

GLOCALIZATION AND SUSTAINABILITY¹

Edgar Gonzalez-Gaudiano²

Introduction

Nowadays, the lexicon of the average citizen is invaded by a new collection of economic notions which are used to describe the phenomena that take place around us. Terms such as deceleration, recession, deregulation, fiscal balances, exchange-rate stability, curbing of inflation, opening-up of trade, and macro-economic results, among many others, constitute the new Cartesian cruxes used to explain numerous events of daily life.

Such a hallowing of the Economy throws into relief an ensemble of new situations defined by means of the concept of globalization. Though it is commonly known that the notion of the “global village” was coined by the Canadian Marshall McLuhan at the end of the sixties, it acquired its international patent in the eighties, when the so-called phenomena of the transnationalization of capital and a series of commercial transactions in increasingly well-defined financial circuits made themselves evident.

The concept of globalization also refers to a territorial dimension, which takes into account different types of phenomena such as the one which is beginning to find expression in the European Union, as the citizens of the countries which make up that powerful region are able to travel freely across the political borders that still define the Nation States.

In this regard Mattelart (1996) maintains that globalization is a reductive notion which simplifies and masks, rather than reveals, the complexity of the current moment, converting itself into a reference that proposes to characterize the organization and interpretation of the world by means of an interconnected network of large economic units. Hence the territorial dimension of globalization is applied to describe not only that kind of elitist nomadism which sees the world as smaller, but also those migratory phenomena which occur for economic motives as well - though different ones - in other world regions such as between Burkina Faso and Mauritania, or closer to home, between Mexico and the United States. Both nomadisms evoke feverish backdrops. From the naïve hallucination of a cosmopolitan nature, to the Californian paranoia materialized in Law 187. In a certain sense, globalization exists only for those who matter as market subjects, which generates new taxonomies for individuals as a function of their capacity for being consumers or agents of production.

But globalization is a term which is also employed in fields distinct from, though interconnected with, the economic one. In the sphere of communication it accounts for the portentous current capacity of the media to transmit messages and images of the world which construct and deconstruct cultural realities and which generate new symbolic balances between the universal and the particular. An intertwining ambiguity of power and being - as a function of having - is disseminated, which implicitly excludes the masses of those who from a marketing perspective are dispensable. The new media culture produces a mirage of free choice by giving

¹ Published in: *Critical Forum*, Australia 1997 (5) 1 & 2: 83-90. August.

² Doctor of Philosophy and Education Sciences, he is the General Director of the Centre for Education and Training in Sustainable Development at the Ministry of the Environment, Natural Resources, and Fisheries in Mexico. In formulating this study he received assistance from Iván González de Alba in researching the information.

access to a multitude of apparent options that gravitate around a unitary conception of a paradoxically diverse world. A new culture which oscillates between difference and indifference. By merely changing the channel we eliminate the bothersome images of conflicts in Ruanda, Bosnia, or Chechenia, and even the closest ones associated with our urban violence, the social decomposition of taking justice into one's own hands and of impunity.

Globalization is also applied to describe environmental problems, ever since the old slogan of the German ecologists about "thinking globally and acting locally" - the history of which has demonstrated the importance of thinking locally and acting globally, in order not to fall into the syndrome of "I think and you act," as well in order to refer to the imperative of analyzing the existing asymmetries on a global level which cannot be resolved by means of a local action.

That permits us to resemanticize the British concept of *glocalize*, which arose in order to describe an appropriate business behavior that attends simultaneously to different domains of potential preferences, in order to think of it as an integrated dimension of the global and the local affecting each other reciprocally. Thus so-called global environmental phenomena such as climatic change, the alteration in the stratospheric ozone layer, the loss of biodiversity, oceanic pollution, and desertification, to cite a few, can receive a better frame of interpretation by analyzing global problems in the light of specific local responsibilities. In the same way, local phenomena such as social marginalization, credibility erosion, and unemployment can be explained from more globalizing perspectives which over-determine them.

Some data on economic globalization

Dieterich (1995: 49-50) mentions that the number of transnational companies has increased from 7,000 in the sixties to 37,000 at the current time. In 1994 the 500 giants alone reached the quantity of 10,245 (British) billion dollars, that is 50% more than the United States GNP, ten times more than the GNP of all Latin America and the Caribbean and 43 times more than the Mexican GNP.

