

# Social Development, Change, and Progress

James Midgley

*The following article is a revised version of the 2021 Khinduka Lecture given at the 22nd Biennial Meeting of the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD) held in Johannesburg, South Africa in July 2021. The lecture discusses the concepts of change and progress, which have played a prominent role in social development thinking over the years. It reviews some of the changes that have taken place during Professor Khinduka's lifetime, noting that there have been huge shifts in geopolitics, economics, living standards, attitudes, communications, and science and technology. It then asks whether these changes have brought real progress to the world's people and considers different views on the subject by leading thinkers. In contrast to the views of those who take a pessimistic view with those who have reached optimistic conclusions, it suggests that the situation is mixed, with progress being recorded in some fields but not in others. It concludes by asking how social development advocates can bring about progressive change and progress.*

**Keywords:** social change, progress, reform, research, teaching, activism

It is a great honor to be invited to give this lecture and to recognize Professor Shanti Khinduka's distinguished contribution to social development over many years. In addition to serving as Dean of Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, he played a leading role in the creation of ICSD, served as its president, and has been a strong supporter of the organization and a leading contributor to social development theory and practice ever since. He truly is a major figure in our field.

I first met Professor Khinduka after I moved from London to the United States in 1985. I had been recruited to Louisiana State University (LSU) by Professor Brij Mohan and had the pleasure of traveling with him to Miami to attend my first

James Midgley, Professor, Graduate School University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA. He can be contacted at [midg@berkeley.edu](mailto:midg@berkeley.edu).

meeting of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Brij kindly introduced us, and I was honored when Professor Khinduka subsequently invited me to visit and speak at Washington University where I met colleagues such as Margaret and Michael Sherraden, who have since become my dear friends. I subsequently had the honor of serving with Professor Khinduka on several national social work committees and panels, and I was particularly pleased to speak at an event hosted by Washington University to mark his retirement in 2004.

I thought hard about a topic that would reflect Professor Khinduka's contributions and decided to link my lecture to the concepts of social change and social progress that have featured prominently in social development thinking over the years. Over his lifetime, Professor Khinduka has seen tremendous changes in geopolitics, economics, living standards, attitudes, communications, and science and technology. Indeed, many of us have also experienced these changes. So, I will begin by talking about the changes we have seen since Professor Khinduka's childhood in India in the 1930s. I will then ask whether these changes have brought real progress to the world's people and briefly consider different views on the subject. Finally, I will talk about how we can promote progressive social change for all. As I hope to show, there are no simple answers to the questions raised in this lecture but, because the concept of progress is so central to our field, I hope my discussion of the issues will illuminate and clarify.

### **A Century of Change**

In what is now almost a century since Professor Khinduka was born, there have been huge changes in geopolitics, the international economy, medical science, communications, attitudes, and lifestyles. These changes have had a profound effect on the lives of millions of people around the world. In terms of the international geopolitical order, he grew up in a world that was very different from the one we know today. At the time, his own country was ruled by Britain which, together with a handful of other imperial powers, exerted absolute and brutal control over most of the world's people. There seemed little prospect at the time that this system could be ended but, because of the campaigns of independence movements, imperial rule did come to an end. After ruling the world for hundreds of years, the European empires were dismantled in just a few decades after World War II, and many new nation-states were established. In 1945, when the United Nations was founded, it had 51 member states. Today, it has more than 190 sovereign member states.

After the war, the European empires were replaced by new global powers—the United States and the Soviet Union—which were armed with nuclear weapons and determined to control the globe. After numerous proxy wars in which millions were killed, the Soviet Union itself broke up and by this time, new powers—including the European Union and China—had emerged to reshape global politics. Today, the world is far more fragmented and fluid than when Professor Khinduka was a child in India.

These geopolitical changes have been accompanied by an increase in international migration. Although people have for centuries left their homes to move to the cities and other countries, the scale of both domestic and international migration is now unprecedented. The United Nations estimates that as many as 300 million people today do not live in the country in which they were born. This has resulted in greater cultural diversity, not only in Western countries but also in many developing countries. Migration is likely to continue as millions of people move to improve their economic opportunities. A significant number of international migrants are refugees and asylum seekers. As many as 80 million people today are displaced because of violence, climate change, or social and economic deprivation. In addition to international migration, domestic migration from rural to urban areas has also increased exponentially. At the time of Professor Khinduka's childhood, most people in India and other societies in the developing world lived in rural communities, but today the position has been reversed and the world is now more urbanized than ever before.

