

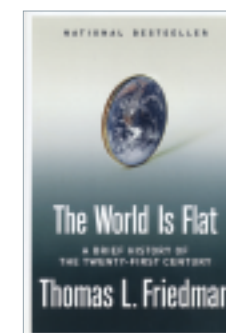


# The Globalization of Social Work:

## How Flat Are We?

By Rick Skwiot

**I**N HIS BOOK, *The World is Flat*, *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman posits that a global technological revolution has increased economic opportunities and created a world that is more connected than ever before.



But does a flatter economic world equal a more just world? Are the benefits resulting from greater connectivity distributed in a way that everyone can share in newfound prosperity? The answer is an unequivocal *no*.

**A**CCCESS TO CAPITAL at the micro level; investment in social development, including health and education; and ensuring more political engagement and transparency are strategies that a new cadre of international social work researchers and practitioners are exploring to address the underlying social conditions that leave so many behind.

In interviews with four of them—whose field experience ranges from India to China, from Nepal to Kosovo — key imperatives repeatedly surfaced. These issues challenge and guide international social work training and practice today and will likely do so in the future:

### Good Governance

Working to fight governmental corruption, indifference, and ignorance through legal and community action.

### Sustainability

Developing programs that continue to effect positive change in communities even after the grant money and aid workers disappear.

### Humanitarianism

Knowing how to mobilize, organize, and direct the generosity and goodwill of others.

### Interdisciplinary Education

Broadening the spectrum of skills in social work training to include organizational management, entrepreneurship, finance, fundraising, law, policymaking, and economics.

### Cultural Sensitivity

Understanding and respecting local culture and customs to indigenize social work programs driven from the bottom up, not imposed from the top down.

THAT IS THE OVERVIEW. Following are insights from four on the frontlines. They discuss how social work schools should educate students, the role of U.S.-based programs, how to fight corruption, and more.

## Leslie Enright

### On good governance:

“It’s hard to effect change without good governance and politicians who aren’t corrupt. To address this requires a lot of due diligence and working in civil-society development. You can influence government and effect change from the bottom up by strengthening civil society.

“Human rights, health, the environment, and education are all important. But where government is corrupt, it’s not fulfilling those needs. For example, in Kosovo health care education is poor because students can buy degrees. So you have ‘professionals’ who are practicing medicine without training.”

### On U.S.-based programs:

“What happens in the U.S. affects every corner of the globe, whether you like it or not. For social work professionals, to know how U.S. policy impacts the rest of the globe is very, very important.

“Most international development is being done by international NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] based in the U.S. But more specialization is needed. Each organization can’t be the jack-of-all-trades. You need to do education and do it well, or community development, and collaborate with other NGOs that do, say, health well. We need more collaboration and partnership.”

### On social work education:

“Washington University’s School of Social Work teaches you how to work with people in a holistic way — health, education, microfinance, agriculture, and women’s rights — which is valuable. But social work professionals tend to have a charity focus. In microfinance you need to think more commercially. You need courses in skill-based subjects, such as finance, accounting, organizational management — things you don’t learn in social work school — because in underdeveloped countries you are



Leslie Enright

Leslie Enright until recently served as operations manager for the Kosovo Enterprise Program, a microfinance institution providing both financial and non-financial services to some 35,000 low-income entrepreneurs in Kosovo. She now works as business development manager for the International Center for Community and Enterprise Development. A New York native, she received her MSW in 1997.



Melody Wen Zhang

Melody Wen Zhang graduated from the People’s University in Beijing in 1989, working as a magazine journalist before co-founding the children’s services agency, Children’s Hope International (CHI), in 1992. She earned her MSW in 1997 and serves in Beijing as CHI’s associate director. In 2005 the agency funded 260 medical operations for needy Chinese children and arranged nearly 500 adoptions of Chinese children.

building capacity in people and the community. The human touch is important. But other skills — lobbying, nonprofit management, research skills, law, business, and health, perhaps through dual degrees — are crucial.”

