

A New Global Ethics

The world is our village: if one house catches fire, the roofs over all our heads are immediately at risk. If any one of us tries to start rebuilding, his efforts will be purely symbolic. Solidarity has to be the order of the day: each of us must bear his own share of the general responsibility.
Jacques Delors

Why a global ethics?

Development is a complex and ambitious endeavour. To secure for all human beings in all parts of the world the conditions allowing a decent and meaningful life requires enormous energies and far-reaching changes in policies. The task is all the more demanding as the world faces numerous other problems, each related to or even part of the development challenge, each similarly pressing, and each calling for the same urgent attention. But, as Arnold Toynbee has said, “Our age is the first generation since the dawn of history in which mankind dares to believe it practical to make the benefits of civilization available to the whole human race.”

Co-operation between different peoples with different interests and from different cultures will be facilitated and conflict kept within acceptable and even constructive limits, if all can see themselves as being bound and motivated by shared commitments. It is, therefore, imperative to look for a core of shared ethical values and principles.

Why cultures in a global ethics?

This search involves culture and cultural aspects in numerous ways. To begin with, such an endeavour is itself an emphatically cultural activity. Who are we? How do we relate to each other and to humankind as a whole? What is our purpose?

Such questions are at the centre of what culture is all about. Moreover, any attempt to formulate a global ethics must for its inspiration draw on cultural resources, on people’s intelligence, on their emotional experiences, their historical memories and their spiritual orientations.

Shared values

As our futures will be increasingly shaped by the interdependence of the world’s peoples it is essential to promote cultural conviviality. Such co-operation between peoples with widely different interests can only flourish when they all share certain principles. The Commission defines the following five ethical “pillars”

- human rights and responsibilities;
- democracy and the elements of civil society;
- the protection of minorities;
- commitment to peaceful conflict resolution and fair negotiation; and
- intergenerational equity.

It is incumbent upon all governments to give effect to such principles. But the implementation of a global ethics requires other actors as well: trans-national corporations, international organisations, and the global civil society. All three can and must be influenced and mobilized.