



Chloe Schwenke

Reclaiming Value in International Development

The Moral Dimensions of
Development Policy and Practice
in Poor Countries

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PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut
London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schwenke, Chloe.

Reclaiming value in international development : the moral dimensions
of development policy and practice in poor countries / Chloe Schwenke.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-313-36332-0 (alk. paper) —

ISBN 978-0-313-36334-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Developing countries—Economic policy. 2. Economic development—
Developing countries—Moral and ethical aspects. 3. Social justice—
Developing countries. I. Title.

HC59.7.S356 2009

174—dc22 2008038703

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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reproduced, by any process or technique, without the
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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2008038703

ISBN: 978-0-313-36332-0

ISBN: 978-0-313-36334-4 (pbk.)

First published in 2009

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the
Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National
Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my father, Colonel C. Ray Schwenke, USMC, Ret.

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Preface

Human survival, well-being, and flourishing—the field of international development tackles these fundamentals. The practitioners, scholars, policymakers, and specialists active in international development are, by and large, mission-driven people who have chosen this vocation because they really believe that they can make the world a better place. They care about the plight of the billions of persons in poverty or suffering under repressive rule, and they strive to do something meaningful about it. Yet despite their caring, their sense of mission, and their dedication and persistence, these people rarely engage with each other or with outsiders about their moral values. International development—an area of human endeavor rich in moral content—seems to lack a common moral vocabulary.

This book is intended to begin to plug that gap by offering a view of international development through the moral lens of development ethics, in language that is understandable and relevant to practitioners, policymakers, bureaucrats, and interested persons—anyone immersed in or perplexed by international development. Readers will broaden their own understanding and effectiveness by seeing development framed in the language and concepts of applied ethics, without requiring recourse to a doctoral degree in philosophy or ethics.

Many of the book's anecdotes and observations are situated in Uganda, where from 2005 to 2006 I taught ethics and carried out my research as a Fulbright professor with the Ethics and Public Management Programme at the Faculty of Arts, Makerere University. After over 25 years of prior service, mostly based abroad (Kenya, South Africa, Philippines, and England) as an architect and planner, and later as a specialist in local governance, the year in Uganda was a unique personal opportunity to take stock. This book is

the product of that stocktaking, and while its chapters are nearly all based in Uganda, the situations that each chapter describes are relevant throughout the developing world.

Ethics, to be effectively applied in a cross-cultural setting, requires reflection and evaluation sensitive to local realities and local values, while still being authentic and responsive to the moral values that inform the observer. I have included personal anecdotes and short case studies both to ground my own moral perspective and to connect the reader with a sense of the realities that development practitioners frequently face. My 14 years of living and working in Africa, and my many additional years working elsewhere in the developing world, taught me that while abstract moral principles and theories have an essential role to play in structuring ethical systems, nothing takes the place of being there. International development is about people, and I have chosen to share some of my experiences with people in developing countries to connect the reader with their lives, hopes, and struggles.

The field of development ethics has come of age, and as will be seen in these chapters, offers many robust approaches and insights to diagnose, understand, and respond to the urgent demands of development across many sectors. While covering all development topics and sectors is beyond the scope of any single volume, this book does apply both moral intuition and several of the most prominent moral theories to offer insights, guidance, and perhaps some observations new to readers on education, ethical leadership, deliberative participation, integrity and corruption, hunger, conflict, urbanization, the treatment of minorities, and the measurement of ethical performance. Each of these sectors, as well as the many aspects of international development that I have been unable to include, has its own rich literature of theory, lessons learned, case studies, methodologies, and technical reviews. Few have been viewed through the moral lens. This book has been written therefore as a small effort to redress that curious imbalance and to enrich and empower a dialogue among practitioners, inviting them to embrace the language and concepts of development ethics.

Acknowledgments

This book evolved as did I, over many years of professional practice and teaching, and through profound changes in my life. The contributions to this evolution are legion, and I will barely do them all justice.

More than anyone, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my spouse, Christine Anne Lucas, and my children, Ian Schwenke and Audrey Schwenke, whose patience at times was sorely tested as I allocated seemingly endless hours of family time to this endeavor. Through these transitioning times, where my authoring a book was but one of her life's smaller challenges, Christine's love, loyalty, and understanding have been beyond measure.

I am also thankful for the financial support offered by Marina Fanning and Larry Cooley of Management Systems International (MSI) in Washington, D.C., without which my year in Uganda—which provided the crucible for the formulation of this book—would have been impossible.

Ann Beltran deserves special praise for her tireless editorial efforts, her insightful suggestions, and her honest and constructive criticism at key points in the writing of this book.

