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Development Ethics

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Abstract: This essay outlines characteristic concerns of development ethics, with special attention to issues around the recognition of costs and risks and the (in)equity of their distribution; including to how these issues arise in relation to environmental impacts of economic development, and to current work on human security analysis which tries to embody important development ethics concerns in an approach helpful for policy-relevant research and policy design.

Keywords – development ethics; human security; environmental change; climate change

Introduction

Development ethics considers major value questions and choices implied in processes of societal and global development – economic, social, and political development. How well is a society – or

the world – progressing? What do we consider progress and why? What has been gained and what has been lost? Who gained, who lost and how far was this justified? Who suffers undeservingly? A field of development ethics emerged to elucidate and weigh the material and psychic costs of processes and programmes of 'development', the dependence of understandings of 'development' on which and whose criteria are used, the relationships between and the mutual rights and responsibilities of powerful groups and weaker groups, and the choices available to persons, groups and national and international bodies. It looks at implications of the interconnections and conflicts in socio-economic development, within countries and internationally and over time, and at impacts besides those captured by markets and the categories of economics, such as impacts on health, environment, culture and the felt meaningfulness of life.

The field is in many respects comparable to (and overlaps with) other wide-ranging fields of practical ethics like business ethics, medical ethics, and environmental ethics. However, the breadth of its themes make definition of its bounds harder, and it may be considered as an interdisciplinary space of research and public debate, not primarily as a delimited scientific sub-discipline. The body of work that has tried to address such themes draws from innumerable sources in philosophy, religion, social science and political ideology, often not under the name ‘development ethics’. Work that uses that name dates from at least the 1950s, notably in Francophone and Hispanophone streams promoted by Louis-Joseph Lebret (Malley, 1968).

This essay outlines characteristic concerns of development ethics, with special attention to issues around the recognition of costs and risks and the (in)equity of their distribution; to how these issues arise in relation to the environmental impacts of economic development; and to current work on human security analysis, which tries to embody important development ethics concerns in an approach helpful for policy-relevant research and policy design.

History and background

Lebret and colleagues in France established in the 1940s the research and action network *Economie et Humanisme*, on the basis of longstanding work in response to economic depression and restructuring in Europe and associated deprivation and suffering. They stressed the development of all persons and of all of the person ("tous les hommes et tout l'homme"), and became influential in the social doctrine of the Catholic church. From the 1950s they extended their work across the world, connecting to like-minded actors in other continents. An important enricher and communicator of this work was Denis Goulet (1971, 2006), who led the emergence of an Anglophone literature using the name 'development ethics'.

Another major sub-area of development ethics, associated with the economist Amartya Sen and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, has arisen at the intersection of critique of welfare economics and ideas from Aristotelian and Kantian ethics (e.g., Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). More broadly, development ethics covers a series of such intersections between various streams in development practice and debate and streams in self-conscious ethics (Gasper and Truong, 2010). The streams in development practice are from diverse areas of socio-economic development policy, planning and management, both within countries and in the relations between countries; and also from other partly institutionally separate, partly overlapping, practice worlds, including: human rights activism and practice; emergency relief, conflict response and humanitarian intervention; migration and refugee issues; and work on business ethics, labour conditions, and corporate social responsibility. The streams of theorizing which are brought into dialogue with the demands and dilemmas of practice come from, besides academic moral philosophy and critiques of mainstream economics, also theology, various humanist ethics, human rights theory and jurisprudence, feminist theory and care ethics, environmental philosophy, well-being research, and additional perspectives generated within professional and practical ethics.

Development ethics is thus a zone of intersections, that contains a relatively small academic sub-discipline but also a much larger loosely interconnected field of research and debate. Bodies that try to stimulate, coordinate and institutionalise such work include the International Development Ethics Association (since 1984) and the Human Development and Capability Association (since 2004), amongst others.

Conceptualising the scope of development ethics

Already from the work of Lebret and Goulet, and increasingly clearly over time, development ethics has been predominantly conceptualized as concerning all countries and periods, not only present-day low-income countries, though the extremities of need and of undeserved and unnecessary suffering of many people in those countries give their situation special priority. Dower has consistently articulated development ethics as centering on the evaluation of societal trajectories, for all societies (e.g. Dower, 2008). The root concerns of development ethics—an insistence on not equating societal improvement to economic growth, on not ignoring costs and their distribution, and on identifying and comparing value- and strategy-alternatives—all apply not only to poor countries but for all countries and for the globe. Globalization has steadily strengthened this rationale.

