Civilising global democracy

Vipin Chauhan *looks at the impact on the Black community of current issues and trends in globalisation. He explores some of the ways in which activists, community development workers and youth workers can respond to global changes through their work practices and how Black perspectives can be incorporated into Development Education.*

Towards a conceptual framework

The journey from the local to the global, and vice versa, is a dynamic learning process. To undertake a journey of this kind it is important to tread cautiously as language, professional terminology, values, beliefs and even life experiences that are taken for granted may well not be applicable in other national or social environments.

In Britain, the term 'Black' is used often to refer to Asian, African and African Caribbean and other minority ethnic peoples who experience racism on the basis of their skin colour ('visible' minorities). It is recognised that the term is a contested one and that actually the Black community consists of multiple communities quite diverse in terms of culture, religion, origins, class and so on. It is acknowledged also that there are differences in the range and type of labels that different Black people apply to themselves and others like them. Despite such internal variances, these diverse communities share significant common experiences shaped by migration, settlement, colonialism, the label of being a 'minority', white racism and so on and these experiences often form the basis of a shared identity and/or political platform.

Within a global context, the term 'majority world' has evolved to refer to those people who either live or have their origins in the South. The majority population in the Southern Hemisphere is Black i.e. 'non-white' but shares a common experience of being subjugated to global domination by Western (white) nations, the minority world. Clearly if we were to conduct a cultural analysis of this Black majority world (and the white minority world for that matter) there would be numerous perspectives, each with a unique outlook on life.

The use of the term 'majority' serves to highlight the marginalisation of the Black majority people from global decision making processes and civil society as well as the need for the world to listen to Southern voices as part of a drive towards greater global democracy. The terms 'Black' and 'majority' are not perfect but still they provide us with useful analytical tools for the purposes of understanding the impact of globalisation from a Black perspective.

Understanding globalisation

For many people in Britain, the predominant world-view today is based on the notion of 'the West being best'. The profit motive, the ideology of nuclear families, individualism and materialism are assumed to be the dominant values of the contemporary global society. Aided by advances in information and communications technology, it is claimed that the world has moved into an age where such values are no longer the aspirations just of the North, but also increasingly desired by people of the South.

Globalisation has often been portrayed as a neutral process benefiting all nations equally when in fact, Western/Northern interests dominate it. Modern globalisation veneers over the exploitative relationship of the Black Southern majority by a white Northern minority. For people in the Black majority world, globalisation often represents a further imposition of mainly negative western global outlooks and the displacement of indigenous ways of life. The Black majority world has witnessed, instead of a 'universalisation' of rights and benefits (Bauman, 1998), the progressive modernisation of its own subservience.

Understanding the colonial legacy

Colonialism, as slavery before it, was a significant phase in the globalisation of the world. Fifty years of political independence in former colonies has clearly not been long enough to overcome its legacy. Oppression and liberation are conditions of life for most people from the Black majority world. This duality characterises their whole lives, their survival, aspirations, identity, movement, security, values and attitudes. There is now an increasing realisation that political independence without economic independence is meaningless and so the struggle continues.

The colonial legacy provides a crucial contextual framework for an understanding of the impact of globalisation on Black people, their political and economic status in the world today, their contribution to global society and their continued oppression and exploitation. Memmi argues that colonial racism was the bedrock that created such ideological, political and social subordination and was governed by three components:

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....one, the gulf between the culture of the colonialist and the colonised; two, the exploitation of these differences for the benefit of the colonialist; three, the use of these supposed differences as standards of absolute fact. (Memmi,1974)

Understanding internalised racism

Although most countries in the Black majority world have achieved political independence, internalised racism continues to play a big part in how Black people see themselves, here and across the world. Internalised oppression is the result of not being able to perceive clearly the 'order' which serves the interests of the oppressors and aspiring at any cost to be like your oppressor, to imitate him/her. (Freire, 1972)

Because world historical events have often been re-written and sanitised to fit a narrow Euro-centric viewpoint, any hints of the negative impact of colonialism and imperialism appear to be removed. More significantly, Black traditions, civilisations and contributions to all of humanity have been negated. The power of this ideology has been enormous and has affected the Black psyche in a very substantial and fundamental way. Fanon states:

Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I?' (Fanon, 1967)

This symbiotic relationship between internalised racism and past colonisation continues to taint, if not determine, current global relationships. The brain drain, the adoption of western approaches to education, health and lifestyle often reflect the workings of an internalised mind-set. Who would argue that the sap from a coconut has less nutritional value than a sip of Coca-Cola?

Understanding global racism

Modern globalisation has managed to create a more direct relationship between international (white) capital and localised (Black) labour. This has been achieved through the work of trans-national corporations (TNCs) as well as intermediary bodies such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Colonialism installed racism as an ideology right across the globe and provided Europeans with the opportunity to institutionalise and enforce their own particular brand of colour coded racism. The ideology of white supremacy has been so deeply ingrained that the tensions between being modern (which often means being western) and being traditional drive many development agendas. From this it is but a short step to seeing Europeans as better than others,

European skin colour as superior to other skin colours and European attitudes as superior to others.

Understanding development

For many Black people in the UK and the majority world, the very term 'development' is problematic, not simply because of what development is about, but because they do not wish to be developed by anybody else. A recent study into Black and ethnic minorities and development education in the UK revealed that many were reluctant to become involved because of the way development was portrayed. (Ohri 1997) To regard the Black majority world as underdeveloped and in need of the minority world's charity is a reflection of arrogance and perceived superiority, or as Sachs (1992) has argued, an outdated monument to an immodest era.

