CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF ETHICS

INTRODUCTION

Attempts to bring the word ‘ethics’ into discussions about poverty and hunger typically give rise to one of the following two reactions: ‘Yes, of course, it is all about ethics,’ or ‘Oh no! Please, no more rhetoric – we need action.’

Concerning the first reaction it is fair to say that, for more than half a century initiatives have, in the name of ethics, been taken by individuals, organizations, and governments to try to alleviate or prevent poverty and hunger in the less-developed parts of the world. The key ethical message has been that those who have much more than they need to sustain a decent life have a moral duty to help those who, without assistance, are bound to suffer and die prematurely. This message has served as the more or less unquestioned background of initiatives to set up programs and policies.

However, although the motivation has been ethical, ethics has not been much discussed in relation to development. The obstacles to carrying through the initiatives have been assumed to be of either a technical or a political nature. The technical issues have been to find the most efficient policies and mechanisms to alleviate and prevent poverty and hunger in developing countries. The political issues have been about motivation. Specifically, here, we mean the willingness of governments and private organizations in the rich part of the world to contribute funding to development projects; the willingness of governments and international organizations to handle trade issues in a way that supports, or at least does no harm to, developing countries; and the willingness of developing-world governments to govern in ways that further, or at least do not hinder, policies and mechanisms designed to alleviate poverty.

The second reaction has to do with what Jonsson, in Chapter 7, refers to as the ‘rhetoric/action gap.’ Ethical statements are seen as rhetoric: fine words diverting attention away from inaction (cf. Pinstrup-Andersen in Chapter 2). What is wanted now is more action and less talk. Eye-catching ethical language has been inserted into the preambles of an endless number of declarations and plans to indicate good intentions. And this, of course, gives rise to impatience.

In the past, therefore, ethics has not really been put to work in relation to the fight against poverty and hunger. However, this now seems to be changing. Ethics increasingly seems to be a genuine issue in discussions both about the goals of development and about the means by which to achieve those goals.

There is a growing awareness that tough ethical discussions need to be held, for example, about whether the goal is simply to alleviate hunger and poverty or a
much wider one involving democratic empowerment of those who today are not only poor and hungry but also lack the basic ability to govern their own lives. And there need to be, to take another example, discussions about the relationships between the goal of ending hunger and the goal of achieving (more) sustainable development.

Regarding the means, there is a growing awareness that the tools applied in encouraging positive development are not always just tools but may also embody ethical assumptions. For example, nowadays neo-classical economics is seen as part and parcel of a utilitarian line of thinking that needs to be discussed in ethical terms. These changes are clearly reflected in the chapters of this book.

In this concluding chapter we try to bring together some lines of thought emerging from the previous chapters. We begin, in the next section, by trying to pinpoint some of the factors that have led to the growing focus on ethics in relation to development and the fight against poverty and hunger. In the third section we try to clarify the different meanings of the kinds of ‘ethics’ at play in the discussion of ethics and development. In the fourth section we give an overview of the academic discussion of the principles of rightness and fairness. This presentation can hopefully serve as an introduction for those readers who are not already familiar with the attempts made by philosophers to theorize about ethics. Readers who are already familiar with ethical theory may want to skip this section. In the fifth section we indicate ways in which academic ethics is relevant to practical issues raised by development. One conclusion of this discussion is that academic ethics helps to make the ethical concerns at play, and the kinds of priorities and trade-offs that have to be made, more transparent. However, it cannot in itself create consensus about which ethical concerns are relevant and the relative importance of these concerns. Therefore, in the penultimate section, we discuss the sources on which a consensus over ethical assumptions might be based, and we point to international law as a starting point for building an ethical vision that is shared around the globe. Finally, in last section, we make some suggestions about how ethical thinking could be used to further global dialogue about development – a dialogue which, ideally, will not only create a better mutual understanding but will also speed up the process of reaching decent minimum goals of development.

WHY IS INTEREST IN ETHICS GROWING?

Over the last three decades, the subject of ethics has attracted growing interest from corporations, NGOs, governments, and international organizations. This is not just because moral standards have been going up. Rather, it is in many ways a sign of crisis.

This crisis is rooted in the following six factors:
1. The breakdown of traditional hierarchies and value systems that arrived in the Western world with the so-called youth revolution in the late 1960s.