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A Comment on the Ethics Statements of Global Non-Governmental Organizations and their Relation to Sustainable Development Goals

Avshalom M. ADAM[1]

Abstract

Human endeavors can be understood at the levels of evaluating what is good (values identification) and judging what is right (norms identification). These ethical considerations ideally find expression by becoming embedded in daily activity, with the ideal often buttressed by formal laws and regulations. Commitments to a strategy of sustainable management remain principally an ethical (rather than a regulatory) issue and are addressed primarily by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rather than states. The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a blueprint for a more sustainable future. Faced with the consequences of climate change, natural disasters, environmental degradation, armed conflicts, and mass migration, NGOs' commitments to the SDGs may be expressed in their engagement with meeting the immediate basic needs of present generations (e.g., for clean air, clean water, food, clothing, and shelter) and by humanitarian or developmental actions (which are part and parcel of sustainability development strategy and its implementation). In the present paper, I will offer a preliminary exploration of the question, to what extent do NGOs' ethical commitments encompass strategy-led sustainable development capable of contributing to improving the likelihood of survival of a vulnerable population?

Keywords: *Global ethics, Strategy-led Sustainable Management, NGOs, SDGs, Code of ethics.*

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1. Introduction

If the unfolding of climate change is going to wreak catastrophic events on humanity and planet Earth in the very near future, then COVID-19 offers, perhaps, a gruesome precursor, albeit not to a crisis of unimaginable scope in both the developed and underdeveloped countries, but rather to the (poor?) capabilities of our civilization to address the basic needs of the most vulnerable. With many countries making mistakes that have cost lives at some point in the crisis, with Inter-Government Organizations (IGOs) lagging behind in their response, and with the strenuous work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to attempt to help the most vulnerable seemingly inadequate, then the question is, how better can we be prepared for the inevitable crisis or disasters to come?

As of early May 2021, it can be said that COVID-19 presents us with experiences many never witnessed before. The sufferings of millions of people can hardly be digested by an individual human being. The statistical data provided by the WHO or worldometer.info on the casualties due to COVID-19 keep flowing, and the accounts of those who are no longer with us primarily concern the most vulnerable. Is this an early warning on how poorly prepared we are to deal with upcoming events associated with climate change? What better choices can we make?

Our choices are based on our understanding of what is good and what is bad in the world around us. Human endeavours can be understood at the levels of evaluating what is good (values identification, Axiology) and judging what is right (norms identification, Ethics) and their relationship to action (theory of action, Praxis) (Bunge, 1989). I will elaborate more on axiology, ethics, and praxis in section 3 below. As such, ethical considerations ideally find expression by becoming embedded in daily activity, with it frequently being desirable to buttress the ideal by public policy specified in formal laws and regulations. However, at present, commitments to a strategy of sustainable management remain principally an ethical (rather than a regulatory) issue and are addressed and tackled primarily by IGOs and NGOs rather than states.

Attempts by IGOs, states, and NGOs to prepare for events associated with climate change began more than 50 years ago. These preparations may be traced back to the 1970s. Then, members of the United Nation tackled the conflict between global economic growth, the increasing needs of the global population, and a deteriorating ecological situation (Meadows et al., 1972). This conflict was set on the agenda of the Brundtland Commission, which asked to formulate a global agenda for change (United Nations [UN], 1987). The resulting report (UN, 1987)

defined sustainable development as "[development] that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" and thereby aims to improve the likelihood of human survival. More recently, in 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted a policy agenda that contained 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets for a more sustainable future (UN, 2015). Faced with the consequences of climate change, natural disasters, environmental degradation, armed conflicts, and mass migration, this policy is being pursued by states, IGOs, members of the private sector, and NGOs.

