

# Globalisation vs Children

Parents, schools or youngsters or sometimes they themselves are often blamed for the trouble they get into. We need to realise that many of the psychological pressures that the young suffer are actually caused by the juggernaut of economic globalisation and the corporations which are ever hungry for profits.

Seetha Ananthasivan interviews Helena Norberg-Hodge, founder of ISEC (International Society for Ecology and Culture) regarding her analysis of how economic globalisation affects children.

**Seetha:** Through ISECs International conferences and your film on Economics of Happiness and in many other ways, you have been focusing on the ills of economic globalization. Can you elaborate on these, especially how they affect youngsters in schools and colleges ?

**Helena:** Its so important that we understand what economic globalization is doing to youngsters and societies everywhere.

Unfortunately most people's idea on globalization has been promoted through the media world wide, as a process of coming together, culturally and socially into one world. But in actual fact, globalization has been an economic strategy that has given huge corporations and banks more freedom, deregulated global trade, giving trans national corporations (TNCs) the ability to reach every corner of the world. At the same time in almost every country, local businesses are suffering

from over regulation and are often disappearing, while the TNCs have become giant monopolies that have a huge influence on our society.

## Psychological Pressures

The effect of this is absolutely dreadful on our youth. In my native country Sweden, in India, in the United States and elsewhere, the end result is huge psychological pressures. Youngsters face pressures from media and peers, and even parents, to conform to distant, global consumer role models. Even if your are western, you are still never good enough, not smart enough, not thin enough, not like Barbie dolls... promoting ideas of perfection that nobody can live upto. These pressures have led to an epidemic of depression, of eating disorders, of very young children wanting hair removed and plastic surgery, and an ever increasing amount of cosmetics, junk food and electronic gizmos.

The youth in every country also

suffer tremendous pressures to get jobs. There is intensified competition for higher education and employment opportunities at the end of education are more and more limited. Competition starts in kindergarten as parents are naturally worried about their children's future. Now this is tragedy, a crime against humanity to pressurise our children in this way. Why are we doing this? What is the cause for this? We need to ask our selves why we have such scarcity in education and job opportunities.

In our analysis, working with economists, anthropologists and others, the reason is very clear. It is to do with the concentration of power in the hands of a few giant banks and global corporations who do everything possible from their perspective - which is to make more profits. They influence trade treaties, are able to arm-twist governments to open their markets for them, to freely move jobs and factories, advertise and get the population

