

A “Long Walk to Freedom” and Democracy: Human Rights, Globalization, and Social Injustice*

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Before I entered the polling station, an irreverent member of the press called out, “Mr. Mandela, who are you voting for?” I laughed. “You know,” I said, I have been agonizing over that choice all morning.” I marked an X in the box next to the letters ANC and then slipped my folded ballot paper into a simple wooden box; I had the first vote of my life. . . . The Images of South Africans going to the polls that day are burned in my memory. Great lines of patient people snaking through the dirt roads and streets of towns and cities; old women had waited half a century to cast their vote saying that they felt like human beings for the first time in their lives; white men and women saying they were proud to live in a free country at last. The mood of the nation during those days of voting was buoyant. The violence and bombings ceased, and it was as if we were a nation reborn. Even the logistical difficulties of the voting, misplaced ballots, pirate voting stations, and rumors of fraud in certain places could not dim the overwhelming victory of democracy and justice. (Mandela 1994, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 618).

Is this the promise of globalization? Will globalization bring democracy and the development and implementation of a human rights agenda and social justice to countries around the world? Will globalization enhance or lead to the deterioration of individual rights? Howard-Hassman (2004:1) presents globalization as “the second great transformation spreading capitalism over the world.” In this context, capitalism is viewed as an essential variable that may lead to a democratic state, which in turn may result in a society in which human rights are an essential part of the same. Howard-Hassman indicates that capitalism is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for democracy, while the latter is “the best political system to protect human rights”² (also see Sen

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2000). It is also argued that although globalization may negatively impact a country in the short-run, its mid- to long-term effects will be positive and will result in “greater moves to democracy, economic distribution, the rule of law, and the promotion of social and civil rights” (Howard-Hassman 2004:1). But is this or will this be the reality for the vast majority of the world’s impoverished nations? The data that we present here suggests that this appears not to be the case, particularly in the context of economic stagnation and increasing poverty, inequality, and social injustice for many countries throughout the world.

Globalization and Capitalism: Is There Hope for the Future?

It is assumed, or at least expected, that today’s impoverished nations, through the process of globalization, will experience economic growth and, through the spread of capitalism, will become similar to the so called developed nations, such as the U.S. and Britain, among others. It is also anticipated that the process of globalization will lead to significant social, economic, and political changes resulting in what has been called the “Second Great Transformation.”³

As a direct consequence of globalization and the expansion of capitalism, national and international economies are increasingly being controlled, dominated, and shaped by global financial markets and transnational corporations (TNC) as well as by foreign governments, such as the U.S. and Britain, among others. These “centers of power” have been able to influence and shape laws, legislation, and public policy at the international level aimed at extending their political, economic, and military power. Their international influence is, to a large extent, shaping the national and global economic agenda and the development, or lack thereof, of countries throughout the world. This has occurred despite increasing skepticism and opposition from other world leaders and the international community, as manifested, most recently, by the widespread protests against the war on Iraq.

Nevertheless, the military and economic power of countries such as the U.S. is real and should not be ignored. For example, according to the U.S. Department of Defense (September 30, 1999) report titled “Active Duty Military Personnel Strengths by Regional Area and by Country,” the U.S. has military troops in 135 or in 70% of the world’s countries. In Iraq alone, the U.S. has deployed over 138,000 troops.⁴ This military presence, and its social, economic, and political implications and consequences, is unprecedented in world history. Have these interventions been in the name of democracy and to safeguard human rights? What will happen in Haiti, Venezuela, Iraq, and Afghanistan in the next year, or in the next five to ten years? Will we see an improvement in the social and economic well-being of these populations? Will these countries be able to generate governments that will result in democratic states in which human rights are protected and social justice embraced?

In this process of globalization and the spread of capitalism, TNC's are seeing as the “engine of development” that will, according to Lerner (1958, cited in Howard-Hassman 2004:7), “promote economic rights through investment and job creation, and civil and political rights through the creation of a stable and tolerant environment.” Does this position assume or infer that TNC's are indeed interested in the economic growth and development of the communities to which they relocate and that they will make considerable investments in local communities? The evidence seems to argue to the contrary. For example, manufacturing as well as other industries have moved from industrialized to poor countries in search of cheap labor, lower tariffs, fewer stringent environmental protection laws, and “flexible” government policies. They have relocated to countries and regions that will generally allow them to set their economic agendas without much governmental protection for their employees or even for the environment. As Parenti argues, “the corporation's social responsibility is nothing more than to itself, to its own system of production and accumulation” (1978:60).

