INTRODUCTION

At the most basic level of ethical behavior, individuals have an obligation to attend to the needs of others. As ethicist Peter Singer argues:

if it is within our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it (Singer 1972, p. 231).

This dictum might be fairly easy to follow when it comes to direct individual actions, but when it comes to policy-making, and especially to international policy-making, the consequences of actions are not clearly defined, nor are the relationships between actions and consequences well understood.

For example, efforts to end global hunger have long revolved around financial aid and food donations. This foreign charity was grounded in the ethical obligation felt by people in wealthy countries to improve the well-being of people in poor countries. Food aid also had a certain appeal. For taxpayers and for farmers, it was easy to compare food aid to direct individual acts of charity. While ethical obligations normally involve some sacrifice, foreign aid, whether in cash or in kind, allowed richer countries to provide assistance to poor countries without requiring any substantial sacrifice by taxpayers. On the contrary, in-kind aid (like direct food aid) enabled farmers in rich countries to benefit from their own charity by creating an outlet for ‘surplus’ commodities. Unfortunately, the appeal of direct food aid did not match the result. Although short-term emergency food aid has its place, there are few, if any, indicators that demonstrate long-term benefits from charitable food aid. In this instance, actions that satisfy an individual sense of morality can be counterproductive.

In addition to the ethical imperatives to help the less fortunate, some ethical constructs rely on the notion of self-interest (enlightened or otherwise). This encompasses arguments that the poor, with higher birthrates and few incentives to safeguard natural resources, are a strain on the world’s ecosystems. (Notwithstanding, of course, the fact that the rich consume much more of the world’s natural resources than do the poor.) Some also argue that wealthy countries have a stake in economic development as a means to stem unpopular or unsustainable immigration. Business and farm leaders in developed countries argue that economic development is essential to the creation of an increased demand for food and agricultural products.

More recently, some have been promoting economic development as a tool to combat terrorism, which they view as being rooted in the hopelessness of poverty. In the last 20 years or so, the ethical duty to aid the less fortunate and the various self-interested rationales have been supplemented by the more complex concept of a ‘negative duty to dismantle unjust structures and to halt injurious action’ (Crocker, 2002). Unlike the positive duties of aiding those less fortunate than oneself or the ethical rationales of enlightened self-interest, dismantling unjust structures and halting injurious actions can impose real costs (at least in the short term, and at a political as well as an economic level) on rich countries, and on some individuals in poor countries as well.

However, the difficulty lies in understanding just what constitutes unjust structures and injurious actions. For example, the agricultural subsidies that have been at the center of the Doha trade negotiations benefit some net-food-importing countries by keeping food prices lower than they would otherwise be, while harming those developing countries that attempt to compete with subsidized products. High tariffs on sugar in the EU benefit those countries that have preferential access to the European market, but damage those countries that must compete in a very artificial world sugar market. In fact, according to many analysts, the very food aid that was motivated by one ethical construct often falls into the category of ‘injurious actions,’ which need to be halted by another ethical construct (Crocker 2002). Even worse, food aid reassures citizens that they are easing the suffering of the poor, on the one hand, while at the same time their tax dollars and government policies are making it more difficult for the poor to escape poverty.

The ethical obligation to halt injurious actions complemented emerging economic analysis demonstrating that the economic policies of the wealthy nations were indeed imposing a demonstrable cost on poorer countries, and that the potential benefits from trade dwarfed the small, and declining, levels of foreign aid. These two complementary understandings formed some of the basis for the Uruguay Round Agreement, in which countries began to restrain domestic agricultural policies that distorted world trade. Setting aside for the moment whether the actual Uruguay Round reforms were effective at disciplining agricultural trade, the philosophical and economic underpinnings of the Uruguay Round’s disciplines on domestic agricultural policies marked a sharp departure from the GATT’s disciplines on border measures.

Coincident with these emerging views on the duties of various actors in the international policy arena is an evolving understanding of the objectives of economic growth. The basic doctrine of liberal economics – that maximizing incomes is an end in itself regardless of the impact on the poor – has been almost completely repudiated in recent years. In a tribute to Friedrich Hayek in the Financial Times (21 September 2004), Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen reminded readers that even Hayek, whom many consider to be the father of liberal economic theory, insisted that any institution, including the market, be judged by its role in advancing human liberty and freedom, not just in generating more income. In place of this utilitarian construct is a more complex notion of development that balances the goal of increasing economic growth with other goals, such as alleviating poverty, hunger, and malnutrition.