Chapter 2: The Human Development and Capability Approach

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Aims of the chapter

- To introduce the key concepts and principles of the human development and capability approach.

- To understand the contribution of the approach to development thinking and policy.

- To identify the implications of the human development and capability approach for development at the micro and macro level.

Key points

- The capability approach contains three central concepts: functioning, capability and agency. A *functioning* is a valuable activity or state that makes up people's wellbeing. A *capability* is a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being. *Agency* is a person's ability to pursue and realize goals she has reason to value.

- The human development and capability approach is multi-dimensional. It contains four key principles: equity, efficiency, participation/empowerment and sustainability.

- Capabilities are the evaluation space according to which states of affairs are assessed.

- Policies should promote valuable capabilities. Some suggest that what is considered to be 'valuable' can only be decided upon through participatory decision-making (Amartya Sen), while others advocate specific prescriptions (Martha Nussbaum).

Structure

Human development

    A bird's-eye view

    Clarification of means and ends

    Values, priorities and public debate

    Agency, voice and empowerment

    Plural information, multiple dimensions

Amartya Sen's capability approach

    Functionings and capabilities

    Some misunderstandings

    The priority of freedom

    Agency

    Compare and contrast (happiness, utility and resources)

Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach

How would you define 'successful' development, that is, a process that heads towards its fundamental purpose or objective? Let us start with two oversimplifications. Consider first an approach to development, in which the objective is to achieve and sustain high rates of economic growth. In this situation, the unit of analysis is evident: the economy. This may be the national economy or the economy of a particular region or sector. The currency of assessment is clearly monetary -- income. Trade-offs, such as between environment protection and employment creation, are in many cases resolved by market prices and exchange rates.

Now consider an approach to development in which the objective is to expand what people are able to do and be, or what might be more properly called their real freedoms. It puts people first. In this view, a healthy economy is one that enables people to enjoy a long and healthy life, a good education, a meaningful job, a happy family life, democratic debate and so on. Notice two shifts: first, in this approach, the analysis shifts from the economy to the person. Second, the currency of assessment shifts from money to the things people can do and be in their lives, now and in the future. This approach also acknowledges trade-offs that engage value judgments about the most relevant objectives for the development process.

Both perspectives are less clear-cut in reality. Those who focus on people's lives are still vitally concerned with economic growth, macroeconomic stability, poverty reduction and many other means to improving people's lives. In comparison, what is commonly held in the 'growth' approach is the assumption that, if economic growth were to be achieved, then other things (nutrition, education, good jobs) would necessarily take care of themselves. The previous chapter has already alluded to some of these related assumptions.

In 1991, the *World Development Report* of the World Bank still sketched the *goal* of development in fairly broad terms:

> Economic development is defined in this Report as a sustainable increase in living standards that encompass material consumption, education, health and environmental protection. Development in a broader sense is understood to include other important and related attributes as well, notably more equality of opportunity, and political freedom and civil liberties. The overall goal of development is therefore to increase the economic, political and civil rights of all people across gender, ethnic groups, religions, races, regions and countries. This goal has not changed substantially since the early 1950s, when most of the developing world emerged from colonialism (World Bank, 1991: 31).

But whether the differences concern the 'objective' of development, or the 'assumptions' regarding economic growth, clearly divergent points of view exist and shape development thinking and action today. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, normative frameworks and ideas about what matters do have enormous practical implications.

This chapter describes the second perspective, the people-focused one, otherwise known as the human development approach. Human development has been pioneered by different people under different names and at different times. A focus on people's freedoms can be found in the notion of *ubuntu* in Southern Africa,[1] with liberation theology in Latin American and beyond,[2] and with many other ethical approaches to development. It is equally applicable in developed and developing countries. One of its leading voices is the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, whose writings on the 'capability approach' provide the philosophical basis of human development. Later sections will present his foundational work and its basic terms and concepts. But, before moving to these, we begin by offering an overview of the key elements of human development.

Human development

[a] A bird's-eye view

The idea of human development has been circulated in policy circles and public debate for the past two decades. One powerful vehicle of communication has been the annual *Human Development Report* produced by the United Nations Development Programme. The first report was published in 1990, and subsequent issues have sought to bring the human development perspective to bear on a wide range of issues. In addition to the annual global report, about a hundred different countries are producing their own *National* and *Regional Human Development Reports* today*,* with some of these countries producing state or provincial reports as well. These reports are intended to assess the state of a population from the perspective of people's quality of life. The analysis draws upon data regarding health, education, political freedoms, security, environment and many other aspects of people's lives. In assessing the state of a population from a people-centred perspective, these reports have the political purpose of raising awareness and generating debate on public issues and concerns which would otherwise not be on the political agenda.

Box 2.1 Themes of Global *Human Development Reports* to date

2009: *Migration*

2007/8: *Fighting climate change: Human solidarity in a divided world*

2006: *Beyond scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis*

2005: *International cooperation at a crossroads*

2004: *Cultural liberty in today's diverse world*

2003: *Millennium Development Goals: A compact among nations to end human poverty*

2002: *Deepening democracy in a fragmented world*

2001: *Making new technologies work for human development*

2000: *Human rights and human development*

1999: *Globalization with a human face*

1998: *Consumption for human development*

1997: *Human development to eradicate poverty*

1996: *Economic growth and human development*

1995: *Gender and human development*

1994: *New dimensions of human security*

1993: *People's Participation*

1992: *Global dimensions of human development*

1991: *Financing human development*

1990: *Concept and measurement of human development*

[!Box ends!]

