Antipoverty: England's first development education organisation (1971-1974)

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Abstract

The Antipoverty Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) founded by O.G. Thomas was the first development education organisation in England. During the early 1970s it aimed to increase young people's understanding of Third World issues through regional 'study-action' projects. This meant that learning about people's lives in economically poor countries should lead to action for change, either in those countries or within England. Learning from a farming community in South Korea and housing settlements in Kenya and India are examples of Antipoverty projects. Antipoverty heralded the emergence of development education in England as more than learning about aid and poverty for the Third World but rather a process that involves everyone.

Keywords: Antipoverty, Development education, Oxfam Education Department, Studyaction projects, O.G. Thomas

England's first development education organisation: The NGO Antipoverty (1971-1974)

This article reviews the activities of Antipoverty, the first development education Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in England, and identifies that many of the tensions that have dominated the field since the 1970s can be found in its early days. The focus of Antipoverty concerns about development education has made it evident that the key work is moving beyond just learning about development issues in the Third World to political and social engagement and action.

The early 1970s in England were key years for the emergence of development education. In 1971 the first identifiable conference on development education was organised in London by the Voluntary Committee on Overseas Aid and Development (VCOAD) as a follow-up to the European conference on 'The School Open to the Third World' organised by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation and UNESCO in Bergendal, Sweden, the previous year.¹ In 1974 VCOAD published for UNESCO a report on 'The Changing World in the Classroom' researched and written by David and Jill Wright as the British contribution to a European survey. This was the first report to identify and name an educational movement as 'development education', describing resources and organisations offering support to teachers.²

In this time of changing terminologies and concepts, learning about the Third World was evolving into an educational understanding of universal processes of development.

From 1971 to 1974 a small NGO called Antipoverty played a small but significant role in this transition through pioneering the idea of 'study-action' learning.

Antipoverty

Antipoverty was a national organisation set up and run by O.G. Thomas. Thomas was described in his 1992 Oxfam obituary as living 'an international life'.³ His direct experiences of the world contributed to his international outlook, his strong belief in the value of learning through contact with people in distant places, and in trying to support their own development. Thomas did military service in Malaya during the 1950s and he taught in Laos and Tanzania during the early 1960s, before returning to England in 1966 on appointment as head of Oxfam's Education Department. He left Oxfam at the end of 1970 and set up Antipoverty. On his return to the Oxfam post in 1974, Antipoverty only continued a skeletal existence as the bulk of its staff and project materials also moved to Oxfam and contributed to that NGO's large role in the growth of development education.⁴

Thomas saw Antipoverty as 'the first organisation in the UK to specialise in Development Education', doing so as a registered charity running 'a series of experimental curriculum and youth work projects with Local Authorities' which resulted in producing materials and publishing reports. Antipoverty was successful in attracting influential sponsors from the world of education, which helped to give credibility to this new concept of a development education NGO and to attract funding from educational and corporate sources. The initial aims of the new organisation were ambitious, including direct linking and support projects in developing countries and importing and selling craft work from cooperatives.

The most successful innovative work of Antipoverty was in technical education with Rolls Royce apprentices in Bristol and in youth education through an exchange programme between Leicestershire and Nigeria. In relation to the formal sector, where work was directly inspired and led by Thomas himself, there is less evidence of impact although there are articles that he wrote at the time to promote and explain this work. The most significant of these was a series of short explanatory pieces in the new 'World Studies Bulletin' of New Era, the magazine of the New Education Fellowship. These articles described the progress particularly of a primary school 'study-action' project in London and secondary school project in Manchester, in the north-west of England.

A project with primary schools: village development in South Korea

Antipoverty pioneered a 'study-action programme' for lower junior classes in the United Kingdom to study and support a farming community in To Kok Li in South Korea. The Korean villagers who were refugees from North Korea had built up a farming community despite a shortage of land. They were undertaking land reclamation from the sea in order to increase their rice crop, with international support from the British aid agency War on Want. The Antipoverty proposal was to produce classroom materials including work cards, a story book and a set of photographs to show primary pupils in London schools the way of life and need for land, together with the 'request for help' from the villages, and teachers' notes to help develop a possible response to this, linked to deepening

understanding of parallel issues in a UK context to include farming, refugees and use of water.⁸ There are elements here of learning aspects that are regarded as important for later development education practice, including direct contact with developing world realities and similarities with development processes nearer home.

