

EEB Case Study 1

Is it ethical to force progress through standardization?

Countries have agreed to and adopted standardization tools such as quotas and directives to ensure alignment of quality and achievement of common goals, such as increased inclusion of women and minorities, global sustainability and other environmental goals, and international accounting standards to increase financial transparency.

Countries are generally free to adopt and implement international standards or quotas. For example, countries such as Norway and Germany have adopted quotas to promote women in leadership positions, while in other countries such as the U.S., discrimination against people based on ethnicity, race or cultural orientation is strictly prohibited by federal and state laws in all areas, including employment.

To achieve goals such as gender equality or compliance with environmental, social or governance standards, organizations or even countries can be denied access to business opportunities if they do not meet certain standards. While this could put pressure on them to reform their systems and promote "progress," it could also be seen as moral imperialism.

According to cultural relativism, no culture's ethics are better than another's; therefore, there should be no international right and wrong. In this context, it could be considered unethical for companies or countries to expect others to adhere to their standards. On the other hand, there are examples of how collective action and peer pressure for a common higher goal can justify enforcement strategies.

We may consider the following two examples:

Example 1

Imagine a relatively poor country with an undernourished population: Would they have to adhere to green standards to gain access to the organizations and markets necessary for development, or would they prefer to use more fertilizer, which is harmful to the environment but allows for rapid growth and better living conditions?

Example 2

Should we stop funding development in countries where women's rights are not recognized or respected, at the risk of widening the development gap with more advanced economies and consequently making conditions even more difficult for women?

Please tackle this dilemma:

Should EU institutions exclude countries and companies that do not comply with the standards from important business activities to force progress?

Can a group of countries, through collective action, enforce standards that should ultimately lead to a fairer, greener, and more inclusive world, thus imposing a temporary cost on progress to some other countries?