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## **Developmental Ethics**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This essay delineates the key concerns of development ethics, focusing particularly on issues related to the recognition, distribution, and equity of costs and risks. The analysis extends to how these concerns manifest in the environmental impacts of economic development and explores ongoing efforts in human security analysis, aiming to integrate crucial development ethics considerations into a framework conducive to policy-relevant research and design. The essay contends that the development ethics agenda encompasses the examination of human costs, choices, and trade-offs in socioeconomic development processes, applying not only to events and choices in a geographically distinct 'South' and its interactions with the 'North' but also to global events and relations within the North. It emphasises the essential role of ethics throughout the research and policy formulation stages, advocating for early involvement to address issues related to the rights and interests of poor and vulnerable populations. The argument draws parallels with the World Social Science Report 2013, which underscores the necessary engagement of social sciences at all stages of environmental change research. Failing to incorporate ethical considerations at every stage risks neglecting the rights and interests of marginalised groups, allowing privileged interests to implicitly take precedence. The essay proposes human security analysis as a pertinent framework for posing critical questions and assessing threats to the fulfilment of needs for specific groups, especially the poor. The ethical role involves supporting responsible science that prioritises the lives of the poor and the most vulnerable while advocating for responsible development practices.

**Keywords:** Development ethics; human security; environmental change; climate change.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Development ethics examines fundamental value questions and choices inherent in societal and global development, encompassing economic, social, and political progress (Gasper, 2012; Udofia, 2021; Udofia, 2023). It assesses the trajectory of a society or the world, probing the nature of progress and its underlying criteria. It delves into the gains and losses, questions who benefits and who suffers, and evaluates the justifiability of these outcomes. The field addresses the material and psychological costs associated with development processes and programmes, scrutinising the criteria shaping our understanding of 'development.' It also explores the relationships between powerful and

marginalised groups, their rights, and responsibilities, while considering the choices available to individuals, groups, and national and international entities.

Development ethics analyses the interconnections and conflicts in socio-economic development within countries and globally, examining impacts beyond those measurable by markets and economic categories (Coe & Yeung, 2015; Okoko et al., 2023). This includes considerations of health, environment, culture, and the perceived meaningfulness of life. Although comparable to other practical ethics fields like business, medical, and environmental ethics, development ethics stands out due to the breadth of its themes (Crane, et al., 2019; Benson, 2023a; Benson, 2023b). It operates as an interdisciplinary space for research and public debate rather than a strictly defined scientific subdiscipline.

The term ‘development ethics’ has been in use since at least the 1950s, particularly in the Francophone and Hispanophone streams pioneered by Louis-Joseph Lebreton (Culebro Juárez & Gasper, 2021). The field draws from diverse sources in philosophy, religion, social science, and political ideology, even when not explicitly labelled as ‘development ethics.’ This essay outlines the key concerns of development ethics, focusing on issues related to recognising costs and risks, the equitable distribution of these impacts, the environmental consequences of economic development, and ongoing research in human security analysis—an approach that addresses crucial development ethics concerns in policy-relevant research and design.

## **HISTORY AND BACKGROUND**

In the 1940s, Louis-Joseph Lebreton and colleagues in France established the research and action network “Economie et Humanisme” in response to economic depression and restructuring in Europe (Cooper, 2004; Benson, 2019). This initiative, addressing associated deprivation and suffering, emphasised the holistic development of all individuals, becoming influential in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church (Massaro & Massaro, 2023). The network, advocating for “tous les hommes et tout l’homme” (all persons and all of the person), extended its influence globally in the 1950s, collaborating with like-minded actors on different continents (McNeill & StClair, 2009). Denis Goulet played a crucial role in enriching and communicating this work, leading to the emergence of an Anglophone literature under the name ‘development ethics’ (McNeill & StClair, 2009).

Another significant sub-area within development ethics, associated with economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, has evolved at the crossroads of welfare economics critiques and ideas from Aristotelian and Kantian ethics (Sen, 2017). Development ethics encompasses intersections between various streams in development practice and self-conscious ethics (Gasper, 2017). The diverse areas of socio-economic development policy, planning, and management within and between countries contribute to this dialogue. It also incorporates practice worlds like human rights activism, emergency relief, conflict response, humanitarian intervention, migration and refugee issues, as well as business ethics, labour conditions, and corporate social responsibility.

