



RAISING LOCAL RESOURCES

LOCALIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION

Glenn Schwartz, Executive Director, World Mission Associates

Signs of globalization can be found in many places. I have a friend in Zambia who is a retired pastor, now living in a rural village with no running water or electricity. However, he has a cell phone that can be charged at a nearby school. Fifty years ago when I first went to Africa, there were only land lines with twelve or fifteen parties sharing the same line. We learned to take turns using the phone! Thanks to globalization, we now have access to a global communication network, which allows me to phone my friend in his rural village using a cell phone, in good weather or bad.

This is only one small example of the change that globalization has brought. Is it possible, however, that we are taking for granted the good parts of globalization without considering some of the negative effects? Consider, for example, the million or more short-term missionaries from Europe or North America who go out across the world each year in search of a meaningful cross-cultural experience. They can get from anywhere to anywhere quickly but often without time to adjust to language or culture. They go with little or no understanding of the local community they are visiting. One result is that the local community has a first-hand encounter with the global community, showing the disparity between the two communities.

One of the unintended consequences of this encounter is that the local community can get the impression that they have little, if anything, to give to the wider world. Along with feeling deprived, they begin to “feel poor”, even though prior to that time they may not have seen themselves that way. This feeling of being poor sows the seeds of unhealthy dependency and results in a local community feeling like second class citizens in the world

around them. Sometimes the visitors try to compensate through the distribution of used clothing and other things which can arrive in boxes as large as shipping containers! The feeling of being dependent is further enhanced when the clothing is given away free of charge.

This scenario reflects the downside of globalization. Surely there must be an alternative to this two-class system as globalization marches across the world. On the positive side, imagine what could happen if the global community shifted their emphasis from being providers to becoming encouragers, investors or employers. Sometimes without even leaving their homes, “globalizers” can devise ways to help local communities find ways of contributing to the global community, rather than simply receiving from it. This can be done if, instead of spending thousands of dollars on each short-term, individuals and churches would invest their funds in a reputable microfinance project, and then do cross-cultural service in a North American inner-city closer to home.

Suppose again that the emphasis shifted from “charity” to “investment” and local communities became producers of some service or product that the global community needs. Were that to happen, local communities would get legitimate help (in the form of payment for products or services) from the global community, thereby preserving both dignity and self-esteem. Imagine the positive impact as local communities find their rightful place within the global community.

This shift from charity to investment is what both globalization and localization need. If it doesn't happen, the global community will continue to make local communities more and more dependent on outside resources.

Little wonder that some of them feel like second class citizens in an increasingly globalized world.

One more observation is in order. Preserving the integrity of those in local communities means dealing with more than just money or other material resources. It means adding to localization and globalization the concept of contextualization. The global community, often on compressed time schedules, has little time to take context seriously. And, if they do not take the time and effort to know the context, how can they be expected to speak clearly into it? What they know about their own faith experience might have little relevance to a local community on the other side of the world. If one does not know the “questions” people are asking in their hearts, chances are that the “answers” will not bring about transformation at a deep level. The alternative is to take the context seriously enough to answer the questions that the local community is asking.

So here is the challenge: How can we find a way to benefit from globalization without doing harm to the local context and, at the same time, introduce the Good News of Jesus Christ without creating unhealthy dependency? Many culturally sensitive missionaries have shown that it can be done, and the Christian movement has spread in many places because of it. The challenge is for all of us to take enough time to understand the local context well enough so that the Gospel truly is “Good News” on the local scene. f

Author – When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement available at www.wmausa.org