Globalization as a Concept

Globalization is a relatively new phenomena that has spread very rapidly, eliciting strong reactions from proponents and opponents alike. Because of the polarizing nature of this debate, both sides have established working definitions that enhance their viewpoints, while ignoring or undermining other important facts associated with globalization. However the UN Committee on Economic, Social & Cultural Rights gave an objective definition of globalization on May 11, 1998 at the Global Policy Forum.

The committee’s statement on globalization defined globalization as “developments in technology, communications information processing and so on that have made the world smaller and more interdependent in very many ways.” This definition, more than any other, captures the fundamentals of globalization in very simple and direct language, but the concept is much broader as the committee readily admits, by attempting to explore some of the major building block of globalization.

The committee observes that globalization has come to be closely associated with a variety of specific trends and policies, including an increasing reliance upon free markets, a significant growth in the influence of international financial markets and institutions in determining the viability of national policy priorities, a diminution in the role of state, deregulation and rewarding individual initiative and increased role to private actors, both in the corporate sector and civil society.¹
Those changes have had a significant impact in shaping the social, political and economic landscape of a shrinking world propelled by “wireless” connectivity. Local communities that had previously resisted external interference are now finding it increasingly difficult to sustain the resistance because the forces of globalization are superior and well organized. The only logical option therefore, is to embrace globalization, but even that approach has yielded mixed results in communities and the debate on this important subject is quickly moving from prestigious conference rooms in Manhattan and into the town hall meetings in Easton, Pennsylvania and other small cities around the country.

Opponents of globalization are no longer just an isolated group of protestors opposed to the inevitable forces of change as proponents of globalization would like us to believe. American citizens across the country are beginning to ask tough questions about this concept that has changed their country as they knew it twenty or thirty years ago. Easton is one classic example of a city that has witnessed tremendous change in the past twenty years and residents of this city are now wondering whether they can keep up with the rapid changes and if the changes will erode the identity of the city as they know it.

The City of Easton

With a unique location at the confluence of the Delaware and Lehigh Rivers, the city was founded in 1750’s by the Indians and prides itself in being one of the only three sites where the readings of the Declaration of Independence were conducted at center square in downtown Easton. The historic site is now used as a gathering place for residents during important holidays and celebrations like Independence Day. Its
population of 26,185 makes it one of the smallest cities in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

This small city with a rich tradition is finding it extremely difficult to embrace globalization, while at the same time maintaining their sense of community and unity that has defined them since the city was founded more than 250 years ago. While the residents like the prices at Wal-Mart, they miss the personal connection to Lane Co, a locally owned shopping center that was strategically located in the city and they identified with it for years until Giant and Wal-Mart opened super centers in the area about 10 years ago, pushing Lane Co out of business.

Mr. Fred E. Fredericks Sr. a 61-year-old native of Easton explains how it was nice growing up in a city that was largely dependent on agriculture and manufacturing. His father, a WW II veteran, worked at Atlantic States, a pipe manufacturing plant, and that became his dream job growing up. His mother did not work, yet he proudly admits they never missed a meal in their big family of seven.

He graduated from Easton High School in 1962 and was immediately employed by SI Handling Systems Inc. where he worked as a welder for many years and was convinced that his job was stable and relatively well paying. He started his own family in 1968. His wife worked part-time at Gracedale Nursing home supplementing the family income. They had four children, three of whom he was able to support through college and are now working out of state.

In 1994, after working with the company for about thirty-two years, Mr. Fredericks was laid off and life has never been the same. Having had only hands on and on the job training, Mr. Fredericks did not know anything else to turn to, because all of
his adult life he was employed at that plant welding and assembling “Low-Tow” systems used by factories across the country.

The company was downsizing the manufacturing department by subcontracting out the work to other companies in the rural south and abroad where wages were much lower. At the time he was laid off, Mr. Fredericks was making $25 per hour and had a full health insurance benefit package for himself and the family. “I had a good paying job, a nice mortgaged home, a new Ford truck and was planning to work for another 8-10 years before retiring,” says Mr. Fredericks. I asked him if he had anticipated the lay-off but his answer was no. He says that while there had been signs beginning in the late 80’s and early 90’s, he never thought he would be a victim because he believed he was at the prime of his career.

