

# **Catalysing the 'Shadow Spaces': Challenging Development Discourse from within the DEEEP Project**

by Tobias Troll and Amy Skinner

RESEARCH March 2014



citizens'  
Empowerment  
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- This collection explores new ways of weaving development education into the daily practice of various stakeholders.
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- **1. “The stories we tell ourselves”** by Rene Suša

### **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 DEEP Project”** by Amy Skinner and Tobias Troll in Policy & Practice.

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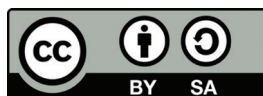


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## Introduction

Development education (DE) is in many cases striking a ‘Faustian bargain’ (Selby and Kagawa, 2011) as it compromises its radical roots and values base for a place at the policy-making table or within a donor-led agenda, which often serves to reinforce rather than challenge the status quo. This has led to concerns that whilst claiming to challenge global injustice and address the structural causes of inequality and poverty, DE is actually being ‘declawed’ and in many cases the skills, values and knowledge underpinning DE are being softened to accommodate, rather than question the prevailing neoliberal global agenda. In this respect, there is a risk that DE ‘endorses [...] the very ideologies and political-economic arrangements that are responsible for producing or exacerbating conditions of poverty and injustice’ (Bryan, 2011: 1) as it fails to challenge the systemic causes of inequality or confront key issues such as consumerism, the economic growth mantra and neoliberal globalisation (Selby and Kagawa, 2011: 19).

Yet this hesitation to address questions of power and systemic change is not confined to the DE sector. The Irish development non-governmental organisation (NGO) Trócaire (2011) argues in its Leading Edge 2020 report that development NGOs must engage far more with power and politics instead of positing themselves as service providers of donor defined aid projects, if they want to remain relevant and make a meaningful contribution to global justice. Indeed, discussions on the post-2015 development agenda, which are increasingly focusing on tackling issues of sustainability, inequality and ‘one world’ development (Fiedler, 2011), as well as reactions to the financial crisis in Europe have prompted many development NGOs to question current growth and development paradigms and consider whether their change agendas are radical enough to deal with the systemic causes underpinning the issues they address (Shutt, 2009).

It would therefore seem that both DE and development organisations are facing an ‘identity crisis’ which is intentionally or unintentionally leading to the opening of critical spaces for reflection on the way we work and our role as organisations in contributing to greater social justice. This provides an opportunity for DE practitioners to re-connect with the radical and transformative foundations of the field itself and move away from being a ‘movement which speaks only to itself’ (McCollum in Bourn, 2008: 13) in order to make a meaningful contribution to the broader development discourse at a time when development paradigms are being increasingly questioned.

Rather than seeing DE as a ‘service’ which is ‘delivered’ to target groups external to our organisations, this article will explore the idea of ‘applied development education’ at an organisational level in order to ‘cast the gaze on ourselves’ (Bryan, 2011: 2) and stimulate critical reflection about the values, principles and ambitions underlying our own work and the work of the development NGOs or networks we are often a part of. It will suggest how applying DE inspired learning processes within organisations can help to facilitate critical reflection about current development paradigms and how to become more effective agents for real progressive change.

The second part of the article will look at the DEEEP project (previously an abbreviation for ‘Developing Europeans’ Engagement for the Eradication of Global Poverty’, but recently changed to the slogan of ‘Citizen Empower-

ment for Global Justice' in line with the vision for the fourth phase of the project). DEEEP is a European support and coordination mechanism for the DE sector, which recently adopted a more radical approach to challenging current NGO practices, both in terms of the project's organisational setup and through repositioning DE within the wider CONCORD (the European NGO confederation for relief and development) network of which it is a part. DEEEP is presented as an attempt from within the DE sector to sidestep the dangers of the 'Faustian bargain' and determine the project's potential to radiate beyond a radical 'shadow space' (Selby and Kagawa, 2011: 26) and induce 'spillover' into the broader development sector.

### **Business as usual is no longer an option**

Both the development and development education sectors are in essence dealing with a similar challenge: Should they proceed with 'business as usual' or is there a need to be more radical in approaches to social change? Debates within the development sector about the shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and what a post-2015 development framework should look like, are providing a space for rethinking development and creating 'new narratives for a changing world' (Sumner and Wiegmann, 2012). Changing geopolitical relations and the collapse of the traditional bi-polar world view of a rich 'North' and a poor 'South' coupled with rising inequalities, and multiple economic, social and ecological crises is leading to a questioning of current models of development and growth and recognition of the need for alternative measures of societal progress. For example, applying indexes of development such as well-being or happiness as opposed to the more traditional financial indicators of development such as per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP). There appears to be gradual recognition from Progressive Development Forum (<http://progressivedevelopmentforum.wordpress.com/>) and others within the sector of the need to move away from an aid-driven agenda to a more politically engaged agenda centred on social justice which tackles the structural causes of inequality (Melamad and Samman, 2013; Shutt, 2009). Notions of 'global development' (Cascant and Kelbert, 2012) or 'world development' (Sumner and Wiegmann, 2012) are gaining ground and the accompanying acknowledgement of a need to change consumerist driven growth and lifestyles in the North.