For example, the tuna industry (including companies such as Neptune, Bumble Bee, Van Camp, and Star Kist) arrived in Puerto Rico in the 1960s fleeing from increasing labor costs, and increasing pressures from labor unions (Mulero 2000) and more stringent environmental protection laws in the U.S. They settled in the west coast of Puerto Rico searching for cheap labor, particularly women, to be employed in low-wage, low-skilled, and dead-end jobs with no real benefits or opportunities for professional growth and development. This industry was characterized by coercion, exploitation, and having their employees working under inhumane and intolerable conditions. In the meantime, the local and state governments paid little attention to the employees and to the widespread contamination of the harbor in Mayagüez (the west coast municipality where most, if not all, of the tuna industry was concentrated). Moreover, the local government became the primary entity in charge of defending and promoting the tuna industry.⁵

Given increasing production costs and increasing pressures to abide by minimum wage and Environmental Protection Agency laws, the tuna industry abandoned Puerto Rico and thousands of employees in the late 1990's and early 2000, and relocated to other regions, such as Central America, where wages would be significantly lower and government interference almost nonexistent. How can capitalism be a condition necessary for the establishment of a democracy and, henceforth, a mechanism that leads to the protection of human rights if the basic and operational principles of these “engines of development” run contrary to promoting the economic well-being of its employees or of a particular society?

It is estimated that, between 1980 and 1994, the world labor force increased by 630 million, apparently resulting in a growth rate much higher than that experienced by the population during this same time period (Giddens 2003

cited in Howard-Hassman 2004). While this may be the case, we must ask how many jobs were lost during this same time period. What types of jobs were generated during this 14-year period? Were the jobs created similar to those generated by the tuna industry in the west coast of Puerto Rico? Which regions or countries were the primary beneficiaries of this job growth? Who or what benefited from the creation of these jobs? What types of salaries and benefits were provided to these “new” employees? How did the creation of these jobs contribute to improving the overall quality of life for the people employed?

While the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *Human Development Report 2003* concurs that significant progress has occurred in poverty-stricken countries throughout the world within the past 30 years, they also acknowledge that these countries (despite significant increases in employment) are experiencing severe economic setbacks. The UNDP report points out that, for many countries, the 1990s “were a decade of despair;” the population in about 54 countries are poorer now than in 1990; for 21 countries, a higher proportion of the population is experiencing hunger; in about 14 countries, mortality for children under the age of five has increased; and about 12 countries have experienced a decline in primary school enrollments. Moreover, the report indicates that, for the past 20 years or more, income inequality has increased in about 33 of the 66 “developing” countries, which report such data.

Are Puerto Ricans “better off” today as a consequence of capitalism or is Puerto Rico’s current economic state an outcome of capitalism and the development strategies that were pursued following World War II under Operation Bootstrap?⁶ We can certainly argue that Puerto Rico is one of the countries that has experienced the greatest economic development in the Caribbean and that its income and economic growth are far superior to any country in this region, resulting in a relatively higher standard of living and economic prosperity for Puerto Ricans on the island. However, the answer to the aforementioned question is relative to our group of reference. Does it make sense to compare Puerto Rico to Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, or other countries in the region? The answer is absolutely not. Given the Treaty of Paris (1898), in which Puerto Rico was ceded by Spain to the U.S. and given the past 100 years of Puerto Rican history, U.S. citizenship, and the Island’s relationship to the US, then it must be compared to the U.S. mainland. However, if Puerto Rico were to become a state today, it would be (by far) the poorest state in the U.S., with unemployment rates in the double figures and poverty rates close to or at 50%, according to the U.S. Census 2000. Despite all its economic progress, Puerto Rico has become a country where the income gap between the rich and the poor has continued to increase and where the economic gap between Puerto Rico and the U.S. has also continued to grow (see Rivera-Batiz & Santiago 1996).

Development, among other things, should imply an increase in wealth for a country or for a particular society. However, under globalization and the expansion of capitalism, can we assume that everyone will equally benefit from this economic development? Will all subgroups of the population benefit from increasing income, reduction in poverty and inequality, and an increase in the standard of living and the quality of life? Of course not. The case of Latin America contradicts the expected pattern and consequences of globalization. Despite increasing development in Latin America, we have also seen increasing poverty and inequality in many of the countries in this region. The upper class is greatly benefiting from rapid development, but these benefits are not trickling down to the general population. Quite the contrary. Today, there are greater economic gaps between the rich and the poor. There is increasing wealth in the midst of ever expanding poverty. Many countries throughout the world have experienced significant development (as measured by GNP and per capita income) while social and economic inequality and poverty have continued to increase (United Nations 2003). Moreover, poverty is a phenomenon that primarily impacts racial/ethnic minorities, women, children, the elderly, and rural populations. Democracy and the development and implementation of human rights under these economic scenarios seems quite complicated, difficult to achieve, and even elusive.

Democracy, Social Action, and Human Rights

What is it that brings about the generation and implementation of human rights? Is it globalization? Can it only occur under capitalism? Does capitalism provide for the natural outgrowth of human rights? In order to generate significant social, political, and economic change to adequately develop and implement a human rights agenda, there must be social action. It is argued that capitalism leads to a democracy only when you have social action or social movements that generate the appropriate conditions for social change (Howard-Hassman 2004; UNDP 2003). There are in fact “historical windows of opportunities” in which a diverse set of factors converge to generate the appropriate conditions that lead to social action or social movements. For example, the rapid economic growth that emerged in the U.S. following World War II, which spread into the 1960s, combined with the emergence of protest groups and massive and widespread manifestations against the Vietnam War throughout the U.S., the rise of instrumental and charismatic leaders, such as Martin Luther King, among other factors, led to the civil rights movement. Similar circumstances emerged in South Africa, with the convergence of the African National Congress (ANC), the leadership of prominent figures such as Nelson Mandela, anti-apartheid movements and protests, and international pressures aimed at the elimination of apartheid, leading to the development

of a process heading towards democracy and democratic participation in South Africa.

