

## ***THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: WHY ARE DEVELOPMENT EDUCATORS AVOIDING THE QUESTION OF NEOLIBERALISM?***

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### **Abstract**

This article reflects on the findings of research commissioned by two Irish international non-governmental organisations, the Centre for Global Education (CGE) and Financial Justice Ireland (FJI), on the extent to which the development education (DE) and the international development (ID) sectors in the island of Ireland are engaging with neoliberalism as the root cause of injustice, inequality and poverty across the world? The research assessed the extent to which the DE and ID sectors incorporate a systemic analysis of global economics as part of their activities and public engagement work. The research findings suggest that both the DE and ID sectors are largely ignoring neoliberalism - the elephant in the room – as the root cause of poverty and inequality. It draws upon the outcomes of two online seminars, organised to share and discuss the research findings, to suggest some of the reasons why the two sectors are not engaging with neoliberalism. It also proposes next steps on how the barriers to engagement with neoliberalism can be overcome.

**Keywords:** *Development Education; International Development; Neoliberalism; Austerity; Inequality; Poverty; Research.*

The global economy is broken and inequality is surging to levels that may exceed those that followed the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. People across the world are fearful of an economic recession that has seen inflation spiralling, food costs and energy bills soar, and families forced into the terrible dilemma of choosing between heating their homes and eating (Partington, 2022). The lost decade of austerity – cuts to services, wages and benefits – that followed the 2008 crisis look set to return which will take a terrible toll on the most vulnerable in society: single parents, the disabled, pensioners and workers on low wages (Toynbee and Walker, 2020). A report on the impact of austerity in the UK following the financial crisis by Philip Alston, the former United Nations Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, found that the policy pursued by the British government was ‘more

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ideological' than driven by economic necessity (Alston, 2019: 1). The ideology driving austerity is neoliberalism, the dominant, de-regulated form of global economics that has been aligned with 'development' since the 1970s. This economic system aims to reduce the role of the state in the ownership of public assets and stewardship of economic policy except in facilitating and accelerating marketisation and deregulation.

The mantra of neoliberalism is growth, growth and more growth. It is obsessed with increasing share prices, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and maintaining profits at all costs. The main problem with this system is that the profits generated by growth are not used to sustain the general wellbeing and needs of society but to reward shareholders, the so-called one per cent. As Philip Alston found: 'the global economy has doubled since the end of the Cold War, yet half the world lives under \$5.50 a day, primarily because the benefits of growth have largely gone to the wealthiest' (Alston, 2020: 15). The 2022 *World Inequality Report* finds that the poorest half of the global population barely owns any wealth at all, possessing just 2 per cent of the total. In contrast, the world's richest 10 per cent own 76 per cent of all wealth (World Inequality Report 2022: 10). On average, the poorest half of the world's people owns €2,900 per adult, (\$4,100) and the top 10 per cent own €550,900 (or \$771,300) per adult (Ibid).

Neoliberalism, as the journalist George Monbiot (2016) argues, 'is the ideology at the root of all our problems' as it invades every aspect of our lives from the workplace to arts and culture, the environment, utilities, health and education. 'Under neoliberalism', argues Henry Giroux, 'everything is for sale and the only obligation of citizenship is consumerism' (2022: 112). Giroux has been sounding the alarm about the slide to authoritarianism and attacks on critical thinking in the United States spawned by an ideology that 'views government as the enemy of the market, limits society to the realm of the family and individuals, embraces a fixed hedonism and challenges the very idea of the public good' (Ibid). The question posed by this article is to what extent are the development education (DE) and international development (ID) sectors engaging with the systemic source of injustice, inequality and poverty across the world? It shares research commissioned by the Centre for Global Education (CGE) and Financial Justice Ireland (FJI) that investigated the degree to which international non-government organisations (INGOs) in the island of Ireland incorporate a systemic analysis of global economics as part of their activities and public engagement work (Fricke, 2022). The article considers the implications of the research findings and considers some of the reasons why INGOs are avoiding the elephant in the room; neoliberal economics.

### Addressing 'root causes'

It's important at the outset to recall that the DE and ID sectors have as their remit addressing the 'root causes' of poverty. As the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA), suggests, the aim of DE is that of exploring 'the root causes of local and global injustices and inequalities in our interdependent world' (IDEA, 2022: 13). Similarly, the Development Education Group of Dóchas, the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Organisations, says that by 'inviting people to examine the causes of poverty, Irish NGOs help them identify the changes that need to happen to bring about lasting solutions to the problems of global poverty and inequality' (Dóchas, 2012). Given the compelling evidence (Oxfam, 2020; World Inequality Report, 2022) that neoliberalism is the 'root cause' of inequality, poverty and injustice, the corollary of that should be that the DE and ID sectors concentrate their educational and advocacy activities on neoliberalism. The CGE / FJI research investigated whether this is in fact the case.

