GLOBAL TRENDS AND THE FUTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY*
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What is the future for human rights? In recent years, as global economic and political power is perceived to be shifting, and as western power appears to be in decline, this question is increasingly discussed. For the most part, however, the discussion takes place only within a narrow framework that weighs the importance of this power shift, both for emerging threats to human rights and for advocacy efforts.¹

Yet the perceived global power shift is only one of many trends that might shape the 21st century, and arguably not of primary importance when considering the future of human rights. Trends in the areas of population growth, migration, education, poverty levels, women’s empowerment, global economic integration, urbanization, technological development and many more will all shape profoundly the future of human rights. A burgeoning literature is devoted to identifying these trends, produced by a range of actors.²

While its predictive value is contested³, the various studies do point to a number of likely scenarios that pose both opportunities and challenges for the protection of human rights. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to summarize the trends identified in a range of studies, and draw out the points that are likely to be of most interest to those considering the future of human rights.

1 Global trends – a snapshot

By way of introduction, it is worth noting that across a range of studies there is convergence on a surprising number of points. Looking ahead 20-30 years,⁴ the world is almost certainly going to be more urban and more middle class, better educated and better connected (to information, but also to each other), more migratory and, individually, more empowered. It is also likely to be a world where traditional forms of government (whether authoritarian or democratic) are challenged, and where security concerns will continue to dominate. It will be a hotter world, and, absent major technological breakthroughs, with fewer of the natural resources that sustain human life.

Such a future, even if sketched out at this macro level, will obviously have many consequences for the protection of human rights, some clearly positive, such as increased education levels, and others, like resource scarcity, apt to lead to gloomier outcomes. The following paragraphs will summarize these key trends in more detail. Following that, a concluding section suggests a number of issues emerging that are of most immediate relevance to those pondering the future of human rights advocacy.

Looking first at technology, progress in four areas will be important: information and communications technology (ICT); automation and advanced manufacturing technology (that may dramatically alter existing global supply chains); resource technologies (for example, breakthroughs in securing food, water and energy supplies through new technologies or advancements in agriculture); and life sciences and health technology (NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, 2012, p. 83). The enormous impact in the past two decades of ICT technology suggests that breakthroughs in any of these areas may have truly global and far-reaching impacts. Some predict a wave of technological development in the area of life sciences (ROLAND BERGER STRATEGY CONSULTANTS, 2011, p. 94). New technologies in the areas of biotechnology, nanotechnology, and genetics will likely raise profound ethical questions, including about what it means to be ‘human’.

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Increasing diffusion of ICT will mean both individuals and governments become more able and adept at manipulating information on the Internet, even as rights to privacy and free expression come under new and increased pressures.

Turning to social issues, all major studies identify key trends in education, urbanization, migration and demographics. Education and literacy rates will continue to rise, along with the global average of years of education completed. By 2030, studies suggest 91% of the global population will complete primary education, and 55% will complete secondary or higher education (ROLAND BERGER STRATEGY CONSULTANTS, 2011, p. 105). Women are also narrowing the educational gap around the world. A growing global middle class will drive the demand for education; and it will be more easily met as demographic pressures on education are falling almost everywhere, as the size of the school-age population declines relative to the working age population (HUGHES; DICKSON; IRFAN, 2010, p. 79).

Increased educational levels, of course, impact positively on social and economic outcomes; higher education rates for women, for example, lead to greater labour force participation (EUROPEAN STRATEGY AND POLICY ANALYSIS SYSTEM; INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES, 2012, p. 74). Further, a more literate world, and one that is better educated, suggests more people will be more aware of their rights, and perhaps better equipped to claim and defend them (a point returned to below).