Another important example of these “historical windows of opportunity” was the actions that led to the recent demilitarization of Vieques in Puerto Rico. On April 19, 1999, a military aircraft accidentally bombed an observation tower where a civilian employee (David Sanes) was working, resulting in his death. What emerged after Sanes’ death was the most significant, comprehensive, and organized social movement in Vieques, and perhaps in Puerto Rican history. What initially characterized these generally peaceful demonstrations was the support and participation of leaders from all political parties (i.e., independence, popular democratic or pro-commonwealth, and the pro-statehood parties); the convergence of religious groups from different denominations; the indignation and support of the overwhelming majority of the Puerto Rican population; and massive protests on the Island, New York City, Washington, D.C., and several countries throughout the world. The establishment of permanent campsites (by political and religious leaders and other activists) in the restricted military zones of Vieques provided a background of solidarity, compromise, organization, and defiance to a world power and its military. This was a social movement that united people with different values, norms, ideologies, and political and economic backgrounds and that eventually resulted in the U.S. Marines leaving the municipality of Vieques, after 50 years of military practices, which resulted in severe health and economic problems for the population of this island municipality.⁷

Most recently (March, 2004), the tragic train bombings in Madrid, Spain (described as the “worst act of terror” in Spain’s history, resulting in over 190 deaths and over 1,400 injured), combined with the initial intent of the government to conceal information on the origins or sources of the attack, the consequent outrage of the population, and widespread opposition to the war on Iraq, led to spontaneous but significant demonstrations and protests in this country. The final outcome was a massive participation in the political elections in Spain that resulted, contrary to expectations, in the victory of the Socialist Party candidate (José Luis Zapatero). Mr. Zapatero has openly opposed the war on Iraq and has indicated, on several occasions, that he will remove the Spanish troops from Iraq. The people of Spain united and generated social actions aimed at, publicly and peacefully, expressing their anger and outrage with the Popular Party. Ironically, perhaps, this was the planned outcome or the original intent of the terrorist attack on Spain, to lead to the defeat of the Popular Party candidate, which supported the war on Iraq.

These examples show that social action or social movements are instrumental in achieving important changes in a particular society whose members respond in an articulated and somewhat organized fashion to different forms of social injustice. The UNDP (2003:2) indicates that “recent

experiences have also shown that social movements can lead to more participatory decision-making.” However, if we agree that social action is needed in order to bring about the protection of human rights, then we might also be arguing that there may be a spurious relationship between capitalism and democracy, and this relationship is explained by a third variable, namely social action, which is aided by global communication networks and the extensive dissemination of information. It is true, however, that these types of social movements are more likely to occur under a democratic state than under an authoritarian and repressive one.

POPULATION PROCESSES, POVERTY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

It seems unlikely that the proposed “second great transformation” will occur in the majority of today’s impoverished nations. There is no doubt that the historical, cultural, economic, demographic, and political conditions for 18th and nineteenth-century Britain are certainly not the same conditions for most of today’s poverty-stricken nations. For example, for industrialized nations, despite widespread poverty and inequality, population growth, generally, went hand in hand with economic development and economic prosperity. Today, many impoverished nations are experiencing very high levels of fertility and, consequently, rapid population growth rates combined with economic stagnation. The decline in mortality and increase in life expectancy in these poor countries was not, primarily, the result of economic development, but of the importation of public health initiatives, such as anti-malaria campaigns, penicillin, and Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT). Further declines in fertility and mortality (particularly infant mortality) have not occurred in these countries given the absence of economic development, widespread inequality, and social and economic deprivation. Therefore, we have an increasing world population and rapid urbanization in the midst of rampant and increasing poverty.

It is estimated that over 1.2 billion people in the world (or about 20% of the world population) are living on the equivalent of less than one U.S. dollar a day (United Nations 2003). Moreover, poor households are increasing at a much higher rate than the well-to-do households. Poverty is increasing at an alarming rate in the urban areas of the world’s poorest countries. Close to 99% of the world’s natural increase (births-deaths) is occurring in these nations, and they house about 81% of the world’s population and represent 90% of the world’s births. In many poor countries, such as Nepal and Haiti, the vast majority of the population lives in rural areas and experience widespread poverty. For example, it is estimated that 42% of the population in Nepal lives in poverty, making it one of the poorest countries in the world outside of Africa, and there has been little or no change in poverty levels in Nepal during the past 20 years (Heleniak 2002).

