundraising messages that present distorted portrayals of the developing world. Images of buzzing flies, begging eyes and bloated bellies flood television screens and print media in an attempt to pull at heartstrings and garner donations” (Nathanson, 2013, p. 103).

This clearly places recipients of Aid intervention as helpless victims without agency, which in my experience in practice significantly leads to unsustainable dependency, where receipts of such interventions are at the mercy of the “merchants of misery”. In my practice in the field over the last 30 years, I have seen some really sorry attempts at eradicating poverty from a number of NGOs and INGOs who missed the fundamental foundation of community engagement in placing those affected at the centre of any development intervention; from building toilets that the villagers do not want to flying in experts, who consume most of the funding secured and who have scant idea of what the issues are, moreover before even beginning to address them.

Agency is “a person’s belief that they are able to tackle poverty, and that that action will have the desired effect” (Darnton & Kirk, 2011, p. 18). Where the need to establish agency as an integral aspect of the intervention is ignored or miscalculated, it can often result in the continuous loop of “giving fish instead of teaching the recipient how to fish”. This mishap further necessitates a critical look around Global Education/ Development Education and associated terms, as both the terminologies and conceptual frameworks, in my experience, have become sites of oppression, instead of practices of liberation, in pursuit of the sustainable development actions highlighted at the beginning of the section, linked to the human development approach highlighted in the last section.

Terminology and conceptual framework of Global Education vs. Global Youth Work

As covered elsewhere, there is a lot of confusion and disagreement about terminology and conceptual frameworks in relation to Global Education, Global Learning, Global Citizenship Education (Sallah, 2009, 2014, 2020a) and a host of other terminologies which I have covered extensively, as well as other authors (Bourn, 2015, 2016; Cotton, 2009; Dare to Stretch, 2009; North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, 2008) who have also explored the complexity inherent in the naming and categorisation of Development Education/Global Education typographies. For example, it has been argued that:

“A development education programme does not, and in most cases will not, have as its main objective changing attitudes and understanding of global poverty and international development. This is likely to be much more specific, such as improving the capacity of teachers to deliver effective programmes, or giving educators the tools and resources to engage with development issues” (McCollum & Bourn, 2001, p. 27).

Whilst many terminologies and conceptualisations have been explored, I have chosen the approach of Global Youth Work as my prevailing conceptual framework that focuses on the duality of 1) provoking consciousness and 2) supporting young people to take action. In an attempt to re-theorise Global Youth Work (Sallah, 2014), I have advanced that Global Youth Work:

1. Is concerned with how the concept and process of globalisation impacts on young people's realities.
2. Is based on the principles of informal education and youth work.
3. Is located in young people's realities.
4. Challenges oppression and promotes social justice.
5. Promotes consciousness and action.

In presenting my thesis, I continue to argue that:

“Principally, this process (Global Youth Work), by way of informal education approaches, must seek to provoke young people's consciousness. It is not about analysing and giving young people a to-do list but rather a dialogical approach where both practitioner and young people are teachers and learners, actors and doers symbiotically and simultaneously. It is one with the object of synthesising young people's existence with their lived realities.

The second component of this project (of Global Youth Work), then is in line with Amartya Sen's capabilities and capacitation approaches to development. Supporting young people to gain the skills, knowledge and values they need to translate their newfound consciousness into reality. As stated earlier, it is not the action we judge to be the best but it is the action that young people, after gaining critical consciousness, have judged to be the best. The practitioner must constantly and continuously engage young people in democratic dialogues and support them to continuously analyse and reflect on their actions” (Sallah, 2014, p. 80).

Collaborative spaces generated to eradicate poverty through Global Youth Work in action in The Gambia

In the next section, I would like to share some heretic attempts aimed at eradicating poverty as per Agenda 2030. These examples I will draw upon have already been written up in previous works (see Sallah, 2018, 2020a, in press), and rather than duplicate them, I will share them here, to be followed up with new analysis after deeper reflection in line with the objective of this paper.

