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Global Education under pressure. Do the Millennium Development Goals set the tone?

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Helmuth Hartmeyer

Global Education under Pressure

Do the Millennium Development Goals set the tone?

Abstract: The author claims that once again education is threatened to be instrumentalised for political aims. Global Education may be expected to support the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. A critical approach in education is therefore necessary.

One world for all - eight targets for the world

In September 2000 the United Nations adopted eight Development Goals, which should ensure that the most urgent problems preventing sustainable development will be drastically reduced by the year 2015. All nations committed themselves to stronger global efforts to reduce poverty, to improve health and education, to promote peace, human rights and environmental sustainability. The eighth aim declares the foundation of global partnerships, which would involve a considerable increase in public finances for official development assistance.

In many countries a debate followed on how to ensure public engagement and support for these goals. The Austrian Development Co-operation in the Austrian Foreign Ministry designed a public awareness raising programme carrying the motto „Eight Targets for the World“. It started at the end of 2003 and is planned for 3 years. The UN Millennium Goals form the communicative framework for various activities. Among them there are article series in leading newspapers and spots on public TV.¹

With this initiative Austria follows similar bigger programmes in Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands.

Above all the following central communication targets are followed:

- through information to achieve transparency of development co-operation efforts and policies
- to legitimise their purpose
- and finally to create interest and support for these kinds of efforts.

The people behind the initiative are convinced that the

Millennium Development Goals are an ideal instrument to achieve these three priority communication targets, because

- there is a common international interest
- there are convincing arguments behind the Goals
- there are concrete programmes and projects in a number of countries which can be presented
- and the MDGs are supported by all the important countries; therefore they can be communicated as a common agenda more easily.

The official Austrian Development Co-operation also hopes that this initiative gives a new push to settle its brand and logo as an overall common identity for all initiatives in the field. All players are invited to contribute to a common public acceptance of „Austrian Development Co-operation“ as a synonym for a view of the wider world, which leads beyond Europe and the industrialised countries outside Europe.

It is argued that development co-operation should not only be seen as a package of a great number of projects carried out in Africa, Asia, Latin America and more recently also in Central and Eastern Europe, but also be understood as a contribution towards increasing the security of Austria („Development policy is life policy“), sharing active solidarity including changes in our own lifestyle („Development policy concerns everybody“) and developing our economic and social relationship with the countries in the South („We have partners in the world“).

Civil society organisations are reluctant to follow this line as they do not want to see this approach separated from the more general social and economic policies of the government and from a deeper debate on values attached to them like freedom, social justice, equality, solidarity, human rights or respect for nature.

Among civil society organisations there is also considerable concern that the philosophy of the Austrian Development Co-operation is in the long run determined by an approach that believes changes primarily have to take place in the developing world. This view is not in line with a number of NGOs who think that it is first of all in our own societies where drastic structural changes are necessary.

KommEnt — the Society for Communication and Development - is mandated by the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the funding and administration of NGO projects in the field of development information. It has also launched a call for proposals, which should in their content and title have a clear reference to one or more of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The call also states that the applicants should in their proposals present the Goals relevance at the global as well as the local level. They should identify the biggest challenges to achieve the MDGs through examples of successful development projects in partner countries of the Austrian Development Co-operation. They should address as broad a public as possible through creative public relations work. They should describe concrete actions and should motivate their target groups to actually get involved. Finally they should strengthen or initiate partnerships and networking.

The 10 most interesting projects will be funded at an overall amount of EUR 350.000,-. The KommEnt initiative is slightly different from the direct activity of the Austrian Development Co-operation, because the applicants are also invited to critically identify the problems, which might stand in the way of achievement of the MDGs. In their basic outlines the methods and strategy are the same in both initiatives.

