

Understanding Globalisation and the Reaction of African Youth Groups

By

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Introduction

Dominant representations of the contemporary global economy abound with endings and beginnings of a particular epoch. What we are witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such; that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (Fukuyama, 1989). For its supporters, the spread of capitalism and democracy holds the promise of one world beyond ideological divides and international conflicts. But cleavages still exist; according to some international relations scholars, the East-West division of the Cold War era has been replaced by a North-South split between a peaceful group of liberal democratic states in the North and instability in the South; a divide sometimes referred to as 'zones of peace and zones of conflict' or mature and immature anarchies (Tickner, 1999).

Consequently, events such as the World Wars, the depression, decolonisation, the Cold War and the likes left their traces on the ebb and flow of globalisation. While increasing integration through trade and investment has been a feature of the global economy since the Second World War, several pivotal events in recent decades have led

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to a sudden acceleration in its social and political prominence. In the North, the oil crisis and the suspension of dollar convertibility in 1972 marked the end of the 'long boom' of post-1945 Keynesianism. They also triggered the meteoric rise of global capital markets, which made earning and keeping 'market confidence' an increasingly important determinant of government policies (Green & Griffith, 2002). In the South, the Mexican Government's near-default on its foreign debt in 1982 marked the end of the post-war era of import-substituting industrialization, and began a long and painful period for developing countries, characterised by the burden of massive foreign debt, and the rise of political influence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and international capital markets, all three of which led policy makers away from development policies focused on the domestic markets and towards policies focused on export-led growth (ibid).

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent collapse of Soviet communism led to the rapid integration of what became known as the 'transition economies' of the former Soviet Union into a seemingly triumphant model of market-driven economic change. There was rapid expansion of trade and investment flows, as large parts of Latin America and Asia adopted export-led growth strategies, and the countries of the former Soviet empire were quickly, if incompletely, absorbed into a growing global economy. 'Globalisation' quickly became the shorthand for this model of expansion.

In this context, existing structures of global economic governance were overhauled. The World Bank and the IMF redefined their roles, moving swiftly away from Keynesian operating principles to become bastions of neo-liberalism. Globalisation and the erosion of national sovereignty drew growing public attention to the undemocratic

and closed nature of increasingly powerful global institutions and the influence and level of accountability of global corporations.

In Africa, political, economic and socio-cultural consequences of this phase of globalisation unified a diverse array of actors. Downsizing and corporate restructuring, privatisation, the erosion of workers' rights and the changing nature of production and supply chains, global warming, unsustainable growth and depletion of resources drew opposition from the African societies, particularly certain youth groups. Increasing corporate power, social inequality and marginalisation have radicalised youths in the fight against imperial overstretch of neo-liberal globalisation and its adherents.

Globalization: Towards a Conceptual Framework

Globalization is perhaps one of the most fashionable yet controversial terms in contemporary international relations discourse. As a concept, it is the historical outcome of a global capital project, several centuries old, for an integrated world market, even if this 'market' is one in which a powerful few fleece the poor majority, in a world characterized by wide differences in development, wealth, resources and power (Obi, 2000).

In terms of political economy, globalisation is a complex and contested notion. The debate is broadly between those who see globalisation as a transformatory capitalist project that is 'dissolving international borders, and rendering the nation-state and traditional concept of sovereignty irrelevant and obsolete' (Ohamae, 1995; Drenger, 1998) and those who insist, that it is 'far from a linear, uniform or homogenizing process' (Boyer & Drache, 1996; Zyman, 1996; Saurin, 1996). Elaborating on the conception of

globalisation, Scholte (2000), found four dominant explanation of globalisation to be grossly redundant, that is, globalisation as internationalisation; globalisation as liberalisation; globalisation as universalisation; and globalisation as westernisation. These are viable in their own sense but do not offer new understanding or highlight new historical conditions. With respect to the internationalisation paradigm, globalisation refers to increases in interaction and interdependence between people in different countries. Considerable increases in cross-border exchanges have indeed occurred in recent decades, so it is understandable that globalisation has come for many to mean internationalisation. However, inter-connections between countries have also manifested at various earlier times during the 500 year history of the modern state-system. In particular, the late nineteenth century witnessed levels of cross-migration, direct investment, finance and trade that proportionately are broadly comparable with those of the present (ibid). No vocabulary of 'globalisation' was needed during these previous periods, and the original terminology remains quite sufficient to explain contemporary cross-border transactions and inter-linkages.