With his job suddenly gone, Mr. Fredericks spent the money he was paid by the company to pay off his mortgage. He then moved to a smaller apartment located in downtown Easton and rented out his home in an attempt to make ends meet. He is now employed with MCS Plastics a frame manufacturing plant earning $10 an hour and he has very few kind words for globalization and the outsourcing of jobs.

“I have to work ten and twelve hour shifts making less than half the money I made at SI Handling because these people sent my job to Taiwan,” he says in an angry tone. Mr. Fredericks feels betrayed by the company and dismisses production costs as an excuse used to justify outsourcing of jobs. “The company did just fine giving me raises every year and benefits; what changed the dynamics?” he asks.

**Corporate Response**
That is the question I posed to Yvette Corby, a sales representative with Victaulic Company of America that manufactures pipe fittings and couplings that are sold throughout the country and in various countries abroad. Ms. Corby admits that it is always difficult to downsize and lay-off employees because she understands the economic as well as emotional attachment, that these workers, especially the older ones like Mr. Fredericks, have with the company but to her, the business decision overrides everything else.

“We were ordering stainless steel from Singapore paying tariffs on the import, transporting it at a cost and paying our workers here in the US as much as 7-8 times what we would pay workers in Singapore; do the math.” said Ms. Corby in an interview at her office. “We feel the pain of these workers, but there is nothing we can do to reverse the global economic trends.” She added.

Ms. Corby explained that the company saved millions of dollars in production costs by opening a plant in Singapore. She says that they have been able to maintain a competitive edge over their main rivals like Groove-Lock Company that produces the same products. Because of the one hundred and eighty employees they laid off in 2001, they now have a leaner and more efficient workforce of about 600 full-time and part-time employees employed at their Easton facility. She does not rule out additional layoffs in the future because the company is constantly exploring ways of expanding with minimal costs.

Ms. Corby is adamant that outsourcing of jobs is not the biggest down side of globalization because technological advances are constantly diminishing the need for manual labor and she says that in the long run, there will be more automated systems in
factories than workers, and only maintenance staff will be hired to maintain, repair and ensure that the systems are functioning properly.

Ms. Corby believes the only concrete solution would be a strong emphasis in technical training starting at the high school level, because that is where the global job market is heading. She reveals that they have maintained most of their engineers and technicians because they are not only hard to come by, but it takes time and money to train them and once the company makes that investment, they are usually reluctant to let such employees go. She also says that technical workers are of great utility to the company because they are always dispatched to facilities in foreign countries like Singapore and Belgium to fix machines when they are broken or to train other technicians.

The key she says is how much an employee can deliver for the company because as soon as an employee is obsolete, it is time for the company to move on. But when I asked her what a fifty-year-old who has worked for the company for their whole adult life is supposed to do when, he or she is laid off, she did not have a solid answer. She maintained that industrial revolution resulted in the loss of jobs for people, but it’s the same revolution that produced the jobs that are now being lost and in the process, propelled the country to great economic success.

She says that its incumbent upon these workers to adjust and perhaps convert themselves into an investor class that creates employment instead of seeking employment. “Some of these workers were paid significant sums of money in terms of compensation and benefits that they could have invested in small businesses.” She concludes.
Kevin Myers, a former official of the Lehigh Valley Chapter of the AFL-CIO disagrees with Ms. Corby’s assessment of globalization and it’s impact on the Easton area, especially the workers. With manufacturing and trading industries constituting 50% of the labor market in Easton, Mr. Myers believes the trend must be reversed soon if the city is to survive.

He points out that while unions primarily fight for workers rights and other related issues, they indirectly fight for the survival of the city because a well paid and vibrant workforce, means increased revenues for the city in terms of taxes and overall consumer spending that results from residents with a sufficient purchasing power. However, it is important to note that real estate investment is at an all time high in the area and Mr. Myers could not explain this key contradiction to his argument.

