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Agricultural Research — On Ethics and Responsibility of Science for Poverty Reduction and Food and Nutrition Security

JOACHIM VON BRAUN

International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), United States of America

Abstract

This paper aims at assessing current and emerging ethical issues of agricultural sciences and proposes a set of actions on what to do in response to these issues.

As the world becomes more populated — approaching 9 billion in the next generation — and as the food chains become longer and more complex, ethical questions and the responsibilities of agricultural science becomes ever more important. That relates to domestic and international agricultural research, as much of the domestic research is also relevant internationally in the globally integrated agricultural science and market systems.

While food consumption is conditioned by hugely diverse habits and tastes around the world, and production is partly a function of agro-ecologies, again of huge diversity, the food system is largely driven by economics and hardly by an ethical value system. Increasingly however, the links of the food system to human health come to the forefront. When the food system is understood as part of or closely linked to the health system, the ethics of the medical profession may shape the future food systems' ethics. The related implications and potentials for “healthy” new ethics of food systems shall be explored here. While the adoption of ethical principles from the medical profession might go some ways toward shaping food and agriculture related ethics beyond the “do not harm” principles, it is also called for that the agriculture profession relates more to the broader ethics profession for defining relevant concepts, issues and coherent actions.

The largest ethical issue of food production, consumption and trade is the persistence of hunger. Under no ethical concept is hunger acceptable; comprehensive sets of policies and programs exist to address the problem, yet hunger does persist. What fresh approaches for strengthening ethical foundations and rights may facilitate change in science, in policy and — most importantly — in behaviour that contributes to reducing hunger?

A related ethical issue arises around the behaviour that determines the means of poor people's access to food. Production technology, property rights (including land and intellectual property rights), and access to markets are part of this. Implicit and explicit hindrances of production possibilities result from ethics of technology pessimism among those who could facilitate progress (biotechnology is one example), from over-regulated or ill-designed intellectual property rights (preventing fast access by poor nations), and from trade protection.

Another ethical issue has to do with consumer's lack of trust in food safety. Use of pesticides on produce, genetically modified foods, and spillovers from animal diseases to humans, have made consumers apprehensive about the impacts of food on human health. Also, the ethical externalities of production processes, such as animal welfare and environmental concerns, have become more relevant to consumers, especially in high-income countries.

A growing issue is the perceived deepening of information asymmetries between producers and consumers. Since agricultural research is increasingly being conducted by scientists affiliated with private corporations, consumer groups are suspicious of research outcomes, which they feel are geared more towards profit maximisation rather than towards enhancing consumers' interests. Related is the concern about growing concentration in the food industry that may enable producers and retailers to transmit information selectively, thus infringing on consumers' sovereignty to make informed decisions with regards to food consumption.

Lastly, there are ethical issues arising from externalities of behaviour and from new ethics itself. For instance, consumer behaviours such as unhealthy diets can be carried over to the next generation; production and trade regulations founded in local ethically considerations may adversely impact others through price and income effects in that the enhanced moral wellbeing of some (rich) consumers may have negative repercussions on other (poor) producers and consumers. Thus, questions to reflect on here are:

- Incentives for ethics: What kind of incentives can induce behaviour change from stakeholders in order to address the issues mentioned above? Are such incentives “ethical”?
- Regulation for ethics: To what extent can ethical principles be used to establish institutions and organisations that uphold ethics in the food and agricultural sector? What is the role of regulations and restrictions for that?
- Activism for ethics: What kind of interventions can induce positive ethical activism and consumer strengthening on food ethics?
- Distribution of ethics: Whose ethics determine the shape of the food system? And how will ethical behaviour related to production, consumption and trade impact the poor?

Ultimately agricultural science, including “soft” and “hard” sciences, is to be science with a heart, serving people. So, what to do in practical terms? Areas of action highlighted in the paper are codes of conduct for the food industry and civil society organisations; establishing organisational mechanisms for discourses in ethics; incentives for behaviour change; ethics for business; the ethics of governance and rights for food security; and providing an ethical context to strengthen roles of marginal actors. Related investments in ethics may have high social payoffs. A renewed engagement of agricultural science with ethics - including in curricula - might enhance empowerment, and political will that would facilitate the needed scaling up of science and its focus on for the purposes of ending hunger, improving food systems that serve people's well being, and enhance sustainable resource management. Ethical discourse suggests that the agricultural science systems in high income / high science countries, such as Germany, have a responsibility to serve these purposes, and must be expanded and strengthened for these roles for the long term.