The *Human Development Reports* were the brainchild of Mahbub ul Haq, a Pakistani economist who wanted to see the world's economic and social progress assessed in a different way, moving away from the usual income and economic growth considerations that had come to characterize the World Bank's annual *World Development Reports*.[3] As ul Haq argued, a country that sells weapons should not be considered more 'developed' than a country that has chosen not to make weapons and export them, simply because the production of weapons makes the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of that particular country significantly higher. The following quote, taken from a speech given by Robert F. Kennedy on 4th January 1968, encapsulates the limitations of GDP as a measure of what makes life valuable:

> The Gross National Product of the United States is the largest in the world, but that GNP, if we should judge our nation by that, counts air pollution and cigarette advertising and ambulances to clear the highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and jails that break them. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and the loss of our natural wonder and chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and the cost of a nuclear warhead and armoured cars that fight riots in our

streets. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.[4]

Box 2.2: The purpose of development (by Mahbub ul Haq)

The basic purpose of development is to enlarge people's choices. In principle, these choices can be infinite and can change over time. People often value achievements that do not show up at all, or not immediately, in income or growth figures: greater access to knowledge, better nutrition and health services, more secure livelihoods, security against crime and physical violence, satisfying leisure hours, political and cultural freedoms and a sense of participation in community activities. The objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives.

The human development paradigm covers all aspects of development – whether economic growth or international trade; budget deficits or fiscal policy; savings, investment or technology; basic social services or safety nets for the poor. No aspect of the development model falls outside its scope, but point of reference remains the widening of people's choices and the enrichment of their lives. All aspects of life -- economic, political or cultural – are viewed from that perspective. Economic growth therefore becomes only one subset of the human development paradigm.

On some aspects of the human development paradigm, there is fairly broad agreement:

- Development must put people at the centre of its concerns.

- The purpose of development is to enlarge all human choices and not just income.

- The human development paradigm is concerned both with building human capabilities (through investment in people) and with using those human capabilities more fully (through an enabling framework for growth and employment).

- Human development has four essential pillars: equality, sustainability, productivity and empowerment. It regards economic growth as essential, but emphasizes the need to pay attention to its quality and distribution, analyses at length its link with human lives and questions its long-term sustainability.

- The human development paradigm defines the ends of development and analyses sensible options for achieving them.

Extracts from Mahbub ul Haq's *Reflections on Human Development*; also in Fukuda-Parr and Shiva Kumar (eds.), *Readings in Human Development* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 3-16.

[!Box ends!]

[b] Clarification of means and ends

Human development draws attention to what really matters: people; in so doing, the appraisal of income growth itself is altered altogether. Indeed, the limited value of income and wealth has been recognized for centuries. Aristotle argued that 'wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking, for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else' (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, chapter 5, 1096^a5-10). Going even further back in time, the first chapter of Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* relates a discussion described in an 8th century B.C. Sanskrit manuscript. A woman, Maitreyee, asks her husband 'if "the whole earth, full of wealth" were to belong to her, she (would) achieve immortality through it.' Hearing that she would not, Maitreyee asks, 'What should I do with that by which I do not become immortal?' (cited in Sen, 1999: 13).

That people matter does not mean that income does not. Income is obviously an important instrument in enabling people to realize their full potential. A 12-year old boy who wishes to pursue secondary education and become a doctor might have his dreams blighted by the fact that he has to work instead, in order to help pay health bills incurred by other family members. But income is not everything. The 12-year old would not have to work if there were adequate public health services for low-income families. And, in some cases, income does not help. A girl born in a well-to-do family might have her dreams of becoming a lawyer blighted because her family and community think it improper for her to work outside the home.

[c] Values, priorities, and public debate

The first *Human Development Report* in 1990 defined human development as 'both the process of widening people's choices and the level of their achieved well-being' (UNDP, 1990: 9). The purpose of development is to enhance people's range of choices, in the present and in the future, in all areas of their life -- economic, social, political and cultural. Choices do not merely relate here to what one would like to do, such as listening to music with the windows open in the middle of the night, or living a life of leisure surfing in Malibu. Widening people's choices is about what is *valuable* for people to be or do.

This issue of values is critical in the human development approach. What are valuable choices that public policy should promote? Who defines what is valuable? How are deep disagreements resolved? What about values that seem reprehensible, ill-informed or harmful? For example, British people value travelling abroad, therefore transportation policy has given them the opportunities to do so cheaply by deregulating air travel and allowing budget airlines to operate. On the other hand, air travel is a significant contributor to climate change, with disastrous effects on the lives of current and future generations, especially among those who

are already most vulnerable. These are the types of tricky questions the approach raises and, as we shall see in later chapters, attempts to address in concrete ways.