He attributes Ms. Corby’s sentiments to the decline of organized labor, as he knew it in the seventies. “You need not look any further than the democratic primaries around the country. With all those jobs lost in Ohio, how did Dennis Kucinich loose that state to John Kerry yet he has the best labor message?” he paused. Mr. Myers also blames the decline of labor unions on union leaders whom he describes as being out of touch with the day-to-day conditions of average workers. “Some of these leaders have been in leadership positions for years and with each passing year, we have a declining membership; don’t you think there’s something wrong with that?” he asks.

The immigrant community moving into the area are not helping the situation either because there is a significant number of Mexicans in the area who are taking up
low paying jobs without benefits, leading to a general decline in wages. However, Mr. Myers is confident that this alarming trend can be reversed if union leaders flexed their political muscles by organizing members to ensure that pro-labor candidates willing to fight for workers’ rights in state and federal legislatures get elected. He believes that labor unions should not give up the fight because according to him, “this is a noble fight worth every ounce of energy in the body.”

**Community Perspective**

Indeed, most residents I talked to agree that something should be done to protect existing jobs from being outsourced in the name of globalization. But there were other fundamental concerns that city residents expressed in terms of the socio-political impact of globalization in the area. Those concerns expose the unique challenges that globalization poses to small communities around the world.

Mr. Fredericks recalls how his mum would send him to the local corner store on 4th and Northampton St where they could get household supplies on credit. “The store owner knew everybody in this area and kept a credit book that he used to record all merchandise sold on credit and the families would pay him weekly or biweekly depending on their pay day.” he said. “We did not have credit cards back then and as a result we didn’t have to worry about twenty day grace periods; all you had to do if you couldn’t pay on time was to notify the store owner and he would understand…No interest, no grace periods - that was life forty years ago in Easton.”

Talking to Mr. Fredericks and other natives of the area, one gets a sense that they miss the good old days and the simplicity of life that prevailed in the area. Mr.
Fredericks readily admits his disappointment with the erosion of trust amongst neighbors and the community at large. “There is this sense of individualism that gets worse every year and it has reached a point where people don’t care about anyone but themselves…When I was growing up, a neighbor could baby sit for you all day if she was a homemaker and you had to work; now you either have to get your own baby sitter or take your baby to a day care center which is too expensive for most residents.” he says.

Mr. Fredericks partly attributes this community erosion to a large number of “nontraditional immigrants” moving into the area from New York and New Jersey. He says that those people bring their big city mentality into this small tight-knit community, destroying the entire social fabric of Easton. “They do not appreciate the depth of this city and to them, this is just a cheap “housing project” where they can live and commute back and forth to Manhattan for work and recreation.” he says.

**Political Fallout**

Local state representative Robert Freeman, a democrat representing the 136th district agrees with Mr. Fredericks that the one way traffic from Easton every morning poses some fundamental problems to the city. He says that there are a lot of vacant office space in downtown Easton and proposes the construction of a reliable rail network that would attract businesses from expensive office buildings in Manhattan and Jersey City to relatively cheap ones in downtown Easton.

“The planning commission is missing an economic opportunity by putting all their emphasis on highways…a rail link to New York city would greatly enhance the marketing of vacant Easton real estate downtown. With the right marketing plan, Easton
could be a town more people commute to than from.”6 says Rep. Freeman in an interview with the Lehigh Valley Magazine in their Jan/Feb 2004 edition.

Rep. Freeman believes that Easton cannot afford to be a perceive observer of globalization but rather an active participant if the city is to protect itself from the strong wave of globalization that threatens to wipe small cities out of the socio-political and economic equation.

In response to these strong forces, Rep. Freeman cosponsored resolution no. 586 in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives directing the legislatures budgeting and finance committees to investigate the outsourcing of jobs occurring within the commonwealth (Referred to committee on commerce, March 8, 2004). However, Rep. Freeman admits that their hands are tied in the state legislature because the federal government controls international commerce and a state legislation would have minimal impact on outsourcing of jobs from the commonwealth.

He believes that outsourcing of jobs is a broad problem that must be confronted at the federal level because the protective role of government is being eroded in the absence of world standards. He is in favor of a global minimum wage and targeted tariffs on imported steel and textile that would help boost the Pennsylvania economy. He says that in the 70s, two-thirds of clothes in clothing stores were made locally at a profit rate of 50%. Now, almost 80% of clothes are imported and considering the low cost of production in foreign countries, the local prices are extremely high.

