



THINKPIECE

ARE WE CHANGING THE WORLD?

Reflections on Development Education,
Activism and Social Change

STEPHEN McCLOSKEY

Centre for Global Education

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- Provide training and resources on development issues;
- Encourage the use of development education methodologies to bring about change at a local and global level;
- Network with partner organisations that share our values and commitment to social justice and equality.

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About the Thinkpiece

This article has been published as part of a one year development education project delivered by the Centre for Global Education and funded by Trócaire. It aims to support reflection and debate on how development educators engage the public on international development issues. The article comes on the back of recent research, most notably Oxfam's *Finding Frames* report, which suggests that the development sector is struggling to enhance and sustain citizenship engagement on the structural causes of poverty and inequality. The article probes some of the factors that may underpin this lack of engagement both within the development education sector specifically and the wider development sector more generally. It examines some of the challenges involved in engaging learners in actions on global issues. Some of these challenges relate to the sectors and environmental pressures in which development educators operate which can thwart in-depth engagement with learners.

The starting point for the article is the shared commitment by many national and international governmental and non-governmental organisations to the action outcome in development education. It goes on to discuss why this core element of our practice is largely marginalised in the planning and delivery of many development education activities and projects. The article argues that this, in part at least, is due to failings within the development sector itself as well as the education sectors in which we operate. It suggests that if development NGOs fail to address the structural causes of global inequality as part of their activities then they cannot expect to engage learners and stakeholders in actions that will reduce poverty. The article appeals for greater clarity and openness with learners in terms of the kind of change that the sector wants to achieve. This does not mean prescribing actions but supporting learners in designing their own forms of active engagement.

The article is encouraging development educators to reflect on this central tenet of our practice and think about how we can become more effective agents of change. The next stage of our project will involve the organisation of a one day workshop in which development educators from a range of sectors will draw from their own practice to discuss the challenges and successes they have experienced in engaging learners in action outcomes. A report on the outcomes of the day will be shared in a report to be published by the Centre. For more details contact stephen@centreforglobaleducation.com.

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Thinkpiece

Are we changing the World?

Reflections on Development Education, Activism and Social Change

Stephen McCloskey

Introduction

For many of the leading stakeholders in development education (DE), the action outcome is a given. Governments and non-governmental actors alike regularly encompass a form of engagement or action on the part of the learner as the culmination of the DE methodology. One of the distinguishing characteristics of DE is what Paulo Freire, the towering foundation of contemporary practice, calls 'liberating action'. The action is liberating because education has a transformative capacity to overcome oppression and alter the social relations that perpetuate inequality and elitism. Cut from the cloth of grassroots activism, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* became a revelatory text because it recognised the social and economic power of education to 'transform reality'. One of the dominant discourses of contemporary DE practice focuses on the extent to which this radical mission has been softened or diluted through DE's negotiations for recognition in mainstream education systems (Bryan, 2011; Selby, 2011). In his 'Foreword' to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Schull accepts that it would be 'absurd' to suggest that Freire's work with illiterates in Latin America could be adopted in our system. And yet, he finds parallels in the 'culture of silence' to which the poor here are subjected and the objectification that often attends submergence in 'our advanced technological society' (1993: 15).

But what of the action imperative in contemporary development education practice? To what extent does this still hold as the culmination of the DE learning process? In a report produced for DEEEP, Sandra Oliveira and Amy Skinner suggest that 'The time is ripe to examine questions around citizen engagement for change, given that recent times have seen a rise in citizen action for social justice as a response to the economic crisis' (2014: 9). This Thinkpiece reflects on what we mean by action and engagement on the part of the learner. It considers the extent to which development organisations are equipping learners to implement change as part of the DE process. Has a creeping depoliticisation of DE organisations become reflected in how we engage with learners and what we expect from active citizenship? Is action just a mantra for development educators or inherently structured within the planning and delivery of DE activities? The article first locates the action outcome within the stated goals of key development players.

