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The Global Context of International Social Work

Introduction

Whether working locally or internationally, social workers who desire to be tuned into international social work require a clear sense of the global context within which all such practice occurs. This is especially true when working in, or with regard to, developing countries. This global context will play various roles in relation to practice and the practitioner. At times it will represent the operational context within which the worker is employed, containing both the employing agency and the organizational network of which that agency is a part. At another level, the global context, or some aspects of it, will be a contributing factor in the presenting problems with which the worker is grappling, and appreciating its significance as a causal factor may be very important. Perhaps less frequently, the global context’s potential role in achieving change will be an element in the worker’s overall intervention strategy. Finally, whatever the specific roles that the global context is playing within specific situations, what is important is that the worker is always able to visualize the prevailing general global context, analyze a presenting situation with that context as an element in the analysis, and develop an intervention strategy that holds together and integrates the local, national, and international levels of context.

We have separated out for discussion in this chapter four dimensions of the global context, namely the social problem, organizational, ideological, and policy dimensions. While all four dimensions are important in themselves, the four interact to constitute the global context as it impinges on international social work. The social problem context is often our starting point as social workers, in that it is our awareness of some global problem such as poverty, refugees, or the HIV/AIDS epidemic that leads us to take an interest in international social work. Pursuing that interest, whether at an academic or practical level, will inevitably lead us to consider what is being done, by what agencies, and perhaps with what employment opportunities for social workers. The organizational context thus becomes of key importance. Further consideration or involvement, however, will lead to an awareness that the motives behind the roles played by various agencies represent a very
important factor. Prevailing motivations reflect a variety of ideological stances and result in a range of policies at all levels of involvement. We shall, therefore, reflect briefly on the ideological and policy dimensions of the global context.

We shall commence with a brief overview of global social problems, using the term “social” because our focus is on the general relevance of global problems to the well-being of people and their communities and societies.

The Global Social Problems Context

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of global social problems, yet it is important that those working in, or proposing to work in, international social work possess a general understanding of at least the major global social problems. We need to be aware of several aspects of this dimension of the global context:

1. What are the main global social problems?
2. What numbers of people are affected by these problems and where in the world are they concentrated?
3. In general terms, what are the main causes of these problems, and to what degree are they interrelated?
4. In general terms, how has the international community been responding to these problems?
5. In general terms, have these problems been reducing significantly in scope and severity in recent decades, and if not, what additional types of intervention seem to be required?

We are distinguishing between, first, the need to understand the world as a whole in terms of the prevailing major global social problems; second, the need for the worker who specializes in a particular field of international social work to understand that field in some considerable detail for purposes of, for example, guiding overall policy and program developments; and, third, the local workers specializing in one or more fields needing to appreciate not only the relevant global context but also all aspects of the field in which they are involved within a relatively circumscribed geographical area. At this point our focus is on the first level, namely a
global understanding. For the fields that we have selected for more detailed attention later in this text, our focus will be on the second level, namely programs and strategies for responding to global social problems.

**Poverty and Interacting Fields**

Poverty, with its associated problems such as infant mortality, malnutrition, and vulnerability, is commonly regarded as the world’s most serious problem. Depending on how poverty is defined and measured, no one would dispute the claim that, at the very least, approximately one in every three of the world’s people lives in poverty. This is partly because many people around the globe exist so close to the poverty line that any one of a number of common occurrences, even at a minor level, will push them into poverty. Such occurrences include economic changes, such as increases in inflation rates, deteriorating trade arrangements, or reductions in a government’s subsidies of basic necessities; ecological changes, such as deterioration of the environment or depletion of essential food sources; social conflict within a nation or war between nations; demographic changes through migration or natural increase; and natural disasters that destroy people’s homes and livelihoods.

The international community has, in the post–World War II decades, made many commitments to reducing poverty rates, the most recent being to halve the global poverty rate by 2015. Moreover, much aid and development work has had this goal in mind, with funding agencies such as the World Bank increasingly requiring that every project submitted by states for funding contain a poverty reduction component. However, despite the best of intentions and endeavors, and while poverty rates have dropped significantly in a few countries, they have fluctuated significantly in many developing countries since the 1980s, and they have not been significantly reduced as a whole. This is partly because poverty is an outcome of many causal factors that are very difficult to control, partly because poverty rates are often maintained by high population growth rates in the poorest parts of the world, and partly due to a lack of commitment to reducing poverty on the part of many governments.

**The Plight of Children**

A recent report from the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) presents the alarming situation that 50 percent of the world’s children are significantly affected by poverty, conflict, or the AIDS epidemic. This alarming situation is reflected in high rates of malnutrition and high infant and child mortality rates in many parts of the world; large numbers of children being forced into deleterious child labor conditions; many children being vulnerable to child slavery, often associated with child prostitution and other abuses; and large numbers of orphans and other children being abandoned, or placed in poor quality orphanages, or otherwise subject to neglect and abuse.

The plight of children is clearly a multicausal situation. It is, moreover, a deteriorating situation, despite the work of organizations like UNICEF, Save The Children, and many others.

**The Plight of Women**

It might surprise some western readers that, after long and hard-fought campaigns for gender equality, we should still be highlighting the plight of women. In many contexts, women bear a disproportionate burden in relation to family life generally and such phenomena as displacement. Women are also more vulnerable than men in many contexts, especially during wars and civil conflict. In situations of poverty, women carry a disproportionate share of the risks and consequences, so that it is common to speak of the “feminization of poverty.” Finally, in many nations, culture places women at a significant disadvantage. Among the customs that are the object of ongoing and active concern are
arranged marriages; female genital mutilation; an inability of women to own property, access credit, or inherit; the acceptance of wife beatings, rape within marriage, and other forms of domestic abuse; and the virtual slavery conditions of many women within pre- and post-marriage contexts.

Once again, many organizations and movements are devoted to enhancing the rights of women, achieving gender equality, offering protection to vulnerable women, and responding directly to the needs presented by women. Unfortunately, progress in this area seems often to be painfully slow.

The Extent of Conflict

A reading of any global history reveals the extremely common inability of social groupings, nations, and empires to live at peace with their neighbors. In pursuit of territory, booty of all kinds, slaves, power, and status, conflict at all levels has been a significant aspect of the human story. The last century witnessed two of the worst wars known to history, and since the end of the Cold War in 1989 the scourge of civil war has intensified alarmingly. In recent times, the world has been experiencing upwards of 30 civil wars at any one time, with very high casualty figures, especially among civilians.

A major goal of the UN is world peace, yet its work and that of national governments and regional associations, along with that of many organizations of civil society, have together failed to do more than perhaps contain many situations. Only when we add together the widespread consequences of conflict on people’s personal lives and social contexts, economic conditions, physical infrastructure, and the environment, do we begin to appreciate the enormity of this global problem. Yet because conflict once again has many causes, it seems difficult for the international community to significantly reduce the impact of conflict in the foreseeable future. Finally, it has become clear in recent times that rebuilding a society after conflict is a complex, hugely expensive, and extremely difficult undertaking.

Natural Disasters and Ecological Degradation

Recent reports reveal the extent to which natural disasters have increased in frequency and severity, whatever the reasons for this. The costs of responding quickly and effectively to natural disasters are truly great, yet they pale into insignificance when compared with the cost of repairing the damage caused by disasters, to say nothing of supporting the people until a modicum of economic and social functioning is restored.

Natural disasters are acute dramatic events that gain immediate attention. Ecological degradation is a more insidious problem that usually creeps up on people slowly, with its inevitable consequences gradually eating away at people’s standards of well-being. Moreover, given frequent controversy over the precise causes of the degradation and the appropriateness of various possible responses, action tends to be piecemeal and insufficient until it becomes almost too late to act.

Both natural disasters and ecological degradation tend to have a greater impact on poorer people, partly because it is the poor who are obliged to live in areas more susceptible to both occurrences, and partly because the quality of their homes and the nature of their daily existence render them more vulnerable.

The Uneven Development of Nations

Allied closely to all of the above problems is the need for all countries of the world to achieve levels and forms of development that are consistent with that country’s economic, social, political, cultural, and ecological needs. This goal was recognized and accepted internationally in the aftermath of World War II, with
very high volumes of resources being devoted to global development since then. Yet despite all the efforts and expenditure, progress on the development front generally has been uneven and somewhat erratic. Some one quarter of the world’s approximately 200 nation-states remain classified as “least developed,” while others are classified as “developing” but with unacceptable low achievement levels in some aspects of that development. There is also widespread concern at the plight of “failed states”—states where governance is not adequate to provide a basis for development. There is also an acknowledgement of the uneven development of many states—states where some sections of the country and populace have done quite well while others languish in poverty or with inadequate levels of development.