The research was carried out by experienced DE consultant Harm-Jan Fricke and underpinned by two assumptions: first, that for their work to have a lasting impact, the DE and ID sectors should involve the public in investigations of and responses to the root causes of poverty (Ibid: 5); and, second, that both sectors should address 'structural-systemic (economic) processes and ideologies' (Ibid). It's important to acknowledge the limited scope of the research which focused on the DE and ID sectors in the island of Ireland but also made reference to information publicly available from the European Union, the European Commission and CONCORD (the European confederation of relief and development NGOs). However, the primary focus of the research was on nine leading INGOs selected as a cross-section of both DE and ID organisations well established in the Irish development sector. The research also focused on IDEA, as the national DE network in Ireland, Dóchas, as the national ID network and Irish Aid, the main statutory funder and policy-maker in ID and DE. The methodology included: a literature review on neoliberalism in the DE and ID sectors; a review of web pages and policy documents of the INGOs, networks and policy-making bodies; an online survey of ID and DE practitioners (29 responses from a sample of 200); and two online consultation seminars – one for Irish practitioners and the other for colleagues in other European Union countries – at which the initial findings were shared and discussed.

### Research findings

The literature review revealed that when it comes to the domestic arena, most public engagement work by INGOs is focused on fundraising and advocacy / campaigning but 'education is typically absent' (Ibid: 6). When education is referenced, it's mostly in regard to overseas work rather than public engagement in Ireland. Most significantly, the research found an absence of a systemic policy analysis of the issues addressed by INGOs as part of their work. '[L]ittle consideration seems to be given', finds the research, 'to systematic explorations of global economics or of root causes of poverty, inequality and injustice' (Fricke, 2022: 7). In regard to the policy statements of Irish Aid, the European Union and European Commission, the research found that they 'highlight the issues they want to focus on but do not provide a significant, let alone comprehensive and systemic analysis of reasons for the existence of the issues' (Ibid: 6). While some of the INGOs investigated relate the issues they address as part of their work to 'the core characteristics of neoliberalism' (Ibid), they lack dedicated education programmes that could be used to engage the public with those issues and their root causes. Many of the INGOs examined are not part of Irish development education networks and lack internal DE capacity to support public engagement activities. What emerges from the research are DE and ID sectors that address single issues but not their economic context and origins. For example, the research references the IDEA 'Code of Good Practice for Development Education' which includes the principle of exploring 'the root causes of local and global injustices' (IDEA, n.d.). However, DE projects and resources considered over the past decade, consulted by the research, suggest limited consideration of 'systematic explorations of global economics or of root causes of poverty, inequality and injustice' (Ibid: 7).

Perhaps the most significant research finding emerged from the results of the online survey of INGO practitioners based in Ireland and other parts of the EU, in which an overwhelming majority of respondents said that 'neither the development education or international development sectors give anywhere near adequate attention to explorations with the public of the economic causes of poverty, inequality and injustice' (Ibid). This would suggest that many of those working in DE and ID would like INGOs and development networks to directly address the question of neoliberalism as part of their activities. There is an even greater moral imperative for them to do so given the

deepening spiral of poverty enveloping people across the world as a result of the cost of living crisis, the energy crisis, the climate crisis, and hunger crisis; all crises created by the same economic system and its unsustainable demands made on the planet's finite resources, eco-system and workforce.

### Why are INGOs ignoring the 'elephant in the room'

Of course, the question hovering over the entire report is why are INGOs largely ignoring the elephant in the room; the neoliberal economic model which underpins poverty and inequality? The two online consultation seminars organised by Harm-Jan Fricke to share and discuss his findings inevitably focused on this question. Some of the reasons advanced by participants and included in the report are: the fear of losing funding from donors or government bodies if challenging neoliberal policies; a lack of confidence, knowledge or skills to address economic issues with peers or the public; a lack of political will to face the practical consequences of challenging government policies, particularly in the domestic policy arena, which many INGOs may consider beyond their remit. Yet another reason offered in the seminars was the DE and ID sectors' uncritical focus on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the main global policy platform for international development and development education which fail to address the structural causes of poverty and promote awareness that is 'a mile wide, but only an inch deep' (Ibid: 40). Indeed, a withering critique of the Goals by Philip Alston in 2020 suggested that they are complicit with neoliberalism as they are 'doubling down on an inadequate and increasingly out-of-date approach' reflected in their commitment to achieve 7 per cent GDP in least developed countries by 2030 (Alston, 2020: 13). This target, suggests Alston, is 'at odds with emerging challenges to the traditional growth paradigm' (Ibid). It also contradicts SDG 8 which aims to 'take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact' (UN, 2015).

