

SIMILARITIES, INTENT, AND EMPHASIS: ALIGNMENT OF INTERNATIONAL ETHICS PRINCIPLES WITH BUILT ENVIRONMENT PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS IN GHANA

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Professional codes of conduct establish the ethical rules and parameters within which built environment professionals operate. In 2021, the IESC published the first-ever global ethical standards for the built environment sector. The ability of global ethics standards to promote parity and greater ethical practice has been a subject of extensive debate. A year on since its adoption, there is little understanding of the global acceptance and uptake of the standards. Focusing on sub-Saharan Africa, the extent to which the existing built environment standards in Ghana are aligned with the global standards has been examined in this paper using a qualitative research approach based on content analysis of ethics standards. The study identified similarities and differences between the global standards and the codes of ethics for the following Ghanaian professions (engineers, architects, and surveyors). Some common elements were also identified, indicating that some rules are indeed universal and culture free. Yet, ethical principles in all the standards examined were also sometimes explained differently in terms of intent and emphasis of the rules.

Keywords: ethical standards; professional bodies; code of conduct; Ghana

INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of the International Ethics Standards Coalition (IESC) is to promote and maintain universal ethical standards for the built environment sector, across different geographical locations (IESC, 2021a). Globally, there are approximately 120 professional bodies, associations and standards setting organisations, who are full members of the IESC (IESC, 2021b). Around 155 others have also openly declared support for these International Ethics Standards (IES) including governmental organisations, academic institutions, and several other businesses (IESC, 2021c). In an increasingly globalised and interconnected world, these universal ethics principles aim to provide consistency across markets and encourage professional organisations to follow the same set of ethical standards wherever in the world they operate. Without guidance from a unified set of ethical principles, professionals who operate on a globalised scale must adapt to different ethical environments in the different jurisdictions within which they conduct business, presenting a dilemma where moral

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clarity is often blurred (Peperkamp, 2019). To attain this goal, professional bodies in the built environment sector must adopt and integrate the IESC principles into their existing codes of ethics or conduct. The modified codes would then have to reflect the high-level principles in the IESC standards, such that the globalised ethical environment would not differ materially from country to country. Although the standards are developed for the global built environment sector, it is unclear if the IESC standards mainly reflects the norms and values associated with the western societies from which it was initiated or even which unified set of ethical standards are most pronounced. Past research that investigated the adoption of global ethics standards in professions such as engineering (Alzahir and Kombo, 2014) and accounting (Espinosa-Pike and Barrainkua-Aroztegi, 2014; Barrainkua and Espinosa-Pike, 2015) suggests that adoption of some principles in a global code of ethics can be constrained by the sociocultural factors in the host country. A key research question that was raised, and which is pursued in this study is on the universality of the IESC ethics principles in terms of how it aligns to codes of ethics in Ghana's built environment sector.

The aim of the study was therefore to investigate the IESC principles in terms of their alignment or non-alignment to the codes of ethic used in the Ghanaian built environment sector. The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a discussion on efforts to standardise ethical practices in the built environment sector, followed by the methodology adopted for the study. The findings are presented based on which conclusions have been drawn.

Global Ethics Principles in the Built Environment.

Built environment professionals must make ethical choices in their practice daily. Globally, these choices are regulated and judged by the professional bodies to which these practitioners belong. The regimes of regulation are usually contained within a code of ethics which guides professional behaviour. Irrespective of their common heritage as built environment professions, the various disciplines within the sector operate separate codes of ethics reflecting the ethical conditions of the countries within which they operate. Indeed, noticeable disparities can also be seen in the codes of professional bodies operating even within the same country. The result of this is that there are broad inconsistencies in the spirit, letter, and application of the codes of ethics for built environment professionals from one location to the other. This imposes some difficulty on professionals who operate across different geographical boundaries (Ast, 2018). Differences can also be discerned in the degree to which the codes are enforced especially when comparing developed economies with developing economies (Rossouw, 1994). Rachels and Rachels (2012) explained that human values are inextricably tied to the cultural background within which they are forged.