Characteristic topics thus include, amongst others:

1. Criteria for what is good societal and global development; including how far we can identify universally appropriate criteria and how far, on the other hand, the content of the idea of 'development' as societal improvement is appropriately variable.
2. Equity in the distribution of the benefits and burdens of development; the meanings and varieties of 'equity'; who bears the costs of various types of 'development', and how equity is often neglected. This investigation concerns both equity at a particular time and equity over time. At a particular time, some groups' interests can be sacrificed for those of others, whether

deliberately (for example through forced displacement, slavery, legal discrimination and other forms of subjection, sometimes violent) or instead as 'side-effects' (for example through the deprivation, even famines, that can be sometimes caused by market shifts, or as externalities, such as from greenhouse-gas-emitting economic activity, or through the exclusions established by commoditizing a good like water, especially in situations of extreme inequality). Also central are relations over time; very high investment to achieve rapid economic growth can be seen as sacrificing interests of the present generation for those of future generations, whereas environmental damage from ever-ongoing economic expansion is increasingly recognised as sacrificing the interests of future generations for shorter-term interests. Deserving special attention in relation to environmental damage is (in)equity in the distribution of risks, not just of definitely known costs and benefits, and how these risks can affect different groups according to their different degrees of vulnerability and resilience.

3. Criteria regarding good/bad process, not only good/bad outcomes, including regarding the meaning and status of free choice. For example, does the 'free choice' of poor people in poor countries to work in dangerous industries (like the Bangladesh garment sector), or to undertake dangerous migration journeys, mean that they have accepted and must bear any and all dangers arising?
4. The ethically appropriate design and management of development policies and actions, including the rights and duties of the various participants and the relationships between groups who have dramatically different strength and good fortune. 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, assesses the adequacy of the values embodied in regnant systems, including market processes and conventional economic evaluation, and seeks to contribute to creating improved alternatives where required.

This essay concentrates on the second area, the equity of distribution of costs and risks, as particularly relevant for analysis and decision-making regarding environmental change.

The Ethics of Benefits, Costs and Risks

What can be called the ethics of benefits—concerning what is the meaning of the good life, what are basic requirements and rights for every citizen, and much more—is a major and distinctive part of development ethics. Sen and Nussbaum, for example, have generated and stimulated much work on the meanings and status of well-being, human agency and freedoms, recognising that wealth as such is no guarantee of well-being. Work such as by the University of Bath's research group on Well-Being in Developing Countries has linked this type of theorizing with well-being theories from psychology and sociology and explored in depth the perceptions and determinants of well-being in various countries (Gough and McGregor, 2007). Even more distinctive of development ethics work, however, is attention to ill-being, insecurity, costs and risks and who bears them.

Costs are inherent to processes of socio-economic development. Creation of physical infrastructure, including in the transition to city-based societies, brings the displacement of legions of people. In the 21st century possibly 10-15 million annually are being physically displaced; in the past many millions were driven out by expropriations of private, communal or common lands. Often people are moved against their will, all too often under threat of force, with little or no compensation, and with little or no share in the benefits that arise from the new investments. Penz, Drydyk and Bose (2011) document this and discuss in detail the rights of potential displaced persons—including, they propose, to be moved only for justifiable responsible development, to be consulted, to have rights of appeal to independent arbiters, to be adequately compensated and to share in benefits arising—and which agents have the corresponding duties.

Physical displacement concerns completely foreseeable costs, that typically mostly hit already relatively and absolutely poor people. It also entails often unforeseen costs of cultural loss, psychological unmooring, disorientation and anomie. Peter Berger (1974) advised thus that

development ethics requires a ‘calculus of meaning’, in addition to the ‘calculus of pain’ required to think clearly about the frequent sacrifice of interests of some groups (like workers in dangerous industries or the displaced) to benefit others.

Other major costs exist that are less easily visible than those from physical displacement. The carbon emissions that have been central to modern economic development fundamentally affect global climate systems, and the guaranteed and probable negative impacts will fall disproportionately on low-income tropical countries which have contributed little to the emissions. These and many other costs have been excluded from economic calculations, let alone the calculations of private businesses. For example, international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank for decades imposed on dependent indebted countries economic programmes that ignored many social and environmental costs, and in effect imposed especially upon the poorer groups in poor countries the main risks from the possible repercussions from this blindness.