It is quite correct that, as Howard-Hassman (2004) points out, the “Great Transformation I,” occurred, in countries such as Britain, in the absence of human rights initiatives but were intrinsically based on military conquest, economic expansionism, exploitation, expulsion, slavery, the selling and purchasing of people, genocide, and ethnic cleansing, among others. However, despite the widespread dissemination of human rights throughout the world, many of these abhorrent practices are still a fact in many countries, although they now appear to be under the scrutiny of international communication networks and human rights’ organizations. Further, notwithstanding increasing international pressures against actions that violate the most fundamental human rights, child labor, pornography, and prostitution; the trafficking of children (Ashford 2002); and sexual, physical, and substance abuse among children in countries around the world remain serious concerns and are part of everyday life for millions of children.

Another major problem in contemporary society is the trafficking and selling of humans. Orhant (2002), citing data from the Congressional Research Service and the U.S. State Department, indicates that trafficking of humans is “a large and growing practice,” resulting in the trafficking of 700,000 to 2 million individuals (primarily children and women) each year across international borders. “Trafficking has turned into a big business . . . representing the third-largest source of profits of organized crime after drugs and guns, generating billions of dollars each year” (Orhant 2002:4). According to Orhant, individuals are being used for “forced prostitution, domestic service, unsafe agricultural labor, sweatshop labor, construction or restaurant work, and various forms of modern-day slavery” (2002:1). This is one of the most extreme forms of violation of human rights and social injustice that we are currently confronting on a global scale.

Population and Development

Since 1954, the United Nations has been celebrating, every 10 years or so, world population conferences.⁸ However, it was the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) that dramatically transformed our perspectives on population, development, and human rights’ issues. This conference was called “the most comprehensive global meeting on population in this century” (Ashford 1995) with important participation from NGO’s and a variety of women’s groups. Participants in this conference, contrary to prior conferences, generally agreed that both family planning and economic development were important to address prevailing population issues. The (non-binding) “Action Plan” that emerged from this conference called for unprecedented changes aimed at enhancing women’s roles and positions

internationally. In the agreed upon 20 year “Action Plan” to stabilize population growth, it was determined that there was a need to promote gender equity in access to health, education, employment, and income. It was “agreed” that there was a need to reduce discrimination against women; to allow women the liberty or rights to control their fertility and to remove the legal, cultural, and/or religious obstacles that would interfere with these fundamental rights (Ashford 1995). Despite this “Action Plan,” not much progress has occurred since then and, to a large extent, the population problems that paved the way for the 1994 Cairo conference remain practically unchanged.

Just before the Cairo conference, in 1993, the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)⁹ for “less developed” countries was 69, today it is 61 (65 excluding China), compared to 7 for industrialized countries. In 1993, life expectancy for poverty-stricken nations was 63 and today it is 65 (63 excluding China) compared to 76 for industrialized nations. This is not to say that poor nations have not experienced significant declines in the IMR and increases in life expectancy. In 1950, the IMR for the world was 156 and in 2003 it was 55; most declines in the IMR during this time period occurred in poor countries. However, much of that decline occurred from the 1950s to the 1980s with very little change or improvements during the 1990s. What is even more troublesome is that the IMR for countries in Africa, particularly for Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle Eastern countries, and some countries in Latin America and the Caribbean remain extremely high. For example, the IMR is 61 in Bolivia, 80 in Haiti, 103 in Iraq, 126 in Mali, 129 in East Timor, 134 in West Sahara, 141 in Liberia, 145 in Angola, 154 in Afghanistan, 155 in Sierra Leone, and 201 in Mozambique, to name but a few. Life expectancy remains extremely low in countries such as Haiti (51), W. Sahara (50), Burkina Faso (45), Sierra Leone (43), Zambia and Zimbabwe (41), and Botswana and Lesotho (37) (Population Reference Bureau, 2003a).

Problems with mortality and life expectancy are exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic that has impacted a significant number of African countries. For example, 39% of the population, aged 15-49, in Botswana was reported to have contracted HIV/AIDS; 31% in Lesotho; 33% in Swaziland; 22% in Namibia, and 20% in South Africa (all countries located in Southern Africa) (PRB 2003a). It is noteworthy that 68% of HIV/AIDS cases worldwide are reported to be in Sub-Saharan Africa. This has primarily become an epidemic among women and the youth in African countries, severely limiting and reversing gains in life expectancy. Moreover, it is expected that life expectancy will continue to decline in some African countries as a direct consequence of HIV/AIDS (see Carr 2004; PRB 2004).

We should also note that approximately 600,000 women die every year as a result of pregnancy, childbirth, and abortion throughout the world. About 95% of the maternal deaths take place in poor countries (PRB 1998). Diseases

associated with diarrhea cause 6,000 deaths, each day, primarily among children under the age of 5. In the urban areas of low-income countries, one child in six dies before age 5. Each day, about 25,000 people, worldwide, die of hunger. Dynes (2004:2) indicates that, according to the World Food Program, "nearly 40 million people are struggling against starvation." Moreover, in 2001, almost 2 million people died from infectious diarrhea and over 1 million people die each year from malaria.

