A dialogue of the deaf? The health impacts of globalisation

Opinion about the true impacts on human health of globalisation remains sharply divided. On the one hand, a wide range of health professionals, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), scholars and activists fear globalisation is worsening the divide between haves and have-nots to unprecedented degrees. As globalisation processes are being played out, they argue that this is leading to real impoverishment, economic insecurity and reduced life chances for those being left behind what Friedman calls a “winner take all” system. There is little hope, they argue, for a real sharing of the largesse of globalisation without fundamental changes to the nature of the system itself. On the other hand, many others have much hope that globalisation is ultimately a positive force for the betterment of all. By enabling greater generation of wealth, it is believed that globalisation will lead to technological innovation, dissemination of information and know how, adoption of minimal ethical, environmental and labour standards, and eventually increased standards of living worldwide. It is through these processes that real improvements in human health will be realised. While there are admittedly wrinkles to be ironed out along the way to such global prosperity, a “steady as she goes” fortitude will gradually lead us to a better world.

The distance between these two perspectives on globalisation could not be farther apart. As the two polarised arguments are played out in meetings like the People’s Health Assembly in Dhaka, Bangladesh and the World Economic Summit in Davos, Switzerland, one observes a dialogue of the deaf in which both sides are entrenched in the rightness of their views. Firmly in the driver’s seat of globalisation at present are the optimists who, advantaged by economic and other resources, mobility, global communications and, above all, formal positions of power, do not feel so strongly the need to question the possibility that there may be flaws in their paradigm. Far more numerous, but clearly out resourced and out voiced, are the pessimists who see globalisation as the latest, and possibly final, phase of wholescale colonisation of the world by certain dominant interests. As long as the debate remains so highly argumentative where need be. The Asian financial crisis is a case in point. It sent panic across the world’s financial markets, and the immediate response has been a demonstration that the globalisation road is one full of potholes and sharp turns. This requires going beyond moral hair pulling to play smart, appealing to utilitarian perspectives are invariably doomed by the zero-sum game logic. When good companies do bad things. Responsibility and risk are already happening albeit on a small scale and probably without sufficient teeth. New initiatives to improve corporate social responsibility, for example, are leading to greater reflection on the wider social and environmental impacts of global economic activity. Many see this as an encouraging sign that those at the top are neither oblivious nor uncaring about such issues. How do we harness these good intentions more effectively?

Finally, we need to engage in a true debate that breaks down the existing polarised views. The events in Seattle in late 1999 certainly grabbed the attention of those driving globalisation, but it amounted to the equivalent of slashing their tyres or stealing the car radio, rather than redirecting the route of the vehicle. The immediate response has been increased security. It would be far more effective to demonstrate that the globalisation road is one full of potholes and sharp turns. This requires going beyond moral hair pulling to play smart, appealing to utilitarian arguments where need be. The Asian financial crisis is a case in point. It sent panic across the world’s financial institutions (including both small and large investors), bringing home the lesson that contagion is global. The “I love you” computer virus that spread from the Philippines to disrupt computers worldwide within days again draws on health imagery to illustrate that globalisation brings opportunities and risks. In short, the public health community needs to get far smarter politically—assembling the evidence, defining the policy alternatives, and selling them in the right circles. Global health is public health writ large.

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