I shall confine the focus of my paper to NGOs' ethical commitments as they pertain to the implementation of SDGs, similarly to a previous study on businesses (Balcerzak & Pelikánová, 2020). This, I suggest may be expressed in the humanitarian-development intersections of their engagement in meeting the immediate basic needs of people (e.g., for clean air, clean water, food supply, clothing, health, and shelter) and by action (humanitarian or developmental), which is part and parcel of sustainability development strategy and its implementation. Thus, I will offer a preliminary exploration of the research question of my paper, to what extent do NGOs' ethical commitments encompass strategy-led sustainable management capable of contributing to improving the likelihood of survival of a vulnerable population?

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Sustainable management and improving the likelihood of survival of a vulnerable population

In 2017, climate change-related hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria threatened the survival of people in the US states of Florida and Texas and in the US territory of Puerto Rico. The emergency management of the associated disasters was neither competent in improving the likelihood of survival of a vulnerable population nor sustainable—but it was not equally incompetent and unsustainable in all three locations. The three incidents received differential treatment in terms of efforts at disaster response from federal agencies and the federal response to the hurricane that struck Puerto Rico was inequitable compared with aid provided to Texas and Florida, with the US federal Environment Protection Agency failed to provide safe water to Puerto Ricans (Willison et al., 2019).

Supported by funding from three major donors, namely, The Rockefeller Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and the Ford Foundation, NGOs endeavoured to help. Indeed, NGOs played a

significant role in assisting Puerto Rico to recover and rebuild the island by providing both humanitarian and development aid to fund short- and long-term plans and follow up implementation (Beltrán, 2018). However, NGOs were only able to lessen the burden partly and could not fully address the dire needs of the affected populations in Florida, Texas, and Puerto Rico.

The lesson learned could have been that the better the connection of the territory to the federal government, the better its chances of surviving a crisis. The role of the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is to respond to natural disasters, yet it is not responsive in terms of its strategy and practice. FEMA has frequently been called to account by the Office of the Inspector General for poor accountability, weak oversight, and erroneous grant awards (Irvine, 2020). However, the EPA made attempts to learn from its failures in Puerto Rico and improve on its capabilities in ensuring clean and safe water (United States Enivironmental Protection Agency, 2020).

As regards the role of NGOs in improving the likelihood of survival of a vulnerable population, clearly NGOs are important actors in civil society, and are capable of being resourceful in crises and natural disasters. Furthermore, they can hold governments to account, they may communicate the SDGs to a broad audience, they can implement projects as well as holding the private sector to account (Hege & Demailly, 2018). However, they have neither the powers nor the financial resources of the public or private sectors. Thus, although NGOs make significant contributions, the onus is on governments and IGOs to increase the likelihood of survival of a vulnerable population.

2.2. NGOs' ethical commitments and strategy-led sustainable management?

NGOs differ in size, scope, and budget. They may focus on humanitarian aid, development, or both, and their interests may diverge across issues concerning humanitarian response, social, economic, environmental responses, and sustainability, to name an important few (Blind, 2019; Long, 2018).

Whether on the national or international levels, or both, the focus of NGOs remains on providing assistance to people living in (or displaced by) armed conflicts, environments degraded by climate change, pollution, or natural disaster. Though NGOs' ethical commitments may vary, they are codified under titles such as code of ethics or code of conduct, (e.g., Australian Council for International Development Code of Conduct, Care Code of Conduct, World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations

(WANGO) Code of Ethics & Conduct) (Balcerzak & Pelikánová, 2020. Those codes are further aligned with humanitarian standards (e.g., Sphere Standards, as discussed later) that offer guidance and best practices to implement those codes in practice with the relevant stakeholders. Thus, ethical commitments based on evaluating what is good and that correspond with the right thing to do become codified. Then, they are translated into lists of actions, the purpose of which is to give assistance to those who remain unable to meet their own basic needs under the circumstances of human-made or natural disasters.

