COVID-19 in the Global South

Published by Bristol University Press

COVID-19 in the Global South: Impacts and Responses.
Project MUSE.  muse.jhu.edu/book/79617.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/79617
Development education (DE) is a sub-sector of international development which aims to tackle the underlying causes of poverty, inequality and injustice in the Global North and South with an interactive learning methodology that supports active global citizenship. Based on the radical pedagogy of the Brazilian activist, educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire (1996), DE has its roots in the Global South but has inspired educational practice across the world (Bourn, 2012: 25–26). Development education is defined by the Irish Development Education Association as ‘an educational process which enables people to understand the world around them and to act to transform it. It works to tackle the root causes of injustice and inequality, globally and locally to create a more just and sustainable future for everyone’ (IDEA, 2020).

Central to this definition of DE practice and Freire’s methodology is the concept of praxis – a combination of reflection and action. As Freire argued, ‘to surmount the situation of oppression people must critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one that makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity’ (Freire, 1996: 29).

What appears to be lacking in the response of the international development sector to the COVID-19 pandemic to date has been an analysis of its root causes. There has been a similar studied omission with regard to the climate emergency, despite suggestions that both crises – COVID-19 and climate change – are ‘inevitable outcroppings of the prevailing global economic growth model’ (Selby and Kagawa, 2020: 106). This chapter argues that in order to respond effectively to the
coronavirus pandemic, we need to understand its connections to the neoliberal growth model that has underpinned ‘development’ since the 1970s. As Reid-Henry (2012) argues: ‘in terms of development policy, neoliberalism often boiled down to the belief that an intensified globalization was itself development, the two being inseparable sides of the same virtuous coin’. The outcome of the alignment of development with neoliberalism has been disastrous with 2,153 billionaires controlling more wealth than 4.6 billion people and almost half of the world’s population living on less than US$5.50 a day (Oxfam, 2020: 7). With governments planning expenditure of US$9tn in stimulus packages to ‘rescue their economies from the coronavirus crisis’, a neoliberal response to a neoliberal-created crisis is likely to deepen the climate crisis and inequality (Harvey, 2020). The chapter proposes that a reimagining of economic planning based on sustainability and human wellbeing is the most appropriate response to COVID-19.

The ‘tyranny of GDP’

Applying DE’s problem-posing methodology to the origins of COVID-19 links its rapid transmission and devastating impact to the global trading network and market system created under neoliberalism. COVID-19 is believed to have been initially transmitted in the wet market of Wuhan, China and the trade in wild meat which has created new pathogens or zoonoses that cause viral infections in humans from animal origins (Spinney, 2020). As Spinney (2020) argues: ‘Covid-19 wouldn’t emerge in food markets if it wasn’t for factory farming, globalised industry and rapid urbanisation’. The virus has spread so rapidly around the world because of the increasingly interdependent, interconnected and deregulated trading system that has been spawned by neoliberalism. As Lent (2020) suggests, ‘coronavirus is revealing the structural faults of a system that have been papered over for decades as they’ve been steadily worsening’. Neoliberalism has not only created the economic conditions for the spawning of COVID-19 but has also systematically privatized public health
services, rendering many of them unequal to the challenge of fighting a pandemic (Tansey, 2017; Campbell, 2020).

If the coronavirus pandemic has compellingly demonstrated the absolute necessity of a publicly funded health service, it also placed a premium on public-facing occupations that the market economy’s yardstick of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) under-values and poorly remunerates. The ‘tyranny of GDP’ results in a moral vacuum which considers ‘speculation, pollution and gambling as being good for the economy’ because they turn a profit (Elliott, 2017). In 1968, US presidential candidate Bobby Kennedy said this about GDP:

> It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.