### **In this respect, there is scope for most NGOs to be much more ambitious in their agendas for change:**

"NGOs will not be able to pursue a more progressive social change agenda if they simply look for improved ways to do the things they already do. Instead, it is argued that self-aware NGOs need to face a choice: to be agents of progressive social change, and in order to do this, transform themselves radically or, alternatively, continue to make modest efforts to ameliorate some of the least defensible aspects of the inequitable global capitalist system of which they are a part, but admitting that this does not really amount to progressive social change" (Shutt, 2009: 19).

As Sumner and Wiegmann (2012: 2) state: 'In all likelihood, nothing less than a fundamental turnaround of world development will be needed to open the road toward a sustainable development for all'. They go on to ask a very relevant question for development education practitioners, as to whether 'the fundamental rethinking needed to put the world on a sustainable trajectory needs to come from a wider group beyond development scholars?'

Indeed, many of these issues detailed above reflect DE's ideas for paradigm change (i.e., the need for a justice rather than aid paradigm for development, notions of one world development, reflection on lifestyles and responsibilities of those in the 'North' for sustainable development etc.), yet how much of this discussion can we honestly say has been prompted by or contributed to by DE practitioners? Although many DE practitioners work within broader development structures, in many cases DE has remained within its own 'bubble', considering development discourse and practice to not be 'progressive enough', rather than trying to find critical spaces to actively engage with and try to contribute to this gradually changing development discourse. Alternatively, feeling squeezed between funding constraints and a possible repositioning as educational service provider following a donor set agenda, and a 'wallflower', low-priority status (Murphy, 2011) in development NGOs under permanent threat of phase out if the funding situation changes or if 'impact' and 'effectiveness' are not sufficiently demonstrated, DE

has also shrunk from dealing with some of these core questions about radicality, transformation and the need for systemic change (Bryan, 2011; Murphy, 2011; Selby and Kagawa, 2011: 20-21). Indeed, as Murphy (2011: 52) found in her research with development educators in Ireland, 'participants are challenged by the charity model of development that underpins their respective NGOs operations, and 'the hardest thing is to challenge the NGO you're working in'. This is further hindered by the lack of a firm and unified identity or positioning of the development education sector (Bourn, 2011), wavering between 'soft' and 'critical' approaches (Andreotti, 2006), often opting for 'safe' DE which just pays 'lip service to global justice' (Murphy, 2011: 53-54) and leaves 'the sector vulnerable to politicization and unable to challenge dominant ideas' (Khoo, 2011: 4).

Yet critical DE approaches which draw on DE's transformative and radical foundations are well-placed to contribute to thinking about fundamental structural changes needed to lead to a world of greater justice. As 'shadow spaces' are starting to emerge within the development sector and development discourse starts to touch upon some of DE's key concerns, is it not the right time for DE to reactivate its radical, emancipatory roots and 'think more creatively and laterally about strategies for creative use of shadow spaces and for inducing spillover into the formal?' (Selby and Kagawa, 2011: 26).

### **Bringing DE from the margins to the centre of development discourse**

In response to the identity crises of development NGOs and development education organisations outlined above, the DEEEP4 project has recently been initiated within CONCORD as a 'transformative action experiment' which attempts to reconnect DE with its radical roots and to facilitate critical learning processes within CONCORD about the role of development NGOs as agents for systemic change. The conceptualisation of DEEEP4 has been strongly influenced by the Smart Civil Society Organisations' (CSO) initiative (<http://www.smart-csos.org/>), hosted by WWF UK until 2011 and now an independent 'lab' of civil society leaders and researchers which proposes a radical re-consideration of NGO practices in order to stimulate systemic change towards a more just and sustainable world.

This 'lab' addresses the question of why CSOs – despite their power, visibility and public trust – fail to challenge the neoliberal market place agenda which is at the heart of many of the social, environmental and cultural distortions they intend to address. This is indeed quite a challenge for development NGOs, busy with daily policy business, trapped in topical silos and steered by the aspiration of short term wins, when the inclusion of momentary buzz words in an official policy paper becomes the success story of the year. The focus on single issues and short term incremental change, and the lack of system thinking and cross-sectoral cooperation (Narberhaus, 2011) – characteristics of CSO practice in many sectors – is also a challenge for the development education sector given that issues related to 'economic growth, neo-liberal globalisation and consumerism' (Selby and Kagawa, 2011: 19) are largely absent from DE discourse.