It is important to note that a nontrivial number of the aforementioned problems are the direct result of the population's lack of access to water and basic sanitation. It is estimated that about 16% of the world population (over 1 billion people) lack access to safe drinking water while about 38% (or 2.4 billion people) do not have access to basic/adequate sanitation. Carr (2004) notes that approximately 1.7 million people die, on an annual basis, as a consequence of "unsafe water, sanitation, and hygiene" (also see De Souza et. al. 2003). With increasing world population, these numbers will also continue to grow. As we might expect, lack of access to water resources is not uniformly or equitably distributed worldwide. Again, it is the poor, children, women, and the elderly that are most likely to lack access to adequate water and sanitation. Access to piped water is lowest in Africa (24%) while only 49% and 66% of the population in Asia and Latin America/Caribbean, respectively, have access to piped water¹⁰ (United Nations 2003). The most "water scarce" regions in the world include the Middle East and North Africa (Roudi-Fahimi et. al. 2002). For example, in Ethiopia, less than a third of the total population has access to clean water. The Ethiopian droughts have caused an insurmountable amount of deaths and suffering among this population.

Impoverished countries throughout the world are experiencing severe health problems, high levels of infant mortality, and relatively low levels of life expectancy, as a consequence of diseases and illness that are preventable and that industrialized nations have done away with for decades. As Carr (2004:1) points out, the "human, economic, and societal costs of ill health are immense. Millions of people die prematurely from diseases that are preventable or curable. At relatively little expense, many of these people could lead longer, healthier, and more productive lives." At the same time, "bad health ensures that a country will not be able to break the shackles of poverty" (Jim Tulloch, country representative for the World Health Organization in Geneva, cited in Carr 2004:2).

Disasters, Poverty, and Human Rights

The problems of impoverished nations throughout the world have been exacerbated by environmental degradation and natural hazards. Easterly (2001, cited in Dynes 2004:2) indicates that "between 1990 and 1998 poor countries

accounted for 94% of the World’s 568 major disasters and 97 percent of disaster related deaths.” Asia is the world’s most disaster prone region (Osti 2004) while, at the same time, its population has continued to experience increasing poverty, thus magnifying the effects of disasters for the regions’ most vulnerable groups. Poor population groups suffer disproportionately the consequences of natural hazards and disasters (Rodríguez 2002; Blaikie et. al. 1995; Curson 1989) as well as that of famines, epidemics, and wars (Curson 1989). Let us take a closer look at several countries whose economies and the population’s quality of life have deteriorated considerably as a consequence of natural hazards and disasters.

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated and one of the poorest countries in the world and it “is near the bottom of the ladder in most measures of human development” (Hutton & Haque 2004:42). According to Hutton and Haque (2004), in normal or regular flood years, close to 18% of the land in Bangladesh is subject to floods. In more extreme years, close to 40% of the land can be impacted by floods. Some have referred to Bangladesh as the world’s “disaster capital,” experiencing cyclones and floods which result in tens of thousands of deaths. The effects of natural hazards in Bangladesh are exacerbated or are a direct consequence of extreme poverty and social inequality.

In October 1998, Honduras (and other countries in Central America) suffered the ravages of Hurricane Mitch; the entire country was severely impacted by this devastating hurricane. The number of hurricane victims in this country still remains unclear; some have suggested a death toll of 5,600, over 12,200 injured, and over 8,000 persons missing.¹¹ The replacement costs in Honduras, as a consequence of the damages generated by Hurricane Mitch, were estimated at about \$5 billion. Some economists have suggested that Mitch resulted in an economic set back of about 50 years for Honduras, one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere.

Vatsa and Joseph (2003) describe the 1993 Latur Earthquake and its demographic and socioeconomic impact in the state of Maharashtra, India as follows: “On September 30, 1993, an earthquake of magnitude 6.3 on the Richter scale struck the southeastern region of the state of Maharashtra . . . around 8,000 people died in the earthquake, and more than 16,000 were injured. In the two districts, Latur and Osmanabad, which were hardest hit by the earthquake, 70 villages were completely destroyed, and more than 1,500 villages reported extensive damages to houses and public property” (2003:207). In May 2003, an earthquake with a magnitude of 5.8 in the Richter scale left over 2,200 hundred dead and about 9,000 injured in Algeria. Most recently (December, 2003), an earthquake, with a magnitude of 6.6, resulted in over 25,000 deaths and more than 30,000 injured in Bam, Iraq. It is noteworthy that an earthquake with a slightly higher magnitude (6.7) in 1994, known as the

Northridge Earthquake, left about 60 dead in a high population density area in northern Los Angeles, California.

What is the difference between these regions (Bangladesh, Iraq, Honduras, and Algeria), that result in such devastation and mass casualty, and countries such as the United States, where the number of deaths from natural hazards has continued to decline? One answer to this question is extreme poverty, lack of adequate disaster preparedness and mitigation initiatives, and an overall lack of adequate and responsible governance. Population vulnerability to natural hazards is exacerbated by poverty; the poorest population groups are more severely impacted by disasters and are the ones that have the most difficulty in recuperating from such events. As Kofi Annan indicates, “most disaster victims live in developing countries, where poverty and population pressures force growing numbers of people to live in harm’s way” (*The International Herald Tribune*, 10 September 1999).