The case of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 has been studied in detail. Following a fall of 40% in national income per capita as a result of world market shifts (especially for coffee), some Rwandans suffered yet greater declines, for example losing their land or job, as an IMF-designed economic programme enforced ‘structural adjustment’ on an ethnically divided society. Genocidal forces defined scapegoats (in this case designated ‘cockroaches’) and attacked them, leading to the murder of half a million to a million people in a few weeks. Quieter disasters have occurred in many countries in Africa, Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Economic analyses and economic policy have been formulated without reference to their social and physical effects, thanks to assumptions that social and natural environments are able to comfortably absorb all ‘external effects’. Further, economic policies towards low-income countries sometimes have wider impacts, on migration, the creation or strengthening of international crime networks, the flows of arms and diseases, and more. As stresses and interconnections increase in strength, some thresholds of safety will be crossed.

Within market systems, the increased wealth of some people (intra-nationally and around the world) competes away resources from poorer people; it reduces their effective access. In extreme cases, when so permitted by laisser-faire authorities, mega-famines have occurred amongst poorer groups, caused or greatly exacerbated by this mechanism; for example in Ireland (then part of the United Kingdom) in the 1840s and in colonial India in the 1870s, 1890s, 1900s and 1940s (Sen, 1981). While sometimes such costs are simply ignored, often they are declared as inevitable or the fault of the victims. Lord Lytton, the poet Viceroy of India who presided over the 1870s famine in which 6-10 million people died, declared on Malthusian grounds that India was overpopulated and that relief efforts would only produce dependency and eventually more people (Davis, 2001).

The question of who bears the risks generated in development processes, and who accommodates the results of eventual crises, is fundamental, as shown by Ulrich Beck (2009). The chequered history in recent decades of privatization of public services like water supply in low-income countries relates to the tension between citizen expectations that public services are to help protect them, and should involve collective sharing of risks, and private corporation expectations that their contracts with the state permit them to protect and prioritise their rate of profit and to leave others to tidy up for any crises, economic or environmental or epidemiological, that may arise.

Much development ethics work has a strong focus on women, partly because they are often families' main carers and also the main 'shock absorbers' when adversity strikes (Gasper & Truong, 2010): they care for the ill and infirm, they take up flexible or informal work when required for their families, and from the 1990s in a new era of national and global economic restructuring they became the majority group in international migration for work. At the same time they are typically required to balance the 'calculus of meaning' for their family and community by visibly embodying a sense of traditional identity. Their own security and well-being can often be downgraded and in jeopardy.

The ethics of markets

Much of development ethics addresses the ethical assumptions and possible limitations of market systems – the values that they include, emphasise or neglect as benefits or costs, the attention they give or withhold to distributive and procedural equity, and the ways in which they mould and constrain public policy or could themselves be moulded and constrained. A core set of questions concern the appropriate bounds to markets: to prevent acquisition of public office and execution of public duties from being market processes, in which the prizes go to the highest bidders; to prevent access to water and essential drugs from being purely on the basis of who can pay a free market price that caters for or reflects the budgets of rich consumers; to assess the claim that the only duty of corporations is the maximization of their own profits; and, in general, to critically consider the rule that there are no sustainable principles of rightness and goodness other than those of a contract which (albeit unequal) bargainers accept.

This issue of which things should be treated as a commodity and which not has been discussed with special intensity in development ethics because of its attention to situations where great riches confront great poverty and markets can invade, dominate and corrupt many relationships. The interpretation of what is corruption and of the status of human organ sales, intellectual property rights, and 'businesses' such as military mercenaries require exploration. Some authors conclude that military mercenaries stand outside the bounds of validity of the willing-seller-willing-buyer paradigm; they help to cause and sustain the inhumanity and conflict that supposedly justify their trade.