Getting out of the 'business as usual' trap and starting to pull the 'key leverage points' for change identified in the 'Smart CSOs report' (Narberhaus, 2011), such as systems thinking, developing new models for change based on cultural transformation and intrinsic values, as well as building cross-sectoral global movements uniting for change at a structural, rather than issue-focused level, is a major strategic shift for most NGOs. DEEEP4 represents an experiment to try out some of the Smart CSOs thinking in practice, and to hopefully scale up its experience in the wider CONCORD confederation, as detailed below.

### **DEEEP as an example of applied development education**

DEEEP is a European Commission-funded, project-based support mechanism that was created by CONCORD's development education working group (the Development Awareness Raising and Education [DARE] Forum) ten years ago. When DEEEP entered its fourth project phase, running from 2013 to 2015, many elements of Smart CSOs thinking were already considered during the drafting process, and more concretely implemented in the first months of the project, when the team and strategic orientation was set up. A two-day 'DEEEP retreat' marked the launch of the project and brought together a team of six and a range of stakeholders from CONCORD who agreed



upon the repositioning of the project as a tool for systemic change. As a result, the project's stakeholders positioned DEEEP as a tool for social transformation based on values and citizens' participation:

"DEEEP addresses global challenges by addressing the structure and power relations inherent within the current global political, socio-economic system. It aims to relocate 'development' as something which needs to happen everywhere: a one world endeavor and a shared responsibility of us all. These changes can only happen through a renewed civil society, driven by a new generation of active citizens empowered by global learning and emancipatory campaigning practices, and joined as and in an organized international civil society in their demands for global social justice" (DEEEP4 Vision and Mission Statement).

This is an ambition which goes far beyond previous project phases, and the objectives of many development NGOs. As outlined above, development education today is still largely defined through the traditional triad of awareness, understanding and action (see definitions at <http://deEEP.org/dear-definitions.html>), with a vague aspiration to 'contribute to the eradication of poverty' (European Consensus on Development: The Contribution of Development Education and Awareness Raising, 2007), yet in many cases bypassing the challenging questions related to the economic and political system shaping our world (Selby and Kagawa, 2011). DEEEP chose an explicitly utopian and radical standpoint as its approach to DE, based on Freirean thinking about the impossibility of neutrality in education (Freire, 1995). The participatory vision process led to broad ownership of this radical repositioning of DEEEP from a support mechanism for one CONCORD working group to a confederation-wide recognised tool to bring about meaningful transformation within civil society and ultimately in the economic and political system.

### **DEEEP within CONCORD**

DEEEP aims to 'gain recognition of DEAR as a means for reconceptualising the overall development paradigm in practice and as providing a space and a tool to transform thinking, practice and policies for a shift towards political and systemic change' (DEEEP4 Vision and Mission Statement). The implementation of this transformational ambition of DEEEP aims to deliver activities, which go far beyond a traditional charity approach to DE (reinforcing public support for development aid), toward actions with a more system oriented, cross-sectoral and long-term citizen engagement with social change. Concretely speaking, this is so far being attempted through the activities described below.

### **A 'new political narrative' for the development sector**

The DARE forum saw the discussions going on within the wider CONCORD confederation about the post-2015 development agenda as an opportunity for DE to move from the margins towards the centre of development discourse by helping to facilitate a critical reflection process on CONCORD's future strategy. The DARE forum, through DEEEP, therefore played an instrumental role in initiating a new political narrative process within CONCORD. As Selby and Kagawa (2011: 27) point out, 'seeking to effect transformative change involves [...] developing and building outwards from a network of the sympathetic within and across institutions and systems' and through tapping into the critical spaces opening up within the broader development confederation of which it is a part. By following such an approach the DARE forum has managed to bring DE principles and perspectives to the fore and make the political narrative process one of CONCORD's three priorities for 2013.

This new narrative process is bringing together CONCORD members in a joint learning process inspired by DE participatory learning methodologies and focused on rethinking the role of development organisations in order to become more effective agents for change in the fight against poverty and injustice. This relates especially to questions of power, politics and global citizenship. An online platform (<http://extranet.concordeurope.org/projects/politicalnarrative>) has been established using innovative crowd-sourcing methods in order to identify the key issues which need to be addressed, which were then taken up further in the 2013 CONCORD General Assembly. The DARE forum has contributed to these discussions and issues of global citizenship, local-global links, and creating a sense of global responsibility and engagement for global justice have been identified as some of the



key ambitions for the development sector. DEEEP is actively contributing to the momentum of this initiative and has made a concrete proposal on how the initial reflective process can be taken forward and put into practice within the confederation.

