Webinar: Main Values of Development Ethics – Reconsidered

HDCA Ethics & Development Thematic Group

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This webinar is to be an interactive discussion of the main values of development ethics. This kind of discussion goes back to Denis Goulet's pivotal observation that the differences between good development and bad development ('maldevelopment') are ethical differences based on values. With this in mind, in the early 2000s I set out to review the various debates critical of development strategies and projects, to examine what values informed these critiques. This review was published as Chapter 6 of *Displacement by Development: Ethics, Rights, and Responsibilities* (which I coauthored with Peter Penz and Pablo Bose, Cambridge 2011) and summarized in several encyclopedia and dictionary articles subsequently. The main finding was that seven values have been prominent: worthwhile development (1) enhances people's well-being, it does so with (2) equity/justice, it is (3) empowering and (4) environmentally sustainable, advancing (5) human rights and (6) cultural freedom, with (7) integrity against corruption. Later, when Lori Keleher and I began planning and co-editing the *Routledge Handbook of Development Ethics* (Routledge 2019), these seven values provided the central structure of the book.

But time does not stand still, nor do conflicts and critiques around maldevelopment. So now, some 20+ years after I began thinking about this, I find that the list needs to be revised. In part this is a recognition that there were some development conflicts that were not presented adequately in the first list; in part, it is recognition that the more particular ethical problems encountered by practitioners in carrying out development projects were not presented adequately, either.

So I have some ideas about how the list might be revised, and I look forward to learning from your feedback on these ideas. To focus the discussion, I attach the entry I wrote on development ethics for Deen Chatterjee's *Encyclopedia of Global Justice*, with marginal notes indicating agenda items for our discussion. These agenda items are: (1) recognizing that discussion of development ethics belongs to everyone, not just specialists like us; (2) how values emerge and function in conflicts and debates about bad development; (3) any questions or concerns or suggestions about the first three values – well-being, equity/justice, empowerment; (4) strengthening the section on environmental sustainability; (5) adding self-determination of peoples; (6) restructuring the list, expanding it to nine values, demoting corruption, adding values of accountability, trust, and respect, which have ongoing importance for practitioners; (7) whether/where/how to mention post-development; (8) any questions, comments, concerns about the section on responsibilities; (9) any other comments, questions, concerns, suggestions.

security. Economist Amartya Sen suggests that poverty alleviation, whether within a state or promoted across borders, leads to positive outcomes for all, so active engagement anywhere is justified. Political philosopher Thomas Pogge goes further and argues that the negative consequences of development in the interest of wealthy states at the expense of the global poor are unjustified because no one is justified in acting in ways that will cause harm to others. As such, development models that work toward satisfying universal human need ought to be selected rather than those that operate at its expense.

Though the question of moral responsibility remains open, the pragmatic consideration of whether states have an obligation to satisfy what it has agreed to is largely regarded as settled. If a state promises others within the international community to abide by or promote certain standards and is negligent of fulfilling those promises, it creates ill-will and fosters international instability. UN GA Resolution 2626 (XXV) set the goal for all wealthy states to provide 0.7% of Gross National Product (GNP) – measured in later years and currently as Gross National Income (GNI) – to Official Development Assistance (ODA).

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) measures ODA as aid that is given to the Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) list of recipients that are selected on the basis of GNI per capita and the United Nations' identified Least Developed Countries (LDCs), and to multilateral development institutions. ODA is defined by the donor, including only aid given by official agencies, and by the aim, including only aid given with the primary objective of the development of poor states. Since the 0.7 target was set, states such as Sweden and Norway have exceeded it, while others, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have consistently failed to meet the benchmark.

In conclusion, it is important to note that development assistance is often provided to the global poor by individuals, charitable foundations, corporations, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The effectiveness of private aid is often determined by conditions that governments or International Organizations (IOs) are best suited to handle. For example, to avoid dictators or rogue factions of a society from siphoning off humanitarian aid from its intended beneficiaries may require military support that only states or IOs can provide. Access to medicine is impacted by the trade and property laws that govern its production, and distribution. For these structural and pragmatic reasons, states and IOs remain fundamentally important to the future outcomes of development assistance.

Related Topics

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Development Ethics

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In its broadest meaning, "development ethics" may be defined as ethical reflection on ends, means, and responsibilities for global development. Reflection on its ends is needed to distinguish worthwhile development from harmful and wrongful development. Reflection on appropriate means is needed to address problems such as corruption or undemocratic governance in development projects and institutions, as well as states. Finally, there are questions about global roles and responsibilities for poverty reduction, for environmental sustainability, or for impacts on vulnerable groups such as women and indigenous people. Because these kinds of reflection are not restricted to any particular profession or academic discipline, it is a peculiarity of development ethics in this broadest sense that many people who contribute to it do not identify themselves as development ethicists. In a narrower sense, "development ethics" can be defined as the multidisciplinary field of theory and practice undertaken by development ethicists (who dedicate

themselves explicitly to conducting and acting upon these kinds of ethical reflection). This narrower field is represented by a researcher–practitioner organization, the International Development Ethics Association.