Overall, Rep. Freeman believes globalization has been bad for Easton and until radical reforms are adopted to include universal labor and environmental standards, the fruits of globalization will remain a mere pipe dream to the residents of this small city.7
The Voice of Reason

Mr. Michael Moorehead, the President of the Two Rivers Area Chamber of Commerce has a different perspective and dismisses critics of globalization as being rigid and unwilling to change with the times. “The key to success in this era of globalization lies in the ability to identify a niche market and catering to its unique needs at an affordable rate.” he said in an interview at his office. Mr. Moorehead is adamant that small business owners who constitute 80% of the chamber cannot compete with large franchise businesses by reducing their prices because of the benefits that such franchises derive from economies of scale.

He fondly gives the example of a local pharmaceutical company that flavors its medication at a client’s request and with that service, they have been able to effectively compete with the local CVS that sells drugs at lower prices. He further points out that innovative local businesses have substantially increased their market share by exploiting the Internet. Viking Village is one such example. The local gift ware store used to market its products throughout the east coast using catalogues but due to its successful online marketing and sales, they have reduced their production costs by eliminating printing costs previously spent on catalogue production. They have also expanded their market share because of the worldwide reach of the Internet. The company ships merchandise to any destination at a fee.

Mr. Moorehead believes that Easton has a great potential as a tourist destination because of its unique proximity to major airports like Newark International Airport in Newark, New Jersey and JFK International Airport in New York. The state theatre alone
receives approximately 100,000 guests every year and he believes that aggressive marketing would attract even more guests to the theatre and other historic sites in Easton.

However, Mr. Moorehead is concern about the job loss in the area and the use of employment agencies to hire workers for local companies. “It is much easier for a company to move its plant to another location if they are hiring through an agency because they have no real connection with the workers.”8 he said. He points out that in the past, companies had foreign branches but they always retained their U.S. headquarters. He is therefore disappointed that companies are now moving all their operations abroad living the locals unemployed.

**Conflicting Conclusions**

That honest assessment by the chamber president was particularly refreshing and I am convinced that it’s that kind of genuine admission of the pros and cons of globalization that can lead to the adoption of moderate policies that are acceptable across the divide. The debate on globalization elicits strong reactions from both sides of the spectrum and the Easton residents I interviewed exemplified that divide.

Their reactions to the impact of globalization in the city were mixed and talking to them individually, it was difficult to know if they were referring to the same city. Some residents, especially the older ones have a very negative view of globalization and blame everything from job loss to crime, on this relatively new phenomenon. Sixty four year old Matthew Adams III told me that he has lived in Easton all his life but it is only a few years ago when people started moving into the city from New York that he is now afraid to walk to the Seven Eleven at night because of drug dealers at the corner of every block.
He said that back in the seventies and early eighties, drug dealers were there, but everyone knew them; but today, they are almost outnumbering the drug addicts.

The security situation may be deteriorating but Easton remains a fairly safe city compared to other cities in the commonwealth and the country at large. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) database puts the city’s violent crime rate at 297.8 violent crimes per 100,000 population which is way below the national average that stands at 504.4 violent crimes per 100,000 population.9 With that security record, real estate business is booming in the city with construction of new housing units every year. Easton’s location on the border of Pennsylvania and New Jersey seems to attract a lot of people from the tri-state area because they get a chance to enjoy the relatively cheap housing in Easton while commuting back and forth to their well paying jobs in New Jersey and New York. I believe this kind of immigration is good for the city because those suburban housing units that are being built every year are not only creating construction related jobs for area residents but also providing revenues in terms of property taxes to the city.

Talking to young people in the city, one gets the sense that they are very receptive to the changes and most of them would like even more changes. But it is important to realize that most of them never worked at the factories that are now closing down and they therefore cannot appreciate the significance of those jobs and the sense of security that they gave workers like Mr. Fred Fredericks Sr. It was particularly surprising that while the young people I talked to had better education levels compared to their older counterparts, the older people were quick in making the connection between job losses in the area and outsourcing, than the young people.
Mark Pierce, a 18 year old freshman business administration major at Northampton Community College works part-time delivering pizza in Easton and is very happy with his job. He says that he doesn’t make a lot of money but the money he makes is enough for him to survive. “I buy my own clothes, I have a cell phone, I get to hang out with my friends when am not working…Life is good man.” he said. When I asked him what he plans to do when he graduates and his prospects of finding a professional job in the area he wasn’t very concern. “I don’t know what I will do when I graduate, I might go to California or Florida…I like warm places…I might get a job in the beach or something.” he said hilariously.