By late 1973, the To Kok Li project had been reduced in scale from one that would have had a paid organiser, because 'we weren't able to raise the money to take one on'. This hindered the implementation of the 'action' part of the programme in terms of London school children giving ongoing and direct support to the Korean community. However, Thomas did point out that the 'study' dimension had been developed through the production of wall charts and leaflets, including how London children 'are involved in the village's development plans and how money can be raised'.

A project with secondary schools: housing in Kenya and India

A second study-action project pioneered by Antipoverty was for lower secondary pupils on the topic of housing, linking schools in Manchester with a shanty town community in Mathare, Nairobi, Kenya and Nadiad, Gujarat State, India. This project did have a full-time project leader, Bob Raikes, working to produce a 'basic kit of materials' which included magazines and action posters:

Implicit in the project is the idea that classes should be able to carry out comparative research on houses and housebuilding in their own neighbourhood – and action too, if need be. Just as they could raise money for Mathare or Nadiad, so they could raise money for Hulme or Moss-side [poorer residential areas of Manchester].¹⁰

There were many difficulties in bringing challenging learning ideas into real school settings. Raikes observed about one school that 'the syllabus was so rigid' that it 'put paid to the inclusion of study of present day Manchester and the Third World'. This he saw as ironic given the 'very high population of Pakistani girls, who might make a comparison of Manchester and the Third World very lively'. Other schools could not fit the project into mainstream teaching and so Raikes was referred to remedial groups as in one case 'a fifth year sanctuary group, of five or six young people who didn't fit in with anything at the school, and were basically being kept busy and happy'. At another Manchester secondary school, the teacher 'couldn't for the life of him think how our project could fit in, especially as a large number of his kids could not read or write'. Significantly, in light of the assumed aim for study to lead to action, 'the kids had quite liked the wall charts but had not been able to do much with them apart from answering Mr Tanberro's questions'.

The result of trying to overcome these barriers of entry was to de-motivate the project worker, although there were some successes to record from 'the schools that did something'. In one of these MrWheeler the Geography teacher had encouraged enquiry about conditions of poverty in Kenya and India, including comparisons within the United Kingdom. The learning was seen as leading to a process of further enquiry, rather than overt forms of action because although the teacher was 'very aware of the political implications of poverty, he was still determined not to bring political issues into the classroom'. In another of the 'success' schools, the Geography teacher 'has not got the kids involved in any action yet, which may explain their lack of positive interest' even

though groups were engaged in learning about housing in Kenya and India. However, even in this school it could be questioned if negative ideas about people's lives in Third World settings were really being challenged, because Raikes commented in his report that 'a lot of the kids merely thought that the Third World people, and their houses, were just backward and primitive. These were the academically backward kids, so maybe they were passing on to others what had been said about them'. In another school, the action amounted to pinning up pupil letters on the board and not sending them to the chairman of the Brooke Bond tea company to complain about conditions for tea pickers. This was because, even though the class were 'fairly steamed up at such blatant injustice', the teacher felt that 'the letters didn't fulfil the school specifications as to neatness, legibility, syntax, etc.' On this occasion Raikes 'fumed somewhat and asked him [the teacher] what he thought study-action was about but I couldn't force him to do anything'. In the school specification is a story of the teacher.

Overall, the Manchester housing project had many difficulties of implementation in secondary schools, in spite of the energy of the project worker and other people like returned overseas volunteers and local community development projects he invited into the schools. Action, particularly on local issues, was seen as dangerously political in a climate where teaching children about their rights was not encouraged. One resource centre could lend materials to teachers but not to pupils. The educational climate in Manchester in the early 1970s could therefore be seen from the light of the present as restrictive towards outside initiatives and even reaffirming negative views of people's development in the Third World rather than supporting active, localised ways of challenging these. In summary, Raikes presented the main obstacles to the project's progress as his sense of working on his own, combined with 'fitting a loose, wide ranging project into a tight school structure' which limited the time available and the depth of study. Also, most teachers showed a lack of confidence in their pupils' abilities, as not being up to 'a mind stretching project'.¹⁷

