

Briefing Note, Visit to Eritrea with DRI – November 11th – 19th 2017

Introduction

I am an academic from the UK with an ongoing interest in universities and their role in local social and economic development. For some time, I have been researching the impact of universities on countries in conflict or post conflict recovery. I have had a long-term interest in the Horn of Africa and the conflicts in the region, as well as in new and emerging states.

After a long-term association with DRI (Diversity Resource International) and the development of a research proposal with Dr Yonas from Asmara University last year, I was finally able to visit Eritrea in November of this year, to see the opening of the DRI branch offices and to meet a number of local professionals. I spent time in Asmara and the surrounding area, and was lucky enough to meet with a range of ministers from the Department of Education and academics from the various higher education colleges.

I also offered my time to provide seminars as requested to the different teacher education institutions. I gave four seminars during my week's visit, for a mixture of students, academics and ministry officials. Towards the end of the week I had discussions at different levels on possibilities for future collaboration and research.

Impressions of Eritrea

I was impressed by the peace and relative stability of Eritrea, and the development I saw in the city and in the surrounding areas such as Zagr with the history of EPLF and the participation of communities during the struggle for freedom, Water dams in Gahtelai, Gergera and Adi Halo and agricultural projects outside of Asmara. The architecture of the city is stunning, and I received warm hospitality in both the homes and the work places I visited. I was impressed by the ability and commitment of the academics I met, both those teaching in higher education and those working in their own time to provide teacher support in schools. The voluntary Action Research group have huge hopes and aspirations for improving the quality of teaching in schools, and are working through the different challenges, of limited resource and large-scale migration of young people to provide this. We had some informal discussions with Dr. Berhane and his group about their aspiration of developing a curriculum to respond to Eritrean community needs.

I was encouraged by the transition from a centrally located university to a range of colleges distributed around the country and the attempt this reflected to try and provide education, free and accessible, in rural areas, connected with and rooted in local issues. I was impressed by the academic and reflective ability of colleagues working at colleges, and internationally and their dedication to improving education and driving up standards at home while also pursuing an internationally renowned academic career.

We were able to visit the Women's Centre, a very vibrant organisation in the Centre of the city with considerable support from the diaspora. The exhibition in the basement showing images of the struggle provided good context for the current strong female involvement both at home and externally. Through their invitation, we were also able to visit a women's weaving centre on the outskirts of the city where a number of HIV positive women are provided with training and support in setting up small weaving businesses.

I remained interested in and confused by the different migration narratives that exist from those that are leaving or trying to leave, and those reporting on it, suggesting either the draw of the West or the difficulties of living in areas where resources are limited, and military service extended. More extensive research to find the real cause of migration in Eritrea feels important, and I wondered what role higher education might play in exploring this pressing issue finding ways to respond to it. However, I saw no real poverty or homelessness in the city or rural areas and am concerned by the stories of predatory smugglers, the danger of the journey and the challenges of surviving in Europe that few seem to understand before they go. While I am not in a position to understand the validity behind asylum claims, I am aware that 'migration is in the wind'. One of my colleagues who visited Eritrea earlier this year and held conversations with students was told: "migration is in the wind our big brothers and sisters joined the freedom movement our generation is migrating for a better life". But many young people and their parents are chasing dreams of a Europe that does not exist. A country without its young people is one that will be severely depleted in the future.

The Seminars

I was invited to deliver four seminars during my week in Asmara. The first – at the Teacher Training Centre (TTC) was on approaches to pedagogy and incorporating Freirean and experiential ways of working into large classes. While there was some interest among the group several had a lower command of English and others were concerned about keeping control within large groups and the difficulties of incorporating more dialogic approaches to teaching. It would have been useful to have had a longer period with this group to properly explore some of these difficulties.

I delivered a second seminar out at the College of Education in Mai-Nefi. This was in collaboration with Dr Yonas, and Khalid, the dean of Education who I have been in email contact with for some time. I was asked to speak about action research, although I became aware after the seminar that the Finish group working with the Ministry of Education had presented something on a similar theme the week before. It would be good in the future if we could collaborate with them in any offer we might make for future research.

I had an informal evening meeting with Dr. Ghebrehans and his team of action researchers currently working to improve teaching in schools in a particular region. We discussed some of the problems of migration and the way in which universities might be involved in helping to tackle this.

I offered a third seminar at the Asmara University building in the city for students from Business and Sociology courses on Paulo Freire. For this particular group Freire's approach to pedagogy was new, and there was considerable interest and fruitful discussion.

Finally, I was invited by the Education minister to present a seminar on Pedagogy of the Oppressed at the Trade Union Building in Asmara. We had around 70 people in attendance and while many had read Freire's book many years ago it was a good opportunity to revisit some of these ideas and look at how they might be applied in today's context. DRI team had a meeting with the National Commission for Higher Education to a follow up meeting at the old Asmara University building before leaving, and suggested we submit a future proposal for research.

I enjoyed all the seminars I gave and the discussions and questions they generated. People seem to be very familiar with Freirean methodologies, though not all are practicing it. I understand the difficulties of trying to work in a person-centered way with large numbers of students in one class, and of developing close relationships with students, when some are trying to leave. However, it was good to have a chance to help people revisit theoretical and ideological aspirations for teaching and learning and to look at the different ways they might address some of these challenges. The college

at Mai Nefhi, their work with a Finish team in educational and research approaches might be a useful avenue for collaboration. There is a Finish supported PhD programme and a team of educationalists resident in Asmara currently, hoping to fund an additional project once this one comes to an end. I was sadly unable to meet with them during my visit to look at connections.

Future Research

Prior to my visit to Eritrea I had already prepared a research proposal looking at the higher education and pedagogy in Eritrea and Ethiopia and the role of universities in conflict. During my visit it was suggested that this would prove very difficult at this time and was not a priority to resubmit for funding. But there was strong encouragement to consider instead looking at the role of Eritrean higher education in migration, as this remains a pressing issue. I discussed with the College of Education the possibility of linking this research with a PhD qualification for an Asmara based researcher, who in this case could be the Dean of Education. We have yet to identify a relevant funding stream for this work, but I have begun to look for this since returning home.

This is still at the very early stages of an idea, but if a relevant funding stream can be identified and ministers in Eritrea are supportive of the idea I would be happy to take it forward. If successful and academic with PhD from the college of education would act as in country supervisor, I would act as Principal Researcher, external supervisor and project director, and we would recruit a local researcher on a three-year PhD programme. However, in the interim a smaller, internally funded pilot could be valuable in getting this work started and evidencing its value for future large-scale funding. Migration remains a huge challenge and one I would be keen to help address.

Before leaving I also spent time at the opening of the DRI offices, my original contact in Eritrea and my hosts, who have recently established a branch office in Asmara. They are keen to develop it as a centre of collaboration and for sharing knowledge research, capacity building and development between Eritrean colleges and international academics. I feel there is huge potential here and wish them every success.

If you would like to support the above teachers training or research idea and need more information, please contact Dr. Juliet at training@dricic.org or leave your contact details at our website www.driorg.com