DSBMUN

Economic and Social Council

The Future of Globalisation

I. Table of Contents

Topic: Creating Policies to Prevent Multinational Corporations from Exploiting Workers in LEDCs

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Position: Chair

II. Introduction

Committee

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was created by the United Nations in 1945 as one of the six principal organs of the United Nations. It coordinates the work of the 14 UN specialized agencies, ten functional commissions and five regional commissions, receives reports from nine UN funds and issues policy recommendations to the UN system and to Member States. The council plays a major key role in promoting gender equality, enhancing peace and development, responding to global emergencies and in fighting HIV/AIDS. ECOSOC's purview extends over 70 per cent of human and financial resources of the entire UN system.

Over the past year, the Economic and Security Council has been centering on multiple projects, such as building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), while also advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It also focuses on strengthening and improving humanitarian work, to save lives and reduce humanitarian need, risk, and vulnerability.

There is no question that globalization has brought our world many benefits and has had many positive effects on some countries and companies.

Topic

There is no question that globalization has brought our world many benefits and has had many positive effects on some countries and companies.

Multinational corporations (MNCs), also called Multinational enterprises (MNEs), are an unavoidable part of our globalized world. These companies are defined by having business operations in at least one country other than their home country, in collaboration with **suppliers**, holding a global presence and a strong influence on governments. MNCs operate in both more economically developed countries (MEDCs) as well as in less economically developed (LEDCs). There are over 80.000 companies currently driving the 21st century, and they have significantly boosted the GDP of their parent nations, like the United States, Western Europe, China etc.

However, MNCs (and more often their suppliers) are usually cast as villains, exploiting their workers in countries without strong labor laws. The question is, do they hold true to stereotypes and perpetuate exploitative behavior?

To find that out, one must first **define** what exploitation means since there are many different approaches to such a complicated concept.
There are three standard theories of exploitation: **consequentialist, fair-share,** and **deontological.**
A consequentialist definition of exploitation asks whether the workers are **worse off** than they would be if an MNC had not employed them.
The second theory of exploitation examines if the workers are paid a **"fair share,"** meaning if the firm shares their profits fairly with their employees since they often produce quite valuable products.
Finally, the deontological approach defines exploitation as a violation of the labor standards of the **International Labor Organization (ILO)**, which nearly every country with multinationals has signed, and the **fundamental human rights**. Violations against these rights can be exploitative even if they benefit the workers compared to their other options.

III. Definitions of Key Terms

MNC/MNE
Multination corporation / Multinational enterprise

MEDC
More economically developed countries

LEDC
Less economically developed countries

Offshoring
The practice of locating (/*moving*) some of a company's processes or services abroad in order to benefit from lower costs or rights.

Home country & host country
The home country is where a company has their headquarters based in, while the host country is a different country where a company has business activities, meaning facilities, offices, etc.

IV. History of the topic

Karl Moore and David Lewis, authors of the Book "Birth of Multinational," write that "the business operated by the ancient Assyrian colonists [in the second millennium] constituted the first genuine multinational enterprise in recorded history." They suggested that already the Phoenician organizational structure resembled modern forms.

How long individual multinational corporations persisted is unknown. However, the British East India Company, founded in 1600, is often called the very first multinational corporation.

The British East India Company

The British east India Company was formed for the exploitation of trade with India and East and Southeast Asia. It was created as a monopolistic trading body on the 31st of December of 1600, incorporated by a royal charter, in order for England to be able to participate in the spice trade of East India. The company also traded cotton, silk, indigo, saltpeter and tea, as well as it transported slaves. From the early 18th century to the mid-19th century it became involved in politics too. In 1873 however, it ceased to exist as a legal entity.

Qatar: World Cup 2022

The thing everyone has been talking about this past year. The World Cup 2022. And Qatar. Everyone knows about the situation in Qatar. In 2010 they were awarded to host the World Cup 2022 and since then there have been various scandals about the working conditions in preparing for the World Cup.

The migrant workers' population rapidly expanded from 1.6 million in December 2010 to 2.7 million in October 2018, and most of them fell victim to Qatar's exploitive labor system.