Development Education and the Action Outcome

The action outcome is a shared element in definitions of development education and other related terms such as global citizenship, global education and global learning. Definitions from across governmental, non-governmental and inter-governmental organisations and institutions appear to

agree that development education should result in behavioural change on the part of the learner. UNESCO, for example, emphasises the local and global dimensions of ‘global citizenship education’ and the ‘active roles’ required to ‘resolve global challenges’.

“Global citizenship education aims to empower learners to engage and assume active roles both locally and globally to face and resolve global challenges and ultimately to become proactive contributors to a more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable world” (2013: 3).

The Development Awareness Raising and Education (DARE) Forum offers a European perspective on development education as it represents national DE platforms across the European Union (EU). The DARE Forum agreed a definition which states that:

“Development education is an active learning process, founded on values of solidarity, equality, inclusion and co-operation. It enables people to move from basic awareness of international development priorities and sustainable human development, through understanding of the causes and effects of global issues to personal involvement and informed actions (quoted in DEEEP, 2012: 6).

DEEEP emphasises the values that are central to development education practice and describes the DE process experienced by the learner as moving from ‘basic awareness’ to ‘understanding’ to ‘personal involvement’ and ‘informed actions’. The Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) is more forthcoming on this process when it suggests that development education:

“Seeks to engage people in analysis, reflection and action for local and global citizenship and participation. It is about supporting people in understanding, and in acting to transform the social, cultural, political and economic structures which affect their lives and others at personal, community, national and international levels” (IDEA, nd).

The IDEA definition directly engages with a key concept in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire called *reflective action* which combines analysis and action in popular participation around development issues. It also expands upon the learner’s level of engagement from the personal to the international beginning with a self-awakening of critical consciousness which Freire suggests ‘leads the way to the expression of social discontents’ (1993: 18). IDEA also connects the local and the global in its definition and frames the kind of issues that DE addresses - social, cultural, political and economic. The Irish government’s development education strategy plan offers a definition of DE that is closely aligned to that offered by non-governmental actors. It suggests that:

“Development education aims to deepen understanding of global poverty and encourage people towards action for a more just and equal world. As such, it can build support for efforts by government and civil society to promote a development agenda and it can prompt action at a community and individual level” (Irish Aid, 2007: 6).

It is perhaps unusual for governments to advocate public action in support of a strategy plan but we regularly find the action outcome attached to policy documents in the sphere of development education. We normally assume governments to be reticent about public mobilisations in any area of policy much less to encourage ‘prompt action’ at individual and community levels. But in the area of development education there appears to be an assumption of a shared endeavour with NGOs

and the public in pursuit of global goals that we can all support. It may be the case that the global, 'other-worldly' nature of international development makes governments feel more comfortable in urging action outcomes. The Irish Aid definition is linking 'government and civil society' as partners in support of a 'development agenda' and exhorting the public to join this effort.