A prime example to illustrate how ethical commitments have been translated into sets of standards by which to meet the basic needs of people under such circumstances is Sphere, which has created reference tools (the Humanitarian Charter and the Minimum Standards in Disaster Response) that have been published together as the Sphere Handbook (Sphere Project, 2018). The Humanitarian Charter section out Sphere's ethical and legal principles and serves a reference for all those involved in humanitarian aid, while Handbook defines best-practice protection and humanitarian standards. As explained in the Sphere Handbook (Sphere Project, 2018), "The Sphere standards are a set of principles and minimum humanitarian standards in four technical areas of humanitarian response: Water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion (WASH); Food security and nutrition; Shelter and settlement; and Health".[2]These standards are concretized as specific indicators and are followed by lists of requirements for effectiveness, quality and accountability.[3] The Sphere Handbook (Sphere Project, 2018) offers a road map to NGOs, has been endorsed and adopted by governments and donors, and serves as a guide to best practices in meeting humans basic needs in humanitarian aid.

Regarding basic needs, in practice, NGOs have aligned their explicit ethical commitments with the SDGs. Some of the United Nations' 17 SDGs and their 169 targets (UN, 2015) overlap with Sphere Handbook (Sphere Project, 2018) whereas others move beyond sustainable resource management strategies to sustainable development. Further, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UNSDSN), whose main objectives include to promote practical solutions for sustainable development and implementation of the SDGs, as well as the Paris Climate Agreement, suggest a linkage between humanitarian standards and SDGs.

[2] I am grateful to Dana Manor, Deputy Director at Society for International Development - Israel Branch, SID Israel, who kindly directed my attention to various unpublished NGOs codes of conducts and codes of ethics, from which this study has benefited.

[3] Sphere is a worldwide community of humanitarian professionals.

The UNSDSN recognizes links between sustainable development and humanitarian assistance, asserting that humanitarian–development linkages involve "recognising that the objective of eradicating extreme poverty and providing universal access to core services will mean working in contexts traditionally thought of as 'humanitarian'" (Sida, 2016)(also see analysis on this topic in Blind, 2019).

The UNSDSN (Sida, 2016) argues succinctly on the intersection of humanitarian and developmental goals and references the SDGs and their targets while referring to Humanitarian Standards, such as Poverty and Nutrition. It is thus worth quoting the UNSDSN (Sida, 2016) at length:

"If we are truly to <<leave no-one behind,>> then we will increasingly find development and humanitarian donors and agencies working in the same places with the same populations. …. Seven of the seventeen goals have clear and direct references, and in several other goal areas, it would be quite easy to make the link. Not only are the countries where humanitarian and development efforts are concentrated increasingly the same, but there are large parts of the global agendas that are similar. … there are clear synergies in the proposed outcomes, both in terms of "leaving no one behind" and working differently to end needs" (p. 3).

This suggests that some of the SDGs are also humanitarian goals and that the efforts of both actors engaged in sustainable development and humanitarian efforts can be complimentary, in that both can choose to prioritise certain issues in contexts where they have mutual concerns. Malnutrition is a good example of progress in humanitarian terms representing progress in development (SDG) terms. This is linkage is further exemplified by the assessments of the SDGs provided by the UNSDSN (Sida, 2016). SDG-Goal 1 is to "end poverty in all its forms everywhere" (Sida, 2016, p. 3). This goal translates into several targets, among them target 1.5: "By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters." Thus, the target of the first sustainable development goal is humanitarian in nature. SDG-Goal 2 is to "end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture" (Sida, 2016, p. 3). This sustainable development goal also translates into several targets, among them target 2.1: "By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round" (Sida, 2016, p. 3), which is again humanitarian in nature. Similarly, target 2.2 of the second sustainable development goal is also humanitarian: "By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally

agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons" (Sida, 2016, p. 3).

3. Research Question

The research question is: to what extent do NGOs' ethical commitments encompass strategy-led sustainable management capable of contributing to improving the likelihood of survival of a vulnerable population? In exploring the research question, I will depict the terms of the question analytically and briefly.