There have also been major changes in the world economy. When Professor Khinduka was growing up, economic policy was dominated by Keynesian ideas which emphasized production for domestic consumption. This focus on the domestic economy also dominated the new field of development, which emerged at this time. Academic discourse and policy in development were primarily concerned with economic growth in the economies of the newly independent countries that emerged after the Second World War. I should add that its subfield of social development also appeared at this time to focus on the social dimensions of development and to link economic policy with social improvements. In time, development became a dominant theme in international economics.

With the reconstruction of Japan at the end of the war, the emphasis shifted from domestic economic growth to export-led development. This fostered increased trade, globalization, and transformation of the economies of many countries, particularly in East Asia. The export-led approach has since been adopted worldwide with considerable success. The economic achievements and concomitant improvements in living standards in East Asia, and particularly in China in recent times, have been remarkable. Because of the adoption of export-led trade policies, formal sector employment opportunities in many countries have increased exponentially resulting in significant improvements in incomes and living standards. Many previously colonized societies that had impoverished populations in the 1930s have experienced rapid economic growth through the modernization of production, and with the creation of remunerative employment, millions of people have been lifted out of poverty.

However, globalization was largely driven by neoliberal economic ideas, which were widely accepted after the 1970s and reshaped economic policy around the world. This was accompanied by the imposition of structural adjustment programs, ostensibly designed to deal with developing country debt, but which caused economic stagnation in many countries as well as widespread misery as government budgets were slashed, and services were decimated. These negative trends

were compounded when the East Asian nations experienced a major financial crisis in the late 1990s, and subsequently when the world faced the devastation impact of the Great Recession of 2007–08. However, about a decade later, the world suffered from the ruinous human and economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Estimates reveal that the virus killed between seven and fifteen million people, and infected and debilitated many millions more. In addition, the World Bank reckons that the global economy shrunk by about seven percent with an overall loss of about \$ 13 trillion because of the pandemic.

There is little doubt that the coronavirus pandemic would have been even more damaging had it not been for significant improvements in healthcare and medical science. Unlike the influenza pandemic of 1918 when tens of millions of people died, medical science proved to be more capable of dealing with the pandemic and infectious diseases in general, particularly through the production of vaccines and the emergence of antiviral drugs. At about the time that Professor Khinduka was a child in India, my father graduated from the medical school of the University of Cape Town and established practice in a remote, semi-desert area about 400 miles north of Cape Town. He was the first physician in the area at that time but had few resources in his medicine bag to treat the diseases that inflicted harm and pain on the local community. I remember my mother telling me how he was rendered helpless when children with diphtheria could not be treated and when tuberculosis ravaged local people, especially people of color. However, in the late 1940s, he acquired a new drug called penicillin which proved to be highly effective in curing infections. I was one of his patients and benefited from the penicillin injection he gave me at the age of six, when I contracted a deadly bacterial infection. There is no question that he and penicillin saved my life. Sadly, my father died of complications from high blood pressure in 1952 when he was only 38 years old. Today, high blood pressure is readily treated with inexpensive medications.

We have also seen innovations in transplant and other types of surgery, enhanced diagnostic techniques, many new medications, and various other treatments, as well as improvements in sanitation, public health, and access to clean drinking water. These developments, particularly improvements in sanitation, the availability of safe drinking water, and control of infectious diseases, have radically improved the health of literally billions of people in the decades since my father graduated from medical school in 1938. These improvements have resulted in a rapid decline in infant and child mortality, increased life expectancy, and extended longevity all over the world. More than any other time in history, people today can expect to live longer and healthier lives than their ancestors. In addition to the improvements in standard medical practice, there have been astonishing innovations in medical science that have enhanced its ability to deal with a range of complex diseases. While some of these diseases such as cancer continued to present a challenge, there have been breakthroughs in many other fields. In 2020, Professor Jennifer Doudna at my own university here in California, together with her French colleague Professor Emmanuelle Charpentier—who now works in Germany—was awarded the Nobel Prize for her pioneering work on gene editing.

This relatively new field has allowed scientists to modify the genetic code and affect the very essence of life. A medical friend of mine recently told me that their work marks the beginning of a revolution in medical science which, like penicillin, will have a profound impact on disease.

