

What is 'development ethics'?

Des Gasper

Essay for: Center for Values in International Development, Washington DC, July 2021

<https://www.centerforvalues.international/what-is-development-ethics/>

Each area of practice generates important ethical questions about priorities and procedures, rights and responsibilities. This holds true also for work in local, national and international development.

'Development ethics' can be understood then as discussion of the many and varied ethical questions that arise in development work. It is a field comparable to business ethics, medical ethics, environmental ethics and other areas of practical ethics. Yet unlike the situation in business, medicine, environment, and some other fields, development ethics remains relatively speaking too little known within the practice of international relief & development. This piece offers a brief introduction to development ethics and some suggestions for further reading.

First of all, development ethics can be seen as a field of attention, an agenda of questions about major value choices involved in processes of social and economic development. For example, what is good or authentic development? How should the benefits and corresponding costs be shared, within the present generation and between generations? Who decides, why, and how? What rights of individuals should be respected and guaranteed? When—in for example the garment trade, the sex trade, the 'heart trade' in care services, and the trade in human organs—should apparently free choice in the market be seen instead as the desperation behavior of people who have very little real choice? Besides such issues of policy ethics, come the numerous ethical issues, stresses and choices in daily professional life and interaction. (Gasper 2012, Glover 1995, Goulet 1988, Hamelink 1997 and Schwenke 2008 provide fuller statements of issues in development ethics; Slim 2015 discusses specifically humanitarian relief ethics.)

Second, development ethics is the body of work that has tried to systematically address such questions, and the sets of answers that are offered. This includes work from long before the label "development ethics" existed; for example, we find positions on some of the questions above from 19th century writers like Saint-Simon, John Stuart Mill, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Karl Marx. It also includes current work that may not use the name "development ethics" but which addresses various of these questions (e.g., Joseph Stiglitz's *Making Globalization Work*, 2007).

Third, and more narrowly, we have the literature and body of work which uses the name "development ethics". Its founder, if anyone should have that title, was the economist Louis-Joseph Lebret (1897-1966) who led a group called *Économie et Humanisme*, which worked first in France and then in many other countries. Similar work emerged in Spanish and Portuguese languages. Notable in connecting these traditions and spreading them into the English language literature was Lebret's protégé, the polyglot American social thinker Denis Goulet (1931-2006), for example in his book *The Cruel Choice* (1971). Others, such as David Crocker and Peter Penz, have linked Goulet's project to the research traditions of human development, human rights, and deliberative democracy. The literature on development ethics includes much by authors who are active in the human development approach which – unlike approaches which prioritize economic growth – puts improvement of human wellbeing at the center.

Fourth, more narrowly still, development ethics is the stream of work that has in addition highlighted a development ethics agenda and tried to institutionalize the field, in publications (e.g., Crocker 2008; Gasper & Lera St. Clair 2016; Drydyk & Keleher 2019), in scholarly associations, networks and in teaching and training courses. The first organization focused on the field, the International Development Ethics Association (<https://developmentethics.org/>), was initiated in 1984 and continues active.

Since ethics is a branch within philosophy, development ethics work has been found partly as one niche in applied ethics or ‘practical ethics’ within university worlds. However, just as environmental ethics is certainly not only engaged in by disciplinary philosophers, work on development ethics involves people from a wide range of backgrounds. The required types of immersion, in particular contexts each with their own reality, and in trying to understand and influence the methods and systems that structure routine practice, must be undertaken by people who come from and remain well connected to specific disciplinary and/or professional background(s). The main role for development ethics is therefore as an interdisciplinary and inter-profession meeting ground where diverse disciplines, concerns, approaches, and practice methodologies interact, and not primarily as an academic subdiscipline in philosophy. Only in this way can development ethics have substantial impacts on methods, movements, education, and meaningful results in the practice of international relief & development.