What is meant by ethical commitments, and how do they encompass strategy-led sustainable management? What does sustainable development mean in terms of policy and usage? What is meant by improving the likelihood of survival of a vulnerable population? By offering an analytical discussion of the terms used in the question, I hope to be able to offer a comment on the modest contribution of global ethics to sustainability. Furthermore, though very general in its implications, this research question is of immediate relevance. We are already witnessing populations in need of assistance as well as displaced populations or forced migrations in which climate change and human-made or natural disasters play a decisive role. Thus, I hope that the analysis offered here will shed light on the discussion of the human future under the dark shadows of human-made and natural disasters.

4. Research Methods

A brief philosophical analysis of the research question of the paper requires a conceptual analysis and a survey of the available literature on the terms that I depict, relying on primary and secondary sources. I offer a conceptual analysis rather than an experimental study.

The spectrum of NGOs' attempts to meet basic human needs is displayed in their written commitments in broad terminology that refers to values and ethics. Such commitments may be found in their explicit statements in their codes of conduct and of ethics, or in text framed under the titles such as Humanitarian Standards or Humanitarian Principles. Their suggested strategy and guidance for actions can be found in their handbooks and training toolboxes as well as in their reports.

Most major NGOs involved in providing humanitarian assistance are committed to the Sphere Handbook (Sphere Project, 2018). With respect to

sustainable development, most major NGOs are aligned with the UNs' SDGs and their action targets (UN, 2015). Consequently, the philosophical analysis will focus on compatibility between the ethics, values, and praxis guidance set out (1) in the Sphere Handbook, as representing those of NGOs with respect to humanitarian assistance, and (2) to the SDGs, as representing those of NGOs engaged in sustainable development.

5. Findings

A conceptual analysis is offered of ethical commitments, and how they encompass strategy-led sustainable management by examining what sustainable development means in terms of policy and usage.

5.1. Ethical commitments

At the primary level of values, we may ask: **What are the *needs* we must meet to survive**, and in the secondary level of values, we may ask: **What are the *wants* that contribute to our wellbeing**? In **evaluating** the needs for human survival, we distinguish between Good and Bad (**values)**. Good values are those that meet the needs for human survival and include "clean air", "clean water", "shelter from weather conditions", "good health", and "clothing", to name but a few (Bunge, 1989, pp. 1-7)[4].

Asked at the primary level of meeting our needs for survival, we shift (from Axiology) to the central question of Ethics, what is the **right thing to do**? Consider the value of *clean air*. Narrowly understood, clean air is breathable air containing acceptably low levels of, for example, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and particulate matter. Thus, an ethical prescription corresponding to the value *clean air* is, **Do not pollute the air at a level dangerous to human health.**

Evaluating what is good and bad is a choice made in an ecosystem. The evaluation of good and bad manifests itself in a set of values. These values, in turn, shape an agent's actions, where the agent may be an individual, group, or organization of any sort, as I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Adam & Shavit, 2008). The choice of values reflects three levels: human survival (needs); human wants that contribute to well-being; and human aspirations for prosperity (Bunge, 1989). As I have described

4 A preliminary to a theory of values (axiology) and ethics. The term "moral sentiment" of an agent encapsulates two distinct capabilities: (a) evaluating what is good; and (b) judging what is right. In extending these capabilities to a society, it may be understood with the consequence that both the evaluations (values) and the judgments (norms) should be embedded in the daily activity of that society.

elsewhere (Adam & Shavit, 2008), norms correspond to values and are expressed through judgement and action: the actor's judgment of the right action to take or to refrain from taking. A choice and action can be judged as right or wrong. People's moral sentiment involves their evaluation and judgment of the social situation. Thus, commitments undertaken toward various aspects of the promotion of global sustainable development can be conceptualized as indirect contributions to people's survival, well-being, and prosperity (Bunge, 1989).

Understood more broadly, I contend that *clean air* is habitable air containing greenhouse gasses, such as carbon dioxide (CO_2) and methane (CH_4), at levels compatible with humanly habitable climates in areas in which people have traditionally lived. Thus, the right thing to do in order to attain the value of clean air is to protect air from pollution, including with greenhouse gasses, and thus reducing greenhouse gas emissions is the right thing to do.