Over Professor Khinduka's lifetime, there have also been enormous changes and improvements in communications technologies. At that time, travel across the Pacific from San Francisco to Tokyo took about 3 weeks. As I know from personal experience, travel from San Francisco to Tokyo by air now takes about 11 hours. Today, international air travel is commonplace and space travel for the very wealthy is about to become a reality. Human beings have been to the moon, and satellites now circle the earth. Because of internet technology, we can now communicate with family members, friends, and colleagues in distant parts of the world in a split second. Instantaneous communication through email has since been transcended by global audio and video linkages, which allow people to participate remotely in conferences and meetings with colleagues in other countries. This would have been unthinkable in the 1930s when Professor Khinduka was a child.

All of us have experienced the impact of modern communication technologies even though we seldom stop to think about how profoundly this has affected our lives. I remember when the first clunky cell phones became available at considerable cost, I said to myself that I would never want one of those contraptions. I also remember being skeptical when communications by email first became available. When I moved to Louisiana in 1985, Professor Mohan arranged for me to have a new IBM desktop computer with a hard drive. Most young people today will not know what I am talking about, but the IBM desktop (which was introduced in the 1980s and was a major advance in computer technology) originally had two large floppy drives. One of these was used for entering data while the other stored data. I was fortunate to be an early beneficiary of IBM's innovative technology, which meant that my new desktop now had a hard disk for storing data and only one floppy drive for entering data. While this was believed to be a major innovation, it now seems quaint because small handheld devices have the same computing power as my IBM desktop with its new hard drive.

I also remember a technician coming from the computer center to set up my new desktop and to give me a basic tutorial on how to use a word processing program called WordStar, which is now obsolete and no longer in production. He mentioned that LSU (and many other research universities) had subscribed to a new international communication system called Bitnet. He told me that I could come over to the computer center and type messages to my friends at the University of London. I thanked him but thought to myself that this was a rather silly idea because it was perfectly easy to use airmail, which delivered letters internationally within a few days. Little did I know at the time that email would soon emerge and completely revolutionize personal communications (or indeed that it would be superseded by even more sophisticated personal communication technologies). These and other technologies have certainly transformed our world.

There have also been significant changes in attitudes, values, lifestyles, and the extent to which people control their own lives in the decades since Professor Khinduka grew up in India. Individualism has spread around the world and has been accompanied by greater skepticism, self-determination, and secularism. In addition, many groups of people who were previously discriminated against and marginalized have resisted oppression. The women's movement has campaigned globally for gender equality and rights, and although much more needs to be done, the situation today is very different than before. There have been similar changes in the civil rights of minorities. Although uneven, few would question the effect of the changes that have taken place, as people of color, particularly in Western countries, have challenged racism and oppression. Even in the late 1980s, when I was still teaching at the London School of Economics, I was doubtful that the oppressed people of my own country, South Africa, would be able to resist and overthrow the apartheid regime that had held them in brutal bondage for many years. I remember watching the television with astonishment as Nelson and Winnie Mandela walked down the "long road to freedom" from a prison near Cape Town in 1990.

Another change is the emergence of the gay rights movement, which has campaigned for LGBTQ people to live without fear of being imprisoned, denied employment, and deprived of housing and the rights that others take for granted. I recently saw a television documentary about attempts by the state government of Florida in the 1950s to single out gay students at the state's universities and to expel them. Several of those who were interviewed in the program said that it was unthinkable at the time that gay people would be free of state persecution, have employment and other rights, and eventually be able to marry. It is also clear that many young people today are far more accepting of difference and willing to act on their beliefs. They were the motivating force behind the Black Lives Matter campaign in the United States and now play a major role in the Green Movement, actively participating in protests against climate change and the degradation of the environment. Many are motivated by a concern for environmental justice and indeed social justice in general.

### **Change and Progress**

While it is generally recognized that there have been enormous changes over the last century, there are disagreements about whether these changes have resulted in significant progress over Professor Khinduka's lifetime. Some may conclude that there has been real progress for the world's people over the last century, while others may argue that there have been few if any social improvements. It may even be claimed that people are now actually worse off than they were before. Another possible and more nuanced answer is that although some changes have resulted in progress, others have not, and overall, the situation is unclear. Of course, it should be recognized that these opposing interpretations express the opinions of different commentators, and one can parody the old aphorism by

noting that progress is in the eye of the beholder. As recent opinion polls in the United States reveal, many voters believe that the country's economy is in a terrible state when objective indicators show that there has been a respectable rate of economic growth, declining inflation, and falling unemployment over the last year. Clearly, assessments about the effects of change are shaped by subjective interpretations.