Factors such as population growth, urbanization, deforestation and environmental degradation, and lack of mitigation initiatives, among others, have also increased our vulnerability to natural hazards (Pielke, et. al., 2003; Rodriguez, 2002; Blaikie, et. al., 1995). Moreover, the existing social, economic, and political systems contribute to the populations’ vulnerability to hazards and disasters (Blaikie, et. al., 1995). As argued by Blaikie and colleagues (1995) and Cannon (1994), among others, the root causes of vulnerability are the population’s limited access to power, structure, and resources. In order to protect lives and property in these impoverished and disaster-prone regions, we need to generate policies and practices that provide for the security and safety of individuals and communities. We must also work with governments and communities in order to develop “disaster resistant” or resilient communities that are able to prepare for, respond to, and recover from hazard events. These are important issues that need to be addressed as an integral part of a human rights’ agenda.

Globalization, Communication Networks, and the Spread of Human Rights

Howard-Hassman (2004) assumes, rightfully so, that communication networks speed up the process of globalization and the spread of human rights throughout the world. She indicates that “with the internet and email, it is easy for citizens of all nations of the world to acquire information and to communicate with each other instantaneously” (27). Technological innovations, including radars and satellites, geographic information systems (GIS), global positioning systems (GPS), the Internet, Internet wireless connections, e-mail, the development of cellular phones, text messaging, PDAs

and other handheld electronic devices, and fax machines, among others, have transformed the way we communicate (Rodríguez et. al. 2004). Consequently, what used to be domestic news or information, limited to a particular geographic location, has suddenly become an international event. Now wars and conflicts, famines, crimes, protests, human right abuses, as well as other types of events, have become international news with an international audience, which take place in many of our living rooms on a daily basis. The expansion of communication networks throughout the world have served to make an increasingly group of people aware of their poverty and misery, while, on the other hand, it has desensitize other groups to the human right abuses and social injustices that are taking place in today’s global society.

The role of global communication networks in the spread of globalization and the dissemination of information on human rights and human right abuses could be extremely important but needs to be carefully documented. Moreover, we cannot assume that all population groups have access to these sources of information or to the information that is being disseminated through the same. Extreme poverty in many of the world’s countries and regions (as described above) limits population access to these types of technology and information. While there is not doubt that, increasingly, citizens throughout the world have access to the internet and other sources of information, it is also the case that the vast majority of people in the world do not have access to the internet, to television, to radio, or to newspapers, among others. Therefore, access to information for the majority of the world population is still extremely limited thus creating an international “digital divide” which exacerbates the existing inequities around the world. Carr (2004) points out that “the poor-rich divide in access to information, technology, and high quality basic and specialized health care threatens to leave the global poor even further behind” (28).

Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Who will defend our rights?

In 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations established the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which proclaimed that this should be “a common standard for achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance” (United Nations 1948:1).

Through this Declaration, the United Nations proclaimed that all individuals have a right to life, liberty, and security of person; that we are all entitled to full equality; that everyone has a right to own property; to freedom

of thought; right to equal pay for equal work; a right to a standard of living that is adequate for the health and well-being of individuals and their families; and a right to education, among others. In 1993, 171 countries reaffirmed the importance of and their commitment to human rights generally and to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* specifically.

Given that over 55 years have elapsed since the United Nations adopted this Declaration, we need to ask if we are better off today as a consequence of this Declaration. Are more countries committed to the full implementation of the same? The answer is “probably so” to both questions. However, the data and issues discussed in this paper also show that we are merely at the beginning of the implementation of this human rights declaration, that many countries are not truly committed to the enforcement of these basic human right principles, that even industrialized countries are no where near to achieving the implementation of the aforementioned rights, and that human rights’ violations and abuses are still the order of the day in contemporary societies.

In an attempt to address the aforementioned inequities, just recently (2000), 191 countries pledged to meet the *United Nations Millennium Development Goals* by the year 2015. These are ambitious but needed goals aimed at eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowerment; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other infectious diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and establishing global partnerships for development (see United Nations 2000 and 2003). This agenda is a complex one which requires the commitment of rich and poor nations. In order to accomplish these goals, however, governments must direct their resources towards increasing education, improving health conditions, and increasing the levels of income of the impoverished populations throughout the world. Moreover, industrialized countries must be willing to invest resources and provide financial, technological, and scientific support and know-how to poverty-stricken nations, if we are to succeed in the implementation of this agenda. Countries must establish international or global partnerships, not in order to influence or determine economic or political agendas but to promote human rights and social justice. The implementation of the aforementioned agenda (the *UN Millennium Development Goals*) requires the immediate attention of countries throughout the world, at a time when socio-economic inequalities and disparities in health have continued to increase (Carr 2004).

Concluding Remarks

There are many questions for which do not have concrete answers when it comes to the implementation of human rights and social justice. For example, who should watch for the protection and implementation of human rights:

international bureaucracies, such as the United Nations; pro-human rights organizations; government agencies; or local communities? What are or should be the consequences for countries that continue to disenfranchise and exploit their populations and violate their fundamental rights? Will governments favor and support organizations, such as the United Nations, as long as they do not interfere with the military and economic goals of powerful nations or as long as the actions taken are in the “best interest” of a particular country? Will countries continue to “defend” and “speak out” against human rights’ abuses throughout the world but continue to generate policies and laws such as those governed by the Patriot Act, which violate human rights for the sake of “national security?” Who are and will continue to be the victims of human rights’ violations and social injustice?

