

DEVELOPMENT ETHICS

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Abstract

Development ethics is ethical reflection on the ends and means of socioeconomic change in poor countries and regions. It has several sources: criticism of colonialism and post-World War II development strategies; Denis Goulet's writings; Anglo-American philosophical debates about the ethics of famine relief; and Paul Streeten's and Amartya Sen's approaches to development.

Development ethicists agree that the moral dimension of development theory and practice is just as important as the scientific and policy components. What is often called "development" -- economic growth, for instance -- may be bad for people, communities and the environment. Hence, the process of development should be reconceived as beneficial change, usually specified as alleviating human misery and environmental degradation in poor countries.

Development ethicists do not yet agree on whether their ethical reflection should extend to destitution in rich countries or aspects of North--South relations apart from development aid. Other unresolved controversies concern the status and content of substantive development norms. Finally, agreement does not yet exist as to how the benefits of and responsibilities for development should be distributed within and between countries.

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1 The nature of development ethics

National policymakers, project managers and international aid donors involved in development in poor countries often confront moral questions in their work. Development scholars recognize that social-scientific theories of development and underdevelopment have ethical or as well as empirical and policy components. Development philosophers and other ethicists formulate ethical principles relevant to social change in poor countries, analyze and assess the moral dimensions of development theories and seek to resolve the moral quandaries raised in development policies and practice: In what direction and by what means should a society develop ? Who is morally responsible for beneficial change? What are the obligations, if any, of rich societies (and their citizens) to poor societies?

2 Sources

There are several sources for moral assessment of the theory and practice of development. First, beginning in the 1940s, activists and social critics -- such as Gandhi in India, Raúl Prébisch in Latin America, and Frantz Fanon in Africa -- criticized colonial and/or orthodox economic development. Second, since the early 1960s, American Denis Goulet, influenced by French economist Louis-Joseph Lebret and social scientists such as Gunnar Myrdal, has argued that development needs to be redefined, demystified, and thrust into the arena of moral debate

(Goulet 1971, p. xix). Drawing on his training in continental philosophy, political science and social planning as well as on his grassroots experience in numerous projects in poor countries, Goulet was a pioneer in addressing the ethical and value questions posed by development theory, planning, and practice (Goulet 1977, p. 5). One of the most important lessons taught by Goulet, in such studies as The Cruel Choice: A New Concept in the Theory of Development (1971), is that so-called development, owing to its costs in human suffering and loss of meaning, can amount to anti-development (Cf. Berger 1974).

A third source of development ethics is the effort of Anglo-American moral philosophers to deepen and broaden philosophical debate about famine relief and food aid. Beginning in the early seventies, often in response to Peter Singer's utilitarian argument for famine relief (1972) and Garrett Hardin's lifeboat ethics (1974), many philosophers debated whether affluent nations (or their citizens) have moral obligations to aid starving people in poor countries and, if they do, what are the nature, bases and extent of those obligations (see Aiken and LaFollette 1996). By the early eighties, however, moral philosophers, such as Nigel Dower, Onora O'Neill and Jerome M. Segal, had come to agree with those development specialists who for many years had believed that famine relief and food aid were only one part of the solution to the problems of hunger, poverty, underdevelopment and international injustice. What is needed, argued these philosophers, is not merely an ethics of aid but a more comprehensive, empirically informed, and policy relevant ethics of Third World development. The kind of assistance and North--South relations that are called for will depend on how (good) development is understood.

A fourth source of development ethics is the work of Paul Streeten and Amartya Sen. Both economists have addressed the causes of global economic inequality, hunger and

underdevelopment and attacked these problems with, among other things, a conception of development explicitly formulated in terms of ethical principles. Building on Streeten's basic human needs strategy, Sen argues that development should be understood ultimately not as economic growth, industrialization or modernization, which are at best means (and sometimes not very good means), but as the expansion of people's valuable capabilities and functionings : what people can or cannot do, e.g., whether they can live long, escape avoidable morbidity, be well nourished, be able to read and write and communicate, take part in literary and scientific pursuits, and so forth (Sen 1984, p. 497; see Nussbaum and Sen 1993 and Nussbaum and Glover 1995).

These four sources have been especially influential in the work of Anglo-American development ethicists. When practiced by Latin Americans, Asians, Africans and non-Anglo Europeans, development ethics often draws on philosophical and moral traditions distinctive of their cultural contexts. See, for example, the writings of Luis Camacho (Costa Rica) and Godfrey Gunatilleke (Sri Lanka).