Growing urbanization is also noted by all of the major studies. By 2030, the majority of the population in most countries will live in cities, as urbanization rates grow (especially in Africa and Asia) to approximately 60% worldwide, from 40% only a few years ago (NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, 2012, p. 26; EUROPEAN STRATEGY AND POLICY ANALYSIS SYSTEM; INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES, 2012, p. 134). Large cities will carry increasing economic and political clout (EUROPEAN STRATEGY AND POLICY ANALYSIS SYSTEM; INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES, 2012, p. 134). As cities grow so too will slums; there will be an estimated two billion slum-dwellers by 2040, double the number today (EUROPEAN STRATEGY AND POLICY ANALYSIS SYSTEM; INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES, 2012, p. 46; UNITED KINGDOM, 2010, p. 12).

Migration from the countryside will drive urban growth, but migrants will also cross borders. It is estimated 405 million people (not including refugees) will live outside their country by 2050, more than double the number today (INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION, 2010, p. 1). There will also be a significant increase in temporary and circular migration. Labour shortages in many developed countries (NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, 2012, p. 24), wealth disparities across countries (INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY, 2007, p. 46) and political instability and climate change will all drive migration. The number of those displaced (mostly internally) due to climate change may reach 200 million by 2050, though it could be much higher (INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION, 2010, p. 2).

By 2030 the global population will have reached approximately 8.3 billion people, up from 6.9 billion today (INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION, 2010, p. 20). Widespread population ageing will accompany this growth as life expectancy increases; the median age of the population in most countries in the world (with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa, and possibly South Asia) will rise. Most population growth will be in the global south — by 2030, roughly seven billion people will live in developing countries, comprising 85% of the world’s population (ROLAND BERGER STRATEGY CONSULTANTS, 2011, p. 22).
Population ageing may have several impacts including: labour shortages that pull migrants to developed countries; the privatization of government services as pension liabilities and the rising costs of medical care create fiscal challenges for governments; an increased burden on caregivers, who will be predominantly female; and increased demand for migrant carers, who are not always well-protected in law.

In considering these social and technological trends, many of the reports suggest the result will be increasing individual empowerment, an idea that describes the growing importance of the individual relative to the State, organizations and society as a whole. This importance stems from the proliferation of ICT technology, already noted. It is projected, for example, that the number of mobile-only Internet users will rise from roughly 14 million in 2010 to close to 5 billion in 2030 (ROLAND BERGER STRATEGY CONSULTANTS, 2011, p. 86). But individual empowerment will also be driven by a rapidly growing global middle class – estimated to rise from 1 billion today to 3 billion or more by 2030 (depending on one’s definition of ‘middle class’) (NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, 2012, p. 8). The diffusion of ICT is closely related to income, thus another driver of individual empowerment is the changing consumption patterns of the growing middle class (NATIONAL LANGUAGE GLOBAL TRENDS AND THE FUTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, 2012, p. 30). Increasing access to education and rising literacy rates will also lead to greater individual empowerment (EUROPEAN STRATEGY AND POLICY ANALYSIS SYSTEM; INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES, 2012, p. 28). Further, rising education rates fuel economic development, which in turn fuels demand for more education (NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, 2012, p. 10).

Turning to economic and political trends, clear outcomes are perhaps less certain. The rise in the economic and political power of countries in the global east and south (BRICs plus many others) has been widely noted. Continued global economic integration is also likely (ROLAND BERGER STRATEGY CONSULTANTS, 2011, p. 38), and that means global economic instability may increase too. Most trend reports agree that while abject poverty will decrease as economies develop and middle classes grow, economic inequality (a relative measure) will grow. Additionally, while abject poverty will decrease in Africa, Asia and Latin America, this will not necessarily reduce the absolute number of ‘new poor’ (SCHINAS, 2012, p. 271). Although many African countries stand to benefit from a large demographic dividend, extreme poverty levels in sub-Saharan Africa will remain high to 2050 (CILLIERS; HUGHES; MOYER, 2011, p. 32). The causes of increased inequality include weak and unequal education systems, as well as the prevalence of disease and corruption in many developing countries (EUROPEAN STRATEGY AND POLICY ANALYSIS SYSTEM; INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES, 2012, p. 77). Shrinking budgets will curtail the ability of governments to redistribute wealth. Inequality could further be exacerbated by migration patterns, as cheap labour flocks to cities and across borders. There will be inequalities too in access to resources, including food and water.

