

# RAISING ANNOYING QUESTIONS

Why values should be  
built into decision-making

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## INTRODUCTION

People make decisions based less on what they know than what they believe. It follows that value choices ought to be examined as carefully as facts.

Can consideration of ethical questions be built into decision-making in a systematic way?

### Origins of CIPA's interest

At the California Institute of Public Affairs, our interest in this question originated in three strands of thought and activity:

- An international project on defining the concept of sustainability that I led during my tenure as chair of the Commission on Environmental Strategy and Planning of IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature. One of the main points made in the book that resulted, *A Sustainable World*, was that sustainability is above all a moral principle: "It is not so much about what *is*, but what *should be*. It has to do with value choices" (Trzyna 1995, 21).
- The "World Ethic for Living Sustainably," a seminal document produced by the Commission's Ethics Working Group, chaired by theologian J. Ronald Engel (Engel 1993). The "World Ethic" was included in *Caring for the Earth*, a broad-ranging strategy issued by IUCN, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the World Wide Fund for Nature in 1991. This, in turn, led to a high-level international effort to adopt an Earth Charter. (Visit [www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org) for details.)
- CIPA's involvement in organizing and studying policy dialogues and other forms of collaborative decision-making. This has included an international project on "The Power of Convening" (Trzyna and Gotelli 1990).

### The "Linking Values and Policy" Project

In 1994-95, with financial support from IUCN, CIPA, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and in-kind help from many others, I explored how the next step might be taken: building systematic consideration of ethical issues into decision-making, focusing on the sustainability ethic. After reviewing the small literature on the topic (see the bibliography), I concentrated on getting the views of thoughtful practitioners and practical-minded scholars from a variety of countries and disciplines (see the list at the end of this report).

The result was "Linking Values and Policy for Sustainable Development: An International Strategy to Build the Sustainability Ethic into Decision-making" (Trzyna 1995). That paper and a subsequent book article (Trzyna 1998) laid out the argument that follows.

## WHY VALUES SHOULD BE BUILT INTO DECISION-MAKING

Those who speak and write about global problems commonly stress the importance of values in motivating people to care for the world around them. But how do moral ideas translate into policies and decisions that will move the world toward sustainability? Transforming public attitudes and internalizing values through education will be important in the long run, but what will have a direct and immediate impact is institutionalizing the process of taking ethics into account, in other words, ensuring that careful articulation of value choices is an explicit part of policy formulation and decision-making.

In practice, of course, policy decisions are complex. As Ralph Carter observes, they “usually involve tradeoffs between multiple values, and one option rarely emerges as clearly superior to others. Far from the ideal world of black and white options, the real world of political choice often seems a landscape distinguished by the remarkable variation in shades of gray” (Carter 1988, 287).

The methods of policy analysis developed in recent years often seem to amount to elaborate dances around the tough value choices at the crux of an issue. Environmental impact analysis, risk analysis, fiscal impact analysis, and similar methods concentrate on assembling facts and examining alternatives; they steer clear of looking at what is right and wrong. They are attempts to bring scientific tools to bear on public policy and, as Herman Daly has written, “Nothing makes a scientist more uncomfortable than to be shown to have made a moral assumption” (Daly 1993, 44).

The main principle underlying policy analysis as it is currently practiced is efficiency, that is, weighing benefits in relation to costs. The announcement for an OECD manual, *Project and Policy Appraisal*, exemplifies how this principle is applied:

“The environmental consequences of any activity should be evaluated in monetary terms, in a cost-benefit framework. How, for example, can the economic values of death or illness due to pollution, amenity losses, or the destruction of natural resources be evaluated? This manual provides a detailed description of such techniques as the monetary valuation of environmental damage . . . and the role of discounting” (OECD 1994).