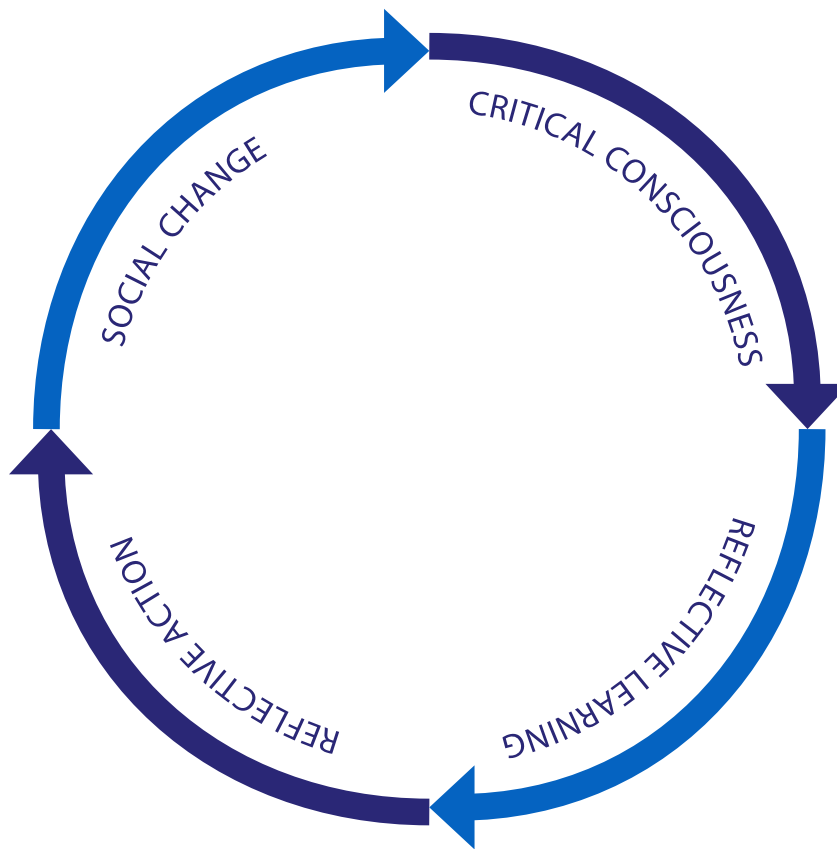
The shared action outcome in these definitions establishes that DE is a learning process designed to go beyond education as an outcome and toward education as a means toward change. We have some broad understanding of the goals of DE in these definitions including: sustainability, justice, fairness, equality and security. We also have a recurring sense of the DE process involving personal development but cascading outward toward the community, the nation and the wider world. The definitions are not prescriptive in terms of intended action outcomes and the next section turns to how we engage with learners in the process of social change.

Praxis

Freire's conception of social transformation is intrinsically linked to the concept of 'praxis' which is a combination of reflection and action. He regarded this 'radical interaction' as a prerequisite for meaningful social change. Reflection without action, according to Freire, was a matter of 'idle chatter'; a mere 'verbalism' without agency. On the other hand, action without reflection amounts to 'action for action's sake'; mere activism devoid of thought. If one of these two crucial elements is missing then the other immediately suffers and the element that combines them is dialogue. The process of dialogue should be inclusive and open ended without prescriptive outcomes thus ensuring that any agreed action has a collective ownership rather than one that is imposed or preordained. Therefore, the development education active learning process should encompass the inclusive dialogue needed to identify appropriate, meaningful outcomes that can directly address the structural social, cultural, economic and political causes of poverty and inequality. Just as knowledge is not deposited in the heads of the learner as an indelible truth by the teacher so it is incumbent on the learning process to agree action outcomes on the basis of a dialogue between the teacher and learner as equals where all knowledge and experience is valid. The action outcome is not imposed from above or below – not a 'crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another' – but the means for the 'liberation of humankind' (1993: 70).

Development educators regularly draw upon the various elements of Freire's praxis in their definitions of DE and description of their aims and objectives. We regularly find a combination of awareness-raising, analysis, reflection and action in a development education formula like that on page 8 which is assumed to result in some kind of desired social change.

Figure 1. Development Education Action Formula



But we can't assume the success of this formula, or anything like it, without considering a number of environmental and methodological considerations that can determine its outcome. These include:

- **The opportunities or constraints imposed by the sector in which the learning is delivered.** For example, the level of recognition offered by a schools' curriculum or teacher training programme to development education.
- **The duration and quality of access to the learner.** For example, the difference in learning outcomes possible in a one-off workshop and a one year course. Or the contrast between an over-crowded classroom and a small, participative group.
- **The quality of resources available to the teacher and learner.** For example, the availability of resources that support critical thinking as opposed to those that reinforce damaging stereotypes and myths about development and the global South.
- **The quality of teacher training both for practicing and trainee teachers.** For example, are teachers given opportunities to experience development education methodologies and supported in their use in the classroom?
- **The institutional approach to learning within an educational sector.** Does the school, youth group, community association, university etc. support transformative learning and social change?