Theoretical perspectives engaging with the demands and dilemmas of development practice include academic moral philosophy, critiques of mainstream economics, theology, various humanist ethics, human rights theory and jurisprudence, feminist theory and care ethics, environmental philosophy, well-being research, and additional perspectives within professional and practical ethics. Development ethics serves as a zone of intersections, encompassing both a relatively small academic sub-discipline and a larger, loosely interconnected field of research and debate. Organisations

such as the International Development Ethics Association (established in 1984) and the Human Development and Capability Association (established in 2004) play a role in stimulating, coordinating, and institutionalising this work (Humphrey, et al., 2014).

### **CONCEPTUALISING THE SCOPE OF DEVELOPMENT ETHICS**

Development ethics has evolved over time, influenced significantly by the work of Le Bret and Goulet (Juárez, & Gasper, 2021). Initially conceived as applicable to present-day low-income countries due to the extreme needs and suffering in those regions, it has gradually transformed into a conceptual framework that encompasses all countries and historical periods. Scholars like Dower have emphasised the evaluation of societal trajectories for societies worldwide, challenging the equation of societal improvement with economic growth and highlighting the importance of considering costs, their distribution, and value- and strategy-alternatives (Werner & Lim, 2016; Udoette, 2015; Udoette, 2018).

Characteristic topics within development ethics extend beyond the concerns of impoverished nations and include:

1. Criteria for defining good societal and global development, exploring the universality of these criteria and the variability inherent in the concept of “development” as societal improvement (Udoette, 2023a).
2. Equity in the distribution of the benefits and burdens of development, examining the meanings and nuances of equity, identifying who bears the costs of different types of development, and addressing neglect of equity considerations. This investigation spans both contemporaneous equity and equity considerations over time.
3. Criteria for evaluating processes, not just outcomes, including the interpretation and significance of free choice (Umotong, 1999; Umotong, 2000). For instance, the essay questions whether the free choice of individuals in impoverished nations to engage in hazardous industries or migration implies their acceptance of all associated dangers (Udoette, 2023a).
4. The ethically sound design and management of development policies and actions, delving into the rights and duties of various stakeholders and the dynamics between groups with disparate strengths and fortunes (Umotong, 2004; Umotong, 2011). Practical development ethics assesses the incorporation of values in policy systems, legal frameworks, social practices, and individual actions. It evaluates the adequacy of values embedded in regulatory systems, including market processes and conventional economic evaluations, and strives to contribute to the creation of improved alternatives when necessary.

This essay focuses on the second area, specifically addressing the equity of the distribution of costs and risks, as it is particularly pertinent to the analysis and decision-making processes concerning environmental change.

### **THE ETHICS OF BENEFITS, COSTS, AND RISKS**

The ethics of benefits, encompassing inquiries into the essence of a good life, the fundamental requirements and rights of each citizen, and related topics, constitutes a significant and distinctive segment of development ethics (Irwin, 2011). Scholars like Sen and Nussbaum have been instrumental in generating substantial work on the meanings and status of well-being, human agency, and freedoms, acknowledging that wealth alone does not ensure well-being. For instance, the research group on Well-Being in Developing Countries at the University of Bath has integrated such theoretical frameworks with well-being theories from psychology and sociology, delving into the perceptions and determinants of well-being across diverse countries (Gough and McGregor, 2007).

However, the distinctive focus of development ethics lies in its attention to ill-being, insecurity, costs, and risks, particularly in discerning who bears these burdens. In socio-economic development processes, costs are inherent. The establishment of physical infrastructure, especially in the shift to urban societies, results in the displacement of numerous people. In the 21st century, an estimated 10–15 million individuals face physical displacement annually, often against their will and frequently without compensation or a share in the ensuing benefits. Scholars like Penz, Drydyk, and Bose (2011) document and discuss the rights of potential displaced persons, proposing entitlements such as being moved only for justifiable responsible development, consultation, rights of appeal, adequate compensation, and a share in arising benefits, with corresponding duties assigned to relevant agents.