The Guardian reported in October 2013 that 44 Nepali workers died in only two months, and in February 2021, they announced that 6,500 migrant workers died since the World cup was awarded. Now when you look at other websites and articles, the number of victims continuously varies. Still, the point is that too many innocent people died because of labor abuse and exploitation.

Although FIFA is not an MNC but an Organisation, this shows one of worst case scenarios of what happens when labor gets abused. While cases like these, that, on the contrary, don't get as much attention as Qatar with the World Cup, they still exist and happen in other places all the time. This is why this topic is so important to discuss and find a solution for. Millions of lives are at stake.

Offshoring

After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, many truths were exposed about certain industries. In 2011 Ernst & Young produced a report that concluded that “Ikea, a Swedish company, knowingly benefited from forced labor in the former East Germany to manufacture some of its products in the 1980s” (The New York Times, 2013).

Ikea was not the only MNC from the former West Germany that exploited its neighbors in a similar way. For example, Kloeckner & Company and Mannesmann did so as well.

Though, nowadays, exploitation of workers usually occurs in LEDCs because when it comes to the point that a country tries to enforce some societal or environmental regulations on MNCs, they just relocate manufacturing to a different country where the laws aren’t as strict or enforceable. This is called offshoring.

An example of this is Nike using cheap labor in Southeast Asia because there they can escape from the regulations and more vigorous enforcement by the USA and Europe.

Further examples are how, in 2020, 85% of Apple's suppliers' manufacturing facilities were located in Asia, 42% of them in China. And how way earlier, in April 2002, Levi Stauss & Company decided to practically shut down all domestic production and shift it overseas.

Advantages

Although MNCs are, as mentioned above, usually cast as villains, and for plenty of good reasons, there are also some advantages they bring to LEDCs.
Firstly, they **provide jobs**. MNCs have many factories or offices in different countries. They lead the job creation process around the world, and it's estimated that they single-handedly control more than 25% of global trade. Because of this, they have created about 86 million jobs until now, and it's known that in countries where MNCs set up establishments, they have an increase in employment.
Secondly, where MNCs set up shop can also **benefit the host country**. For example, Coca-Cola set up a bottling facility in El Salvador. Its supply chain hired sugar cane harvesters, which was good for El Salvador since it needed this hiring surge, as its poverty rate is 25.70%.
Thirdly, they **bring in capital flow** to LECDs by building factories, for example, since that requires construction workers and surrounding infrastructure, which leads to stimulating economic development in the host country.
Additionally, sometimes they also **reduce the technology gap** by bringing modern technology to LEDCs.
Generally, MNCs can help develop a country's economy, which is why some nations, like Bangladesh, even invite MNCs to set up shop there.
Nevertheless, some of these were only benefits for the host country and the nation as a whole. Yet this is not the question. The question is, do multinational corporations exploit the workers there?

Do MNCs exploit their workers in LEDCs?

Consequentialist approach:
One might argue that while a worker might not be working under good conditions at an MNC, it is not exploitation since they would be much worse off if they had not worked at the corporation. And, if we assume that perfect competition was available (complete information, no transaction costs, no costs to switching jobs & no market power by firms or employers), it suggests that the worker's decision was made perfectly informed and thus was their best option. By the consequentialist definition, this is thus no exploitation.
However, moving away from the theoretical assumption of perfect competition and thinking of the much more realistic labor market conditions, such as information failure or asymmetry, transactions and switching job costs and market power makes the answer with this approach much more complicated.
Workers' wages can be lower than their marginal revenue products. Additionally, they may not be fully informed of the safety conditions, which can include risks such as long-term exposure to chemicals, immediate injury and sexual harassment, and they may be forced to

perform labor beyond their contract, like forced overtime. All these market imperfections exist creating a possibility for exploitation.

Fair-share approach:
Many people think that just paying better than the alternative is still not fair, that paying an "unfair share" is economic exploitation. They recognize it as morally wrong if an MNC with a high profit margin doesn't share some of its surplus with the workers.
Meaning MNCs paying just slightly above the market wage isn't sufficient to conclude that they aren't exploiting their workers in terms of fair sharing.