It would seem to be the case that, if development aid of all kinds were made available by states on the recommended basis of 0.7 percent of GDP, and if that aid were then devoted to global development on the basis of needs (not self-interest), the current development situation could be fairly speedily rectified. It seems, however, that this is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future, and that the world will continue to be a very uneven place in terms of prevailing levels of development.

The Uneven Impact of Most Global Problems

Many readers will be familiar with the biblical saying that to those who have more will be given, and the relevance of this to the modern world is difficult to ignore. Many countries are vulnerable, in the first place, because their geographical conditions or location—for example, small, remote, landlocked and island states—have held back their development. Some of these are also in regions of the world more prone to natural disasters. If these countries experience high rates of population growth, and especially if the land is ecologically fragile, poverty is likely to spread widely and development be further impaired. These outcomes may then result in low levels of social cohesion and poor governance, resulting in high levels of social tension, corruption, and inefficiency.

It is not a coincidence that some 90 percent of global population growth is in the poorer parts of the world, that most civil wars take place in developing countries, that poorer countries are more prone to the ravages of natural disasters, and that trade and investment flows tend to favor the better-off or more developed states. Hence many countries are very seriously affected by virtually all of the main global social problems, the cumulative impact of which can be horrendous.

Given this situation, one might think that the bulk of the efforts of the international community would be devoted to rectifying global inequality. Unfortunately, this is not the case. When countries or regions are given such labels as “basket cases” or “bottomless pits” in terms of absorbing aid, or when governments are corrupt or inefficient or have failed, there is a reluctance to devote too many resources to them because to do so seems to be an inefficient use of resources and is politically unpopular. Hence poor situations may deteriorate further.

The Displacement and Forced Migration of People

One inevitable consequence of extreme poverty, widespread social conflict, serious natural disasters, ecological degradation, and low levels of development is that many people are forced to leave their usual place of abode and seek refuge, assistance, or a better future elsewhere. In reality, only a small proportion of people affected by such events are able to leave. Many will stay and die, and many linger on in poverty and fear, for flight is simply not a viable or acceptable option for them.

Official figures place the numbers of displaced persons at around 50 million, although
in many situations only rough estimates are possible. Even if this number is reasonably accurate, the impact of the displacement of 50 million people on the people themselves, often on the areas from which they originate, and certainly on the areas to which they flee, is substantial. The tasks of protecting, providing sustenance for on an ongoing basis, and finding a satisfactory solution to the plight of 50 million people are huge: when, however, those displaced are unwelcome guests in foreign lands, or are destabilizing local economic and social stability levels yet have nowhere else to go, the challenge becomes massive.

The UN and various organizations of global and local civil society have made the care of the world’s displaced a major concern. However, these organizations can seldom influence the forces that cause displacement, and those forces frequently result in a sudden and massive exodus of people requiring a large-scale emergency response. Moreover, the huge cost of responding to displacement is seldom met by the international community, so that in recent times many displaced persons have not survived their ordeal. Nor is the situation helped by the fear of western and other countries that displaced persons might seek to breach their borders and impose themselves on a nation as uninvited guests.

The HIV/AIDS Epidemic and Other Global Health Concerns

HIV/AIDS became a significant health concern in the 1980s, and in the 1990s was seen as “the greatest shock to development” (UNDP, 2003, p. 41). This report estimates the numbers of people infected at around 42 million, with some 22 million already killed and 13 million left orphans. In addition to its destruction of human life, HIV/AIDS is throwing development off course in much of Africa by devastating workforces generally and key groups such as teachers particularly (e.g., Zambia lost 1,300 teachers in one year). Beyond Africa, China, India, and the Russian Federation are among those countries experiencing soaring rates of infection, while few countries are escaping the epidemic.

While HIV/AIDS is the major current health concern it is certainly not the only one. Maternal mortality, at its most urgent in sub-Saharan Africa; child mortality, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia; tuberculosis (killing up to two million people a year), and malaria (killing some one million people a year) are among other major health concerns.

Global Social Problems and International Social Work

There are several reasons why social workers contributing to international social work need to possess a general awareness of global social problems, in addition, of course, to a precise awareness of those social problems dominating the areas (field and geographical) where they are working.

First is the fact that it is these major social problems that largely determine the very nature and existence of the international community. The evolution of international structures, the work on global policy, and the deployment of resources are all largely determined by the focus on poverty, conflict and armaments issues, international terrorism, global crime, refugee movements, the abuse and exploitation of children and women, ecological concerns, and so on, and social workers need to be aware of how and why these concerns drive global agendas. (See the discussion of the international community’s millennium development goals in UNDP, 2003.)

Second, there is virtually no work situation, especially in developing countries, in which international social workers are to be found that will not be affected at a significant level by probably several of these global concerns. No population or situation is immune, especially in developing countries, and social workers need to be able to relate local situations to global trends.
Third, it follows that wherever and at whatever level social workers are working, they should have in mind their obligation to contribute, where possible, to the evolution of global policies and programs relating to these global concerns. The knowledge and experience that international social workers derive from their fieldwork are of great importance when the international community at the macro level seeks to formulate a response to a global problem or some dimension thereof. For example, when the Hague Conference on Private International Law sought to establish a set of principles pertaining to international child abductions, they approached International Social Service and its workers worldwide to furnish them with relevant case data. In more recent years, it has been NGOs working in the HIV/AIDS field that have campaigned for international action, and contributed vital information and suggestions as to the directions that such action should take.

Fourth, an understanding of the global realities pertaining to any problem situation makes possible a better analysis of a local situation—for example, by incorporating the global dimension—and facilitates a better intervention strategy by encouraging the worker to draw on international experience as a guide. The international comparative approach has much to commend it.

Fifth, the fact that a network of agencies and conventions and so on have been brought to bear on any global social problem at the international level means that there is potentially available to workers in the field a wide range of resources—provided that workers are aware of what has been happening globally. Various UN agencies provide technical assistance to governments but also at times to NGOs; a range of international reports are potentially helpful to workers; workers may explore the relevant networks in search of advice; the relevant active international community agencies may be sources of funding or other resources to assist local initiatives; and so on. The possibility for local workers in the international field to tap the international community is always there and is usually highly beneficial.

The Organizational Context

The second dimension of the global context that international social workers need to understand is the organizational context. The global context can be conceived of as a range of international organizations, often referred to rather loosely as the international community. The range is extremely wide, consisting of several key categories of agencies, each of which is in itself highly varied and complex. The main categories of organizations are:

- national governments and the agencies they establish for international work;
- intergovernmental agencies established by groups of nations, including regional associations such as the European Union and African Union;
- the UN system established and supported by the great majority of states;
- corporations, especially the transnational or multinational ones (TNCs or MNCs);
- nongovernment organizations operating internationally (INGOs); and
- the other organs of global civil society, such as social movements, labor movements, religious movements, and cultural associations.

Each of these categories has important roles to play internationally, and their actions determine much of the global context and its ongoing development. Furthermore, the interaction between these categories of organizations, and between the plethora of individual organizations of which each category is composed, is a further important dimension of global developments. While each category warrants a textbook, or at least a full chapter—given their size, complexity,
and importance—we shall briefly comment on each category and leave it for the reader to explore further. Before doing so, however, let us reflect on what preceded the emergence of the international community.

