

WORKING TOGETHER FOR A SUSTAINABLE LIVING

by Sara Marilungo

DUBLIN - During the tragic earthquake that hit Honduras in 2009 hundreds of buildings were damaged or burnt to the ground. However, houses made of plastic bottles were not. The issue of affordable housing, presented by Trish Groves of Trócaire, was one of the topics discussed during two of the meetings of the 15th Convergence Sustainable Living Festival, promoted by Cultivate from 26th May to 1st June.

How can our developed world learn from ideas and technologies from the Southern Hemisphere? How do climate change and global justice interconnect? And what does it mean to be resilient in Ireland?

Posing a series of questions, the meetings on 26th and 27th May aimed at sparking a discussion among the participants on issues that, rather than being extraneous to our daily lives, should affect our lifestyles and our consumption behaviours directly.

“Climate change isn't just an environmental issue but is a global justice issue,” said Eimear McNally, of the Institute for the Development of Education in the Arts (IDEA). “The people who are being affected by it are the ones who have done the least to contribute to it and there is a responsibility for people of the Global North to respond to that. Learning from the South means challenging the traditional model of charity and our models of development.”

The conference scheduled a series of “provocations”, short presentations by representatives of various associations, aimed at pinpointing some of the issues encompassed in the concept of “resilient communities”. The feature talks were followed by “World Cafe Discussions”, a new methodology of hosting conversations among the audience by making people move between groups of four or six, one table at the time, in order to freely exchange and compare ideas about issues that matter. “When four people come back to a table they're bringing four other conversations, merging five conversations. At the end of two rounds 25 people have had an input into the conversation, recorded on table cloths,” explained a video screened at the beginning of the meeting. “We have to remember that the intelligence is in the room, it is not always in the podium.”

Resilience is a new term across the sustainability movement. “The concept focuses on how communi-

ties deal with the shocks of climate change, globalization and the economic collapse and respond to it on a local level,” said Davie Philip, of Cultivate, introducing the conference.

The future of Southern communities depends on their capacity to lose their dependency on the North and be able to rely on their own resources, knowledge and biodiversity. Jose Antonio Gutierrez, of Latin America Solidarity Centre, talked about his experience in the Andean community in the North of Titicaca Lake. In the past indigenous populations produced food by building terraces along the slopes of the hills. Those terraces haven't been used for hundreds of years due to the influence of evangelization and colonization. An area that was a huge food producer 200 years ago is now importing 80 per cent of its food and its inhabitants suffer from malnourishment. “A country that cannot feed itself is a country destined to be a slave of other countries,” he said. “The main philosophy of indigenous communities was that you couldn't dominate the environment and 'mother earth' but you had to cooperate with it. The terraces for example don't alter the natural slope of hill; the Inca in particular never changed the terrain, they adapted to it. This principle was substituted by Western philosophy based on the concept of domination. But are these new technologies always good? We should actually try to learn from these philosophies of the past.”

“In Honduras we worked on technologies based on new ideas and new materials,” said Trish Groves. The big challenge today in South America is access to safe and affordable houses. “They have no land, no materials and live in areas prone to disasters, like mud slides,” she added. Trocaire's project aims at turning non-biodegradable waste into construction and irrigation material. The walls of the buildings are made from plastic bottles filled with local earth. The bottles are tied together with strings and reinforced with cement. “They can be filled by anybody in the community from children to the elderly, women and people with disabilities. In Honduras we built a community centre, the size of this room,” she said. “In 2009 there was a big earthquake in the region and there was no damage to these structures whatsoever. It is a movable structure.” The technology was also applied to construct reservoirs for water storage.

Unprotected water sources was one of the problems met in Sub-Saharan Africa by Laurence Gill of the Department of Civil, Structural and Environmental Engineering of Trinity College Dublin. Drinking

polluted water increases the chances of spreading water related diseases like dysentery or chronic diarrhea. Gill's team is working on a project to implement a technology that uses a sustainable resource like sunshine. "If you leave a bottle of water for six, seven hours in the sun, sun rays kill bacteria and viruses. That's been known for long time. So what we've been trying to do is to convert this principle into a village scale," said Gill. The water coming from the source which is potentially polluted goes through a system of glass tubes able to capture sunlight that kills bacteria and viruses and ends up in a reservoir. "We installed the system in a village of 500 people in Kenya," he said. "It produces about 5000 litres of water per day which is about 10 litres per person. There's been a full community involvement: they provided most of the labour and raw materials for the project."

But how can the North, and Ireland in particular, learn from these experiences? And how can we recognise a green community in Ireland if we see one? During the two days of World Cafe Discussions people engaged in an active consideration of possible ways of learning from the experiences reported by the speakers and from their own experiences in environmental groups and state bodies. The first day's groups agreed almost unanimously, though through different patterns of discussion, on the idea that a change of behaviour comes first with a new set of values. This might involve a reconsideration of our needs and wants, of our choices – taking the bike instead of the car and recycling, for example – but also a decision to meet our needs through self-help or through relying on a community.

However, sometimes people are not aware of this kind of problems or they don't know what they can do to tackle it. "I think that many people are really concerned on doing the right thing," said one of the participants at one of the discussion tables. "Only, they need to be informed on how to do it."

"Sometimes people think that global warming means having more sun... like living in Italy! They don't realize that global warming is an imminent worldwide catastrophe," said Sharon Jackson, Research Associate at Trinity College, during the discussions.

"That's why education and the media play a key role in it," added Trish Groves, sitting at the same table. Education and information were regarded as vital by the participants in this respect. Reconsidering our resources on a global perspective and the effects of our actions on other populations, also by "slowing down"

our lifestyles, were other issues that emerged from the discussions.

Ireland is already committed to environmental protection, but much more can be done. "There are about 10,000 households that now have green homes in Ireland but there's nearly a million and a half households in the country," said Matthew Crow of the Environment Protection Agency of Wexford during the second day of discussions. "One of our problems today is how can we speed up greening our communities and how we can develop some kind of certification or award scheme for communities," he added.

Fiona Quinn of the Department of Environment, observed that there are more than 700 villages across Ireland involved in the Tidy Towns project, which looks at things like tidiness, waste minimization, wildlife protection, climate change and landscaping, among others. "But more people need to be involved," she said.

"The building block of sustainability is communities, not individuals," said Chris Chapman of Cultivate. "It is incredibly wonderful to think of half a million people involved in the National Spring Clean every year or 700 villages in Tidy Towns or 2000 green schools but still the gap between our current way of being as a society and sustainability is actually enormous. It's not just about being a little bit tidier and a little bit more efficient... it is enormous and this has to be said."

A number of ideas emerged during the second day of discussion: the need to involve the private sector through incentives and the creation of sustainable employment opportunities; the importance of marketing strategies able to sell eco-friendly products; the need to involve children and youths in green activities; the characteristics that distinguish a green community: usage of waste, water and energy, fair trade, indicators and measurability of consumption or facilities, education outreach, transport networks, recycling facilities, festivals and events, and many others.

"If you do it alone, little can be changed. But when everybody works toward the same goal you can move mountains," was the comment of one of the participants at the discussion tables. Green communities are not just an idea, they are already tangible and committed to responding locally to global challenges. "Active citizenship is a lot more than volunteering," concluded Davie Philip, "and I think that engagement in local communities is the start of a resilient community on a national scale."