Why should one bother with ‘development ethics if one already utilizes such frameworks as the human development approach and/or capability approach, which are common within United Nations organizations and other national and international institutions that address development concerns? Human development thinking, as originally formulated by Mahbub ul Haq and others, contains both an ethical perspective and a theory of interconnections. Both arose in reaction to the traditional perspectives that prevailed – and remain widespread – in economics. The principle of interconnection holds that linkages that are not mediated and measured through economic means are often centrally important: for example, the linkages from lopsided income distribution to malnutrition to reduced learning capacity and lifetime earning capacity, or the linkages from skewed international trading systems to societal stresses and conflict in low-income countries. “Side-effects” and “collateral damage” are widespread; they are marginal only in terms of the attention often given to them, and they are certainly not marginal in their occurrence and their human significance. “Some get the gains, others get the pains”, observed the World Bank’s first sociologist, Michael Cernea. The principle of interconnection strengthens the ethics agenda as well as implying the need for wider scope in explanation—it brings a focus on the side-effects damage experienced by some people, for example when greater purchasing power and greater political power for some groups makes food unaffordable for weaker groups or leads to their displacement from lands that more powerful people now desire. One explicitly ethical perspective within development ethics, the capability approach, stresses that the ethical principles embodied in market-based economics do not suffice for public policy; instead, market values are important primarily insofar as they support valuable “beings” and “doings” that constitute a truly human life. This component in human development theory is vital, but it is far from giving a full ethical basis; for example, for how to handle conflicts between and within different people’s valued “beings and doings”. To think about the ethical meaning(s) inherent in being human, and about trade and sweat labor, forced displacement, and professional ethics, human development thinking needs to draw on longer standing discussions in development ethics. (See e.g.: Gasper 2012; Hamelink ed. 1997; Ingram & Derdak 2019; Penz et al. 2011; Schwenke 2007, 2008.)

Next, why should we bother with development ethics when we already have a well-established human rights tradition? Thinking in terms of rights is invaluable but it is insufficient. Rights often conflict, not all relevant values can be thought of in terms of rights, and rights language in isolation is at risk of becoming rigid and legalistic (and hence also not particularly motivational) as it becomes set in forms and institutions which are often not accessible for poor or otherwise marginalized peoples (Gasper 2007). The World Commission on Dams illustrated how processes of equitable and respectful negotiation are needed, besides declarations of rights (see Penz et al. 2011). We require a richer value basis than only rights or only capabilities, or even the two together, a basis which includes attention to the roots, processes, formats, and logics of ethical reasoning, and to attitudes of caring, altruism, and commitment to universal human dignity.

We can see in current development practice that human security thinking has gathered momentum, as it draws upon a deeper picture of human personality, emotions, sociability, interdependencies, and lived experience than has been used in some thinking on human rights and human development. The concern for achieving human safety and security pushes us to ask what the “human minimum” ought to be for each person, beyond possession of a set of reasoned preferences and capacities for choice? An exploited garment worker and the seller of a kidney may have made informed and reasoned choices, within their perceived context of agency, opportunity, and constraint. Human security thinking connects to the roots in humanistic psychology, humanistic philosophy and daily moral life that also fed Goulet’s thinking and related work in development ethics (see, e.g., Haq 1999, Gasper 2007). Similarly, in thinking about responsible lifestyles or responsible and respectful (and therefore more effective) forms of advice and influence, or in trying to interpret and counteract corruption, we can draft and use forms of institutionalized codes of rights and duties, but codes alone will not suffice to harness the motivation needed to support and sustain appropriate action.

For many people, it appears that the discussion of ethical questions and principles is somehow felt as embarrassing or unnecessary; in reality it is very far from being a luxury. As human beings we undertake our lives with notions about what are appropriate ends, rights and due respect. For all of us connected to development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, those ideas require thoughtful attention, for our better understanding, for better negotiation, more creative and effective partnerships, and for our orientation and motivation as agents of positive change.

Some sources on development ethics are given below:

Introductions

1. Crocker, D.A., 1996. International Development Ethics. A brief on-line introduction at: <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/OApp/OAppCroc.htm> .
2. Gasper, D., 2012. Development ethics – Why? What? How? A formulation of the field. *Journal of Global Ethics*, 8:1, 117-135. An expansion of the ideas in this article, including a response to objections to development ethics as supposedly futile or diversionary.
3. Gasper, D., 2021. Ethics of Development. The concluding chapter (ch. 30) in: *An Introduction to International Development*, 4th edition, eds. P. Haslam, J. Schafer and P. Beaudet; Oxford University Press Canada. Written for undergraduate students.