Deontological approach (focusing on human rights):
Every human being has fundamental human rights, which is why deontological arguments consider it unethical to benefit from, for example, the poverty of workers in developing nations because everybody is entitled to be treated with dignity. This includes, for instance, that the employers should pay the workers enough to afford things such as food for their families, education for their children and decent housing, despite the wage employees are willing to work for.
There's evidence of discrimination by gender and often ethnicity in many countries, which the human rights approach, of course, deems as unfair and exploitative. Moreover, to pay women or workers from a different ethnicity less than an equally qualified man or workers from the same ethnicity is, under this definition, exploitation, regardless of the differences in market wages. In general, the ILO claims human rights at work separate from whether the market transaction is voluntary.
In summary, all violations of human rights and, additionally, the labor standards of the ILO are considered exploitation with this approach. These rights include the right to work in just and favorable conditions, prohibit slavery, child labor, forced labor, discrimination against women, etc. and give workers the right to join a union. Almost all countries have signed treaties approving these rights.

Basic rights

Most of the claims of MNCs and their suppliers exploiting their workers aren't based on relative wages but abysmal treatment standards, like insufficient safety measures, physical or verbal abuse, child and forced labor, and too many working hours.
The 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work demonstrates how vital a rights approach (a deontological one) is to the ILO (*check out IV. Past actions for clarification*). Because they're part of the ILO Conventions, they are also found in the Code of Conduct adopted by many MNCs.
Now the question is, do they violate the five categories of the Declaration?

- *Freedom of association and the right to organize*

Evidence of whether MNCs discourage labor organizations is mixed and limited. Hijzen et al. (OECD, 2010) found, by using linked employer-employee data, that in the UK and Germany,

workers working for an MNC are unlikely to be in a union. In comparison, Arnal et al (2008) find that MNCs show higher unionization rates compared to domestic firms.
In some countries, unions are indirectly forbidden because if workers attempt to organize, they are threatened with blacklisting, dismissal or violence (Milberg & Amengual, 2008, p.32). Some of the factories owned by major international brands sometimes even actively prohibit the right to organize, despite the potential reputational costs. An investigation by Cividep India (2017) reports that in one of Samsung's factories in India, workers tell that they are asked whether they know what a union is during their job interview. If they do, they're not hired. And that the leaders of attempts to create a union were dismissed shortly after.
In some cases, unions are even violently suppressed. That happens in MNC supply chains sometimes. One such example is the Bangladeshi garment sector, where union organizers have been attacked with machetes or found dead with signs of being tortured (HRW, 2015).

- *Forced or compulsory labor*

While there is no evidence of slavery (meaning people being forced to work for no pay), there is extensive evidence of workers being required to work overtime above two hours per day, many times without payment (Milberg & Amengual, 2008). Often workers can get threats, such as violence, dismissal or even deportation, to be pressured into working more overtime than they want to.
The ILO estimates the global number of people in a situation of forced labor (including child labor) to be about 27.6 million (ILO, 2022).
In November 2020, BCC published an article about Indian factory workers being exploited. Women working at Ralph Lauren said that sometimes they have to stay overnight and sleep on the factory floor to complete orders. "Our bosses don't care. They're only bothered about production.", a woman working there said. She also told BBC that they have to work continuously and, as mentioned above, often through the night. They go to sleep in the factory at 3 am and wake up again at 5 am for another full day of work.

- *Child labor*

This is one of the most condemned practices in the West, which is why over the last decade, western-based MNCs have established zero-tolerance policies on the employment of children. Nevertheless, cases of child labor are still often uncovered since they are harder to detect and prevent at suppliers of MNCs.
Moreover, people have also started to focus on ways multinationals sometimes indirectly contribute to child labor by paying low wages. A report on children of Bangladeshi garment workers (SOMO, 2017) reveals that some families take their children out of school to, on the one hand, reduce expenses and, on the other, undertake childcare and housework that the parents can't perform due to their long working hours. Additionally, sometimes children help with the family's income by working in an industry that doesn't have a zero-tolerance policy for child labor.
At the 5th global conference on the elimination of child labor in Durban this year (15th to 20th May 2022), the latest figures by the ILO show that child labor has increased for the first time since they started measuring it 20 years ago. Today there are 160 million children

working, 89 million are between 5 and 11 years old, and half of all work in working conditions that put their health, safety and moral development at risk. These numbers are, of course, general, not only focused on multinationals.