This is not to question the objectivity of respected and influential commentators such as late William F. Buckley Jr. who, until his death in 2008, was an important writer on social, economic, and political issues in the United States. Buckley came from a well-to-do family and attended Yale University where he disapproved strongly of the behavior of his fellow students and the secularism of his teachers. Disillusioned by his time at Yale, he recounted his experiences in a book entitled *God and Man at Yale* (published in 1951). The book resonated with many conservative Americans and was an instant success. He found *National Review*, an important conservative journal, and appeared frequently on radio and television talk shows. Buckley was appalled by the changes he saw around him, and in 1955, famously wrote: "I stand athwart history and yell STOP! One can imagine the hapless Mr. Buckley standing on the railway line of time trying to obstruct the train of change barreling down on him."

Although many were amused by Mr. Buckley's remark, he contributed to the rise of traditionalism that now characterizes much political opinion not only in the United States but also in other countries. Today, many people in Western countries yearn for a bygone age when life was supposedly simpler, where people lived in homogenous communities, where they knew and respected each other, where traditional values and religious beliefs were upheld, and where the family and community were primary institutions. They are bewildered by social change and antipathetic to new ideas and practices such as same-sex marriage, feminism, and the diversification of their communities, particularly through international immigration. Like Buckley, they think that the changes that have taken place over the last century do not amount to progress but have resulted in a worsening of the human condition. Like the famous poet, T.S. Eliot, they believe that the world is now a wasteland.

Traditionalism is also widely embraced by religious fundamentalists who deplore the changes brought about by modernism and secularism. Accepting a literal interpretation of the Scriptures, they are appalled by what they regard as godless behavior, especially among young people who often question the authority of religious leaders and their elders and believe that they should determine their futures. Some fundamentalist religious movements have aroused potent passion among their followers, and some have even resorted to violence in an attempt to recreate a bygone age governed by traditional beliefs. In recent times, the brutality of fundamentalist organizations such as Al Qaeda, Islamic State, and the Taliban has killed, maimed, and devastated many lives—all in the name of a literal but contested interpretation of religion. Less dramatically, struggles between fundamentalists and progressives also characterize religious discourse within



several mainstream Christian denominations, and in the United States evangelical Christian fundamentalists now exert considerable political influence. They not only rebuff the claim that things have become better but also work assiduously to recreate a society based on their religious dogmas.

Similar views have been expressed by some academic social scientists. They include the postmodernist writers who claim that progress is an illusion, promoted by Western political elites for their purposes, and argue instead that the world is far more chaotic and disordered than ever before. It may be surprising that even within our field, some writers believe that development has not brought progress. They include Dr. Wolfgang Sachs, the editor of the *Development Dictionary* (2010), who wrote: "The idea of development stands like a ruin - delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes, have been the steady companion of development." Of course, Neo-Marxist writers of the Dependency School of the 1970s reached a similar conclusion, claiming that development has impoverished poor countries while enriching the prosperous Western nations. For these and other writers, social and economic changes have not been progressive but have been responsible for the economic stagnation of many developing countries and for the high rates of poverty and deprivation experienced by millions of people around the world.

At the other end of the spectrum, some social scientists have concluded from their analysis of the data that the changes discussed earlier have brought about considerable social and economic progress. One of them was Professor Julian Simon who taught for many years at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and subsequently moved to the University of Maryland. In 1980, he challenged the views of Professor Paul Ehrlich of Stanford University who had argued in his best-selling book, *The Population Bomb* (1968), that uncontrolled population growth would result in chronic food shortages, resource depletion, and immiseration of the world's people. This Malthusian interpretation, Simon argued, had no factual basis because the data reveal that natural resources are not being depleted and that social and economic conditions are steadily improving. He famously laid a wager with Professor Erlich that the prices of key commodities would fall in coming years, and his predictions were subsequently found to be correct. Shortly after Simon's death in 1998, his ideas about progress were published in a book called *Its Getting Better all the Time* (2000), written by his former doctoral student, Stephen Moore. Reviewing data on several topics including health, nutrition, income, employment, housing, education, and leisure, he and Moore concluded that "there has been more improvement in the human condition in the past hundred years than in all of the previous centuries combined...."

