

Conclusion

SHALL WE LEAVE IT TO THE EXPERTS?

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Not many years ago, “the experts” assured us that globalization would benefit rich and poor nations alike, peasants as well as dot-com millionaires. The rising tide of free trade would promote economic prosperity, which would trickle down and bring about gradual improvements in the lives and health of the world’s poor. To the extent that we allowed the experts to keep us informed, however, we were sadly misled. And to the extent that we allowed them to make decisions, to guide the process, we found that their interests were not necessarily the same as ours. Arundhati Roy vividly describes our contemporary dilemma:

What’s hard to reconcile oneself to, both personally and politically, is the schizophrenic nature of [globalization]. . . . In the lane behind my house, every night I walk past road gangs of emaciated laborers digging a trench to lay fiber-optic cables to speed up our digital revolution. In the bitter winter cold, they work by the light of a few candles. It’s as though the people of India have been rounded up and loaded onto two convoys of trucks (a huge big one and a tiny little one) that have set off resolutely in opposite directions. The tiny convoy is on its way to a glittering destination somewhere near the top of the world. The other convoy just melts into the darkness and disappears.¹

The critical question about globalization, implicit in every chapter of this book, is “Does it promote social justice?” To date, testify our authors, it has mostly done the opposite. We know that the current economic globalization has produced a small but growing number of extremely wealthy persons, wealthier than at any other time in history. But it has not produced a concurrent growth in the fortunes of those least well-off.

What of globalization’s benefits? Increased speed in communications, transportation, and other transactions across nations and regions is often how the benefits of globalization are characterized. Direct benefits from better international communication cannot be denied. The spread of the lethal SARS virus that killed thousands in 2003 was no doubt hastened by the ease

of international travel, but so also was its containment assisted by an efficient system of transglobal communication among public health authorities. The potential benefits of a speedy response to dramatic international events and infectious disease outbreaks are real, particularly to those in the developed countries. But the simple reality is that the bulk of the population in today's world is not primarily oppressed by fears of Ebola outbreaks, SARS, or even natural disasters. Their children still succumb to measles and malaria, the women die in childbirth, the men suffer from tuberculosis, just as those in the rich countries did a century ago. Among the important health problems for most of the world, only AIDS is a new disease, and it might be argued that the sluggish international response to AIDS in the underdeveloped world contributed to its terrible dominance in many countries today.

Some of the same technologies that are being used to increase the rate of return on global capital can also be harnessed for progressive social change. Perhaps the brightest example of how speedier communication can invigorate activism is the organizing potential of the Internet. Originally designed by nuclear scientists and the military, it has been used to mobilize people much more rapidly than phone trees, direct mailings, and fliers. When the US government was gearing up for a war against Iraq, an antiwar network rapidly organized, turning out almost a million people in the US on February 15th, 2003, achieving in six months what had taken organizers four years to do during the Vietnam War.² Beyond the US borders, the mobilization was even more impressive; millions of people around the world organized through e-mail and Web communication to mobilize the largest protest in history.

Yet we also know that for the great bulk of immediate problems facing the world's poor, the Internet is either unknown or an irrelevant curiosity, and its benefits untested. The speed with which international financial transactions can take place may simply mean that their local currency can lose half its value faster than ever before, perhaps overnight, or that their jobs as state employees can be dissolved in a matter of days or weeks. Speed is not a good in itself; it may simply bring what it will faster than before. The real focus in analyzing the effects of globalization must be on what changes, not how quickly change comes.

If our goal is to improve health, those within the health sector must move outside classrooms, laboratories, and hospital walls to embrace a broader approach to health. We cannot be "neutral" as the health care industry reaps huge profits and restricts people's access to treatment and care.

Globalizing the Struggle for Health

What, then, should be the response of those who want to change the current directions of this globalized world? To Noam Chomsky, the answer to that question is not new: "Being alone, you can't do anything. All you can do is deplore the situation. But if you join with other people . . . millions of things are possible, depending on where you want to put your efforts."³ Whatever the response, it will almost certainly involve not working alone but organizing others to join in the effort.

Movements to promote fair trade and global justice have won many small and several large victories in the struggles thus far. In 1998 the proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), which would have granted corporations equal international standing, with nation-states, was scuttled as a result of intensive grassroots education and political pressure.⁴ The famous "Battle of Seattle" in 1999 brought together tens of thousands of activists from around the world to express public protest against the corporate-sponsored plans and policies of the World Trade Organization. That historic event proved beyond doubt that people of both North and South do care, and are willing to show they care, about the future of this planet and its people. Today, each successive round of trade negotiations is faced with a formidable range of protests and demands from consumer groups, environmental activists, organized labor, and others demanding a place at the negotiating table.

