

The global dimension in neighbourhood community work in Britain

How can development education centres engage in long-term community development and ensure that it incorporates a global dimension? **Rosemin Najmudin** explains how Lancashire Global Education Centre has supported local groups in setting up projects, informed by partnerships with community initiatives in the South, that the groups can ultimately manage themselves.

Introduction

Lancashire Global Education Centre (LGEC) has worked in community education for a number of years. This case study looks at the history and social context of this work and describes some of the initiatives and projects with which LGEC is currently involved. It gives particular emphasis to LGEC's work in East Preston which is currently focusing on enabling community groups in that area to become self sufficient through the establishment of a Community Development Trust (CDT).

LGEC's strong involvement in community development is relatively unusual for a development education centre (DEC). At a recent DEC training event, workers were asked if they were directly involved in community work. About ten of the forty or so people present said they participated in community-related activities in their personal lives, but only three or four raised their hands when asked if they worked directly with local communities in their daily work at their DECs.

Workers in development awareness have to decide between competing agendas and cannot be all things to all people. Generally speaking, they concentrate on aspects of development education which link with their own lives. Some work in schools because in the past they were teachers, often in so-called developing countries. Other practitioners' work focuses on particular geographic locations because they have visited the area, are married to someone from there, or simply have good contacts in the region. Some of the workers in LGEC (or 'Global' as it is often referred to locally) had previous experience of community work and so this naturally became part of LGEC's work.

In the mid 1980s the centre was involved in informal community education on global issues in a range of settings including youth work, lifelong learning and faith based groups. During the early 1990s the community side of LGEC's work became focused on Agenda 21 and strong links developed with other agencies working under the umbrella of Local Agenda 21 (LA21). As a result, opportunities arose for linking local concerns with global issues and LGEC were successful in attracting funding for this work from a number of sources outside the usual development education funders.

Julie Downs, co-ordinator of LGEC believes that community development in the UK shares many similarities with, and has much to learn from, community development

in countries of the 'South'. Social and economic exclusion are global phenomena and people living in areas of relative social and economic exclusion in both 'North' and 'South' are concerned with similar issues – pollution, crime and fear of crime, land issues, lack of community facilities, housing, etc. Julie had previous experience of supporting local communities developing health promotion and environmental projects and this experience informed LGEC's early work in the field of community development.

Geographical and social context

LGEC is based in Preston, at the very heart of the north-west of England, in the county of Lancashire. Preston is steeped in history and tradition but this modern city also supports hi-tech businesses and leading edge industries such as aerospace. Preston is a university town and people from all over Britain and from other countries visit for study and research.

Many northern areas in the UK such as Burnley, Oldham and recently Halifax have come to public notice because of racial riots, harassment of refugees and the election of extreme right wing candidates into the local political assemblies. The reports which examined the causes of the 2001 riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley (*Community Cohesion in Britain*, Home Office, 2001) pointed to a range of factors, none of which was unique to those towns, and the government placed Preston in an 'at risk' category for community disturbances. Government Office North West appointed a consultant to work with the local council to develop a community cohesion agenda for the city 'to tackle the ignorance and fear that is easily and mischievously exploited' (*Best Value Review of Community Cohesion*, Preston City Council internal briefing paper, 2003).

The demography of Preston is similar to other northern ex-Mill towns where there have been difficulties and some of the inner wards of Preston suffer high levels of deprivation, but there have been no significant problems to date and the British National Party (BNP) have not fielded any candidates. The reasons for this are not completely clear but many people in the local communities, police, and representatives of the city and county councils consider that Preston is essentially a very conservative city. It has attracted an 'orthodox' immigrant population with similar family values to the local white population. Although younger generations are moving away from these values, there do not appear to be the same levels of disenfranchisement of the

black and minority ethnic (BME) community that can be found in other Northern towns.

The Sustainability in Action Project

LGEC's Sustainability in Action Project (funded between 1996 and 1999 by the government's Environmental Action Fund) supported community groups involved in, or developing, community initiatives which contributed to LA21. Research carried out by Lancashire County Council had demonstrated that many local communities mistrusted local and national government initiatives as they found that assumptions about their needs were made by people sitting in faraway offices. LGEC believed it was important to provide opportunities for people in local communities to make their own decisions about sustainable community development in their own neighbourhoods and also to provide a global context to this work. The project aimed to contribute to the regeneration of some of the most deprived areas of Preston, in particular those in the east of the town. Local people were encouraged to identify their own problems, set their own goals and develop visions for the future based upon the principles of sustainable community development. The emphasis was both on environmental sustainability and on the ability of local people to run and manage their own projects on a sustainable basis.