In 1974 Thomas summarised much of what Raikes had learned from trying to run the Manchester housing project for 11 to 13 year olds. Firstly, that 'the project leader needs the formal support of the Local Education Authority'. Secondly, it was clear that the project worker had been 'over-optimistic' at the outset and had then become 'rather depressed' as schools failed to show enough enthusiasm and fell by the wayside. Thomas confessed to being 'caught on the hop' by this apparent failure of engagement, because it compared unfavourably with successes in Bristol and Leicestershire where the project leaders were well known. He could also have acknowledged that these were finding more success in the further and informal education sectors through working with apprentices and youth groups, whereas the Manchester project had been seeking entry to lower secondary curriculum areas.

The study-action concept

In his writing about Antipoverty projects, Thomas felt the need to emphasise the new educational approach he was trying to develop for learning about Third World development issues, that study should lead to some form of action. To be more exact, he believed that pupils should 'have to deal with a genuine choice in taking action or not'. This concept was linked to the introduction of plans for four more study-action projects:

on rural health in Bolivia for 9-11s, on village development in India for 11-13s, on urbanisation and slums in Accra, Ghana for 14-16s and on the European Economic Community (EEC) and sugar and cotton trade for sixth forms:

The aims of all this activity are two-fold: to make a contribution to the education of young people in the U.K.; and to make a contribution to world development. We deliberately don't rate either aim above the other: our purpose is not simply to use world poverty as a useful peg to hang a teaching programme on; nor simply to fling battalions of young people into the fight for development. In our view each is truly complementary to the other: one of the essential ingredients in any world wide development effort is education; and one of the essential ingredients in any child's education is that he or she should be aware of one of the major issues of our time, and equipped to take some kind of hand in it.¹⁹

Thomas' projects aimed to bring the real world contacts and experience of the NGO sector into active engagement with Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and teachers looking for more meaningful ways of learning about the developing world. Thomas speculated about this process that 'we suppose that it must be beneficial for developing countries' to have young people in a developed country taking this active approach to learning about them. If this is accepted, then it becomes important to understand the mechanics for achieving it, which 'won't be by teachers alone', nor 'by voluntary organisations' campaigns to recruit the hearts and minds of young people'. Thomas believed that Antipoverty was trying to show the way to help each group to be 'more receptive to the other' as 'not an easy job in the early stages, but in the long run of tremendous mutual benefit'.²⁰

In a series of Progress Reports on Antipoverty between 1973 and 1974, Thomas spelled out for members and supporters the difficulties in running this kind of innovative organisation on a low budget.'²¹ At the same time, logistical difficulties in linking Third World contexts with learning at home were emerging. Correspondence from Gujarat State in India was lost in the post, for example.²² Other projects had to be postponed through delays in publishing or more simply because the original vision of entry into schools had proved to be more difficult. This is reflected in a report on the decision by the middle of 1973 'to abandon the original Antipoverty plans in favour of a more gradual kind of growth'.²³

The 'National Organiser's Report' of July 1973 was more positive in recording 'the willing cooperation of Local Education Authorities' in helping to appoint Antipoverty's project leaders, introduce them to schools and offer some office accommodation and facilities. However, even with this note of optimism, Thomas felt bound to underline that 'only rarely has a school taken the opportunities offered to link study with a related action programme, or continued with this work once the services of our project leader are withdrawn'. His conclusion was that teachers needed to be more closely involved in the projects at an earlier stage, because not all could be left in the hands of the external project leaders who were often not physically based inside the system. At the same time, the growing body of sales of Antipoverty's learning materials was to be celebrated. A conclusion from this is that what Thomas had carried over from Oxfam was working well: the production of pupil friendly, visual resources for learning about Third World issues and realities. What was not working so well was the innovative educational concept of

study leading to forms of direct action, because the links painstakingly constructed by Thomas and his workers were in effect very hard to sustain.

