

# Globalization: An African Perspective

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During April 2008, it seemed like the world arrived in South Africa, as parliamentary members, ambassadors and officials from 135 nations converged in Cape Town for the 118<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). The IPU is “a world organization of parliaments that work for peace and cooperation with focus on worldwide dialogue. It seeks to strengthen parliaments as crucial pillars of democracy, focusing future cooperation on a number of key areas” (Qinga-Vika, 2008).

“Pushing back the frontiers of poverty” was the primary theme of the 2008 conference. Other topics discussed in the assembly included the political, economic and social challenges that blight global communities around the world, the plight of migrant workers, human trafficking, xenophobia and human rights. The IPU painted a picture of the world in conversation and of globalization as a positive force to solve local and regional problems.

In the African context, globalization is received with mixed feelings. Thomas Friedman (2000), in his book *The Lexus and the Olive tree*, describes globalization as “everything and its opposite”. He explains that it can be “incredibly empowering and incredibly coercive. It can democratise opportunity and democratise panic. It makes the whales bigger and the minnows stronger ... While it is homogenizing cultures, it is also enabling people to share their unique individuality farther and wider. It makes us want to chase after the Lexus (the essence of modern life) more intensely than ever and cling to our olive trees (our traditional ways) more tightly than ever. It enables us to reach into the world as never before and it enables the world to reach into each of us as never before” (2000, p. 406). From an African perspective, there is a continuous tension between the positive influences of globalization and the extensive impact it has on our lives.

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As Christian leaders in the world today, it is vital that we have an intimate knowledge of the context in which we lead. How should we respond to change? We cannot ignore or deny it, nor should we simply go with the flow and see where we end up. We cannot approach the future as merely an extension of the past or simply more of the present. We need to understand the times in which we live and consider the factors influencing our world.

### **The African Landscape**

“I am an African,” South African President Thabo Mbeki (1998) began a famous speech with these words that echoed through the hearts of all who are passionate about Africa.

If you think of Africa, what do you see? Some see corrupt governments and ongoing civil conflict; poverty and starving African children; or the grim reality of HIV/AIDS along with frightening predictions of collapsing health care systems. It is not surprising that many people, organizations and even nations believe that globalization holds the answers to all of Africa’s problems.

Yet, mixed in with this sad collage of images, are pictures of the wonders of Africa: majestic mountains; oceans and deserts; beautiful people with rich and diverse cultures; elephants standing proud and firm; lions racing after prey across vast plains covered with zebras, giraffes and antelope against the azure blue of the African sky.

What makes Africa really special, however, cannot be described in picturesque words, recorded as sound bites or depicted in a coffee table book or travel brochure. The real treasure of Africa is found in the hearts of its people. Although many Africans do not possess what their counterparts in other lands do – comfort, basic amenities, Oprah – they have something that is often a lost element of many western lives: hope. The injustices of the past and the struggles of the present leave the African with the dream of a better future, a brighter tomorrow. The question, however, is how does globalization affect this picture of the future?

## The Impact of Globalization in Africa

The impact of globalization in Africa today is not all rosy. Those on the lower economic rungs of society seem to often be the ones who are impacted the most. Many stories illustrate this point. Tom Sine (1999) tells the story of John Otieno and his family in Uganda:

“A gigantic orange sun began its descent into Lake Victoria as John Otieno stood patiently in line at the back door of the Euro Fish Factory. John, his wife Beatrice and their four children lived on the edge of Lake Victoria in Uganda. He had just completed twelve hours of hard work on a road construction project. In a good month when work is regular he makes \$80 ... Beatrice brings in another \$10 to \$15 a month to help the family income. The Otienos live on the edge of an urban slum in a small two-room hut that costs them \$25 a month. A single light bulb suspended from the ceiling costs them \$7 a month and kerosene for their cooking stove another \$8 to \$10 a month. They spend an additional \$3 to \$4 a month to purchase water from a neighbourhood standpipe. In other words this family spends roughly half their meagre income for shelter and utility costs, leaving very little left over for food, medicine and the education of their two oldest children. Until three years ago, they budgeted their funds to buy fresh fish twice a week from local fishermen ... but globalization has changed all that for the Otienos and thousands of their neighbours who live near Lake Victoria. The local fishermen used to sell their Nile Perch fillets for \$1 a kilogram. But in the past three years the price of fish has increased more than four-fold and the Otienos and many others can no longer afford to buy it. They are very concerned about how to provide an adequate diet for their four children.” (p. 147)