Because of human diversity itself, our respective values also tend to be somewhat heterogeneous. Still, development in a given society tends to reflect its most cherished values -- of equity, harmony with nature, peace and order, material wealth or children's well-being. The UK is the fourth largest global economy but a 2007 UNICEF report on child well-being in rich countries concluded that its children had the lowest level of well-being among industrialized nations.[5] Not surprisingly, the report created substantial concern. This type of analysis help people clarify what their values are, and what they might wish to change.

In 2007, a British TV channel brought a group from the small Pacific island of Vanuatu to make an anthropological study of British people. The trip was sparked by an alternative index of well-being in which Vanuatu ranked as the most 'developed' country on earth, while the UK came in at 108.[6] In one episode, the Vanuatu citizens spent half an hour in Central London during rush hour trying in vain to engage commuters in a conversation. They could not grasp why people would pass each other like objects and rush like bees in a busy beehive. As a newspaper review of the series put it: 'This they thought was "crazy," a rejection of the most important things in life, which they believe to be "love, happiness, peace and respect."'[7] Human development raises such discussions of values, priorities and trade-offs, about which people often hold differing views, so that they might be in a better position to shape their respective societies.

[d] Agency, voice and empowerment

One of the central goals of human development is enabling people to become direct agents in their own lives. People are after all not passive objects of social welfare provisions but are active subjects with the power to determine, to some degree at least, how they choose to live. From this perspective, development engages with people's freedom to make decisions about their lives. People themselves decide upon what kind of development they would like for themselves. People should be empowered so that they can define their respective priorities as well as choose the best means to achieve them. Referring to the choice between cultural tradition and poverty, on the one hand, and modernity and material prosperity, on the other hand, Amartya Sen (1999: 31) writes: 'If a traditional way of life has to be sacrificed to escape grinding poverty or minuscule longevity, then it is the people directly involved who must have the opportunity to participate in deciding what should be chosen.'

Agency and the expansion of valuable freedoms go hand in hand (see box 2.3). In order to be agents of their own lives, people need the freedom to be educated, to speak in public without fear, to have freedom of expression and association, etc. But it also in being agents that people can build the environment in which they can be educated and speak freely, etc.

Box 2.3 Human development: focusing on well-being and agency (by Amartya Sen)

The perspective of human development incorporates the need to remove the hindrances that people face through the efforts and initiatives of people themselves. The claim is not only that human lives can go very much better and be much richer in terms of well-being and freedom, but also that human agency can deliberately bring about radical change through improving societal organization and commitment. These are indeed the two central ides that give cogency to the focus on human development. That focus relates, on one side, to a clearer comprehension of how – and in what ways – human lives can go much better and, on the other, to a fuller understanding of how this betterment can

be brought about through a strengthening of human agency. I shall call them, respectively, the 'evaluative aspect' and the 'agency aspect' of human development.

Extract from Amartya Sen's foreword to *Readings in Human Development* by Fukuda-Parr and Shiva Kumar

[!Box ends!]

[e] Plural information, multiple dimensions

The human development approach is inherently multi-dimensional and plural (see Box 2.4). It is about education as much as it is about health. It is about culture as much as it is about political participation. It deals with fiscal policy as much as health policy – higher taxes on alcohol and cigarettes could be as effective in giving people opportunities to live long and healthy lives as spending more on health services. It deals with agricultural policies as much as it deals with exchange rate policies – the devaluation of a currency may do more to promote exports and provide farmers with greater opportunities to earn a decent income than farm subsidies. It deals with educational policy as much as gender, environmental, industrial or technological policy. And so on and so forth. Human development thus relates to many aspects that concern people's lives, not only economic ones. It can therefore not be subsumed under one single academic discipline. It encompasses many, including economics, law, sociology, political science and philosophy.

Box 2.4: What is human development? (by Amartya Sen)

What does the human development accounting, in fact, do? What is its special feature, its identifying characteristic? This is, at one level, an easy question to answer. Rather than concentrating only on some solitary and traditional measure of economic progress (such as the gross national product per head), 'human development' accounting involves a systematic examination of a wealth of information about how human beings in each society live (including their state of education and health care, among other variables). It brings an

inescapably pluralist conception of progress to the exercise of development evaluation. Human lives are battered and diminished in all kinds of different ways, and the first task, seen in this perspective, is to acknowledge that deprivations of very different kinds have to be accommodated within a general overarching framework. The framework must be cogent and coherent, but must not try to overlook the pluralities that are crucially involved (in the diverse nature of deprivations) in a misguided search for some one measure of success and failure, some single clue to all the other disparate concerns.'

Extract from Amartya Sen's 'A Decade of Human Development', *Journal of Human Development*, 2000, 1(1): 17-23

[!Box ends!]

Human development contains core principles that relate to various dimensions of the development process. Four of these were mentioned by Mahbub ul Haq and have been used repeatedly in applying human development. They are: equity, efficiency, participation and sustainability. Of course other principles – like responsibility or respect for human rights – also matter. But these four are considered central:[8]

- *Equity* refers to the concept of justice, impartiality and fairness and incorporates the idea of distributive justice, particularly in terms of access to opportunities and outcomes to all human beings. It is related to, but different from, the concept of equality, which implies equal treatment of all people. The principle of equity recognizes that those who have unequal opportunities due to various disadvantages may require preferential treatment or affirmative action. For example, the poor, differently-abled, women, ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged sections of the population may need special measures to enable them to have the same level of opportunities.