Worthwhile Development Versus Maldevelopment

Development ethics arose partly in response to a tendency in the policy world to conceive of development simply as economic growth. This view was opposed not only by ethicists, but also by some economists and other development scholars. One of the first development ethicists to oppose it was Denis Goulet, who argued for the importance of distinguishing between kinds of development that are worthwhile – which can be advocated as worthy social goals – and the contrary kinds of development that are ethically unacceptable and ought to be avoided – which might be classified as "maldevelopment."

One approach to elucidating this distinction is to base it in a theory with normative and empirical application to the real world of development. Arguably this has been done by Amartya Sen (who, while often cited by development ethicists, has not identified himself as one). His version of the capability approach aims to define the "evaluative space" which captures inequalities that are most significant in the context of development. These are inequalities in people's capability to function in ways that they have reason to value, such as being adequately nourished, being in good health, learning, and so on. What makes goods and opportunities advantageous is that they expand capabilities such as these. These substantive freedoms, taken together, comprise a person's freedom to live well, or "well-being freedom," and it is to this goal that worthwhile development should aim: development as freedom (which also embraces civil and political freedoms).

One might also take a more pluralistic and pragmatic approach by identifying the values that have been invoked in debates over what constitutes worthwhile development, as distinct from maldevelopment. These debates have exhibited a repeated dialectical pattern. Initially, it was ideas of economic growth and modernization that guided national and international development policies and projects. Many of these caused unexpected harm to the people who were meant to be helped. Where people were capable of resisting, they did. Challenges to these ideas and practices of development reverberated upward through local organizations, political parties, civil society organizations, transnational social movements, and in some cases, these reverberations created divisions within and between national governments, international development institutions, and donor governments. Academics joined in.

Implicitly, certain values were called upon, as everyone grappled with questions of what went wrong. New ideas of good development emerged as alternatives.

Through this process (so far) seven values have become salient. The first four are central pillars of the "human development approach" which, led by Sen and Mahbub ul Haq, opposed economistic approaches that "left people out" from their conceptions of development.

Human Well-Being

Worthwhile development must enhance people's well-being. However, the production of goods and services in a region can expand without rendering the people there better off; in certain circumstance, economic growth and rising poverty can coincide. Moreover, some measures of wealth and poverty are misleading as indicators of well-being or its contrary. While critics of a growth-centered conception of development agree that worthwhile development must enhance people's well-being, they may still disagree on how to interpret "well-being" and measure it – whether in terms of needs, capabilities, quality of life, or in other ways. Finally, it is not just the expansion of well-being that is critical, but also human security against downside risks.

Equity

Development that is worthy of being pursued as a social goal does not merely enrich elites without benefit to the poor. There are once again competing answers, however, to what else equitable development should aim for: equality, raising the capabilities of all, with priority to the worst off; sufficiency, raising all above threshold living standards, meeting basic needs; efficiency, allowing only those inequalities rendering the disadvantaged somewhat better off; or rectification by wealthy countries of inequalities for which they are historically responsible.

Empowerment

Goulet captured this value by saying that people should be the subjects of their own development, not passive recipients. "Participatory" development has been advocated in this spirit, and more recently this has been expressed as a value of "agency." All of these may be encompassed by the value of "empowerment," meaning metaphorically that people become better able to shape their own lives, or, more literally, that they engage with powerful actors, through their own decision making, to surmount obstacles to well-being.

Environmental Sustainability

The broad core value here is that development should not jeopardize future generations. Because of the value it

places on human well-being and equity, development ethics is not especially amenable to more biocentric approaches, in which other species, ecosystems, or the land are valued intrinsically. However, living with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature has been identified as central to human well-being by Martha Nussbaum (who, like Sen, is cited by development ethicists, but does not identify herself as one).

Human Rights

The view that human rights can be suspended for the sake of development is opposed within the framework development ethics, where it is held that worthwhile development promotes human rights – as affirmed by the UN Declaration on the Right to Development.

Cultural Freedom

This has been defined usefully in Human Development Report 2004 as freedom to be who we are and who we want to be. Its contrary, in broad terms, is social exclusion. Worthwhile development is held to promote cultural freedom and reduce social exclusion.

Integrity Regarding Corruption

Integrity is valued for its own sake, as an aspect of worthwhile development, but it is also valued because corruption is damaging to well-being, because it produces, preserves, or expands inequities, and because it is disempowering.

