The Impact of Globalization on Human Rights: The Challenge for Adult Educators

Derek Mulenga

Abstract: This paper examines the impacts of globalization on human rights and the challenges faced by adult educators. It concludes that globalization has adversely affected human rights, particularly in the South. Adult educators must challenge the discourse of accepting globalization as an inevitable product of development.

This paper examines the impacts of globalization on human rights and the challenges faced by adult educators. The paper has three sections. The first section explains the origins and nature concept of globalization and its impact on peace and stability in diverse societies, particularly in the South. The second section explores the relationship between globalization, development and human rights. The analysis focuses on the impact and implications of a neoliberal, market-driven development paradigm on human rights. The third and final section explores the roles of adult education in promoting and educating human rights in order to create a peaceful society, particularly within the context of resurgence of “democracy” in the South.

What is Globalization?

Although there are several theories of globalization, at the moment, two schools with opposite positions can be identified: the romantics and pessimists. According to the romantics, key features in the global economy including increased levels of economic and financial integration, interdependence, and openness of national economies characterize globalization. The main carrier of economic globalization is the global corporate firm. The romantics point out that this process has gone so far that nation states have lost most of the power they used to have. Instead, they predict the emergence of supra-national entities that are both borderless and powerful. The romantics are ideologically linked a neoliberal view of economics and business. A good example of their arguments can be found in the works of Kenichi Ohmae, like The Borderless World and The End of the National State.

I would like to suggest that both the views of romantics and those of the pessimists are wrong. It seems to me that an adequate understanding of this phenomenon must differ from each of them. First of all, I would argue that — contrary to the narrow view of romantics — globalization is not just about the deepening of financial markets, but a complex and multidimensional process that embraces a whole range of social, political, economic, and cultural phenomena as well. Simon Marginson’s (1999) broad conceptualization of globalization best captures this position. He argues that there are six aspects of globalization: finance and trade, communications and information technologies, international movements of peoples, the formation of global societies, linguistic, cultural and ideological convergence, and world system of signs and images.

What is the driving force of globalization? The consensus is that the radical development of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) has played a critical role in driving
the process of globalization. While technology certainly plays a key role in this process, I concur with Sachs (1999) that the most fundamental factor underpinning globalization is policy change rather than technological change. What we are observing is a deliberate policy change from decades of state-led economic growth policies and in some extreme cases, autarkic socialist development strategies that prevailed in much of the Third World towards policies of radical economic liberalization and global integration. Similarly, the new technologies are not being developed coincidentally at this particular period in history. In fact, they are the result of deliberate policies that have resulted in significant increases in investment in research and development of new information and communications technologies and in the sciences that support them.

Marginson (1999) concludes that when this heterogeneity of globalization is recognized, its partial nature also becomes more apparent. In fact, I think that we are at the beginning of the process of globalization, not at the end. We are at the beginning of a fundamental change of the world. This change, as Marginson (1999) correctly points out, comes from numerous sources, not from a single source. We are at the beginning of this process and we do not really know as yet where it is going to lead us. I think Martin Albrow's recent book, *The Global Age*, provides the best way to conceptualize where we are. He says we are at the beginning of a global era — not a post-modern age.

Second, contrary to the pessimists, I would say that globalization is the most fundamental set of changes going on in the world today. It has not advanced as far as the romantics say, and it is not purely driven by economic market imperatives, but it is still the most fundamental phenomenon of our times. Perhaps Anthony Giddens’ notion that globalization is the shrinking of the world to a ‘global village’ through a virtual *annihilation of space through time* provides its broadest description (Giddens, 1990, p.64). In this sense, globalization has to do with the increasing inter-penetration between individual life and global futures, something that I think is relatively new in history. It is as much about the self — changes in our personal lives and certainly changes in local arenas — as it is about global systems. Globalization is also, in many respects, a contradictory process that produces rapid economic growth and wealth in some places and inequality, poverty, and social exclusion in others (Castells, 1998). It is not just about social fragmentation but also about the creation of new forms of unity.