- *Efficiency*: The attention paid to distributive justice however is not at the expense of efficiency in the system. Efficiency is conventionally defined as the optimal use of existing

resources. From a human development perspective, efficiency is defined as the least cost method of reaching goals through optimal use of human, material and institutional resources to maximize opportunities for individuals and communities. It is necessary to demonstrate that the chosen intervention is the one that offers the best results in enlarging choices and enabling the optimum use of opportunities. When applying this principle, one must conceive of efficiency in a dynamic context since what is efficient at one point in time may not necessarily be efficient in the long run.

- *Participation and empowerment* is about processes that lead people to perceive themselves as being entitled to make life decisions. It is about the freedom to make decisions in matters that affect their lives. Whether at the level of policy-making or implementation, this principle implies that people need to be involved at every stage, not merely as beneficiaries but as agents who are able to pursue and realize goals that they value and have reason to value.

- *Sustainability* is often used when referring to the environment but is not confined to this dimension alone.[9] It refers to sustainability in all spheres, social, political and financial. Environmental sustainability implies achieving developmental results without jeopardizing the natural resource base and biodiversity of the region and without affecting the resource base for future generations. Financial sustainability refers to the way in which development is financed without having to run into a deficit. Specifically, development should not lead countries into debt traps. Social sustainability refers to the way in which social groups and other institutions are involved in ensuring participation and involvement by avoiding disruptive and destructive elements. Cultural liberty and respect for diversity are also important values that can contribute to socially-sustainable development.

Amartya Sen's capability approach

The human development approach has been profoundly inspired by Amartya Sen's pioneering works in welfare economics, social choice, poverty and famine, and development economics.[12] While Sen's works cover an extremely wide range of topics, his 'capability approach' has led to a virtual revolution in the field of economics and in the social sciences in general.

In 1980, Sen gave in Stanford University the Tanner lectures on human values called 'Equality of What?'. He questioned the adequacy of measuring equality in the space of marginal or total utility, or primary goods. And he outlined for the first time his conception of capabilities. This section introduces that approach – its key terms, its contrast to other approaches and how various components interrelate.

In *Inequality Re-examined,* Amartya Sen writes: 'A person's capability to achieve functionings that he or she has reason to value provides a general approach to the evaluation of social arrangements, and this yields a particular way of viewing the assessment of equality and inequality' (1992:5). The key idea of the capability approach is that social arrangements should aim to expand people's capabilities – their freedom to promote or achieve valuable beings and doings. An essential test of development is whether people have greater freedoms today than they did in the past. A test of inequality is whether people's capability sets are equal or unequal.

Different phrases are used to try to communicate this basic idea in simple ways:

- The *Human Development Reports* describe the objective of expanding people's choices

- Amartya Sen's 1999 book was entitled *Development as Freedom*

- Sometimes the words effective freedoms or real freedoms are used to emphasise that what matters is only the actual possibilities that lie open before one.

Box 2.5 Key terms of the capability approach

Functionings: 'the various things a person may value doing or being' (Sen, 1999: 75). In other words, functionings are valuable activities and states that make up people's well-being – such as a healthy body, being safe, being educated, having a good job, being able to visit loved ones. They are also related to goods and income but describe what a person is able to do or be with these. For example, when people's basic need for food (a commodity) is met, they enjoy the functioning of being well-nourished.

Capability: 'the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another...to choose from possible livings' (Sen, 1992: 40). Sen also defines capabilities as the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for [a person] to achieve.' Put differently, capabilities are, 'the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (Sen, 1999: 87).

Agency: the ability to pursue goals that one values and has reason to value.
[!Box ends!]

[a] Functionings and capabilities

Because functionings are aspects of human fulfilment, some may be very basic like being nourished, literate and clothed, while others might be quite complex, like being able to play a

virtuoso drum solo or being able to eat caviar. Both basic and complex functionings can relate to different dimensions of life. For example, some may be focused on survival, work and material well-being, while others are focused on relationships, empowerment and self-expression.

Capabilities are a kind of opportunity freedom. Just like a person with a pocket full of coins can buy many different things, a person with many capabilities can enjoy many different activities and pursue a variety of different life paths. For this reason, the capability set has been compared to a budget set. Capabilities are thus described as the real and actual possibilities open to a given person. As T.H. Green wrote, 'We do not mean merely freedom from restraint or compulsion … when we speak of freedom as something to be so highly prized, we mean a *positive power or capacity* of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying' (cited in Sen, 2002: 586).

As Green's quote implies, capabilities include only possibilities that people really value. Activities or states that people do *not* value or have reason to value would not be called capabilities. Truly evil or utterly vacuous activities are not capabilities (although they still exist and must be reckoned with, as we shall see). Some of Sen's descriptions of capability stress this, such as his description of capability as 'a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being' (1993, p. 30). Box 2.6 illustrates the distinction between functionings and capabilities.

Box 2.6: Capabilities and functionings in Mexico (by Pedro Flores)

In Mexico, as well as in other parts of the world, there are people who are in the business of dealing with 'second-hand goods.' These people go to apartment buildings and

neighbourhoods to buy used things that people no longer want. This merchandise can vary from clothing, electronic appliances and tableware to CDs and toys. The profit in this business lies in buying things at a very low price and later going to open-air markets and selling them at a higher price. So the second-hand goods dealer is a collector of useless things that he can occasionally improve, which he then sells in various markets.