Understanding Uganda was critical to my thinking, and I would especially like to thank Sarah Kihika for her thoughtful advice and unwavering support as I grew to understand development issues in that country and to understand my own identity. Other helpful advice and contributions came from Kevin Doris Ejon, Julius Kaggwa, Nikki Salongo, and my dear friend Byaruhanga Rukooko. My colleagues at the Department of Philosophy at Makerere University in Kampala were also instrumental in shaping my views, and in particular, I thank Edward Wamala and Gervase Tusabe. Other Ugandans who also deeply influenced my thinking include Edgar Agaba, Ashaba-Aheebwa,

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Angela Bafokuzara, Lillian Keene Mugerwa, Damon Kitabire, Sam Mukasa-Kintu, Peter John Opio, and Hannington Sengendo. The support of Alyson Grunder at the American Embassy and Bharat Gupta at Landplan in Uganda was also most appreciated.

Finally, I offer deep appreciation to my loving sister, Barbara Cartmell, who has supported me in so many ways throughout this creative endeavor and during these times of change.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Makerere University is Uganda's oldest, and many would say its best, institution of higher education. The campus sits atop one of Kampala's many plentiful hills, and it's a landmark in this nation's capital. From 2005 to 2006, it was my pleasure to serve as a Fulbright professor at Makerere, but getting to and from the campus by car each day meant navigating through the inevitable traffic jams at the chaotic Wandegeya intersection. As I would sit in my car, often lost in some random thought, I not infrequently encountered a tap on my window. A woman, dressed in simple and worn clothes, holding a very young and rather dirty looking baby, was seeking a handout. Hers was a regular presence there, enduring the high pollution and dangerous driving tactics of taxis and other vehicles and subjecting her small baby to this extremely unhealthy environment as she sought a handout. My question to myself was always the same: should I give her some money?

The arguments about how best to handle such solicitations are well rehearsed. Giving her the requested handout of small change might have provided her with the means to achieve a modicum of relief in an otherwise austere, harsh existence. It might also have encouraged her dependency and could have been an inducement for her to remain in that unsavory environment, subjecting both her and her innocent, vulnerable baby to the many dangers there. Any handouts given may also have discouraged her from seeking a more sustainable and wholesome lifestyle somewhere else, perhaps back in a rural district among her extended family. Also, there was my own sense of identity and connection with those around me to consider; I pondered the mildly discomfiting thought that by providing such handouts, she and others like her would stop seeing me as a person, but only as another rich so-called “*mzungu*”—a wealthy white foreigner and a source of easy money.

And should I have decided to give her a handout, then where would I stop? Would I give her something every single time I saw her (and if not, why not)? Ought I to have invested in her welfare more substantially, finding a way to learn more about her and her history, and helping her to find a way out of poverty—assuming that she was motivated to pursue such a course? What if she had some deeper psychological problems, which rendered her unable to hold a job and threatened her competence as a parent? And, of course, what of the many, many more persons like her—why this one woman and her baby, and not them? Were all the poor people living near me in Kampala to adopt her tactics, there would be innumerable taps at my window each day.

As an American living in Uganda, I frequently encountered such daily reminders from many beleaguered victims of poverty. Before and following my year in Uganda, while living and working in Washington, DC, coming face to face with poverty was and is a less frequent—and usually less extreme—experience. Yet despite Africa feeling like a second home after 14 years of work based there, still the majority of my working and teaching career associated with international development was conceived of, and managed from, Washington. Many others who are practitioners of international development, teachers or theorists of international development, or policymakers in international relations, live relatively insulated lives divorced from the daily Wandegeya intersection, face-to-face encounters with poverty. While these colleagues in international development are almost certainly well intentioned, sensitive, and caring persons, the problems of development that they wrestle with may necessarily appear abstract and remote to them. Those living in Uganda haven't the excuse of distance to explain their moral detachment from the plight of those in poverty around them, yet in my experience, wealthier Ugandans and foreigners (expatriates, or expats) also often treated poverty as an abstract phenomenon. They avoided looking the problem in the face.

The abstraction of poverty isn't in itself wrong, but consciously choosing to ignore poverty raises many moral concerns. Abstraction can be a powerfully objective tool; using empirical data to focus objectively and impersonally on poverty and the plight of the victims of poverty is an essential and responsible part of the process of seeking to analyze, understand, and find solutions to this complex phenomenon. Through our research and observations, we regularly encounter the statistical footprint of global poverty and injustice, poor governance and corruption, international crime and terrorism, brutally violent conflict, and the many incarnations of globalization. In both the more economically advanced countries (the North) and the less developed and poorer countries (the South), many persons struggle to understand why poverty, poor governance, and conflict are such intractable problems to remedy, but the moral weight of the dilemmas has been less clearly articulated. Is the reminder of the Wandegeya intersection beggars and the likely prognosis for the life of that mother and her infant just too painful to ponder in too bright and personal a light? Perhaps surrendering one's objectivity to confront poverty at a personal level is even counterproductive to our ability

to find sustainable solutions. The statistical lens is more tractable, less prone to emotionally clouded or sentimental reactions, and more relevant in our economics-based worldview.