- **The level of community engagement in the learning experience.** For example, is the local school actively involved in community development through extra-curricular activities? Or is the school isolated from the local community and any movements for social change?
- **The connections made between the local and the global.** Is the learner given the opportunity to understand the concept of interdependence and develop a sense of solidarity with people in struggle for social justice in other societies?
- **The pedagogical approach.** Is the teacher willing to facilitate a dialogical exchange with the learner in which all experience is valid? Or is the approach one of 'banking' or depositing knowledge in the head of the learner?

This list is by no means exhaustive but alludes to the challenges confronted by the educator and learner in trying to embrace development education in 'our advanced technological society' which is experiencing alarming levels of material inequality (Oxfam, 2015) and social disconnection (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Within these challenging contexts what kind of actions are possible and how do development educators support citizen engagement?

Levels of Citizen Engagement

As part of his research on citizen engagement with the global justice movement in the UK, James Trewby identified five continuum lines (see Figure 2) which should capture most forms of active citizenship. The five lines of engagement are: *low cost* and *high cost* which refers to 'expenditures of time, money and energy' on the part of the activist; *low risk* and *high risk* which speaks to anticipated dangers 'whether legal, social, physical, financial' etc attached to the particular form of activism; *conventional* and *unconventional* forms of engagement spanning petitions and lawful demonstrations to non-violent direct actions and, ultimately, violent actions; *non-political* to *political* activism - the former may be more community-oriented and grassroots focused and the latter more concentrated on political or business elites; and, finally, *individual* and *community* activism with the former concentrating on lifestyle changes such as consumer choices and the latter representing shared, public participation such as marches and protests (2012: 7-9).

Figure 2. Forms of Engagement (Trewby, 2014)

All forms of engagement belong within the 'repertoire of contention'.
Any particular form, within a specific context, can be plotted according to:



Meyer suggests that ‘for most people, participation in a social movement is dependent upon coming to a belief that a problem is (a) urgent; (b) has potential solutions; and (c) that his or her efforts might matter’ (2007: 453 quoted in Trewby, 2012: 13). Trewby suggests that the first useful pre-condition of action is ‘knowledge of injustice’ and the second is an individual’s belief that ‘they are able to become engaged’ (13-14). Clearly, development education can play an important role in creating the pre-conditions for engagement through its awareness raising activities, critical thinking skills, capacity for attitudinal change and promotion of positive social values such as respect, diversity and interdependence. However, within the DE sector there are different conceptions of action including the idea that the learning process itself is an acceptable learning outcome.

Debates around Action

A report by Fricke and Gathercole suggests that there are typically three transformations or outcomes pursued by ‘adjectival’ educations – those that are pursuing some form of social change through citizen engagement. The first is a ‘personal’ transformation that can result in behavioural and attitudinal change through the development of a sense of ‘social responsibility’. This transformation is driven by values that are central to DE such as diversity and respect, and can lead to a ‘commitment to action’ rather than resulting immediately in active citizenship. For some educators, their role is one of providing critical thinking skills and promoting action rather than supporting the learner in taking action. The second transformation promotes systemic change through education which enables the learner to ‘acquire an interdisciplinary, holistic perspective on the world and its processes’ (2015: 16). Learners are assisted in the process to ‘develop and improve action-oriented and decision-making skills’ (Ibid).

The third transformation is perhaps the most familiar to DE practitioners as it seeks to eradicate poverty and inequality through community/societal transformation. It is concerned with sustainable development, and seeks to influence political, economic, social and environmental decision-making. Fricke and Gathercole offer words of caution in respect to whichever of the three transformations are pursued suggesting that we cannot assume a ‘linear mechanism linking learning to change’ as it ‘probably doesn’t exist’. The complexity of the issues involved, particularly in regard to systemic change, makes it difficult to effect transformation. The key, they suggest, is not to prescribe predetermined outcomes but to prepare the learner for ‘different rationalities’ where sometimes they will have to change how they ‘gather and view knowledge and understanding’ (Ibid).