The Beginnings of an International Community

For many centuries, world affairs were dominated economically by traders and trading routes and politically by the concept of “balance of power.” As Eban (1983, pp. 243–44) explains, “balance of power” was an ambiguous concept. On the one hand, it implied a quest for equilibrium that, if achieved, would result in peace between nations with each apprehensive about taking up arms against another. Others, however, saw it more as a quest for superiority by states, so that balance really meant imbalance and the pursuit of national interests, including developing the ability to defeat aggressors. Within this system, war was the ultimate sanction: “The logic of the balance system requires that those who uphold it must threaten to fight against those who challenge it,” and such a threat will supposedly deter would-be aggressors. However, as Eban points out, “both of the world wars . . . reveal the fragility of deterrent systems based on the assumption of total rationality” (p. 244). Hence not surprisingly, after the horrors of the First World War initially and then those of the Second World War, there was a drive to initiate what Eban calls “a new diplomacy”—“a movement for international organizations.” This movement aspires to organize nation-states into a universal community, all of whose members are committed to mutual assistance in accordance with an objectively binding code. Its aim is nothing less than world peace under law. In this conception what each member of the community owes to the other does not depend on individual discretion according to each member’s predilections, solidarities, and interests:

The UN system aspires to reconcile national sovereignty with world order. The guiding principle of the UN idea was collective security. This requires the creation of such a preponderance of power that no single state or group of states can hope to withstand it. (Eban, 1983, p. 239)

With hindsight, the Cold War that ran from the end of World War II to 1989, the division between western and third world or developing country interests (as reflected in, for example, the Bandung Conference in 1955 of nonaligned states and in voting patterns in the UN General Assembly), and the post–Cold War dominance by the United States as the only global power were among the many factors that worked against the short-term achievement of the vision that lay behind the establishment of the international community. Other ongoing concerns included the difficulty that states and international organizations often experienced in reconciling national interests or sovereignty and a new world order, the difficulty that the emerging INGO sector often had in collaborating with the global economic institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the difficulty in fitting the TNCs—with their apparently distinctive and self- or profit-centered goals—into the overall international community. Nonetheless, there was no doubt that an international community was and is emerging, and there continues into the twenty-first century to be great hopes for a future under its leadership.

National Governments and the Agencies They Establish for International Work

No matter how much some people might desire the focus to be on international organizations, there can be no doubt that the most significant players on the international stage remain the nation-states. Against such claims as that globalization has overtaken the state, and
that TNCs are not only not subject to the control of states but often more wealthy than they are, states remain very much alive and well. All major global economic and political associations are made up of member states, and although such associations may act against a state member or seek to influence its internal affairs (e.g., the World Bank or European Union), the status of the state retains its integrity and much of its importance. Moreover, individual states have shown themselves able to act unilaterally in either the pursuit of international goals (e.g., the United States) or in pursuit of national goals that contravene global agreements (e.g., Burma/Myanmar, North Korea, and many others).

At another level, many individual states pursue their national interests through the operation of internationally oriented agencies—the international or foreign aid departments that in the West are sometimes located within ministries of foreign affairs. These agencies frequently operate very large aid programs, working through both the NGO sector and through bilateral developments undertaken with other governments. States are interested in trade arrangements and frequently enter into bilateral arrangements in this area; they retain the need to be ready to defend themselves against possible aggressors, through intelligence gathering operations or military establishments; they relate to world population mobility through the establishment of various migration and asylum seeker programs and tourism arrangements; and they engage in aid and development work, partly at times for altruistic reasons but sometimes as an extension of the pursuit of national interests. Moreover, the network of diplomatic activity undertaken by states seeks to maintain a national awareness of developments around the globe, especially of those likely to constitute a potential threat to national interests, such as terrorism and human trafficking.

On another level again, writers on global development are very aware of the potential threat to global economic and political stability of what is commonly referred to as “poor governance.” Such is the nature of global interconnectedness that poor governance not only undermines the well-being of the people of the state in question, but has potential consequences for many others (e.g., through encouraging asylum seekers or illegal migrants, causing internal conflict with widespread external ramifications, and undermining external economic relations).

A further important issue for the international community that will increasingly affect the roles of national governments is determining in what circumstances it should take action to change a course of events within a sovereign state, usually through the UN but also through regional state bodies such as the European Union and African Union. The international community, or various organs within it, have sometimes taken action and sometimes withheld from taking action, and have been criticized for both types of decisions. How important and how justifiable today is the maintenance of the integrity of the sovereign state? Does the sovereign state take precedence over the international protection of people’s human rights, or international prevention of ecological vandalism, or international rejection of the perpetuation of extreme poverty, or an international right to bring to justice those accused of crimes against humanity?

Finally, the question of the long-term viability of states has to be considered seriously, especially as, on the one hand, some states are clearly failing, and, on the other hand, pressure is exerted to divide a number of states into their constituent ethnic or religious components, thus creating a larger number of smaller states. (See recent developments in the former USSR, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.) There is also a major concern for the world’s poorest states—many of which are landlocked, small island states—and states that have never really achieved a significant measure of state identity or national governance. It may well be that the
only answer for such states is to become members of wider regional associations that will underwrite their development and support their ongoing functioning, while recognizing their national identity and autonomy to a least some degree, as we have seen happen in the European Union and to some degree in the Pacific.

While states continue to be the major players on the world stage in many ways, a range of questions surrounds their very existence in some cases, and in all cases their specific roles within the world community. To what extent states will continue as we know them today remains one of the many ongoing questions in considering the global context. What is certain, however, is that many social workers engaged in international work will be employed by states, work under state auspices to some degree, interact regularly with state agencies, and be involved in addressing situations which are at least in part an outcome of state actions. (For detailed discussions of the future of modern states and their roles see, for example, World Bank, 1997; Holton, 1998; Randall and Theobald, 1998; and Duffield, 2001, pp.163ff.)

Intergovernmental Agencies Established by Groups of Nations, Including Regional Associations Such as the European Union and African Union

The obvious distance between many states and international structures, such as the UN, can leave such states feeling insignificant and rather lost on this international stage. It is not surprising, therefore, that many political leaders and states have regarded associations of states within circumscribed areas, within which they share common interests and concerns, as essential to the state and as a necessary first step to effective global associations such as the UN. There are indeed many regional associations, of which some of the best known are the European Union (EU), Organization of American States, African Union (formerly the Organization of African Unity), Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and Arab League. In addition, areas of Africa, Asia, and Latin America have formed many subregional associations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Countries (ASEAN) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). To a significant degree these regional and subregional associations remain in their infancy. Issues of a regional parliament, common policies and institutions, and a common currency have taken center stage in the evolution of the European Union; however, the question as to whether this union is a blueprint for other such developments, or whether Europe has unique characteristics that might render its export of the concept of a regional federation as dubious as its export of the concept of the nation-state in an earlier century, remains one that is difficult to answer. On the face of it, however, regional associations make much sense and could be an important stepping-stone to global security and well-being.

The United Nations System

The UN system is the first truly global system in history, with almost all states being members of it and supporting its key roles to at least a significant degree. That it remains an evolving system is obvious, with much of its structure reflecting the realities prevailing at the end of World War II when it was established, and so inevitably requiring reform 60 years later. Understandably, a key role of the newly established system was to seek to ensure that a war such as that recently endured during 1939–1945 would never be repeated. As Eban (1983, p. 239) writes of the UN: “While its responsibilities were to cover many fields of action and struggle, its major task had always been deemed to lie in the prevention, cessation and termination of armed conflict.”

This task lay essentially with the Security Council, the composition of which has become increasingly outdated and ineffective in fulfilling
its key role. In 2004, a UN panel called for the
Security Council to be expanded from 15 to 24
members, giving broader representation to
developing countries. It recommended that six
new permanent members be added to the exist-
ing five—two from Asia, two from Africa, one
from the Americas, and one from Europe.
The UN system was also to have a major role
in global economic and social development. Key
economic roles were given to the International
Bank for Reconstruction and Development
(later renamed the World Bank), the Inter-
national Monetary Fund and the General Agree-
ment on Trade and Tariffs (later renamed
the World Trade Organization or WTO), and
although these bodies were essentially indepen-
dent of the UN itself they were clearly estab-
lished as important components of the UN
system. The World Bank is owned by its 181
member countries, controlled by its own board
and based in Washington, D. C. It provides
development funds, mainly in the form of inter-
est-bearing loans, to needy developing states
together with technical assistance. It has been
agreed that the United States nominates the
head of the World Bank. The IMF was set up to
monitor and regulate the international mone-
tary system. It is financially independent of the
UN although it reports to it. Its short-term loans
are designed to bring stability to international
exchange rates and alleviate serious balance of
payments problems. The perceived problem,
however, is that the loans tend to be conditional
on the recipient states adopting a range of
policies—policies largely reflecting western
neoliberal thinking. The WTO, with currently
142 members, has had as its core aim the reduct-
ion of tariffs on internationally traded goods
and services based on a free trade philosophy.
More recently, it has moved also into the protec-
tion of intellectual property rights. Considerable
controversy surrounds almost all aspects of
its work. (See Todaro, 1997, part 3; and Todaro
and Smith, 2003, pp. 584–87 and 626–30 for a
detailed discussion of these agencies.)
The roles of the mainstream UN system in
economic and social development are more
closely related to direct development aid, involv-
ing the provision of funding, technical assis-
tance, and opportunities for states and agencies
to share experiences and plan strategies. To carry
out these purposes, there is a range of agencies
reporting to either ECOSOC (the Economic and
Social Council) or directly to the General
Assembly. Gordon (1994, p. 72) sets out the
goals underpinning this work:

Chapter IX of the [UN] charter deals with the
general subject of international economic
and social cooperation, and chapter X deals
specifically with the organisation and func-
tions of ECOSOC. Article 55 of chapter IX
reads:

With a view to the creation of conditions
of stability and well-being which are neces-
sary for peaceful and friendly relations
among nations based on respect for the prin-
ciple of equal rights and self-determination
of peoples, the United Nations shall promote:

a. higher standards of living, full employ-
ment and conditions of economic and
social progress and development;
b. solutions of international economic,
social, health, and related problems,
and international cultural and educa-
tional cooperation; and
c. universal respect for, and observance of
human rights and fundamental free-
doms for all without distinction as to
race, sex, language, or religion.