The case discussed here is that of Jorge Solís, who began to work as a second-hand goods dealer when he was 17 years old. This was because he and his mother were left on their own. His brothers and sisters had married and no one was there to help out with the household expenses.

People know that the second-hand goods dealer is in the neighbourhood when they hear him shouting: 'Old appliances you want to sell?' Consumers like me hear him and invite him to our homes to see what he is selling. One day, I saw Jorge through the window and I invited him in to see what merchandise he had.

Pedro: Sir, I didn't hear you shout. I want to sell several things.

Jorge: The thing is that I can't shout. I have a sore throat.

Pedro: Really? Have you taken some medicine for your sore throat?

Jorge: No, I don't have enough money to buy medicine.

Pedro: But if you don't buy any medicine, you won't get better and you won't be able to shout. As a consequence, we won't be able to hear you and we won't offer you our things.

Jorge: Well, yes, but there is no other way. I just hope that people see me even if they don't hear me shout, so that I'll be able to get something today and sell it.

What does this simple story illustrate? Jorge did not have the functionings required to be healthy and this restricted his possibilities of promoting his services and receiving a decent

income. If Jorge does not have more money, he won't be able to buy the medicine he needs for his throat to heal, and the circle of restrictions will not be broken.

The fundamental lesson is that the basic functioning of enjoying good health can affect Jorge's capability. Not having good health is also limited by the lack of instrumental freedoms, such as financial means and social security. For instance, Jorge had no access to affordable health services.

Jorge earns around $2,500 Mexican pesos per month (US $250) and he spends this money on food. So how can he buy medicine if he gets sick? The last time I saw Jorge, he told me that his daughter is now working and the she has registered him at the *Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social* (IMSS Mexican Institute for Social Security) so he now can get free medical care. Lastly, I asked him if he planned to continue working in second-hand goods; his answer was: 'I couldn't work in anything else. What else could I do?'

[!Box ends!]

[b] Some misunderstandings

A misunderstanding between 'capability' and 'choice' often surfaces, especially with the translation by the *Human Development Reports* of the rather esoteric term of 'capabilities' as 'choices'. It is usually more important to be able to choose a career than to be able to choose between an array of rival brands of toothpaste. And sometimes people value having to make only a few good choices, rather than many cumbersome choices. People also sometimes value making some choices together – as a family or a community – and not individually. The phrase 'expanding people's choices' is good because it is easily understood. But it does *not* mean that we focus on expanding *all* choices – regardless of their value. Furthermore, most choices affect more than one person and many are often made after discussion and

consultation with others. So, in trying to 'expand people's choices', we are not imagining that individuals are to make all choices in isolation. Indeed, many capabilities can only be created and sustained by people acting together.

This brings up one further misunderstanding of Sen's capability approach and its relation to individualism. Three kinds of individualism can usually be distinguished from one another (Robeyns 2005: 107, 2008: 90):

- *Ethical individualism* 'postulates that individuals, and only individuals, are the *ultimate* units of moral concern… This, of course, does not imply that we should not evaluate social structures and societal properties, but ethical individualism implies that these structures and institutions will be evaluated *in virtue of* the causal importance that they have for individual well-being.'

- *Ontological individualism* holds that 'society is built up from only individuals and nothing (but) individuals, and hence is nothing more than the sum of individuals and their properties.'

- Explanatory or *methodological individualism* presumes 'that all social phenomena can be explained in terms of individuals and their properties.'

Many presume that the capability approach is individualistic because it focuses on people rather than groups. First, we must point out that much of the work on the capability approach and human development as a whole has engaged groups specifically – women's groups, social movements, public actions, democratic practices, and so on. Also, many choices are made by groups, not individuals. The capability approach thus does not defend methodological or ontological individualism. But even if we are highly interested in groups, the capability approach, as initially framed by Sen, takes the normative position of 'ethical individualism' -- the view that what ultimately matters is what happens to every single individual in a society.

The reason for this support of ethical individualism is that choosing a group unit of moral concern, such as the family, the social group or the community will systematically overlook any existing or potential inequalities *within* these units. For example, the deprivations particular to women and children have regularly been overlooked by analyses that focus on the household unit. Or consider an orchestra: its members may perform a wonderful musical performance that is irreducibly social in nature.[11] The concert cannot be decomposed into individual occurrences, nor can it be expressed in terms of individual characteristics. Yet, the beauty created by the musical performance may depend upon the fact that some of its members have been forced by their families to play music from an early age, leaving them no opportunity to play or express themselves in other ways – in other words, with no way to exercise agency. This is why the capability approach insists that a given state of affairs should be assessed in terms of its consequences for individual freedoms. Whatever the beauty of the performance, it may not have expanded the freedoms of all the individuals involved in the orchestra.[12]

A disagreement among capability theorists about whether ethical individualism can in fact be endorsed by the capability approach however remains. These dissenting voices have questioned whether a rejection of ontological individualism is consistent with a commitment to ethical individualism. In other words, ethics, they argue, cannot be separated from ontology. When human beings live together, they generate something truly collective, which is more than the sum total of their individual lives and cannot be reduced to individual characteristics. Assessing states of affairs only to the extent that they have a positive or negative effect on the well-being of each individual is therefore insufficient. There may be something genuinely positive in the irreducibly social good that has been generated, despite

its negative effects on some individuals. According to that argument, the orchestra performance can have an intrinsic value even if it has been oppressive to some of its members. The architectural beauty of medieval cathedrals in Europe is another example of an irreducibly social good which is of positive value, despite the toll on individual well-being for those who built them.