In response to the last question and based on the data and information presented throughout this article, we must coincide with Parenti (1978) when he indicates that the poor possess “little material wealth when wealth has been the greatest determinant of life chances, the lower classes have experienced the harshest exploitation as both workers and consumers; the most disease and the earliest deaths; the least opportunity for comfort, learning, autonomy, self-governance, and self-respect and the sternest mistreatment at the hands of the law” (1978:65). Others might choose to agree with Marx and Engels, when they point out that “the modern bourgeois society . . . has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones . . . society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other” (1848:9).

In order to generate significant social and economic change and to focus on the growth and implementation of human rights, countries need to experience economic development, increase in education, particularly for women, and become part of the international communication network. We must also focus on the alleviation of poverty and social inequality, particularly in the “less developed” regions of the world. Countries must develop economic strategies aimed at increasing the basic incomes of individuals and families in the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. However, wealth or income is only one of the components of poverty. As the 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics, Amartya Sen, has stated, poverty is a “serious deprivation of certain basic capabilities,” (1998:194) such as health care, schooling, and land tenure, among others. Therefore, an increase in a country’s GNP, will not necessarily result in a reduction in the deprivation of basic necessities. Quite the contrary, as we have already shown, we can continue to experience increasing poverty and inequality in the midst of increasing GNP. Sen (2000) argues that development is or should be a process of expanding freedom for a country’s population. He goes on to indicate that “development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic

opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states” (2000:3).

The alleviation of social inequality, the implementation of a human rights’ agenda, and the development of a socio-political process aimed at enhancing social justice are not simple tasks to undertake nor will they yield immediate results. Nevertheless, “unless there is radical improvement, too many countries will miss the [United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals] targets — with disastrous consequences for the poorest and most vulnerable of their citizens” (UNDP, 2003:13). As the UNDP states, in its *Human Development Report 2003*, in order to achieve significant and systemic changes in health, education, and in the alleviation of poverty, we will need the work and commitment of government officials, international collaboration, and “popular mobilization to sustain the political will.”

Whether we agree or disagree with Parenti or Marx and Engels, we do need to ask whether globalization will mitigate or exacerbate the social, economic, health, and other human rights’ problems and concerns presented here. In my view, the data seems to be pointing towards the latter. Is globalization and capitalism the ultimate or long-term solution to these problems? The evidence seems to be somewhat arbitrary and contradictory in this area. Whether capitalism is a necessary condition for democracy and, henceforth, for the implementation of a human rights’ agenda, is also questionable; the evidence, at best, is mixed and inconclusive (Howard-Hassman 2004).

Our intention is not to argue that the social, economic, and health problems discussed in this article have emerged as a direct consequence of globalization. Indeed, many of these problems have co-existed with human beings since the beginning of time. However, we do argue that globalization is not the panacea that will contribute to the solution or amelioration of the aforementioned problems. What does seem to be clear, as we have documented here, is that the outcome of globalization has been the exacerbation of poverty and inequality.¹² If globalization is the long-term answer or solution to the world’s problems (as the proponents of globalization argue), then it seems that we will be taking a long walk to freedom, democracy, and the fulfillment of human rights and social justice. It is also important to note that as this process of globalization continues, many of our human rights will continue to be negatively impacted by diverse economic, political, and military forces.

Despite the aforementioned circumstances, it is necessary to understand that globalization is a fact in today’s societies and appears to be an irreversible process. Therefore, we must analyze, explore, and generate concrete initiatives that will address many of the problems and issues presented throughout this paper. It is quite evident, however, that we do not need additional laws, legislation or public policies aimed at alleviating poverty, providing access to adequate health care and educational benefits, or aimed at enhancing women’s rights vis-à-vis their male counterparts. What we actually need is the fulfillment

or the implementation of the United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights or their Millennium Development Goals or the 1995 ICPD Action Plan. We need governments to commit to these goals and to invest economic resources in initiatives aimed at providing adequate health care and basic education to their citizens.

Social action will be instrumental in mobilizing local and international governments and communities in order to pursue and implement the aforementioned initiatives. Social mobilization combined with pro-human rights organizations and the dissemination of information, through global communication networks, have and will continue to contribute to the human rights’ movement, allowing populations throughout the world to learn about and to expose human rights’ abuses in their communities. Finally, we as scholars, intellectuals, and researchers can play a very important role in this process. We have an obligation to educate, to inform, and to train our students to think about the impact and outcomes of globalization, development, capitalism, and human rights. Even today, we can agree with C. Wright Mills (1958):

Every time intellectuals have the chance to speak yet do not speak, they join the forces that train people not to be able to think and imagine and feel in morally and politically adequate ways. When they do not demand that the secrecy that makes elite decisions absolute and unchangeable be removed, they too are part of the passive conspiracy to kill off public scrutiny. When they do not speak, when they do not demand, when they do not think and feel and act as intellectuals — and so as public individuals — they too contribute to the moral paralysis, the intellectual rigidity, that now grip both leaders and led around the world. (151)

These words are all the more relevant today in a post 9-11 environment, in the era of the Patriot Act, terrorism, and homeland security.

