

CONFERENCE REPORT

Pre-CHOGM People's Forum, Malta 21 November 2015.

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Malta hosted the 2015 Commonwealth Heads of Government Forum, known as CHOGM, the second time the country hosted the event in the last ten years. As usual, this forum is preceded by the People's Forum which takes place in the same host country and which attracts participants from various international NGOs, educators, social activists, professionals and academics, among others.

Given the UN's 2030 Agenda, Sustainable Development was the theme of this forum which kicked off with an educational session, the Civil Society Dialogue on Education and Sustainable Development in Small States, a day long session held on Saturday 21 November. The actual title of the day forum was 'Transformative Education and Sustainable Development in Small States: Building resilience through skills and livelihoods.' The forum raised themes that are of interest to the ongoing conversations regarding postcolonial education and which will be the focus of this report. This particular forum was ably put together by a Maltese social activist, Vincent Caruana and International Social Development Consultant, Fatimah Kelleher.

Participants came from a range of countries such as New Zealand, Cyprus, Samoa, Tonga, Lesotho, Malta, Bahamas, Fiji, Tanzania (Zanzibar) and Mauritius. The presence of participants from small island states reflects the importance given to these states or what are called 'developing' small island states by the UN in its 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda documents. The setting for this forum and potential themes were laid out, at the forum's

opening, by Kruse-Vaai from the National University of Samoa. Prominent among the themes, and of great relevance to the journal, was 'colonialism and its legacies' that was given extensive treatment in the opening presentation by Joel Warrican from the University of the West Indies Open Campus.

His presentation focused on postcolonial curricula. He demonstrated how a thematic dialogical approach to concepts of sustainability can be woven into the curricula which need to be developed in such a way that one does not throw out the knowledge and core competences baby with the colonial 'banking education' bathwater. Echoes of Paulo Freire and Franz Fanon reverberated throughout his and discussant, Shaun Grech's (Manchester Metropolitan University and The Critical Institute) address at the end of the morning session, Grech himself a key contributor to praxis concerning disability in the Global South (he is the founding editor of a journal and a book series in the area).

Themes regarding biodiversity, education for sustainable development (ESD) and their relation to power were broached by other speakers. Paul J. Pace from the University of Malta's Centre for Environmental Education & Research, discussed trends in ESD. He concluded his talk with reference to the Eco-schools project in his country, Eco schools being given importance in another 'on the ground presentation', a recorded one, by Marcia D Musgrove from the Bahamas Reef Environment Education Foundation. Other 'on the ground projects, this time involving university partnerships were presented by environmental social scientist, Nicholas Watts who also spoke about the 'Blue Economy' regarding communities of fishers. Higher education for transformation was also the theme of Kavriaj Sukon's presentation from the Open University of Mauritius.

My contribution to the meeting was to raise issues of critical education, sustainable development and power in my presentation concerning a critically engaged pedagogy. I made extensive reference to transformative learning as developed by Paulo Freire, in his later years, and his legacies with reference to the *Carta da Terra* (Earth Charter) and the thematic complexes chosen for the popular public schools when Freire was Education Secretary in the Municipal Government of São Paulo. The notion of lifelong learning, as promoted by the UN

in its 2030 Agenda, was unpacked with a critique of its recent OECD and EU-induced economic baggage.

Also focusing on the issue of education and power was the presentation by fellow Maltese academic and social movement activist, Maria Pisani, founder of Integra Foundation. Her presentation on migration across the Mediterranean, as well across the globe, with its colonizing foundation, broached pertinent areas such as questioning the citizenship assumption in critical education concerning the oppressed (in her case migrants), intersectionality, the subaltern migrants lack of safety to speak, social movement organisation and their successes (reference to her direct involvement in coordinated protests against a government-attempted 'push back' policy regarding migrants) and indeed colonialism itself.

Other subaltern groups were the focus of presentations at this forum including the disabled, the focus of the presentation of Nkasi Sefuthi from the Lesotho National Federation of Organisations of the Disabled.

Issues arising from activism within movements and organisations were provided by Omar Mattar Tajir from ZAYADESA (youth and livelihoods education and the environment) in Zanzibar, a presentation which raised, at least in my mind, questions regarding the legacies or otherwise of the massive reforms introduced by Tanzania (Zanzibar forms part of this country), under the presidency of Julius K. Nyerere, a key figure in African decolonizing politics. This presentation touched on the role of CSOs (civil society organisations), and their capacity building, with regard to developing sustainable development. The CSO theme was also addressed by Felicity Humblestone from the Bahamas and by Timote Vaioloti, the latter from an adult education perspective given that the speaker belongs to the Asia South Pacific Association of Basic and Adult Education, as well as being a teacher-educator at Waikato University, New Zealand.

A synthesis of main points from the presentations and ensuing discussions was agreed in the afternoon workshop with a view to presenting them as signposts for future policies among stakeholders, including policy representatives from different Commonwealth countries. A group of participants

from this forum met these policy representatives the following Tuesday at the same venue.

Here are some of the main points selected for presentation to policy makers: Re-conceptualization of education and lifelong learning that should not be limited to 'employability' and the economy but entail a holistic and humanistic approach with people as social actors, both as individuals and as members of a collectivity (self-and collectively directed learners), for Sustainable Development. This has implications for a globalised curriculum not only for small states and small island 'developing' states (SIDS) but also for 'developed', mainly Northern, countries. There was a case made for going beyond the mere functional form of old and new literacies, including digital literacies, to incorporate what Paulo Freire would call 'critical literacy', that is the ability to read/write the word and the world. This necessitates a safe space for critical thinking without fear, including the fear of freedom and change.

The conference highlighted a call for policies alert to the demands of several marginalised populations. These policies would entail bottom up approaches to policy formulation that involve the traditionally voiceless and emphasise the right to livelihood and basic human dignity as an essential feature of a genuinely inclusive and transformative education and a more socially-just and ecologically responsible society. Citizenship is often a means of exclusion and this situation needs to be addressed. There is a need to develop policies that protect environmental refugees, given that climate change was an important topic in this forum and was shown to hit hardest the formerly directly-colonised populations in the South. In this respect, we require policies that facilitate safe and legal migration for all, in keeping, I would add, with the spirit of the 1951 Geneva Convention.

The forum called on policy makers to seek to develop education curricula that impart the necessary communication skills to bridge the gap between disabled and non-disabled. Furthermore, in a vein that accommodates postcolonial and decolonizing thinking, it called on policy makers to develop curricula characterised, as in the case of the Kiribati Climate Change initiative, by a combination of local knowledge systems and modern technology. Policy makers are also called on to recognise the contextual bases of learning and education

when borrowing from best practices from abroad. As Freire argues, experiments cannot be transplanted but must be reinvented.

The Commonwealth might be viewed with suspicion by those bent on decolonizing approaches to education and action but events such as the People's Forum offer important spaces for people from different parts of the postcolonial world, notably activists, to come together and place on the agenda important issues that need to be confronted in the spirit of realising some of the UN goals. In the 2005 Malta Forum, the education session addressed the Millennium Development Goals. This time the focus is on the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda goals. One hopes that these goals do not remain a mere pipe dream, as in the case of the EU poverty reduction agenda for 2020 (rather than decrease, the EU poverty figure is set to increase from 80 million to a 100 million by 2020). As stated, time and time again during this opening part of the People's Forum, further decolonizing approaches to education are key in this regard. Hope springs eternal!