Surveys

4. Crocker, D.A., 2008. *Ethics of Global Development – Agency, Capability and Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
5. Drydyk, J., & L. Keleher, eds. 2019. *The Routledge Handbook of Development Ethics*. Routledge.
6. Gasper, D., & A. Lera St. Clair (eds.), 2016. *Development Ethics*. Routledge (first edition 2010, Ashgate). Twenty-eight selected articles from across development ethics.

Textbooks

7. Gasper, D., 2004. *The Ethics of Development: From economism to human development*. Edinburgh University Press. (2005: South Asia edition, SAGE). A general overview and textbook.
8. Ingram, D., & T.J. Derdak, 2019. *The Ethics of Development: An Introduction*. Routledge. A new textbook by scholars from Loyola University, Chicago.
9. Schwenke, C., 2008. *Reclaiming Value in International Development: The Moral Dimensions of Development Policy and Practice in Poor Countries*. Greenwood Press.
10. Slim, H., 2015. *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster*. Hurst.

Other references/suggestions

11. Ellerman, D., 2004. Autonomy-Respecting Assistance: Toward an Alternative Theory of Development Assistance. *Review of Social Economy*, 62, 149-168. Also in Gasper & Lera St. Clair (eds.).
12. Gasper, D., 2007. Human Rights, Human Needs, Human Development, Human Security. *Forum for Development Studies*, 2007/1, 9-43.
13. Gasper, D., 2008. Denis Goulet and the Project of Development Ethics: Choices in methodology, focus and organization. *Journal of Human Development*, 9(3), 453-474. Also in Gasper & Lera St. Clair (eds.).
14. Gasper, D. 1999. Ethics and the conduct of international development aid: charity and obligation. *Forum for Development Studies* Vol. 26, 1999/1, 23-57. Open access at <https://etico.iiep.unesco.org/en/resource/ethics-and-conduct-international-development-aid-charity-and-obligation>
15. Ghere, R.K. 2016. Ethical Dilemmas in International Development Nongovernmental Organizations. In: Farazmand A. (eds) *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_2462-1
16. Glover, J., 1995. The Research Programme of Development Ethics. Pp. 116-139 in Nussbaum, M. and Glover, J., eds. (1995) *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, Oxford University Press.
17. Goulet, D., 1971. *The Cruel Choice: A new concept in the theory of development*. New York: Atheneum. A classic early statement.
18. Goulet, D., 1988. Tasks and Methods in Development Ethics. *Cross Currents*, 38(2), 146-163. Also in Gasper & Lera St. Clair (eds.).
19. Goulet, D., 2006, *Development Ethics at Work: Explorations 1960-2002*. Routledge.
20. Hamelink, C. (ed.), 1997. *Ethics and Development - on making moral choices in development co-operation*. Netherlands: Uitgeverij Kok. Especially chapter by Cees Hamelink: 'Making Moral Choices in Development Co-operation: The Agenda for Ethics.'
21. Haq, M. ul., 1999. *Reflections on Human Development*. Oxford University Press, expanded edition.
22. Karns, Margaret, Timothy Shaffer and Richard K. Ghere, 2015. The Challenges of Accountability for International Nongovernmental and Civil Society Organizations. Pp. 180-196 in: *Accountable Governance: Problems and Promises*, edited by Melvin J. Dubnick and George H. Frederickson. M.E. Sharpe.

https://www.academia.edu/398233/The_Challenges_of_Accountability_for_International_Nongovernmental_and_Civil_Society_Organizations

23. Penz, P., J. Drydyk & P. Bose, 2011. *Displacement by Development: Ethics, Rights and Responsibilities*. Cambridge University Press. Major example of ethical diagnosis and practical advice, in the field of (threatened or actual) displacement of people by development projects.
24. Schwenke, C., 2007. *Formulating and Implementing an Effective Code of Ethics: Guidance Manual for Public Institutions*. Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank.
25. Stiglitz, J., 2007. *Making Globalization Work*, expanded edition, W.W. Norton.

Note: An earlier version of this essay was published in English and in French in *HD Insights* (HDR Networks), January 2009, Issue 24. The current version has been revised and updated.

Author: Des Gasper, International Institute of Social Studies (The Hague), Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands. <https://www.eur.nl/people/des-gasper>