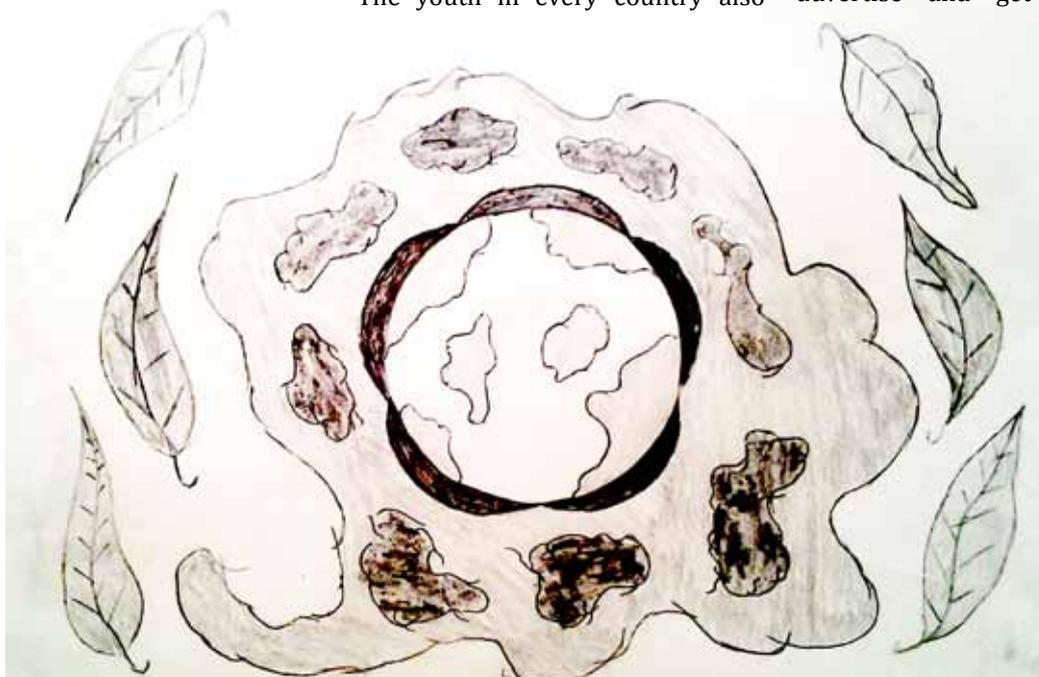


Illustration by Rushil, age: 13 years

addicted to non-essential products and harmful foods and much more. The connections between economic globalization and the psychological pressures faced by our children do not often seem clearly evident, but from the early nineties – the beginning of neo-liberal globalization - to now, we find that there is more poverty, more unemployment, more political unrest and depression.

### Joining the Dots

**Seetha:** The crises of sustainability, social justice and human and ecological well being that we are faced with are extremely complex – in the sense that there are many root causes and contributing factors and their effects which have a dynamic relationship with each other. Hence we need clear-cut joining of dots... Therefore, can you talk about some specific aspects of economic liberalization and how they are linked to specific problems experienced by people, particularly the youth today?

**Helena:** In the economic global arena there are some major issues to be worried about for the youth, related to the use of technology, competition for employment, the problems of urbanization and industrialized food, to name a few. The TNCs replace people with technology and scour the world for the cheapest labour. People get employed for some years and are dumped because the cost of labour goes up and the big businesses move elsewhere. This creates tremendous instability and poverty, increasing the gap between the rich and poor in a completely unsustainable way.

It is very important for people to understand that this is a global problem. The developed North also suffers more and more unemployment while a large number of jobs are exported to the South. In my native country Sweden, which is held as a model for the world, the same processes are under way - they have not created desperate poverty but they are creating tremendous stress and hard ship. While Globalisation promises more jobs, in actual fact, a huge number of livelihoods, many more than the new jobs created, are destroyed. As power is concentrated in the hands of a few corporations with a high degree of automation in their factories, it also brings in a system where jobs become more limited. Absolutely central to this global growth

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Another consequence of globalization is mass urbanization which definitely affects the quality of life of the next generation. I see it as a structural conspiracy - something that started a long time ago and has become worse now. Large cities are convenient for big businesses – but they consume more power, more food, create more waste and are definitely unsustainable. People in rural areas, where farming is unviable because of pro-big business policies, are drawn into urban centers where employment is available.

Big businesses also need global infrastructure - big ports, airports, highways and so on. These are subsidized by the governments so that the goods produced by companies reach the smallest village and they also destroy the small local businesses and livelihoods.

One specific area quite terribly affected by globalization is food. Globalization has given big businesses more freedom to move in and out of other countries, freedom to invest from long distances. The big subsidies given in some countries, the WTO and other trade treaties have created a situation where food from miles away is cheaper than the same kind of food that has been locally produced. These trade treaties are about governments sitting

together with the agenda of giving more freedom to banks and corporations.

Globalization has led to a situation where 500 corporations control 70% of total world trade; just two TNCs govern 70 to 80% of the world's grain trade and just 3 giant corporations govern 70% of the trade in seeds. These corporations have become destructive machines – they have forced changes in our universities, changes even in science to support companies like Monsanto to market genetically modified seeds and crops. One of the most insidious strategies of these corporations is to make seeds that cannot be used to produce more seeds, and thereby robbing farmers of their seeds, and their right to produce seed. Moreover, such genetically modified crops are engineered to demand more pesticides and fertilisers (which are produced by these same companies) and the escalation of monoculture destroys agro bio-diversity. That in itself is a crime against the environment and society because it goes completely against nature. Diversity is the principle of life and the beauty and joy of life. This diversity is being stolen by these giant corporations.