Physical displacement incurs foreseeable costs, predominantly affecting relatively and absolutely poor individuals. Additionally, it entails unforeseen costs such as cultural loss, psychological disorientation, and anomie. Berger argues for a ‘calculus of meaning’ in development ethics to complement the ‘calculus of pain’ required for clear thinking about the sacrifice of interests for the benefit of others (Poruthiyil, 2013). Less visibly apparent but equally significant costs arise from carbon emissions, a central aspect of modern economic development that profoundly impacts global climate systems. The negative repercussions disproportionately affect low-income tropical countries that have contributed minimally to the emissions. These costs, along with numerous others, have been excluded from economic calculations, including those of private businesses. International financial institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, have imposed economic programmes on dependently indebted countries that disregard social and environmental costs, exposing poorer groups in these nations to the main risks resulting from such oversight.

The case of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 provides a detailed example of the consequences of economic policies that neglected social and physical effects (Adunimay, 2017). Following a substantial decline in national income per capita due to global market shifts, an IMF-designed economic programme enforced structural adjustment on an ethnically divided society, leading to devastating outcomes. Similar disasters, though less widely studied, have unfolded in various countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, and beyond. Economic analyses and policies, premised on the assumption that social and natural environments can absorb all external effects, have failed to consider the broader impacts on migration, international crime networks, arms and disease flows, and more. As stresses and interconnections intensify, the likelihood of crossing thresholds of safety becomes more pronounced.

Within market systems, the augmented wealth of certain individuals, whether intra-nationally or globally, competes for resources at the expense of poorer populations, diminishing their effective access. In severe instances, when permitted by laissez-faire authorities, this mechanism has led to mega-famines among impoverished groups, as seen in historical events such as the Irish famine of the 1840s and famines in colonial India during the 1870s, 1890s, 1900s, and 1940s (Sen, 1981). While such costs are at times disregarded, they are frequently deemed inevitable or attributed to the victims’ own fault. Lord Lytton, the Viceroy of India during the 1870s famine that claimed 6–10 million lives, argued on Malthusian grounds that India was overpopulated, contending that relief efforts would only foster dependency and result in a higher population (Davis, 2001).

The critical question of who bears the risks generated in development processes and who bears the consequences of subsequent crises is fundamental, as emphasized by Ulrich Beck (2011). The checkered history of privatising public services like water supply in low-income countries in recent decades underscores the tension between citizen

expectations of public services contributing to their protection, involving collective sharing of risks, and the expectations of private corporations. The latter often prioritise their rate of profit under contracts with the state, leaving others to handle any economic, environmental, or epidemiological crises that may arise.

A significant aspect of development ethics work centres on women, partly because they often serve as primary carers within families and act as the primary “shock absorbers” in times of adversity (Gasper & Truong, 2010). Women take care of the sick and infirm, engage in flexible or informal work when necessary for their families, and, since the 1990s, have become the majority group in international migration for work during a new era of national and global economic restructuring. Simultaneously, they are typically expected to balance the “calculus of meaning” for their family and community by visibly embodying a sense of traditional identity. Consequently, their own security and well-being are often compromised and at risk.

### **THE ETHICS OF MARKETS**

A significant portion of development ethics focuses on the ethical assumptions and potential limitations of market systems. This includes examining the values they incorporate, emphasise, or overlook as benefits or costs, their consideration of distributive and procedural equity, and their influence on or susceptibility to shaping public policy (Graafland, 2006). Fundamental questions revolve around defining appropriate boundaries for markets. This includes preventing the acquisition of public office and execution of public duties from becoming market processes where positions go to the highest bidders, ensuring access to essential resources like water and drugs is not solely based on the ability to pay a free market price, and critically evaluating claims that corporations have a duty only to maximise their profits. In general, there is a need to question the notion that sustainable principles of rightness and goodness are limited to contracts accepted by (albeit unequal) bargainers.

The issue of determining which things should be treated as commodities has not been extensively discussed in development ethics due to its focus on situations involving great wealth confronting great poverty, where markets can invade, dominate, and corrupt various relationships. The interpretation of corruption and the status of human organ sales, intellectual property rights, and businesses like military mercenaries necessitate exploration. Some authors argue that military mercenaries fall outside the valid bounds of the willing-seller-willing-buyer paradigm, contributing to the inhumanity and conflict they supposedly justify.