(cited in Rogers, 2012)

If GDP dictates what our talent deserves, then what price now should be put on the labour of a nurse, a carer, a driver, a refuse collector, a supermarket worker or a cleaner, all of whom have been indispensable to our surviving coronavirus? Oxfam estimates the annual monetary value of unpaid care work carried out globally by women aged 15 and over at US$10.8 trillion (2020: 6). Using the GDP metric, this labour holds little or no monetary value and, yet, it is priceless to the elderly, sick and people with disabilities across the world lacking social care. ‘It is absurd’, suggests Elliott (2017), ‘to believe that GDP provides the best – or even an accurate – picture of how well the country is really doing’. Our experience of COVID-19 affords us an opportunity to finally decouple human development from GDP and the neoliberal growth model to prioritize services critical to the wellbeing of society and the environment.

The United Nations Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, has suggested that social justice and human rights should become central to the ways in which we implement and measure human development (Alston, 2020). ‘Rather than resolving to address the inadequacy of their public health and social protection systems in response
to the pandemic’, argues the Rapporteur, ‘many governments have seen COVID-19 as a passing challenge to be endured’ (Alston, 2020: 9). The Rapporteur recommends a raft of measures that could help address endemic poverty in the Global South including: bringing equitable taxation and redistribution front and centre; large-scale debt forgiveness for low-income countries; closing tax havens that support tax avoidance by multinationals; ensuring universal social protection for low-paid, vulnerable workers; and embracing participatory governance that listens attentively to the needs of the poor (Alston, 2020).

Rethinking ‘development’

The COVID-19 pandemic should represent a line in the sand where we resist and roll back the marketization of services that have no business in private hands: healthcare, education, utilities and transportation. Wolfgang Sachs suggests that “Development” is now a plastic word, an empty term with no positive meaning’ (2020: 67). ‘Development’, Sachs argues, ‘is more often about survival now, not progress’ (Sachs, 2020: 68). With that in mind, civil society groups, governments and international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) need to look beyond the short-termism of overseas aid, emergency appeals and public ‘clicktivism’ to focus on the long-term needs of humanity. Economies, to function properly, need to be put at the service of society’s needs, not the needs of the market. That means critically interrogating the concept of ‘development’ in the light of coronavirus to debate what it means in a future that is likely to be clouded by recession, increased inequality and an ever-looming climate crisis. A United Nations’ working paper estimates that as a result of COVID-19 ‘there could be increases in poverty of a substantial magnitude – up to 400 million new poor living under the US$1.90 poverty line, over 500 million new poor living under the poverty lines of US$3.20 and US$5.50’ (Sumner et al, 2020).

Those at greatest risk of falling under the poverty line are workers in the informal economy, with the International
Labour Organization (ILO) describing the world’s 1.6 billion informal workers as ‘the most vulnerable in the labour market’ (2020: 1). As ILO Director-General, Guy Ryder, said: ‘For millions of workers, no income means no food, no security and no future’ (cited in Bronswell, 2020). The international development sector should draw upon DE’s critical thinking skills that support a demystification of the world to challenge some of the sickly myths about coronavirus.

Chief among them is the idea that when it comes to coronavirus, we’re all in this together. It goes something like this: coronavirus is a great leveller that has plunged rich and poor into turmoil, insecurity and isolation. We are all equally susceptible to contracting the virus, which does not distinguish between its victims in terms of class, race and occupation. The reality is a lot different. According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, the better-off may actually increase their savings during the crisis as spending on forbidden activities falls (Crawford et al, 2020). But poorer households spend much more of their limited income on necessities, leaving them vulnerable to sudden falls in their incomings (Crawford et al, 2020). ‘So save us the platitudes of coronavirus as the great leveller’, suggests Jones (2020), ‘abandon this sickly myth that we are all in this together’.

In addition to class and income, race and occupation have also been found to be important determinants in the number of cases of COVID-19. By April 2020, 119 National Health Service (NHS) staff had died as a result of coronavirus in the UK, 64 per cent of whom were members of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) sector yet only 20 per cent of NHS staff are from an ethnic minority background (Bailey and West, 2020). But, as The Lancet suggests, ‘essential work extends beyond health care’. ‘[M]illions of workers have jobs that cannot be done at home ... These people leave their homes to help maintain a semblance of normality for others, at great risk to themselves and their families’ (2020: 1587). These are the kind of occupations that are vulnerable in a post-COVID-19 economic recession, but as The Lancet argues: ‘Essential workers are just that – essential – and by protecting their health, we protect the health and wellbeing of us all’ (The Lancet, 2020).
Degrowth and a Green New Deal