By early 1974, the tone of reporting became more realistic and even negative. In March, Thomas commented on Raikes' difficulties in Manchester which were providing evidence that 'teachers on the whole are not particularly keen, and in any case find it rather difficult to teach about development issues in any kind of sustained and meaningful way'. This led to the production of a forward-looking paper on 'Antipoverty after 1975', written around the same time. Better links with local development issues were expressly spelled out:

As far as the future is concerned, I think I agree with the people at the meeting who said they would like to see AntiPoverty develop more explicitly its relationships with local and national development issues as well as with overseas; and that in doing so we may find ourselves working much more closely with groups like the CRC [Community Relations Council], or Shelter, or CPAG [Child Poverty Action Group]. We have already worked fairly closely with Shelter, and this should serve as an encouragement to us to carry out more of the same kind of collaboration.²⁶

Thomas' realisation of the need to look for new issues and new partners led to proposals to extend to race relations or the environment as new areas for projects, while he recognised that the aims of support organisations for these within the United Kingdom 'have appeared to be at variance with those of the overseas development enthusiasts' as:

... the Race Relations people complain that those who stress the wretchedness and poverty of life in India and Jamaica are doing nothing for race relations in the U.K.; and the environmentalists are concerned about the implications of raising levels of resource consumption. If Antipoverty can show ways in which these apparent conflicts can be resolved, so that we can get a greater element of common cause between the overseas development groups and the other two, this will certainly be a valuable contribution for us to make.²⁷

This forward visioning paper ended with an appeal to readers to try to make sense of it, as on thorough reading 'some kind of crazy pattern may emerge'. The sense is certainly one of attempted vision straining against practicalities of reduced income-earning capacities.

By July 1974, the Director was obliged to write a letter to staff recommending that they start to look for other jobs. This was written in full acknowledgement that 'if we are to keep going, we shall be spending so much time fund-raising that we shall have hardly any time for our real work at all'.²⁸ In July, Thomas reported some financial improvement, thanks largely to a rescue grant from Oxfam.²⁹ The next priority for survival was to use contacts with Members of Parliament and those with political influence to try and get two Government Ministries, the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the Ministry of Overseas Development (ODM), to 'come to some agreement about funding us, instead of continually passing us from one ministry to another'.³⁰ The whole fundraising cycle that was impeding the progress of project work was now being described as 'a vicious circle'. The Progress Report for August 1974 further developed the line of thinking about better support from government, but with no more positive news:

I proposed to Mr Price [the Parliamentary Secretary of the Overseas Development Minister] that HMG's [Her Majesty's Government] interest in furthering development education could only be

adequately secured by joint action on the part of the Department of Education and Science and the ODM. He didn't seem to think that this was very important, but I'm continuing to try to arrange a joint meeting, in which the DES have already said they are willing to join.³¹

Towards the end of 1974, the Director of Antipoverty and its trustees realised that under the financial circumstances and with lack of secure support from either or both of the key Government Ministries, the organisation could not continue to employ paid staff. This did not mean that Antipoverty was wound up but it did result in the existing staff finding other posts, which in Thomas' own case meant a return to Oxfam employment. Thomas continued in a role as 'A Director' of Antipoverty, distributing occasional reports and keeping the organisation in existence as a trust fund. A review of this position he circulated in 1982 referred to the 'Transfer of operations to Oxfam's Education Dept.' Himself, his secretary Margaret Birch and two current 'experimental Development Education projects' for primary schools and the youth service had all been taken to and carried to fruition by Oxfam.³² This prompted Thomas to reflect that 'while the scope of Antipoverty's activity has changed and considerably decreased since 1974' this could now be seen as part of a movement to persuade all political parties and the government of the day to make an increased commitment to 'one of the most important operations of the present decade' in providing substantial funds for development education in the UK.33

An evaluation of Antipoverty

The 1974 report on *The Changing World in the Classroom* contained an appreciation of the work of Antipoverty, as an organisation which:

... points a way forward in development education in four spheres: variety of action; gaining the official backing of LEAs, including financial support, so that participation is encouraged by advisers and appears 'respectable' to headteachers; producing and evaluating materials in a variety of situations with as much care as Schools Council projects; and finally, linking work on the local environment, Britain and Europe with work on the Third World so that a comparative study is built up.³⁴

