



Global Citizenship

What is it, and what are our ethical obligations as global citizens

Janet Keeping and Dan Shapiro

What is “global citizenship”?

The term “global citizenship” is increasingly heard, especially in Canada, but rarely defined. This leads to confusion because it is often not clear what a particular writer or speaker means by the term.

One thing leaps out at us though. Global citizenship does not refer to a legal status. My Canadian citizenship gives me rights which are legally enforceable against the Canadian government, such as, to live in Canada, to vote here, to obtain a Canadian passport, and to enter the country freely. There are no analogous rights at the world level: as Michael Byers says in *Are You a ‘Global Citizen?’*, “If such a thing as global citizenship exists, it clearly doesn’t amount to the rights of national citizenship, transposed to the planetary level.” Why? Because “[t]here is no world government ...”

Sometimes what people have in mind is no more than an attitude towards the rest of the world, an acknowledgement of global interdependence. Consider this definition from Daisaku Ikeda, celebrated intellectual and Buddhism scholar:

Feature Report on Citizenship

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The wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living.

The courage not to fear or deny difference; but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from encounters with them.

The compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one's immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places.

These qualities are the essential elements of global citizenship.

The following definition from Michael Byers comes closer we think to expressing what most of us mean by global citizenship:

Global citizenship empowers individual human beings to participate in decisions concerning their lives, including the political, economic, social, cultural and environmental conditions in which they live. ... It is expressed through engagement in the various communities of which the individual is a part, at the local, national and global level. It includes the right to challenge authority and existing power structures, to think, argue and act with the intent of changing the world.

This definition uses the language of involvement and action, with the goal of moving us towards greater social justice in all dimensions of our lives, including the global.

The ethical core of global citizenship

For most people, the notion of global citizenship is strongly normative: because everything is interconnected, we should take our global, as well as other, impacts into account. Because we are all interconnected, the range of people to whom we have responsibilities is global in scope.

Without doubt, the *should* here is the moral or ethical *should*, and the responsibilities to others – which flow from our interconnectedness – are moral or ethical responsibilities.

Global citizenship is not yet a legal concept. But law reform often follows ethical shifts: the majority of Canadians came to view capital punishment as immoral, and *then* the law was changed to forbid it. So we would be wise to understand the ethical dimensions of the global citizenship movement, in preparation for the eventual law reform debates.

Advocates of global citizenship cannot be cultural relativists

One of the most prevalent attitudes amongst Canadian social justice activists is the view that everything is relative to culture. As John Ladd, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Brown University, puts it in his book *Ethical Relativism* (1985):

Feature Report on Citizenship

... respect does not preclude criticism; in fact, we may show more respect when we criticize another's views than if we ignore them, treating them as not worthy of a response. Of course, how we criticize and whether or not we are willing to accept criticism in return is crucially important.

... whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he [or she] belongs.

Social justice activists look around the world and see that there are many different social practices: in Somalia female genital mutilation (FGM) is nearly universal; in Canada it is anathema (and illegal). Many conclude such differences are irreconcilable. Many also think that in order to show respect for other cultures one must refrain from criticism of them. They also justifiably fear repetition of past mistakes, for example, when colonial powers imposed their standards on Aboriginal peoples with terrible results. They fear being perceived as imperialists if they make moral judgments about other cultures.

These are understandable reasons for finding cultural relativism attractive, but all are at bottom misguided. For example, respect does not preclude criticism; in fact, we may show more respect when we criticize another's views than if we ignore them, treating them as not worthy of a response. Of course, *how* we criticize and whether or not we are willing to accept criticism in return is crucially important.

Moral evaluation is a two-way street: if we are relativists, we have no reason to take seriously criticisms which emanate from other cultures, for example, that we in the West use far more than our fair share of resources while roughly two billion people live on two dollars or less a day. And this is precisely the kind of inequity which global citizenship movements seek to remedy.

However, the most serious problem with relativism is that it is self-defeating. The global citizenship advocate believes we have obligations to people in other parts of the world. But a relativist cannot make any kind of moral judgment about practices in other cultures – too bad about FGM in, say, Somalia, but that is just what they do. So relativism undermines our reasons for acting to end practices we find repugnant.

What is the nature and extent of our ethical obligations as global citizens?

There is no hope of answering such a question briefly, but here are some thoughts.

We need a principle according to which we can know whether we are fulfilling our duties as global citizens. We need to know, for example, how far are we obliged as a global citizen to go in supporting efforts to end FGM?

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Kwame Anthony Appiah, Professor of Philosophy at Princeton, explores questions of this kind in his book *Cosmopolitanism* (2004). He starts off with this example:

If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out ... This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would ... be a very bad thing”.

We can agree with this: we should rescue the child. But what is the general principle here? It can't be that trivial sacrifices – such as getting our clothes muddy – are sufficient to fulfil our obligations as global citizens. No, our obligations must be more onerous than this.

Appiah offers this as the ethical standard: “If you can prevent something bad from happening at the cost of something less bad, you ought to do it.”

Now, this looks promising. But what is meant by “something less bad”? Is it less bad that Dan does not fix his front steps and is sued for a lot of money? Is it less bad that Janet does not honour her promise to pay her daughter's university tuition?

Isn't almost anything we can think of “less bad” than that an innocent child undergoes genital mutilation? And yet we don't really believe that we are required to give up so much, do we?

Perhaps we need to shift gears and take as our departure point basic human needs: people have a right to the satisfaction of their basic needs, such as health, food, shelter, and education. But even if true, what are our moral obligations to help others satisfy those needs?

Appiah has no definitive answers, but he offers several factors which put a limit on those obligations. One is this: the entity with primary responsibility for meeting basic human needs in any country is that country itself. Of course! But some states cannot satisfy those needs. There is no government in Somalia; hence it won't be the Somali government that stops FGM in that country.

According to Appiah, another limit is that each of us need do only her or his fair share. This sounds right. But think again: *why* only my fair share, and what in any event does “fair share” mean?

Appiah also argues that in any event our highest duties are to those to whom we are closest: “Whatever my basic obligations are to the poor far away, they cannot be enough, I believe, to trump my concerns for my family, my friends, my country”. Family? Probably. Friends? Perhaps. But country? Isn't this precisely what global citizenship resists?

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Conclusion

The term global citizenship has no legal significance at the moment. Perhaps as such it never will. But the words often serve as a rallying cry for ethically motivated action on global problems, such as FGM and the AIDS pandemic. And the concept is likely to contribute to calls for more onerous obligations on the powerful and fortunate – in both international and domestic law – to share with those who are less so.

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This article is based upon a presentation made by Katherine Austin-Evelyn, Dan Shapiro and Janet Keeping at “Global Citizenship: Thinking Beyond Borders”, a conference held in Calgary on November 22 – 24, 2007.