

# Ethics and Development

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The field of development ethics explores questions and debates concerning what is good development of societies and of the world, and good development for individual persons. Generations of experience suggest the inadequacy of the assumption that societal-, world- or personal- development can be equated to economic growth and wealth. That assumption neglects issues of equity, security, personal relationships, natural environment, identity, culture and meaningfulness. In particular, equating national development to national economic growth neglects the welfare and rights of many groups of already disadvantaged people. Over ten million people a year, for example, are displaced from their home due to economic expansion, frequently with little or no compensation (Penz et al. 2011). An important alternative conception of development is 'human development', meaning achievement with respect to a wide range of well-reasoned values, not only those measured in money, and advancement of people's ability to achieve such well-reasoned values (Haq 1999; Nussbaum 2011). Development ethics tries to identify and systematically reflect on values and value-choices present in, or relevant to, cases and processes in the development of societies, persons, regions, and the globe.

Topics in development ethics include, amongst others: meanings and evolution of the idea of 'development', and the values that these meanings can contain about what is acceptable and desirable; concepts and evidence about human well-being and ill-being; assumptions and gaps in conventional economic evaluation; meanings and varieties of 'equity', and how equity can be neglected; and the significance of various types of human vulnerability and security (Goulet 1971), and their relationships to economic growth. Practically oriented development ethics looks at how and which values are or can be incorporated in systems of policy, laws, social routines, and public and individual actions.

## ***Ethics of Development: Why?***

'Development' sounds self-evidently desirable. Why did a field of ethics of development arise? Firstly, because of persistent undeserved removable poverty, sickness, insecurity and unhappiness, despite economic growth. Rise of average incomes does not necessarily benefit ordinary and especially poor people. Despite enormous growth in human powers and economic turnover, hundreds of millions of people remain undernourished, leading to their physical and mental stunting, illness and premature death. As of 2004 UNICEF estimated that 30,000 babies and children under 5 died every day from poverty-related causes; a third of the world's people lacked basic sanitation, almost a billion adults were illiterate, and 170 million children were engaged in hazardous work. Most of the people affected—including the babies and children—were not to blame for their own situation and had little unaided response-ability. As Nussbaum (e.g. 2011) asks: how far should the chance of being born in one nation rather than another determine the life chances of a baby?

Second, many people become harmed even within processes of economic development: they are made to bear the costs without sharing in the benefits, as for

example in uncompensated displacement from their homes and livelihoods. The people displaced are nearly always poor, moved in order to clear the way for projects that very largely benefit people who are already better off. So, not only do some groups not share in benefits, they may be deliberately harmed, as were generations of slaves and many other workers. Even when not deliberately sacrificed, many suffer through increased exclusion and marginalisation. Issues of distribution and harm involve also future generations, notably in relation to damage to the natural environment, especially through human-induced climate change (UNDP 2007).

Development ethics looks at implications of the interconnections and in-built conflicts in socio-economic development, within countries and internationally and over time. Increased carbon emissions, a core feature of modern development, indirectly eventually damage people in vulnerable environments around the world. Investment for future generations can be at the expense of present-day poor people; construction of infrastructure for some people's benefit results in displacement of others, typically with major economic, social and psychological disruption; and within markets, the increased wealth of some people competes away resources from poorer people, by forcing up the prices of goods such as land, housing and food. Famines and malnutrition have often been caused less by shortage of supply than by this mechanism, whereby wealth draws in resources from around the world (Davis 2001). Increased pressures of most sorts typically affect women especially, for they are the main care-givers and 'shock absorbers' in a society, that get noticed only when broken. The disproportionate concentration of costs of development upon some groups has been used as a mechanism of transformation – 'breaking eggs in order to make omelettes', in the words of Britain's Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain and many others; industrialisation and the transformation of agriculture have typically partly occurred through processes by which many small agricultural, industrial and artisanal producers are forced out of business. In recent years around a quarter-million Indian farmers have committed suicide due to accumulation of unrepayable debts—here a case not of exclusion from modernization processes, but of vulnerable people who are induced and/or choose to participate in types of economic modernization and who then sometimes suffer severely when the risks and the 'small-print' prove to be more than they can cope with.