This emphasis on change in a world context can be seen in later development education theory, even if not overtly expressed in Thomas' own published writings during the Anti-poverty phase. What is evident is a serious attempt to write in educational language about emotive issues of poverty and injustice in the world:

... teachers who see the value of helping children to know about the Third World and about development issues must make sure that they also help them to form moral and critical judgements about these areas of study and in addition give them every possible help in becoming personally involved: otherwise live issues will be reduced to arid academics, which is an unpardonable diminution of the purpose of education. On the other hand teachers who want to point their children in the direction of social awareness and social action should ensure that these are based on the most comprehensive knowledge possible, on the most impeccable academic accuracy: it is no good basing one's social concern on half truths, or solely on emotional responses.³⁵

In trying to bring together the affective and cognitive domains in this way, Thomas was trying to establish the professional and pedagogical credibility of his vision of 'education for development'. He was placed, in Antipoverty, between the aid and fundraising

organisation he had chosen to leave and the new education he was trying to conceptualise and put into practice through localised study-action projects in schools in England directly connected to localities in the developing world. He saw that this had to be made acceptable to teachers as valid learning if it was to have any successful take-up within the profession. Thomas was therefore writing as a teacher for teachers, but one who had himself gained a wide experience of the developing world and of working for development. The chief task was to derive from that a field for learning about and through development. In an interview at the time he was leaving Antipoverty, Thomas gave pupils' learning needs as the reason why he had set up the organisation:

In essence, education in Third World development is a process that involves meeting two quite distinct sets of needs: those of the Third World population itself, and those of the children who are learning about them. Unless the kids' own learning needs are met, learning just won't happen.³⁶

Barbara Clark, who had worked on the To Kok Li rural development project, wrote later about the impact of Antipoverty. She described her feelings on returning to primary classroom teaching after being 'a campaigner for a better life for the world's poor, the capable and concerned organiser of events and meetings'. She had quickly become paralysed by the everyday realities of caring for the education of real children. By the time of writing, she was at last feeling able to take on 'a bit of development studies' with her pupils and beginning to use the Oxfam Korea wallet which had resulted from the original Antipoverty project:

Development, however, just never seemed to get off the ground, and I began to get a sensation of slowly drowning in a mire of playtimes, dinner duties, lost pencils and the Christmas Concert.³⁸

Clark had to acknowledge that the return to teaching had meant her own horizons being 'narrowed right down to the four walls of my school'. Her proposed answer to this situation was to see the need for teachers to be revitalised to increase their levels of enthusiasm and to maintain high professional standards. After her primary teaching phase, Clark took up a post in an Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) resources centre helping to produce materials on development studies for the 14-16 age-range.³⁹ Her article highlighted the potential highs and lows of a learning approach like that advocated by Antipoverty. Thomas' project brought excitement and expectation of how a study-action approach to learning from and with real Third World localities could bring meaningful learning into school curriculum settings in England. However, this level of excitement was often more apparent to Antipoverty's project workers than to many of the pupils and teachers who became involved in supporting the projects. Consequently, Clark's article also helps to reveal the downside of the Antipoverty approach to development education: that it was largely conceived and sustained from outside real classroom situations. Its roots were more in the charitable than the schools sector, as Thomas himself was to re-learn when he left Antipoverty to take on the management and direction of Oxfam's Education Department during the crucial years for the emergence of development education in England during the mid to late 1970s.

In a reflection written when Thomas died in July 1992, his Oxfam colleague Pete Davis described his theories of study-action as 'an empowering process for young people's education which 'would have been acknowledged and welcomed by Paulo Freire and his

ilk but were probably too radical for the British education scene of the 1970s'.40 This article has tried to show at least some of the difficulties of bringing new ideas about study of distant places leading to action within the confines of the school curriculum's 'secret garden' during the early years of the decade. From this point onwards, VCOAD continued and became The Centre for World Development Education (CWDE) in 1977. Oxfam, Christian Aid, Save the Children, War on Want and others developed, separately or in partnership, educational projects and resources for a movement increasingly identifiable by the name development education. Local Development Education Centres came into existence and collaborated with LEAs and teachers to increase the educational expertise and resources of the movement. In 1978, the Government's ODM accepted the Report of its Advisory Committee on Development Education to increase funding support for the movement. Therefore, by the end of the decade development education in England and the rest of the United Kingdom had become a reality and the Antipoverty organisation had made a useful contribution to this. In 1979, the Labour government was replaced by a Conservative government and that resulted in a major change in the landscape and funding for development education. What happened thereafter is a story for a different article.

