

The shape of the world

'This example is about the way we imagine the world, and the models we use to help us understand its complex reality.

One of the defining features of human societies is the significant differences in human welfare from one to another; because these have a spatial dimension, they are of great interest to geographers. On a global scale the dominant model used to explain this in school geography has its origins in the Brandt report's North-South model¹, interpreted through the 1995 National Curriculum as the MEDC-LEDC idea.

I think there are two real problems with this model; the first is that it has only a tenuous relationship to reality. It suggests there are basically two groups of country, rather than a continuum of human welfare and development. In geography we often need to simplify reality to make it more understandable, but there's a real danger the model gradually takes on a life of its own and departs from reality. I think we've reached this point with the LEDC-MEDC idea. For example we commonly teach pupils that in LEDCs most people work in agriculture, people have low life expectancy, poor education etc. So because they have most people employed in agriculture, low life expectancy etc., we select the countries with lowest human development to represent all LEDCs; they become 'an undifferentiated entity'². Or, because we ourselves assume all LEDCs are like this, we can even end up ignoring reality to make a country fit the model. For example Brazil, often used as an example of an LEDC, has 19% working in agriculture and average life expectancy of 72 years; Mexico 14% and 75 years (2006).

The other problem is that the model becomes locked in time, whereas in reality progress happens. The past four decades have seen really significant improvements in human welfare and development: since 1970 the world as a whole has averaged a 41% average increase in HDI, with striking improvements in education and health³. There are clearly still huge gaps from one end of the spectrum to another, within as well as between countries (e.g. life expectancy in Afghanistan 44 years, compared with 83 in Japan in 2010). The question for school geographers is – do we focus on the gaps (the current model) or the progress?

I think this is also problem about knowledge, especially how we keep our own subject knowledge sufficiently up to date so that we teach about the real world, not one of thirty or forty years ago. But it's also a problem about our predominant paradigm – starting with the issue (contrasts in human welfare), then looking for a model and working outwards, rather than starting with reality and investigating the model to see how useful it is.

¹ Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues (1983) *North-South: A Programme for Survival*, London: Pan Books

² Roberts, M. (2009) 'Investigating Geography' *Geography*, 94:3, pp.181-188

³ United Nations: Human Development Report (2010), p.28 <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2010/>

So the LEDC/MEDC model not only represents reality poorly, but it makes a real difference to how we perceive the world (and gets stuck in our textbooks, exam specifications etc.); it is an illusion that must surely affect pupils' world view. It makes it easy to forget that development is dynamic, and it's about progress, and development and progress happen across the world. By downgrading the idea of progress, and the possibility that people can change the world, we're also promoting a rather uncritical approach to the way the world works (Harvey 1974). By contrast, a greater focus on progress creates the idea of the possibility and strength of change – the idea of development as progress, and that people and countries can make progress through their own efforts. It is a more optimistic view of the world – one where development doesn't come to mean un-development. Attention to the facts, knowledge and the real world would help mitigate this. It's a theme Hans Rosling will develop in his keynote tomorrow.'