Among the many agencies entrusted with
these goals are the United Nations Development
Programme (UNDP), World Food Programme
(WFP), World Health Organisation (WHO),
UN Environmental Programme (UNEP), UN
Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisa-
tion (UNESCO), UN High Commissioner for
Refugees (UNHCR), Human Rights Commission,
Commission for Social Development, Food and
Agricultural Organisation (FAO), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the UN Centre for Human Settlements (HABITAT).

In addition to the central UN agencies, with their global mandates, ECOSOC has its regional equivalents, such as the Economic and Social Commission for Asia Pacific (ESCAP), with their own divisions and programs.

A further important role of the UN system is its adoption of declarations and conventions on various topics. These have been of particular importance in the field of human rights, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 (see UNDP, 2000). The difficulty in this field has been in the area of compliance. As Donnelly (1993, p. 11) puts it, states “did not agree to let the UN investigate their compliance with these standards.” The same situation has applied in the area of international law more generally. States were expected to sign the various UN treaties and incorporate their provisions within state legal systems. The outcome, as Donnelly says, is a body of international law—“Customary rules of international law are well-established state practices to which a sense of obligation has come to be attached.” The difficulties here have been twofold. First, a number of states have either not ratified a treaty or have failed to incorporate it in state law. Second, the enforcement of international law remains highly problematic, despite the existence of the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court and various specific tribunals to investigate crimes against humanity (see Robertson, 2000).

There are various texts describing the UN system and discussing its strengths and weaknesses (e.g., see Gordon, 1994). What is important is that the international social worker possesses a realistic appreciation of its effectiveness. From experience, it is all too easy to have far higher expectations of the UN than it is capable of fulfilling (e.g., because of its dependence on the support of states), and, alternatively, to become so skeptical of the body that one overlooks both its past achievements and its future potential. It is a system with strengths and weaknesses; moreover, as is often said, in terms of a global system it is all that we have, and it is therefore incumbent on us all to do what we can to make it work, hopefully even better in the future than it has in the past.

Corporations, Especially the Transnational Ones

There is a tendency for international social workers to dismiss the private for-profit sector at the international level (the TNCs—transnational corporations or MNCs—multinational corporations) as either irrelevant to their work or as highly deleterious in their impact on states and on people’s lives. Whatever one’s view on the potential of TNCs to bring harm or good to the world, their existence and importance on many levels cannot be ignored. Todaro (1997, pp. 534–43) begins his discussion of MNCs as follows:

Few developments have played as critical a role in the extraordinary growth of international trade and capital flows during the past few decades as the rise of the multinational corporation (MNC).

Todaro proceeds to discuss the size of these bodies, pointing out that they are far larger than many states, that they control 70 percent of world trade, that they generally dominate the areas of production, distribution, and sale of many goods from developing countries, that they exercise power in a variety of ways, and that they are concentrated in a few western countries (44 of the 100 largest are headquartered in the United States alone). In terms of the controversy over the roles of TNCs, Todaro suggests that it is really a controversy over the development process. He writes,

The controversy over the role and impact of private foreign investment often has as its basis a fundamental disagreement about the
nature, style, and character of a desirable development process. (pp. 537–38)

In his own assessment of the pros and cons of MNC activities, Todaro stresses the complexity of the question and concludes,

Perhaps the only valid general conclusion is that private foreign investment can be an important stimulus to economic and social development as long as the interests of MNCs and host country governments coincide (assuming of course that they don’t coincide along the lines of dualistic development and widening inequalities. (p. 543)

Todaro accepts that MNCs will continue to “gravitate toward the most profitable investment opportunities, engage in transfer pricing, and repatriate profits,” (p. 543) but he is uncertain as to whether the net outcome of their involvement will be positive or negative.

Other writers have a far more negative impression of the impact of MNCs or TNCs on economic development generally and developing countries in particular. One outspoken critic of TNCs is Korten (1995) who writes of the TNC agenda,

It is a conscious and intentional transformation in search of a new world economic order in which business has no nationality and knows no borders. It is driven by global dreams of vast corporate empires, compliant governments, a globalized consumer monoculture, and a universal ideological commitment to corporate libertarianism.

While much of what Korten and others say in criticism of the TNCs sounds convincing, the reality is that TNCs do exist and will continue to play major roles on the world stage. The goal should therefore be that the UN system and global civil society will increasingly be able to expand the potential for good that the TNCs certainly possess, influence their agendas by increasing their awareness of certain realities, and generally learn to cooperate with this critical sector.

**Nongovernment Agencies Operating Internationally (INGOs)**

International nongovernment organizations (INGOs) have a long history (see Kaldor, 2003, chap. 4). The oldest of the well-known INGOs is the Red Cross, founded in 1863, but many Christian humanitarian organizations, Jewish welfare agencies, and the American Medical Association were founded even earlier (Beigbeder, 1991, pp. 8–9). Many other NGOs were established in the period of the 1920s to the 1960s, but the great expansion of NGOs generally and of INGOs in particular began in the 1970s. The range of INGOs is enormous (see Korten, 1990, p. 2; Kaldor, 2003, chap.4). Some have budgets larger than those of many nations, operate globally, and are widely known. Others have small budgets and a limited range of activities and are known only in the circles within which they operate. The internal structure of INGOs also varies greatly. Some are highly structured organizationally with an employer-employee structure, and others are extremely loose, operating largely as umbrellas for personal initiatives. Funding arrangements are a further important variable. Some INGOs are almost completely dependent on receiving contracts from other agencies or on donor agency funding for programs they develop, while others—especially the religious agencies—have a constituency on which they depend for donations. This funding variable is extremely important in determining the extent of the independence of agencies and hence their ability to display initiative.

As with all sections of global organizations, the INGO sector has its strengths and weaknesses. While it used to be widely assumed that all NGOs generally had more ability than other sectors to respond to newly emerging needs, in innovative ways, and on the basis of principles such as people’s participation, this is certainly
not a valid assumption today. As governments and the UN increasingly pursue their goals through the NGO sector, as NGOs and INGOs become more and more dependent on external formal funding sources, and as more and more INGOs for whatever reason adopt bureaucratic structures and administrative procedures, the nature of INGOs is inevitably changed. It used also to be assumed, perhaps wrongly, that the NGO sector shared common values and would instinctively work together for the common good. Whatever the past reality, a common complaint about INGOs is that they compete with each other—for funds, for a prominent share of a specific task, for media coverage, for personnel, and for kudos. There is a noted inability or unwillingness to cooperate or collaborate in many contexts, and a tendency for the sheer numbers of INGOs involved in many situations to constitute a major problem in efficiently and effectively responding to a designated area of need. (Examples include the refugee and post-conflict reconstruction field but also many aspects of local level development. See, for example, Duffield, 2001, pp. 53ff.)

Understandably perhaps, the quality of the work carried out by INGOs varies greatly. This may be due in part to inadequate funding, inappropriate staff recruitment, poor program design or management, or inexperience in the field. The large number of NGOs and INGOs competing for funding even allows a few bogus NGOs to attempt to obtain a share of available funds fraudulently. Moreover, the tendency of INGOs to pursue funding sources, and therefore programs popular with donors, will adversely affect their ability to respond effectively to an overall presenting situation, thus detracting from the sector’s ability to complement the contribution of the government and for-profit sectors. (On NGOs and INGOs in development, see Edwards and Hulme, 1992; Poulton and Harris, 1988; Korten, 1990; and UNDP, 1993, chap. 5.)