Other writers have confirmed the trend toward improved social and economic conditions. Dr. Charles Kenny of the World Bank wrote in his book *Getting Better* (2011) that contrary to widespread pessimistic views about the limited impact of development, many low-income countries had experienced major improvements in incomes and standards of living, health, education, and nutrition. However, he points out that while global development is succeeding, there are significant variations among developing countries and in the extent to which people



benefit equitably from development efforts. Dr. Johan Norberg, who has gained some notoriety for his criticisms of environmental policy, reaches a similar conclusion in his book *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future* (2016). After reviewing the data published by the United Nations, World Bank, and the World Health Organization (WHO), he concluded that in contrary to what most people believe, progress over the last 50 years has been unprecedented and that things are markedly better now than they have ever been. He claimed that there has been more progress over the last century than in the preceding 100,000 years.

These findings are reminiscent of earlier predictions about the positive impact of development by economists in the 1950s associated with the Modernization School who argued that the mobilization of financial capital for industrialization would create mass employment, raise income, and significantly improve social conditions in the developing world. Professor Walt Rostow's book, *The Stages of Economic Growth* published in 1960, succinctly encapsulated these ideas by arguing that the investment policies of the governments of developing countries would, if properly funded and implemented, result in rapid economic growth, widespread prosperity, and transformation of impoverished societies to high-income mass consumption nations. His ideas influenced the aid policies of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the 1960s, and although his writings were subsequently questioned, his emphasis on capital mobilization for industrialization continues to resonate.

The idea that economic growth will bring about prosperity echoes ideas first expressed by John Maynard Keynes in his cornucopian vision of the future as outlined in his lecture *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren* (1930). He predicted that the economies of Western countries would continue to grow despite the onset of the Great Depression and that within a century, the problem of economic scarcity would be solved. With economic growth, the drudgery of wage labor would end, and the problem then would be how best to utilize the abundant free time citizens would have. An assessment of the accuracy of Keynes's predictions, published in their book, *Revisiting Keynes* in 2008 by Drs. Pecchi and Piga, two researchers at the University of Rome in Italy, found that he was largely correct and that standards of living in Western countries have indeed improved substantially since the Great Depression. There is also evidence that working hours have declined and that leisure time has increased. However, there are major distributional problems with Keynes's predictions in that many people have not benefited from growth and that poverty persists, especially among unskilled workers and those with limited education. They also point out that Keynes paid little attention to the nations of the Global South, which were then subject to European imperial rule. Despite significant growth and improvements in living standards in many countries, almost half of the people of the developing world still have incomes of less than two dollars a day.

The unevenness of progress both between and within nations suggests that a more cautious and reasoned assessment is needed to determine whether the changes discussed earlier have benefited the world's people. Although broad

generalizations about progress are appealing, they do not account for variations in overall trends, and it is clear that an analysis of the impact of change needs to be cognizant of developments in different countries and regions of the world. In addition, there are significant differences in the way the components of change are assessed since progress in one metric does not mean progress on all. For example, improvements in incomes do not necessarily mean that there have been improvements in the status of women, a reduction in conflict, or enhanced observance of human rights. Also, the assumption that progress is linear resulting in continuous improvements needs to be qualified by the observation that improvements have often been accompanied by setbacks. This leads me to reach my own conclusion, which is that there has indeed been progress, but not everyone has benefited. Also, I believe that progress has been incremental and characterized by numerous setbacks and disconnections. Instead of claiming that things have improved vastly or that they have stagnated and even declined, I believe that the results of social change over the last century have been decidedly mixed. While I reject the idea that progress is an illusion, I also reject the idea that social conditions all over the world have improved dramatically and resulted in sustained progress for all.

The incremental nature of progress can be illustrated with reference to statistics about global poverty. When Margaret Hardiman and I were collecting material for our book, *Social Dimensions of Development* (published in 1982), information on global poverty was limited. Although the United Nations annual Reports on the *World Social Situation* were helpful, as were studies published by the World Bank, we relied on data published by Dr. Montek Ahluwalia in 1976, who made one of the first estimates of the incidence of global poverty. His conclusions were based on household surveys undertaken in 66 countries and found that approximately 800 million of the world's population had an income of less than one dollar per day. His work led to the adoption of the \$1 a day poverty line by the United Nations and World Bank, which has since been widely used to measure the incidence of poverty around the world.

