

POLITICAL ISSUES IN HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

The purpose of this article is to explore political and power-based influences on human potential. The impact of politics and power in developing human resources is a product of the changing nature of the global society and workplace and the role of power and politics in this transformation. In addition, the power and influence of international organizations and the power, authority, and autonomy inherent within organizations is examined. An exploration of the limitations that politics and power have on sustainable

development of organizations and human resources followed by a description of the evolution of more ecocentric methods for the development of sustainable human and environmental resources provides clues about the complex contexts in which individuals and organizations interact with their political environments.

Such inquiries into the impact of politics are needed to (a) remove constraints to sustainable development of human resources, (b) enhance the development of global systems that support sustainable human resource development and, (c) build socially- and politically-responsive individuals and organizations. Human resource development as an organizational function and as a stand-alone profession plays a principle role in enhancing the long-term sustainability of organizations and has the potential to help cultivate organizations and people that positively influence communities, society, and the environment. The role that politics and power play in the development of environmental and human resources requires much more discussion and dialogue than is currently happening.

1. Introduction

To build a sustainable life support system, a system in which current needs are satisfied without diminishing the chances of future generations, requires “enlightened institutions” with social, economic, and political agendas that enhance human and environmental development. Yet, even the smallest and most specialized organizations do not operate in isolation. They are impacted by, and wield varying degrees of power upon, State politics and policy. Their internal systems also affect individuals, processes, and the organization as a whole while their outcomes alter external organizations, communities, societies, and even the ecosystem. Conversely, external power and politics influence organizations at several levels, namely, individual, organizational, socio-economic, and strategic.

For the first time in history, the great improvement in the human species’ ability to survive has resulted in unprecedented population growth, uncontrolled mass consumption, and technological advances. These changes have impacted modern commerce and much of the modern workplace. Mirroring scientific discoveries and shifts in scientific worldviews, the technological revolution in developing countries, and in global governance, the nature of the workplace in the industrialized countries is transforming and forcing changes on individual and organizational participants worldwide.

One of the most spectacular human commitments of the last half of the twentieth century was to economic growth through tremendous increases in productivity and expansion of global trade. This economic globalization of production has redefined the working class and altered organizational structures, work processes and the development of human resources on an international scale while affecting global political and power relationships. With these economic and technical changes come new demands placed on educational systems in the less developed nations as they attempt to train their workers for increases in technology and production. Similarly, new demands have been placed on the educational systems of the developed nations, as automation and “e-commerce” have replaced the obsolete routinization of work. Moreover, political

ideologies, political agendas, and policy and power issues both internal and external to organizationsacerbate technological, economic, and social influences on the transformation of the workplace. Information technologies have been criticized as a tool of the privileged few. Economic growth carries previously unsuspected side effects such as the devastation of the environment whose cumulative impact may be covert and be more deleterious than the undoubted benefits that growth also brings.

Powerful political and power-based influences on human potential require recognition and discussion to (a) remove constraints to sustainable development of human resources, (b) enhance the development of global systems that support sustainable human resource development and, (c) build socially and politically-responsive individuals and organizations. The impact of politics and power in developing human resources is discussed first through addressing the changing nature of the global workplace and the role of power and politics in this transformation, followed by an account of the political influence on organizations and human development within organizations. In addition, the power and influence of international organizations and the power, authority, and autonomy inherent within organizations are examined. Finally, the limitations that politics and power have on sustainable development of organizations and human resources is debated followed by a description of the evolution of more ecocentric methods for development of sustainable human and environmental resources.

2. Conceptual Framework

Human resource development (HRD), as an internal organizational function, exists within literally thousands of public and private organizations worldwide. Organizations exist within economic, societal, and political contexts that involve customs, rules, laws, governance processes, concepts of legitimacy, and the allocation of socio-political power. It is these internal and external political ideologies that positively and negatively govern the development of human resources, and thus workplaces that are socially and ecologically sustainable.