Third, and certainly contrary to globalization pessimists, the current phase of globalization is not just an extension of earlier phases of Western capitalist expansion. I do not dispute the argument that globalization as a process has been going on for a long time, and that it has largely benefited the industrialized countries of the West (Mosa, nd). However, the current phase of globalization as a *deepening phenomenon* really began only about 35 years ago, when the first global communication system was established. This created new economic mechanisms, such as 24-hour global money markets, that affect so much of our lives. But with instantaneous global communication, the very texture of social life is also altered. When we live in a world where media images are conveyed across the planet, this changes who we are and how we live.

Although the contemporary processes of globalization are much more decentered than in the past, it is important to emphasize that globalization represents not only a reaffirmation of global capitalism but also an imposition of the neoclassical worldview of development and governance. The economic governance of the world is virtually in the hands of the “Washington
Consensus” consisting mainly of the G-7 countries, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the G-Thirty and the World Economic Forum. The political management of the world is done by the G-7 through the United Nations and the other global structures, networks and fora.

**Definition and Main Approaches to Human Rights**

Human rights are based on respect for the dignity and worth of all human beings and seek to ensure freedom from fear and want. Rooted in ethical principles (and usually inscribed in a country's constitutional and legal framework), human rights are essential to the well being of every man, woman and child. Premised on fundamental and inviolable standards, they are universal and inalienable.

How are human rights defined? The traditional view limits them to civil and political rights in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nation, 1948. Included among these are the right to life, liberty and security; the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of race, color, sex, language, religion, social class or political opinion; the right to vote, freedom of speech and freedom of press; the right to be free from arbitrary invasion of privacy, family or home; and legal rights such as the right to due process of law and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty.

Over past 50 years, this traditional view of human rights has been challenged. Some say that it is too limited in scope and that a more multidimensional and holistic approach must be taken. Consequently, through various instruments, charters and declarations, the basic civil and political rights have been expanded to include crucial social, economic and cultural rights. These include: the right to an adequate standard of living; the right to education; the right to work and to equal pay for equal work; and the right of minorities to enjoy their own culture, religion and language. Of particular importance to this view is the protection and advancement of the rights of disadvantaged and minority groups (such as women, children and indigenous peoples). The United Nations has adopted this holistic approach in determining what human rights are, and the international community has repeatedly affirmed the interdependence of both sets of rights.

Generally, there have been two main approaches of ensuring the realization of human rights. The first one, the “violations approach,” involves human rights being closely monitored to publicize abuses and hold states accountable for upholding the law and implementing their international human rights commitments. A second approach emphasizes a comprehensive view of human rights, stressing both the protection and promotion of both natural and human rights. Thus, while securing the rule and enforcement of the law is crucial, so too is adopting measures that enable people to exercise their rights under the law. For example, promoting women’s rights means not only changing and enforcing legal codes on gender equality and property rights, but also increasing women's access to paralegal services, local land, property title registration services, and equal employment opportunity.

**Globalization, Development and Human Rights**

The relation between globalization, development and human rights raises several questions. One key question is how we perceive the concept of development and human rights, especially in the context of South.

Development is also often used in a normative sense as a multi-valued social goal covering
such diverse spheres as better material well-being, living standards, education, health care, wider opportunities for work and leisure, and in essence the whole gamut of desirable social and material welfare (Esteva, 1992). The 1986 *Declaration of the Right to Development* and the 1990 *UN Global Consultation on the Right to Development as a Human Right* state that the right to development is an inalienable human right with the human being as the central subject to the right and that all the aspects of the right to development set forth in the *Declaration of the Right to Development* are indivisible and interdependent. A development paradigm that disregards or interferes with human rights is the very negation of development. The rest of this section briefly discusses the market-oriented development paradigm because it is the engine driving globalization.

