Global Values for Global Development

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Summary
In this paper, author Klaus M. Leisinger argues that despite water scarcity being amongst the greatest challenges of our time, technical solutions alone will not solve the problem: rather, better governance will. The key, he explains, is in rallying collaborative action across all affected sectors – and this can only happen by invoking shared values and moral principles that resonate with all parties.

The paper looks at what Leisinger calls the “wicked problem” of water scarcity through an array of lenses: technological (how to make more efficient use of the water we have), developmental (how the opportunities of tomorrow’s generation may be limited by our current overuse of this resource), and ecological (how climate change impacts water scarcity today and tomorrow). “Due to the water-food-health-economic-development-nexus,” he writes, “Good governance for water security is a precondition for peace and security.”

The paper sets out the typical characteristics of a wicked problem and shows how the problem of water scarcity fits this model: complexity; the lack of a clear indicator when a solution is reached; no clear right or wrong answer, merely a “better” or “worse”; enormous complexity; flexibility around orientation – which is to say, the problem looks different from the perspectives of different stakeholders.

Another commonality to wicked problems is their ubiquity: just as all cultures and religions across the world share the values of, say, justice and fairness, all cultures and religions share a common understanding that wicked problems cannot be solved by one group alone. There is global recognition that these problems demand coordinated responses “transcending national borders, political and cultural differences” – and this recognition can act as a precondition for what comes next.

The paper explains that the first step towards taming a wicked problem is to bring together stakeholders to develop a global understanding of the problem, in line with shared values – ideally, with “a common moral ground”. It prescribes a “deep multi-stakeholder dialogue” to develop this foundation, and recommends, where possible, beginning on what Leisinger calls a “solid fundament”. In other words, we know we need to work together and we also seem to know where to start: our common normative principles.

These normative principles are not just things individual groups and cultures know in isolation, but values that have been formally declared as common to us all. The paper recommends beginning with a declaration of global values, along the lines set out in the Declaration toward a Global Ethic and World Ethos (2010) or UNESCO’s 1999 publication A Common Framework for the Ethics of the 21St Century. Leisinger
holds up the Millennium Declaration (2000) as another example of anchoring work towards a solution to wicked problems in undisputed global values, such as freedom, equality, solidarity and respect. These principles are not only the goals, but also the means of reaching those goals.

The paper concludes with a cautionary note: whilst the work of building consensus and creating change is difficult, often enormously so in the context of such wicked problems, it is still worth doing. Small, focused efforts are key, and with perseverance, may yield results. While Leisinger doubts that we will see a “quantum jump for selfless sustainability change in international and national politics and policies” or in the consumption patterns of the global rich, he believes that opening a dialogue between different parties and anchoring that dialogue in these common normative principles could yield progress towards a solution, perhaps beginning nationally and then moving to the regional arena.

It may take time, Leisinger believes, and it will take the concerted efforts of small groups of outliers who believe in their own vision – but it can be done.