The diffusion of economic and political power, the increasing importance of regions (like the European Union (EU)) in global governance and the increasing growth and hence power of cities are all likely to contribute to the waning importance of centralized state power (NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, 2012, p. 54). This may lead to the reform of the major international organizations, including the UN, the WTO and IMF as well as their increasing cooperation with regional institutions in the realm of global governance (INSTITUTE OF WORLD ECONOMY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, 2011, p. 10). Regions, and regional institutions, may become more important building blocks in global governance. As regional integration grows, some of the trend reports see the creation of more regional institutions of supranational sovereignty such as the EU.
cities grow in influence, they will pull political and economic power away from the traditional state level to the sub-national level (NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, 2012, p. 54).

Demographic pressures and increasing budget deficits will contribute to the failure of governments to deliver on the demands of an increasingly interconnected citizenry; more disillusionment in central government is likely. Corruption, privatization and the slow responsiveness of state institutions will exacerbate this trend (INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY, 2007, p. 48). Some studies suggest an emerging “governance gap” will result, and the importance of traditional party politics and governance structures will decline (EUROPEAN STRATEGY AND POLICY ANALYSIS SYSTEM; INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES, 2012, p. 14). Governments will be challenged to modernize and respond to increased demands for participation, while facing diminished capability to regulate public life and redistribute resources. Some governments may meet this challenge, but worst-case scenarios predict instead the breakdown of state structures and the advance of organized criminal networks (EUROPEAN STRATEGY AND POLICY ANALYSIS SYSTEM; INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES, 2012, p. 97).

Increasing economic and social inequality, marginalization, and disillusionment with central government may exacerbate conflicts related to self-determination, political autonomy and self-government (EUROPEAN STRATEGY AND POLICY ANALYSIS SYSTEM; INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES, 2012, p. 39). Tensions may be spread and shared through the diffusion of ICT, and the waning importance of traditional and central state authority may make it easier for new States to break away.

As regards security trends, it is likely that many aspects of government policy will continue to be thought of and formulated in terms of security. This will especially be driven by the wider access of non-state actors to lethal and disruptive technologies, including chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapons (NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, 2012, p. 64). Further, a well-executed cyber-attack could cripple economies and disrupt global interactions in trade and finance. As systems become more interconnected, the costs of such an attack will only increase (WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, 2013, p. 6). States will most likely use increasingly sophisticated ICT to monitor their populations and control and censor information (as is already apparent). The military balance of power in some regions may shift as more States gain access to CBRN.

Finally, turning to environmental and resource trends, the most obvious (and most commented on) is anthropogenic climate change, acknowledged as a real and growing risk in almost every report studied, including forecasts from the energy sector. The consequences of a warmer planet and more severe natural disasters are grim. Food and water pressures will increase. Threats to public safety will increase too and living standards may decline in hard-hit areas due to rising temperatures and severe storms, general environmental degradation and an increase in humanitarian disasters (EUROPEAN STRATEGY AND POLICY ANALYSIS SYSTEM; INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES, 2012, p. 81). These effects will be felt most severely in China, South Asia and the Sahel, where resource pressures will also be highest.

By 2030, demand for food will rise by at least 35%, demand for water, by at least 40%, and at least half of the world will live in areas suffering from severe water stress (NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL, 2012, p. 10). States in Africa and the Middle East are the most vulnerable to food and water shortages, but China and India could be affected as well. Demand for energy is expected to rise by 50%, due to changing consumption patterns as the global middle class grows and consumes
more (ROLAND BERGER STRATEGY CONSULTANTS, 2011, p. 75). Additionally, growth rates in world agricultural production will slow and may even fall due to climate change. Agricultural production will also be threatened due to water scarcity (ROLAND BERGER STRATEGY CONSULTANTS, 2011, p. 62).