- *Discrimination*

The most vulnerable workers in many countries are women and migrant workers because they face discrimination and are, therefore, at risk of being exploited.
Firstly, migrant workers are vulnerable because they may not know the local language, but more importantly, their employer may be able to deport them. Furthermore, they aren't aware of their rights and out of fear of deportation, seeking legal help is usually not an option.
There are well-documented cases of MNCs treating migrant workers more harmful than local workers and providing them with worse conditions. One example of such a case is the research of SOMO (2013). They looked over the relative treatment of migrant workers at three MNC-owned Malaysian electronics factories, and, as mentioned above, the migrant workers were treated worse. While local workers had to work "eight to ten hours a day, five days a week and mainly work in the morning shift," migrant workers had to "work 12 hours a day, six days a week and all shifts" (SOMO, 2013, p.7). Moreover, migrant workers reported more unfair treatment: the pay was about half what they were promised, their pay was docked if they came late or were sick, employers threatened with deportation, the outsourcing agency held their passports and to top it all off, many of them had never seen their formal employment contract or only in a language they couldn't understand.
Secondly, women are very vulnerable as well. In many nations, they experience discrimination and often do not have access to education.
Women working at suppliers for MNCs report frequent violations of their fundamental rights, such as verbal and physical abuse, sexual harassment, unfair dismissal due to pregnancy and denial of maternity leave or other legal benefits.
Furthermore, women working in garment sweatshops that produce clothes for a lot of big multinationals are sometimes even unpaid and don't receive any kind of compensation for maternity leave, overtime or sick pay. Currently, they make up about 80% of all garment workers in the global south (Bernews, 2022).

- *Health and safety*

Some MNCs and, more often, their suppliers have hazardous workplaces and catastrophes such as the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh highlight that. Over one thousand workers died in that incident when an unsafe building where workers produced clothes for some major brands crumbled.
Field research by SOMO (2013, p.7) in the Malaysian electronics industry discovered that workers must stand during the entire shift for their work. The workers report that they're all exposed to chemicals and toxic fumes during the process of lead welding. Many workers also tell of allergic reactions and that they often get coughs, but employers do not offer protective equipment like masks. Bangladeshi garment workers, whom the Human Rights Watch interviewed, said that the water the factory provides is undrinkable because of how dirty it is (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Sweatshops

The probably most notorious example of workers' exploitation in LEDCs is sweatshops. During the Industrial Revolution, the first sweatshops began to appear in some continental European cities. However, with the increase in labor costs and rights in Western countries in the 21st century, garment sweatshops started to be outsourced to a lot of countries in the global south.

These facilities supply employment with low wages, long hours and unsafe working conditions. The average garment worker, for example, gets between 2-6 cents per piece working between 60 to 70 hours per week and, in the end, takes home about $300 (Bernews, 2022). Moreover, an estimated 250 million children, 61% in Asia, 32% in Africa and 7% in Latin America, work in sweatshops for over 16 hours a day (2020, BerkeleyHaas). Nevertheless, there is the defense that claims that sweatshops provide job opportunities and even with inhuman and unsafe conditions, it's better than nothing. Moreover, even if regulations prevented terrible working conditions and improved wages, the jobs would be outsourced to a place where these restrictions don't exist.

V. Timeline of Events

17th - 19th Century

The time of **industrialization**. England was the first country to industrialize and the first successful factory was built there. With the rapid spread of the industrial revolution, thousands of factories followed worldwide. Consequently, there was an increase in demand and, therefore, a need for higher production, which meant more workers. Many consider this the start of labor.

In the 19th century, with the surge of industrial capitalism, the first modern-era MNCs were formed. They were engaged in oil, mining and agriculture sectors where production was directly linked to the land. In the last third of the 19th century, the improvement of transportation and communication led to a vast expansion of MNCs since delivering goods and information became much faster and easier.

1920s

By the end of the 1920s, international business was widely spread around the world, as well as many MNCs. Among them were companies like Ford, General Motors, Nestle and Unilever. Additionally, multinational manufacturing was also well established.