In addition to the variables affecting the nature and performance of the NGO sector generally, there is a considerable literature on NGO-government relations in developing countries (e.g., Holloway, 1989; Fowler, 1991; UN/ESCAP, 1991; Clark, 1993; Heyzer, Riker, and Quizon, 1995). An ESCAP seminar on government-NGO cooperation in social development in 1991 revealed a tremendous diversity among states in the Asia-Pacific region in this regard, ranging from the practical outlawing of the NGO sector, to significant levels of mutual suspicion to close cooperation, making it difficult and dangerous to generalize. What it did reveal was an issue requiring considerable work, and the report of the seminar makes a number of recommendations. This focus on barriers to state-NGO relations and development of recommendations for overcoming these is common to most writers in the field. The prevailing conclusions are that there remains a long way to go in building strong and cooperative state-NGO relations in many developing countries, that the goal is extremely important, and that there are a number of readily identifiable strategies for achieving this goal. Some of the literature focuses extensively on state legislation pertaining to the NGO sector, which currently varies greatly across states, as the starting point for achieving better relations.

We should also be aware of relationships between the INGOs and the UN system (see Otto, 1996; Willetts, 1996; Weiss and Gordenker, 1996). In his foreword to the Weiss and Gordenker publication, Boutros Boutros-Gali, then the secretary-general of the UN, stresses the importance of the NGO sector within the UN system in “the maintenance and establishment of peace” and “the areas of assistance, mobilization, and democratization activities.” The only mention of NGOs in the UN charter is in article 71, which empowers ECOSOC to “make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence.” Since 1968, NGOs having a representative and international character have been entitled to admission to consultative status in the UN,
supervised by the Committee on NGOs. NGOs and INGOs also operate within the system as lobbyists (see Kaldor, 2003, pp. 90–91), and by attending the NGO forums that parallel most UN Global Forums composed of government representatives. How much influence the NGO sector has within the UN system is, however, very difficult to determine. Certainly the deliberations and recommendations of the transnational federations of NGOs and INGOs are much more likely to influence outcomes than are most individual NGOs and INGOs, and some agencies within the UN system (e.g., the UNHCR) have been instrumental in establishing or encouraging NGO federations able to provide an input within specific fields of work.

Finally, reference should be made to the important role of the INGOs within the emerging global civil society, but we shall defer discussion of this to the final section in this review of the organizational dimension of the global context.

Global Civil Society

Shaw (1994, p. 647) has defined civil society as follows: It consists of “the network of institutions through which groups in society represent themselves—both to each other and to the state.” In effect, civil society stands alongside the other three components of modern society, namely the state or governance system, the market or economic systems, and people-in-community, which components Galtung (1995, p. 204) regards as the different types of power in society. Civil society is usually seen as constituting the linkages between people-in-community and the economic and political systems of the state. As such, it enables people to participate in society in strength, by working together within a range of voluntary associations, and so to keep political and economic systems accountable. Exactly the same argument applies to civil society at the global level. However, despite these definitions, we need also to be aware that global civil society is, in the literature, seen in a variety of ways and given varying degrees of significance, as the following review demonstrates.

The UNDP’s 1997 Human Development Report warned that, while globalization offers great opportunities, it represents also a major threat to global equity. Pieterse (1997, p. 374) goes further, commenting that globalization has led to “the overriding imperative of competitiveness, resulting in distortions and the sacrifice of the interests of the most vulnerable in society.” Hence the key role of global civil society is, as it is at the state level, to seek to ensure that the political and economic forces and systems that operate are held accountable to the people. If national civil society aims “to limit arbitrary or abusive state power” (Polidano and Hulme, 1997, p. 7), so global civil society represents essentially “transnational political activity” (Pasha, 1996, p. 643) carried out on behalf of people to ensure that global developments are in the people’s best interests.

Aziz (1995, p. 12) sees global civil society as spearheaded by grassroots movements, thus representing “globalization from below.” These movements reflect concerns such as “the environment, human rights, women’s issues, sustainable development, peace and justice, universal literacy, and liberation from oppression” (Aziz). Rosenau (1995, p. 387) emphasizes more the collaboration between INGOs, or what he calls transnational NGOs (TNGOs). Rosenau refers to the growth in TNGOs as “stunning,” with numbers increasing nineteen times since 1956 to more than 18,000 in 1992. Clearly both INGOs (or TNGOs) and global movements come together to represent what Stern-Pettersson (1993, p. 136) refers to as “the emerging third force in world affairs”—a third force that “shares authority and responsibility for global policy with actors representing the state and market.” The Commission on Global Governance (1995, 254) comments that “global civil society is best expressed in the global non-government movement,” but elsewhere its report points out that this movement covers a
multitude of institutions, voluntary associations and networks—women’s groups, trade unions, chambers of commerce, farming or housing cooperatives, neighborhood watch associations, religion-based organizations, and so on (p. 32). This Commission recommended that there be established, within the UN system, an annual Forum of Civil Society.

Kaldor (2003, chap.1) sets out five different versions of global civil society, all both normative and descriptive. The first is concerned with the rule of law or civility, with global civil society signifying cosmopolitan order; the second version is concerned broadly with all aspects of economic, social, and cultural globalization; the third version is the activist one concerned with political emancipation, where social movements and civic activists seek to influence the global sphere; the fourth version is that of the neoliberals promoting the benefits of western society through global privatization of democracy and humanitarianism; and, fifth, the postmodern version seeks “to break with modernity of which a key component was the nation-state,” and sees global civil society as the “plurality of global networks of contestation.” Kaldor’s own approach incorporates various aspects of these five dimensions.

While many writers hold high aspirations for global civil society, and perhaps realistically so given developments to date, we would have to agree with Shaw (1994, p. 635) that “these developments have so far been limited, and that global civil society is still more potential than actual,” in terms not so much of size as of fulfilling the global roles possible. What is important is that this “globalization-from-below” movement continues to strengthen, engage in social action, put forward alternative social and economic policies and development models, and advocate for the world’s disadvantaged people. Six key roles for civil society, nationally and globally, emerge from the literature:

- mediating between people and national or global political structures;
- reinforcing social ties between differing, and potentially competing, groups in society and globally;
- the promotion of democracy or people’s participation;
- the reflecting and managing of pluralism;
- the advocacy of the rights of the disadvantaged and marginalized or excluded; and
- the presenting of needs and of alternative development models or strategies.

Global civil society must be strong enough to interact effectively with global economic and political structures, strong enough to represent the needs of all peoples of the world, and strong enough to play a key role in the formulation of global policies and programs that will reflect the basic principles and rights that constitute the essence of humanity. (A further useful reference on the contribution of global civil society, especially at the values level, is Bruyn, 2005.)

The Global Organizational Context and International Social Work

Social workers who enter international social work will inevitably find themselves working within a section of the broad global organizational context. The choice of employment path is indeed one of the first decisions confronting the graduate who decides to enter international social work. Should they participate in their own nation’s global outreach or move on to the international level? Should they aim to work for the UN or one of the INGOs? This decision is inevitably linked to the decision as to the field in which our graduate will specialize (refugee work, natural disasters, conflict resolution, postconflict reconstruction, etc.), and to a determination of the focus of the graduate’s involvement—for example, policy formulation, program development and administration, research, or frontline operations. Some organizations are much stronger at one or more of these levels than
others, while most international organizations specialize in a particular field of activity. Thus a knowledge of the organizational context of international social work is important for enabling a social worker to plan his or her career path.

Related to or even independent of their career paths, international social workers may choose to use their knowledge of the organizational context to contribute to the strengthening of one or more areas. They may, for example, admire the roles and work of the UN and seek to play a part in its strengthening in general or specific terms. Alternatively, workers may link up with particular INGOs, such as the Red Cross or Amnesty International, and similarly contribute to strengthening their international role. Similarly, many social workers have worked hard to strengthen global civil society, either at a general level by, for example, lobbying at the UN, or more specifically by helping to strengthen some component of global civil society, such as the green movement. Often of course, the social worker’s contribution along such lines might be carried out through the profession’s own global organizations, such as the IFSW.

Frequently an understanding of the global organizational context will become more critical as international social workers become involved in a specific local situation. They will want and need to know what elements within that organizational context are potentially relevant to what their local situation requires. Can they involve particular international agencies, or seek funding from them, or involve them in local training schemes, or have the agencies’ experts placed with them for brief periods, and so on. This global organizational context is potentially the most important resource available to workers at the local level in most contexts.

Sometimes an understanding of the global organizational context is vital in helping workers to control their anger and frustration. From the perspective of their local level, workers may be asking: Why does not the UN intervene? Why cannot the various NGOs cooperate? Why are these national agencies blocking our endeavors? Only by understanding the general nature and current realities of the global organizational context can workers begin to appreciate the possible roles, the weaknesses or imposed limitations, the organizational decision-making processes, and so on to the point where they can be realistic in their expectations and controlled in their reactions.