Neo-liberals view globalisation as liberalisation, a phenomenon that sees a global world as one without regulatory barriers to transfers of resources between countries. In recent history we have indeed witnessed many reductions of statutory constraints on cross-border movements of goods, services, money and financial instruments.

Globalisation as westernization still fails the test of providing new insight. Certainly more people and cultural phenomena than ever before now spread to all habitable corners of the planet. However, moves towards universalisation are hardly new. Writing of our global pre-history (Scholte, 2000), Clive Gamble argued that the trans-

continental spread of the human species, begun a million years ago, constitutes the initial instance of globalisation. In this regard too, the new terminology of 'globalisation' is unnecessary. Globalisation as westernisation also provokes another academic discourse. This terminology has arisen particularly in various arguments about post-colonial imperialism. In this case, globalisation is more often associated with a process of homogenisation, a modern and western world, and particularly American in outlook. In other words, the concept of globalization conveys idea of westernisation, Europeanisation and Americanisation.

The preceding comments endorse the skeptic's position that talk of 'globalisation' can be a social scientist's jargon, a journalist catch phrase, a publisher's sale pitch, a politician's slogan and a businessman's fetish (ibid). Because of the core disagreements about the nature of globalisation, its impact on international relations theory can vary. To employ analytical schemes that are standard within the field, globalization may be thought to have impact on the nature of the actors, or upon the environment in which they find themselves; it may be transforming the process of international life or its structures.

By employing conventional theoretical approaches, the potential impact of globalization might be seen from realist, pluralist and structuralist perspectives (Clark,1999). Citing Little and Smith, Clark further noted that from a realist perspective, globalisation would be seen to be transforming the processes of international relations by diminishing further its power and security dimensions. By its very nature, globalisation draws attention to economic and technological aspects of life, and to deep-seated changes at the level of culture and identity. Emphasis on the 'global' highlights integrative aspects of social life, and thereby lessens the validity of any view of inter-state power politics and

an autonomous sphere of activity. Secondly, Clarke observed that globalisation might be regarded as an intensification of the pluralist challenge in that it draws attention to a variety of international and transnational actors. As it questions the relevance of inter-state borders, globalisation seems to problematise further the primacy and unitarian conception of states.

Finally, globalization might be discussed as part of a structuralist paradigm. At first glance, this would mean simply a reordering of the environment in which states operate. But as far as the dominance/dependence literature and world system theory is concerned, the significance of structuralist perspectives goes beyond that of environmental change alone. It projects a new era of state formation, as part of a quasi-deterministic account of the material system within which the state is generated.

Globalization and the accompanying identity crises

Presently, it is doubtful if the continents' scholars have identified the 'African perspective' on globalisation. The term 'globalisation' first appeared in a dictionary of American English in 1961 (Webster, 1961), and is thus seen as an Americanism. Since then, the notion of globalisation has quickly spread to other languages, nations and continents. Accordingly, we can talk of *globalizzazione* in Italian; *globalizacion* in Spanish; *globalizacao* in Portuguese; *Globalisierung* in German; *mondializare* in Romania; *mondialisering* in Dutch; *Quanqiuhuain* China; *globalisaatio* in Finnish; *globalisasi* in Indonesia; *Gukje Hwa* in Korea; *bishwavya-pikaran* in Nepal; *lokanuvat* in Thai; *luan bo'ot* in Timorese and *toan kouboa* in Vietnam (Scholte, 2000).

One of the effects of globalisation worldwide has been to arouse cultural insecurity and uncertainty about identities. Indeed, the paradox is that it promotes enlargement of economic scale, and also fragmentation of ethnic and cultural scale. The enlargement of economic scale is illustrated by the rise of the European Union, and by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The fragmentation of cultural and ethnic scale is illustrated by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the separation of Czechoslovakia into two countries, the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in India and Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan, the collapse of Somalia after penetration by the Soviet Union and the United States, and the recurrence of genocidal behaviour among the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi (Mazrui, 2001).