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'Development' as an equal partnership has gained favour in some quarters, but this too misses a simple point. If people in the majority world wish to be developed they will want to define and lead it for themselves. People develop themselves; others cannot do it for them. The role of those outside the 'development' process would be to offer support without imposing their own, often racist agenda. In other words, development is about 'us' and not 'them'.

Many argue that Northern NGOs give the impression that developing countries' governments are acting against the interests of their populations. Given that democracy functions in most countries in the Black majority world what excuse is there to discard the opinions of their elected leaders? Do Northern NGOs, have a better idea of what is in the interests of the world's poor than those countries' own governments do? Are we witnessing the pursuit of neo-colonialist relationships here?

Towards a global Black perspective in Global Youth Work (GYW)

Black perspectives in GYW refers to that process of investigation and education that necessarily includes a Black viewpoint and incorporates the perspectives and experiences of Black people into any analysis of contemporary and historical global life. That is, a systematic and deliberate process of learning about and understanding Black peoples' viewpoints about world events.

For both Black and white young people GYW offers an opportunity to locate themselves in a global context and to tackle global inequality (including global racism), becoming involved in the solution, not merely contributing to or colluding with the problem.

A global Black perspective cannot be merely an extension of the Black political perspective that has been developed in and evolved from experiences of the Black community in the UK. This would be an imposition of local British experience

on the world, of seeing the world through Black British goggles. A global Black perspective is about examining Black people's experiences globally and identifying common structural causes that describe that experience. It is defined as:

A perspective that aims to strive for global democracy and place Black people at the forefront of global and local decision making. Far from being kept on the fringes of global society, Black people ought to be at the heart of global society, securing fair and just rewards for their contributions to a shared and interdependent world. The majority world cannot simply be ignored or wished away. (Joseph *et al*: 2002)

The perspective aims to be inclusive, acknowledging the interdependence of civilisations and the sharing of ideas and values that have led to modern day global society. The perspective challenges the narrow and exclusive worldview, dominant in the west that describes the world in terms of the 'rich' North and the 'poor' South. Although it gives voice to Black people and the majority world, it does so with the intention of generating a more holistic outlook that genuinely celebrates the diversity of culture, knowledge and values that exist locally and globally.

It is also holistic in that it aims to promote an understanding of the world that addresses all forms of inequality. A Black perspective is not a single-issue political strategy. It recognises that the process of western globalisation over the past five hundred years has imposed upon the world a cultural and political outlook that is sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic and exploitative of working people. The impact on the Black and majority world communities has been one of either reinforcing and legitimising existing inequalities or introducing new ones where previously they did not exist.

Global Black perspectives draw on the experiences of the majority Black world that aimed to create a united stand against colonialism, imperialism and now globalisation. Alliance building is central to this and strategic relationships need to be developed with other movements for equality, such as those concerning gender, which cut across both the majority and minority worlds.

The core principles of Black perspectives in GYW

At the heart of Global Youth Work are the principles of starting from the young person's experiences, offering educative, participative and empowering opportunities, working to a negotiated agenda and using critical analysis to understand the relationships and inequalities that exist in the world. Through this youth work interchange GYW helps to promote the values of justice, diversity, equality and joint action for change.

These principles are designed to raise discussion and enable young people and their communities, as well as the people who work with them, to actively engage with the issues.

Conclusion

Black perspectives in GYW call for a reassessment of past and present relationships between the minority and majority worlds. As global interdependency grows there is a need to move from colonial and hierarchical relationships of the past to democratic partnerships of the future. This would apply to relationships with Black communities in Northern countries such as Britain just as much as it would apply to Black communities of the majority world.

The history of Black people has essentially been about resistance and liberation. The anti-slavery, anti-colonial, independence, civil rights, anti-racist and anti-apartheid movements represent significant milestones in the global history of Black people. These movements inspired, and were inspired by, other global struggles for liberation, most notably the labour, feminist and green movements. Black people's contributions and achievements to all these movements have yet to be fully acknowledged and Black perspectives need to permeate the practice of Global Youth

The following are defined as the core principles of Black perspectives in GYW:

1. Make more explicit and visible Black contributions to the development of all humanity.

2. Highlight the fact that Black people are in the majority in this world.

3. Accept that Black people have the right to self-determination.

4. Challenge white supremacist views of globalisation and the world.

5. Acknowledge that Black perspectives are inclusive and require equal responsibility by Black and white people.

6. Acknowledge that Black people are holistic, cultural, spiritual and gifted human beings and not just economic units for exploitation by the minority or victims of poverty to be pitied.

7. Encourage people from the minority world to take responsibility for their behaviours, choices and actions on the global stage, acknowledging that not all minority people have equal access to power.

8. Explore how systematic racism against Black people is also related to other forms of oppression and the need to connect the oppressed with the oppressed.

9. Ensure that Black young people and their communities are involved in the determination of global agendas.

10. Ensure that Black young people and their communities are involved in the design and delivery of all youth and community work, of which GYW should be an integral component.

Work and global education, if we are to create truly civil global democracies.

This article is based on a report "Towards Global Democracy: An Exploration of Black Perspectives in Global Youth Work" written by Joe Joseph, Kwame Akpokavi, Vipin Chauhan and Viva Cummins for the Development Education Association, London

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