Access to safe water will improve (to 86% of all people by 2015), but there will be an enormous gap between rural and urban areas: eight out of ten people without access to safe drinking water will live in rural areas (ROLAND BERGER STRATEGY CONSULTANTS, 2011, p. 59). High levels of water pollution in developing countries, caused primarily by rapid urbanization and unsustainable agricultural practices, will only be partially mitigated by 2030. This is particularly important, as dirty water is the source of up to 80% of the total disease burden in some developing countries (WATER..., 2009).

2 The future of human rights

The foregoing is only a partial look at key trends, largely ignoring, for example, important developments in the diffusion of global political power and trends in relation to the prevalence of violence and armed conflict. Nevertheless, even this partial analysis suggests a number of important issues that ought to be considered by human rights organizations when formulating plans for future work. As noted at the beginning, identifying a trend does not necessarily translate into predicting a definitive outcome. Many of the trends identified might have either beneficial or detrimental consequences for human rights, and most likely—for a number of trends—it will be a combination of both. For example, urbanization may improve access to education and basic health care, but where it entails living in slums, it will likely expose people to new forms of violence and insecurity.

Two sets of issues arise: first, what do the trends suggest about emerging human rights concerns, and second, what impact might they have on advocacy efforts? A particular trend may pose a new threat to human rights, even as it provides new opportunities for those working to protect human rights—for example, the advances in ICT.

Looking first at impacts on the enjoyment of human rights, positive outcomes include increased access to education, because it is the fulfilment of a basic human right, but also because there is a strong correlation between education levels and development gains, especially where girls are completing school. Further, education equips individuals to be much greater masters of their own fate—better able to engage in political life and better able to find shelter, food and employment security. The notion of the ‘empowered individual’—because of education, but also because of the availability of and access to ICT—captures this sense of being less at the mercy of traditional and political authority. Linked to this, of course, is the likelihood that the proportion of people living in extreme forms of poverty will decrease; and increases in life expectancy point to improved access to the right to health.

Other positive outcomes may arise from the growth in the urban population, which may improve access to basic human rights, including secondary education and health care. Even if much of the growth in urban population will be in marginal and sub-standard housing and in slums, it will be easier to provide such services than it would be in rural areas.
Enhanced access to ICT may make it easier for people to exercise basic civil and political rights—to organise, associate and assemble, and to free expression. Certainly access to information will be easier, even if governments grow more sophisticated in forms of censorship.

If power is decentralised to sub-state levels, in theory political participation should be enhanced as decision-making moves closer to the people affected. Too many human rights demands are placed on central state authorities and it would likely improve the realisation of many rights if sub-state authorities (regional, provincial, municipal) were identified more explicitly as duty-holders (and engaged as such by national and international actors).

Other technological advances, for example in the life sciences, may dramatically improve our ability to diagnose and treat disease, but whether this will produce overall positive effects will depend on the extent to which there is equitable access to such technology.

Regarding negative outcomes, security, environment and resource trends are all particularly worrying regarding their likely impacts on the enjoyment of human rights. The human rights impacts of climate change seem clear enough—forced displacement, increasing difficulties in access to basic necessities, threats to lives and livelihoods (from natural disasters and degraded or lost agricultural land)—although the precise timescale and the areas of highest impact are debated.

Increasing attention to security, and advances in ICT that make surveillance easier, will challenge rights to privacy and basic civil rights like expression and assembly. There is likely to be a continuing expansion of the situations in which people who pose perceived threats can be killed rather than arrested, as the rules normally applicable in war are increasingly applied whenever state security is threatened. Threats posed by the diffusion of CNBW to non-state actors mean it is likely States will resort more often to derogation and the use of exceptional powers. If trends in resource depletion are accurate, and climate change looks likely to accelerate these, then the question of equitable access to these resources will grow in importance. Where such resources are essential to support and maintain human life, then it is similarly likely that the debate will implicate rights to water, to land, to food— and to access to advances in technology that mitigate or overcome the effects of depletion.