The current production capacity is dizzying. Marini (1996) points out that the global production of goods and services in 1980 was 15.5 billion dollars (in 1990 values) and that in only ten years it attained the figure of 20 billion (more than two thirds concentrated in the G-7). The increase of 4.5 billion in only a decade surpasses everything that had been produced from the discovery of agriculture to the first half of the twentieth century. It is difficult to imagine the quantity of raw materials implied by an increase of that magnitude and the corresponding ecological and human impacts.

Data known to everyone indicate that the 500 largest corporations in the world are American, Japanese and European. Only four are Latin-American and these belong to the primary and tertiary sectors. The combination of the capital of these giant corporations is a clear short-term tendency, favoring the appearance of integrated economic empires which do not recognize a territory or sovereign government, where the money flows daily by means of digital networks sustaining processes that do not constitute true commercial activities, but which consist mainly of speculative currency transactions or inter-business accounting exchanges, many of them in order to evade tax obligations. A free-floating capital which represents about 13 billion dollars. This is the true dimension of globalization. Thinking of it as a movement which will make greater social equity possible is only wishful thinking.

The demographic dimension

The economic data take on a different dimension when they are articulated with other elements of analysis. An example of this is the population data which show the relationship that exists between world demographic growth and its expression in high-, upper-middle-, middle-, and low-income countries. Diverse conclusions may be drawn from this information, particularly the existing relation between rate of growth and income. It can be inferred that the problem goes beyond simply blaming the poor countries for the "population bomb," catalogued as the main global environmental problem by developed countries. It has been widely demonstrated by studies of all kinds, undertaken by United Nations agencies (UNICEF, UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA, etc.) as well as by private organizations, that the increase in schooling levels among women or the raising of life expectancy in rural areas produces a short-term decrease in the birth rate. That is, an interpretation may be derived which relates the distribution of global wealth and quality of life with demographic growth.

The UNDP's Report on Human Development (1996: 1-4) points out dramatically that though in the last 15 years a spectacular economic development has been observed in 15 countries which represent approximately a fourth of the world population, a totally unprecedented decline has also manifested itself in more than 100 countries which together also represent 25% of the population - where 70 countries show an income inferior to that which they had in 1980 and 43 an income inferior to that of 1970. This is generating two increasingly polarized worlds, where of the world GNP of 23 billion dollars in 1993, 18 billion is distributed among the industrialized countries and only 5 among developing countries, even though 80% of the world population is concentrated in the latter. The disparities in the use of economic resources between the richest fifth and the poorest fifth of the world population have doubled in the last twenty years, passing from a proportion of 30 to 1 to one of 60 to 1.

The same UNDP warns that though political leaders are usually fascinated by the quantitative aspects of economic growth, it is necessary to pay more attention to the aspects related to its structure and quality in order to avoid distortions and defects, which foster:

Growth without employment, which has repercussions of various kinds, but which in developing countries is expressed by the need to invest more hours of work for low income and by the increase in the informal economy, for example the street-hawking which generates more than 32% of the metropolitan GNP in Mexico City (Jaliffe-Rahme, 1996).

Growth without equity, in which the fruits of work principally benefit the rich. Between 1970 and 1985, the world GNP increased by 40%, but the number of poor people increased by 17%.

Growth without a voice in the communities, where growth is not accompanied by democratization, characterized by authoritarian regimes which stifle social participation in the decisions which affect the lives of the population.

Growth without roots, in which cultural identity disappears through the fomentation of a uniformity that suppresses differences, but not inequality.

Growth without a future, as when natural resources are squandered and the environment is degraded in the eagerness to obtain short-term growth.

These are also the profiles of an economic globalization which does not hide a congenital voracity of resources for the benefit of a few. Paul Hawken (1994: 135), citing Robert McNamara, ex-President of the World Bank, points out: "Even if the growth rate of the poor countries doubled, only seven would close the gap with the rich nations in 100 years. Only another nine would reach our level in 1,000 years".

Globalization and the environment

As can be inferred, there is also a close relationship between globalization phenomena and the form in which the natural resources of the planet are used. The plain reality of the planetary distribution of world resources is manifest in the ratio of energy demand between Bangladesh and the United States, which is 1 to 15. Which confirms the thesis that the population problem cannot be analyzed as an isolated variable.