While most development ethicists advocate development that satisfies these values, another approach argues that development is inherently incapable of doing so. Adherents of this antidevelopment school, including Gustavo Esteva, Arturo Escobar, Wolfgang Sachs, and others, have argued that actually existing development is necessarily inequitable, disempowering, and environmentally damaging; hence anyone who values equity, empowerment, and the environment must seek alternatives to development. Though this group might object to being called "development ethicists," their thinking does address central questions of development ethics. This broad agreement on the values of development resolves many questions about the appropriate means. Within this development ethics framework, then, debate shifts away (for instance) from questions of whether development must be carried out by means that are empowering, sustainable, but not corrupt, and instead toward such questions as what are the best means of empowering sustainable development while overcoming corruption. Nevertheless, there are specific means of development that demand ethical attention all their own. For instance, infrastructure projects, in particular, displace and resettle individuals, families, and sometimes entire communities. Dam projects (Narmada, Three Gorges) are especially well-known examples. Cases like these present specific dilemmas pitting well-being, equity, and empowerment against each other. These remain important cases within development ethics, cases where debate is not reduced but focused by the accepted framework of development ethics values. Other such issues include impacts of development on women and indigenous peoples, the role of science and technology in development, the role of religion in development, and a range of issues involving human security, peace, conflict, post-conflict development, and truth commissions.

Responsibilities

Special attention has been given in recent years to questions about the ethical responsibilities of the many actors and stakeholders involved in global development. This discussion merges with the wider discussion of collective and individual responsibilities to relieve hunger and poverty globally. Development ethicists might distinguish between three main approaches.

In the first approach, determining responsibilities is a coordination problem imposed by a collective duty to reduce such inequalities as hunger and poverty. This might derive from a Kantian duty to treat others as ends in themselves, from the universality of the recognized human right to social security, from a moral right to be protected against extreme poverty, from more specific capability-derived rights, or from other ethical perspectives.

A second might be called the "can implies ought" approach, which allocates responsibilities according to how well situated people, countries, or institutions are to contribute to poverty reduction and other tasks of development. While this approach can be traced back to Peter Singer, it has been renewed more recently by Sen and others who argue that with freedom and capability comes responsibility toward those whose freedom or capability is curtailed or diminished.

A third line of argument holds that the countries that created the current international order are culpable for much global poverty because these institutions and practices have encouraged diversion of capital away from poverty-reducing development toward maldevelopment that is corrupt, militaristic, and antidemocratic. So, it is argued, these world powers have duties of reparation for harmful effects of postcolonial development relations and institutions, and in some cases also for previous colonial exploitation.

One further perspective that development ethicists add to this debate stems from their concern for empowerment. Because the other approaches focus initially on who must act for the poor, they can overlook the need and moral right of these people to be the agents of their own development. To start instead with a concern for empowerment brings into focus the responsibilities of the many local agents who, while they may or may not have been part of the problem, are clearly part of the solution, including political parties, civil society organizations and lobby groups, and media organizations. An important question emerging in this context is how to reconcile subsidiarity (devolution of effective decision-making responsibility to the lowest-level stakeholders) with the moral responsibilities of local social actors (civil society, local parties, and media), local states, foreign states, and international institutions.

Bearing on Global Justice

Lines of influence between development ethics and theories of global justice run in both directions. Equity is one of the values distinguishing worthwhile development from maldevelopment, so unless it can be maintained that there is no such thing as global justice, development that promotes unjust global inequalities will be included as a form of maldevelopment. Hence development ethicists must concern themselves with the nature of global justice. On the other hand, development ethics contributes to knowing how movements and policies for global justice should be led. Any strategy for reducing global injustice will most likely involve development in the nonnormative sense: expanding perceived public and private goods. In that way, the means for reducing injustice are subject to the other values of development ethics: well-being, empowerment, environmental sustainability, human rights, cultural freedom, and integrity. In this way, development ethics adds considerable detail to our knowledge of acting justly, or good leadership for the cause of global justice.

Related Topics

► Agency, Collective
► Agency, Individual
► Basic Needs
► Capabilities Approach
► Crocker, David
► Development Assistance
► Dower, Nigel
► Environmental Sustainability
► Gender Justice
► Global Poverty
► Goulet, Denis
► Human Rights
► Nussbaum, Martha C.
► Pogge, Thomas
► Poverty
► Responsibility, Individual
► Sen, Amartya
► Singer, Peter
► Subsidiarity Principle
► Sustainable Development

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Development Institutions

► Basic Needs
► Development Assistance
► United Nations: Right to Development

Difference Principle

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In *A Theory of Justice* (*Theory*), John Rawls (1971) presents a conception of justice for regulating modern constitutional democracies. The central element of that conception is two principles of justice. The first principle is one of equal liberty, which requires that all individuals be accorded the same scheme of basic liberties, with those