An increasing number of writers on public policy assert that efficiency is not a morally adequate principle to inform decision-making. However, policy analysts usually ignore ethics in spite of strong arguments for their inclusion. According to the political scientist Douglas Amy, the reasons analysts usually give for shunning ethical debate – that it is impossible, unnecessary, or impractical, or that it injects personal biases into the analytical process – are not the real ones. The real reason is that ethical analysis “conflicts with the practical policies of the institutions that engage in policy analysis.” There is a tendency in ethical

analysis to raise annoying questions, and bureaucracies put an emphasis on consensus and following orders. They are not debating societies, and they are not designed to encourage frank discussion and dissent. Given these institutional realities, there is little incentive for analysts to raise ethical questions.

According to Amy, policy analysts cultivate a professional image as purely technical advisors whose work is value-free and apolitical. The administrators who are their bosses "are reluctant to encourage ethical investigations both because the inquiry itself might raise questions concerning established program goals and because the style of analysis conflicts with the technocratic ethos which dominates bureaucratic politics."

Ethical implications "may often be the subject of informal discussions. But the point is that such ethical deliberations are *ad hoc* and they are unlikely to be made public or to be the subject of careful and systematic investigation in formal agency studies and reports." Like policy analysts and administrators, members of legislative bodies also tend to shy away from value questions – in their case, to avoid alienating fellow legislators and important segments of their constituencies (Amy 1984, 575-84).

These are powerful arguments for building ethics into decision-making. Value judgments are always made. Incorporating ethics into the policy process, subjecting value choices to the same kind of rigorous analysis as facts, will make those in authority consider the moral implications of their decisions.

## **TOOLS FOR BUILDING VALUES INTO DECISION-MAKING**

Six techniques for incorporating systematic consideration of ethics into decision-making are:

***Including ethics in policy analysis.*** Governments, international agencies, businesses, and other organizations can adopt a requirement that ethical implications be considered as part of policy analysis. Such an action-forcing measure would be analogous to the requirement for an environmental impact statement. In fact, an obvious starting point would be to encourage governments and agencies that already have a requirement for environmental impact analysis to include consideration of ethical issues in their procedures.

***Including ethical analysis in policy dialogues.*** Ethics has much to contribute to multi-stakeholder approaches to decision-making. It is not enough to bring representatives of various interests around a table, even with an expert facilitator. Without the vision of a higher common purpose, such discussions tend to stay at the level of searching for the lowest common denominator among the participants' special interests. Those interests usually reflect basic conflicts of values. Ethics can help to clarify the value choices and move the discussion

toward higher ground.

***Declarations of principles and ethical codes.*** These include broad global statements such as the draft Earth Charter; general statements adopted by governments and intergovernmental organizations; and statements specific to professions, businesses, and associations. Such statements are important for two reasons: They set the tone for debate of issues and direction of policy; and those who subscribe to them can be held accountable to their principles, if not legally, then morally and politically. Ethical statements can be important steps in reforming the system and should be designed with that purpose in mind. However, experience shows that they succeed only if they initiate a continuing conversation within an organization or community. Ethical statements therefore should provide for formally bringing ethics into the decision-making process.

***Organizational units to represent ethics.*** One conventional way of ensuring that a viewpoint is taken into account in an organization is to create a formal position or group to represent it. Ethics might be represented by a staff advisor, an advisory committee, or a dedicated position on the governing body. Any such unit should have as part of its responsibility training and raising awareness throughout the organization. An example of how ethics can be represented in an organizational structure is the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority of the United Kingdom. The Authority was set up in 1990 to regulate treatment and research for assisted conception, and it was recognized from the beginning that ethics would be central to its work. Its twenty-one members are appointed to reflect specified views and qualifications, including religion, which has been represented by an Anglican bishop and a rabbi. It has working parties on ethical issues. A section of its annual report is set aside to report on such ethical issues as surrogacy and sex selection.

***Informal interventions.*** Some of the most productive ways of incorporating ethics in decision-making may well be a variety of informal interventions tailored to specific situations. These would include, for example, experts in ethics working with policy-makers and their staffs, organizing workshops, participating in meetings, and drafting and reviewing policy documents.

