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A busy street in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

# Globalization: A View from Below

BY JEAN-BERTRAND ARISTIDE

Our planet is entering the new century with fully 1.3 billion people living on less than one dollar a day. Three billion people, or half the population of the world, live on less than two dollars a day. Yet this same planet is experiencing unprecedented economic growth. The statistics that describe the accumulation of wealth in the world are mind-boggling. From where we sit, the most staggering statistics of all are those that reflect the polarization of this wealth. In 1960 the richest 20% of the world's population had 70% of the world's wealth, today they have 86% of the wealth. In 1960 the poorest 20% of the world's population had just 2.3% of the wealth of the world. Today this has shrunk to just barely 1%.

Imagine that the five fingers of your hand represent the world's population. The hand has \$100 to share. Today the thumb, representing the richest 20% of the world's population, has \$86 for itself. The little finger has just \$1. The thumb is accumulating wealth with breathtaking speed

and never looking back. The little finger is sinking deeper into economic misery. The distance between them grows larger every day.

Behind the crisis of dollars there is a human crisis: among the poor, immeasurable human suffering; among the others, the powerful, the policymakers, a poverty of spirit which has made a religion of the market and its invisible hand. A crisis of imagination so profound that the only measure of value is profit, the only measure of human progress is economic growth.

We have not reached the consensus that to eat is a basic human right. This is an ethical crisis. This is a crisis of faith.

Global capitalism becomes a machine devouring our planet. The little finger, the men

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**Jean-Bertrand Aristide comforts an orphan at Lafanmi Selavi, a center for street children he founded in 1986.**

and women of the poorest 20%, are reduced to cogs in this machine, the bottom rung in global production, valued only as cheap labor, otherwise altogether disposable. The machine cannot and does not measure their suffering. The machine also does not measure the suffering of our planet. Every second an area the size of a soccer field is deforested. This fact alone should be mobilizing men and women to protect their most basic interest — oxygen. But the machine overwhelms us. The distance between the thumb and the little finger stretches to the breaking point.

### **GLOBALIZATION: A CHOICE BETWEEN DEATH AND DEATH**

*A morgue worker is preparing to dispose of a dozen corpses. One living soul lifts himself off of the table, shakes his head and declares, "I am not dead!" To which the morgue worker answers, "Yes you are. The doctors say that you are dead, so lie down."*

In today's global marketplace trillions of dollars are traded each day via a vast network of

computers. In this market no one talks, no one touches. Only numbers count.

And yet today this faceless economy is already five times larger than the real, or productive, economy.

We know other marketplaces. On a plain high in the mountains of Haiti, one day a week thousands of people still gather. This is the marketplace of my childhood in the mountains above Port Salut. The sights and the smells and the noise and the color overwhelm you. Everyone comes. If you don't come you will miss everything. The donkeys tied and waiting in the woods number in the thousands. Goods are displayed in every direction: onions, leeks, corn, beans, yams, cabbage, cassava, and avocados, mangoes and every tropical fruit, chickens, pigs, goats, and batteries, and tennis shoes, too. People trade goods and news. This is the center; social, political, and economic life roll together. A woman teases and coaxes her client: "Cherie, the onions are sweet and waiting just for you." The client laughs and teases back until they make a deal. They share trade, and laughter, gossip, politics, and medical and child-rearing tips. A market exchange, and a human exchange.

We are not against trade, we are not against free trade, but our fear is that the global market intends to annihilate our markets. We will be pushed to the cities, to eat food grown on factory farms in distant countries, food whose price depends on the daily numbers game of the first market. "This is more efficient," the economists say. "Your market, your way of life, is not efficient," they say. But we ask, "What is left when you reduce trade to numbers, when you erase all that is human?"

Globalization, the integration of world markets, has promised to "lift all boats," rich and poor, to bring a global culture of entertainment and consumer goods to everyone — the promise of material happiness. And indeed, since 1980 most Third World countries have embraced globalization. They have opened their economies to the world, lowered tariffs, embraced free trade, and allowed goods and services from the industrialized world to flow in. It seems the world is brought closer together. In fact the gap between the thumb and the little finger has never been larger.

What happens to poor countries when they embrace free trade? In Haiti in 1986 we imported just 7,000 tons of rice, the main staple food of the country. The vast majority was grown in Haiti. In the late 1980s Haiti complied with free

trade policies advocated by the international lending agencies and lifted tariffs on rice imports. Cheaper rice immediately flooded in from the United States, where the rice industry is subsidized. In fact the liberalization of Haiti's market coincided with the 1985 Farm Bill in the United States which increased subsidies to the rice industry, so that 40% of U.S. rice growers' profits came from the government by 1987. Haiti's peasant farmers could not possibly compete. By 1996 Haiti was importing 196,000 tons of foreign rice at the cost of \$100 million a year. Haitian rice production became negligible. Once the dependence on foreign rice was complete, import prices began to rise, leaving Haiti's population, particularly the urban poor, completely at the whim of rising world grain prices. And the prices continue to rise.

What lessons do we learn? For poor countries free trade is not so free, or so fair. Haiti, under intense pressure from the international lending institutions stopped protecting its domestic agriculture while subsidies to the U.S. rice industry increased. A hungry nation became hungrier.

In a globalized economy, foreign investment is trumpeted as the key to alleviating poverty. But in fact, the top beneficiary of foreign investment from 1985-95 was the United States, with \$477 billion. Britain ran a distant second at \$199 billion, and Mexico, the only Third World country in the top 10, received only \$44 billion in investment. When the majority of this money fled the country overnight during Mexico's financial meltdown in 1995, we learned that foreign investment is not really investment. It is more like speculation. And in my country, Haiti, it's very hard to find investment statistics.