Recognizing the interconnection between each person's well-being in both space and time highlights the limitations of ethical individualism for assessing well-being. Because of its interdependent and dynamic character and, in view of its spatial and temporal dimensions, the well-being of one group of individuals in the present may often be founded on the ill-being and struggle of others before them or in other places. Current environmental debates indicate that the well-being of some individuals in the present is likely to be at the cost of the well-being of future generations.

[c] The priority of freedom

As highlighted earlier, Sen's capability approach proposes that we identify functionings – the things people value doing and being. The focus of development and policy is then to make people free to do and be these very things, allowing them to expand their capabilities. But, some people wonder, why should we focus on freedoms so much? Do poor people really want to have the freedom to avoid extreme discomfort and deprivation? Do they not simply want to avoid extreme discomfort and deprivation? In most cases, yes, but what is distinctive about Sen's approach is the substantive role that freedom plays. Here are two of many reasons why freedom is important:

First, if we only focus on expanding functionings, we could do so by force, coercion, domination or colonialism. Most basic needs can be met in a prison, for example. Indeed, some countries have used force to advance functionings: for example, forced sterilization or the forced isolation of people who are HIV-positive. Focusing on freedom draws attention to social development and the value of empowerment, responsibility and informed public action.

Also, reasonable people sometimes choose to be deprived in one area of life in order to enjoy another kind of goodness. A person who is fasting is in a state of under-nutrition, which may seem very similar to starvation. But, in the one case, the fasting person *could* eat, although she chooses not to, whereas the starving person would eat if he could. Similarly, a student who could live well if he worked may instead endure poor and overcrowded housing conditions so that he might obtain a degree. People should be free to refrain from a functioning for good reasons if and when they so choose.

For economists and those who are accustomed to the language of space, it may be of interest to observe that 'there is no difference *as far as the space is concerned* between focusing on functionings *or* on capabilities. A functioning combination is a *point* in such a space, whereas capability is a *set* of such points' (Sen, 1992: 50).

The notion of capability is also closely related to that of freedom. Sen defines freedom as 'the real opportunity that we have to accomplish what we value' (1992: 31). Freedom, he argues, has two aspects: opportunity and process. The opportunity aspect pays attention 'to the ability of a person to achieve those things that she has reason to value', and the process aspect pays attention to 'the freedom involved in the process itself' (2002: 10). The notion of capability

refs to the opportunity aspect of freedom, while the notion of agency, which is explained below, refers to the personal process of freedom.

[d] Agency

The third core concept of the capability approach is *agency*. Agency refers to a person's ability to pursue and realize goals that she values and has reason to value. An agent is 'someone who acts and brings about change' (Sen, 1999: 19). The opposite of a person with agency is someone who is forced, oppressed or passive.

The agency aspect is important 'in assessing what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good' (Sen, 1985: 206). Agency expands the horizons of concern beyond a person's own well-being to include concerns such as slowing climate change or helping others. From this perspective, people can active and creative, with the ability to act on behalf of their aspirations.

Agency is related to other approaches that stress self-determination, authentic self-direction, autonomy, self-reliance, self-determination, empowerment, voice and so on. The strong collective desire for agency suggests that development processes should foster participation, public debate and democratic practice.

Agency is inescapably plural in both concept and measurement. In Sen's view:[13]

1. Agency is exercised with respect to goals the person values and has reason to value.

2. Agency includes effective power as well as direct control, that is, it includes not just individual agency, but what one can do as a member of a group, collectivity or political community.

3. Agency may advance well-being or may address other goals – for example, relating to the good of one's family or community, of other people and of art and the environment.

4. To identify agency entails an assessment of whether the agent's goals are in some way reasonable – a person who harms or humiliates others would not, in this view, be exerting agency.

5. The agent's responsibility for a state of affairs should be incorporated into his or her evaluation of it.

Box 2.7: Agency and wellbeing, freedom and achievement (by Ingrid Robeyns)

Suppose two sisters, Anna and Becca, live in a peaceful village in England and have the same levels of achieved well-being. Both believe that the power of global corporations is undermining democracy, and that governments should give greater emphasis to global justice. Anna decides to travel to Genoa to demonstrate against the G8 meetings, while Becca stays at home. At that moment, Anna is using her freedom of agency to voice some of her political concerns. However, the Italian police do not like the protesters and violate Anna's civil and political rights by beating her up in prison. Anna's achieved well-being has obviously been considerably lowered. Anna is given the option to sign a piece of paper declaring that she committed violence and is a member of an extreme-left organization (which will then give her a criminal record). If she does not sign, she will be kept in prison for an unspecified length of time. Anna therefore has a (highly constrained) option to trade her freedom of agency for a higher achieved well-being. Becca had the same potential agency but chose not to use it. She

is concerned about human rights violations and the hollowing of democracy itself, but does not wish to sacrifice her achieved well-being for these goals.