**The market-oriented development paradigm**

The market-oriented development paradigm promoted by the “Washington Consensus” is based on the market and its logic. The basic principle is profit making through competitive pricing. This leads to the exploitation of labor and continuous technological innovation that makes labor or human beings redundant. Exclusion becomes an inevitable part of progress. Expansion and exclusion happen in the same breath under this regime. Resource power rules over labor power in this culture of development. We have seen how, thanks to globalization, a few TNCs control and manage the resources of the world to make profit. Technology is monopolized and manipulated for the military (production of military hardware is the most lucrative business) or production-of consumer goods for the rich. Plenty, economic growth and poverty co-exist and is being legitimized.

Global integration of the economic, political and sociocultural structures, processes, and ideologies produce injustice, oppression, exploitation and maldevelopment in society. The systematic integration of the forces that are dominant in the globalization process intensifies human rights violations. Globalization intensifies impoverishment by increasing the poverty, insecurity, and fragmentation of society and thus violates human rights and human dignity of millions of people.

Human rights have become an integral part of the process of globalization in many ways. The Western countries are increasingly using their view of human rights concept as a yardstick to judge developing countries and to deal with economic and trade relations to extend development assistance.

**Development aid and trade**

Development aid raises several issues related to human rights. First, aid raises the question whether aid should be directed mainly to reducing poverty and providing social services to the needy or whether priority should be given to economic growth and strengthening infrastructure. Second, there is a question whether the recipient government or the donor state should have a decisive voice. The developing states emphasize their primary responsibility for development of the country and their right to self-determination in respect of the economy and resources. Donor countries tend to emphasize their narrow concepts of human rights as a prerequisite to sanction development assistance. They also emphasize the pragmatic political fact that aid is not likely to be provided if the beneficiary states violated basic human rights. Thus, human rights have become
another arsenal of Western countries in their bid to bring recalcitrant Third World nations to heel in their New World Order. Human rights terminology has often been used to justify decisions to provide aid or to terminate it; while human rights criteria - to the extent that there is such a thing in the aid policy of any donor - have been confined to the search for those human rights violations that could justify cutting off aid (Tomasevski, 1997).

Liberalization of global trade is a key feature of globalization. Through the WTO and similar organizations, a set of new rules and regulations has been instituted to promote the formation of regional economic trading blocs. At the same time several Western countries have been trying to interrelate trade policy with human rights policy. Under mounting pressure from the business lobby in the respective countries, several Western governments have altered their policies depending up on their business interests. Under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) that provides for trade benefits for developing countries, the USA has withdrawn or threatened to withdraw preferences from some countries that violate human rights. The case of USA-China trade relations is a good example. This is a case of shift in policy based on convenience rather than ideological convictions or moral principles.

On the other hand, some developed countries are pressing for trade sanctions against states found to violate human rights, especially human rights standards that are generally based on the Conventions and Recommendations of the International Labour Organization. They have tended on the whole to oppose trade liberalization treaties such as NAFTA and currently WTO. The developing countries have generally objected to such measures since they would reduce their comparative advantage through cheap labor and constitute a major barrier to their industrialization. From their point of view, workers rights enforced by trade barriers would contribute to greater poverty in their countries.

Although the Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises adopted by the Organization of Economically Developed Countries (1976) provided for observance of standards of labor relations with respect to human rights by transnational companies, the USA and a few other countries have prevented its adoption. These are some of the examples of the double standards adopted by the developed countries that profess concern for human rights. The fact is that the economically-powerful Western countries are in a better position than others to take the advantage of globalization and at the same time dictate policies and guidelines to increase their bargaining power.