A better future can be created and it lies in our hands

The main concern of development policy is to create the right framework for a just and sustainable world and future, which allows all human beings a life in freedom and free from poverty and hunger. Yet, the occupation with development policy and development co-operation is often characterised by the claim to already possess or at least know how to achieve the recipe for a better world. In the wake of such consciousness development policy and development co-operation are very much defined as mastering and managing the future. However, is this not the time and again the attempt to get rid of the uncertainties the future will always hold for us, the attempt to finally control it?

In the second half of the twentieth century „development“ was the lead idea, which the nations followed like ships searching for the beams of a lighthouse tower. Five decades after the invention of „underdevelopment“ the historical conditions, which were the basis for the origin of development policy, have mostly disappeared. „Development“ has largely turned into an empty and shapeless term. This may be the reason why it is spread so willingly. Everybody can use it: the IMF, the Vatican, revolutionary forces, industrial managers, grass root NGOs. The term has lost its meaning, therefore it fulfils all purposes and justifies any claim for any future.

The dependence theory of the 1970s as well as the modernisation theory of the 1980s defined development as a list of deficits, which should and could be overcome through a new world order. Only very tenderly development was respected as the unfolding of one's own abilities. It is therefore not surprising that also development co-operation is dominated

by thinking about success, results and relief. People have no room as independent players, they are „target groups“ and carry „roles“.

The pictures and languages of the North determine the hearts and minds, the dreams and motives of the people. We witness a huge monoculture of a multinational economy, information world and living milieu. The negative and threatening thing about it is that through the expansion of this monoculture, all other forms, which could form a living alternative to the growth oriented society are extinguished. In the course of this development, the „other“ disappears.

Facing the realities in this world there are indeed a good number of reasons to think about the future anew. Most diversified threats for people, whole nations, cultures, social networks, and the environment have contributed to increase the general uncertainty. They have darkened our belief in progress.

The complexity of the „New Global Disorder“, the huge amount of information about constant new crises have led to some development fatigue with longstanding activists. Many have noticed that their well established views on life and their mental compass no longer fit together with the realities of today.

The eight Millennium Development Goals promise remedies:

- they are accepted and followed by the „whole world“
- they are distinct and comprehensible
- they can be broken down into concrete projects in each

country; and thus development co-operation can be understood through its practice.

Complexity is reduced to "through 8 great goals the world shall be better and more just until 2015." The secret or even open wish is to re-establish belief in experts, who know the solutions. The temptation exists to diminish a very complex matter into a few straightforward points. People should hear a certain term („Austrian Development Co-operation") and should immediately think in a certain direction.

The Millennium initiative of the Austrian Development Co-operation wants to strengthen the assent and support of Austrian citizens for development co-operation and increasing public expenses for it. A new online game „Development works" has been produced to feed this support. However, all Austrian and also international polls show that support as such *is* high. Probably it is also shallow. The pictures of development assistance in Austrian minds are still determined by wells, injection needles and school classes.

The problem with reports about „good development projects" has often been discussed. The tendency to stereotype presentations is especially high in reports about development co-operation. The emphasis on the efforts of your own country and of your compatriots too often supersedes relevant background information. National development efforts are overrated. A majority of Austrians think that Austrian ODA is above average. Experts have called this a „trap of omnipotence". The assumed overall power of the (so-called) donors increasingly produces a picture of the powerlessness of the (so-called) recipients.

Simplification is not basically wrong. It is needed in a complex world. Policies must be made comprehensible. It has been shown that simplifications allow orientation. However, it is decisive what is simplified. When the complexity is lost in this process, simplification manipulates. It then prevents us from reflection and the suspicion arises that it wants to prevent us from reflection.

At an all-Austrian development conference in December 2003, which followed the motto „Globalisation is not destiny, it is made", a two-year process initiated by a number of NGOs achieved its interim purpose. In this process all players interested in development issues were invited to reflect on present practice and only afterwards new priorities in everybody's specific development policy should be decided.