Solar dryer

It has been estimated that up to 60% of mangoes produced in the short three-month mango season goes to waste in The Gambia. This applies to a significant number of other fruits and vegetables as insufficient technology is available to preserve or store these for any appreciable length of time. These issues were raised by local young people through consultative conversations as issues to do with the environment and also linked to food sufficiency and healthy eating. This project was aimed at developing SMART technologies, starting with solar mango dryers. A team of engineers working with students from UK universities and local Gambian volunteers and carpenters identified the problem and through a Global Youth Work pedagogical approach, designed and tested the proof of principle for a solar dryer for mangos which could also be used to dry other fruits. Again, the key success is not only in mobilising young people to discuss and gain a new understanding of the problem, linked to globalisation, but to respond to the second of the duality of Global Youth Work, initiating action, beyond just talking, to act out solutions.

Solar taxi

The "Live Lab" developed in Manduar is completely off-grid and in its construction, between 2014-15, the issue of how and where to source its energy came up constantly. Consequently, and through a number of spaces generated within and between De Montfort University experts, UK higher education students, and local Gambians, the issue of environmental sustainability in relation to energy came up with great frequency. Why are we not using solar energy given its abundance in The Gambia, especially given the increasing levels of pollution, as the average car in The Gambia is over ten years old with over 100,000 miles clocked, and not subjected to a compulsory annual vehicle test. Consequently, through a Global Youth Work pedagogical exploration, the idea for the use of a solar car was developed to test the principle of its viability, in terms of commerce as well as production of clean and non-polluting energy. Again, this was following a period of consultative conversations, to address the first of the duality of Global Youth Work. Using solar panels donated by Sharp Electronics and an electric vehicle, contributed by Nissan Europe, the project has been testing the proof of principle for running a 'solar taxi' service in The Gambia (first in Africa) by recharging the vehicle from a solar-powered mini-grid. Preliminary research (Sallah & Gammon, 2017) has shown that 50-60% of daily revenue collected by taxi-drivers goes towards fuel, which can be greatly reduced by using solar energy instead, given the availability of sunlight in the region. Emerging results demonstrate a significant decrease in environmental and noise pollution, as well as financial viability for the use of electric cars.

Compressed earth brick machine

Following critical questions raised through the consultative conversations about the availability of low-cost housing in The Gambia and the significant erosion of some beaches and other associated negative environmental impacts, as observed by Manduar Development Hub users and Global Hands members, a project was initiated, based on distinct identified needs, to address the unavailability of low-cost and sustainable housing. The project not only aimed to address the increasing scarcity of sand (an essential component of making bricks and building), but additionally linked to the cutting of trees, and importation of corrugated iron sheets, with a heavy carbon footprint as the majority of these were imported into The Gambia. The first component of the project was to provoke consciousness and then explore practical solutions from their perspectives. The aim of this project was the development of SMART, locally made, Compressed Earth Brick Fabrication Machines, using a collaborative approach to combat soil erosion and promote cheaper sustainable housing using locally available mud/clay. One of these machines' costs about \$4,000 to import, which takes it out of the reach of most Gambians, but the project delivered the aim of producing one for under \$400. The project developed SMART, low-cost Compressed Earth Brick Fabricator that is affordable to local builders which will significantly improve their ability to afford and build houses as well as mitigate soil erosion as there is significant sand mining leading to soil erosion and environmental degradation. The introduction of this low-cost machine will have a significant impact on the availability of housing. Through a Global Youth Work approach, the focus was not to only understand the environmental issue of lack of housing and debunking unsustainable approaches to housing, but to get the most affected to take action, designing and building a solution by mobilising the best placed to do so.

The #Candleflight #Backway campaign

The “Backway” is an informal slang that often refers to the “illegal”, unregulated migration of young people, largely from Sub-Saharan Africa, into mainland Europe, largely through the Sahara desert, often resulting in a great number of fatalities, since migrants often die crossing the Mediterranean - that is, if they first survive the Sahara desert, including marauding bandits and slavers and all other perils, including organ harvesters. This attempt at the perilous journey is often motivated by lack of opportunities at the home country. This project aimed to raise awareness of the “Backway” and to provoke consciousness that leads to action, as too many young men and women are losing their lives, every day, gratuitously. The aim of the project was to provide solutions and to find other options to save the lives of so many young people dying, mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa.