The influential Jubilee movement that pressed for canceling the debts of the poorest countries began in churches, in response to an understanding of the shocking burden of debt. After several years of Jubilee's grassroots education and activism, some of the most heavily indebted poor countries were granted a reduction in their debt.

Smaller victories of "people power" are also cause for celebration. Citizens of Vieques Island in Puerto Rico succeeded in 2003 in stopping the US Navy from using their island as a bombing range. In Bolivia, a proposed pipeline to transport natural gas through Chile to the Pacific coast appears to be stalled because of strong protests from the indigenous population. All through Europe, resistance to the use of genetically altered foods is growing and has been successful in bringing about outright bans of such foods in some areas. Where people care about an issue and are willing to take action to back up their concerns, change is possible.

The health community has had only a limited voice in discussions about globalization to date, but health workers and agencies have tremendous potential to further globalize the struggle for health. AIDS activists have set a

good example of what can be accomplished through social action and persistence. The People's Health Movement presents a good opportunity to participate in a global solidarity movement for health. As health care becomes further privatized in the US and abroad, there is an increased need and ample opportunities for mobilization. Linking health to other efforts such as the environmental and economic justice campaigns can multiply the potency of each struggle. Very important efforts are underway to develop alternatives to the global economic structure (e.g., fair trade, supporting local economies) at the meetings of the World Social Forum. Chapter Fourteen describes a few of the efforts underway and the Resource Guide at the end of this book lists some of the groups that are working for health and justice.

Those concerned about health need to work with movements that are proposing alternative models for globalization, even though the precise structures for these alternatives may not yet be fully defined. Words matter: we might begin by clarifying global justice and human development as essential determinants of health, and refusing to use the term anti-globalization. We must show the powerful corporate interests that they must answer to the public for all they do, or do not do, to affect the health of the public. We need to think of ways to show the world the ugliness of the current world order, to build on the growing skepticism about where this planet is headed, and to talk of globalizing health as an alternative.

We suggest two key principles for those involved in promoting global health. The first is to *promote equity* as the central focus of efforts, going beyond health services to recognize that it is mostly broader conditions of life that provide more or less opportunity for achieving health—water, land, housing, health care, food security, work, dignity.

The second is to press for the provision of *health care as a fundamental universal human right*, as agreed by all countries that signed the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such a movement would seek to revive the concept of comprehensive primary health care as it was proposed in 1978 at Alma-Ata. Both principles demand that health care not be a commercial product, to be bought and sold in the marketplace. Both will require, in the longer run, deep changes in the basic economic and political systems that currently define our lives.

Time and again, health has been declared a basic human right. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services."⁵ The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and

Cultural Rights, adopted by the UN in 1977, recognizes the right of everyone to enjoy “the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.”⁶ In 1978, the goal of Health for All by the year 2000 was laid out at the Alma-Ata conference and every participating country, including the US, signed on to make it a reality through comprehensive Primary Health Care.⁷ The WHO Ottawa conference on Health Promotion held in 1986 put forth a charter highlighting the fundamental conditions and resources that are prerequisites to health, including “peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable eco-system, sustainable resources, social justice, and equity.”⁸

Within those principles lies a broad array of actions or objectives that those working to improve health might aim to address. Any one individual or group can focus on only a limited set of issues. The aim must be to contribute to a network of like-minded activists who, together, can make a difference. The following are likely to be key areas for the immediate future:

1. Promote equity in the global economic system, probably the most central concern. A wide range of initiatives is under way for such efforts as restricting the power of transnational corporations and multilateral lending institutions, restructuring trade policies to promote fair trade, canceling the debt of the poorest countries, and taxing international transactions (the “Tobin Tax”).

2. Restrict or ban international trade in industries whose products are designed or destined to kill, such as military hardware, including land mines, and tobacco.

3. Promote national responsibility for the provision of health care to all. In both North and South, resist privatization of health care and support national health care systems.

4. Assure that food, clean water, and other basic needs are seen as basic human rights and protected from profit-oriented exploitation.

5. Redesign and enforce an international essential drug policy that will regulate prices for the supply of, and research on drugs so that basic medicines can be provided to all who need them.

6. Include worker health and well-being whenever issues of industrial production or trade are discussed. Continue the international pressure to ban sweatshop labor and promote fair trade practices.

7. Demand environmental protection for this planet earth, requiring control of toxic wastes, clean and reduced energy use, and other similar measures.

Whatever the issue, strategically there is a critical need for intra-national and international solidarity—North-South, North-North, and South-South.

Solidarity means struggling together, as well as celebrating together when gains are made, small or large. People from many walks of life must be inspired to move out of their “comfort zones” and step into other worlds, to see the reality of globalization as it affects the lives and health of people today. We need above all to globalize dissent, resistance, and the demand for accountability. We need to envision and project a new reality that will move the globe towards a more just system.

And in the words of Arundhati Roy, we cannot leave it to the experts.