1930s to 1970s

Between these years, many of the key components of the first global economy were destroyed or weakened by a series of worldwide political, military and economic shocks, from the depression of the 1930s to the World War II of the 1949s and resulting political changes, the end of the old empires and the spread of communism.

In the following decades, MNCs did begin to build a new global economy, but it was a somewhat lengthy process that only bore fruit in the 1980s and 1990s.

1980s & 1990s

From the 1980s, MNCs were able to relocate their production to take advantage of the low labor costs and social and safety standards in LEDCs, especially in Southeast Asia.
By the 1990s, multinational service firms were the most significant and potent component of the new global economy.

VI. Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Ever since the industrial revolution in the 18th century, there have been two goals that are, however, incompatible: the well-being and care of the workers and the earnings and efficiency of the companies. When companies want to lower their expenses or increase their efficiency, they often risk the well-being of the workers.
Many previous actions, like conventions, were made, but they were all about labor rights and exploitation in general, not concentrated on MNCs.
In 1919 the International Labor Organization (ILO) was founded as part of the treaty of Versailles ending World War I. Then in 1946, it changed its constitution and became the first specialized agency associated with the UN. Before that, in 1930, the member states of the ILO adopted the Forced Labor Convention. Gradually more and more conventions were adopted that banned slavery globally and combated/tackled child labor. By 1970, 134 Conventions and 142 Recommendations had been adopted.
At its 86th session in Geneva in 1998, the ILO adopted the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and amended it in 2022. It commits Member States to respect and uphold basic human values and rights in five categories. These categories are:

- freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining;
- the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labor;
- the effective abolition of child labor;
- the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation; and
- a safe and healthy working environment.

Furthermore, in 2014 the ILO adopted the Protocol of 2014, which adapted the Forced Labor convention and strengthened workers' protections. One year later, in 2015, the GA adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, where, in goal 8, the exploitation of workers is directly addressed. The goals 1, 4, 5, 9, 10 and 16 aim to increase legal protections for workers by eliminating the inequities that leave tens of millions vulnerable, reducing the economic incentives that encourage exploitation and prosecuting those who abuse and enslave.

VII. Major Countries Involved

The United States of America

The United States is the home country of most of the world's Multinational companies. About 33% of the total MNCs globally have their headquarters there. However, almost no manufacturing is done there. Most of the time MNCs only base their offices there and relocate their manufacturing to LEDCs.
In the end, the parent nations of the MNCs, like the US, benefit from being the home country. Their GDP grows and their economy as well.

The United Kingdom

MNCs were an integral part of the United Kingdom's colonial history. Britain controlled the administration of its far-flung colonies by assigning MNCs to service the trade routes. The very first was none other than the East India Company. Today, 5% of the world's MNCs call the UK their home country.
However, just like in the US, the multinational corporations only have their offices and headquarters in the UK, while their manufacturing is usually located in LEDCs.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the countries a lot of MNCs relocate their manufacturing to. Around 921 different ones have done so, especially in the garment industry. A great number of people in Bangladesh (about four million) work in the garment sector, the rules aren't strict and the labor costs are much cheaper than in most countries. It's a great source of foreign currency for the nation. Moreover, MNCs help develop the country's economy and increase the growth of the GDP, which is why sometime Bangladesh even "invites" multinationals. In conclusion, it's good for the government and the country's economy.
But is it for the people?
Bangladesh has ratified all eight ILO core conventions, which means that all companies have been committed to align their policies with the international labor standards. Furthermore, Bangladesh passed it's own Labor act in 2006, amended in 2018, and the 2015 Labor Rules. They state the maximum of working hours, a limitation for women workers that they shall not work a shift from 10.00pm to 06.00am without their consent, matters about wages, however the wages weren't fixed but rather it set a procedure for fixing the minimum wages rate, and, among many other things also that any employee can demand their rights if hampered before the Labor Court.
However, how strong these regulations are being enforced is a different story. The most known example to showcase this is the tragedy of the 2013 collapse of Rana Plaza. The building housed five garment factories and the collapse killed at least 1,132 people while injuring more than 2,500. The reason was a structural failure and it, among some other of the worst industrial accidents on record, made the world realize under what poor working conditions the (garment) workers in Bangladesh faced. Of course this disaster happened some time ago, but since then no fewer than 109 accidents have transpired.