The ethical evaluation of market arrangements and criteria prompts consideration of the physical, social, cultural, and political environments and prerequisites of markets, along with the values required to respect and maintain these environments, which can be harmed by economic activity. Reproduction, encompassing environmental, biological, emotional, and psychological aspects through families, caregiving, and meaning systems, may be undervalued when economics becomes overly focused on immediate measured production. Thus, the precautionary principle needs to be applied to the non-physical environments of markets and policies. This broadening of the “sustainable development” approach is sometimes referred to as a “sustainable human development” perspective or a “human security” perspective, emphasising that human and global societies rely on many shared public goods, including concepts of the common good and common responsibilities (Hickel, 2020). This perspective was articulated in “Human Security Now,” the report of the (Ogata-Sen) Commission on Human Security (Khou, 2023), initiated by the Government of Japan and the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan.

## **A HUMAN SECURITY PERSPECTIVE**

A human security approach seeks to comprehensively and contextually examine the lives of ordinary individuals, aiming to protect and empower them in addressing threats to their fundamental rights and needs (Umotong, 2014; Umotong, 2021). This includes taking preventive action when appropriate. The approach is people-centered, focusing on the specific life circumstances of distinct groups rather than relying solely on broader categories such as ‘the nation’ or ‘the economy.’ This formulation was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2012. Examining people’s lives holistically helps ground concerns for human rights in an understanding of bodily and emotional needs, global interconnections, and the intersecting circumstances of everyday life.

The Rwanda disaster serves as an illustration of themes highlighted in human security thinking, emphasizing the interconnection of economic issues, identity issues, and physical security (Leaning & Arie, 2000; Umotong, 2023; Umotong, 2023). It also underscores reactions when people feel threatened and the global interconnections of countries through markets, tastes, trends, arms trade, and media. A human security framework suggests that the consequences of disintegration, similar to the Rwanda scenario, such as anger, violence, state collapse, drug exports, disease, and traumatized refugees, will not remain confined but can spread and have impacts worldwide (Kozol, 2014).

Human security analysis aims to facilitate a flexible exploration of lived experiences of insecurity and provide a human-scale focus in both understanding and evaluation. This approach stems from a commitment to basic human rights and human dignity. It examines the particular situation and priority vulnerabilities of specific groups or types of people, emphasizing that vulnerability and insecurity result from the intersection of numerous factors. Economic globalization and global environmental change, for instance, have additive and interactive effects, triggering further reactions. Groups most threatened by global environmental changes often face simultaneous threats from global economic changes, residing in more exposed locations, experiencing greater damage, having less protection, and exhibiting lower resilience in crisis recovery due to their lack of resources. Narrow analytical frameworks restricted by disciplinary or national boundaries miss these intersections and fail to capture the real insecurities and responses of vulnerable populations. Scientific analyses may need to be guided by ethical criteria to consider and duly remember people, achieving greater ethical and explanatory adequacy (O’Brien, St. Claire, and Kristoffersen, 2010).

## **DEVELOPMENT, ETHICS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE**

Contemplating and formulating responses to global environmental change intricately intertwine with the inherent concerns of development ethics. The inquiry into how society is progressing into the future is imperative, acknowledging that transformations are not inherently beneficial, equitable, or democratic. A critical exploration of winners and losers becomes essential, considering pervasive interconnections at both intra- and international levels. For instance, the impact of land acquisition for biofuels on displacing impoverished populations and affecting food production must be scrutinised.

An examination of climate change literature highlights that studies informed by diverse perspectives tend to perceive the challenge of climate change as more serious (Wise et al., 2014). Approaches that neglect the lived experiences of impoverished individuals due to restrictive disciplinary methodologies or Northern-centric frames yield overly narrow diagnoses and proposals. The World Development Report 2010 on climate change exemplifies this trend, recognising climate change as a fundamental problem but framing it in economic terms for cost-benefit analysis. This approach tends

to downplay the effects on the poor, given their limited purchasing power, and is inclined to prioritise gains for the affluent over losses for the impoverished.

Introducing a development ethics perspective into climate change discussions aids in uncovering implicit assumptions regarding whose interests hold paramount importance in guiding analyses. In engineering design, a “conservative” approach incorporates adverse scenarios during the design phase to minimise the likelihood of dangerous outcomes. However, in climate change discussions, optimistic assumptions and underestimated risks are labelled as “conservative.” Employing these assumptions involves ensuring a high level of confidence that a hazardous outcome will materialise, despite uncertainties. This contrasts with engineering design, where “conservative” assumptions aim to prevent dangerous outcomes from potential hazards.

