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Are there universal values?

By Jeanne Lätt,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

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Bonn, 8 November 2010. Is there such a thing as universal values? That was the question put to both German and foreign participants of training courses at the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) during a session on human rights. The result was revealing: The German participants all said 'yes', while the international guests – who were all from economically advanced countries – all said 'no'.

The question about values and norms that are applicable across national and cultural boundaries is more than just an interesting thought experiment. Since the 1990s European countries in particular have held the view that the global dimensions of climate change, the North-South divide and international terrorism require cross-border solutions. Their focus has been on strengthening multilateral institutions and instruments and thus on codifying the international system.

Emerging economies have their own ideas

At the same time, there is a growing awareness that with the rise of economically significant developing countries like China, India and Brazil we are entering a new – multipolar – phase in world history. Regardless of whether we want to call them 'emerging powers' or 'emerging economies', China's role in overcoming the financial crisis, the greater voting power for emerging economies within the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the growing significance of the G20 group of nations are clear signs that important developing countries are on their way to becoming part of the global establishment. They are increasingly being included in international decision-making processes as equal partners.

However, these countries are very unlikely to accept the principles of international cooperation that have developed over decades of western predominance. There is already some evidence for this: Since the beginning of the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 emerging economies have been exerting increasing pressure to push through developing

countries' interests. The climate negotiations of recent years and, ultimately, their failure in Copenhagen in 2009 are above all down to the different perspectives that industrialised nations and emerging economies have on global responsibility and entitlements – specifically in regard to allocation of emissions rights. Finally, China and other countries from the South are raising their profile as "new donors" in development cooperation and putting pressure on the traditional principles and procedures introduced by western donors.

Universal values, yes or no?

In this setting, a debate on values is inevitable. Proponents of the global governance approach believe the world's problems can only effectively be solved on the basis of shared values and the dissemination of global norms and standards. But is this actually possible in the fundamentally plural and complex society of today?

In addition, many are raising their voices in developing countries to express a deep mistrust of "so-called universal norms". The diverging answers to the question mentioned in the opening paragraph are symptomatic of this. According to critics, the claim to universality is no more than the expression of vested interests and of western ideas of what is "good". There is also the concern that international organisations could interfere with the sovereignty of nation-states in order to push through principles that are specific interests disguised as universal norms.

It is probably impossible to completely reconcile these two contrasting positions, even though some argue that over the last decades a number of norms and principles have been negotiated under the umbrella of the United Nations that are at least formally recognised by most states. Among them are human rights, labour law, the principle of sustainable development and poverty reduction. It is a fact that national and international action is already noticeably determined by global norms and rules, and that the level of codification at international level is increasing.

Strengthening international dialogue

Nevertheless, it is important that the scepticism expressed by some developing countries when it comes to universal values be taken seriously. The international community is becoming increasingly dependent on cooperation between the North and South to solve transnational problems. Western industrialised nations will only be able to convince emerging economies of the need to cooperate to solve global problems if the west addresses their concerns. Emerging economies must be given the opportunity to make a significant contribution to shaping the normative bases of the international system.

Opportunities thus need to be created for both sides to discuss the content and normative foundations of international cooperation. Such a North-South dialogue will have to take account of differences in terms of perceptions of and priorities attached to global issues. Priorities are not a given, and developing countries still tend to attach greater importance to addressing poverty and social injustice than environmental problems or the protection of minorities. Also, climate protection is not as high on the agenda in all emerging economies as it is, for example, in Europe.

The relevant actors will, however, only muster the political will to engage in joint global action if they can all identify with global objectives.

For their part, emerging economies are called to play a constructive role in shaping the future world order. In the past they have used international organisations to put through their own interests and have left it to the old industrialised nations to develop initiatives to promote sustainable global development. The growing role given to countries like China and Brazil in international organisations such as the IMF or on account of their membership of the G20 is essentially a good thing. Now these countries must be made more aware of their responsibilities when it comes to tackling global challenges and shaping the normative foundations of global governance. That will not be possible without a fundamental debate on values involving the traditional industrialised nations and the emerging economies in equal measure.



Jeanne Lätt

*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*