Third, the gains in well-being through policy approaches that equate development to economic growth are sometimes very questionable. When and how far does acquisition of and preoccupation with material comforts and conveniences bring, or jeopardise, a fulfilling and meaningful life? (Gasper 2007). The French economist Louis-Joseph Lebret (1897–1966), who helped to found the subject of development ethics, spoke thus not only of "development for all persons" but of "development of all the person" and of "putting the economy at the service of man".

Fourth, besides outcomes, major questions arise about democratic participation in processes of decision-making (e.g. Chambers, 1997; Ellerman 2005) and about responsibilities in relation to harm and undeserved suffering: who has responsibilities and to do what—to help, prevent, refrain, compensate—including in light of past injustices (such as slavery) and their consequences for present-day undeserved advantages and disadvantages.

Issues of development ethics become relevant because of arguments that better alternatives are possible compared to what has happened, and that real choices exist for the future too. Evidence of such alternatives may lie in the experiences of other countries (Dreze and Sen 1989)—for example some East Asian countries that have combined a rapid climb out of poverty with a relatively high degree of population inclusion and sharing in benefits. Financial and economic calculations are also relevant; for example, that to attain

the \$2 per day per person income line for everyone would cost around 1.2% of the gross national products of high-income countries, vastly less than they spend on military forces. A recent estimate of the extra costs required to achieve universal primary education was: four days of the world's military spending.

### ***Ethics in Development: What and How?***

The agenda of development ethics includes: to explore how the content of the idea of 'development' as societal improvement is value-relative; to highlight who bears the costs of various types of 'development', and to examine the value-choices that are implied and should be considered in development policy, programs and projects; to present well-reasoned alternatives to mainstream habits regarding those choices, in particular to clarify the values behind evaluative and prescriptive arguments from economics, query the narrowness of using only values from the marketplace, introduce other relevant values and query therefore an automatic superior status for economics arguments, in relation for example to human rights arguments. The root concerns of development ethics—the insistence on not *equating* societal improvement to economic growth, and on identifying and comparing value- and strategy-alternatives; and the concern for not ignoring costs and their distribution—all apply not only to poor countries but with almost equal force in rich countries and for the globe.

In examining the value-choices in development, work in development ethics operates at the interface of ethics, development studies and development policy. It asks: Which life-conditions and which effects are both unfair and avoidable? For those considered unfair and avoidable, what changes should be made? Who has which responsibilities—including to remedy the damage that they cause, and to respect and preserve local and global public goods? How far are national boundaries ethically relevant, in a world that is increasingly economically unified, such that people influence each other worldwide? When is international aid justified? - for serving longer-term self-interest, or as praise-worthy but non-obligatory charity, or as obligation, including as an obligation of former colonial powers and beneficiaries from colonialism? What are ethical requirements regarding its conduct?

Some development ethics work deals with basic issues of concepts and theory (e.g., Goulet 2006; Gasper 2004); some engages with specific sectors and policies (e.g. Drèze and Sen 2002). Some significant examples of the latter type are: (i) Much work looks at health, and the gross imbalance between health needs and health spending, including spending on research; diseases of the poor have been grossly neglected. Pogge amongst others has investigated both relevant ethical theory and health policy options. (ii) The Jubilee 2000 debt-relief campaign studied the history of banking and found that all the countries that had long insisted on total repayment of debts by low-income countries, which had vastly escalated since the 1970s oil crises and increased interest rates, had themselves had major earlier episodes of debt relief or repudiation. (iii) Penz et al. (2011), building on the work of the World Commission on Dams, propose a detailed, principled approach to assessing, deciding on, and compensating for displacement, based on a synthesis of development ethics thinking, with attention to what is justifiable development and what are good procedures for resolving conflicts.

The field of development ethics is a meeting place of theory and practice, and of many disciplines and types of knowledge. It needs to use a broad vision, looking at the range of real experience of human joys and suffering (see e.g. Narayan et al. 2000), and at interconnections besides only those captured by markets and the categories of economics.

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## Useful Websites:

- International Development Ethics Association, IDEA: <http://www.development-ethics.org/>  
Human Development and Capability Association, HDCA: <http://www.capabilityapproach.com>.