Economism, however, provides but one perspective on extreme poverty and the consequences of conflict and injustice.¹ I would argue that we lose something important when we convert the faces and the voices of the poor into statistical data, and—for those of us involved in international development, peace building, and good governance—that through such abstraction we become less sensitive to the urgency and the moral dimension of development. While the moral burden of those afflicted by poverty, poor governance, or conflict may be more acute than we as individuals can cope with, or effectively respond to, I am certain that ignoring or abstracting away the personal tragedies of poverty does nothing to diminish the moral burden. The mother and infant at Wandegeya will be there today and tomorrow. Whenever I return, I will have to look her in the eye again (or, if feeling cowardly or perplexed, close my window and pretend not to see her). Yet even if I choose not to look, the moral dilemma is inescapable and all around us. We live in societies defined by interdependencies and by a complex web of obligations, many of which are moral and ethical.

If this is true (and intuitively each of us knows that it is so), then why is it that in development dialogue, research, policy, and practice, we seldom deal directly—in *moral terms*—with the moral issues and moral language of development, governance, and conflict? Where is the moral lens through which to see, evaluate, understand, and respond to these important challenges?

As I will argue, the moral lens is both available and a potentially powerful component in the development toolkit. First, however, we must see what other lenses we have grown accustomed to, and reliant upon, and why.

ECONOMISM: THE ECONOMICS PARADIGM

As individuals, we are drawn to live in relationship to others, and we structure our social institutions and governance arrangements to make this possible and, ideally, even pleasurable and rewarding. To a considerable extent, our own personal development and the meaning that we derive out of our lives are products of interactions with other persons. We have defined our particular social order to set the terms of our daily social interactions, which in turn—along with the influence of our individual character and virtues—establishes the safety and freedoms that we enjoy, the obligations that we bear, the justice that we perceive, and the opportunities that we are able to pursue. Society shapes us, and we shape society.

It is no surprise then that we are so preoccupied with understanding and improving our social world. In this endeavor, those of us involved in development have been trained to view our social world and our constituent social institutions primarily through the neoclassical economics lens. The discipline of neoclassical economics is a potent tool for perceiving important parameters

and components of society, but, like any lens, it shows only part of the spectrum. We frequently limit our area of interest to that spectrum; when we speak about development, we often add the adjective *economic*—economic development. Sometimes we equate development with economic growth, as if growth alone were the goal, instead of economic growth as a means to achieve human flourishing. Yet the spectrum of human development is wider and more than economics can explain; society also embraces important political, psychological, spiritual, and moral dimensions. It is curious, then, that the institutions that we establish (or that evolve) to govern society are generally described primarily in economic and political terms. The spiritual aspects of our being are compartmentalized away into separate domains, often under formal religious institutions, while psychology and personal morality are relegated to the contemplation of the murky inner workings of each individual or to an evaluation of conceptual behavior, cognitive processes, genetic epistemology, or the behavioral aspects of personal moral development.²

Similarly, for those of us engaged in the general and policy dialogue of development, the morality and ethics of society and the existence of an intricate web of moral obligations and moral community are topics that are seldom discussed in any comprehensive way (other than by philosophers and ethicists). Our relative silence in this sphere may be due to the apparent lack of a robust common language of values, morality, and ethics, particularly in comparison to the authoritative and largely unified language of economics and political science. The literature of development portrays this perceptual bias, being dominated by economists and to a lesser extent by political and social scientists, with well-known thinkers from these disciplines featuring prominently.³

The economism that I am describing, based on neoclassical economics, reigns supreme—and for a good reason. Even with the complexities of regression analyses and economic theory, the economics lens is relatively easy to apply, and the empirical dimensions of development, governance, and conflict that economics illuminates for us are essential to our effectiveness and understanding. The statistics themselves are amoral and value free, but the message that they convey can range from heartening to sobering to alarming, when placed in the context of the misery and suffering of underdevelopment. Heartening, as the numbers tell us that people do in fact care about those less fortunate; in response to the devastation wrought by the Asian tsunami of December 26, 2004, the world responded with an unprecedented contribution of over US\$12 billion (Efron, 2005). Yet despite this demonstrated ability of the more developed world to rush to the aid of the less developed world, the numbers also describe a more sobering reality: rich countries currently spend less than this sum—or about US\$11 billion annually—for *all* development assistance targeted at basic social services. Over 60 percent of this comes from individuals in rich countries through contributions to international NGOs; the other 40 percent comes from their governments (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2003,

p. 290). Estimates place this combined sum at just 3.6 percent of the amount that would actually be needed to eradicate severe poverty,⁴ or US\$300 billion annually, a figure that would lessen significantly over time (Pogge, 2002). This sum may sound like a lot, but the surprising reality is that were we to raise annual development expenditures to this level, those living in the wealthiest countries (who only represent 15 percent of the world's population) would experience an almost imperceptible diminution in their quality of life.⁵ Yet current global annual funding levels at US\$11 billion are less than the financial response to the tsunami alone (World Bank, 2004, p. 253). Why the discrepancy between the response to one dramatic natural tragedy and the response to a long-standing global crisis?