5.2. How "ethical commitments" encompass strategy-led sustainable management?

Thus, evaluating what is good in meeting our needs, in this case, the value *clean air*, corresponds to a set of ethical prescriptions, of right conduct, which in turn may be translated into **action** (Praxis). Then, in this case, it can be embedded in the requirements of **zero net emissions** of greenhouse gasses in general and CO_2 (the major greenhouse gas emitted by human activity) in particular. Excess emissions of the greenhouse gases strongly contribute to global climate change. The target of zero net emissions has yet to be reached. Industrial countries such as the US and China emit CO_2 at high levels, whereas (ironically at present) the people who migrate in response to climate change, environmental degradation, or disaster, thereby becoming what are often termed climate refugees, generally live in countries that emit relatively low levels of CO_2, such as Guatemala, Cameroon, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

Taking care of Earth and sustaining its capabilities for present and future generation are among the most urgent challenges humanity faces. The question as to our obligations toward the survival of future generations when the needs of many in the present generation are not met remains open, however, doing nothing to avert these threats is unacceptable if we choose to live.

5.3. What does sustainable development mean in terms of policy and usage.

As was briefly detailed above, the linkages between ethical commitments (primary values corresponding to norms), translated into (Sphere) Humanitarian Standards overlap with some SDGs, and thus humanitarian and sustainability development linkages are offered. SDGs may be specified in projects such as net zero emissions.

6. Discussion

The validity of the arguments in this paper is based on whether the conclusion offered is derived from the premisses given. One of the main arguments offered in this paper suggests that there is a direct connection between values, norms, and actions, and that this direct connection justifies the practice of sustainability development and its derivatives as means to meet human survival ends. As such this argument is not original. Mario Bunge contributes to this argument at great length (Bunge, 1989). However, the contribution of the present paper is to apply this argument to NGOs' ethical commitments and humanitarian standards, and to point to their relevance in the SDGs framework, and thereby stress the ethical imperative for human survival in the ambitious policy set by the SDGs.

Not less in its importance is the attempt made here to focus on NGOs as important actors in the pursuit of human survival. The importance of NGOs lies in both humanitarian actions and development, and in their collaborating among themselves and with the other sectors to mobilize for the survival of people on planet Earth (Hege & Demailly, 2018).

Moreover, though I did not discuss the variety of roles that are assumed by NGOs in pursuit of the sustainable development goal, such roles include acting as watch dogs, representing and giving a voice to those who are too often left behind, and fighting for the right cause even if as a minority or by using nonstandard methods.

7. Conclusions

My comment is confined to the question of my paper: to what extent do NGOs' ethical commitments encompass strategy-led sustainable management capable of contributing to improving the likelihood of survival of a vulnerable population? Even if I establish that NGOs' ethical commitments encompass strategy-led sustainable management, and even if doing so entails that such sustainable management is capable of contributing

to improving the likelihood of survival of a vulnerable population, NGOs alone are unable to accomplish this herculean task of improving the survival of vulnerable populations. NGOs, regardless of their size, scope, and budget, should therefore consider creating partnerships with other bodies, such as partners in civil society, the private sector, or the public sector.

Taking care of Earth and sustaining its capabilities for present and future generation are among the most urgent challenges humanity faces. The question as to our obligations toward the survival of future generations when the needs of many in the present generation are not met remains open, however, doing nothing to avert these threats is unacceptable if we choose to live. The framing of this question of obligation offers an anthropocentric frame of references on ethics in sustainable goals, which has been criticized elsewhere (Kopnina et al., 2018), while recognizing that humanity is not an island on planet Earth.

Regardless of the efforts of NGOs and IGOs and their good intentions, COVID-19 events illustrate that they failed to decrease the high cost in human lives. This is the result not only of the gap between the needs of populations for vaccines and their allocation that remains so high that it excludes many people (primarily the most vulnerable), but public policy as dictated by political leaders and the failure of health system capabilities and resources. The present events are too close and still rapidly unfolding and therefore it will be important to conduct a more comprehensive analysis when it is over.

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