Conclusion

In reflecting upon the experience of Antipoverty, one can see many of the issues that have continued to dominate the thinking and practice of development education. For example the challenge of proposing an approach towards learning that makes connection between the cognitive and affective domains and the related areas of the relationship of learning and action continue to be key debates.

Secondly, it is important to understand that development education is for learning about development questions nearer home as much as in the developing world.

Thirdly, the approaches and issues addressed by development education are by their very nature controversial and could be deemed to be 'political' resulting in often sceptical or hesitant responses from teachers and educational bodies.

Fourthly, the approach taken by Antipoverty was about making the learning alive, innovative and above all relevant to pupils' lives.

Finally, Antipoverty was a small NGO that relied on external funding. Thirty years on in many industrialised countries, development education still struggles for secure funding without certainty where future support will come from.

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Condensed from a chapter on Antipoverty in my prospective PhD thesis on 'Oxfam and the rise of development education in England: 1960s-1970s', this has been made possible thanks to archival materials from Barbara Bond and personal memories of hers and of Sally Thomas.

Notes

1 For the 1971 VCOAD conference, see Thomas 1971.

- 2 The report concluded that the term 'development education' was not in common use in the country. It was probably not ideal and this might have been be the last use of it. See Wright and Wright 1974, 44.
- 3 'Og Thomas' contributed by Marieke Clarke and Peter Davis, undated (Oxfam internal obituary notice, July 1992).
- 4 Oxfam's Education Department is not the focus of this article, but forms a large part of my PhD thesis. See also Whittaker 1983 and Black 1992.
- 5 Owen Godfrey Thomas, Curriculum Vitae, 1987 (in papers held by Barbara Bond).
- **6** As outlined in 'Antipoverty Education for development: An explanatory paper' and 'Antipoverty Education for development: A description, with costing (both September 1971, in Barbara Bond papers).
- 7 E-mail correspondence with Paul Sherlock (Antipoverty's technical education officer), January 2008. Discussion with Barbara Bond (Antipoverty's youth education officer) in February 2008. See Bond 2004.
- 8 World Studies Bulletin 25, December 1972, pages 11-12.
- 9 World Studies Bulletin 28, September/October 1973, page 7.
- 10 Ibid. page 6.
- 11 'Project A106: Interim Report', February 1974 (in the Barbara Bond papers).
- 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 Ibid.
- 18 Antipoverty Progress Report no. 35, to 28.iii.74, page 1.
- 19 Ibid. page 7.
- 20 Ibid. page 8.
- 21 Antipoverty Progress Report no. 27, to 31.v.73, page 1.
- 22 Antipoverty Progress Report No. 35, to 28.iii.74, page 4.
- 23 Ibid. page 3.
- 24 Antipoverty National Organiser's Report, July 1973, page 1.
- 25 Antipoverty Progress Report No. 35, to 28.iii.74, page 2.
- 26 Antipoverty after 1975, page 2.
- 27 Ibid. page 3.
- 28 O. G. Thomas letter to B. Bond, 4 July 1974.
- 29 Notes for Oxfam Directors' Meeting, 3.vii.74, page 1.
- 30 Ibid. page 2.
- 31 Antipoverty Progress Report no. 39, for August 1974, page 2.
- 32 Antipoverty 'A brief report for the years 1974 to 1982', August 1982, page 1.
- 33 Ibid, page 2.
- **34** Wright and Wright 1974, 20. The Schools Council was a semi-official body at the time which carried out curriculum development projects and published influential reports.
- 35 See Thomas, 1971
- **36** In 'Educating Young Britons about the Third World: O G Thomas, Director of Antipoverty', *Third World*, September/October 1974, page 10.
- 37 Clark, 1978, page 146.
- 38 Ibid. page 147.
- 39 Ibid. page 149.
- 40 'Og Thomas' contributed by Peter Davis, undated (Oxfam internal obituary notice, July 1992).

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