2 Areas of consensus

Although they differ on a number of matters, development ethicists exhibit a wide consensus about the commitments that inform their enterprise, the questions they are posing and the unreasonableness of certain answers. Development ethicists typically ask the following related questions:

What should count as (good) development?

Should we continue using the concept of development instead of, for example, progress, transformation, liberation, or postdevelopment alternatives to

development (Escobar 1995)?

What should be a society's basic economic, political and cultural goals and strategies, and what principles should inform their selection?

What moral issues emerge in development policymaking and practice and how should they be resolved?

How should the burdens and benefits of development be conceived and distributed?

Who or what should be responsible for bringing about development? A nation's government, civil society or the market? What role -- if any -- should more affluent states, international institutions, and nongovernmental associations and individuals have in the self-development of poor countries?

What are the most serious local, national and international impediments to good development?

To what extent, if any, do moral scepticism, moral relativism, national sovereignty and political realism pose a challenge to this boundary-crossing ethical inquiry?

Who should decide these questions and by what methods?

In addition to accepting the importance of these questions, most development ethicists share ideas about their field and the general parameters for ethically based development. First, development ethicists contend that development practices and theories have ethical and value dimensions and can benefit from explicit ethical analysis and criticism. Second, development ethicists tend to see development as a multidisciplinary field that has both theoretical and practical components that intertwine in various ways. Hence, development ethicists aim not merely to understand development, conceived generally as desirable social change, but also to argue for and

promote specific conceptions of such change. Third, although they may understand the terms in somewhat different ways, development ethicists are committed to understanding and reducing human deprivation and misery in poor countries. Fourth, a consensus exists that development projects and aid givers should seek strategies in which both human well-being and a healthy environment jointly exist and are mutually reinforcing (Engel and Engel 1990). Fifth, these ethicists are aware that what is frequently called development -- for instance, economic growth -- has created as many problems as it has solved. Development can be used both descriptively and normatively. In the descriptive sense, development is usually identified as the processes of economic growth, industrialization, and modernization that result in a society's achieving a high (per capita) gross domestic product. So conceived, a developed society may be either celebrated or criticized. In the normative sense, a developed society, ranging from villages to national and regional societies, is one whose established institutions realize or approximate (what the proponent believes to be) worthwhile goals -- most centrally, the overcoming of economic and social deprivation. In order to avoid confusion, when a normative sense of development is meant, the noun is often preceded by a positive adjective such as good or ethically justified .

A sixth area of agreement is that development ethics must be conducted at various levels of generality and specificity. Just as development debates occur at various levels of abstraction, so development ethics should assess (1) basic ethical principles, (2) development goals and models such as economic growth , growth with equity , basic needs and, in the nineties, sustainable development , structural adjustment and human development (United Nations Development Programme), and (3) specific institutions and strategies.

Seventh, most development ethicists believe their enterprise should be international in the

triple sense that the ethicists engaged in it come from many nations, including poor ones; that they are seeking to forge an international consensus; and that this consensus emphasizes a commitment to alleviating worldwide deprivation.

Eighth, although many development ethicists contend that at least some development principles or procedures are relevant for any poor country, most agree that development strategies must be contextually sensitive. What constitutes the best means -- for instance, state provisioning, market mechanisms, civil society and their hybrids -- will depend on a society's history and stage of social change as well as on regional and global forces.

Ninth, this flexibility concerning development models and strategies is compatible with the uniform rejection of certain extreme. For example, most development ethicists would repudiate two models: (1) the maximization of economic growth in a society without paying any direct attention to converting greater opulence into better human living conditions for its members, what Sen and Jean Drèze call *unaimed opulence*, and (2) an authoritarian egalitarianism in which physical needs are satisfied at the expense of political liberties.

3 Controversies and agenda

In addition to these points of agreement, there are several divisions and unsettled issues. A first unresolved issue concerns the scope of development ethics. Development ethics originated as the *ethics of Third World Development*. There are good reasons to drop -- as a Cold War relic -- the *First--Second--Third World* trichotomy. There is no consensus, however, on whether or not development ethics should extend beyond its central concern of assessing the development ends and means of poor societies.