In 1997, 110 people came together at an event called 'Local Action Global Agenda'. This event showcased successful community initiatives that were contributing to LA21 and provided a global context. Keynote speakers were the late Audrey Wise, Preston's MP, and Edwin Ochieng, a Kenyan teacher involved in LA21 in Kenya. Both speakers related local activity to global environmental problems and stressed the role of positive action locally in contributing to global sustainable development. Edwin informed participants about how local communities in Kenya were contributing to LA 21 and also demonstrated some of the connections between the local and the global, for example, how excessive use of carbon based fuel by countries in the 'North' is affecting climate change which is leading to increased desertification in parts of Kenya, which in turn is affecting people's livelihoods in those areas.

Organisers of the day took a gamble as they were not sure if local community members would be interested in what was going on in Kenya. However, Edwin's contribution was really well received and participants felt empowered by the realisation that their efforts locally were contributing to global sustainable development. Much of the day consisted of participative workshops about local community initiatives. All workshops were facilitated by community members, many taking this role for the first time.

The event was a huge success and the overwhelming cry at the end of the day was 'We want more!' As a result, the Local Action Global Agenda (LAGA) Network was born. Follow up events and activities were organised and a newsletter launched. Funding was obtained which allowed this aspect of LGEC's work to expand and involve

communities in other areas of Lancashire. The LAGA Network has continued to run events which focus on the success of local community initiatives and which bring diverse communities together to learn from each other's experiences. A number of these events have been enriched by input from visitors from countries of the 'South'.

LGEC feels that by bringing people together and raising awareness about the experiences of other communities and cultures, they have helped to prevent mistrust of others and oppose the prejudice encountered in neighbouring towns. Community cohesion has been achieved by active and supportive community work and little overt tension has been encountered. Evaluation has been constant so that project leaders do not become complacent. Participants in events organised by the LAGA Network have shown a genuine belief in the strength of multiculturalism and positive collaboration.

Through its links with LA21, LGEC was encouraged to develop this work further and in 1999 was successful in obtaining funding for developing its work in East Preston. Today, much of LGEC's community development work is concentrated in the 10 wards which make up 'East Preston', which are among the 20% most deprived wards in England. The first priority was to build good working relationships in which the local communities had their say in every aspect of the project and work focused on the communities' own agendas. LGEC introduced a global dimension to the work, for example through facilitating visits from community development workers and other appropriate visitors from countries of the 'South'. Useful links were made and mutual learning centred on how best the communities in both locations could benefit from shared experience. The focus was on themes which impacted on both the visitors and the people being visited and knowledge about geography, political and environmental issues was shared. An example was where a Kenya visitor shared how best to involve volunteers in one's work. Visitors have come from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Uganda as well as other communities around Preston.

LGEC has also developed work with local Minority Ethnic communities. Initially two environmental projects were undertaken with women from Preston's significant Asian community. The Backyard Project focused on working with the women to develop an attractive, environmentally-friendly backyard using murals, painted walls and appropriate plants. The Community Garden Project took things a step further by concentrating on gardening techniques to enable women to grow vegetables, flowers and herbs. The main aims were that women would learn skills by working communally in their neighbourhoods and then take the new skills to improve the environment in their own homes and gardens. In 2003 LGEC embarked on a new project, the Minority Ethnic Women's Neighbourhood Project, which will support Black and Minority Ethnic women in becoming more involved in community activity and in the sustainable development of their communities.

Establishing a Community Development Trust

LGEC's current work in East Preston is focused on the establishment of a Community Development Trust (CDT) for the area. This will enable the community itself to take responsibility for its own development. A CDT is a distinctive type of organisation. It is established by people who are not only concerned about the physical, environmental, social and economic decline of a locality, but who are also determined to halt and reverse the process. All development trusts share a number of essential features but no two are exactly the same. Common activities include community development, training, property development and management, environmental improvements, business development, building restoration and managed workspace. Most trusts have developed from partnerships to maximise the impact and effect of their programme.

Before creating a development trust, those involved should consider:

- What they are really trying to achieve. (the purpose)
- Is a development trust needed to achieve that purpose? (what are the advantages and disadvantages)
- How will the wider community be involved?
- What are the critical success factors?
- What skills and funds will they need to get started?
- Will they be able to keep the development trust going? (sustainability)

There are now more than 250 CDTs and the number is increasing weekly as people become aware that local ownership and control of resources – land, buildings and capital – is an effective way of bringing about real improvement in deprived, disadvantaged and neglected areas. In essence they attempt to fit into an interlocking framework of public, private and voluntary sector activity.

