

Report on a Case by the Board of Ethical Review

Case No. 67-6

Free Engineering Overseas

Facts:

An engineer working with a volunteer organization which has the purpose of "assisting those working to raise living standards in developing areas of the world," has inquired as to the extent to which he may ethically provide engineering assistance through the volunteer organization. A number of inquiries for technical assistance are from overseas field workers associated with various organizations of an eleemosynary nature who are seeking technical advice relating to problems in the areas of the world in which they are stationed.

A typical request for assistance directed to the engineer was for a method of improving a primitive African water supply, which consisted of uncovered holes intercepting ground water. Those requesting such technical advice are not in a position to pay for it.

Question:

Is it ethical for an engineer to provide technical advice to persons or organizations in the developing nations through a volunteer organization.

References:

Code of Ethics-Section 2(b)- "He shall seek opportunities to be of constructive service in civic affairs and work for the advancement of the safety, health and well-being of his community."

Section 9(a)-"He will not undertake or agree to perform any engineering service on a free basis, except for civic, charitable, religious, eleemosynary non-profit organizations when the professional services are advisory in nature."

Discussion:

Although Section 2(b) refers to "civic" and "his community," we have no doubt that the thrust of the Code is that the engineer should provide constructive services for the advancement of others without regard to geographical limitations. We believe that it is proper and desirable that Section 2(b) be read in its broadest context, particularly when largely through the work of engineers the entire world has become one "community."

The engineering involved is clearly free and is intended to be so. We believe that under the circumstances it can and should be considered as being rendered for civic, charitable, and eleemosynary purposes, even though it may not be entirely clear whether nonprofit organizations are necessarily involved in the foreign countries. We do not believe that detailed semantic technicalities should obscure the motive and intent of Section 2(b) for the purpose described.

Section 9(a) further prescribes, however, that the free services "are advisory in nature." That is to say, an engineer may not ethically provide free engineering services even if in compliance with all the other provisions of the Code if those services involve actual design, or detailed reports that are other than advisory in nature.

In the circumstances of the case before us we would see no objection to the engineer furnishing information and general advice on technical problems. This could include suggestions for techniques which might be employed to deal with local technical problems, the furnishing of or reference to technical data, reports or books to be used by local overseas field workers or others in the community, or even simple sketches or outlines of possible solutions to the type of problem cited in the facts.

It is not feasible to conceive of each possible situation which might be involved, but in general we believe the Code should be interpreted liberally to permit engineers interested in contributing their services for the type of activity involved. Where the purpose is worthy and selfless there is little chance that the mandate of Section 9(a) will be violated.

Conclusion:

It is ethical for an engineer to provide technical advice to persons or organizations in the developing nations through a volunteer organization, provided the services do not extend to actual design or detailed reports that are other than advisory in nature.

Dissenting Opinion:

Member Waldemar S. Nelson disagrees with the conclusion believing it should be qualified for the following reasons:

"Many developing nations have well-established engineering professions frequently including national colleges or associations of engineers legally empowered to regulate the practice of engineering within their countries. North American engineers would be presumptuous and could be in violation of law as well as the Code of Ethics of the engineering profession of the nation in question in furnishing free engineering service without consideration of the local customs and regulations governing the practice of engineering. Furthermore, full knowledge of the local facts and conditions is necessary in giving technical advice in any area and the engineer rendering gratuitous advice on a problem in a foreign country on another continent is unlikely to be fully acquainted with the necessary technical, social, economic, political, and religious facts involved. I believe, therefore, that the conclusion should be qualified as follows: ' . . . , provided that:

1. Such advice is rendered with the knowledge and consent of the government of the nation involved.

2. The furnishing of such engineering service is not in conflict with the Code of Ethics of the engineering profession in the nation involved nor with any laws of such nation.
3. The engineer is certain that he has full knowledge of the necessary facts on which to base his advice.' "

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