DEEEP also facilitated the participation of CONCORD in the first ever European Citizens Summit, which took place in Brussels in June 2013 and united 230 participants from all sectors of civil society to explore a new vision and narrative for Europe, based on shared values such as solidarity and justice – this was quite out of the ordinary for a confederation whose main scope remains institutional policy work. Furthermore, DEEEP is organising a global conference in Johannesburg in November which will kick-off a three year process towards ‘building a global citizens’ movement’. Through facilitating CONCORD’s participation in an initiative which focuses on global justice and citizens empowerment and promotes cross-sectoral engagement, it will support development practitioners within CONCORD to collaborate with non-traditional development stakeholders such as social movements, activists, popular educators etc.

Intrinsic to all these activities are DEEEP’s communication, advocacy, research and capacity development strategies which have all made this transformative ambition a key focus of their work. For example, DEEEP will experiment with a ‘new advocacy’ which aims to develop a more empowering, participatory and political approach to advocacy which aims at longer term systemic change rather than short term policy gains.

### **Internal practices and policies within DEEEP**

Besides DEEEP’s engagement with broader processes within CONCORD, it is also trying to apply key DE values and practices to the way it works ‘internally’ in its organisational set up. In this respect, DEEEP has established an explicit value-base to the project, which is shared by the team and the management, and which is the baseline for all activities and decisions, including those that go beyond the ‘core business’ of development education. For example, ambitious internal ‘green policies’ are being developed, and the HR policies attempt to follow a logic of empowerment rather than traditional line management. Instead of solely contracting a final project evaluation, a ‘critical friend’ will accompany the project permanently to facilitate an emancipatory learning process and an empowerment approach to evaluation. Collectively, the DEEEP team is working towards establishing itself as a community of learners, as well as practitioners, in our specific roles. Regular team meetings and retreats will allow staff to reflect and learn together and co-shape project development. By applying a systems thinking approach, we will try to critically assess all organisational practices and implement innovative and sustainable solutions regarding procurement, climate impact, staff policies, fundraising etc. For example, inspired by research carried out by the New Economics Foundation (2010) into the multiple societal and planetary benefits of shortening the working week, all DEEEP staff members have 60-80 percent working positions. In line with its experimental nature, the project also tries to continuously cultivate new ‘shadow spaces’ and ‘seeds’ for new forms of DE and NGO practice which are rooted in the values and vision of truly emancipatory change.

### **Possible risks of adopting a more radical approach**

Clearly, the ‘radicalisation’ of DEEEP is not without risks and possible contradictions. We are still in the very early phases of the project, where a lot of energy has been dedicated to reshaping the ideological framework of DEEEP through the vision process and using the Smart CSO approach as a tool for doing so. Yet, it is still to be proven that DEEEP will be able to live up to these high ambitions, and that the conceptual thinking behind it, such as the Smart CSO ‘leverage points’ (Narberhaus, 2011), will be the right tools to deliver results. DEEEP’s approach could also be considered too idealistic and not grounded enough in the reality of the structural framework within which DEEEP is situated. Indeed, if DEEEP were to fail as a ‘transformational action experiment’, it may risk discrediting not only CONCORD and the DARE Forum, but also a more ambitious conceptualisation of DE at pan-European level.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether development educators (DEEEP’s main constituency and target group)

are in fact the right people to initiate systemic change. Do they have the power and political talent to be serious political actors for change? Indeed, many might suggest that it would be more effective to address global justice through working with political and civil activists, and in particular with movements from outside Europe, rather than development NGOs. While time will tell if DEEEP was too ambitious, the project's stakeholders hope that even if it does fail in some of its ambitions, the overall effect of transforming the project into a more radical tool for change will provide inspiration for development NGOs beyond the DE sector, and possibly contribute to a re-conceptualisation of DE, learning and citizen participation as a central element of any global justice agenda.

## Conclusion: From the shadow to the centre

Selby and Kagawa have suggested occupying 'shadow spaces' beyond the formal organisational structures in order to re-invent development education and escape the risky Faustian pact of limited traction on policy for the price of values and principles. The examples of DEEEP and CONCORD show that whilst the institutional setting of DEEEP might indeed provide a more radical and flexible niche within the confederation, the inspiration sometimes comes out of the shadow. Processes of strategic concern for the development sector of civil society, like the political narrative process of CONCORD, were largely facilitated, nurtured and shaped by the development educators within the confederation, specifically the DARE Forum and DEEEP. The radicalisation and broadening of the DE concept actually allowed for a repositioning from the margins to the centre of the development discourse, illustrating Selby and Kagawa's (2011: 26) point that 'effectively nurtured, the dynamism of the shadow space can inform the formal dimension'. The DEEEP example, though in its early stages, is attempting to avoid any kind of Faustian bargain and to demonstrate that DE can enhance its relevance to civil society precisely by sticking to its core values, instead of trading them away.

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