Focusing on activism with young people, Temple and Laycock take the view that educators should be very open and clear about their agenda for change and actively support children in taking action on global issues. They see two main benefits in this approach: first, ‘it enables us to justify the changes we are working for and the values that drive our work’; and second, ‘it enables us to open up our goals and values to critical analysis’ (2009: 101). They argue that we are often vague as educators about the actions we would like young people to take despite this being the ‘societal purpose of education’. Temple and Laycock ask: ‘Just as we support young people to learn about the issues, should we not, therefore, support them to take action on those issues?’ (103). They go on to suggest that at an early stage of the learning process young people can be supported in their action building through a ‘more structured, direct (but never manipulative) form’ and, as the young people develop, we can ask them ‘to design their own actions and manage their own direction’ (Ibid).

As practitioners this involves nothing less than ‘examining our agendas for change, reflecting on our

values and principles, revisiting how we conceive active global citizenship, and re-appraising how we communicate and interact with young people and teachers' (106). Therefore, rather than hedging on the issue of action outcomes why not bring it front and centre of the learning process and structure it within the planning and delivery process? This more positive and foundational approach to active citizenship would appear to be urgently needed given the increasing difficulties experienced by the development sector as a whole in creating the pre-conditions necessary for sustaining citizen engagement with the structural causes of poverty and injustice both locally and globally.

Public Attitudes to Development

There have been important and influential recent research studies on public awareness of international development issues and the extent to which the development sector is failing to engage and sustain citizen involvement in poverty eradication efforts. Hudson and van Heerde (2009, 2012), for example, in surveying public attitudes to development have characterised public support for development 'as a mile wide and an inch deep'. They suggest that the survey instruments used to measure public attitudes are 'not fit for purpose' and, perhaps more importantly, that there is a sectoral lack of understanding of the 'factors that motivate support for development aid in the first place' (2012: 5). By focusing on the measurement of public support for development rather than 'the variation and determinants of individual support', the sector finds it difficult to sustain that support. Moreover, in the difficult economic environment for the development sector since the 2008 global financial crisis, 'public support appears to have turned against international development efforts' (Ibid). Hudson and van Heerde argue for future research that directs 'its attention to a more nuanced understanding of the determinants of individual-level support, moving beyond existing self-interest versus moral frameworks' (18).

Another influential research report commissioned by Oxfam called *Finding Frames* (Darnton and Kirk, 2011), also questioned how development NGOs elicit public support and, in particular, the values and frames used to appeal for civic engagement. The report argues that values and frames 'offer ways to look at the problem of public engagement' and 'identify possible solutions'. Frames are the 'chunks of factual and procedural knowledge in the mind with which we understand situations, ideas and discourses in everyday life' (2011: 5). It suggests that development NGOs in the main have appealed to transactional frames - rooted in consumerist values - in their engagement with the public. The transactional frame is one 'in which support for tackling poverty is understood simply as making donations to charities' (7) as opposed to transformative frames that are based on self-transcendent values and support 'pro-social' behaviours.

The report uses the example of the Make Poverty History campaign in 2005 which succeeded as a mass mobilisation but its transformative potential was 'drowned out by the noise of celebrities, white wristbands and pop concerts' (2011: 6). It argues that Make Poverty History resulted in an ephemeral engagement with the issues based upon transactional frames that were an unwelcome throwback to the Band Aid initiative of the 1980s. Indeed, Hudson and van Heerde concluded rather depressingly in 2012 that 'Despite massive awareness-raising initiatives such as Make Poverty History, the Jubilee Debt Campaign, and Comic Relief, the public understand and relate to global poverty no differently than they did in the 1980s' (2012: 20). Development educators will undoubtedly concur with the *Finding Frames* analysis of public engagement and share the view that sustained civic engagement with development issues is dependent upon a greater investment by the sector in the pre-conditions

for action identified above. Therefore a large part of the equation in civic engagement is the approach adopted by the messenger as much as the message itself.