The ethical assessment of market arrangements and criteria leads us to consider markets' physical, social, cultural and political environments and prerequisites, and the values needed to respect and maintain those environments, which can damaged by economic activity. Reproduction – environmental and biological, and also emotional and psychological (through families, caring,

and meaning-systems) – can be underweighted when economics becomes obsessed with immediate measured production. The precautionary principle needs thus to be applied also to the non-physical environments of markets and polities. This broadening of a 'sustainable development' approach is sometimes called a 'sustainable human development' perspective or 'human security' perspective. It underlines that human societies and world societies rely on many shared public goods, including the very concepts of common good and common responsibilities. This was well articulated in *Human Security Now*, the report of the (Ogata-Sen) Commission on Human Security (CHS, 2003), initiated by the Government of Japan and the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan.

A human security perspective

A human security approach aims to look in a comprehensive and context-specific way at how ordinary people live, and to seek to protect and empower them in dealing with threats to fulfilment of their basic rights and needs, including by action to prevent threats where appropriate. It is people-centred in looking at the specific life circumstances of specific groups of people, rather than relying only on categories like 'the nation' and 'the economy'. Such a formulation of the approach was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2012. Looking at people's lives holistically helps to base concern for human rights in an awareness of bodily and emotional needs, of global interconnections, and of the intersecting circumstances in people's everyday lives. The Rwanda disaster illustrated themes that are highlighted in human security thinking: the interconnection of economic issues, identity issues and physical security; the reactions when people feel threatened; the interconnections of countries linked through global markets, global tastes and trends, the arms trade, and global media. A human security framework suggests further that effects of Rwanda-type disintegration—the anger and recourse to violence, state collapse, drugs exports (as in Afghanistan or Colombia), disease, traumatized refugees—will not stay for

ever ‘off-screen’ but will spread and can bring impacts anywhere in the world (Beck, 2009).

Human security analysis aims to facilitate flexible exploration of lived experiences of insecurity, and to provide a human-scale focus in both understanding and evaluation. It does so because of a starting point of commitment to basic human rights and human dignity. A human security approach looks at the particular situation and priority vulnerabilities of particular groups/types of people. It emphasises that vulnerability and insecurity are produced by the intersection of many factors. Economic globalization and global environmental change, for example, have both additive effects and interactive effects and trigger further rounds of reactions (Leichenko and O’Brien, 2008). The groups who are most threatened by global environmental changes are often those who are also most threatened by global economic changes. They live in more exposed locations, are more damaged by the same exposure and by their actual exposure, for they have less protection, and are the least resilient in recovery from crises because of their lack of economic and non-economic resources. Narrow frameworks of analysis, confined by disciplinary and/or national boundaries or other principles of exclusion, miss these intersections and miss some of the real insecurities and responses of vulnerable people. Scientific analyses may require to be guided by ethical criteria for what to consider, in order to duly remember and respect people and to achieve greater ethical and explanatory adequacy (O’Brien, St.Clair and Kristoffersen, 2010).

Development ethics and environmental change

Thinking about and trying to respond to global environmental change connects closely to the characteristic concerns of development ethics. How is a society moving into the future? This must be asked given the recognition that transformations are not automatically good, equitable or democratic. Who is gaining and who is losing? This must be explored with a recognition of pervasive interconnections, intra- and inter-nationally; for example how land acquisition for bio-

fuels has displaced poor people and affected food production.

A comparative survey of literature on climate change suggests that the broader the sources of perceptions that inform the studies, the more serious in turn is the perceived challenge of climate change (Gasper, 2014). Approaches that ignore the lived experience of poor people, thanks to restrictive disciplinary methodologies and/or Northern-centred frames of attention, lead to overly restricted diagnoses and proposals, often proposals that do not even match the restricted diagnosis, because the impacts on poor people and their possible reactions have disappeared from view. The World Development Report 2010 on climate change provides an example, where climate change was recognised as a fundamental problem but was then formulated in economic terms and as a subject for economic cost-benefit analysis. This methodology weighs the effects on poor people as far less, for they have little purchasing power, and it is ready to allow gains for the rich to outweigh losses for the poor.