A majority of the young people I talked to did not have strong opinions about globalization and its impact on their community. Those who were looking for jobs and could not find them were more likely to blame it on the country's economy because they did not think that Easton had anything to offer in terms of well paying professional jobs. “There is nothing around here. You can get a good education because you are away from the big city distractions, but a job! I don’t think so.” said Jane Wright, a computer science major at Lafayette College. “Am from New York and that’s where I will be looking for a job once I graduate.” she said.

Talking to these young people one gets the feeling that globalization leads to a concentration of power in certain places like Manhattan and London while small cities like Easton, Pennsylvania are just temporary stops for bright young people trying to make it to the top. Lafayette college ranked 30th amongst the best liberal arts colleges in the country by the reputable US news magazine, is located in downtown Easton and their major contribution to the community is not manpower as one would expect. Most of
their graduates seek employment in the big surrounding cities like Philadelphia and New York. If globalization had reciprocal benefits as proponents claim, Easton could easily attract a multinational corporation because of the steady flow of skilled manpower from one of the country’s top liberal arts colleges.

There was also a problem with objectivity when I talked to people who had been affected by globalization in one way or another. They were either for or against it, depending on how globalization had affected them and it was difficult to make them concede anything. Ms. Yvette Colby of Victaulic Company was all for it because of the increased revenues to the company. Mr. Fredericks was all against it because he was laid off from his well paying job and Mr. Kevin Myers a former AFL-CIO official was against it because of his labor ties. Rep. Freeman did not deviate from the Democratic National Committee’s talking points either.

**General Consensus**

The only thing that everyone I talked to could agree on was Wal-Mart and other one-stop shopping outlets in the area like Giants. Residents agreed that prices were relatively low because of the huge variety of merchandise to choose from. All the people I interviewed also found the ability to find everything they are looking for at one location irresistibly convenient. But Mr. Myers and Rep. Freeman took issue with their labor practices, accusing these franchises of paying minimal wages while accruing millions of dollars in profits. Mr. Myers admitted to shopping at Wal-Mart but only because he doesn’t have any alternatives.
Facts about the City, its Residents and Globalization

After the numerous interviews I conducted over a two month period talking to key interest groups in the area and local residents, it is difficult to take either side of the argument because each side made it’s case very convincingly. However, the most dominant yet sketchy issue that emerged in interview after interview was jobs or the lack there of. Ms. Colby admitted that they downsized but said that jobs were being created in the service sector of the economy. Mr. Myers formerly with AFL-CIO disagreed but neither of them provided data to back up their claims. When I checked the job statistics as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the numbers were not very clear because the data available combined the entire Lehigh Valley including Allentown and Bethlehem with a population of 106,368 and 71,068 respectively. Easton is the smallest of the three cities in the Lehigh Valley with a population of 26,185. Therefore, the latest unemployment numbers of 5.1% may not be an accurate reflection of the actual unemployment numbers in the city.13

Overall, the unemployment number is below the national average that is currently fluctuating in the high fives and therefore if that unemployment number is a proportionate representation of the three cities, Easton is in fairly good shape in terms of jobs. But good paying jobs are still elusive in the area and that explains the low median household income of $28,000 annually.

Most of the area residents are optimistic about the future and they are especially happy with the local school district that has one of the best ratings in the state. The Easton Area School District prides itself in having the third highest number of high school graduates joining public and private colleges in the state. Approximately 83% of
high school graduates in Northampton county join colleges across the country according to the Pennsylvania State Data Center.\textsuperscript{14} There is no doubt that the residents recognize the role of education in this competitive era of globalization.

