

THE KNOWLEDGE DIVIDE



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Globalization looks very different when it is seen, not from the capitals of the West, but from the cities and villages of the South, where most of humanity lives. Four examples taken from my own country, Peru, illustrate how the paradoxical forces shaping globalization look when seen from the other side.

In October 1999, 28 schoolchildren died in Taucamarca, a remote village in the highlands of Peru, after drinking water and powdered milk mixed in a vat that had contained a powerful insecticide. Nobody could read the label on the vat and the children were poisoned. The insecticide in question has been banned in practically every industrialized nation; its sale continues only in places like my country.

Secondly, an important annual event recently took place in Cajamarca, in the north of Peru. Potato growers gather there to exchange the best seeds they have produced in the last year. It is an act of pride for communities to share with others seeds that will help improve the production of potatoes. In 1999, transnational corporations attended the festival and are now working to patent the genes of these traditional foodstuffs in order to sell them at profit.

Peru's macro-economic indicators are excellent. In the offices of investment bankers, you will be told that Peru is a great investment opportunity. The situation is not so rosy however, when considered from the perspective of Peruvians. Fifty per cent of the population have been living below the poverty line for the last ten years. Twenty per cent of the population are living below the critical poverty line: their income is insufficient to pay for even minimal nourishment. Two-thirds of the workforce is unemployed or underemployed, and between now and 2005, more people will enter the labour market in Peru than in the whole of the European Union.

A distinguished North American political scientist, Dr. Benjamin Barber, recently pointed out that in the United States democracy had degenerated into bringing one group of rascals in for four years, and then throwing them out and replacing them with another group of rascals for four years. From the perspective of the South, that looks very good! In a context where rascals manipulate elections and stay in power for fifteen or sixteen years, I would appreciate the chance to throw them out through peaceful elections every four years.

Thus, the complaints of the North are often the aspirations of the South. Progress in industrialized nations can be a threat to developing countries.

Ten years ago, in the euphoria of globalization and the expansion of services and finance that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, I advanced the idea that we were entering a fractured global order. Globalization brings us into contact with one another, but it also strengthens profound divisions and fractures in terms of societies and income, and most importantly in our capacity to generate and utilize knowledge. Over the last ten years, the concentration of wealth and power has greatly increased both within and between societies.

There is a real risk of two civilizations emerging, with two ways of viewing and relating to the world: one based on the capacity to generate and utilize knowledge; the other passively receiving knowledge from abroad and deprived of the ability to modify it.

The world now faces the prospect of this Knowledge Divide becoming an unbridgeable abyss. We need the international community to return to the basic principles of international co-operation and introduce the idea that a minimum level of science and technological capability, including access to the Internet, is an absolute necessity for developing countries and should be the subject of international solidarity.

This can be achieved. However, contrary to the situation of 20 years ago, national governments are no longer the major players in the game of science and technology. Whether we like it or not, the private sector and the international community of scholars must be invited to the table with governments from the North and South to begin discussing an agenda for the mobilization of science and technology for development. UNESCO, the only United Nations agency with a mandate for the development of the sciences, has a special role to play in the revitalization of international co-operation in this field. ■

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