Such an example shows that the distinctions Sen makes are important because, in evaluative exercises, one has to ask whether the relevant dimension of advantage is the standard of living, achieved well-being, agency achievement, well-being freedom or agency freedom. The central claim of the capability approach is that whatever concept of advantage one chooses to consider, the informational base of this judgement must relate to the space of functionings and/or capabilities, depending upon the issue at hand. Sen's claim is that well-being achievements should be measured in functionings, whereas well-being freedom is reflected by a person's capability set. A focus on agency will always transcend an analysis in terms of functionings and capabilities, and will take agency goals into account. However, it is typical of Sen's work that he does not defend this as a closed theory or dogma: there can be good reasons to include other sources of information as well.

Extracts from Ingrid Robeyns, 'The Capability Approach – A Theoretical Survey', *Journal of Human Development*, 6(1), pp. 102-3

[!Box ends!]

[e] Compare and contrast

The capability approach arose in conversation with other approaches to development. At that time – and, indeed, even now – many were suggesting that social arrangements and development itself should focus on maximizing income, assets and other commodities in the interests of achieving happiness.

Income, happiness and commodities are obviously important. The problem is that, if policies aim *only* to increase one of these, they might unintentionally create distortions. This is

because policies that focus on only one objective tend to ignore everything else. For example, if a programme aims to maximize individual happiness alone, it may celebrate the achievement of a deeply joyous political prisoner, without feeling any obligation to address the unjust detention in which the prisoner finds himself. A more thorough analysis of the situation might appreciate the prisoner's tremendous inner strength, on the one hand, *while* working immediately to help free him, on the other.

The capability approach argues that focusing on capabilities is a more direct and accurate way of expanding what people really value. Focusing on capabilities introduces fewer distortions. We therefore compare and contrast the capability approach with other approaches to the evaluation of well-being:

- with happiness

Much conventional economics is based on a utilitarian approach. It assumes that the most desirable action is the one that increases people's psychological happiness or desire-fulfilment the most. This view has made a tremendous comeback in recent years, drawing on new data on happiness and life satisfaction. Richard Layard (2005), for example, thoughtfully examines how our entire economic system could evolve if our steady and enduring purpose were to maximize a nation's happiness, instead of its income.

This sounds good, since everyone wants to be happy. Happiness seems to invite a deeper reflection upon our material goals and values. It helps people see these goals from a different perspective. Sen and others writing on the capability approach consider happiness to be 'a momentous achievement' to be celebrated. But, when you look beyond the headline and more deeply into the ideas, some concerns continue to arise.

First and perhaps most importantly, our mental utility may not track in any predictable fashion the things we really *value*. A poor, devout widow may become serenely reconciled to her circumstances, but this does not mean that she would not value having warm socks and pain medication for her arthritis. Alternatively, a middle-aged man may become a hospice volunteer following the death of his mother because he wishes to share with others the inner peace he has found as a result of having come to terms with her terminal illness. In doing this, he may share the pain and tragedy of others' lives, so his 'happiness' would be lower than if he did not do hospice work at all. But he would not wish for any other kind of life.

Second, happiness levels may obscure significant deprivations. Sen notes that people whose deprivations deserve systematic attention may often not be utility-deprived:

> Consider a cripple…. Suppose that he is no worse off than others in utility terms despite his physical handicap because of certain other utility features. This could be because he has a jolly disposition. Or because he has a low aspiration level and his heart leaps up whenever he sees a rainbow in the sky. Or because he is religious and feels that he will be rewarded in (the) after-life, or cheerfully accepts what he takes to be just penalty for misdeeds in a past incarnation. The important point is that, despite his marginal utility disadvantage, he no longer (has) a total utility deprivation' (Sen, 1980: 217).

His happiness rating would therefore not provide a very good marker for the requirements needed to address his deprivations.

Third, self-reported utility may often be biased by information and social circumstances. As Sen (2002) pointed out in the *British Medical Journal*, the state of Kerala, which had almost universal education and a life expectancy of 74 at the time, also had the highest self-reported morbidity in India. In contrast, Bihar, one of India's poorest states, with a life expectancy below 60, had the lowest rate of self-reported morbidity. The objectively healthy state was

subjectively health-poor and vice versa. How do we evaluate this? It seems that the low self-reported morbidity in Bihar occurred because people had less ability to assess their own health situation, and had less hope of doing anything to remedy it. Subjective data, whether on happiness or morbidity, is therefore conditioned, to a great degree, by our specific circumstances.

- with resources

Many other approaches to development focus instead on cultivating different kinds of resources. These may be assets, property rights or basic needs, such as housing, food, clothing, sanitation, and so on. These approaches recognize the fundamental importance of commodities and material good to our well-being in the short- and long-term. They identify valid connections between resources and capabilities, and argue that, in order to expand capabilities and sustain these expansions, certain resources are required. In many cases, these analyses are utterly apt, and will form, as we shall see, an integral aspect of the human development approach.