#CANDLEOFHOPE #BACKWAYSOLUTIONS CHALLENGE

The #Candleofhope #Backwaysolutions challenge was a social media campaign to highlight the horrible situation of hopelessness that drives young people, largely from Sub-Saharan Africa, to attempt to get into Europe at all cost in search of greener pastures; often resulting in many fatalities as evidenced by the constant stories on our TV screens, of migrant boats capsizing in the Mediterranean, for those in the West; and for those in Sub-Saharan Africa, knowing someone who has embarked on this journey or whose corpse never came back; stories of young men and women losing their lives across the Sahara desert or in the seas is a daily

occurrence. This campaign was a call to action; an active statement of intention to develop solutions to this travesty.

The following activities were developed in support of the campaign:

- *Backway Music Video. “Backway” was a new single created by an artist from The Gambia, Silver P, and an artist from Leicester, Ayolah Hanley, in March 2017, with a focus on raising awareness about irregular migration from mainly Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe.*
- *Backway to Europe: Gateway to Death. This is a short documentary produced by Hexalens, in collaboration with Global Hands and James Skinner Films, exploring the “Backway” phenomenon (irregular youth migration) mainly from The Gambia in Sub-Saharan Africa, via Libya to mainland Europe, released in April 2017. The documentary speaks of the hopelessness that drives youths from Sub-Sahara into perilous journeys across the desert and Mediterranean, often resulting in fatalities.*
- *Run4Africa 2017. The Run4Africa is an annual event held in Leicester - UK and The Gambia; the 29th April 2017 version focused on the #Candleofhope #Backwaysolutions. The event was opened to all ages to come along and run, walk, dance or crawl their way through 5 km. The run focussed on #Candleofhope and #Backwaysolutions to highlight the dire plight of young migrants involved in the “Backway”. There was also a #Candleoflight Africa Festival immediately after the Run4Africa at Abbey Park (Leicester), featuring various artists, internationally chosen to interpret the “Backway” theme.*

Campaign impact

Through a Global Youth Work pedagogic approach, we wanted to focus on a case study of how young people, both in Europe and Africa, were mobilised, with both local and international media houses being engaged to feature the campaign, as well as young people in Africa taking the lead in provoking consciousness and taking action. It reflected the transformative power of young people to mobilise and bring about transformative social change, starting with the establishment of counter narratives and the generation of hope. It can be stated that the project had two main objectives; the first was to raise awareness about the “Backway” situation so that the general public and relevant authorities could understand its causes, consequences and solutions; second was the need to take concrete action to redress this hostile situation. In relation to the first objective, we can report that the music video and song has been widely shared on social media, including 1,716 hits on YouTube as of June 2020; the documentary was also widely shared on Facebook, with 3,261 hits on YouTube (June 2020) and a Facebook reach of 3,572 likes and 27 shares. Additionally, both the song and documentary were given 1-hour slots on Interface TV (syndicated to GRTS in The Gambia; Malmo’s TV in Scandinavia, and BEN TV in the UK, shown on Sky TV). Whilst there are no concrete viewing numbers, all these TV platforms have both national and International coverage as well as online replay facilities. The #Backwaysolutions #Candleofhope campaigns were also covered on BBC Africa TV with a powerful international audience, as well as on their Facebook page, which drew over 133,186 views, 893 shares and 804 reactions, as well as 120 comments. This demonstrates a significant reach and impact, as well as significant success raising awareness on the issue. Additionally, the Run4Africa in The Gambia drew over 100 participants, and the run in Abbey Park (Leicester - UK) drew over 200 participants. Significant evidence has been gathered to illustrate that this campaign has been a contributory factor in bringing the subject to the attention of some

