

IDB conference

Sen calls for expanded role for ethics in development

How can the development community advance the use of ethical thinking in the cause of economic and social progress? Opening the Ethics and Development Day conference held at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) on January 16, Nobel Prize Laureate in Economics Amartya Sen proposed a more active, participatory role for citizens in applying ethics to further sustainable development.



Sen: “The need for broadening the instruments for sustainable development is certainly strong: participatory ethics and citizenship are clearly important in this broadening.”

Commending the conference theme as “unprecedented in the history of international financial organizations,” Sen’s remarks also praised the Inter-American Initiative on Social Capital, Ethics, and Development for its broadening of the intellectual horizon of economists and other social scientists.

Launched in 2002 under IDB President Enrique Iglesias with support from Norway’s government, the initiative promotes ethical principles in Latin

American development, drawing on the participation of hundreds of public and private organizations.

As Sen noted, within a short time, the Initiative has been “very successful in firmly placing ethical issues on the development agenda.” Nevertheless, he stressed, it is important to continually reexamine difficult issues, take note of new results and fresh knowledge in the neighboring fields on which development ethics draw, and build on what has been established to develop further uses, applications, and extensions.

Sen more specifically explored why a fuller scrutiny of the demands of citizenship and its participatory implications may be particularly necessary now. Emphasizing that “sustaining living standards is not the same thing as sustaining people’s freedom to have—or safeguard—what they value,” he urged that people be seen as reasoning beings whose judgments, values, and freedoms are themselves important.

Corporate social responsibility

Commenting on the ethical responsibility of governments, civil society, and private businesses, Norway’s ambassador to the United States, Knut Wollabaek, argued that the fundamental shift in power from

countries’ governments to corporate boardrooms is likely to grow, and this trend must be accompanied by increased corporate social responsibility. Since mobilizing businesses and governments to improve the plight of the poor is not in itself sufficient, he added, civil society must become more responsible and put ethical values at the core of our global institutions.

Power of applied ethics

Mirta Roses, Director-General of the Pan American Health Organization, explained how introducing the ethics dimension has helped her organization set priorities to increase access to health care services. Calling for a more comprehensive view of development that includes an ethical and spiritual aspect, former president of Chile Patricio Aylwin explained that his country’s policy of growth with equity was underpinned by dialogue and national consensus that helped bring about positive social policy changes in health care, worker compensation, housing, and education.

Describing applied ethics as a “very powerful tool” for change, Bernardo Kliksberg, General Coordinator of the IDB’s Inter-American Initiative on Social Capital, Ethics, and Development, surveyed some recent development projects, including Brazil’s Hunger Zero Project, which aims to convert hunger from a health care problem to an ethical problem.

What can ethics contribute to social and economic issues? The Reverend John McCullough, Director of the World Church Service, argued that ethics should challenge us to ask what aspects of development policies contribute to poverty’s persistence. We must also ask, he said, whether a common vision unites the development community, how the community can move toward greater representation of the disenfranchised, and how transparent the community wants to be in this process. Father Gasper LoBiondo, Director of Georgetown University’s Woodstock Center, explained how the Center’s Global Economy and Cultures Project is compiling narratives of the lives of the poor to see how ethics is embedded in their cultures and to empower them to better control how globalization affects them.

Globalization can help

While agreeing that “something is not working right for the poor” in the globalization process, the manager of the IDB’s Multilateral Investment Fund (MIF), Donald Terry, focused most of his remarks on the growing remittances sent from rich countries to poor ones—an area where globalization, by halving technology costs, has actually accelerated this “deep, ethical commitment” of family members. Picking up on Sen’s point that a main aim of the conference was to discuss how to broaden instruments of sustainable development, Terry explained that the MIF is working to channel at least some of these remittances into savings accounts.