Using a modified version of this metric, namely the \$1.90 poverty line, the World Bank reported that the incidence of global poverty was steadily declining, especially in East Asia. However, poverty rates in other parts of the developing world, notably in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Central America, remained high. Unfortunately, because of indebtedness and the imposition of structural adjustment programs, poverty rose in much of the Global South, and this was also the case in East Asian countries which faced a major financial crisis in the late 1990s. However, following the World Summit on Social Development held at Copenhagen in 1995, and a commitment from the world's governments to reduce poverty, the situation improved and by the time of the 2015 Sustainable Development Summit, global poverty rates had declined significantly. The most remarkable reduction was recorded in China, but poverty rates also declined in other parts of the world, especially in Brazil, India, Indonesia, and other countries in South America the Middle East. Although poverty remained high in sub-Saharan Africa, it was also falling.

The adoption of policies designed to reduce poverty and improve social conditions by many governments following the Copenhagen Summit and the Millennium Summit has made a major contribution to social progress. In addition, the remarkable spread of social protection, particularly in the form of social assistance in the Global South, also contributed to it. Though it was previously believed that the governments of developing countries could not afford to introduce cash transfer schemes, many have done so, and social assistance in particular has been widely adopted to raise the living standards of low-income families. Beginning with Mexico and Brazil, which led the way with the introduction of conditional cash transfers, many governments have since established schemes of this kind, and in addition many have expanded categorical social assistance and even introduced noncontributory, universal pensions for elders. These schemes have not only increased household income but also, as shown in my recent book *Social Protection, Inequality and Social Justice* (2020), have helped to reduce inequality.

However, around 2018, progress in poverty reduction slowed down. In fact, a report by the World Bank (2020) called *Reversal of Fortune* found that living standards in many parts of the world had stagnated even before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. In some cases, poverty rates rose significantly. The problem was exacerbated by the pandemic which, as was mentioned earlier, had a devastating impact on household incomes in many countries. The World Bank believes that the increase in poverty in many parts of the Global South before the onset of the pandemic can be attributed to various factors including sluggish economic growth, the failure of governments to implement anti-poverty policies, and the prevalence of corruption and armed conflict.

Violence is indeed responsible for the reversal of progress in many parts of the world today. Although writers such as Professor Steven Pinker contend in his book *The Better Angels of our Nature*, 2011 that conflict is not as widespread as before, it continues to devastate the lives of millions of people. Many have been killed, and many have suffered horrible injuries or faced the destruction of their homes and communities and have been forced to flee. Although it is often assumed that armed conflict occurs mostly in the developing countries as a result of ethnic strife and military coups, recent events have shown that Western countries are not exempt. In addition to the conflict in the Balkans and the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, terrorism, gang wars, and other forms of violent crimes have resulted in misery for large numbers of victims in high-income countries. The systematic bombing of the people of Gaza by the Israeli military with the support of the United States and other Western governments also reveals that violence is not limited to the developing world.

In addition, the use of violence to oppress ethnic, religious, and other minorities is common. These groups have been discriminated against, denied rights, imprisoned, expelled, subjected to murderous aerial bombardments, corralled in concentration camps, and callously oppressed in other ways. Another problem is the rise of dictatorship and the brutal suppression of political opponents.

The frequent violation of human rights and breaches of international law have also contributed to the reversal of progress. Dr. Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile, and High Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations, gave a speech in which she said: “We are now witnessing the worst cascade of human rights setbacks in our lifetimes.” The increasing influence of ethno-populist politics and the efforts to undermine democratic elections in many countries have also had a negative effect. A recent article in the *Economist* magazine (November 18–24, 2023) summarized the way political elites around the world are using what it describes as “tricks” to prevent voters from expressing their electoral will. Apart from simply outlawing elections, detaining opposition politicians on trumped-up charges, and altering or incorrectly reporting election results, voters are prevented by different unscrupulous techniques from casting their ballots.

As these depressing events reveal, progress has been uneven and people in different parts of the world have been affected in different ways. The data on the incidence of poverty over the last half-century referred to earlier confirm that while economic development has benefited large numbers of people in many nations and world regions, others have not seen significant improvements in their living standards. In addition, the decline in global poverty has been accompanied by reversals. This suggests that conclusions about the nature of progress need to be tempered by a careful assessment of both global and domestic trends. Nevertheless, while progress has been uneven, I remain optimistic and inspired by the words of Dr. Martin Luther King who famously said: “The moral arc of the universe bends towards justice.” However, while he may be right in saying that there is something historically inevitable about progress, I personally believe that progress is not automatic but must be brought about by deliberate human action and a shared commitment to promote progressive change.