### On sustainability:

“If you have a program funded by the World Bank for three years, you don’t want it to disappear after you leave. That’s different, of course, in disasters or post-conflict situations, where you have to provide short-term services. But overall we need to focus on sustainable local programs and to think in a more market-oriented way. Social workers have great skills working with people, but they need to focus on what they leave behind.”

## Melody Wen Zhang

### On U.S.-based programs:

“In China we are still striving to develop our definition of social work. U.S.-based programs can serve as good role models and promote the better practice of social work on a bigger scale, encouraging exchange between professionals.

“American organizations do pretty well at trying to be respectful of cultures and customs, and Chinese organizations need U.S. support. But U.S. organizations need to realize that the Chinese remain suspicious of foreigners, and so they need to localize their programs, with all top leadership being Chinese. An outsider doesn’t know how to tackle core issues and will always be mistrusted, no matter how well they speak Chinese.”

### On fundraising:

“The legal and organizational infrastructure is lacking here, so we must fight from both sides, continuing to meet needs while fighting to establish ourselves. China is not poor. If we learn how to give and trust organizations, we can be self-sufficient in terms of funding.

“The whole society does not trust that organizations will do what they say. So we need social service organizations to remember those principles that guide them. Build credibility, establish your reputation, and never go around the rules or misdirect donations. Then people will trust them.”

“People here want to give, but there are no proper channels — with no tax exemptions except for donations to four government-run organizations. And legally we cannot directly solicit donations, only inform people of our need. We need laws in this direction and are working toward that.”

**On social work education:**

“Social work students need to study management and organizing. By being interdisciplinary, you have more tools. Do not try to use theory to fix society. Stick with the reason you chose social work: to make a difference, to help others.”

**On the ‘Iron Rice Bowl’:**

“Before the 1980s, most Chinese wanted government jobs that provided the Iron Rice Bowl of housing, health care, pensions, and children’s education. Now, with capitalism, we have the Glass Rice Bowl, which pays 10 times as much but without the security. It’s transition time. We need to help people to help themselves, not wait for the government to solve their problems.”

**Richa Dhanju**

**On social work education:**

“One of the most important aspects of social work that’s missing from most training is politics. Social work professionals need to realize their potential as politicians and policymakers and changers. I am very inclined toward advocating, lobbying, and networking. I see a need for U.S. social work practitioners to use politics to be more connected.”

**On cultural sensitivity:**

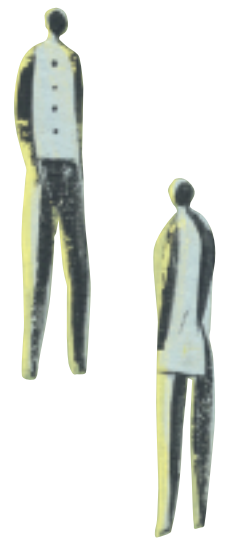
“Often there’s a missing voice: the people’s view. We assume we need to do an intervention with our outsider knowledge base and resources. As a result, social work often becomes insensitive to localized culture. We need to step back and study the people and issues as they exist before we plan interventions. Today there’s a lot of arrogance and lots of hubris.

“When I went to tribal schools, I was ostracized, but the people were suspicious of all outsiders. They lived in hutments, felt



Richa Dhanju

Richa Dhanju, a Punjab native, took an MSW degree from Bombay University and, in May 2006, will earn a second MSW from Washington University, where she came “to learn American policy.” She has done governance fieldwork in the slums of Delhi, women’s micro-financial development in Mumbai, India, and research on the Jarawa Tribe on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India. Her interest in social work was fueled by her childhood as the daughter of an Indian Army officer, attending tribal schools in remote villages on the Chinese and Pakistani borders. She hopes to begin work on a PhD in anthropology in fall 2006.



imposed upon by government policy, and wished they weren’t part of India. Their issues were never considered in government policymaking. Those policies were trying to homogenize everyone, for whose benefit I do not know.”

**On U.S.-based programs:**

“If U.S. policies don’t work, I want to know, for they are being replicated in my part of the world. What does export well are research techniques, management skills, and the interrelatedness of issues.”