The Development Sector and Social Change

The level of civic engagement with development issues that we can expect from the public is, to a large extent, determined by the strategies, policies and education programmes implemented by NGOs and civil society movements. Critical voices from within the sector have argued that in return for marginal traction with governments and statutory bodies, development NGOs have narrowed their policy engagement to the issue of overseas development aid at the expense of deeper public understanding of the root causes of global poverty (Hilary, 2013). This depoliticisation of the development sector has arguably resulted in the *soft* rather than *critical* forms of public education that have accompanied initiatives such as Make Poverty History. The mass mobilisation generated by these initiatives has quickly evaporated and resulted in questionable policy outcomes (McCloskey, 2011). Within the development education sector, too, we've heard suggestions that DE has been 'declawed' or 'stripped of its original radical underpinnings' (Bryan, 2011: 2) as 'The neoliberal emphasis on performance, efficiency and accountability within the development industry' has narrowed the development aspirations of the sector (3).

Selby and Kagawa similarly asked if there are signs within DE and the closely related sector of education for sustainable development (ESD) of 'a compromising of values and trimming of original intentions and visions happening in the light of the global marketplace?' (2011: 18). In falling in with the prevailing market-driven ideology, Selby and Kagawa found that 'a kind of Faustian bargain is struck; a collusion with the prevailing neo-liberal worldview in return for some, likely ephemeral, purchase on policy' (17). Selby and Kagawa found in their research of a sample of development education policy and research documents an apparent acceptance of the neoliberal growth model or a failure to critique the relationship between that model and increasing poverty and inequality. This view chimed with that of Andy Storey who drew attention to the muted response from the development sector in Ireland to the spectacular collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy in 2008 and subsequent imposition of severe austerity measures by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its European Union partners. Here was an opportunity, suggested Storey, to learn from the structural adjustment programmes disastrously imposed by the IMF and World Bank in the global South. Storey argued that 'If an opportunity for education *from the South* is being lost here, then so also is an opportunity for education *about the South*' (2011: 82).

Whether it be, as Selby and Kagawa suggest, a case of 'sleeping immersion in current orthodoxies' or 'studied omission', many leading players in the development/DE sectors appear to be ducking the dominant question of neoliberal-driven globalisation in accelerating poverty and inequality. This wider sectoral consideration has in turn a significant bearing on the potential outcomes that can arise from the practice of development NGOs. If we fail to correlate market-driven growth with record levels of economic inequality then how can we expect to engage learners and stakeholders in actions that will reduce poverty?

Conclusion

Sandra Oliveira and Amy Skinner suggest that the development education sector has not sufficiently reflected on how we enhance and sustain citizen engagement. They argue that:

“Engagement’ is a term frequently used within DEAR (Development Education and Awareness Raising) but there has been little exploration of its meaning. Little research has been done into how DEAR practitioners conceptualise ‘citizen engagement’ and how DEAR relates to the broader context within which it is being carried out” (2014: 9).

They also point to how the funding strategies for development education sometimes frustrate action outcomes as they are often project bound and fall into three year cycles. This can create a very short window of opportunity for engagement with learners on action outcomes given the period of awareness raising, content delivery and active learning needed to get to the point where they feel equipped and comfortable enough to engage actively with an issue. Moreover, meaningful education will often require a lengthy gestation period and civic outcomes may take more time to manifest themselves than that made available in a project cycle. These are challenges that practitioners need to consider in developing engagement strategies. As Oliveira and Skinner suggest:

“Although all practitioners recognise that engagement is a fundamental part of their work, very few have clearly defined engagement strategies. Rather there tends to be a focus on engaging target groups in specific actions or projects, meaning that it becomes a tactical issue, comprised of a sum of ad-hoc actions or short term projects” (17).