### **Promoting Progress**

I know that everyone attending this conference is committed to improving the lives of people around the world. However, some may I ask what can I do? They may say I am only a student, or a staff member at a voluntary organization, or a social worker in a government department or a lecturer at a college or university. Obviously, not all of us can make a high-profile contribution like that of Dr. King, or others who have been internationally recognized for promoting progressive social change. But I believe we can all make a difference through our daily activities as students, practitioners, volunteers, faculty members, activists, and policy advocates, and I hope to give some examples of how this can be achieved. We should certainly not underestimate our contribution because, without recognizing it, many of us are already promoting social change through these activities.

However, we need to recognize that bringing about progressive change is a long and hard process that involves struggle. My teacher and mentor, Professor Richard Titmuss, often said that there are no quick solutions to the social problems we face. He also pointed out that by being realistic, we need not give up on

idealism or a commitment to progress. His contributions to social policy in the United Kingdom reveal that change does not come easily, but requires hard work, determination, and persistence.

First, we can bring about progressive change through research. I did a quick scan through recent volumes of *Social Development Issues* and found that many of our colleagues are engaged in research that has a positive impact. One of the articles I found was published by Professor Lombard and her colleague, Peggy Chiwara, on research into multidimensional poverty in Namibia. This research helps to redefine the conventional subsistence poverty line approach to measuring poverty and focuses on the many other factors that are responsible for poverty. It also examines the incidence of poverty in the country and will no doubt inform government policy in the field.

Another example of how research can foster social progress is Michael Sherraden's work on Individual Development Accounts. I remember when he published his path-breaking book, *Assets and the Poor* in 1991, which called for greater emphasis on social investment in social welfare. His relatively simple idea that poor people can be encouraged to save had a profound effect as IDAs, and child and youth savings accounts have been established all over the world. Margaret Sherraden's work on financial literacy complements Michael's contribution, stressing the need to help low-income families better manage their financial affairs.

The many studies undertaken by the host of our conference, the Center for Social Development in Africa (CDSA), have also made a huge contribution to understanding the challenges faced by many people in Africa. The Center has been an international leader in research into social protection in the way the income transfers provided through these schemes have raised the incomes and standards of living of many poor families. I should also mention the research on social protection by Professors Armando Barrientos of the University of Manchester and Lutz Leisering of Bielefeld University, which has done so much to document the impact of these schemes around the world.

Second, we can also promote progressive changes through teaching. Those of us who teach do not always appreciate how our classes can inspire students to work for progressive change. I like to tell students here at Berkeley how in 1978, a young woman (sitting in the classroom where they sit now), was inspired by her experience as a student to become actively involved in community work. She was particularly interested in politics and 18 years later (in 1990) ran successfully for a seat in the California Legislative Assembly. In 1998, she successfully competed for a vacant seat in the United States Congress. Her name is Barbara Lee and today, she is a highly respected member of Congress. She has chaired the Democratic Progressive Caucus and campaigned to expand healthcare, affordable housing, education, and income-support programs. She has represented the constituency where I live for many years and is very popular and is invariably reelected to office.

Earlier this year, she introduced a Bill in Congress to repeal the *Military Authorization Act* of 2002, introduced by President Bush, shortly after the

September 11th attacks. The Act allowed him, and subsequent presidents, to deploy the United States military without Congressional authorization. When President Bush's Bill first came to the floor of the House in 2002, she was the only member of Congress (out of more than 600 members) to vote against it. For this supposedly unpatriotic behavior, she received a great deal of abuse, hate mails, and even death threats. Today, her Bill to curtail the war powers of American presidents has passed the House and is now in the Senate where it is also expected to pass. When she was a student, I doubt that she could have imagined that she would become an important figure in American politics.

Third, we can also promote progressive change through practice. Indeed, many social work colleagues are already making a significant contribution through their daily practice. I include all kinds of social work practice, noting that the lives of many people have improved because social workers have worked with them to address the personal problems they face. In addition to direct practice, community practice and policy advocacy are two areas in which the profession can play an especially important role. There are many community and policy organizations staffed by social workers that have fostered progress by addressing the needs of children and women, people with disabilities, those suffering from mental ill-health, and others who are vulnerable and marginalized. In addition to serving their clients, these organizations also lobby governments to adopt programs and policies that will significantly improve their lives. Some social workers have even been elected to political office and, like Congresswoman Barbara Lee, have introduced or supported legislation that serves progressive purposes. Others have worked as government policymakers and administrators influencing those in political authority to act in the best interests of needy individuals and families.