Bringing a development ethics agenda to climate change discussions helps to identify tacit assumptions about whose interests matter most, that guide the analysis. In engineering design a 'conservative' approach is one that takes adverse scenarios seriously into account during the design phase, in order to minimize the possibility of a dangerous outcome during operation. In contrast, in climate change discussions optimistic assumptions and figures that very likely underestimate the real risks are commonly called 'conservative'. Using these 'conservative' assumptions leads to checking whether one can be highly confident that, regardless of the uncertainties, a dangerous hazard *will* indeed arise. In contrast, in engineering design 'conservative' assumptions are part of seeking to ensure that, despite the uncertainties, a dangerous outcome from possible hazards *will not* ensue. The meaning assigned in climate change discussions reflects how the burden of proof in international climate change politics has been placed on those who warn of the dangers. The precautionary principle, to take due care to not endanger people's lives and health, is neglected. In the absence of certainty on the extent of unacceptable climate change-related impacts, more evidence is demanded, to avoid the 'risk' that

emissions might be unnecessarily reduced, while at the same time the risk of possible serious damage to the lives of vulnerable people is tolerated. The assumptions and estimates that are taken as 'least objectionable' are those which are least likely to be objected to by highly-mobilized rich greenhouse gas emitters. Those assumptions are often ones that could be strongly objectionable for poor and non-mobilized potential victims, but these groups typically have little or no voice.

Development ethics as a field in practical ethics

The general rationale for development ethics as a field in practical ethics is the same as for sister fields like business ethics and medical ethics. Practical problems exist that have an ethical content, and real choices exist that involve implied ethical choices and can lead to significantly ethically different outcomes. In addition, adequate understanding of and participation in public action and social change require thoughtful attention to ethics, for people use and are moved by ethical ideas, among others. We see this from for example the impacts of religions and of human rights thinking. Development ethics is important because human rights thinking alone is not sufficient. Human rights sometimes conflict and need to be prioritized; specifying definite feasible defensible duties that correspond to proposed human rights is sometimes very difficult, so that we need attention also to virtues not only rights or duties; and legalistic human rights approaches can become lost in cumbersome legal systems, which are often *de facto* accessible only to the rich and powerful.

At the same time, human rights are likely to be an essential element in practical development ethics, and human rights history provides vital lessons. The significance of human rights thinking is not restricted to incorporation in legal systems: rights-based approaches extend more broadly, as approaches in policy design and planning, in schooling and citizen education, and for influence in business, civil society, and everyday life. A further lesson concerns the relevance of a pragmatic approach in a world of wide differences of thought and culture; human

rights work has sought agreeable consensus on what are basic human rights and principles, not on exactly what are the reasons that lead to their acceptance.

In that same spirit, Penz et al. (2011) identify what is 'responsible development', on the basis of values which have attained international acceptance in a series of intergovernmental agreements during recent decades. Responsible development must not harm or violate: human well-being and security; equity; sustainability; participation; cultural freedom; other human rights; and integrity. Penz et al. show how these principles can be applied in detail to issues of physical displacement. They clarify the rights and responsibilities of national and international actors: governments, investors, local residents, and others.

Conclusion

The agenda of development ethics concerns the human costs, options and 'trade-offs' in socio-economic development processes. It applies not only to events and choices in a geographically separate 'South' and its relations with the 'North', but to events and relations within the North and across the globe. The required role of ethics is not just to be added in a final stage of considering research findings and policy proposals, when 'thinking about the implications' of findings or assessing the acceptability of proposals. For reasons seen above, ethics should be involved at all stages of research and discussion, especially in identifying the areas for attention, the categories used and questions asked (Goulet, 1971; Gasper, 2014). The World Social Science Report 2013 made a parallel argument, on the required involvement of social sciences in all stages of research on environmental change. If ethics questions are not raised at all stages, especially concerning the rights and interests of poor and vulnerable people—for example their exposure to potential low-probability but very high-damage events—these matters are unlikely to be considered or to enter in a final stage; instead the interests of already privileged groups will tacitly receive attention and priority. Human security analysis is a relevant framework for raising such questions, checking on

the threats to needs fulfilment for specific groups of (poor) people. The role for ethics includes to support responsible science that gives due attention to the lives of the poor and those most vulnerable, and that supports responsible development (Gasper, 2014).

Cross-References: Agricultural Ethics; Applied Ethics; Benefit and Harm; Benefit-sharing; Climate Change and Health; Common Good; Consent: Community; Corruption; Cultural Diversity; Development and Bioethics; Exploitation; Food Security; Future Generations; Global Ethics; Human Dignity; Human Rights; Hunger; Justice: Global; Justice: Theories of; Migration; Moral Relativism vs Universalism; Organ Trade; Poverty; Precautionary Principle; Quality of Life; Responsibility: Social; Sustainability.

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