

Morality, Uncertainty and Policy

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Abstract

Moral imperatives express universal values: freedom, dignity, equality, etc. Practitioners, motivated by moral imperatives, promote infrastructure development, security, climate change mitigation, etc. However, regional or local moral imperatives may differ. For instance, infrastructure development and education in 3rd world countries is rightly viewed as enabling health, equality and achieving full human potential of local peoples. However, this can cause major social changes, adversely impacting local cultures and harming the dignity and freedom of choice of adherents to traditional life styles. Furthermore, the damage to local values may emerge gradually. We make three points.

1. Moral imperatives are often different at different scales of space or time. What is ethical in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, may be viewed very differently in local societies or over longer time periods. The point is not that development agencies might decide, either implicitly or explicitly, to overrule local values. The point is that moral imperatives operate differently at different spatial and temporal scales.

2. Conflict between universal and regional moral imperatives is often difficult to anticipate. For example, girls' education can upset traditional social relationships in ways that are difficult to predict, and may not become evident for years. Or, reducing infant mortality may lead to population growth far exceeding local food productivity and creating previously unidentified needs. Or, transportation infrastructure development in one region may eliminate livelihoods in other regions. It is not sufficient for foreign planners and developers to learn local customs and values. The point is not insensitivity by development agencies. The point is that development can impact the future, or other regions, in highly uncertain ways.

3. Policy must be guided by moral imperatives tempered by uncertain impact. Optimizing morally imperative outcomes is irresponsible in light of uncertain clashes between values in different places and times. Moral enthusiasm must be tempered by realizing that social and individual outcomes of worthy projects are difficult to predict due to severe uncertainty in human affairs. Two methodological concepts must guide the planner: satisficing and robustness. The planner must satisfice moral objectives: achieve outcomes that are good enough - acceptable if not optimal for all involved. The planner must achieve robustness against surprising developments adversely impacting the diverse moral imperatives. Robust satisficing is implemented in practice by assessing concepts including resilience, redundancy, flexibility, adaptivity, and comprehensiveness. The talk illustrates this analysis with a development example from Belize.