# Environment, Climate Change and popular education

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In contemporary times, 'environmental issues' are increasingly on the agenda of both policy makers and communities. In particular, climate chaos is of great concern to many, and is the subject of international summits such as those which took place in Copenhagen in December 2009. Recent years have seen 'climate change' move from being the province of environmentalists to becoming a household term.

At the same time, governmental and business interest in the phenomenon has rapidly increased, with many governments of the global North establishing climate policy as an area underpinning all other areas of governance. In Scotland, government's Climate Challenge Fund has allocated £27.4 million for community-based carbon reduction projects and the Climate Change act includes a public sector duty to contribute to emission targets. As well as being asked to respond to increasing interest in such issues by providing educational information in response to community demand, community education workers are increasingly likely to be working on projects related to climate, or funded through climate-related pots of money. But how has 'climate change' been framed in policy, and what plans for addressing it have been implemented?

In Western society, 'the environment' is generally seen as something separate from society, often as a resource to be exploited, and sometimes as a resource to be preserved. In this conception, 'environmental issues' often become compartmentalised as those relating to 'green' or 'scientific' issues, rather than relating to the living conditions of both people and the natural environment (Cannan, 2000). At the same time, knowledge about 'the environment' has become the preserve of experts such as scientists (Martin, 1988). This narrowing of the debate excludes certain actors from discourses on environmental issues, so that the role of 'experts' is valued over that of laypersons. Eden (1996) notes that this process can be seen at work particularly in relation to global environmental issues, which are not so easily perceived by people's bodily senses. Meanwhile, the separation of the environment from other issues represents a false dichotomy which prevents links between issues being made.

Indeed, the way climate change has come to be represented is a useful illustration of this.

Although a global issue, climate change can be seen to follow similar patterns to many of the other issues community educators work on with local communities. Research shows that disadvantaged groups are most likely to be affected by climate change, both within developed nations (Chalmers et al, 2009) and on a global scale (Sowers, 2007), while rich nations and rich people are disproportionately responsible for producing greenhouse gases which cause climate change. There is also a historical dimension, as industrialized countries have taken and used the resources of developing countries, and produced pollution in the process. With regard to policy on climate change, global inequalities are apparent, as more powerful countries hold

more sway on climate negotiations, whilst poorer nations have less weight in discussions. Within countries, a similar situation can be seen as certain groups have greater power to lobby for their own interests.

The first major international and legally binding agreement aimed at addressing climate change, the Kyoto Protocol, a protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, introduced the market-based mechanisms to address emissions of climate damaging gases for example carbon trading, joint implementation.

Carbon trading sets a ceiling on carbon dioxide emissions and fixes a price for permits which can be bought by those who continue to pollute beyond this ceiling, or can be sold by those who reduce further than these reduction targets. Joint implementation involves producers of large amounts of emissions in the rich North investing finances in projects to reduce emissions in the poor South. These schemes allow large emissions producers in the North to 'meet' emissions reduction targets, whilst actually producing the same amount of emissions, effectively allowing those who can afford to do so to buy their way out of reducing emissions. All of these 'solutions' involve the allocation of property rights over atmospheric emissions and set a price for greenhouse gases.

In 'solving' the problem through the creation of a market for pollution, these negotiations can be seen as firmly located within the neoliberal model.

The solutions put forward using neoliberal discourses as a basis can be seen as perpetuating a system which has created both huge inequalities and sustained environmental damage. Using the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as an illustration, Okereke, (2005) argues that 'the climate change problem indeed serves well to show the extent to which concerns for the environment and global equity are subsumed under the neoliberal economic regime'.

At the same time, the structural conditions which have created these problems are disguised by the framing of climate change as a scientific issue related simply to the amount of carbon emissions produced, separating climate change from political and economic factors (Steven, 2009) and compartmentalizing the issue.