Notes

1. This article was initially presented as part of the “Panel on Human Rights and Globalization,” Southern Sociological Society, 2004 Annual Meeting, April 14-17, 2004, Atlanta, Georgia. It originated, in part, as a response to Rhoda E. Howard-Hassman’s paper titled “The Great Transformation II: Human Rights Leapfrogging in the Era of Globalization,” also presented in this panel session. I would like to thank Alfonso R. Latoni and other esteemed colleagues for their insightful comments and recommendations.

2. It is noteworthy that there is not a causal relationship between democracy and the implementation of a human rights’ agenda, broadly construed. Although, human rights are more likely to flourish in a democratic society, this is not necessarily the case, particularly when we look at issues such as the reduction of poverty, universal access to adequate health care and education, and equal rights for men and women, among other

factors. For example, the U.S. population has achieved political rights, that is, freedom of speech and the right to democratically elect their government representatives through popular elections. However, the U.S. population is not guaranteed economic rights; they do not have a right to employment or a right to universal health care, among others. Over 43 million Americans do not have access to health care in the U.S.; extreme poverty exists throughout the mainland, particularly in central cities (where minorities are concentrated) and in rural areas. It is estimated that in 2002, 17% of all children in the US were living in poverty, with rates as high as 29% in the District of Columbia and 26% in Louisiana, Mississippi, and New Mexico (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2003). These rates are much higher in rural areas of the U.S. and among racial and ethnic minorities and female headed households, which confront severe health problems and lack of adequate health care. Further, African Americans have a lower probability of “reaching mature ages” when compared to individuals in many impoverished nations throughout the world (Sen 2000). On the other hand, although experiencing widespread poverty and lack of a democratic state, Cuba has made significant gains in the educational process and in the health field. The Cuban population has also experienced important demographic changes resulting in fertility and infant mortality rates, as well as life expectancy at birth, that compare very favorably to the most developed and the richest countries in the world, despite over 40 years of a U.S.-imposed economic embargo on this country (see PRB 2003a, 2003b)!

3. For a detailed discussion on the origins and consequences of the “great transformations,” see Polanyi 1944; Howard-Hassman 2004).

4. As a consequence of the escalating violence in many regions throughout Iraq combined with the increasing threats of several countries (e.g., Spain, Eritrea, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras) to withdraw their military troops from Iraq, the U.S. military presence in this country will more than likely continue to increase.

5. For a more detailed analysis of the tuna industry in the west coast of Puerto Rico and the social, economic, and political implications see Mulero, 2000 and Valdés-Pizzini, 1996.

6. Operation Bootstrap or “Operación Manos a la Obra” was a 25-year economic development strategy initiated by the Puerto Rican government, in 1947, in order to attract manufacturing industries from the US mainland to Puerto Rico in order to industrialize the Island, based on the provision of cheap labor, tax exemptions, and low-cost infrastructure, among other incentives (Scarano, 1993). For an overview of Puerto Rico’s economic growth and development, see Carr 1984; Irizarry-Mora, 2001; Perez de Jesus 1987; Rivera-Batiz & Santiago 1996; Scarano, 1993; Quintero-Rivera, 1986; Rivera-Medina & Ramírez 1985; Ramirez de Arellano & Seipp, 1983; Weiskoff 1976, among others.

7. Although this social movement was instrumental in defending and protecting the human rights of this population, it also resulted in political and economic actions taken by the U.S. government that will have far-reaching consequences for the Puerto Rican population.

8. For a detailed discussion on the world population conferences and their goals/objectives and outcomes, see PRB 2004 and Ashford 1995).

9. The IMR is expressed as the annual number of deaths of infants, under age 1, per 1,000 live births. For comparative purposes, in modern society, an IMR of 10 or more is considered to be “high.”

10. It is estimated that developing and transnational countries spend about \$80 billion on the water sector, on an annual basis (Preliminary 3rd World Water Forum Statement, March 21 2002). However, these countries need to spend over twice that amount or about \$180 billion, on a yearly basis, to achieve water security and to provide adequate sanitation services for the world’s poor population (Macan-Markar 2003).

11. Pielke et. al. (2003) have estimated the total loss of life in Nicaragua and Honduras, as a consequence of Hurricane Mitch, in the 10,000 mark with over \$8.5 billion in combined damages. For comparative purposes, we should note that Hurricane Andrew in 1992 (one of the costliest hurricanes in U.S. history with an estimated total loss of about \$25 billion) left a death toll of 15 in Florida (Dade County), 8 in Louisiana, and 3 in the Bahamas for a total of 26 deaths.

12. Howard–Hassman (2004) indicates that, in the short-term, globalization has resulted in the violation of human rights, leading to social disruption and much exploitation although she argues that the long-term effects of globalization will be positive and will promote the development of a human rights’ agenda.

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