In practice, this means that communities that are similar socio-culturally are likely to share ethical views, while those from diverse cultures are less likely to agree on ethical perspectives. Ethical relativism is a belief that morality varies from one culture to another and that what is deemed ethical in one culture may be considered unethical in another (Airoboman and Thomas, 2021). Proponents of this concept argue that there can be no single framework within which to judge ethical conduct. This view is contested by moral realists (FitzPatrick, 2022) who espouse the notion of ethical objectivism, a belief that the ethical domain is to be understood on a realist model. Thus, moral judgements are absolute and not dependent on extraneous factors. Some argue that taken to the extreme, ethical relativism can become 'convenient

relativism' whereby all sorts of behaviours can be justified under the banner of ethical relativism (Parboteeah and Cullen, 2017). Notwithstanding this debate, some professions such as accounting (IESBA, 2015), auditing (IIA, no date), legal (IBA, 1988) and medical (WMA, 2022) operate a universal code of ethics for their practitioners around the world. The IESC seeks to replicate this practice for the global built environment sector. The challenges associated with the implementation and enforcement of global standards are well documented (see Vanasco, 1994) and highlights the significance of cultural alignment as a key factor in the implementation these standards. Thus, the effort required to smoothly adopt and implement the IESC standards in Ghana depends on how well the existing Ghanaian professional ethics codes already align with the IESC principles.

METHOD

A qualitative content analysis of the code of ethics for built environment professional bodies in Ghana, UK and the USA was undertaken. The choice of the USA and the UK for analysis was influenced by the significant similarities between the operational structures, practices, and procedures of Ghana's construction industry and that of those countries (Osei, 2013). From the UK and the USA, the codes examined comprised those that existed before, as well as those issued after the adoption of the IESC standards. The Ghanaian codes examined were from before the adoption of the IESC standards since no updates have yet been issued following the adoption the IESC standards. The codes of conduct selected for examination represented those from three key professional groups in the built environment industry, Architects, Engineers, and Quantity surveyors.

The decision to utilise the code of ethics from these three professional groups was primarily driven by a need to ensure that the professions selected from Ghana had their direct comparable opposites in the selected Western countries. This alignment was done to limit or minimise any potential inconsistencies and ensure that the subject of this comparison (the code of ethics) is guided by the same or similar professional practices in both countries. The codes were directly obtained from the professional bodies themselves or from their websites.

Employing a content analysis methodology, a key objective of the researchers was to elicit or decipher meaning from collected data to draw realistic conclusions from it (Kleinheksel *et al.*, 2020). The methodological approach considered the context in which the occurrences of words, phrases, and sentences were recorded for analysis, discussion, and to provide an in-depth understanding (Boettger and Palmer, 2010). Using a deductive approach, the researchers adopted the 12 principles within the IESC standards to create thematic categories which formed the basis for analysing the rules and provisions found in the selected codes of ethics. The following steps were followed:

1. Constructing a coding frame using the 12 categories based on the IESC principles.
2. Line by line coding of the pre-existing UK/USA professional codes using the coding frame.
3. Line by line coding of the updated UK/USA professional codes using the coding frame.
4. Line by line coding of the Ghanaian professional codes using the coding frame.

The analysis began with the exploration of similarities and differences. Where similarities were identified, further analysis was undertaken to assess the intent and emphasis placed on these principles within the different codes of ethics in Ghana. This is also reflected in the frequency of citation analysis undertaken for the codes of ethics in the Ghanaian built environment sector, as the main unit of analysis.

FINDINGS

This section presents the content analysis results showing comparisons of the IESC standards against the existing codes of practice in the UK, USA, and Ghana.

Comparison of the IESC Standards and Pre-Existing Codes in the UK and USA

A comparative analysis of the code of ethics for the Royal Institute of British Architects and the American Institute of Architects shows that their codes pre-existing to the adoption of the IESC standards were already in consonance with the global principles as they would come to be established.