It is my firm conviction that we all need constant reflection on what we are doing and planning before we too willingly jump on any new bandwagon. In modern societies science claims the sole right to explain the world, technology wants the monopoly on the management of the world and the economy claims to set up the rules. Through information the necessary prerequisites

shall be created and changes shall be brought about. In such a framework also education falls under growing pressure of expectations of success.

Education under Pressure

There is the danger that a high level of expectation, strongly nourished by the MDGs, endangers free and visionary thinking. Walter Fust, director of the Swiss Development Co-operation, reminds us that in reality everybody knows that the sum of all efforts (in the North as well as in the South) would have to be doubled if the ambitious goals were to be reached within the next 12 years. Doubling public spending on development assistance seems to be globally beyond reach. Nor will the private economy be able or even want to fill the holes. New instruments for financing development will have to be found but nobody dares to speak of new taxes, because political alliances for this purpose will hardly be feasible. The developing countries on the other hand will find it hard to mobilise more financial means of their own and to fiscally clear their public households. The difference between political declarations and reality is constantly growing and the message is very clear: given the present state of affairs the MDGs will not be reached (Eine Welt December 2003, p.21)

Franz Nuscheler, a renowned German expert on development issues, warns letting the MDGs to become a can of worms („Mogelpackung") (epd-Entwicklungspolitik 23-24/2003, p. 11).

A critical approach is therefore necessary. It is a very promising fact that all governments have agreed internationally on certain targets, but it would be misleading to fall into a development euphoria. In Norway the RORG network (a network of NGOs funded by the government for their DE work) asked evaluators from the South to express their views on the MDGs and their relevance and significance in development education. They recommended „a process of critical engagement with the MDGs". The question of how to apply this

recommendation was tested at the end of 2003 when the Norwegian Minister for International Development invited the RORG network to take part in a joint campaign „to create enthusiasm" for the MDGs. The RORG network stated (following advice from its Southern colleagues) that it did not find any justification for a campaign aimed at creating enthusiasm, but rather a campaign to raise awareness of the problems and critical debate. In particular a critical assessment of MDG 8 (global partnerships) is regarded as a priority (DEA Journal February 2004, p. 20)

Most campaigns in support of the MDGs propagate once again a concept which in the end promises progress and an ultimate solution. Thus the chance would be lost to also see the MDGs as a field for experiment to debate visionary concepts and solutions beyond mainstream prescriptions. Civil society organisations should be invited to participate in the designing of strategies, as providers of information and services, but also as critical watchdogs to ensure that the government fulfils its commitments.

The central message in most MDGs campaigns remains that we, the North, have to help the people in the South. Where this creates solidarity the message is important. Where it solely creates charity or even worse selfishness, any thoughts about necessary structural changes on a global scale are left aside.

Global education centres around our own involvement and participation in development and requires a critical reflection on all common concepts including the MDGs. Global education circumscribes learning processes around ourselves as critical players. It is not about public relations and does not want to convince anybody of any ready-made concepts.

To my mind, education and learning should by definition abstain from the credo of absolute planning and strategy. They should not be based upon concrete targets and pre-defined results. On the contrary, they should be an open process derived from the needs of the learners as well as the learned. The „Club of Rome" has for many decades in this context referred to the importance and relevance of Utopian debates. There must be space for thinking and spheres of fantasy, which are freed from the direct pressure of political interest.

Global Education requires space and time

Global education (GE) promotes the ability to understand global interdependence, to perceive the unity of human mankind and one's own participation. Pure additional information is not enough: it requires the reflection of our horizons in increasingly deregulated societies, it requires the experience and enlargement of our own abilities to learn and to act. Edu-

cation is thus defined as self-determination and unfolding of our personalities. For that we need enough individual and social free space to allow the interests, experiences and abilities of everybody to be involved.

Global education is a principle, not a new subject matter. It defines learning as a discovery tour, not as a „feeding hopper" through which knowledge is funnelled into the victims of education. The aim should be understanding and insight, because it would be absurd to assume that at the end of a learning process, which is determined by external targets and content, the learners arrive at independence and at the ability to decide for themselves.

