

Introduction to Globalization



By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

Globalization is now a buzzword in twenty-first-century politics. This interconnection and interdependency has equally long lists of pros and cons. What does globalization mean and when did it begin?

What is globalization?

In the later decades of the twentieth century, people found they needed a term to describe the dizzying amount of changes going on around them. The businesses that people worked for were buying and selling more

goods in distant places. International organizations were increasingly bringing together representatives from many different communities. People were exchanging ideas rapidly as technology made travel and communications easier. These networks were not only getting bigger and covering more ground, but also their activity had become more intense. It was now possible to send and receive information or visit other places much more rapidly than ever before. Some observers even noted that people could have closer relationships with others living thousands of miles away, than with their own neighbors. How could all of these changes be described? If you guessed "a hot mess," you're close enough, but scholars and journalists eventually settled on *globalization*.

A general term, globalization refers to how the world has become more connected economically, politically, socially, and culturally over time. In this general sense, its roots go back to the era of agrarian societies as empires expanded and trade networks grew. These connections really accelerated and encompassed the whole world after the Columbian Exchange. When people, plants, goods, diseases, and ideas were shared across all world zones, the lives of humans everywhere changed. In some regions this was mainly positive. For example, the introduction of more caloric food increased life expectancy. However, in other regions, the effects were more negative, such as slavery and exploitation of the land and resources for profit elsewhere—known as the dependency cycle.

After the Industrial Revolution, the world became even more interconnected, and some scholars say that globalization really began in this period. In this sense, globalization is about people around the world becoming so connected that local life is shaped by what is happening in other parts of the world. This challenges our definition of community in

some ways. Through the Industrial Revolution, local-global connections like this began to be established. Transportation and communication advancements led to an increase in travel and the sharing of ideas (collective learning). Imperialist nations exerted control over other areas of the world. The legacy of this colonization was, of course, negative in many ways when you consider slavery, destruction of traditional cultures, and the depletion of resources. But there were some effects most think of as positive, including the new technologies like railways and telegraph lines that connected more people and ideas around the world.

The world wars globalized us even more. In fact, these major conflicts proved to the world that working together across global networks could be good and bad. There was global disaster with World War I, the even deadlier sequel, and the Great Depression. But we also saw global cooperation for good—like ending the Nazi regime. After World War II, many global organizations were formed to help to bring peace, stability, and economic prosperity to the world. The United Nations, NATO, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund are all global organizations you'll learn about later in this unit.

Globalization's effect on communities and economies

Globalization has touched all aspects of human existence. In the modern era, voluntary migration as well as forced migration have resulted in a diverse human population in many parts of the world. America, which is often called a "melting pot", is a prime example of how the mass

movement of people has shaped the modern world. Today's Americans come from all corners of the globe. But equally diverse populations can be found in parts of Mexico, South Africa, Indonesia, and many other places. And as people move, they bring with them their language, culture, food, and customs. These become interwoven within an existing society and create diversity, which should be celebrated.

Similarly, the world economy today is so intertwined that if one nation struggles financially, the effects are felt in global markets. The 2008 global recession, for example, caused several banking crises in Europe and Asia, but really began with a "bubble" of bad loans in the United States. On an everyday basis, globalization is represented by multinational corporations that employ people around the world. These companies often make a single product from resources and labor in many different countries.

The pros and cons of globalization

This kind of intense globalization brings together people from around the world. But—and there are some buts—what are the side-effects? Technological innovations now let people around the world communicate and share ideas in real time, when messages sent across continents used to take months. But not everybody has the same access to computing or the Internet. Governments can work together to trade and solve problems. But that means some people are affected by laws or policies made in other countries. Beliefs are shared, which results in millions of people practicing the same faith in various parts of the world. But these shared beliefs also increase tensions with disagreements between people of different faiths, and even within faiths. Economies have become intertwined through international trade and aid. *But,*

globalization has also led to an increase in inequality. In some nations the wealthy have become far richer while the poor have stayed stagnant economically. Some areas of the world have become extremely powerful and wealthy while others are still trying to overcome the negative effects of colonialism. In perhaps the biggest but of them all, the use of fossil fuels in industrialized nations has led to pollution that spreads around the world. As a result, one nation's pollution becomes the problem of other nations, as wind and water currents carry these toxic fumes and chemicals. Wealthy nations have also exported their waste to poorer nations including toxic waste and garbage from landfills.

Interconnection and interdependency, therefore, can be a double-edged sword, as you will learn in this unit's lessons. However, with all of the twenty-first century's technology, medical innovations, and multinational corporations, it's impossible to think that we can ever retreat from the modern world to focus only on ourselves. As humans, we have the ability and consciousness to improve not only our own lives but also the lives of all humans as well as other species by working together. Globalization isn't reversible, so how can we eliminate some of the negatives as we move forward and continue to reap the rewards of working together and exchanging ideas?

Author bio

Bridgette Byrd O'Connor holds a DPhil in history from the University of Oxford and has taught Big History, World History, and AP U.S. Government and Politics for the past ten years at the high school level. In addition, she has been a freelance writer and editor for the Big History Project and the Crash Course World History and U.S. History curriculums.