Certainly, with the current rates of demographic growth the world population will triple by the year 2030, and so a decisive intervention is demanded in this domain. All the same, the fundamental problem resides in the social injustice which prevails in the figure that the 50 million people who will be added to the population of the United States in the next 40 years, in accord with its rates of demographic growth, will produce an impact in terms of consumption of natural resources equivalent to that which 2,000 million would produce in India (Hawken, 1994: 161).

The matter is related to the differences in consumption per capita, though it is also associated with the efficiency of the productive processes in terms of the quantity of energy per unit of product. It has been pointed out (CCOD, 1995: 12-13) that the energy consumed in equivalent kilograms of oil for every 100 dollars of GNP product currently attains 15 in Japan, 29 in Germany, 38 in the United States and 54 in Canada. If all countries increased their energy efficiency to the level of Japan the total world consumption of energy would be reduced by 2,343 billion equivalent kilograms of oil - that is, by 36% of world energy consumption. That would have even more effective results in developing countries, where the energy consumption in equivalent kilograms of oil for every 100 dollars of GNP is up to 161 in China, 120 in Mozambique, 117 in Venezuela, and 106 in Egypt, in comparison with Japan's 15.

I am not trying to champion the discourse of technological efficiency but the former does explain, at least partially, why a true improvement of the global environmental problem necessarily implies the establishment of international policies which encourage a greater and more equitable distribution of wealth and technological and scientific exchange. But this will not occur as long as the current orientations of the existing world economic system prevail, which denies each year more than 500,000 million dollars in economic opportunities to poor countries by limiting their access to commercial, labor, and capital markets on a planetary scale; which maintains itself based on an inverse transfer, from poor countries to rich countries, of net resources superior to 50,000 million dollars annually; whereby the richest countries reluctantly grant only 0.35% of their GNP for official aid in development to the 1,200 million absolute indigents of the developing world, while they allocate between 15 and 20% of GNP in their budgets for the social safety nets of their own 100 million poor people (CCOD: 7).

Sustainable development

Without claiming in the slightest to exhaust such a currently controversial theme as sustainable development, it is especially germane in this study to point to some critical aspects derived from the polemic which has been taking place since the report entitled "Our Common Future" was presented by the World Commission on the Environment and Development, headed up by the Prime Minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland. It will be recalled that the report promotes sustainable development as that which allows us to satisfy our present needs without compromising the possibilities of future generations to satisfy their own.

This thesis of inter-generational commitment has provoked various types of reactions, from those who emphasize the importance of a greater intra-generational commitment (Bifani, 1992), to those who manifest the marked differences derived from the interests of the countries of the North and those of the South, in terms of an ensemble of themes which range from the demand for technological transfer in conditions less disadvantageous for developing countries (Singer, 1992), to the access to germ plasm banks which are fundamental for research in biotechnology, calling on the existence of biodiversity as part of humanity's heritage - to cite only two examples with sharp socioeconomic and political edges.³

Certainly, sustainable development begins to manifest its potential as a strategic framework for long-term planning, with possibilities of incorporating regional adjustments in the definition of priorities which permit the formulation of better-articulated projects in the three topics which constitute it: social equity, particularly with policies directed to overcoming poverty; the protection of the environment, with a focus on taking advantage of natural resources in accord with the cycles and dynamics of nature, taking into account the regeneration of its productive capacity and its levels of assimilation of residues; and economic growth, which in developing countries is accomplished through the fomentation of worthy employment.

Nevertheless, the points of balance - if that's what one could call particular and complex processes of conflict negotiation - among these three topics: social equity, economic growth, and protection of the environment, are not produced automatically, nor do they result from an analysis supported by "strictly scientific-technological bases"; instead they necessarily imply the adoption of political postures, not only within the countries themselves in the context of their sovereign decisions, but also in confronting the external pressures issuing from the phenomena of globalization. That becomes especially complicated when traversing extremely difficult macro-economic surroundings, intermingled with severe crises of social conflict that generate backdrops of increasing uncertainty and in which not infrequently substitutes appear which do not offer answers at all different from the conventional ones.

Sustainable development is an unfinished proposal - it does not yet constitute a model, much less a paradigm, as has been maintained. All the same, it does represent a focus which offers some possibilities for reactivating discussions on old

³ For a typology of the different conceptions of sustainable development associated with educational projects, see Sauvé, Lucie (1996)

unsolved problems, and which allows us to move forward in the clarification of strategic elements in order to reinforce the transition toward more just global conditions. That is not a short-term problem.

