

Handout 11d: Myths and Realities of Globalization by Larry Kuehn

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“A rising tide lifts all boats” is the claim often made by those who argue that globalization will be good for everyone. In other words, growth in the economy in general will provide more for everyone. This is similar to the “trickle-down” theory of economics—that if the rich get richer, some of those riches will filter down to those who are less well off.

Unfortunately, the reality of globalization has been just the opposite. The gaps between rich and poor have grown between nations, as well as within nations. Canada has not been immune to this global trend.

A recent report from the International Labour Organization says “Seen through the eyes of the vast majority of women and men, globalization has not met their simple and legitimate aspirations for decent jobs and a better future for their children. Many of them live in the limbo of the informal economy without formal rights and in a swathe of poor countries that subsist precariously on the margins of the global economy. Even in economically successful countries some workers and communities have been adversely affected by globalization”.

“Yes, but there is no alternative,” say those who argue that the form of neo-liberal or corporate globalization is inevitable. Governments have been giving up their ability to regulate the economy in ways that ensure fairer and more equal distribution of the economic output of countries. They have joined trade agreements like the NAFTA and the World Trade Organization, which integrate economies in ways that favour the interests of corporations over those of the great majority of the people.

As the unfairness of the effects of globalization become more obvious, many people are now saying there must be alternatives. Our societies and cultures, as well as economies, are constructed by human efforts. We can find alternative ways of doing this that meet the needs of more people.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people meet in the World Social Forum and regional forums to work on designing new approaches to the global economy. The central theme is that “other worlds are possible.”

In addition, the less developed countries that have suffered the most from the impact of globalization are saying “no.” The negotiations at the World Trade Organization and the Free Trade Area of the Americas have broken down because countries, under the leadership of Brazil and others, reject further exploitation by rich countries and global corporations.

“The global sharing of culture makes life richer for all of us.” Communication technologies,

ease of travel and multi-cultural communities can open us up to the variety of human expression. It can create shared experiences across distances and languages.

However, as the power of the media and its narrow base of ownership can have a restricting effect, as well. Globalization of culture can mean McDonald's in every country, the news defined by CNN and Fox-TV, action movies from the US, and water as well as pop from Coke.

A global youth culture may actually be much narrower and even destructive of rich national and ethnic cultures. Just as economic development and habitat destruction are leading some flora and fauna to extinction, so global culture is producing extinction of many of the languages of humans.

“There is nothing I can do about globalization as an individual.” The very word 'global' makes it seem like it is impossible for own person to have an impact. But the actions of individuals, taken together, can have an effect. Ironically, the very nature of the global economy makes aspects of it vulnerable to organized pressure.

As an example, many student groups have joined the campaign by the Maquila Solidarity Network to make theirs a 'no sweat school'. This is done by winning and enforcing an anti-sweatshop purchasing policy for school uniforms or other clothing. An important part of the campaign is developing an understanding of the link between things in our every-day life, how and where they are produced, and what is our responsibility for them.

A particular aspect of the anti-sweat project is very connected to British Columbia. The “Play Fair at the Olympics' campaign calls on the International Olympic Committee and sportswear companies to take action against worker rights abuses in the sportswear industry.

The issues around globalization are large and complex, but they are not beyond our understanding or our ability to act.

Sources of further information

Maquila Solidarity Network
www.maquilasolidarity.org

New Internationalist
www.newint.org

International Labour Organization

www.ilo.org

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