It is vital for many reasons, a few of which we have highlighted, that international social workers understand the nature of the global organizational context within which they operate and on which they will often be dependent.

### The Ideological Context

The term “ideology” has been defined as “systems of thought and belief by which individuals and groups explain how their social system operates and what principles it exemplifies” (Gilpin, 1987, p. 25). Ideologies are essentially “intellectual commitments or acts of faith” (Gilpin, p. 4). The importance of ideologies is reflected in the existence throughout world history of religious and cultural systems, political and related social systems, economic systems and so on, all based on ideology. One critical issue that arises is how these differing systems coexist on the world stage. Do they tend to exist side by side in peace, compete with each other, or seek to dominate others? History would seem to demonstrate that, at any point of time, a range of ideologies or worldviews coexist and compete with each other with varying degrees of aggression involved. Because of this, there are those who present the global ideological context as a pervasive clash between competing ideologies or civilizations. Two examples of such writers are Huntington (2002) and Gilpin (1987). (See also Sachs, 2002.) Huntington’s theme is that “human history is the history of civilizations” (p. 10) that are inevitably clashing with each other. Not surprisingly, the title of his well-known but highly controversial book is *The Clash of Civilizations*. Gilpin, by contrast, by
contrast, presents a model based on conflict between ideologies. He argues that three competing ideologies of political economy have divided humanity since the 1800s. The three ideologies are liberalism, nationalism, and Marxism (see Table 3.1), of which he writes,

These three ideologies are fundamentally different in their conceptions of the relationships among society, state and market, and it may not be an exaggeration to say that every controversy in the field of international political economy is ultimately reducible to differing conceptions of these relationships. The intellectual clash is not merely of historic interest. Economic liberalism, Marxism, and economic nationalism are all very much alive at the end of the twentieth century. (Gilpin, 1987, p. 25).

Other commentators on recent world history, who follow this basic type of approach to ideology, are those who focus on the rift between the ideology of “triumphant economic—and political—capitalist liberalism,” as it had developed in the Western world, and the “New World” that the West set out to dominate (Hobsbaum, 1995, p. 201). This is a view shared by Worsley (1984) and Hoogvelt (2001, pp. 18–21). The tendency to divide the world into largely irreconcilable camps has long been evident and is still with us, exemplified in, for example, ongoing perceptions of the differences between East and West or Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition.

All of the above schools of thought are examples of schools that see differing ideologies as coexisting but inherently in conflict to some degree. This is usually because of some element within each ideology that encourages its followers

### Table 3.1 Summary of the three ideologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Thoughts and Beliefs</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Impact</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberalism</td>
<td>Liberty</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>Social, economic, and political conditions seem to improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Minimum, but active state intervention</td>
<td>Increasing inequality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rationality</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Weak distribution of resources which concentrates them in hands of a few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free market</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Private property</td>
<td>Capital formation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Colonization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>State-building</td>
<td>Political autonomy</td>
<td>Security and belongingness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Industrialization</td>
<td>Strong and weak nations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>Military power</td>
<td>Colonization and exploitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sovereignty</td>
<td>Economic self-sufficiency</td>
<td>Sanctions, conflict, and war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geographic location</td>
<td>Protection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marxism</td>
<td>Class struggle</td>
<td>Change through struggle</td>
<td>Progress towards equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communism</td>
<td>Classless society</td>
<td>Socialist/communist forms of government</td>
<td>Better distribution of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Common ownership of means of production</td>
<td>Analyze and critique capitalist structures and actions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liberation for all people</td>
<td></td>
<td>A strong center</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High initial growth accompanied by stagnation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Declining impact on states.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
to proselytize or seek to subjugate competing ideologies.

A second type of school focuses on particular ideological trends which are in themselves, in the view of these schools, a danger to the global community. Adherents of these schools then seek to counteract these trends by promoting alternative ideologies. For example, many writers and activists have focused on the strong antifemale trend often found in religious, political, economic, cultural, and social systems, and have sought to counter this through the promotion of feminism. Others have identified the tendency in many ideologies and systems to have scant regard for the natural environment, and have sought to counter this trend through the promotion of green ideologies. Both feminist and green ideologies are widely espoused, in general terms, by a wide range of workers in the international field. This is because each of these ideologies is seen as having vital implications for human well-being.

A third aspect of the current ideological context that calls for attention is characterized by either opposition to, or major doubts concerning, various existing dominant ideologies. For the most part, however, this type of opposition or concern has not resulted in opposing ideologies in any full sense, but rather in protests against, and widely expressed opposition to, these ideologies. Well-known ideological movements of this kind include anticapitalism, antiglobalization, anti–free trade, and anti–transnational corporations. Supporters of these views, a very varied camp, have sought to disrupt many international gatherings in recent years and received considerable media coverage. Many books have also been published reflecting such concerns, as can be seen from titles such as Chua’s *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (2003).

A fourth and very important type of global ideological thinking focuses not so much on criticizing existing ideologies as on highlighting what might be, and so promoting a particular ideology. Examples of such ideologies are humanitarianism, a focus on human rights, and various religious ideologies. The promotion of such ideologies usually emanates from a combination of a concern for some existing state of affairs and a belief in the efficacy of bringing a particular ideologically based approach to bear when addressing that state of affairs. The expression of these ideologies is, therefore, found not so much in protest movements as in the active engagement in the field at all levels of ideologically based agencies, religious and secular in nature.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that ideology can and does play significant roles in understanding the overall legacy of history, in analyzing existing socioeconomic-political situations and trends, and in developing intervention strategies.

### The Significance of a Historical Perspective of Ideology

While the study of many areas of history has the potential to assist our understanding of the contemporary global context, we shall confine our comments here to the widely acknowledged significance of the history of capitalist expansion emanating from Europe as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This history, as Hoogvelt perceives it, encompasses

- the period of mercantilism of 1500–1800—that is, “the striving after political power through economic means” (p. 3);
- the period of colonialism, 1800–1950, important in Hoogvelt’s eyes because of its “legacy of the international division of labour, of resource bondage and the westernisation of the peripheral elites” (p. 26);
- the period of neocolonial and imperialism, 1950–1970—a period of “unequal exchange
between the rich and poor worlds... mediated by neocolonial class alliances between international capital and third world bourgeoisies” (p. 47); and
the postimperial era from 1970 on, which saw a “transfer of economic surplus through debt peonage” (p. 17). (see also Potter, 1992.)

Whatever the details, this general pattern of western dominance is generally accepted, and is widely regarded as highly relevant to recent developments.

It is not therefore, in this context, the details of the history of capitalist expansion that are important. They can readily be found in Hoogvelt (2001) and elsewhere. Rather it is the widely accepted conclusion that the ideologies of mercantilism, colonialism, imperialism, and modernization have left their mark on all of the countries directly involved, and most others, and have resulted in modern systems that reflect these historical events and contemporary realities that still bear the mark of this historical legacy. For example, in his well-known text on development, Black (1991) assumes throughout that the former colonial powers, now neocolonial powers, are as able today to control trade arrangements and to exploit tribal and ethnic animosities as they were during the colonial period.

Furthermore, the reality that the liberalizing elites in most former colonies—who achieved independence and guided postindependence development—were themselves strongly western in orientation contributed to this outcome (see, e.g., Hobsbaum, 1995). A further important factor contributing to the recent situation has been western control of the establishment and policies of the global economic institutions set out after World War II. Indeed, the history of capitalist expansion, and especially colonialism, has left its mark on the world in a whole range of ways, including through the imposition of arbitrary state boundaries, especially in Africa, by colonial powers; through western-engineered state demographic profiles, as in Malaysia and Fiji; through western-influenced state political systems, introduced before conditions were conducive (e.g., in Papua New Guinea); and through the formation of western-style state welfare systems (see Chapter 1). These are but some of the important aspects of the colonial legacy. It is a legacy of which many of the general public in developing countries are strongly aware.