The conceptual framework of this article is a synthesis of several major premises. First, comparative politics and the determinates of Nation-State performance *external* to organizations was coupled with the influence of political-power systems and human resource development within or *internal* to organizations. These two concepts were linked with the third concept, the influence of international organizations on the Nation-State. In other words, external political systems and the State influence organizations, and conversely, organizations possess internal power systems and, perhaps for the first time in recorded history, global organizations and industry-based power alliances impact upon global sociopolitical and ecological systems. In addition to external and internal politics and power issues the socio-political and rational-legal (economic) ideas of organizations and individual worldviews are further synthesized into the conceptual framework, which adds to the understanding of organizational and political behaviors.

3. Politics and Power in Organizations

The following discussion of politics and power in organizations addresses the importance of political ideologies in understanding political systems, the power of the

Nation-State, governments, and polity, and how political systems vary from the developed Northern countries to the less developed Southern countries. The focus here is on the influence of politics and power on organizations and the development of sustainable environmental and human resources.

3.1. Political Ideologies

Political ideology is the prevailing force behind the institution of government and greatly influences the economic viability and success of organizations. Political ideology explains the ideals of government and State activity as they fall along a continuum from anarchy, or total personal freedom, to totalitarianism, or total state control of individuals within the State. In between the two extremes of anarchy and totalitarianism Wartick and Wood identify several forms of government:

1. Negotiated consensus, which adds collective decision-making to anarchy;
2. Simple and pluralistic democracies that insure that each citizen can vote on all governmental issues and in which governmental representatives elected by citizens make decisions on their behalf;
3. A bureaucratic ideology, which emphasizes the continuity and stability of a permanent bureaucratic government with little input from individual citizens.

Political ideologies tend to set the tone for governmental support or hindrance of the development of resources – both natural and human. Organizational economic success may be affected by the way a government approaches citizen and organizational participation in decision-making. Political ideologies are important to the development of human resources through the enhancement or denial of democratic decision-making processes that set the tone for organizational ideologies.

3.2. Political Influence on Organizations and Human Resources: The Power and Influence of the Nation-State, Governments, and Polity

Much has been written about the transformation of the workplace brought about by technology, changes in cultures including population growth, economic globalization, shifting workforce diversity, global life systems, global social changes, advances in learning, and the spirituality movement. However, there has been little discussion concerning the changes brought about by politics and power.

Politics is one of the leading causes of sweeping economic globalization and ensuing changes in the international workplace. Nation-States exercise varying levels of political power over organizations and the subsequent development of human resources. The network of governance and political systems of nations and States responds to the demands of both the public and organizations by exercising authority and setting policy over the allocation of resources, values, and services. Governmental politics influences such decisions as what individuals and organizations receive, when, and how, and what can be delivered in what contexts. International governance that impacts organizations is concerned with trade and cooperation between nations and global security and order. But, in most cases the State includes more than just the government; it also includes interest groups and influential business leaders and even some powerful international organization and nongovernmental actors.

To make and enforce decisions about the distribution of resources, governments exercise power -- the power to influence and the capability to enforce that influence, typically through legal or military action. Political authority becomes legitimate when political participants including institutions accept the exercise of power as legitimate and just. Beyond this overt political authority, Nation-States, often with the most heterogeneous populations, can serve as psychologically valid surrogates for the family and therefore as the beneficiaries of a powerful psychological uniting bond. *Solidarity* is an example of this uniting bond. Thus, States perform various and important functions that influence organizations and human development within organizations. The famous American economist Milton Friedman identified four necessary functions that States perform for organizations:

1. Creation and enforcement of rules and regulations;
2. Provision of common monetary authority;
3. Control of the negative influence of monopolistic power;
4. Care of children and other marginalized citizens who are unable to participate legitimately in the system.

Wartick & Wood added that through contracts and supplies Nation-States are a business client and a financier of business. Nation-States are also a promoter of trade policies, and through tariffs, regulations, and laws they are a protector of organizations and human resources. Finally, in some cases, they are an owner of essential services such as utilities.

