

reflections

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The very word globalization triggers often highly polarized views. For some it is an apocalyptic demon devouring the environment, homogenizing cultures and values and subverting equity, justice and common decency. For others it is the ultimate evolution of the market, freeing multinational corporations from government red tape and promising previously unimaginable economic development which could overcome poverty and scythe through what are seen as outdated, suffocating values.

In reality, it is neither and both — a force which can be steered in either direction and hopefully one that is deemed sensible and intelligent for people and the planet. We are missing the chance to do this amid the heated arguments, but UNEP aims to seize the moment in areas affecting its mandate and vision.

UNEP's annual Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum meetings provide an opportunity to raise the level of debate, and point towards the sustainable globalization we so urgently need. We need it because even before globalization became common parlance the Earth's ecosystem services, upon which all life depends, were declining. We need it because, at present, globalization is failing to capture the true value of nature-based goods and services. We need it because those benefiting from globalization may well do so at the expense of those unable to take part in its essentially short-term, market-led approach. And we need it because the gap between rich and poor is widening, with no evidence that wealth is 'trickling down'.

UNEP does not presume to be the first organization to organize a globalization debate. But we do perceive that a new understanding is emerging that the international community must address, fair and square, how it relates to environmental sustainability. Some pioneering corporations — including ones that depend on fisheries — are beginning to question whether the existing model is a good long term investment, whether the natural or nature-based resources upon which their profits are predicated will remain over the coming decades.

In 2001 the World Trade Organization launched the Doha Round with linkages between trade and environment; though stalled, it has firmly underlined that the globalization of trade needs managing to ensure environmental and human well being.



Sustainably managing globalization can include many measures, from extending certification of timber and other natural resources to adopting green procurement policies. Innovative market mechanisms that start recognizing the true value of the Earth's assets are also urgently needed.

UNEP recently hosted the meeting of the parties to the Basel Convention on hazardous wastes. Globalization is triggering a massive rise in electronic wastes, some of which are being dumped in Asia and Africa: one investigation indicates that at least 100,000 computers arrive at the port of Lagos alone each month. Up to three quarters of the imports — which also includes old televisions and mobile phones — will end up in an African rubbish tip or open air incinerator.

Like any market, the global marketplace is both an economic and a social construct. Intelligent globalization implies willingness to incorporate such fundamental values as fairness and equity — and knowledge about how our planet can best sustain the production and consumption patterns of now close to 7 billion people. Environmental sustainability and social equity have emerged as key determinants of whether globalization is a viable economic development path for the 21st century. How we manage the opportunities and risks associated with it is ultimately for everyone to choose — not for some to dictate.

Johnny Clegg, the South African rock star and anti-apartheid campaigner, has chosen — and become a computer recycling businessman. Learning that his old PC was likely to end up polluting land or water, he established a company to recycle electronic waste. He has already opened a plant near Johannesburg and aims to set up an ultra-modern, high-tech factory near Cape Town recycling United States and European e-waste, and providing work for 17,000 township people. He is demonstrating that globalization is what we want it to be — a threat, or a new way of doing businesses that brings an intelligent and creative approach to conserving finite natural resources, and to benefiting the planet and its people.

Cover photo © ChinaFotoPress/Getty Images. Plastic recycled slippers float on water as part of an environmentally themed art show created for World Environment Day, 5 June, 2006, in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China. Looking afresh at our consumption and production patterns, and redefining our attitudes to waste and a product's lifecycle, are components of a broader discussion of the environmental implications of globalization.

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