

The 3 barriers to action

In any attempt to encourage people to take action, there are three problems which must first be overcome:



1. A lack of awareness of the issue

This is obviously an extremely important first step – if they don't know, they certainly won't act. It is often surprising (and not a little depressing) to discover just how unaware people can be about issues relating to developing countries. In research I did in a youth club in Reading, some of the young people were convinced that poverty had been 'made history' in 2005; they were surprised to learn otherwise.

On the other hand it cannot be assumed that the giving of information will automatically lead to action; *"even if participants have high levels of knowledge about the problem and the community has invested in changing their attitudes through advertising or educational campaigns, behaviour is often unaltered"* (McKenzie-Mohr 2000, 'Fostering sustainable behaviour through community-based social marketing'). For this reason 'awareness-raising' alone is of limited value – whenever possible it should be linked to overcoming barriers 2 and 3.

2. The feeling that it has nothing to do with them

This is the 'So what?' stage: *"People far away are suffering – so what? What's that got to do with me?"*. Steps have to be taken to make a link between their lives and the issue, or even better between them and an individual who is facing the problem under discussion. Two approaches are often used here – responsibility and empathy.

Responsibility involves tracing the causes of the development issue back to your young people's lives. For example, in discussions about trade justice you could focus on the words of Martin Luther King: *"Before you've finished your breakfast this morning, you'll have relied on half the world"* or investigate where their clothing was made. Similarly linking back to the actions of governments or companies might be relevant, such as with subsidies for the arms trade or Coca Cola's actions in India. Empathy involves focussing on the things 'in common' between your young people and someone in the developing world. Big charities often use this method by explaining issues through the eyes of a person of a similar age. Another powerful method is to make more direct contact, either through 'simulation'/role-play games, first-hand communication via the internet or school/church/youth club 'twinning' or by second-hand via presentations by returned volunteers, people from that country etc.

3. The belief that there is nothing they can do about it

This stage is vital! It is no good simply depressing your young people. It also serves an educational purpose, making concrete what has been learnt; *"it is crucial real opportunities for involvement are provided. This is not only a logical outcome of the learning process, but a significant means of reinforcing new knowledge, skills and attitudes"* (Fountain 1995, 'Education for Development: A teacher's resource for Global Learning', 16).

There are two steps here: introducing relevant actions, and then convincing them that their actions are worthwhile. Actions might include writing letters, signing petitions, making posters (raising awareness counts as taking action), signing up to an email newsletter, prayer, making some kind of commitment or pledge and so on. The value of their actions could be affirmed by evidence of previous campaign success, the support of campaign organisations/relevant opinion leaders, the starfish anecdote or the African Proverb *"You think you're too small to make a difference? Then you've obviously never slept in the same room as a mosquito"*.

This stage should be as practical and immediate as possible (although it could lead to longer term involvement). In workshops I have previously used a hierarchy of outcomes:

At least	Knows more
	Takes an immediate action
	Commits to telling others (raising awareness)
	Commits to ongoing actions
At best	Commits to ongoing action and raising awareness

By keeping these "three barriers to action" in mind during the planning of any justice and peace orientated activity you can increase the possibility of them committing to action.