Much discussion on climate change focuses on carbon emissions and the impact of these. In this model, 'experts' hold the key to knowledge about both the problem, and the solutions, these generally being both technological and market-based (Fauset, 2008), for example in the form of emissions trading, 'green' consumerism, and carbon 'offsetting'. Carbon 'offsetting' schemes allow large producers of carbon to carry on polluting, whilst paying to 'offset' emissions by paying into schemes such as tree planting, often carried out in developing countries with damaging local results (Smith, 2007), exacerbating global inequalities. A report by Acción Ecológica into carbon offset tree plantation projects in the Ecuadorian Andes catalogues the negative environmental and social impacts of these projects on the local community, including damage to the long term sustainability of ecosystems as monocrop trees are planted, issues of land access as huge areas of land are taken up by plantation, and negative changes to the local economy (Granda, 2005). Similarly, research group CarbonTrade Watch document the example of a carbon offset eucalyptus plantation in Brazil, where villagers report that as well as their land having come under private ownership, the water table has dropped, making subsistence agriculture problematic, since the fast growing trees were planted in a project funded by carbon credits bought by oil

giant BP (CarbonTrade Watch, 2007). These type of projects, whereby the rich North uses tree plantations in the global South to 'offset' its emissions, have been described as a form of 'carbon colonialism' (Bachram, 2004).

With the issue of climate change framed within this discourse, there is little or no discussion or even recognition of the processes that led to the current situation of climate chaos. As noted by Sklair, 'the fatal connection between the capitalist mode of production and the holistic ecological crisis is almost entirely suppressed' (Sklair, 2001, p.57). As this is removed from the equation, so too is it removed from the discussion of solutions.

A summary of the situation this leads to is given by Lohmann:

> ... Kyoto-style carbon accounting systems [tend] to marginalize non-corporate, non-state and non-expert contributions toward climatic stability. The Kyoto Protocol's market system... not only cannot succeed in slowing the upward flow of fossil carbon into the overflowing above-ground carbon dump, but is also entrenching institutions and procedures that are likely to stand in the way of constructive approaches to climate change.
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> (Lohmann, 2006, p.18).

There is a risk with regard to climate change, that as the scientific nature is emphasised as the realm of 'experts', and the solution posited by the state is reducing carbon emissions, communities are disempowered to examine the issue for themselves, and communities are left with 'expert' state and corporation driven solutions such as market-based pollution trading and technological fixes, imposed austerity and individualised solutions (carbon counting).  These approaches fail to address a fundamental dimension of the issue, namely that climate change, as well as being a problem, is also the symptom of a problem. Looking to the processes that created it to address it may (possibly) have the impact of cutting carbon emissions, and therefore decreasing climate change, but fails to address the underlying causes. Looking to the same sources that created the problem to solve it could also have the effect of exacerbating the problem – in the following dimensions

- Business as usual, in the form of carbon trading etc, which has turned pollution into a market, and extended the reach of neoliberal capitalism into another realm, with the associated increases in wealth and power inequalities

- Green consumerism which has opened up another avenue of continued expansion of consumption

- Decreasing community power further, as individualised solutions are sought

- Increasing the gap between rich and poor, both literally, (those most able to afford 'green' solutions will be most able to reduce or mitigate the effects of both climate change, and measures aimed at cutting carbon emissions such as fuel taxes) and metaphorically, - as individuals are held responsible for the situation, those with least resources to do anything about it are likely to be stigmatised and looked down on.

- Diverting attention away from the real causes of the situation. Described by Steven (2009)  as the 'carbon consensus', the consensus model of politics is drawn upon to look at how 'we're in this together', glossing over the social, political and

economic relations that have led to this situation, and creating the illusion that 'if we can just all pull together to stop climate change things will be fine'.

As noted by Steven,

> 'by focusing on carbon and not the flows of capital responsible for their emission, policy makers are confusing the effects with the system that produces them. This focus on carbon helps to insulate the system from criticism by creating the problem as external and divorcing it from its social context'.

This is similar to discourses found in current community work policy, which have couched the roll-out of neoliberalism in the language of 'partnership' and 'community empowerment' (Davies, 2007), and have pushed responsibility for issues such as poverty and unemployment onto communities and individuals, hiding structural causes.

These approaches can be seen as perpetuating the global inequalities which exist, and which have played a key role in creating the situation, and can be seen to reinforce hierarchies of knowledge which justify moving in depth discussion on the issue out of the public arena. Understanding this, there is a key role for educators in engaging with the issue, and reframing the debate. The intersection of environmental issues with community issues creates an interesting opportunity for workers to make links between global and local issues. Whilst in policy, these connections are made in a sterile way, devoid of political and economic context, the bringing of global issues into local communities creates opportunities for workers to develop analysis and generate discussion around these issues.


**The example of the Climate Challenge Fund**

As noted earlier, a central plank of the Scottish government's commitment to acting on climate change is the Climate Challenge Fund. This fund presents some interesting opportunities, as well as the need to for community educators to view with caution the discourses it promotes.