members of the public for the first time. In relation to taking action, it is significant to note that two groups of young people, both in The Gambia and the UK, were at the heart of drawing the concept paper for the campaign. Working with a group of politics students from the De Montfort University's Faculty of Business and Law, Global Hands Leicester volunteers, and Global Hands Gambia volunteers, working in conjunction with Manduar Development Hub staff, all the projects were conceptualised and operationalised with young people, through a Global Youth Work pedagogical approach. Additionally, young vulnerable people to the "Backway" were also directly involved in designing and implementing the initiative. A conference was organised by young people in June 2017 at the Manduar Development Hub in The Gambia, with the aim to explore causes, consequences and solutions to the problem. Various stakeholders from the statutory, voluntary and commercial sectors were engaged, in addition to young people who have attempted the "Backway". The Run4Africa 2017 with a focus on #Backwaysolutions and #Candleofhope also raised over £2500, which went to support projects to counter the "Backway", including a library, a conference, and other capacity building ventures now happening at the Manduar Development Hub, such as food processing and solar energy training.

Tensions beyond theoretical considerations

The four above examples I have chosen to share in this paper represent only a fraction of the heretic attempts I have been involved in engendering disruptive pedagogy towards the eradication of poverty in all its forms, everywhere. This has not necessarily been a linear and progressive journey, but one of immersion that has been a constant process of learning, recalibration, theorising in action and on action, and reflection. Whilst it gave me great joy on many instances, it also required a lot of sweat, tears, and pain, at other times. I would like to conclude by reflecting on the following points:

The creative tensions of scholar-activism

I have spent the last 16 years trying to synthesis my dual identities of being both a scholar and an activist, and this process of generating creative tension has both its trappings and challenges. In addition, my intersecting identity of being a scholar-activist privileges me and simultaneously disadvantages me from the "logic of the system". Whilst at times the academy is supportive, it can also be mechanical and inhumane, with scant understanding of the tensions I have to straddle as a scholar-activist. Where I win awards based on my scholar-activism, this is very much welcomed and celebrated, even rewarded. However, carving out time to engage in activism is hardly supported; in fact, I had to learn the art of creativity to manage some of these tensions. Additionally, I had to conduct the overwhelming majority of my activism in my own time, in addition to my full-time role as an academic, and this can result in serious health complications, especially as a result of trying to burn both ends of the candle. The rules of engagement for scholars, in my experience, is very different to that of the activist, especially in relation to the concept of time, ethical boundaries and process. Whilst my work over the years has had a demonstrable significant impact, it has left me with many scars, acquired in the trenches.

Debunking colonised development paradigms

Decoloniality has been a central plank, informing my practice, especially given my situatedness; the aftermath of slavery and colonialism, although not palpable, remains insidiously present in my audiences' configuration, sanctification, validation and consideration of ways of knowing, and ways of being. This process of decolonisation cannot, therefore, be seen as old colonial relics; to the contrary, they are essential components for the deconstruction of centuries old orthodoxy architectures that imbue development paradigms in the South and their enactment. This process of decoloniality, in my experience, is a sine quo non for both academics and practitioners, in the North and the South, who must engage more critically, both in thought and action, when it comes to engendering disruptive actions to eradicate poverty in all its forms.

A critical look at our intervention from the West

Linked to the last point, current attempts, especially by NGOs and INGOs, as well as UN and state actors, must take an inner recession to critically examine what they purport to do with the funding at their disposal and how they intervene more effectively, whilst at the same time cognisant of the historicity, power, and positionality of their interventions. Any continuation of business as now, in my experience, is a continuation of the “missionary position” colonial raping, just a more subtle mutation. “Development pornography” peddled by the “merchants of misery” at a significant detriment to those in whose lives we purport to intervene in, requires significant recalibration.

My positionality

Unashamedly and unapologetically, my situatedness and positionality has given me certain vantage views that allow me to gain greater insight into the causes, consequences and solutions to intractable development challenges, especially given my affinity, having had a personal serving of these intractable development challenges. This has significantly influenced my theory and practice. For those who do not have this situated/positional affinity, it is imperative that they understand it before effective efforts can be taken to dismantle all forms of pervasive, intractable, inhuman and deplorable poverty, in all its forms, everywhere!

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