Political ideologies of governments and Nation-States may positively or adversely influence organizations and the development of human resources. This is generally accomplished through governmental regulations, tax structures, and the establishment of laws such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the United States that prescribed organizational responses to establishment and maintenance of basic human rights in the workplace. National laws and regulations may also limit organizational freedom and curtail development of human resources. Such laws and regulations may even limit an organization's ability to compete in the global marketplace. Technological and ecological ideologies strongly impact organizations and individuals. For example, poor countries with abundant natural resources may relax environmental regulations to attract investment, the consequences of which may be deleterious to long-term human development.

Political ideologies may also include "supranational" issues such as universal human rights. Ideologies that transcend national boundaries may be documented and implemented through charters and codes such as the United Nation's (UN) Human Freedom Index. These codes are aspirational in nature and thus difficult to enforce.

Wartick and Wood said that variables that explain the State-organization relationship include degree of cooperation, degree of decision-makers' self-interest, degree of pluralism in public policy development, definition of the public interest and the influence of lobbying techniques. The degree of cooperation between government and business may range from adversarial as in the United States or more cooperative as in Germany. The self-interest that motivates public and private decision-makers impacts

cooperation and interaction between government and organizations. Self-interest ranges from myopic economic interests to collective social responsibility. The degree of pluralism, or the extent of public access to the policy development process, indicates private and public involvement with and response to the establishment of public policy.

How a government defines its public interests impacts organizations and the development of human resources by curtailing group dissent through maximizing the mix of self-interests or providing vehicles to enhance a collective view of corporate social responsibility. Lobbying also impacts organizations and human resource development. The way lobbying is achieved either helps decision-makers reach rational and meaningful conclusions that positively impact human development or merely serves as a procedure to buy political favors. This is accomplished through special interest groups who may or may not have human or environmental development or sustainability in their best interest. For example, the tobacco lobby in the United States seldom views the health of citizens as its primary mission.

State political ideologies and political systems change as governments, societies, and cultures change. Coups, revolutions, rebellions, wars, economic upheaval, cultural misunderstandings and hostilities, elections, suffrage, and other conflicts and cooperation transform political systems and significantly impact organizations and the development of human and environmental resources.

3.3. Comparative International Politics: Issues of Influence and Dominance

Comparing the politics and political conduct of the more than 170 Nation-States beyond a single border and an isolated political system helps identify the implications of political events, trends and changes on organizations and the development of human resources. How economic and environmental policy is made and carried out in different countries, how their governments and legal systems operate, how public opinion is formed, all play a role in organizational growth or decline and the development or disintegration of human and environmental resources. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide details of comparative political systems of the many Nation-States in existence today. However, a broad understanding of the political systems of the North and South and their impact on economics of Nation-States and growing multinational organizations remains critical knowledge for educators and private and public organizational and human development leaders.

Comparative politics is important to the sustainable development of multinational organizations that tend to traverse and embody several political systems. States may and do exclude or include specific groups on the basis of ethnicity, gender, age, or economic status. They may view certain practices as legal or illegal, moral or immoral, and dictate who may be hired or fired. The possibility of rapid change through coups or other means can change a State's position for an organization or industry from support to opposition overnight. Multinational companies increasingly are planning in terms of regions or hemispheres rather than countries, and the financial markets are depending more on international time zones than on individual Nation-States.

Political institutions and governments, and the organizations and development of human resources influenced by those institutions and governments differ from Northern to Southern countries. Southern and especially Third World nations, which may or may not lack democratic ideologies, are preoccupied with their exploding populations and resultant issues of development and distribution of food and sweeping poverty. Furthermore, the South is locked in subservient economic relations with global capitalistic Northern countries. The Northern countries have raised their populations well above the starvation level and modernized and advanced their definition of poverty.

Yet, even the more developed countries of Europe are facing sweeping changes and challenges. For example, as the twelve member nations of the European Community integrate their economies, their individual States are less able to chart their own political and economic policies. The post-communist countries of Eastern Europe in particular are striving to reconfigure their economies through quasi-democratic reforms while struggling with the psychosocial well-being and living standards of their publics. Even though cooperation and trade and prevention of violence are promoted among nations by organizations such as the United Nations, it is impractical to think that nationalism, national boundaries, or individual polity will completely vanish or cease to be an influence on organization and human development in the near future.