TNCs (and associated multilateral agencies and think-tanks) have become very powerful players under globalization. They are the main actors in several Western countries (and the South) in formulating new foreign policies to shape a new global order. This trend has been highlighted in a recent study that the emerging global order is spearheaded by a few hundred corporate giants, many of them bigger than most sovereign nations. By acquiring earth-spanning technologies, by developing products that can be produced anywhere and sold everywhere, by spreading credit around the world, and by connecting global channels of communication that can penetrate any village or neighborhood, these institutions we normally think of as economic rather than political, private rather than public, are becoming the world empires of the 21st century.
Globalization and Human Rights Violations

It is evident that globalization has brought in its train, great inequities, mass impoverishment and despair. It has fractured society along the existing fault lines of class, gender and community while, almost irreversibly, widens the gap internationally between the rich and the poor nations. Globalization has resulted in gross human rights violations for millions of workers (particularly women workers), peasants and farmers, and indigenous communities, particularly in the South.

(a) Globalization has resulted in the violation of the fundamental right to work. In their drive for profits, companies, in particular TNCS, have been restructuring their operations on a global scale. This has resulted in massive unemployment and underemployment, the worst situation since the 1930s. Two major impacts of globalization are noticeable. First, there is an accentuation of the process of the informalization of labor and the growth of the informal economy. Here, not only are the wages low, but also the legal protection of workers is minimal. Second, the ‘feminization of labor’ since women constitute the overwhelming majority of labor in the in low-wage industries. Workers in such industries are not only inadequately protected as regards health and safety, but they also do not enjoy security of employment in view of the tendency of such investors to move offshore to cut costs.

(b) Globalization poses a serious threat to the right of livelihood of millions of traditional farmers in the South. The requirement to comply with the GATT Final Act has opened up the agricultural sector to imports (mainly from the North) and as land laws are revised to facilitate corporate farming, there will inevitably be large-scale displacement of such communities. All these developments, and in particular the drive under the WTO regime to make access to food mainly dependent upon market mechanisms, are a threat to food security - the most fundamental of all human rights.

(c) Globalization has provided a new impetus to the destruction of the habitat and livelihood of indigenous communities in many countries of the South. The continuing displacement of such communities as a consequence of the intensification of such economic activities as mining and logging is a grim reminder of such violations of human rights.

(d) Where IMF/World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) are the main mechanism for promoting globalization, it has resulted in a massive violation of human rights. These SAP programs had resulted in a violation of the right to work, the right to food, the right to adequate housing, the right to health, the right to education and the right to development. The combined effect of the violation of the right to food and the right to health has had devastating consequences.

The Role of Adult Education

Given the above analysis, what should be the role of adult education? Generally, there are three possible responses to globalization and human rights – do nothing about it, engage with and accept it or resist it and/or build alternatives. Below I outline some suggestions and tasks for adult educators.

First, adult educators must challenge the discourse of accepting globalization as an
inevitable product of ‘development.’ The phenomenon of globalization as packaged by the "Washington Consensus,” its empirical basis, is very debatable. This implies resisting and confronting the ‘totalizing’ gaze of the ideology of globalization as an inevitable force of nature because it negates the centrality of human agency in history.

Second, adult educators must become more actively involved in generating awareness as well as articulating counter-critique of not only globalization but its relationship/impact on education/lifelong learning. It means getting involved in creating alternatives such as accessible fora for discussion and exchange of information, strategies aimed at building capacities for local groups to engage and confront globalization and its effects and supporting initiatives, networks and campaigns at the local, national and international level that aim at building solidarity especially among workers, women. Adult educators must actively oppose racism, sexism and all forms of discrimination. Third, adult educators must do more than just teaching about globalization or presenting academic papers about globalization and human rights. Adult educators need to develop new conceptual tools which contextualize the political economy of adult education and which recognizes that history, class, power and the state are all features that need to be taken into account in coming to grips with changes in the education, the economy and society (Brown, 1999). One way of developing new conceptual tools is to become more adventurous about crossing the narrow disciplinary ‘borders’ and seeking and appropriating new perspectives to track, inform and expand our analysis of processes of change inherent to capitalism and its transformations and expressions.

References