It may seem absurd to propose degrowing the global economy as countries across the world have been forced to shut down their economies at some point in 2020 to contain the coronavirus pandemic. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned that the ‘great lockdown has triggered the worst recession since the Great Depression and forecasts global output losses of US$12 trillion in 2020–21’ (Gopinath, 2020). Bouncing back to ‘normal’, however, with a massive injection of capital stimulus into carbon-based industries responsible for over 70 per cent of global emissions, will only deepen the climate emergency (Riley, 2017). Degrowth activists suggest that despite the name, they are not seeking the kind of economic contraction attended by recession and austerity but ‘a thoughtful, democratic, managed and equitable downsizing of the economy’ (Seaton, 2020). Degrowth advocates suggest that the endless pursuit of growth as an objective of the global economy, rather than the social wellbeing of citizens, is harvesting the natural resources of the planet at an unsustainable level to produce consumables, many of which are unnecessary, wasteful and designed to satiate the needs of the market rather than enhance the quality of our lives.

However, degrowth alone will not ensure the social and economic protection of low-paid essential workers who have sustained us through the coronavirus pandemic. Green New Deal advocates, including Naomi Klein, have argued for the introduction of a basic annual income – ‘a wage given to every person’ – with the ‘benefit of creating much needed economic security in the frontline communities’ (2019: 94). The idea of a Green New Deal has been proposed by progressive social movements and political actors to decarbonize the global economy, invest in renewables, and ensure a just transition for workers threatened by ‘the economic and political shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy’ (Climate Justice Alliance, 2020). Inspired by Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal response to the Great Depression in the United States in the 1930s, which combined public investment in services with social welfare, employment rights,
banking regulation and supporting the natural environment, the Green New Deal needs to be no less ambitious.

**Conclusion**

UNICEF has warned that the COVID-19 pandemic could cause significant mental health problems for the most vulnerable in society, particularly young people. The agency has highlighted that ‘the mental health and psychosocial impact of restricted movement, school closures and subsequent isolation are likely to intensify already high levels of stress, especially for vulnerable youth’ (UN, 2020). A survey by Barnardo’s of a thousand young people in the UK suggests that climate change is already a source of anxiety and stress for young people. The survey found that: ‘More than half (54 per cent) said climate change was one of the most important issues facing the country over the next three to five years, with 42 per cent saying older generations don’t seem to understand or be interested in this issue’ (Barnardo’s, 2019).

With its capacity for compassionate action, critical thinking skills and deeper understanding of global issues, DE can provide what the Irish NGO, Children in Crossfire, describes as ‘an emotional literacy framework for preparing young people to participate in the world as compassionate global citizens’ (2015: 4). This includes providing teachers and community educators the training and resources needed to address the complexity of COVID-19 and the climate emergency in a way that offers young people a sense of empowerment and hope based on their own capacity and agency for change.

DE’s radical pedagogy with its central concept of praxis, combining reflective learning and active citizenship, is ideally positioned to support the kind of social and economic change demanded by the twin crises of COVID-19 and climate change. It seems unconscionable that society can revert to the same high-growth ‘normality’ that created the economic conditions which spawned COVID-19 and precipitated the climate crisis. Underpinning these global emergencies and the grotesque levels of inequality that have followed the 2008 global financial crisis is neoliberalism; ‘the ideology’, suggests
George Monbiot, ‘at the root of all of our problems’ (2016). The identification of international development with the high-growth, GDP-measured production and consumerism of neoliberalism is no longer tenable if the development sector is serious about tackling the root causes of poverty and climate change. What is required instead is a just transition to degrowth and a Green New Deal with a people and planet-centred plan for development (Klein, 2019).

References


Climate Justice Alliance. (2020). ‘What do we mean by transition?’. Available at: https://climatejusticealliance.org/just-transition/

Crawford, R., Davenport, A., Joyce, R. and Levell, P. (2020). ‘Many better-off households may increase savings as spending on “banned”