The terminology used in climate change discussions underscores the burden of proof placed on those cautioning against danger. The precautionary principle, emphasising due care to avoid endangering lives and health, is often neglected. In the absence of certainty about the extent of unacceptable climate change-related impacts, demands for more evidence are made to avoid the “risk” of unnecessarily reducing emissions. Concurrently, the risk of potential serious damage to the lives of vulnerable individuals is tolerated. The assumptions and estimates deemed “least objectionable” are those least likely to encounter objections from affluent, highly-mobilised greenhouse gas emitters. These assumptions may be strongly objectionable to impoverished and non-mobilised potential victims, who typically lack a voice in such discussions.

### **DEVELOPMENT ETHICS AS A FIELD IN PRACTICAL ETHICS**

The fundamental rationale for the existence of development ethics within the domain of practical ethics mirrors that of related fields such as business ethics and medical ethics. Practical issues abound with inherent ethical dimensions, and genuine choices entail implied ethical considerations, leading to potentially divergent ethical outcomes. Moreover, a comprehensive grasp of and engagement in public action and social transformation necessitates a discerning focus on ethics since individuals are influenced by and utilise ethical ideas alongside other factors. This influence is evident in the impacts of religion and human rights thinking. While human rights thinking is indispensable, it is not exhaustive. Conflicts among human rights often arise, necessitating prioritization. The formulation of specific, feasible, and defensible duties aligned with proposed human rights can be challenging. Therefore, it is imperative to consider virtues, not solely rights or duties. Furthermore, legalistic human rights approaches may be engulfed in intricate legal systems, predominantly accessible to the affluent and influential.

Simultaneously, human rights are likely to constitute an integral component of practical development ethics, drawing essential lessons from the history of human rights. The relevance of human rights thinking transcends its incorporation into legal systems; it extends to approaches in policy design, planning, and education and exerts influence in various spheres, including business, civil society, and everyday life. An additional lesson pertains to the pragmatic approach required in a world characterised by diverse perspectives and cultures. Human rights work endeavours to establish consensus on fundamental human rights and principles rather than precisely delineating the reasons for their acceptance.

In the same vein, Penz et al. identify the concept of ‘responsible development’ grounded in values that have gained international acceptance through a series of intergovernmental agreements in recent decades (Wilmsen & Webber, 2015). Responsible development must refrain from causing harm or violating human well-being and security, equity, sustainability, participation, cultural freedom, other human rights,

and integrity. Penz et al. elucidate how these principles can be meticulously applied to issues involving physical displacement, delineating the rights and responsibilities of various stakeholders, including national and international actors, governments, investors, and local residents.

## CONCLUSION

The agenda of development ethics revolves around scrutinising the human costs, choices, and ‘trade-offs’ embedded in socio-economic development processes. This scrutiny is applicable not only to events and decisions in a geographically distinct ‘South’ and its interactions with the ‘North’ but also encompasses events and relationships within the North and worldwide. The ethical dimension should not be treated as an appendage to the final stage of contemplating research findings and policy recommendations when ‘considering the implications’ or evaluating proposal acceptability. As discussed earlier, ethics should be an integral part of all stages of research and discussion, particularly in delineating areas for attention, framing categories, and formulating questions (Adams, 2007).

The 2013 *World Social Science Report* echoed a similar sentiment, advocating the necessary involvement of the social sciences at all research stages related to environmental change (Castree, 2017). Failing to incorporate ethics throughout the process, especially concerning the rights and interests of impoverished and vulnerable populations, might result in these issues being overlooked entirely. For instance, the exposure of such groups to potentially low-probability but highly damaging events may be disregarded, with attention inadvertently prioritising the interests of already privileged groups. Utilising the human security analysis framework is crucial for posing these ethical questions and assessing the threats to fulfilling the needs of specific impoverished groups. The ethical role extends to endorsing responsible science that conscientiously considers the lives of the poor and vulnerable, supporting sustainable development efforts (Zhang, et al., 2019).

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