

# Globalization: Positive and negative issues

## Alexander B. Leman

*The author, immediate Past President of the World Society for Ekistics, is an architect and urban planner with extensive national and international experience in urban developments of varying scales. Founder of his own architectural firm in 1956, he has also served since 1972 as President of Leman Group Inc., an urban planning and development consulting firm based in Toronto, Canada. Projects have included the planning of a new capital city, new communities, towns and cities; ports; regional economic development plans; self-help housing programs; and economic and regional structure plans, as well as programming and project management. Since 1994, he has also served as Chairman and CEO of Urbanitas Worldwide Inc., a company dedicated to planning and development of human settlements in the developing world. Over the course of his career, Mr Leman has been invited to speak in 48 countries around the world. He holds the distinction of being one of the few Canadians listed in the International Who's Who 2000, published in London, UK and was, in October 2000, nominated and elected a Fellow of the World Innovation Foundation. The text that follows is extracted from a message which was made available to participants at the international symposium on "Globalization and Local Identity," organized jointly by the World Society for Ekistics and the University of Shiga Prefecture in Hikone, Japan, 19-24 September, 2005, which Mr Leman was finally unable to attend.*

Today, many people demonize globalization, insisting that it is a threat to local cultures, languages and identities. To a great extent, these critiques are well founded.

Nevertheless, globalization is not simply an evil. In fact, it is a process that offers, in my view, the greatest promise to humankind's progress and to its enrichment, at many different levels. It is critical to make a crystal clear point, that globalization is about the only known human development process that can bring all of humankind together on this one and only planet that we know. If we do not succeed in globalization to find the ways and means to live together in peace, we risk not only losing a unique opportunity but we also, very likely, risk the civilized continuance of humankind. War is such an evil and it becomes a particularly daunting terror in this modern

age of technology, with weapons of large-scale destruction. We must no longer allow for the possibility of fighting wars for the sake of territoriality. Such destruction is really very frightening and, hopefully, it is precisely through the process of globalization that such outdated territorial wars can be brought to an end.

In many ways, globalization processes bring us closer to what Marshall McLuhan somewhat awkwardly – but now famously – called the "global village." One of the greatest technological innovations of human history is computer technology. It is such a remarkable product that, in principle, allows any individual to contact any other individual, anywhere on the planet. One can transmit words, papers, maps, drawings, books more efficiently than ever before. I know that when I send an email message to Japan, I will likely receive a response by the next morning, if not earlier.

At the same time, as the world becomes smaller through such technological innovations, we come to see firsthand and in new ways, the rich *diversity* of cultures upon our planet. Human diversity is an enormous wealth. Certainly, that diversity sometimes arises in terms of inequities and inequalities among different societies. It is clear that much of humankind lives in such dire poverty that is unimaginable to many western cultures. My experience in countries like India, where I spent a number of years working to improve the housing conditions for the disadvantaged, convinces me that addressing the problems of poverty in many areas of Calcutta or Delhi are no longer simply the responsibility of India. On the contrary, it is incumbent upon all of us to come to terms with these challenges, precisely because globalization makes us aware of these inequities in new and very powerful ways. Globalization forces us to take note of cases of national poverty or of instances of oppression or aggression amongst nations as never before. It forces us to act in ways that were previously unimaginable.

Surely, local cultures deserve to be respected. Culture arises spontaneously and globalization trends that threaten local cultures also threaten basic elements of human dignity and identity. The mediocre is easily standardized across the globe and yet we must ensure that global trends do more than simply advance mediocrity and homogeneity that dulls the richness and depth of local identities.

However, global civilization need not threaten local cultures. We have the opportunity to advance civilized behavior across the globe, precisely because of the international perspective afforded by advanced technologies, such as satellites, computers and futuristic air travel. Beware the tendency to revile globalization: like most things in life, it holds both a danger and one of the greatest promises of human history.