A small diversified farm can provide meaningful work to a large number of people and it has been proven that bio-diverse organic farming with trees, bushes, vegetables and grains can

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The centralization that started in an era of slavery and genocide is a part of industrial large scale production and above all linked to fossil fuels. We are truly beginning to understand the price we have paid for basing all our activities fundamentally on fossil fuels - pesticides, plastics, war machines, transport - the entire global economy is built on non-renewable energy.

So the concentration of production that has been marketed as efficient was efficient for the big businesses. But when we look at environmental costs, we are not only talking about global warming but also, we are talking about areas of the planet where there were thousands of verdant oases which have been destroyed.

produce two to three times what can be produced in a monocultural chemical farming. Diversity reduces the need for pesticides, herbicides and fungicides. It is very good news that the UNCTAD has brought out a report declaring that organic farming is essential to feed the world sustainably. It has asked governments to wake up before its too late, warning against more globalization and further trade treaties.

### Roots of Globalisation: Genocide, Slavery and Colonialism

**Seetha:** Many people imagine that economic globalization is part of a natural evolutionary process. Perhaps examining the genesis of economic globalization can help us understand real issues and also see the importance of shifting from global to local...

**Helena:** We have to understand that the roots of economic globalization with its centralization of power and control of trade started with genocide, slavery and colonialism. As the first industries and plantations were set up, of course it made sense in Britain and the US to have cheap labor from Africa and India. So we can see as we go back in history that centralization started with violence, otherwise we would not be in a world where on one side of the planet people get 100 \$ an hour and on the other side people earn 100\$ a month or a year. That has come about because of preceding slavery and colonisation.

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are truly beginning to understand the price we have paid for basing all our activities fundamentally on fossil fuels - pesticides, plastics, war machines, transport; the entire global economy is built on non-renewable energy. So the concentration of production that has been marketed as efficient was efficient for the big businesses. But again when we look at environmental costs, we are not only talking about global warming but also we are talking about areas of the planet where there were thousands of verdant oases which have been destroyed. In India, Albert Howard identified the rich and abundant food forests and fisheries that existed. In Africa, areas that are desert now were green and thriving.

**Seetha:** Localisation is the solution that you and many of us propose to deal with the issue of economic globalization and the concentration of power it creates. Localisation can be misunderstood as going back to the villages, as setting the clock back or as stronger socialist nationalism and many other things beside. Can you elaborate on why you believe that localization is important for the future of our children, the future of our civilization...

**Helena:** As we look at the historical roots of globalization, and its huge human and ecological costs, I think most people would agree that we need to move in the opposite direction. And if we see it structurally, centralizing and urbanizing is part of the problem. Decentralizing and ruralising is part of the solution.

But that doesn't mean that every one has to move away from cities

and move back to villages. Cities have been there for a long time, they have preceded European expansionism and have existed in countries like India, but they were of a human –ecological scale.

In the future cities we imagine, we must certainly abandon air conditioned high rise centres and promote human scale dwelling, may be 5 storeys high; We must, as part of our localization process look at our real energy needs, energy for heating and cooling, lighting and cooking that are actually essential. So localization means going back to trees for shade, sun for heating and to use renewable forms of energy, and minimize non-renewable energy use.

Globalisation has involved the centralization of economic activities and power which we can see has been disastrous. To shift to a systemic process in the direction of human and ecological well being, localization is essential, wherein economic activities and power is decentralized. This thought has come from great leaders like Gandhiji, who long ago foresaw that economic globalization would wreak havoc on our civilisation.

In brief, we can say that economic globalization works against the best interests of the world, against the well-being of our children and grand children. Decentralizing and localizing at a very fundamental level is about real justice and it is something that is so empowering because it is about ecological sanity and sustainability.



**Helena Norberg-Hodge** is a pioneer of the localization movement, and the Founder and Director of the International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC), a non-profit organization concerned with the protection of both biological and cultural diversity.

Her book, *Ancient Futures* has been described as an "inspirational classic" by *The Times* and has been translated into 42 languages. Her books include *Bringing the Food Economy Home* and *From the Ground Up: Rethinking Industrial Agriculture*. Helena has also produced / co-directed two wonderful documentaries - "*Ancient Futures*" and *The Economics of Happiness*