**Economic Neoliberalism and its Neoconservative Wing—the New Right**

Of the ideologies that have made up the global ideological context in recent times, none is more important than the ideological trend known by various names but which we shall refer to as economic neoliberalism. It is a highly controversial ideology, having a wide range of supporters, including many highly influential leaders and scholars, but also many critics, some of whom regard it as the most significant factor adversely influencing the well-being of a high proportion of the world’s population. Some see this ideological development as a return to historical liberal capitalism, and some present it as the heritage of the “New Right” political forces, “a mixture of economic liberalism and renascent conservatism” (Pierson, 1998, p. 39) espoused by Margaret Thatcher (prime minister of the United Kingdom, 1979–1990) and Ronald Reagan (president of the United States, 1981–1988). Even more significantly, however, many see economic neoliberalism as the ideology underpinning, in particular, the work of the World Bank and IMF in terms of, for example, their structural adjustment packages (e.g., Randall and Theobald, 1998, pp. 160–61); the focus of the WTO and of many western states on free trade (e.g., Nader et al., 1995, pp. 79ff.); and the pursuit of policies designed to enhance economic growth at the expense of virtually all other...
Indeed, some commentators speak as if economic neoliberalism is at the heart of most of our global problems, although as Hoogvelt (2001, p. 187) and others point out, the precise nature of any causal link is difficult to detect. The fundamental issue, perhaps, concerns the question of the distribution of decision-making power, nationally and globally. Korten (1995, p. 86) comments that, at its core, this ideology is “not about the public interest” but “about defending and institutionalizing the right of the economically powerful to do whatever best serves their immediate interests without public accountability for the consequences.” This seems to be a fairly widely held view in many quarters of the international field.

What are the key elements of this ideology of economic neoliberalism? Among the elements most commonly referred to are

- freeing up of the economy by essentially minimizing government interference—deregulation;
- maximizing trade potential by instituting a free trade regime—free of government subsidies and import-export controls;
- limiting or rolling back state power, in part by devolving more responsibility to communities, families, and individuals;
- placing a strong emphasis on individualism—often linked to private property, consumption; and the pursuit of entrepreneurialism; and
- a negative view of the welfare state as uneconomic, unproductive, inefficient, and a denial of freedom.

However, we need to be aware that discrepancies between what an ideology suggests and what a viable political economy permits are common, and that this ideology is seldom imposed as rigidly as it is sometimes presented or in a uniform manner.

**International Social Work and the Ideological Context**

It should be clear to readers that an understanding of the global ideological context, from both a historical and a contemporary perspective, is an important aspect of international social work. It is difficult to see how most situations could be analyzed, and therefore understood and responded to, without addressing this aspect of the global context. Let us develop this general conclusion a little further by focusing on three ways in which the global ideological context might be relevant to international social work.

**The Worker’s Own Ideological Position**

No worker will enter the international field without some ideological baggage, whether related to general cultural background and upbringing or to specific experiences in the field. Indeed, many social workers entering international social work do so, from our experience, as a result of strong ideological motivation. Sometimes this motivation emanates from the worker’s background, as with religious motivation; sometimes it comes from international experiences resulting in a desire to work towards achieving human rights and social justice or humanitarian goals; and sometimes it is a result of participation in a particular social movement possessing strong ideology, such as green or feminist movements.

Often strong ideological motivation drives the workers’ degree of commitment, protects them against frustrations and disappointments, and provides them with strong support networks. If there is a negative aspect to this situation, however, it is the danger that workers who are strongly driven ideologically will find it difficult to be objective in their approach, or open and insightful in coming to an understanding of situations seemingly at variance with their ideological stance. There is a general cross-cultural...
issue involved here, and a considerable literature addresses this issue. In addition, we need to be aware of workers’ often strong reactions to situations that for them are ideologically unacceptable, but to which, in reality terms, they have to demonstrate an objective approach and bring about, if possible, an outcome acceptable to all relevant parties. The question is whether most workers find it easy to make the necessary compromises.

Local People’s Perceptions of Western Ideology

While they may not express it in ideological terms, many people in developing countries will have strong emotional reactions to the West, its agencies, and its personnel. The prevailing emotion may be anger, suspicion, or hatred, reflecting frustration that is related to perceptions of Western behavior in the distant past or in recent times. Emotions may be so strong that certain lines of action may be effectively closed to workers, or they may spill over into an inability to even accept workers with western connections, or they may be so strong that any forward movement at all might be deemed impossible. In any event, an awareness of the possibility of ideological reactions and an ability to analyze their nature and causes are crucial to intervention. Chua’s 2003 text is a good example of this phenomenon, although at the macro level.

Workers’ Reactions to Relevant Institutional Ideologies

It is not at all uncommon for workers in international social work to find themselves working in or for, or having to collaborate with, agencies or institutions possessing dominant ideologies to which they personally are inherently opposed. Seldom do all personnel in any agency reflect even similar ideologies among themselves, let alone the same ideology as the agency has endorsed at some formal level. Faced with potentially conflicting ideological views, what are appropriate reactions? Should the worker withdraw, seek to change the organization’s ideology from within, or accept the realities of ideological pluralism and develop an ability to work within such a situation? The decision will be an individual one, reflecting a range of considerations, and any of the above decisions may be thought appropriate. What is inappropriate is that workers fail to acknowledge the potential for tension or conflict, and carry on working regardless; for when this occurs, events may overtake decision-making and leave the worker with few satisfactory options for resolving complex and difficult situations.

The Emerging Policy Context: The Emergence of Global Social and Economic Policy and of International Law, and the Significance of These for International Social Work Practice

While certainly the world is still a long way from functioning under a set of universal or global policies, ideologies, principles, and laws, there are many signs of the world moving in this general direction, no matter how slow, uneven, uncertain, and precarious the steps being taken. The subject is complex, but let us share our understanding of the current state of developments and encourage the reader to reflect on the potential significance for international social work of what seems to be occurring.

International Law

Let us commence with international law. There seems to be no doubt that, as Robertson (2000, p. 90) puts it: “for the present, international law comes courtesy of nation states if it
comes at all.” International law is not legislated by a parliament of nations with authority to do so but by a “hopelessly unrepresentative” General Assembly (GA) of the UN; while the International Court of Justice in The Hague “is not permitted to become a Supreme Court for Humankind” (Robertson). Yet nonbinding resolutions of the GA do sometimes influence nations, while “customary international law” does at times “filter through into national law” (pp. 91–92). As Robertson points out,

Some common law systems, including the British and American, accept customary international law as part of that common law, although treaties must be incorporated by specific legislation before they can have any direct legal effects. [However] at the beginning of the twenty-first century, international law remains subordinate and subservient to state power, which tends to favour economic, political or military interests whenever they conflict with those of justice. [Yet] abusive exercising of state power is becoming harder to hide and easier to condemn and the legal theory that human rights can be subjugated to ‘state rights’ is becoming recognized as a dangerous fiction. (pp. 91–92)

Social workers need to be aware of the gradual development of a body of international law, of the need for states to endorse it and incorporate it into state law, and of their role as social workers to seek to influence this last process.

Global Economic Policy

Global economic policy presents a different situation. The existence of a global economy is not disputed; nor is it disputed that, as a consequence of the operations of the global economy, “it is less and less possible for individual states to regulate the economic activity that goes on within and across their borders” (Pierson, 1998, p. 64; see also Randall and Theobald, 1998, p. 253). The key issue, however, is the degree to which global economic policy is a reality, determined by global organizations and institutions relatively independent of states. Randall and Theobald (1998, p. 253) write,

Capital flows and investment decisions, fiscal and even monetary policy are increasingly determined by the actions of international banks, commodity brokers, currency speculators, market makers and the like. Debtor nations must submit themselves to policies and programmes imposed by the IFIs [International Financial Institutions].

The prevailing reality would appear to be a degree of tension between state and global economic policies, with a variety of scenarios. Some states appear to be supporting, or even driving, global economic policy, while not always adhering to those economic policies in their own behavior. Other states appear to be subjugated to global economic policy, and, on the basis of some criteria, to be suffering accordingly. Other states again, however, remain reasonably successful in ignoring global economic policy and pursuing a largely state-determined economic path. In essence, then, the relationship between global and state economic policy differs from that pertaining to international law only in that the powers behind global economic policy are far more powerful than those behind international law—and certainly even less accountable to the people or to many states.

Global Social Policy

Over the last few decades, the focus in international social work has been mainly on comparative social policy and the emergence of social policy in developing countries. (See, for example, MacPherson and Midgley, 1987.) While that remains important, here we are more concerned with global social policy. In the first chapter of his text on global social policy, Deacon (1997)
includes within the term the “globalization of social policy instruments, policy and provision” (p. 2), all viewed as in their early stages of development, and “the socialization of global politics”—“In other words the major agenda issues at intergovernmental meetings are now in essence social (and environmental) questions” (p. 3). Regarding the extent of the development of global social policy, Deacon writes,

Social policy as an academic discipline or field of study has, we suggest, been rather slower to wake up to the impact of the new world (dis)order on its subject matter than some economists, political scientists, international relations students and sociologists. On the other hand, because of its commitment to welfare and the concern of its practitioners to not only analyse existing policy but prescribe better ways in which human needs might be articulated and met, its potential contribution to the new global politics is immense. (p. 8)

Deacon agrees with Townsend and Donkor (1995, p. 20) that

the problems in the late twentieth century of the international market and the replacement of sovereignty and empire by international hierarchical power will demand the establishment of forms of an international welfare state.