Table 1: Comparing IESC global standards with codes of ethics of RIBA (UK) and AIA (USA)

IESC Global Standards	Architects (AIA) - USA	Architects (RIBA) - UK
Version	2020	2019
Accountability	✓	✓
Confidentiality	✓	✓
Conflict of Interest	✓	✓
Diversity	✓	✓
Financial Responsibility	✓	✓
Integrity	✓	✓
Lawfulness	✓	✓
Reflection	✓	✓
Respect	✓	✓
Standard of Service	✓	✓
Transparency	✓	✓
Trust	✓	✓

As shown in Table 1, prior to the adoption of the IESC standards, all twelve (12) of the IESC principles were fully represented and adequately catered for, in the existing codes of ethics for the two professional bodies. This shows that the IESC standards closely mirrors the ethical framework that exists in those societies.

Comparison of the IESC Standards to the Updated Codes in the UK

Within the UK, at least three professional bodies, including the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), and the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE), have modified and published updated versions of their codes, following the ratification and adoption of the IESC principles in 2021. The UK experience demonstrates that adaptation has been easier for UK professional bodies. This is mainly because these organisations already possessed baseline ethical ideals and aspirations that closely resembled the standards within the IES. As shown

in Table 2, the three UK professional bodies have modified their standards and now have codes that are compliant with the ethical principles within the global standards.

Table 2: IESC compliance comparison of old and new versions of UK codes

IESC Global Standards	Surveyors (RICS)		Engineers (ICE)		Architect (RIBA)	
	Version	Version	Version	Version	Version	Version
	2012	2022	2017	2022	2019	2021
Accountability	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Confidentiality	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Conflict of Interest	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Diversity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Financial Responsibility	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Integrity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lawfulness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reflection	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Respect	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Standard of Service	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Transparency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trust	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

A closer examination of their modified codes revealed that not only are they compliant with the IESC standards, but that they also reflect the spirit and focus of the IESC principles. Notwithstanding efforts by the IESC to promote the widespread adoption and implementation of these standards, the evidence suggests that the push to adopt and implement the standards will be considerably much smoother in regions of the world where existing standards are already comparable to the IESC principles.

Comparison of the IESC Standards and the Ghanaian Codes

An evaluation of the Ghanaian codes predating the adoption of the IESC standards reveals that they do not reflect certain key principles within the IESC standards. This is in sharp contrast to the findings obtained from comparing the codes in the UK and the USA with the IESC standards. Even though the IESC standards were ratified and adopted in 2021, professional bodies in Ghana have not yet taken any steps to update their professional codes of ethics to incorporate the new global standards. A key question that arises is whether the Ghanaian professional bodies also view the issue of global standards with the same urgency and importance as their western counterparts. Indeed, a significant portion of the drive and ambition to create and implement a unified set of global ethics standards in the built environment sector has arisen from western societies (ISURV, 2017) prompting some such as Chattopadhyay and De Vries (2008), to question their underlying reasons and motivations for undertaking such initiatives. Table 3 highlights the areas of differences and similarities between the IESC standards and the existing standards originating from the Ghanaian built environment professional bodies.

Data in the table suggests that there are many topical areas where the professional codes of ethics of the Ghana built environment bodies broadly reflect the IESC standards. Indeed, on principles such as conflict of interest, financial responsibility and integrity, all three Ghanaian codes seem to largely follow the IESC standards in their scope. However, even where the rules seem similar, some contextual misalignment can sometimes be discerned. For example, regarding respect, both the IESC and the Ghanaian professional bodies demand consideration for others. However, the IESC standards go further to include discrimination and prejudice in its scope of expectations. The Ghanaian codes on the other hand are silent and do not address these two concepts in any way.

