



Mains Practice Question

Case Study

Vikram is an urban planner in a fast-growing metropolitan city. His department has been tasked with overseeing the redevelopment of an old industrial area into a modern residential neighborhood. The project promises to rejuvenate a dilapidated part of the city and provide affordable housing for hundreds of families. However, the area in question is also home to a vibrant but lower-income community that has lived there for decades.

While the local government has promised that the redevelopment will bring economic opportunities and better living standards, Vikram has begun to uncover troubling details. Many of the residents have been living there for years and have a strong social and cultural attachment to the area. They also run small businesses that are crucial for their livelihoods. The redevelopment plan includes tearing down their homes and businesses, displacing them, and relocating them to a different part of the city, far from their current community and support systems. Moreover, there is a lack of detailed information on how the government will ensure affordable housing for the displaced families or whether they will be properly compensated.

Vikram is also aware that there are significant financial interests behind the project. Several influential real estate developers stand to gain immensely from the redevelopment, and their lobbying efforts have heavily influenced the planning process. Vikram, who was initially excited about the project's potential to revitalize the city, now feels conflicted. On one hand, the redevelopment could bring economic growth, but on the other hand, it may cause social harm to the marginalized community that lives there.

As the project progresses, Vikram is put under pressure by his superiors to approve the project without further scrutiny, as delays could risk funding and affect the city's overall development plan. He is aware that his career could suffer if he raises objections or calls for a review of the plan. At the same time, he is troubled by the ethical implications of displacing vulnerable communities for the sake of economic development and real estate profit.

Questions:

1. What are the key ethical dilemmas involved in this situation?
2. How should Vikram handle the apparent conflict of interest in this situation, with powerful developers pushing for the project and the displacement of a marginalized community?
3. Can economic growth justify the displacement of a community? What ethical principles should guide policymakers when planning such development projects.

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Introduction:

The case revolves around **Vikram**, an urban planner, who faces an ethical conflict while overseeing a redevelopment project that promises economic growth but risks displacing a long-settled, marginalized community. As vested interests pressure him to approve the project without adequate safeguards, Vikram must choose between professional conformity and moral responsibility.

- This dilemma **closely aligns with John Rawls' theory of justice**, which emphasizes that true development must be fair and benefit the least advantaged members of society.

1. What are the key ethical dilemmas involved in this situation?

- **Professional Duty vs Ethical Integrity:** Vikram is expected to follow orders from his superiors and approve the project quickly. However, he is ethically bound to ensure the project is fair and just for all stakeholders.
- **Urban Development vs Social Justice:** The redevelopment promises infrastructure growth and economic benefits. But it risks displacing a vulnerable community with deep social and cultural roots in the area.
- **Personal Career Security vs Moral Courage:** Raising objections may harm Vikram's career and future opportunities. Yet remaining silent compromises his values and the rights of affected citizens.
- **Efficiency and Timelines vs Comprehensive Scrutiny:** Approving the plan without delays will keep the city's development agenda on track. However, overlooking critical gaps—like compensation and rehabilitation—can cause long-term harm.
- **Real Estate Interests vs Public Welfare:** Powerful developers stand to gain significantly from the project. Vikram must balance these interests against the welfare and rights of the existing residents.
- **Government Promises vs Ground Reality:** Official narratives suggest affordable housing and upliftment. Vikram's findings indicate that these promises lack clear, enforceable guarantees for the displaced community.

2. How should Vikram handle the apparent conflict of interest in this situation, with powerful developers pushing for the project and the displacement of a marginalized community?

- **Seek Detailed Documentation and Transparency:** Vikram should formally request written details on rehabilitation, compensation, and affordable housing provisions.
 - This builds an evidence-based case without appearing confrontational.
- **Initiate a Stakeholder Consultation Process:** He can propose a public consultation or stakeholder hearing with the local community, NGOs, and planning authorities.
 - This will add democratic legitimacy to the planning and highlight overlooked social concerns.
- **Recommend a Socio-Economic Impact Assessment:** Suggesting a rapid assessment can help quantify the impact on livelihoods and culture. This professional step is pragmatic and adds weight to any concerns raised.
- **Propose a Revised, Inclusive Development Plan:** Vikram can suggest alternatives—such as in-situ redevelopment, phased relocation, or inclusion of EWS (Economically Weaker Section) housing—that balance development with justice.
- **Use Internal Reporting Mechanisms:** If pressure mounts unethically, he should use formal departmental communication channels to flag concerns. This protects him from retaliation while keeping a record of ethical due diligence.
- **Engage Civil Society and Legal Avenues Discreetly (if needed):** If displacement proceeds without safeguards, he can confidentially alert watchdog bodies, citizen groups, or legal aid organizations to bring attention to possible rights violations.
- **Document His Position:** To protect his professional integrity, Vikram should maintain internal memos or minutes outlining his suggestions and concerns. This ensures accountability if issues arise later.

Vikram need not be oppositional but must act as a responsible planner who integrates development with ethical governance. By working within the system, using due process, and building collective pressure for fairness, he can uphold both public interest and personal integrity.

3. Can economic growth justify the displacement of a community? What ethical principles should guide policymakers when planning such development projects.

While economic growth is essential for national progress, **it cannot unconditionally justify the displacement of communities**, especially when the affected populations are vulnerable, historically

marginalized, or lack meaningful alternatives. Development must be inclusive, equitable, and ethically grounded.

Why Displacement Cannot Be Blindly Justified by Growth:

- **Human Rights and Dignity:** Every individual has a right to shelter, livelihood, and social identity. Economic growth at the cost of these rights becomes ethically problematic.
- **Social Disruption and Cultural Loss:** Communities are not just physical settlements; they embody social capital, cultural heritage, and informal economies that are often irreplaceable.
- **Disproportionate Impact:** The benefits of growth often accrue to corporations and elites, while the displaced suffer long-term consequences — creating developmental injustice.
- **Historical Precedents:** Past experiences (e.g., large dam projects like Narmada) show that poorly managed displacement leads to poverty, alienation, and social unrest.

Ethical Principles That Should Guide Policymakers:

- **Utilitarianism with Safeguards:** Aim for the greatest good, but ensure **no group bears an undue burden** of that progress.
- **Justice and Equity (Rawlsian Ethics):** Displaced communities must be compensated in a manner that improves their condition, not worsens it. The least advantaged should benefit from the development.
- **Principle of Informed Consent:** Transparent dialogue with affected communities and obtaining their free, **prior, and informed consent** is essential.
- **Rehabilitation as a Right, Not Charity:** Resettlement must not be treated as a formality. It should ensure an equivalent or better quality of life.
- **Sustainability and Inclusivity:** Development must balance economic, social, and environmental concerns, aligning with SDG principles of “leaving no one behind.”
- **Accountability and Transparency:** Policymakers must ensure open processes, independent reviews, and grievance redress mechanisms to protect the displaced.

Conclusion:

“Development is not about factories, dams, and roads. Development is about people. The goal is to improve the well-being of people.” Vikram must navigate the delicate balance between development and social justice by upholding transparency, advocating for inclusive planning, and ensuring the displaced community’s rights and dignity are protected. While economic growth is vital, it should not come at the cost of ethical responsibility or human suffering.