Mazrui noted that because of the linkages between globalisation and 'westernisation', identity crises from Uzbekistan to Somalia, from Afghanistan to Nigeria, have been triggered. Fragile ethnic identities and endangered cultures are forced into new forms of resistance. Resisting westernisation becomes indistinguishable from resisting globalisation.

As the globalisation process has been engineered by corporate elites and serves their interests, they have successfully conveyed the impression that globalisation is not only inevitable but has been a great success. This is fallacious. Even ignoring for the moment its distributional effects, globalisation has been marked by substantial decline in rates of output, productivity and investment growth. Under the new regime of enhanced financial mobility and power, with greater volatility of financial markets and increased risks, real interest rate have risen substantially (Herman, 1999).

African youth's reaction to globalisation

Africa has been unable to participate effectively in the global economy because of pervasive poverty, pandemic corruption, marginalisation, unemployment, persistence of structural vulnerability and over-dependence on oil, dispossession of masses of people, and the crippling debt burden. Globalisation of the world economy has left Africa marginalised. In Africa, the discourse on state and society has emerged from the self-proclaimed politically marginalized; the 'youth', which in contemporary Africa parlance has become a term of exclusion.

Youth in Africa are challenging the abuse of corporate power by multinationals. Large corporations with international undertakings stand accused of social injustice, unfair labour practices including slave labour wages, poor living and working conditions as well as lack of concern for the natural resource environment, and ecological damage. The militant disposition of youths in Africa has a dominant feature resonates with anti-globalization protests world-wide. Representing a broad spectrum of groups, lobbyists, and overlapping networks, including some violent extremists whose presence raises security concerns, they share a mutual antipathy towards multinational corporate power.

Protest objectives, however, extend beyond alleged corporate impropriety. Multilateral institutions, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank (WB), and the IMF, are seen as establishing, monitoring and passing judgement on global trade practices, and are viewed as the spearhead of economic globalization (CSIS, 2000).

Thus, underlying the anti-globalisation theme is the criticism of the capitalist philosophy, a stance promoted by militant youths. Shock and surprise were widespread in the wake of the disruptive protest and associated violence that characterized the Seattle

WTO Ministerial Conference held from 29th November to 3rd December 1999. The principal targets were multinational corporate powers. There were other protests, for example against the G8 Economic Summit in Cologne, Germany (2000); the IMF/World Bank demonstration in Washington DC (2002); the protest of the Organisation of American States (OAS) ministerial meeting in Windsor, Canada (2000); and the World Petroleum Conference (WPC) protest in Calgary (2000). Youth protests against globalisation and its instrumentalities are almost daily occurrences in Africa.

Contradictions in the Globalisation Framework

The western industrialized countries successfully imposed globalisation on Africa through elite manipulation and in what Geshiere and Nyamnjoh (2001) and Awasom (2003) referred to as autochthony - a phenomenon that requires either the acceptance, dramatic exclusion or outright victimization of countries on the bases of 'belonging' and not 'belonging', or 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. In his seminal paper titled *Globalisation and Catching-up in Emerging Market Economies*, Kolodko (2004), contends that catching-up is possible when the economic growth in a given country is at the same time fast, sustained, and endogenous. However, he queried, how can we say growth is fast, noting that this is a relative concept, because what is considered high growth in one country will be low elsewhere. Similarly, sustained growth pertains to a macroeconomic reproduction process, which spans a period of at least ten to twenty years, allowing per capita income to double at roughly half-generation intervals. While the endogenous character of growth ensures that only by building, during one phase of rapid growth, the foundations of continued expansion in the following phase, can the self-sustaining

character of growth be assured (ibid). Unfortunately, dependent and neo-liberal economies in Africa lack the high efficiency and management capacity required to attain these global expectations. Globalisation has thus continued to influence the economy and the people, particularly youth culture and survivability.

Globalisation is a very uneven process, with unequal distribution of benefits and losses. This imbalance leads to polarization between the few countries and groups that gain, and the many countries and groups in the society that lose out or are marginalised. According to Knor (2001), globalisation, polarisation, wealth concentration and marginalisation are therefore linked through this process. And in this process, investment resources, growth and modern technology are focused in a few countries (mainly in North America, Europe, Japan, and East Asian Newly Industrialising Countries (NICs)). Viewed from this perspective, Africa is excluded from the process, or is participating in it, in marginal ways that are often detrimental to her interest.