However, while setting out the pressures for the globalization of social policy, Deacon warns,

National and regional self-interest and protectionism are alternative strategies available to governments. Supranationalization can be resisted. (p. 14)

Emerging Global Policy and International Social Work

While it is clear that developments in all three areas of policy covered are to some degree or in some regards in their infancy, it is also clear that those developments that have occurred are already having an impact on world affairs and development. Robertson is convinced that customary international law is working to protect human rights, although much more needs to be done; while Deacon is convinced that global social policy, as manifested by developments within regional bodies such as the European Union and by the field of international economic and social development, is already opening up possibilities such as global policies, global taxation and redistribution of monies, and global provision for the welfare needs of populations such as refugees. Furthermore, the global agreement relating to welfare goals and agendas in a range of areas augurs well for the future. How far developments in global economic policy have proved beneficial to the world’s people is a more contentious issue, but undoubtedly much good has been achieved and there is still much more potential for good. The key element lacking here would appear to be the incorporation of the least developed countries within a more equitable global economic order.

The significance of these developments for international social work practice is readily perceived. In the first place, they together constitute a policy context of which workers need to be aware as they seek to understand and respond to situations of any kind. In the second place, the policy context contains much potential for good, and international social workers need to be aware of the responsibility they carry to contribute to its appropriate and effective ongoing development. However, the significance of global policy does not detract from the continuing significance of national policy regimes, and international social workers will frequently find themselves seeking to balance and handle these two competing demands. When operating internationally, the importance of and inherent difficulty in grasping the intricacies of perhaps several sets of national policy, the interaction between these, and their relationship to emerging global policy will frequently confront workers, calling for a firm grasp
of the policy field generally and of a large body of
detailed knowledge, relating to the national and
international levels, in specific fields of practice.

With the social work profession having
increasingly found its place in the policy arena in
recent years at the national level, it follows that
the profession will be seeking to participate in
policy concerns at the global level. Indeed, social
work practitioners in some obvious contexts
have long been aware of global policy needs and
realities: for example, social workers in inter-
country casework, intercountry adoption, other
areas of child welfare such as custody disputes
across borders, and in the corrections field have
long possessed some kind of focus on global
social policy. At another level, social workers
engaged in such fields as poverty alleviation,
unemployment, and local-level development
have often been very aware of how global eco-
nomic policy was impacting on the local situa-
tion. Finally, social workers who have specialized
in human rights work, work with indigenous
minorities, ecological concerns, and a range of
other areas have either utilized international
law and conventions as a vehicle for pursuing
national or local change, or have contributed to
the expansion of policy at the international level.

If the importance of global social and eco-
nomic policy to social work has already been well
established, there is little doubt that it will grow in
importance in future years. High levels of inter-
national population mobility, various types of
collaborative arrangements between states, global
collaboration in responding to needs, and the
ongoing process of globalization generally will
all continue to possess a policy dimension, and
probably on an increasing level. International
social workers need to be aware of these processes
and ready to play their part in ensuring that the
policies that do emerge are in the best interests of
human well-being, and not just of states and cor-
porations, and especially of the more vulnerable
of the world’s people whose voice is often not
heard at decision-making levels.

However, it is also important that, as global
policies do evolve, international social workers
especially, but increasingly all social workers, are
familiar with them and aware of their relevance
to their practice. Often it is social workers who
will carry the responsibility of making individu-
als and groups aware of the global policies that
might affect their situations, and who will facil-
itate their ability to interact with those policies
and the agencies that administer them. This is,
of course, already the situation in some areas of
practice, as noted above, but the range of areas
of practice to which global policies will apply is
likely to expand.

In other words, just as social workers have
always needed to possess a knowledge and
understanding of national legal and policy
regimes, so in an era of rapid globalization do
they also need to be aware of global regimes.

Conclusion

The context of international social work is vast
and complex, yet highly fascinating. More and
more professionals, from a wide range of disci-
plines and countries, have moved into inter-
national work. They find a niche within that
complex of international organizations, having
frequently to interact with some or all of the sec-
tors involved, and therefore needing to develop
some basic understanding of the network of
global organizations and how they function.
Their work will see them focusing in often a rela-
tively limited field, but almost invariably they are
conscious of the impact on their field of a range
of other fields, issues, and social problems. Many
find themselves obliged to improve their cross-
disciplinary abilities, as they wrestle with highly
complex situations that are often underresourced
in personnel and other terms. Increasingly too,
workers encounter an ever growing array of inter-
national laws, conventions, and policies, some of
which relate directly to what they are seeking to
achieve. To understand this legal and policy con-
text is not easy for most workers, but not to
understand it, or have access to those who do, can
often result in unfortunate outcomes. Finally, one
is aware also of the existence of dominating or competing ideologies, and of the need at the very minimum to appreciate these as one aspect of one's operating reality.

While the above is true for all who enter the international field, for social workers and other members of the helping professions the focus required will be on specific elements of each of these four aspects of the international context. This should become clearer to readers as we consider various aspects of the field of international social work in subsequent chapters. At this point, however, we would hope that readers will have a basic understanding of these four aspects of the international context that have been discussed.

Summary

- It is important to have a clear understanding of the global context of international social work, and this context has been presented in terms of four dimensions: global social problems, global organizations, ideologies of global relevance, and global policy frameworks.
- A clear understanding of global social problems is necessary as these problems influence actions and resource allocations of national and international agencies. Such an understanding also helps social workers to analyze and relate to local situations and contribute to local and global policies.
- The organizational context for international social work is very vast and complex. The roots of the beginning of international organizations may be traced to the consequences of the two world wars. One way of understanding the overall organizational context is by looking at the national governments' agencies which serve international purposes, at intergovernmental agencies such as the European Union and African Union, at the UN system, and at some transnational corporations, INGOs, and global civil society. This understanding significantly helps social workers to contribute to international social work.
- Many countries have been strongly influenced by, if not the victims of, prevailing ideologies. Liberalism, colonialism, nationalism, Marxism, imperialism, and neocolonialism have all had an influence on the development of various nation-states and international developments. However, liberalism, in its many forms including neoliberalism, appears to have been the dominant ideology, although there have emerged strong ideologies opposing it. An understanding of these ideologies is an important part of the preparation for international social work.
- The global policy context is composed of international law, economic policy, and social policy, although social policy developments particularly are in their early stages. However, understanding such emerging policies is necessary for international social work practice.
Questions and Topics for Discussion

- After reading this chapter, what do you consider to be the main aspects of the global context of international social work?
- According to you, what are the main global social problems? Of these, choose a social problem of your interest, and discuss it in light of the four questions (nos. 2–5) posed in the global social problems context section.
- Why do you think social workers need to be aware of global social problems?
- Discuss the broad organizational context for international social work.
- Study any of the following organizations that interest you and identify roles for social workers:
  - A national government’s agency established for international work.
  - An intergovernmental agency or regional association.
  - A UN agency, e.g., UNICEF, UNDP, etc.
  - An INGO.
- With the class divided into small groups, let each group consider the nature, strengths, weaknesses, and potential of one of the six categories of international organizations discussed and present their conclusions to the class.
- How can better coordination and cooperation be developed among international organizations?
- According to you, what are the most dominant ideologies in the contemporary world? Consider the merits of opposing ideologies to these dominant ideologies.
- Why is it important to understand these ideologies for international social work practice?
- Assume that, as an international social work practitioner, you are going to work in a specific field in a particular country. Discuss global and state policies possibly relevant to the chosen field and country.
- As an international social work practitioner, what aspects of the global context should be kept in mind for your practice?

Possible Areas for Research Projects

- Undertake a systematic analysis of any global social problem according to the four questions (nos. 2–5) posed under the global social problems context section.
- Undertake an analysis of a particular issue according to the four dimensions of the global context presented in this chapter.
- Examine the current level of coordination and cooperation (or lack of it) among the six categories of organizations in a country as a case study.
- Study the issues in implementing international law and global policies at the national level.
- Study what constitutes the global context of international social work in a selected situation.
- Undertake a study of how the organizational context matters in international social work by surveying social workers working in international organizations.
Further Reading