We are still moving from misery toward poverty with dignity.

Many in the First World imagine the amount of money spent on aid to developing countries is massive. In fact, it amounts to only .03% of GNP of the industrialized nations. In 1995, the director of the U.S. aid agency defended his agency by testifying to his congress that 84¢ of every dollar of aid goes back into

the U.S. economy in goods and services purchased. For every dollar the United States puts into the World Bank, an estimated \$2 actually goes into the U.S. economy in goods and services. Meanwhile in 1995, severely indebted low-income countries paid \$1 billion more in debt and interest to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) than they received from it. For the 46 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, foreign debt service was four times their combined governmental health and education budgets in 1996. So, we find that aid does not aid.

The little finger knows that she is sinking deeper into misery each day, but all the while the thumb is telling her that profits are increasing, economies are growing and he is pouring millions of dollars of aid into her country. Whose profit? Whose economy? What aid? The logic of global capitalism is not logical for her. We call this economic schizophrenia.

The history of the eradication of the Haitian Creole pig population in the 1980s is a classic parable of globalization. Haiti's small, black, Creole pigs were at the heart of the peasant economy. An extremely hearty breed, well adapted to Haiti's climate and conditions, they ate readily available waste products, and could survive for

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Two boys at Lafanmi Selavi waiting for soccer practice.



Jennifer Cheek Pantaléon



Girls playing jump-rope at Lafanmi Selavi.

three days without food. Eighty to 85% of rural households raised pigs; they played a key role in maintaining the fertility of the soil and constituted the primary savings bank of the peasant population. Traditionally a pig was sold to pay for emergencies and special occasions (funerals, marriages, baptisms, illnesses and, critically, to pay school fees and buy books for the children when school opened each year in October).

In 1982 international agencies assured Haiti's peasants their pigs were sick and had to be killed (so that the illness would not spread to countries to the North.) Promises were made that better pigs would replace the sick pigs. With an efficiency not since seen among development projects, all of the Creole pigs were killed over a period of 13 months.

Two years later the new, better pigs came from

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ourselves up  
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Iowa. They were so much better that they required clean drinking water (unavailable to 80% of the Haitian population), imported feed (costing \$90 a year when the per capita income was about \$130), and special roofed pig-

pens. Haitian peasants quickly dubbed them as "*prince à quatre pieds*," (four footed princes). Adding insult to injury, the meat did not taste as good. Needless to say, the repopulation program was a complete failure. One observer of the process estimated that in monetary terms, Haitian peasants lost \$600 million. There was a 30% drop in enrollment in rural schools, there was a dramatic decline in the protein consumption in rural Haiti, a devastating decapitalization of the peasant economy, and an incalculable negative impact on Haiti's soil and agricultural productivity. The Haitian peasantry has not recovered to this day.

Most of rural Haiti is still isolated from global markets, so for many peasants the extermination of the Creole pigs was their first experience of globalization. The experience looms large in the collective memory. Today, when the peasants are told that "economic reform" and privatization

will benefit them they are understandably wary. The state-owned enterprises are sick, we are told, and they must be privatized. The peasants shake their heads and remember the Creole pigs.

The 1997 sale of the state-owned flour mill confirmed their skepticism. The mill sold for a mere \$9 million, while estimates place potential yearly profits at \$20-30 million a year. The mill was bought by a group of investors linked to one of Haiti's largest banks. One outcome seems certain: This sale will further concentrate wealth — in a country where 1% of the population already holds 45% of the wealth of the country.

If we have lingering doubts about where poor countries fall in this "new" economic order, listen to the World Bank. In September 1996, *The London Guardian* newspaper cited a draft World Bank strategy paper that predicted that the majority of Haitian peasants — who make up 70% of Haiti's population — are unlikely to survive bank-advocated free market measures. The Bank concluded: "The small volume of production and the environmental resource constraints will leave the rural population with only two possibilities: to work in the industrial or service sector, or to emigrate." At present the industrial sector employs only about 20,000 Haitians. There are already approximately 2.5 million people living in Port-au-Prince, 70% of them are





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**Junior Thelusma takes in some shade at the Ministry of Agriculture in Tabarre outside Port-au-Prince, where the children of Lafanmi Selavi tend their own fields of beans, bananas, and mangoes.**

officially unemployed and living in perhaps the most desperate conditions in the Western Hemisphere. Given the tragic history of Haiti's boat people, emigration, the second possibility, can hardly be considered a real option.

The choices that globalization offers the poor remind me of a story. Anatole, one of the boys who had lived with us at Lafanmi Selavi\*, was working at the national port. One day a very powerful businessman offered him money to sabotage the main unloading forklift at the port. Anatole said to the man, "Well, then I am already dead." The man, surprised by the response, asked, "Why?" Anatole answered: "Because if I sneak in here at night and do what you ask they will shoot me, and if I don't, you will kill me." The dilemma is, I believe, the classic dilemma of the poor: a choice between death and death.

Either we enter a global economic system, in which we know we cannot survive, or we refuse, and face death by slow starvation. With choices like these the urgency of finding a third way is clear. We must find some room to maneuver, some open space simply to survive. We must lift ourselves up off the morgue table and tell the experts we are not yet dead. ■

*\* Lafanmi Selavi is the center for street children in Port-au-Prince founded by Aristide in 1986.*

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*Jean-Bertrand Aristide is a lifelong human rights activist who was elected president of Haiti in 1990. This article is adapted from his book *Eyes of the Heart: Seeking a Path for the Poor in the Age of Globalization* (Common Courage Press, 2000).*

*(For teaching ideas, see page 56.)*