***Adversarial methods.*** Proposals have been made for processes that would deal directly with moral conflicts in ways similar to those used in courts of justice. One such proposal has been made by the political scientist Kristin Shrader-Frechette (1985). A "technology tribunal" would hold adversarial hearings at which people speaking from different perspectives could present their cases. Advocates would debate the issues, call and cross-examine witnesses, and defend policy recommendations. The tribunal would then render a formal decision. Such formalized, quasi-judicial methods have serious drawbacks that include magnifying conflict and focusing attention on procedures rather than real issues.

## PUTTING THE IDEA INTO PRACTICE

"Linking Values and Policy for Sustainable Development" called for experimenting with these tools in various settings:

**Governments and intergovernmental organizations.** Candidates included several national and subnational governments, starting with environmental impact assessment processes; the World Bank, which announced major reforms in 1993; and the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, which deals with such important moral issues as defining fair and equitable sharing of the benefits of using genetic resources.

**The business community.** One focus here could be on working through existing efforts to promote sustainable development in the international business community. Another approach would be through the field of business ethics. This has become a large field of activity, with its own professional societies, consulting firms, journals, and training courses. Business ethics typically deals with the rules of the business game, for example, keeping promises and being fair to competitors. However, there is a trend toward redefining business ethics to include the impact of a company's operations on the world at large. For instance, some firms are now taking into account the "whole-life" cost of products (Drummond 1994). Some progressive companies are banding together in such groups as Business for Social Responsibility in the United States. Ethical assessments and similar mechanisms could help to ensure that proposals are measured against company or industry-wide statements of principles and codes of practice. The ultimate goal must be changing corporate culture.

**The professions.** Like codes of business ethics, the ethical rules of professions commonly define their members' obligations in terms of integrity and excellence, giving little or no attention to relevance to social needs. Ashok Khosla, president of Development Alternatives, a leading Indian group working for sustainable development, relates the story of a very senior civil servant in the Ministry of the Environment in New Delhi who "was fighting tooth and nail against a [bad] project . . . it so happened that the next morning he was appointed head of the ministry to which that project belonged, so the next day he was telling me how proudly he was fighting tooth and nail for it . . . This was a gentleman who had been secretary of the Ministry of the Environment, who had been advocating the internalization of the environmental dimension into everybody's work, and how each ministry ought to have an environmental capability, and yet he saw it as a professional – his job was to do what the minister said he ought to do" (Khosla 1989, 100).

Khosla believes professional communities need to develop "value systems, enforced if possible by their internal mechanisms, to ensure that their work does not undermine the objectives of the wider society within which they operate but

rather enforces them" (Khosla 1994, 2).

***The investment community.*** Little progress will be made toward sustainability unless there is much more private investment in businesses that engage in such activities as sustainable forestry, recycling, and low-input farming. One of the barriers to such investment is the system of ethics governing the investment community. Two officers of a New York foundation quoted as representative the statement of an institutional investment manager responsible for many hundreds of millions of dollars of venture capital portfolios: "As a fiduciary, I have a moral obligation to my investors to maximize return and minimize risk. I simply cannot take into account exogenous factors like social or environmental impact, or I will reduce the opportunity set and thereby reduce the rate of return" (Tasch and Viederman 1995, 127).

A dialogue is needed with leaders in the investment community about what can be done to promote private investment in enterprises that foster sustainability. This dialogue should include exploring how sustainability as an ethical principle can be included in investment decision-making.

## **ISSUES AND BARRIERS**

A number of organizations agreed in principle to participate in carrying out the strategy set out in "Linking Values and Policy for Sustainable Development," but for several reasons, including my leaving the IUCN commission chairmanship because of term limits, it has not gone further.

Almost without exception, those who were consulted about the idea of experimenting with ways of building ethics into decision-making strongly endorsed the approach taken. However, a number of issues were raised:

- Bringing ethics into decision-making will not be easy to sell. For some people, "ethics" seems airy-fairy. To others, it sounds elitist. Still others are threatened by the value shifts that it implies. Many of these comments echoed Douglas Amy's warning, quoted above, that ethics raises "annoying questions."
- Tough cross-cutting tasks are involved. Bridges must be built between scholars and practitioners, between those trained in the sciences and those with backgrounds in the humanities, and among people from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds. Any one of these orthogonal tasks is hard enough; facing all of them concurrently compounds the difficulty.
- Such an effort will fail if it has an academic style or moralistic tone. Because it is directed at policy-makers, its style must be the style of the policy arena. Among other things, this means responding quickly to requests and opportunities; politicians and business executives have short time scales.