Through the economics lens, we can see that many of the poor clearly are not living quality lives. Around the world, the view through the economics lens is alarming. There are 2.4 billion (mostly female) persons who lack access to basic sanitation, and more than 1 billion (mostly female) persons who now exist on unsafe water (UNDP, 2003, pp. 6, 9, 87). Stepping down from the billions plateau, nearly 800 million persons are undernourished (UNDP, 1998, p. 49). Perhaps even more profoundly disturbing, 34,000 children younger than five years old die each day from hunger and preventable disease—that's almost 24 children each and every minute of every month of every year (U.S. Dept of Agriculture, 1999). If awesome numbers start to sound fuzzy, think in fractions. About one-third of all human deaths are linked to poverty, deaths that are in most cases preventable (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1999).

Compared to these deaths due to poverty, perhaps the mother and infant begging at the Wandegeya intersection in Kampala are among the fortunate ones? But is the mere fact of continued survival the appropriate measure of fortunate, of what a human life ought to be? Where ought we to draw the threshold of basic services, basic nutrition, even basic human rights and freedoms? How do we value a human life, and on what basis do we allocate the available—but woefully inadequate—resources to those in need? What more ought we to do to assist others in need, and why? What responsibility do those in need have to be the agents for their own solutions to their poverty and their own development? Are we obliged only to facilitate their development, leaving the ultimate responsibility to the poor? When we draw the boundaries of our moral community, who ought to be included, and who left out? Beyond the obvious implications of political unrest and insecurity, and the threats that the disgruntled poor pose to our self-interested goals, why ought we to care about—and act to alleviate—the plight of those less fortunate, particularly if they live so far away?

When we move to the questions of *ought*, the economics lens grows dark, or at best, blurry. Even utilitarianism, which is the moral theory that underpins neoclassical economism and that advocates maximizing utility for all, fails to provide answers to critically important questions of how development *ought* to be distributed equitably, while at the same time protecting important

individual rights and freedoms from being eroded for the sake of the greater good. Using *ought* conjures up a moral vocabulary and simultaneously challenges us to reflect upon what morality means for each individual, for our society, and for our choice of priorities and actions. As soon as we move more directly into this moral landscape, however, some yawning chasms confront us. Morality is about values, but whose values? What is *morality* anyway?

Bernard Gert provides perhaps one of the best definitions of morality: “Morality is an informal public system applying to all rational persons, governing behavior that affects others, and includes what are commonly known as moral rules, ideals, and virtues and has the lessening of evil or harm as its goal” (Gert, 1998, p. 13).

With the concept of morality being so relative, and so imprecise, what is any person contemplating international development to gain from a view through the moral lens, other than confusion and discord? The moral perspective—the moral point of view—must be ordered if it is to be of value as a tool for improving human development. Ethics is the ordering of moral value systems, and through ethics, moral concepts can be systematically considered, evaluated, and applied.

THE MORAL MORASS: WHOSE VALUES?

The moral vocabulary often is confusing to many, particularly as it is not yet commonplace in the dialogue on development, governance, and conflict. As indicated above, morality encompasses a variety of value systems, which sometimes overlap and often compete. Cultural values, religious values, secular values, and idiosyncratic personal values all contribute to the shaping of a society’s sense of identity and purpose—a society’s set of shared values—but that identity is forged as much by the conflict of values as by their harmony. When society takes on the deliberative task of resolving conflicting values and articulating a set of shared values, this in turn helps to clarify the moral obligations of all members of that society and sheds light on the relationship of a society to other communities, nations, or groups.

Ethics is the discipline that a society uses to reconcile and reach a consensus of values that otherwise conflict.⁶ Ethics brings order and structure to moral values and creates rational and persuasive moral systems by considering fundamental principles that define values and that specify and assign moral obligations, and by examining the characteristics of virtue and vice. By deliberating about what is *good* or *right* (and *bad* and *wrong*), in terms of actions or human character, a society brings some order to its moral values.⁷

CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

International development and related areas of research, policy, and practice that include governance and peace building are pursued in a formal process