The Development Trusts Association (DTA) is the umbrella group for the CDTs, with a mission to bring about a successful development trust in every community that wants one. It encourages the exchange of information and good practice by supporting nine regional networks and numerous specialist forums, conducting research, and publishing a quarterly information bulletin and a range of publications. It promotes the work of development trusts and advocates on their behalf by contributing to public policy developments and briefing and lobbying central and local government. It also liaises with a wide range of organisations at regional, national and European level.

What next?

During the last six years LGEC has ensured that the community development groups become self-sufficient and work towards setting themselves up as a CDT. The hope is that each community will obtain funding to provide more activities for the different members of their communities, for example youth clubs where there is advice on drugs and employment as well as providing an area for the youth to

'hang out.' In order to be sustainable, groups have to be self-sufficient and self-managed. Instead of reinventing the wheel, communities in East Preston have been visiting independent CDTs in, for example, Liverpool and London, to learn how best to become an independent trust themselves. LGEC is passing on skills such as fundraising, management, running an organisation and networking to guarantee the groups' capacity to do this.

Many communities within this project have become very successful, with one now having a bigger monetary turnover than LGEC itself. These communities are encouraged to help other groups who are still learning about how best to set themselves up. Some are moving onto new areas of work, such as setting up more formal structures (eg. management bodies) and developing partnerships with other agencies (eg. local FE colleges or local schools). Models are being developed to improve results for youth by using informal youth networks.

LGEC will, however, still have a role. It is currently looking at how existing links with Kenya can be developed and embedded into the further development of communities in East Preston. The aim is to provide support for local agendas but within a framework that includes a global context. The emphasis is on interdependence, on links between local communities working to determine their own development and on the value of communities learning from the experience of other communities, both locally and globally.

References

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- discuss the theme of the year and exchange ideas on the organization of the event in their schools.
- During the Global Week (in November) teachers guide their classes to undertake work around the theme: essays, small projects, comics, cartoons, plays, publications in the school magazine, drawings or paintings, handcrafts, videos, CDs and CD-ROMs, according to their students' talents and interests. This work is usually exhibited in the school for parents and the general public.
 - In December, Gaia asks participating teachers to complete forms related to these activities, so that an overall picture of the whole event can be formed, which is reported to the North-South Centre.
 - In January or February Gaia organizes an evaluation workshop in which teachers are invited to discuss the results of their students' activities and exchange ideas about improving their work and the whole operation.
 - By the end of the school year (end of May or June) Gaia organizes an exhibition in a central place in Thessaloniki, in which selected student work from the event is presented to the general public. The inauguration function of this exhibition is usually combined with a workshop in which final evaluations for the current year and plans for next year are drawn up.

Each year the number of teachers participating in this event has increased. During the last school year more than 150 primary and secondary school teachers were involved, not only from Thessaloniki and the neighbouring areas but also from Athens and other parts of Greece.

The teachers' network

Currently Gaia's work is particularly assisted by a teachers' network titled New Educational Perspectives (NEP). This network stemmed from the teachers involved in Global Education Week who mainly wished to strengthen their engagement in world education. The idea sprang from Tide~ (Teachers in Development Education), a teachers' network associated with the Birmingham DEC, which was a partner of Gaia in the project 'Enjoying Development Education'.

A core team of teachers presented a draft of NEP's constitution to their colleagues participating in the last workshop of the school year (6 June 2003). Hence, the final

form of this constitution appeared and the network was born. Its official recognition by the appropriate authority (the Court of Thessaloniki) is expected by the end of 2003. Meanwhile, branches and links of the network have already appeared in other Greek areas as well. Through the financial assistance of an inter-European project co-financed by the European Commission/ DG Development the ambition is that the network will cover as many Greek areas as possible. The title of this project is very characteristic: 'Strengthening Teachers' Engagement in Development Education'! In this project Gaia is the second member of a consortium, the first being the lead organization Scotdec (Edinburgh). Three more partners are involved: DEC (Birmingham), IBIS (Denmark) and ORCADES (Poitiers, France).

Gaia Resource Centre

The network NEP is already actively involved not only in the Global Week of the present school year but also in another very important activity: the establishment of the first big Gaia Resource Centre in Thessaloniki. This major development was possible after a decision of the local City Council's Central Library to allow the establishment of the resource centre in an appropriate part of its premises. Financial assistance for this operation has been secured again through the inter-European project mentioned above. It is expected that by the beginning of 2004 the centre will be open for any teacher or other educator who would like to enrich Greek education with the world dimension. A formal inauguration day is planned for the end of March 2004. It will be combined with the visit of two teams of teachers, one from Italy and one from Wales, in the framework of another inter-European project, titled 'Three Nations, One World', which is also co-financed by the European Commission through the Socrates/ Grundtvig II programme. Anyone else interested in participating in this event is cordially invited, too!

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