

# An Airborne Disease: Globalization through African Eyes

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As a scholar of international human rights with background knowledge of Africa, I asked myself the question, "what does globalization mean to Africans"? I also asked how globalization affected Africans' capacity for autonomy. Finally, I asked whether Africans' interpretation of globalization was factually accurate. I considered especially the question of whether international and national governing institutions were legitimate in the eyes of Africans. An institution's perceived legitimacy rests on whether its citizens accept it as fair.

Although I refer to "Africa" throughout my essay, I actually write about sub-Saharan Africa, the part of Africa in, or south of, the Sahara desert, excluding North Africa. Africa is by far the poorest continent in the world. It is the continent least connected to the global economy, and it has the least influence on global governance. Yet, little is known about how individual Africans think about globalization. Many scholars and policy-makers regard Africa as a poverty-stricken and disease-ridden "basket case." Although they want to assist Africa to develop, they are not interested in investigating whether Africans might gain a higher capacity for, and sense of, autonomy if there were changes in the institutional organization of global politics, international law, and the global economy.

I investigated what globalization meant to Africans by referring to interviews that I and two graduate assistants from McMaster University, Anthony Lombardo and Kristina Maud Bergeron, had conducted with seventy-five elite Africans from twenty-six countries between 2002 and 2004. These Africans included forty-two human rights activists, twenty-five scholars, and eight ambassadors to the United States. We spoke in person with seventy-two of these individuals, and interviewed the last three via email. We referred to the people we spoke with as "elite" Africans because all of those for whom we had information about education had at least one university degree. Although elite, they were not disconnected from the life of ordinary Africans. Many had uneducated parents, and many were still close to their home villages.

Autonomy can be briefly defined as self-rule. For a continent or region such as Africa, autonomy means that the region has the political, institutional, and economic tools to run its own affairs. For an individual, autonomy means that she can make her own decisions about her own life and act on them. In my view, without a sense of autonomy, an individual cannot enjoy a sense that others respect her, or that she is a dignified human being. Yet human dignity is the basis for human rights; we want individuals to have human rights so that they can enjoy their human dignity.

The Africans we spoke with had very little sense of continental or personal autonomy. They viewed globalization as a continuation of the systems of slave trade, colonialism, and neo-colonialism which, they thought, had been exploiting them for centuries. They viewed foreign investment in their agricultural and mineral export industries as a form of theft, a way for Western economies to steal African resources without contributing anything in return. As one man from Tanzania put it, globalization was "an airborne disease." It blew in, as it were, from the West, bringing only suffering in its wake. Africans lost jobs in manufacturing because of competition from foreign imports, as one Kenyan man suggested. Structural adjustment programs negotiated by African governments with the

International Monetary Fund in return for loans required that governments lay off or reduce the salaries of employees in the civil service, health, and educational sectors. These programs also required that basic goods such as water be privatized — that is, that private companies should distribute water as a profit-making activity, rather than government distributing water on a non-profit basis. With increased unemployment, lower wages, and higher prices for basic goods, the Africans we talked to saw only increased poverty as result of globalization. They thought that the West should redistribute some of its wealth back to Africa.

These Africans also believed that the institutions of global governance, especially the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, had been set up by the Western world for its own benefit. Only some of the ambassadors who had a more sophisticated knowledge of global governance than most of the people we talked to, had some faith in international economic institutions, especially the World Trade Organization. But these ambassadors wanted the World Trade Organization to follow its own rules. They especially wanted to be able to export more African products to the West. This required the West to level the playing field by reducing government subsidies to agricultural goods such as cotton grown in Western countries, so that they would no longer be cheaper than African imports. To level the playing field, the West would also have to lower its tariff barriers, so that Westerners trying to import African products would pay less import duty (tax) for them.

Although I understand the despair that caused the people we spoke with to regard globalization as something that had only negative effects on Africa, I disagree with their analysis. Timothy Besley and Robin Burgess are two economists interested in poverty reduction. In their view, poor countries need economic growth, more than internal or global redistribution of wealth. This economic growth requires increased foreign investment, or more globalization. Increased foreign investment follows institutional improvements, especially establishment of more transparent, accountable governments, and the rule of law. A transparent and accountable government is one whose decisions and policies are open to scrutiny by its citizens, and that is not corrupt. Rule of law means that the government must obey the law. Besley and Burgess also stress better protection of individuals' capacity to earn their own living. Citizens need improved security of tenure in land and property. They also need better access to small-scale credit. A better-qualified, more educated labour force is more likely to draw foreign investment that provides paid employment to a country. And finally, narrower income inequalities correlate with a better capacity to fight poverty.

I agree with Besley and Burgess. I believe that globalization may have significant positive effects in the long term for all human rights, including economic rights. Africans need more globalization, not less. But they need it within a context of democracy, workers' rights, the rule of law, and citizens' active involvement in the decisions their governments make. Foreign investors are attracted to countries that provide a stable political, legal, and economic environment. They need to be assured that no one will suddenly change the investment rules, or suddenly take away their property. But this stability should not be implemented at the price of the individual rights of the citizens of African states. Africans need governments with greater organizational and institutional capacities than most now possess. They also need leaders who are responsive to their populations, and who are not corrupt. The starting point for external legitimacy is internal legitimacy. Unless there is serious, autonomously-driven, and conscientious reform in sub-Saharan Africa, the conditions to independently have some influence over globalization will not emerge.

I conclude that to ground the "airborne disease" of globalization, and turn it from an evil to a benefit, requires institutional changes that only Africans can guide. Good governance, the rule of law,

democracy, and human rights are not only aspects of life that protect individuals from arbitrary rule. They also create the stable, reliable conditions that attract long-term investment. And conversely, they create the conditions that will permit Africans to speak out and organize politically when, as often happens, foreign investors want to exploit their labour and resources without any responsibilities to the continent.

These findings suggest that African citizens will benefit most from globalization when their basic human rights are also respected. A citizen who enjoys the right to vote for, or criticize, her government is more likely to think of that government as legitimate. If the government protects the judicial system, then the rule of law is more likely to be enforced. This means that the citizen's property rights in her home, land, or business are more likely to be respected. It also means that she can enjoy her rights as a labourer; for example, to join a union in a foreign-owned global corporation. Enjoying these rights, the citizen is more likely to feel a sense of personal autonomy. At the same time, her nation, and the continent of Africa as a whole, will also enjoy a higher capacity for autonomy if they are democratically organized.

Part of globalization is the spread of ideas. One very powerful idea is that of human rights. There were far more human rights organizations in the world in 2005 than twenty-five years earlier. Human rights protect individuals against corrupt and cruel governments, and against global investors that disregard their property and labour rights. But human rights also make it more likely that in the long run, globalization will benefit ordinary citizens. When citizens enjoy human rights, globalization will no longer be an "airborne disease."