Fish prices soared in Uganda owing to several factors, key amongst them was the good relationship that the Ugandan government developed with European investors. These investors, hearing of the bountiful resources in Lake Victoria, built a number of fish factories around the shores of the lake. They are reportedly buying, processing and flying 200 tons of fish a week from Lake Victoria to dinner tables in Europe. As Tom Sine (1999) notes:

“John stands in line at one of these fish factories with his neighbours to buy the bones and fish heads since they can no longer afford the fish harvested by their own fishermen from their own lake. One of the cardinal doctrines of the new religion of free trade is that everyone on the planet has to be allowed to fish in everyone else’s pond. The advocates

of this doctrine insist that if everyone is allowed to own the banks, phone systems and harvest the fish in other people's countries eventually it will work out to everyone's benefit." (p. 147)

This is in line with the World Bank's take on globalization in a recent briefing document, defining it as: "the observation that in recent years the quickly rising share of economic activity in the world seems to be taking place between people who live in different countries (rather than in the same country)(2004, p.1).

### **A Global Culture**

With globalization has come the rise of a global culture. Although there is a time lag between western and non-western nations, generally a visitor from the United States will find themselves wearing the same brand of clothes, drinking and eating the same types of food and listening to the same styles of music, whether they are visiting Nairobi, Ontario, Buenos Aires, Prague or Bangkok.

Simultaneously, the values and morality of the global elite are filtering through to all the nations of the world. Value is increasingly defined in terms of economic worth and happiness is defined in terms of this worth. "I am happy if my needs are met, if I have accumulated enough 'stuff' and if I am having new and wilder experiences to keep me from getting bored. When I surf the web, I am in control of where I go, what I see and whom I talk to. Alone with my computer I can form part of a community, but who can really get to know me or care about me?" The world is made up of millions of strangers living their lonely lives, experiencing their thrills with no boundaries, no borders and no foundations. There is a need for a foundation upon which to base global living in the twenty-first century. Jesus, not the Internet, is the stable point of a rapidly changing world. To quote Tom Sine (1999):

"While we feel out of control, our God isn't. At the very core of our being we are a people of a wild outrageous hope. We believe that the God who began this entire venture will write the final chapter and make all things new. Scripture tells us that God invites us to be a part of this venture." (p. 18)

## Responding to Global Trends

Globalization is impacting our world and is changing the shape of all that we know. A number of global trends will define the world of tomorrow. Common to all of them is the removal of barriers dividing individuals, nations, cultures and markets and an increased tendency towards an integrated whole or a global village. Within each of these trends are both positive and negative tendencies. Below are three of the most prominent trends and suggestions on how we can respond to them.

### 1. Transformation of authority and culture

The information revolution is threatening the power structures of the world. Traditions no longer make sense in our fast-moving world. Why should we rely on the authority of those older and wiser than us when we can supposedly learn more by travelling the information superhighway? As these authority structures are gradually eroded in society, a vacuum of leadership is being created. No one in today's global culture is explaining the "whatness of what is" and showing the way forward. Instead, this vacuum is being filled by the forces of multiculturalism, postmodernism and relativism, which hold that "anything goes."

Because globalization has brought down many of the walls that limited the movement and reach of people and because it has simultaneously wired the world into networks, it gives more power to individuals to influence people, markets and even nations than at any time in history (Friedman, 2000). Oprah Winfrey is an example of such a super-empowered individual, with people worldwide quoting her latest opinion.

Globalization is also creating a crisis of identity and displacing people from their traditional cultures (Harrison & Huntington, 2000). A global culture is being communicated through the media, the entertainment industry, the Internet, satellite communications and to a large degree, consumerism. Few things are more threatening to people than to have their identity or their sense of home stripped away. People have a need to belong to a family, a community, a nation or religion.

In Africa, this sense of community is especially strong. One of the most predominant worldviews in African culture is that of *Ubuntu*, which is best described through the

expression: *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Zulu). This means: *A person is only a person because of other people*. Mike Boon (1996) explains the concept of *Ubuntu*:

“One’s humanity can, therefore, only be defined through interaction with others. It is believed that the group is as important as the individual, and a person’s most effective behaviour is in the group. All efforts towards this common good are lauded and encouraged, as are all acts of kindness, compassion and care and the great need for human dignity, self-respect and integrity.” (p. 32)

People don’t like seeing their cultures disappearing into some global melting pot. Within Africa there is therefore a profound sense of tension between tradition and our global reality.