India

India is, as well as Bangladesh, a country full of MNCs because of its fast growing economy and, furthermore, it has a significant market population. Nevertheless, while multinationals bring benefits for the country as a whole, like contributing to the infrastructure growth, reducing the technology gap and stimulating the economy, they still choose India as a host country because of the weak law enforcements.
It's the same situation as in Bangladesh; the multinationals are good for the government and the nation, but usually not for the people.

China

Many multinational corporations have established operations in China, both Western and otherwise. China is, after all, one of the world's most rapidly growing economies and since its adoption of the free-market principles it has become one of the most popular and hyped investment locations.
Moreover, many chinese MNCs are also growing very fast, such as DJI Innovations, Huawei Technologies, Lenovo, etc. About 10% of the world's multinationals have their headquarters in China.

VIII. Questions a Resolution must answer

Which of the three standard theories of exploitation (*consequentialist, fair-share & deontological*) should be the deciding factor?

Should MNCs be held accountable to the laws/regulations of the country their headquarters are based in?

Should there be a global minimum wage and how should this be defined?

Should all MNCs be obliged to comply with the same regulations?

How can the UN enforce the regulations on multinational corporations and their suppliers?

Would it be possible to implement checks & balances on an international level in the form of a UN body?

IX. Possible Considerations for the Future

Simply addressing violations of workers' rights in multinational corporations won't solve the problem. It only tackles a part of the widespread bad conditions, considering that multinationals employ only a share of the workforce in most nations. However, MNCs and their suppliers are more visible to governments and consumers. They have more influence, leading to the fact that if they treat workers more fairly and enforce regulations more, and require the same of suppliers, it could potentially help the whole situation.
Moving forward, it will be essential to hold MNCs, especially their suppliers, to internal and external standards. The efforts to enforce the fundamental labor rights set by the ILO have to be increased strongly. Furthermore, raising the minimum wage is part of the solution. Reports show that a modest increase improves workers' productivity and working conditions, which leads to everyone benefiting in the long run.

X. Conclusion

In conclusion, Multinational Corporations are a big part of our current globalized economy and world. They have a significant influence and boost their home country's GDP while also benefiting host countries by providing jobs and bringing in capital flow.
Be that as it may, MNCs and their suppliers are often made out as villains who exploit their workers in less economically developed countries. They relocate there because the enforcement and the regulations are not as strict.
There are three different approaches to defining and deciding if they do, in fact, exploit their workers in LEDCs.
Firstly, the consequentialist approach, under which the definition of exploitation, would ask whether the workers are worse off than they would have been otherwise. Here one might argue that although the workers aren't working under the best conditions, it is still better than their alternative. But because market imperfections, like information failure or asymmetry, market power, etc., exist, we know that the workers' decision wasn't perfectly informed. Thus, we don't know if it was their best option.
Secondly, the "fair-share" approach, which examines if the workers are being paid a fair share since only paying better than the alternative, is considered economic exploitation by many.
Thirdly, the deontological approach considers it exploitation if the labor standards of the ILO and a worker's basic human rights are being violated. The Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work adopted by the ILO commits member states to respect and uphold those rights in five categories. As demonstrated above, there is plenty of evidence of MNCs or/and their suppliers violating these rights.
For the future, it will be necessary to vigorously enforce the fundamental labor rights set by the ILO in MNCs and their suppliers. Although multinationals only employ a share of the workforce and concentrating on them just tackles a part of a widespread problem, they have a

lot of influence (on) and are more visible to governments and consumers, which would lead to them potentially helping the whole situation.
Finally, to the question of whether MNCs exploit their workers, there isn't one final answer. It depends on how you define exploitation, but also on the corporation and the countries. Nevertheless, Prof. David Levine, a labor economist and chair of the Haas Economic Analysis and Policy Group, answered the question "Do multinationals exploit workers?" in an interview that he thinks "they **do not do enough** for their employees (…) to **protect** [their] basic human rights.".

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