Some alternative ideas

In the search for new answers strategies have been set forth which are directed towards the valuing of nature and the internalization of the externalities of the productive processes in the cost of the products. Economic incentives have been proposed which stimulate or discourage certain types of behavior and preferences, and institutions and judicial frameworks have been strengthened in order to impel a new rationality in accord with the cycles and dynamics of recuperation and the absorptive capacities of nature. Proposals which can become a transmission band with the potential for modifying the ensemble of forces which have moved the wheel of history in the civilizing process which characterizes our unprecedented current moment. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that such proposals run counter to the dominant model of development, they have not succeeded in unseating its general principles which dominate the direction and intensity of the processes now underway. The data about the rise in the concentration of wealth and its social repercussions among increasingly larger contingents of the world population, added to those about the enormous ecological deterioration which has taken place in the last thirty years, testify to that.

Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that globalization represents a phenomenon which inscribes itself in different space-time scales, which make it even more complex to express its possibilities, difficult in themselves, in a conceptual model. All we possess is general traits which do not manage yet to define their profiles, from which some threatening manifestations may be deduced, even though they are also generating areas of technological, regulatory, and commercial opportunities, as well as greater articulation among certain scientific and professional sectors - all avenues of which we must take advantage.

Facing the threats requires a strengthening of those social processes oriented towards encouraging a greater participation by people in the decisions which affect their lives, such as:

The formulation of public policies which sponsor a more appropriate regulatory framework, in order to confront external and internal pressures for the establishment of openings and exchanges without restrictions.

Generating conditions which reinforce the empowerment of people, by means of strategies directed to those who now make the decisions, as well as to widening the decision-making groups with a greater social participation which foments authentic local and regional leadership.

Developing better association and communication strategies, by means of the promotion of networks of citizen organizations that create and demand alternative mechanisms for participation and for obtaining truthful and opportune information.

Reinforcing regional and local processes articulated toward people's own well-

identified interests, which allow them to counteract the hypnotic effect of an illusory approach to worlds which are increasingly distant for the majority.

Fomenting alternative processes for conflict management which avoid the sapping and division of communities for the benefit of outside interests and which promote the analysis of their true needs and priorities.

Furthering educational and training processes through formal and informal methodologies which strengthen people's own identities, place value on distinctive characteristics and resources and sponsor the framing of particular horizons of a possible and truly sustainable future.

Bibliography

- Arditi, B.** (1995) The underside of difference. mimeo.
- Bifani, P.** (1992) "Desarrollo sostenible, población y pobreza: Algunas reflexiones conceptuales." *Conferencia Magistral en el Congreso Iberoamericano de Educación Ambiental*. Guadalajara, México. Noviembre.
- Chesney Lawrence, L.** (1993) Lecciones sobre desarrollo sustentable. Caracas, Ediciones Fundambiente. 81p.
- Chomsky, N.y Dieterich, H.** (1995) La sociedad global. Educación, mercado y democracia. 2 ed. México, Joaquín Mortiz. 198p.
- Concertación Centroamericana de Organismos de Desarrollo (CCOD)** (1995) Acción concertada. Year V, Núm. 18. Heredia, Costa Rica. 89p.
- Hawken, P. (1994) The ecology of commerce. A declaration of sustainability. New York, HarperBusiness. 250p.
- Jalife-Rahme, A.** (1996) "Goeconomía. La globalización económica y desglobalización política," in *El Financiero*, 31 August, p.36. Review of the book by **Richard Barnett and John Cavanagh**: Sueños globales: corporaciones imperiales y el nuevo orden mundial.
- Marini, R. M.** (1996) "Proceso y tendencias de la globalización capitalista." In: Marini, R. M. & Millán, M. (Coord.) La teoría social latinoamericana. Cuestiones contemporáneas. Tome IV. Mexico City, El Caballito. 256p.
- Mattelart, A.** (1996) "Una comunicación desigual." In *El Correo de la UNESCO*. Year XLVIII, February. pp.11-15.
- PNUD** (1996) Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano 1996. Madrid, Mundi-Prensa Libros. 250p.
- Sauvé, L.** (1996) "Environmental education and sustainable development: A further appraisal." In: *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*. (1) 7-34.
- Singer, F.** (1992) "Sustainable development vs global environment: resolving the conflict." In: *The Columbia Journal of World Business*. Fall-Winter, pp.155-161.



Documento disponible en

<http://anea.org.mx>