### **A Christian Response**

People are yearning for absolutes on which life, society and civilizations can be built. Both globalization and postmodernism seem to be interacting to undermine the authority structures in society. Biblical Christianity has never been undermined by industrial and technological change and advancement, but it has been eroded when false ideas have been left to spread in society. As Christians we need to be on the cutting edge of technological change and opportunities, but resistant to ideological change that undermines absolute truth. People need to be aware of their uniqueness, individuality and destinies in God because as cultures are increasingly homogenized, they will feel lost and unimportant within this global environment.

## **2. Technological growth and the emergence of a knowledge-based economy**

At the heart of the globalization system is the democratisation of technology, finance and information (Friedman, 2000). In the 1980s, major innovations involving computerization, telecommunications, miniaturization, compression technology and digitisation paved the way for unprecedented technological growth and innovation. Today, the Internet is directly influencing the daily lives of millions of people. The democratisation of technology has created a much faster, more open and more complex marketplace, with a whole new set of efficiencies as well as a whole new place to do business called cyberspace.

This means that the potential for wealth creation has become geographically dispersed, giving previously disconnected people the chance to access and apply knowledge. In order to participate, developing countries will have to upgrade their education and skills. Commenting on the African context, South African President Thabo Mbeki (1998) notes that:

“The developing countries have been left behind. It would not be an exaggeration to say that as the west is cruising in automobiles on the information superhighway, we are still moving on horse-drawn carts in a dirt road in some small village.” (p. 169)

Never before in the history of the world have we been able see through, hear through and look through almost every conceivable wall. Today, no country can ever truly cut itself off from the global media or from external sources of information.

### **A Christian Response**

The technological and information age provides tremendous opportunities for communication and media. We should respond in kind or we will not be able to compete with the flood of alternative worldviews contained in popular culture. As Christian leaders we need to keep abreast of modern technology.

A very large percentage of the population in Africa does not have access to computers, but we have one of the largest mobile phone subscriber percentages in the world. Knowing this, Google recently announced their intentions to open an African office in South Africa (Lingham, 2007). Having researched their market, their focus appears to be primarily upon utilizing the huge network of mobile phones, 30 million in South Africa alone, and upon improving Internet connectivity via these mobile devices. Similarly, many churches in South Africa use mobile text messages to communicate with people. They have come up with some very innovative tools for evangelizing and growing people.

### **3. Our responsibility to the poor**

The Bible repeatedly reminds us of our responsibility to the poor (James 1:27; Proverbs 14:21; Matthew 6:2). In response to the mounting challenges facing the growing number of the poor on our doorstep, the debt crisis, the decreasing governmental aid and failure of the

global economy to include many of our poorest neighbours, Christian leaders have new opportunities to:

- Invest in the development of African leaders, providing them with the abilities and tools to bring lasting change to their communities and nations.
- Encourage local communities to develop a high level of self-reliance in the production of food to reduce vulnerability to the ups and downs of the global economy.
- Enable people and organizations to address the needs of the most vulnerable through, for example, education of the poor and empowerment programs.
- Fashion a range of new co-operatives and partnerships to maximise the impact of our efforts to see the transformation of communities of need. Local churches can partner with churches abroad and relief agencies can partner with church planting agencies, to work towards the common goal of community transformation (Sine, 1999).
- Actively participate in organizations such as the IPU, where stakeholders come together to discuss practical solutions to poverty.

### **Conclusion**

As Christians, we have the responsibility to understand the impact of globalization on our world and specifically on the people living in this context. We also have the responsibility to bring God's righteousness into this world. We need to think about, dialogue and strategize about these and many other aspects, repercussions and opportunities as a result of globalization.

True and lasting transformation, however, begins in the heart. Individuals who have been transformed internally through a living relationship with Jesus Christ, who have been founded in their faith through an understanding of God's Word, who have developed a Biblical Christian Worldview and who have recognised God's calling within their sphere of influence can and will transform Africa. In the African context, leaders need to be raised up and given the tools and abilities to take God's way and will into Africa, so that we can see African Reformation – God transforming Africa into His likeness.



## About the Author

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