The locals are also mobilizing with the help of nonprofit organizations to keep kids out of the streets through sports programs run by the local Girls & Boys Club and the YMCA. They sponsor sports leagues for young boys and girls in the area helping them nature and develop their talents in team sports like basketball and football.

With those kinds of programs, one gets the feeling that all is not lost and the residents of this small city are trying their best to fight back and retain their identity in the midst of uncertain global trends. Whether they are succeeding in that fight or whether they should be fighting is the big question with complex consequences.

There is no doubt that globalization has a direct impact on Easton, Pennsylvania just like it has an impact on East London and other global capitals and cities around the world. The big challenge is to find a clear balancing act that can incorporate the unique needs of small cities like Easton while maintaining the superior infrastructural leadership of East London and other financial capitals of the world. One of the key arguments made by proponents of globalization is the distribution of resources to areas with attractive investment opportunities but that distribution creates instability and uncertainty.

Globalization is primarily driven by profits and therefore its distribution resembles the same patterns. In this global economy, companies will maintain their presence in an area so long as they are deriving maximum profits with minimal production costs. If the dynamics change and they can no longer derive such profits they
will look for another profitable venue living the locals with only memories of their presence.

I believe that the emphasis on profits and detachment from the community undermine the overall spirit of globalization. The fact is Easton, just like other small cities around the world cannot swim in the deep waters of globalization. They lack the basic infrastructure to be competitive with modern cities that are competing head to head with them in the global market. The reasonable approach would entail a full acceptance of less developed cities like Easton and allowing them into the global market place with fewer restrictions. Such cities should be allowed to form their own simplistic stock markets that they can use to trade with other cities of equal economic stature.

Such an initiative would be an important model for solving other global problems that can be attributed to the rise of globalization. Many opponents of globalization propose universal standards as the only remedy to the numerous problems posed by globalization but I disagree with their assessment. In the diverse world we live in, it would be extremely difficult to adopt and enforce global standards for anything.

I believe that the solution lies in the ability to recognize and appreciate that we live in an unequal world and the best we can strive to achieve is equity. If a city like Easton with a small population of twenty six thousand people is opposed to the construction of Wal-Mart in the area because of its potential to drive local retailers out of business, that is a genuine concern that should be addressed and respected. Unfortunately, such opposition are usually met with hostile labels of protectionism at the expense of though analysis and debate.
I agree with Rep. Freeman that Easton cannot afford to be a perceive observer of globalization but I also believe that the city should not embrace it blindly. The city must protect itself from exploitation and extinction by formulating specific legal requirements within their jurisdiction that would ensure that the city maintains its identity and effectively survives in this global onslaught.

When I talked to people around the city, the divide was clear and simple, those who had well paying jobs were happy and they didn’t seem to care whether those jobs were created by forces of globalization or not. Those who lost their jobs wanted to know where their jobs went and where they could get their next job. Those who just left school and are trying to get their first job, are busy looking and they don’t care about the forces that will create those jobs.

The people of Easton like most people around the country have bills to pay and all they care about is an ability to pay those bills. The people I interviewed were less concerned about the cultural and social implications of globalization and more concerned about their jobs and their day-to-day survival in a city that is fast expanding and trying to maintain its footing in this turbulent era of globalization. As Rep. Freeman eloquently asked, “who is going to buy those cheap products at Wal-Mart with the loss of all these manufacturing and textile jobs?”

Job loss and creation is by far the main yardstick used to measure the success or failure of globalization and Easton is no different. Talking to the residents there was no overwhelming outcry for the loss of jobs but there was wide spread concern for the future. Most residents I interviewed felt they could loose their job at anytime.
However, these uncertainties have not slowed *Eastonians* down and they are determined to succeed and overcome the challenges of globalization. As one of the residents told me, “we are just taking it day by day.” That quote best summarizes the sentiments of most residents of the city because to them, life is a daily struggle and the dynamics of globalization are a distraction from the bread and butter issues that they face on a daily basis.

Having interviewed numerous residents of Easton, I understand their frustrations and fears, and that is why I believe a moderate approach to globalization would be good for the city. The current approach has failed and it is time the government intervened with regulatory mechanisms, because if left unchecked, small cities like Easton will be crushed into oblivion by the strong forces of globalization.

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