Table 3: Comparison between the IESC standards and the three Ghanaian standards

IESC Global Standards	Surveyors (2007) (Frequency of Citations)	Engineers (2012) (Frequency of Citations)	Architects (2016) (Frequency of Citations)
Accountability	✓	✓	X
Confidentiality	✓✓	✓	X
Conflict of Interest	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Diversity	X	X	X
Financial Responsibility	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
Integrity	✓✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓✓	✓
Lawfulness	X	✓✓	X
Reflection	X	X	X
Respect	✓	✓	X
Standard of Service	✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	X
Transparency	✓✓	X	X
Trust	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	X

Other features of the IESC standards such as rules relating to accountability, confidentiality, lawfulness, respect, standard of service, transparency and trust appear in at least one of the codes of ethics, although they are not present in all three of the Ghanaian codes examined. This points to a lack of uniformity in the ethical codes of ethics guiding built environment professionals within the Ghanaian context. This is unsurprising and rather consistent with the findings of Langlois and Shlegemilch, (1990) who indicated that there can be significant differences in the approach to ethics even amongst people who share similar cultural orientations. Out of all three codes, that of the GIA was identified as having the least alignment with the IESC standards. The GIA code only aligned with the IESC standards in the areas of conflict of interest, financial responsibility and integrity.

Two of the IESC's guiding principles were missing from all three Ghanaian codes. These are related to the principles of diversity and reflection. In addition to requiring practitioners to complete CPD to maintain and advance their professional skills, the IESC standards included a second concept on reflection. This obligated practitioners to reflect on their work to ensure that it is consistent with the evolving nature of ethical principles and professional standards. It is possible to argue that the point that one's practice must be consistent with evolving ethical principles and professional standards is captured in the obligation to complete CPD as stipulated in the Ghanaian codes. For the purposes of comparison, however, it is worthy to note that reflection as an IESC concept is accurately and separately captured in the codes emanating from both UK and USA professional bodies. This variation can be corrected by the Ghanaian codes of ethics stating an explicit requirement for the CPD undertaken by practitioners to include content on the evolving nature of their ethical responsibilities. The exclusion of diversity from the Ghanaian codes could be traced to the cultural environment in the country, which is like the situation that pertains in other parts of the African continent. Although Africa is the continent with the most diverse populations and has over 1000 different ethnic groups (Awedoba, 2005) the amount of research on diversity and inclusion management is relatively low (Appiah and Adeyeye, 2021). As a society, Ghana is multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural and is estimated to have over 90 ethnic groups (Asante and Gyimah-

Boadi, 2004). Yet, corporate Ghana has a low appreciation and understanding of the subject of diversity and inclusion management (Appiah and Adeyeye, 2021). The broad commonalities between the different ethnic groups in the country obscure the differences between them making it harder to identify discrimination. Owing to this and other factors, Ghanaian society at large has failed to grapple with the issues of discrimination and marginalisation to the same degree that western societies have and continue to do. The same can be said of discrimination against sexual minorities (Akinwotu, 2021), gender discrimination (Akotia and Anum, 2015) and people living with disabilities (Ocran, 2019). The absence of these issues from the cultural conversation and as matters of vigorous debate may account for the inability of the professional bodies to include it in their codes. However, discrimination against minorities in Ghana exists and the built environment sector will not be immune from its effects. Provisions for diversity will need to be included in the Ghanaian codes if they are to be brought into conformity with the spirit and letter of the IESC principles.

