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A multi-religious consensus on the ethics of sustainable development: reflections of the Ethics in Action initiative

Anthony Annett, Jeffrey Sachs, Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, and William Vendley

Abstract

The challenges of sustainable development are primarily ethical in nature. Guided by a ceaseless quest for profit, today's global economy is synonymous with vast amounts of exclusion, indignity, and environmental devastation. To succeed, therefore, the Sustainable Development Goals require "moral capacity" as much as financial or technical capacity. In line with the recently-formed initiative, the authors therefore propose a sequence of measures designed to better orient the global economy toward the common good, coherent with the values of the world's major religious traditions. These proposals are in the areas of financing, the pursuit of justice, and pedagogy.

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1 Challenge

In today’s modern global economy, the urgent challenges of fighting poverty, promoting justice, and protecting creation are fundamentally ethical in nature. This is because the means of implementation to achieve the world’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—financing, technology, and policy change—are all available or within our reach if we take the goals seriously. If we ultimately fail to save the planet from global warming, species extinction, extreme poverty, rising inequality, “failed states”, mass migration, or conflict, the problem will not be a lack of means. It will be a lack of will—not just political, but individual as well. In that sense, it is the human spirit—the essential question of ethics—rather than the challenges of economics and engineering that will determine our success or failure.

Our productivity and wealth are astounding. The world economy produces \$US 127 trillion of output per year at international prices, for an average output per person of \$16,770 that is distributed highly unequally across and within countries. With this average level of output per capita, extreme poverty would have ended long ago if countries had acted boldly and in international partnership. Challenges such as extreme poverty, hunger, lack of access to education, and deaths caused by preventable and treatable disease, are anachronisms. Worse, they are choices. Their persistence reflects what Pope Francis has called the “globalization of indifference.”

The market-driven world economy is fueled by greed—the quest for profits—rather than by the common good. Sometimes those two concepts are aligned, such as when a company brings to market a new product that meets real human needs, is environmentally responsible, and is perhaps even life saving. Yet too often, private profits and the public good directly collide. This is the case when the oil industry makes profits by producing a product that is dangerously warming the planet. It is the case when a Wall Street firm makes a large profit through insider trading or by swindling an unsuspecting counterparty. It is the case when a brazen crook, often a billionaire, bribes a head of state to split the proceeds from a publicly owned mine, with the proceeds ending up in a tax haven. It is the case when human traffickers and narcotics traffickers prey on the innocent. It is the case when drug companies jack up the price of life-saving medicines to maximize profits. And it is the case when financial institutions and countries promote tax evasion and money laundering.

2 Proposal

To achieve sustainable development—meaning a world economy that is at once prosperous, socially inclusive, and environmentally sustainable—the world needs a fundamental re-orientation toward the common good. The profit motive can still be deployed as a tool, but it must be embedded within an overarching moral framework that distinguishes between good and evil. Such a moral framework must prevent the horrendous abuses of human beings, the extreme violation of human dignity, and the irreversible and rampant destruction of nature. It must value creation and ensure that humans manage it responsibly for the sake of future generations.

The common good, in turn, can be identified as the shared vision of the world’s great religious and secular ethical traditions developed and honed over the past 2,500 years. The world’s religious traditions, despite their profound differences, all coalesce around a multi-

religious vision of “shared well-being.” Such a vision puts the dignity of the human being at the center of the common good. Such a vision puts the golden rule, to treat others as they would be treated, as the guiding moral precept. Such a vision enjoins us to help the poor, the hungry, and the suffering, for they have the greatest needs, and possess the same human dignity as everybody else. And such a vision, finally, must recognize that moral virtues are not simply inherited, or present, or lacking—these virtues are cultivated by societies that hold the dignity of the individual as the highest purpose. If we are silent in the face of suffering, we are degrading our own virtues.

Crucially, people are blocked from access to the common good when they are mired in poverty; when they lack access to health care, education, decent nutrition, water, sanitation, and modern energy services; when are impeded from achieving a livelihood with dignity and respect, including through unjust wages and abusive labor practices; and when they face forms of discrimination and violence, including along gender lines.

Some might claim that this vision of the common good—whereby the wellbeing of each is intimately bound up with the wellbeing of all—is fanciful or utopian. Yet evidence suggests that it is more deeply coherent with the truths of human wellbeing than the egotistical pursuit of profits that drives the world economy.

In practical terms, the SDGs—adopted by all nations of the world in September 2015—provide the best roadmap for making this needed ethical shift at a global scale. These seventeen goals seek to change the dominant economic paradigm by insisting that economic progress must always go hand-in-hand with social inclusion and environmental sustainability. They were complemented in December 2015 by the Paris Climate Agreement, which commits nations to moving to an economy based on net-zero carbon emissions by the second half of the century.

The key point here is that the sustainable development paradigm implies a deeper transformation than a mere technical re-alignment of economic and social policy. Fundamentally, it entails a re-orientation of the global economy around a different set of values and the inculcation of a different set of virtues, to bind it within a moral framework centered on the common good. This aspect is insufficiently appreciated, and yet it is essential—without this fundamental ethical shift, the transformation called for by sustainable development is unlikely to take root. To succeed, sustainable development needs “moral capacity” as much as financial or technical capacity.