This article has shown that many key stakeholders in development education, across government and non-government sectors, share citizen engagement and action as an intended outcome of the DE methodology. They have adopted the Freirean idea of praxis - reflection and action – as the template for agreeing appropriate responses to social and economic injustices. However within the sector, the action component of DE does not appear to be adequately incorporated into the planning and delivery of projects, courses and workshops. It can either be served up as a menu of (mainly soft, transactional-based) options offered to learners at the end of an educational process or be discussed theoretically rather than implemented in practice. Or when it is factored into planning, it is ‘often short-term, activity oriented, rather than long-term, systemically oriented’(18).

These weaknesses in the action component can, perhaps, be attributed at least in part to the depoliticisation of the NGO sector which has resulted in transactional and superficial forms of citizen engagement best exemplified by the Make Poverty History initiative. The action outcome can not be separated from the strategies, advocacy programmes and policy positions adopted by the development NGOs that are the main conveyors of DE. Should NGOs fail to grapple with the structural causes of inequality then it will become increasingly difficult for citizens to take the steps necessary to bridge the widening gap between rich and poor in the global North and South. This could also result in development NGOs becoming increasingly irrelevant to the primary constituents we claim to represent - the poor, vulnerable, marginalised and oppressed.

The worrying depoliticisation of the development NGO sector was acknowledged by CIVICUS, a global alliance of civil society groups. In an open letter to ‘fellow activists across the globe’, CIVICUS offered a damning verdict on the civil society movement and its failure to address the ‘glaring inequality that

sits at the heart of the new world order'. The letter said of civil society groups:

"We are the poor cousins of the global jet set. We exist to challenge the status quo, but we trade in incremental change. 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.

A new and increasingly connected generation of women and men activists across the globe question how much of our energy is trapped in the internal bureaucracy and the comfort of our brands and organisations. They move quickly, often without the kinds of structures that slow us down. In doing so, they challenge how much time we – you and I – spend in elite conferences and tracking policy cycles that have little or no outcomes for the poor.

They criticise how much we look up to those in power rather than see the world through the eyes of our own people. Many of them, sometimes rightfully, feel we have become just another layer of the system and development industry that perpetuates injustice.

We cannot ignore these questions any longer" (CIVICUS, 2014).

The urgency of this letter should spur us all on the road to change that is bottom-up, informed by the needs of those we claim to represent and propelling our citizens toward a process of meaningful action that will tackle the obscene levels of inequality that continue to plague our world.

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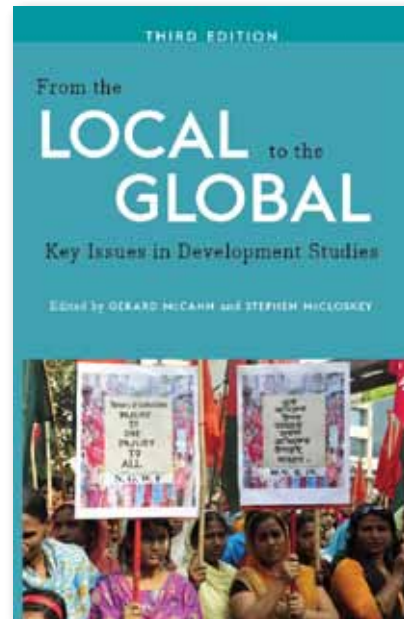
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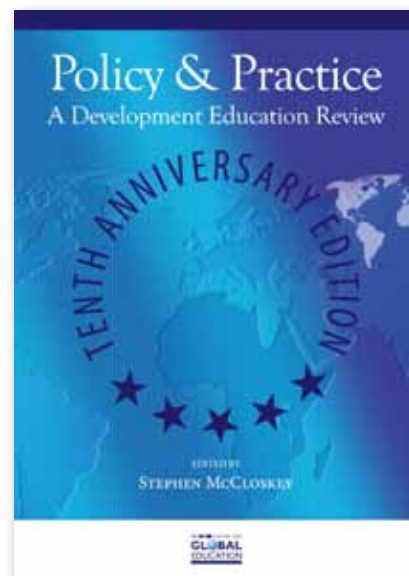
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