Specificity

Provisions found in the Ghanaian codes but are missing from the IESC standards are outlined in Table 4. For example, items 2, 4 and 12 in the table do not directly relate to any of the IESC standards. On the other hand, items 6, 7, and 10 are examples of Ghanaian provisions that go even further but could be related with the IESC's broad ideals on giving due attention to social and environmental considerations (accountability) and treating others with consideration, avoiding acts that will damage the wellbeing of others (respect). Item 9 which is a provision in the Ghana Institution of Engineers' code enjoins members to recommend specialised professionals to undertake roles where needed. This can be said to be an expansion of the IESC standards that requires professionals to only take on assignments for which they are adequately qualified and trained. Similarly, item 11 also from the Ghana Institution of Engineers stipulates that members are not to get involved with payments on projects. This is an even more explicit provision than the IESC standard on financial responsibility which merely calls on practitioners to be truthful, transparent, and trustworthy in financial matters. The specific and granular provisions of the Ghanaian codes suggests that they were written with the intention of resolving context-dependent ethical concerns that are prevalent in Ghana. Those issues while relevant in the Ghanaian context may not necessarily be applicable to other jurisdictions to merit their inclusion in a globalised set of ethical standards.

Al-Aidaros *et al.*, (2015) and Allen (2010) presented and discussed a two-pronged approach to ethical code building. The first approach, known as the conceptual framework approach, establishes high-level overarching principles that may be applied to evaluate ethical behaviour and to determine compliance with the fundamental principles of a code. In contrast, the second component known as the rules-based approach, stipulates *de facto* rules that must be followed in an absolute manner. Utilising the conceptual framework approach, (also sometimes referred to as a 'principles-based' code (Allen, 2010), the IESC standards provides a set of shared high-level ethical principles. It will be inconceivable then for the IESC to anticipate and accommodate all matters of ethical concern, especially those that have peculiar country or culture-specific implications. Consequently, comparisons and efforts to evaluate whether the Ghanaian codes are in conformance with the IESC standards should be based on whether the Ghanaian codes incorporate all the guiding principles that are included in the IESC standards. Ultimately, the responsibility lies with

professional bodies who are members of the IESC to ensure that the specific details within their codes adhere to the core concepts of the IESC standards.

Table 4: Standards found in only Ghanaian codes

	Standards in Only Ghanaian Codes	Surveyors	Engineers	Architects
1	Contribution to charitable objectives	✓	✓	
2	Guidance on solicitation for work	✓	✓	
3	Guidance on taking over work started by a fellow professional	✓	✓	✓
4	Guidance on promotion of services offered	✓	✓	✓
5	Not to collaborate with members who are not in good standing	✓		✓
6	Not to supplant fellow professionals	✓		✓
7	Exercise restraint in criticising fellow professionals in public		✓	
8	Adhere to laid down whistleblowing procedures		✓	
9	Recommend client engages specialist skills where required		✓	
10	Respect for cultural heritage		✓	
11	Not to get involved with payments on projects		✓	
12	Advise client of consequences of overruling professional judgement		✓	

A comparison of the IESC standards with the Ghanaian codes revealed some elements of the IESC standards were already in the Ghanaian codes. For some of these however, some variation could be discerned in the context and focus. Some elements, such as diversity and reflection, were completely absent from the Ghanaian codes, while some aspects from the Ghanaian codes did not make it into the IESC standards. This can be traced to the fact that there are unique cultural and ethical considerations within the Ghanaian context which were unaccounted for in the IESC standards.

CONCLUSIONS

A successful implementation of a universal set of ethics standards for the built environment profession would result in several clear advantages and benefits. Notwithstanding the considerable global engagement prior to the establishment of the standards, this study shows that the global standards are more aligned with western codes than they are with the Ghanaian codes. More work would be required to adapt and implement the standards in Ghana than in regions where the IESC requirements are already comparable to existing standards. The professional bodies will need to update their professional codes of ethics to accommodate and integrate the elements of the IESC standards that are not present in their codes. They will also need to re-orient their members, through targeted CPD activities, on the revisions and the implications for their practice. The primary shortcoming of this study is that its emphasis is based entirely on the examination of secondary data. It is therefore limited by the lack of input from experts and professionals within the Ghanaian built environment sector. There is a need for further research that involves the collection and analysis of primary data. This could provide a deeper understanding of contextual issues and allow better insight into the possible challenges and how they can be addressed for the

successful adoption and integration of the IESC standards. This work is currently being undertaken as part of a larger research effort.

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