For this reason, a newly-formed initiative called *Ethics in Action*—a partnership co-hosted by the Chancellor of the Pontifical Academies, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), Religions for Peace, and the University of Notre Dame—brings together global religious and secular ethical leaders to develop a shared moral consensus on the challenges of sustainable development, and to convert this consensus into practical action.

A principal recommendation to the G20, therefore, is to similarly enlist high-level religious and other ethical leaders to help rebuild the missing “moral capital,” including by the creation of an “E20” of ethical leaders. This group would advise political leaders and policymakers, and communicate widely and frequently on the moral imperative to advance sustainable development. The *Ethics in Action* initiative stands ready to work with the G20 on such an effort.

Some Practical Recommendations from a Moral Perspective

The participants in the *Ethics in Action* initiative propose a set of practical ethical actions to advance sustainable development—specifically around three core areas of financing, justice, and pedagogy.

Starting with financing: a core ethical imperative of sustainable development involves an effective and predicable transfer of resources from the rich to the poor within countries and from rich to poor countries. Table 1 shows clearly that the investments needed to implement the SDGs are minor in terms of the global economy, and that much of the wealth is ethically misdirected.

Table 1: Relevant Magnitudes for Financing Sustainable Development

Annual world income: \$127 trillion
World poverty gap (annual cost of meeting the basic needs of all): \$300-\$400 billion
Annual ODA to save additional five million children’s lives per year: \$20 billion
Annual ODA to end AIDS epidemic by 2030: \$40 billion
Annual ODA to provide universal education for all low-income countries: \$40 billion
Annual global cost of solving climate change: \$1 trillion
Annual cost of providing clean energy to the bottom 3 billion: \$200 billion
Global wealth of billionaires: \$7.1 trillion
Annual military spending: \$1.5-\$2 trillion
Annual after-tax fossil fuel subsidies: \$540 billion
Money in tax havens: \$20-\$30 trillion (estimate)
2016 pay of top ten hedge fund CEOs: around \$10 billion
Annual profits from modern slavery: \$150 billion (estimate)

In particular, we propose the following concrete measures that allow for the financing of sustainable development in an ethical manner:

- Establish a Global Fund for Education to mobilize the incremental \$40 billion needed each year to provide universal education to secondary level in all low-income countries. This is a tried-and-tested strategy—similar global funds in the health space were instrumental in improving health outcomes in the world’s poorest countries, including by significantly reducing deaths from AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. The world’s religions are already leading the way with vast institutional commitments to education—they can also well-placed to unite around the moral imperative of establishing this Fund.
- Divert up to 10 percent of current global military spending to finance initiatives to fight poverty, social exclusion, and climate change. This could be called the “Isaiah fund” or the “Pope Paul VI fund.”
- Tax the wealth held in tax havens at a rate of up to 1 percent, raising as much as \$200 billion per year.
- Establish a Global Fund for the Sustainable Development Goals endowed by the world’s billionaires, with donated assets aiming for at least \$200 billion, out of combined net worth of more than \$7 trillion for the estimated 1,826 billionaires (Forbes, 2015).

- Urge all wealthy countries to honor the commitment to 0.7 percent of GDP in Official Development Aid (ODA). This currently stands at about 0.3 percent of GDP in the rich countries, a shortfall of about \$200 billion a year.

The second area of practical ethical action pertains to the need to promote justice for the poor, the excluded, and future generations. In this sense, ethical leaders could give top billing to the following core aspects of policy:

- The prioritization of decent work as a central source of human dignity and meaning, which must take precedence over the quest for profit.
- The fundamental human right to the basic necessities of a dignified life, including water, nutrition, sanitation, housing, health care, education, and clean energy.
- Support for grassroots movements, unions, and worker cooperatives to promote the interests of the poor and workers, and to counteract the influence of business and finance.
- The full implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement by all nations without delay.
- Changing laws and regulations to emphasize a company's duty to a broader array of stakeholders, and holding multinational corporations accountable for their social and environmental impact.

A third vital area of practical action is pedagogical in nature, reflecting the fact that a shift in norms and values will require ethical training:

- Reform educational curricula in schools to emphasize the ethics of sustainable development.
- Reform business and economics curricula to better incorporate ethical responsibility and the importance of pro-social values.
- Empower and equip religious communities around the world with the means to promote the shared ethical vision of sustainable development.

This set of proposals, couched within a genuine attempt to elevate the ethical dimension of policymaking and so change the economic narrative, would help lay the groundwork for the successful implementation of the SDGs. It would help re-orient the economy from a path of destructiveness to a path of safety, fairness, and sustainability. And it would help right the economic ship during an increasingly dangerous and turbulent period for the world.

References

This brief should be regarded as written on behalf of the Ethics in Action Initiative, reflecting the consensus of the group.

Please note:

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The Editor