The ID and DE sectors appear to be extremely unbalanced in their activities. On the one hand, they are completely over-extended in their uncritical support of a failing SDG agenda most unlikely to be delivered by 2030 to, on the other hand, studiously omitting from their work an analysis of neoliberalism as the root cause of the problems that the Goals are trying to fix. Because the Goals fail to problematise the growth paradigm and set out an alternative approach to development that rejects the neoliberal path which has precipitated the climate emergency and inequality crisis, they seem destined to fail. The DE and ID sectors appear to be ignoring the failings of the SDG agenda (Murphy, 2020) and as Selby and Kagawa found a decade ago are either 'falling in with the neoliberal marketplace agenda' or reluctant 'to directly, overtly and critically engage with that agenda' (2011: 15). Until the DE and ID sectors arrest this inertia and start directly addressing the 'root causes' of poverty they risk becoming increasingly irrelevant to, and detached from, those they claim to represent; the poor, marginalised and voiceless.

Back in 2014, CIVICUS, a global network of civil society groups, published 'an open letter to our fellow activists across the globe' which flagged many of the issues raised in CGE / FJI's report. 'We exist to challenge the status quo', said the letter, 'but we trade in incremental change' (CIVICUS, 2014). It went on: 'Our actions are clearly not sufficient to address the mounting anger and demand for systemic political and economic transformation that we see in cities and communities around the world every day' (Ibid). Eight years on and it appears that the open letter fell on deaf ears and the sector remains 'trapped in the internal bureaucracy and the comfort of our brands and organisations' (Ibid).

## Next steps

By way of next steps, the CGE/FJI report recommended an investigation into the factors underpinning the lack of engagement with neoliberalism by consulting and debating with practitioners in the ID and DE sectors on the challenges and barriers to systemic analysis of the root causes of poverty and effective action that addresses those root causes. The report specifically suggested that further research could investigate:

- “How the stated intentions of organisations (for example regarding poverty, inequality and injustice) are or can be addressed through educational approaches that involve the public in explorations of the global economic system;
- And, how the practices of organisations, that are currently often focussed on ‘single’ issues, can incorporate global systems thinking into their work, in particular through approaches that actively include people in a process that enquires into, discusses, reflects on and responds to the dominant global economic system” (Fricke, 2022: 43).

This research is needed to not only identify the main impediments to engagement with neoliberalism but to initiate discussion within both sectors as to how they can be overcome. Such a process could ultimately support INGOs in incorporating neoliberalism into their education activities and advocacy work.

Where once activism on global poverty and inequality may have been optional, it has now become obligatory given the parlous state of the natural environment and the threats to democracy posed by coat-trailing populists profiting from public anger and disconnection from mainstream politics. A sense of alienation is enveloping many post-industrial communities across the world, despairing of assistance from government and hope of finding a decent job, owning a home and escaping poverty. A growing authoritarianism, as we saw in Trump’s America, is attended by the ‘othering’ of black and minority ethnic communities, undocumented immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees, and people on low pay and benefits (Shapiro, 2020). ‘[N]eoliberalism has waged war on the welfare state, public goods and the social contract’, argues Giroux, ... and ‘elevates unchecked self-interest, self-help, deregulation and privatisation to the governing principles of society’ (Giroux, 2022: 111). The DE and ID sectors need to urgently come to terms with this reality and address the systemic cause of the issues they tackle as part of their work. This requires a deeper commitment to development education both as internal capacity-building and public engagement work. And, where are the academic institutions linking ID and DE to neoliberalism and supporting research on the connection between neoliberalism and the slide to authoritarianism? Where are the doctorate students researching such an obvious gaping hole in DE and ID policy and practice? Has the sector become so de-radicalised that it is willing to ignore the elephant in the room?

‘Poverty is a political choice’, argues Philip Alston (2020: 1). It’s not inevitable that millions of people should be subjected to austerity or that nurses have to use foodbanks because their wages are so pitiful (Gorton, 2022). The DE and ID sectors have a choice of either silent complicity with market orthodoxy or mobilising their considerable resources to agitate for progressive political change and engage the public in education programmes that link poverty to neoliberalism. The choice, dear reader, is yours.

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