Global education should not promote ready-made, instant solutions, but „solutions" should be an issue and discussed critically.

I critically doubt the three-phase-concept: seeing/learning -judging/understanding - acting:

1. We help the learners with their own development and thus help the Third World in the long run
2. Better information brings about better development
3. Education produces a different consciousness and thus produces the right action.

Global education does mean learning *about* the world, but acting *in* the world.

The didactical concept of global education should accept that knowledge transfer is necessary, but is not sufficient in itself. It wants to enable us to experience „the global world". It wants to promote curiosity and the drive for freedom and creativity. It also demands political suggestions and room for action. Through a constant exchange of experiences the prerequisites for our growing needs for learning, for a reduction of prejudice and for the opening of room for decision can be created.

Global education promotes the development of our own identity and a sense of security about it. This is the basis to be able to communicate with other people, to be able to see

the world through the eyes of others and to be able to pass judgements on the basis of different points of view and to be able to act accordingly.

Global education does not want to change the learner, but to enable him or her to reflect his/her environment. Development education used to be defined as knowledge of how to help the poorest and the marginalised. GE wants to promote the debate about our own way of life and for example to critically look into „values“ like growth and progress.

No urging information „Time is running out“ can accelerate learning. One alternative could be „no pressure at the last minute“. It needs discovery as well as reflection, adventure as well as thoughtfulness. Change never happens on the spot. Education however can contribute to experience change and to better understand how our experiences in the past and our wishes for the future, have impact on our present time. Education should put the here and now more into the centre. This is asking for the risk to trust that in the banalities of our life (like small social gestures) there is enough to feed our hunger for the future and the world.

If anybody thinks that the global situation of today leads to the death of mankind or calls it hell this person has two ways how not to avoid suffering. One is to become so much part of it that you do not recognize the fright any longer. The other demands openness and constant attention: to seek for and to realise who and what amidst this global insanity and suffering, this hell, is not hell and to give them and it support, space and time.

Space for thoughts and Utopias

It is a very positive fact that the Austrian government supports and funds a considerable number of development and global education programmes and projects. About 50% of an annual amount of three mio Euro for the funding of development information projects in Austria goes into educational activities. KommEnt has with the approval of the Austrian Development Co-operation meanwhile developed the third three-year-programme 2004 - 2006, in which all relevant criteria are laid down and then applied in the funding decision process.²

Projects eligible for funding should promote north-south dialogue in partnership, i.e. they should respect and include views from the South and consider the issues, interests and claims of their Southern partners. They should promote peace and conflict resolution, sustainable development, i.e. to promote the integration of social and economic development with due respect for the environment and the living conditions of future generations, gender justice and they should strengthen the dialogue of cultures and promote the participation of immigrants. On the whole they should promote an understanding of global interdependence and its reflection on a local, regional and national level.

Among other criteria KommEnt regards as eligible projects for funding which in their methodology combine the realities in the South with realities in our own society, which are concrete and comprehensible, aim at public attention and reflection, promote learning through all our senses, aim at co-operation

and networking, especially in fields beyond development, consider the needs of those who are placed at a greater disadvantage by globalisation most, especially address young people and their ways of living and thinking and promote action and lead to a concrete follow-up.

To allow projects which apply to these criteria to be developed and implemented, the necessary space will be very important in the light of dominant Millennium Development Goals initiatives.

In order to understand and support the MDGs connections and linkages must be made to concrete educational goals and programmes in our own countries and to the values underlying them. Learning about them has to be centred in our own lives. Development or global education does not provide us with the know-how for magical transformation of societies. It can, however, promote global perspectives. If untied from political determination it can promote creative thinking about how to contribute individually and socially to a world which is more just and equal.

Annotations

1 For more information: www.aussenministerium.at/eza.

2 For more information: www.kommEnt.at/foerderungen.

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