In relation to demographic issues, perhaps the most significant will be the doubling of the population living in slums. As noted, the growth of slums is not uniformly negative for human rights, but there are numerous human rights challenges arising for people living in slums, far beyond the narrow issue of their inadequate housing. These include the threat of criminal and domestic violence, denials of basic rights to water, sanitation, etc., inequitable treatment by municipal authorities, arbitrary treatment by the police, denial of public participation rights, arbitrary interference with property rights and more. If demographic and migratory predictions are accurate, over 20% of humanity will live in a slum by 2030. This suggests a clear prioritization for human rights work.

Forecasts in relation to migration suggest a doubling of those who will be living outside their country of citizenship by 2040 (not including refugees nor those displaced across borders by climate change), and the debate will intensify over the permissible limits on the rights of non-citizens. It is likely that a significant proportion of these new migrants will be temporary or irregular. Most often irregular and temporary migrants are excluded in important ways from the normal, domestic constitutional guarantees, and thus international human rights protections are of crucial importance to these
groups. There will likely be an increase in the human rights abuses associated with temporary and/or irregular migration: discrimination in employment and access to services (education, health, social security); denial of political rights; arbitrary detention; denial of rights to privacy and family life, questions of equality before the law, etc. Within migrant populations, women, children and visible minorities will be most at risk. Human trafficking may grow, simply because more people will be on the move and it will be harder for governments to counter.

In terms of the groups most affected, one can expect that disadvantaged and discriminated groups will be most at risk in any scenario involving declining resources and conflict. The rights of the elderly will grow in importance. Slum populations, migrants and the displaced will all be at particular risk. Though the number of people living in extreme poverty will decline, significant pockets will remain, even in the new middle-income countries.

Secondly, what do these various trends point to, in terms of work to promote and protect human rights? Will it be easier or harder to win acceptance for human rights claims? As noted, advances in education, especially at post-primary levels, a growing middle class, and greater access to information and the means of communication could all point to greater individual empowerment. This could improve the individual capacity (and proclivity) to know, claim and defend rights—and this might be true for hundreds of millions of people. If accurate, the projection that 5 billion people will have mobile access to the Internet by 2020 is particularly breath-taking in the possible implications it will have on social change and mobilization. Greater access to information, and the greater difficulties those in power will face in restricting this access, could signal major new exposure to and interest in human rights.

Urbanization trends may further increase the interest in human rights and the capacity of people to organise in defence of their rights, as will increasing migration, as migrants too often fall outside domestic legal protections and must look to international standards (and ‘human’—not citizen—rights) for protection.

Yet, a greater interest in and demand for the protection and fulfilment of human rights might arise precisely at a time when central governments have a weakened capacity to respond effectively. Human rights are claims on power and as power diffuses so too must human rights advocacy. This is already apparent in the way human rights NGOs have placed demands on armed groups, development agencies, religious authorities and transnational corporations, and this ‘advocacy beyond the state’ is likely to grow in importance. But even within the state, work to promote and protect human rights will increasingly need to shift its attention to sub-state levels of authority—provincial, regional, municipal—where power is actually being exercised. Further, where regional economic and/or political bodies, like the European Union, assume real powers of decision, then they, too, will need to be the objects of greater advocacy efforts.

Although this paper has not addressed the impact on human rights advocacy of global power shifts, it should be said that these shifts—and the multipolar world they point to—will likely deepen tension, mistrust and animosity between North and South, West and East. This will certainly impact the manner in which human rights issues arise and are resolved in international relations. In short, for those working to promote and protect human rights at an international level, it is unlikely to get any easier.
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