I remember when Leila Patel was appointed as the Director General of South Africa's Department of Social Development in 1996. I visited her at this time, and she told me about her work on the White Paper on Social Welfare and her support for a committee appointed to review the cash transfer or "grant" system chaired by Professor Francie Lund. As we know, the White Paper was subsequently adopted by President Mandela's Cabinet. The Lund Committee made recommendations that reformed grants and had a significant impact on poverty and living standards in South Africa. I know she downplays her contribution but there is no doubt that because of her commitment to progress, millions of people in the country are better off today than they were before.

Fourth, we can also work for progressive social change by supporting organizations and political parties committed to progress. We can work for them as volunteers, give donations, vote and take part in protests. In fact, we in social development and social work have historically been involved in this way. However, I would like to go outside our field and give an example of a group of teenagers in Germany who are very concerned about climate change. Early in 2021, they joined up with an activist organization to bring a case before the country's Constitutional Court. They argued that their generation was not responsible for climate change and that it was unjust that they, as the next generation, would inherit the problem and have to deal with it.



Accordingly, they asked the Court to order the German government to be much more specific about its plans to end the country's reliance on fossil fuels. The Court agreed and issued a judgment against the German government requiring it to report, in precise specific detail, how it intends to tackle climate change in the coming decade. I am truly inspired by their activism and commitment, knowing that the future generation is greatly concerned about issues that affect all of us.

To conclude this lecture, I would like to refer again to Professor Shanti Khinduka, and his lifelong contribution to social work and social development. As Dean of the Brown School, he was responsible for the education of thousands of future social workers, and for promoting the school's research agenda. He also devoted a great deal of time to enhancing the school's reputation as a major center for teaching, research, and practice. As one of the founders of ICSD and its former president, he helped the organization realize its commitment to social progress. He is also a recognized scholar. An article he wrote in the prestigious journal *Social Service Review* in 1970 called "Social Work in the Third World" inspired my writing. I was also inspired by his later work on peace and social development.

It is fitting that we honor him today for working tirelessly to promote progressive social change over many years. I know you will join me in thanking him and wishing him, his wife Mano, and his family much happiness in the years ahead.

## References

- Ahluwalia, M. (1976). Inequality, poverty and development. *Journal of Development Economics*, 3(4): 309–342. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-3878\(76\)90027-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-3878(76)90027-4)
- Buckley, W. F., Jr. (1951). *God and man at yale: The superstitions of academic freedom*. Chicago: Henry Regnery.
- The Economist* (18–24 November 2023). Distorting Democracy, pp. 51–52.
- Ehrlich, P. R. (1968). *The population bomb*. New York: Ballantine.
- Hardiman, M., & Midgley, J. (1982). *The social dimensions of development: Social policy and planning in the third world*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kenny, C. (2011). *Getting better: Why global development is succeeding and how we can improve the world even more*. New York: Basic Books.
- Keynes, J. M. (1930). Economic possibilities for our grandchildren. *The Nation and Athenaeum*, 48(2), 3–18.
- Midgley, J. (2020). *Inequality, social protection and social justice*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789905588>
- Moore, S., & Simon, J. (2000). *It is getting better all the time: Greatest trends of the last 100 years*. Washington, DC: Cato Institute.
- Norberg, J. (2016). *Progress: Ten reasons to look forward to the future*. London: OneWorld Publications.
- Pecchi, L., & Piga, G. (2008). *Revisiting Keynes economic possibilities for our grandchildren*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262162494.001.0001>

- Pinker, S. (2011). *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined*. New York: Viking.
- Rostow, W. W. (1960). *The stages of economic growth: A non-communist manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sachs, W. (2010). Introduction. In W. Sachs (Ed.), *The development dictionary: A guide to knowledge and power*. Second Edition. London: Zed Books, 332 p.
- Sherraden, M. (1991). *Assets and the poor: A new American welfare policy*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- World Bank, (2020). *Reversals of fortune: Poverty and shared prosperity, 2020*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.