- Most people don't like to be told to become ethical because they see themselves as being ethical. As Richard Tucker of the University of Michigan pointed out, "many of them would be startled and put off by what I think they would perceive as the implication that ethical issues are not already pervasive in their work." People should not be asked to become ethical but rather, Tucker said, to carry out "more systematic analysis" of ethical issues "on a more consistently explicit level than is yet generally the case."
- The most difficult issue in dealing with ethics in an international context is the problem of unity and diversity. Ronald Engel wrote that "For many, to speak of a global ethic smacks of a forced unity – something that will be imposed by one part of the world on other parts of the world, a new kind of colonialism. And surely, given the course of world history, such fears are justified. On the other hand, there are many who are worried that we are drifting into a situation of "cultural relativism" – whereby it is assumed that no one, except those who belong to a particular society, can or should say anything about the values of that society" (Engel 1994, 4-5). Engel believes the answer is to recognize that there can be unity in variety, that it makes sense "to speak at one and the same time of 'a world ethic for living sustainably' and of 'world ethics for living sustainably.'" In other words, there should be global consensus on broad goals, but there can be a variety of ways of achieving them. The required balance can be difficult to achieve in practice.
- Finally, bringing the sustainability ethic into decision-making isn't a panacea. There are limits to what it can accomplish. Considering ethical issues may point to a "right" decision, but there is no guarantee that such a course will be chosen. Building the process is more important than any individual decision. Raising ethical issues can start a conversation that will eventually change organizational culture.

## **WHAT NEXT?**

Based on subsequent discussions and experience, I believe the most promising tool for starting to link values and decision-making is including ethics in policy dialogues. However, this must be done with care. The right mix of practical-minded scholars and thoughtful practitioners is needed (see Trzyna 1990; meetings can't have an ivory-tower atmosphere. People able to tease the ethical issues out of the flow of discussion are essential. They might be professional ethicists but could just as well be historians, political philosophers, lawyers, writers, or religious leaders, for example. The most valuable people are frequently those who move easily between the academic and practical worlds.

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## NOTE ON DEFINITIONS

The words "values," "ethics," and "moral" do not have single or precise definitions; their meaning depends on the context in which they are used. In this paper, they are used as follows:

**Values:** Core beliefs or desires that guide or motivate attitudes and actions. Some values, such as the importance persons attach to honesty, fairness, and loyalty, are ethical in nature because they are concerned with the notion of moral duty - they reflect attitudes about what is right, good, or proper, rather than what is pleasurable, useful, or desirable.

**Ethics:** A system or code of conduct based on moral duties and obligations that indicate how one should behave. Ethics deals with the ability to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong, and propriety from impropriety.

**The difference between values and ethics:** Since only some values are concerned with ethics, ethics and values are not the same. Individuals tend to develop value systems that provide a basis for prioritizing competing values. Only those value systems which subordinate non-ethical values to ethical ones are ethical.

**Moral:** Relating to principles or considerations of right or wrong action; proceeding from a standard of what is good and right.

The first three definitions are adapted from those of the Josephson Institute for Ethics (Independent Sector 1991, 22-23).

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## A CONSULTATIVE PROCESS

This project was conducted through a consultative process involving increasingly wider circles of IUCN member organizations, councillors, staff, and commission members, as well as others leaders in conservation, development, ethics, and international affairs. Between January 1994 and August 1996, the author met with over fifty people and received comments from forty others. Listed below, they included officials of governments, international agencies, foundations, and national and international nongovernmental organizations, as well as scholars, writers, and consultants – citizens of thirty-two countries.

### Persons consulted

- Listing here does not indicate endorsement of the ideas presented above
- Affiliations are as of 1995, when the original paper was published
- \*Indicates a meeting was held
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