Some argue that development ethicists should criticize human deprivation wherever it

exists and that rich countries, since they too have problems of poverty, powerlessness, and alienation, are underdeveloped and, hence, fall properly within the scope of development ethics. Perhaps the socioeconomic model that the North has been exporting to the South results in the underdevelopment of both. Others contend that since development ethicists address questions of rich country responsibility and global distributive justice, they should not restrict themselves to official development assistance but also should treat international trade, capital flows, migration, environmental pacts, military intervention, and responses to human rights violations committed by prior regimes. The chief argument against extending the boundaries in these ways is that development ethics would thereby become too ambitious and diffuse. If development ethics grew to be identical with all social ethics or all international ethics, the result might be that insufficient attention would be paid to alleviating poverty and powerlessness in poor countries. Both sides agree that development ethicists should assess various kinds of North-South (and South--South) relations with respect to their effects in reducing economic and political inequality in poor countries. What is unresolved, however, is whether development ethics also should address such topics as the ethics of trade, military intervention and international institutions.

Development ethicists also are divided on the status of the moral norms that they seek to justify and apply. Three positions have emerged. Universalists, such as utilitarians and Kantians, argue that development goals and principles are valid for all societies. Particularists, especially communitarians and postmodern relativists, reply that universalism masks ethnocentrism and (Northern) cultural imperialism. Pro-development particularists either eschew all universal principles or affirm only the procedural principle that each nation or society should draw only on

its own traditions and decide its own development ethic and path. (Anti-development particularists, rejecting both change brought from the outside and public reasoning about social change, condemn all development discourse and practice.) A third approach -- advanced, for example, by Martha Nussbaum, Jonathan Glover, Seyla Benhabib and David Crocker (Nussbaum and Glover 1995) -- tries to avoid the standoff between the first two positions. On this view, development ethics should forge a cross-cultural consensus in which a society's own freedom to make development choices is one among a plurality of fundamental norms and in which these norms are of sufficient generality so as not only to permit but also to require sensitivity to societal differences.

Next is a question related to the universalism--particularism debate: to what extent, if any, should development ethicists propose visions committed to a certain conception of human well-being, and how thick or extensive should this vision be? There is a continuum here: at one end, there is more commitment to the values of individual choice, tolerance of differences, and public deliberation about societal ends and means; and, at the other, more normative guidance about the good human life but less room for individual and social choice.

Supposing that development principles should have some substantive content (beyond the procedural principle that each society or person should decide for itself), there are disagreements about that content. Assuming that societal development concerns human development, with what moral categories should human it be conceived? Candidates for such fundamental moral notions include utility (preference satisfaction); social primary goods, such as income; negative liberty; basic human needs; autonomy; valuable capabilities and functionings; and rights. Although some think that a development ethic ought to include more than one of these moral concepts,

development ethicists differ with respect to which ones to embrace and how to relate them. One alternative would be to work out a concept of human well-being that combines, on the one hand, a neo-Kantian commitment to autonomy, critical dialogue and public deliberation with, on the other hand, neo-Aristotelian beliefs in the importance of physical health and social participation. Development duties might then flow from the idea that all humans should have a right to at least a minimal level of well-being.

There is also an ongoing debate about how development's benefits, burdens and responsibilities should be distributed within poor countries and between rich and poor countries.

Utilitarians prescribe simple aggregation and maximization of individual utilities. Rawlsians advocate that income and wealth be maximized for the least well-off (individuals or nations).

Libertarians contend that a society should guarantee no form of equality apart from equal freedom from the interference of government and other people. Capabilities ethicists defend governmental responsibility to enable everyone to be able to advance to a level of sufficiency with respect to the valuable functionings.

Development ethicists also differ with respect to whether (good) societal development should have -- as an ultimate goal -- the promotion of values other than the present and future human good. Some development ethicists ascribe intrinsic value, equal to or even superior to the good of individual human beings, to human communities of various kinds, for instance, family, nation or cultural group. Others argue that nonhuman individuals and species, as well as ecological communities, have equal and even superior value to human individuals. Those committed to *ecodevelopment* or *sustainable development* do not yet agree on what should be sustained as an end in itself and what should be maintained as an indispensable or merely

helpful means. Nor do they agree on how to surmount conflicts among intrinsic values.

The agenda of development ethics is -- through an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue that deepens and widens the current consensus -- to apply ethical wisdom to enhance human well-being and international development.

References and further reading

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