UNCTAD's Trade and Development Report 1997 (TDR.97), indicates that global trends are rooted in a set of forces unleashed by rapid liberalization, exacerbating inequality by favouring certain income groups over others. There is growing inequality between skilled and unskilled workers (due to declining industrial employment of unskilled workers and large absolute falls in their real wages); the rise of a rentier class due to financial liberalisation and the rapid rise in debt (with government debt servicing in developing countries also distributing incomes from the poor to the rich); and the benefits of agricultural price liberalization being accrued mainly by traders rather than farmers.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

Today, globalisation is being challenged around the world, in particular in Africa. There is discontent with globalisation. Joseph Stiglitz (2003), Nobel laureate in economics, argues that globalisation can be a force for good; that the globalisation of ideas about democracy and of civil society have changed the way people think, enabling many to attain higher standards of living, while global political movements have led to debt relief and the treaty on land mines. In the same way, the countries that have benefited the most have been those that took charge of their own destiny and recognised the role government can play in development, rather than relying on the notion of a self-regulating market that would fix its own problems.

However, Stiglitz states that for millions of people globalisation has not worked. Many has actually been made worse off, as they have seen their jobs destroyed and their lives become more insecure. They have felt increasingly powerless against forces beyond their control. They have seen their democracies undermined, their cultures eroded (ibid). Vayrynen (2000), opines that the criticism against globalization grows out of the sense of powerlessness. There is a feeling that we are living, as Anthony Giddens puts it, in a 'runaway world'. In Stiglitz's view, we cannot go back on globalisation, it is here to stay. He therefore put forward some of the challenges that have to be faced in dealing with globalisation:

- (1) The greatest challenge is not just in the institutions themselves, but in the mind-set: caring about the environment, making sure the poor have a say in decisions that affect them, promoting democracy and fair trade are necessary if the political benefit of globalization are to be achieved. The problem is that the institutions

have come to reflect the mind-set of those to whom they are accountable. The typical Central Bank Governor begins his day worrying about inflation statistics, not poverty statistics; the trade minister worries about export numbers, not pollution indices.

- (2) If globalization is to work, global public institutions must be established to help set the rules. Voting rights matter, and who has a seat at the table – even with limited voting rights, matters. It determines whose voices get heard. The IMF is not just concerned with technical arrangements among bankers, such as how to make bank check-clearing systems more efficient. The IMF's actions affect the lives and livelihood of billions throughout the developing world; yet developing and least developed countries have little say in IMF's actions.
- (3) The most fundamental change that is required to make globalization work in the way that it should, requires a change in global governance. Short of a fundamental change in governance, the most important way to ensure that international institutions are more responsive to the poor, to the environment, to the broader political and social concerns, is to increase openness and transparency.

Youth in Africa want genuine reform in the institutions that govern globalisation. They continue to support and build solidarity against neo-liberal globalisation; to denounce neo-liberal international policies; to seek to delegitimise the new institutions of global capitalism and to build an anti-capitalist/anti-imperialist internationalist pole (15th World Youth Congress, 2003). The struggle against multinational corporations as the core of globalised capitalism is daily gaining momentum, through campaigns, protests and demonstrations, specifically targeted at certain multinationals.

To move forward, there is a compelling need to redirect Africa's economic development programme to deal with poverty and unemployment; resuscitate agriculture for self sufficiency in food production; increase manufacturing capacity; reverse declining standards of education as a means of preserving and further developing the continent's manpower base, and improve radically the environment of security and the system of justice delivery so that the enthusiasm of the international investment community can be kept alive.

Finally, Vayrynen (2000) reveals how Zygmunt Bauman captures an important aspect in the motives for youth protest by stating that "the price of silence is paid in hard currency of human suffering. Asking the right questions makes all the difference between fate and destination, drifting and traveling'. If we are to make globalisation work for the millions of people for whom it has not, if we are to make globalisation with a human face succeed, then our voices must be raised. We cannot, we should not, stand idly by (Stiglitz, 2003).

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