**On sustainability:**

“In India we have diminishing social services due to corruption, red-tape-ism, and diminishing top-down dollars. So there’s a need for microenterprise, to make people independent and self-sufficient, not dependent on welfare.”

**Gautam Yadama**

**On international social work:**

“To understand international social work, one must know the context for social work in underdeveloped countries. While high rates of economic growth have reduced the numbers of the poor in large parts of the world, many still lack access to basic social services. Extreme poverty in least developed countries is not only from a lack of income but also from lack of access to health and mental health services, education, financial services, clean water, and sanitation. Addressing critical social service needs is the first step in this assault on intractable poverty around the world. Charity is not where social work is. We’re about understanding persistent conditions and antecedents, and how governments deliver services, and systematically applying what we know from research on why people remain chronically poor.”

**On social work education:**

“We’re preparing students to work effectively in complex and changing environments. This is not merely theoretical discussion of how global forces are affecting people, but rather how do we design better policy, make services work, build assertive and engaged communities

The way you effect change is by enabling people to understand how they can assert themselves and the power that resides within them.

so that local governments deliver on public services. Key social development strategies of decentralizing social service provision to achieve greater participation by citizens, and greater collaboration between primary beneficiaries of services and local governments, are central to alleviating poverty in many countries across Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

“Effective social work in the developing countries is about crafting policy and program strategies that can penetrate these inequities in access to vital services — social, financial, and legal. To champion such social change, our students must acquire a deeper understanding of the lives of the poor, the limited choices they face, and strategies for unshackling their lives.

“A big challenge for our school, social work professionals, and researchers is to understand how this all comes about. It requires a certain risk taking and imagination, but most importantly interdisciplinary thinking.”

**On good governance:**

“High rates of corruption burden the poor disproportionately — public health services, education, public distribution of food, and provision of water are all highly susceptible to corruption. Recent press coverage has highlighted how in some parts of India, nursing staff in hospitals demand anywhere from \$7 to \$12 from the poor in order for them to see their newborn. In India and other countries, social activists and social work professionals find themselves on the front lines of mobilizing communities against corruption and exercising laws and policies that are on the books.



Gautam Yadama

Gautam N. Yadama is associate professor and director of international programs at the School of Social Work. Indian by birth, he grew up traveling widely, thanks to his father’s work as a U.N. diplomat, which, he says, shaped his interest in international social work. His work in understanding how poor communities benefit from development programs is rooted in the concerns of social work. His field research and international collaborations have taken him to India, Bhutan, Nepal, Mongolia, Vietnam, post-Soviet Republics of Central Asia, and, most recently, China, where he is studying how critical social services are being produced by citizen and local government collaborations.

“Social activists and social work professionals are taking on the problems of the poor and advocating with central governments to do something — documenting cases, mobilizing people to file public-interest litigation, using right to information laws, and moving governments toward greater transparency and accountability.

“But we can’t think of good governance only at the macro level. We have examples of how social workers can be catalysts in pushing municipal governments to be accountable and transparent, thus enabling the poor to see how being informed, active, and engaged results in better delivery of public services.”

**On cultural sensitivity:**

“Many social development projects imported into developing countries seldom consider the perspectives of their very audience and their livelihood strategies. Some of these outside programs are great and with good intentions, but if there’s no investment on the part of local communities, they remain short-lived. Effective social work demands strategies that are culturally relevant, politically viable, and economically sustainable.

“It is best to begin to build a culture where people can see how mobilizing their own resources can work for them. That should be part of social work education and training: that you’re not going to go in and change everything. The way you effect change is by enabling people to understand how they can assert themselves and the power that resides within them.”

**On poverty:**

“I’m not optimistic about an end to poverty in the next decade, for it exists on so many levels. But we can make a significant attack. To address poverty, we need to consider dimensions beyond income and resources, such as giving voice to the disenfranchised within their households, communities, and nations. Mobilizing communities to assert their needs and preferences with governments — from local to central — will be crucial. There is real hope when people are able to see and taste victory as a result of their own agency and effort.”