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Editorial

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Globalisation and social justice

Globalisation", like climate change, is one of the abiding realities of our time which, within a generation, has changed the world almost beyond recognition. The term itself means different things to different people, ranging from economic integration in itself to the now-defunct neo-liberal policies that largely guided the process up to the sub-prime crisis of 2008. Most of those engaged with the first-world economy in countries around the globe have experienced it, above all, as a revolution in information technology which, some say, has changed the way we think.

But there is another dimension to it, central to the theme of *LDD*, which is addressed in the latest article published in this volume: the impact of this phenomenon on development and democracy, especially in the developing world and, more specifically, in Africa.[1]

It is, of course, a hugely complex topic which has generated a vast literature[2] and much contention between "supporters" and "opponents" of globalisation. In one sense this debate is academic: for better or worse, the economic transformation associated with globalisation is here to stay. It is as irreversible as the changes wrought by the industrial revolution or the invention of electricity. We cannot go back to the world of the 1960s or unscramble the global economy.

Indeed, those on the left should have no wish to do so. Marxism, after all, has always asserted the internationalisation of the forces of production and socialism (beyond its

[1] John Cantius Mubangizi "Democracy and development in the age of globalisation: Tensions and contradictions in the context of specific African challenges" (2010) 14 *Law, Democracy & Development*.

[2] To illustrate this fact as well as the IT revolution, the Google search term "impact of globalization" brings up 32 400 book titles alone, and "impact of globalisation" a further 14 500.

Stalinist distortions) has always been conceived of as an order that could only be sustainable on an international basis. At an economic level globalisation may be seen as setting the stage for the many forms of progressive change that socialism envisaged.

Social reality, however, has turned out to be increasingly at odds with this vision; and this is the real point of the debate. The world today, as Mubangizi points out, is characterised by stark contrasts between wealth and poverty, welfare and suffering, much of it coinciding with the division between "developed" and "developing" countries, with the centres of economic power and decision-making largely located in the former and deprivation largely concentrated in the latter.

But, as the article notes, there is more to it than this. Extreme inequality exists not only between countries but also within countries, including countries of the developing world. The "first world" – that is, the world of high technology and comfortable lifestyles – is not confined to the developed countries. Even though it includes far greater parts of the population in those countries, it has larger or smaller enclaves in virtually every country of the developing world also.

The problem is therefore not simply one of (monolithic) rich countries versus (monolithic) poor countries. Much though nationalism encourages this type of thinking, globalisation has seen the emergence of a global elite, sharing common interests and values, at a much faster pace than the growth of similar bonds amongst working people and the poor.

This is not to deny the existence of conflicts within that elite. The last 100 years, for example, have seen two full-scale wars among the ruling classes of Western Europe who are today combined in the European Union (which continues to be troubled by divisions of its own). Nor is it possible to deny the existence of hierarchy within the global elite, from its centres of power in the world's financial capitals to its subordinate layers in far-flung countries, where local elites may resort to nationalistic rhetoric to strengthen their hand in the global power game.

All these issues cannot be explored in a single article, nor does the author seek to do so. While posing some provocative questions and making some challenging statements, the article in essence establishes a point of departure for addressing these issues: if we understand "globalisation" as signifying a many-faceted complex of socio-economic and political developments linking different parts of the world together, then from an African perspective it is remarkable that the process has been accompanied by growing inequalities among and within countries, with little if any amelioration of the conditions of the poor.

This does not mean, of course, that globalisation in and of itself is the problem, in the sense of establishing a causal link between the integration of global society and particular forms of deprivation or oppression on the ground. In fact there is nothing

inevitable about deprivation or oppression in any form, whether in today's world or in the relatively autonomous nation-states of the past. Rather, as the article shows, specific social ills can be traced to specific policies and decisions, which are capable of being reversed. That, rather than the disintegration of the globalised order, is surely what the struggle for social justice is about.

One feature, however, does distinguish the era of globalisation from previous phases in history. The integration of global society has brought with it an increasing concentration of power – economic power in the first place, typically in the hands of transnational corporations; but, with it, numerous forms of socio-political leverage and influence (manifested in ways ranging from the toppling of reform-minded governments, such as that of Allende in 1973, to the setting of teenage fashions) that economic power tends to generate. The authors of policies and decisions, in other words, may not only be very powerful; they may also be far removed from the scene where the consequences of their policies and decisions are played out.

This observation, too, is hardly original. It has been at the centre of scholarly and political debate for a generation. But what Mubangizi's article invites is an assessment of Africa's most critical social and developmental problems in this context. The point is not to shift blame. Local despots or corrupt elites, rather than transnational corporations or moneylenders, are often directly responsible for the misery experienced by millions of Africans. The point is more that, in a globalised world, there is only so much that small, poor states can do to lift themselves out of poverty. With the best will in the world they have little control over markets – that is, the prices at which their exports are sold and essential imports are bought – or over the terms on which foreign capital is invested in their countries (because capital can usually go elsewhere).

So where to from here? This is surely the question that has most exercised supporters of social justice in general, and the left in particular, at least since the fall of the Soviet Union – which, for all its perversions, in the eyes of many represented at least the *possibility* of an alternative social order – and probably for much longer. For, while the flaws of the globalised order are manifest, solutions are not.

One thing, though, is clear: given the internationalised nature of the society we live in, any credible alternative to the policies of existing global players will similarly have to be international in nature. With the demise of the Soviet Union and China's gradual submission to market forces, existing notions of socialism as a self-evident answer to the problems of capitalism lost much of their one-time authority. Developing real answers is going to require hard, painstaking work of a theoretical as well as a practical nature, at an international level as well as locally – not only in universities but also by policy-making structures in the public and private sectors, NGOs, trade unions and all those concerned with building social development on a democratic basis. *LDD*

will continue to contribute to this discourse by inviting articles that will stimulate further debate about ways of promoting this project.