The literature on the Climate Challenge Fund clearly emphasises the 'key role' for communities in tackling climate change, stating, for example, 'there are lots of things each of us can do to reduce our carbon emissions but if we work together as communities we can do even more', and 'the Climate Challenge Fund is here to help communities make a real difference' (Scottish Executive, 2008, p.1). It is necessary to look critically at the opportunities that are created here. While indeed, there may be ways that community workers can work with local communities on environmental issues, the way in which these are framed in policy has an impact on the way this work is approached, and what it aims to achieve. This has long been noted in community education where policies have neglected deep rooted structural factors which are major contributors to the situations the policies are ostensibly addressing.

The £27.4 million allocated through the Climate Challenge Fund to community projects aimed at cutting carbon emissions could translate into eco-projects without a political dimension, but at the same time, could also offer up opportunities or cracks which community educators can use to problem-pose. There may also be opportunities for the creation of locally-controlled, genuinely sustainable projects.

Educators can work to problematise what is ostensibly a reformist / single issue campaign, and support people to make the links between this and other issues. The issue of climate change is ripe for exploration of issues around equity, democracy and power. Climate change can be reframed as related not simply to 'the environment' in the green or scientific sense, but in relation to a holistic view of 'the environment', which emphasises the linked nature of humans and the environment. Rather than being something external to human society, the environment can be defined as 'the totality of what we live in, natural or constructed, spatial, social and temporal', including

> all the biophysical components of the natural world such as land, air, water and including the atmosphere as well as all organic and inorganic materials and living things, all elements of human society including social, economic, cultural, aesthetic and spiritual, physical and mental well-being, security, justice, peace and gender relations and the interaction of all of these.

> (North American Alliance of Popular and Adult Education, cited Hall and Clover, 1997, p. 739).

As such, climate change is about power, domination, economy and politics, race, class and gender. There is an opportunity for community education workers to repoliticise debates around the environment, making links to political and economic issues, issues of power and governance. Links can also be made between climate change and wider struggles for justice, exposing the ways in which impacts are unequal, both within and between nations, with richer countries and people disproportionately contributing to the situation, and poorer people and countries disproportionately affected, this being not an accidental outcome, but an integral part of the current political and economic system.

There are many examples of educators engaging in this type of work, including both paid community educators, and grassroots movement based popular educators. Due to space constraints, just a few examples are given here. Trapese popular education collective, set up in 2005, has used the issue of climate change to draw links to other issues in the current global economic set up. Trapese's recent work includes interactive workshops such as 'Climate Justice: Working towards a more just and sustainable future. How did we get here and where are we going?' and 'Saving what for whom? migration and climate change- making the links. A brief look at historical patterns of migration, linking to ecological debt and current campaigns around migration and borders'. These workshops create space for reflection and dialogue around both the specifics of these issues and the wider structural set-up, with a view to inspiring, informing and enabling action. Members of Trapese also produce resources and articles, and have participated in various grassroots forums such as the Klimaforum Peoples' Climate Summit which ran in parallel to the Copenhagen climate talks last year.

In Scotland, a current project of So We Stand, (a 'DIY education collective') is a series of popular education events under the title 'Gathering on the Flightpath', working with communities affected by carbon heavy industry production and striving for environmental and economic justice. The first of these took place in Clydebank in November 2009. This gathering drew together grassroots anti-poverty activists and environmental activists to explore the common roots of the problems these groups

focus on, and to strengthen networks between those resisting various types oppression and exploitation and working for social change.

There are also opportunities for those working in the community education sector to problematise dominant discourses and to support dialogue and critical thinking about action.

In Grangemouth, Scotland, for example, a video project worked with the local community to make contact with communities in Brazil, as both communities were negatively impacted on by oil production. In Grangemouth, the BP oil refinery caused local air pollution. In Brazil, BP was involved in carbon offsetting projects which depleted ground water forests. Through this project, the residents of each community were able to see parallels in their experiences and to expose wider societal structures which were the common root of the local issues. They then took action in solidarity with each other (CarbonTradeWatch, 2007).

Scottish Education and Action for Development have produced resource guides and case studies looking at both climate change and 'false solutions' and run various workshops in local communities using popular education.

Projects such as community wind farms, food growing projects, community orchards, and so on, which are examples of some Community Challenge Fund projects, all open up opportunities for discussion of issues of democracy, corporate control and justice. Climate change can thus be used as an illustrative example to highlight the structural factors which create inequalities of power and wealth, and as a catalyst for inspiring action for social change.

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