An exploration of political systems and how they affect economic performance necessarily includes a review of broad economic policy and how the State system meets its economic goals and the public's expectations of economic success. In the Northern countries and especially in the Western polyarchies (democracies that predominate in North America and Western Europe), economic policymaking is divided into two ideologies. *Pluralism* is the idea that groups compete within an agreed-upon set of rules with government as mediator, and *corporatism* is the concept where government, business, labor, and other special interests groups cooperatively set economic policy. Generally speaking, the policy-making process in Northern, First World countries is considered pluralist while Southern, Third World countries tend to embrace corporatism. Organizations and the development of human resources are at risk when a political system discourages an open dialogue for setting economic goals. For example, governmental or special interests groups may throttle unionization by accusing the union of trying to divide the society.

Not only do governments and polity impact economic policy; public and private institutions also establish and influence the economic policy of Nation-States. For example, organized labor or trade unions influence economic policy and action through strikes, affiliations with leading labor parties as in Great Britain, or large national industry federations such as the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) and the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations) in the United States. Today, a generally weakened organized labor movement, especially in the polyarchies, and other large economic interest groups are blamed for much of the unsatisfactory economic performance of several Northern countries, namely Great Britain, France, and Germany. In some developing Southern countries such as China and Burma, freedom of association, the hallmark of unionization, is discouraged or completely prohibited.

Recent shifts in socio-political systems have had far-reaching effects. Socialist regimes of central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet bloc countries have been replaced with various forms of democratic government. Shama noted that these political system shifts brought about the following changes: (a) from a centrally-managed economy to a market-driven one, (b) from low inflation rates to rates as high as 3,000 percent, (c) from almost nonexistent unemployment rates to rates as high as thirty percent, and (d) from relatively no competition to a highly competitive global market environment. Generally speaking, the impact of these political system changes on human resources has been less than positive. Many organizations have struggled to meet payroll, hire qualified people, or expend even minimum resources to develop required skills and knowledge. Only time will tell if these effects are permanent or temporary results of massive socio-political change.

In the Southern, Third World nations, the quality of life for citizens is the most urgent of all issues. People in the grinding poverty of poor countries are concerned with meeting family expenses, including food and shelter, clothing, and the simplest medical care. Even in resource-rich countries such as oil-rich Nigeria and many South American countries, political systems must cope with uneven economic development, corruption, and rapid and uncontrolled industrialization and urbanization.

In comparison, the impact on international organizations of political systems struggling to provide the basics of life and sustenance to their citizenry makes social justice and ecological responsibility seem trivial problems. The tradeoffs between economic development, reducing poverty, and ecological degradation are difficult to discern. Loss of rain forests in South America is a direct result of placing economic gain over environmental responsibility.

Southern economies are competing with other developing and newly industrializing countries to attract foreign direct and portfolio investment and trade. But questions about how these economies deal with issues such as rampant disease and starvation, escalating infant mortality, illiteracy, safe potable water, agricultural production and food, exploding populations, culture wars and “ethnic cleansing”, political and civil wars and associated defense spending remain. Also in question are how these economies will meet basic human needs, and how these dilemmas affect sustainable environmental and human development within organizations.

There is no doubt that Third World countries’ polity affects this development to some extent. Governmental decisions such as India’s autarkic economic policy, in which it chose to rely on its own resources, are among the causes of an overall inability to solve many environmental and human potential problems. The fact that multinational corporations and international organizations use developing countries to further their own economic goals and ambitions seldom aids in resolving these obstacles to environmental and human development.

When organizations exert power beyond their national boundaries and influence the political systems of host States, then organizational power has transcended the Nation-State polity. Many multinational corporations and international organizations already wield such power and this power is quickly expanding.

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Biographical Sketch

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