Fundamentally, however, it is critical to recognize that measuring resources is still different from measuring functionings, and that we will inadvertently make mistakes if we try to give everyone the same resources. To take a simple example, the same *amount* of rice (or other good), will be converted into radically different levels of physical vigour by a child, a disabled teenager, an agricultural worker or an elderly person. Similarly, people who are physically impaired require greater resources to achieve mobility. Clearly, people have different abilities to convert resources into capabilities and, if policies equalize resources, they could disadvantage some in significant ways.

Sen identifies five vital factors that are often overlooked when we focus on income and resources instead of capabilities (1999: 70-1):

1. *Personal heterogeneities* (a pregnant woman will have different nutrition requirements from an elderly woman);

2. *Environmental diversities* (pensioners in Scotland will need a different income to keep warm in winter than pensioners in Sicily);

3. *Variations in social climate* (parents in a country with a free public education system of good quality will require a different income to educate their children than parents in a country with no free public education system or with poor public education);

4. *Differences in relational perspectives* (the income requirements for appearing in public without shame when having guests differ greatly for each person, depending on customs and habits); and

5. *Distribution within the family* (the family income might not be used to feed the children adequately but instead to buy the parents' drinks).

In order to assess people's well-being, further information is therefore needed on other aspects of people's lives – their health, education, nutritional status, dignity, autonomy, and so on.

Another problem is that there are things that people value other than increased resources. The process of maximizing resources may have social and environmental costs (changes in culture and lifestyle) that people have good reason to reject. In the words of the 1990 *Human Development Report*: 'The basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. This may appear to be a

simple truth. But it is often forgotten in the immediate concern with the accumulation of commodities and financial wealth' (p. 9).

- Putting it all together

A bicycle provides a good example of how these different concepts relate. A person may own or be able to use a bicycle (a resource). By riding the bicycle, the person moves around town and, we assume, values this mobility (a functioning). However, if the person is unable to ride the bicycle (because, perhaps, she has no sense of balance), then having a bicycle would not in fact result in this functioning. In this case, the access to the resource coupled with the person's own characteristics (balance, etc.), creates the capability for the person to move around town when she wishes. Furthermore, let us suppose that the person enjoys having this capability to leap upon a bicycle and pedal over to a friend's house for lunch – thus having a capability that contributes to happiness or utility.

Resource	→	Functioning	→	Capability	→	Utility
bicycle		mobility		to cycle		pleasure
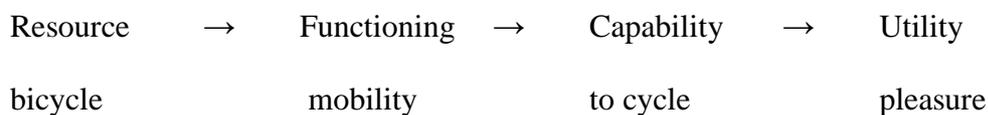
The bicycle example illustrates how the various concepts are all related to one another when they coincide nicely. The question is: which concept do we focus on? Which will be distorted most (or least) often? The capability approach argues that utility can be distorted by personality or adaptive preferences; functionings can be enjoyed in a prison or stifled environment; and a bicycle can be useless if you cannot balance, so *capability* represents the most accurate space in which to investigate and advance the various forms of human well-being.

Indeed, the capability approach has often been mistaken for a theory of justice (see chapter 5). At its core, however, it does little more than propose to set the evaluation of social arrangements in the space of capabilities:

> [T]he capability *approach* is a proposition, and the proposition is this: that social arrangements should be evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value. If equality in social arrangements is to be demanded in any space – and most theories of justice advocate equality in some space – it is to be demanded in the space of capabilities. (Alkire, 2005: 122)

The capability approach does not advocate some specific way of identifying what people might have reason to choose and value, and even less some programme of action to realize these ends. The approach is 'primarily and mainly a framework for thought' (Robeyns, 2005: 96) -- a 'broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements' (p. 94):

> [T]he capability approach is not a theory that can *explain* poverty, inequality and wellbeing; instead, it rather provides a tool and a framework within which to *conceptualize* and *evaluate* these phenomena. Applying the capability approach to issues of policy and social change will therefore often require the addition of explanation theories.

Nussbaum's capabilities approach

In addition to not being a theory of justice, one of the central features of the capability approach is that it refrains from making prescriptions about which valuable capabilities public policy should promote. As noted earlier, the development process should be assessed according to the extent to which it expands the 'capabilities that people have reason to choose and value'. The choice of relevant capabilities will therefore depend upon the underlying social concerns and values within a given society. Public reasoning in each society should determine which capabilities they wish to promote. There is no single method to identify the freedoms that people have reason to choose and value.

Because of its resistance to overt prescription, the capability approach is open to many different forms of specifications regarding what constitute valuable capabilities. In this sense, then, the capability approach remains fundamentally incomplete. Even if it was not necessarily erroneous to look for a complete ordering of what constitutes human well-being, it cannot be identified in practice. This is what Sen calls the 'fundamental and pragmatic reasons' (Sen, 1992: 49) for incompleteness.

Sen's pluralistic and incomplete view of development has been the object of much criticism. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has dealt with the problem of incompleteness by proposing a list of central human capabilities that should constitute the evaluative space for public policy. She argues that the capability approach would encounter the same deficiencies as the preference approach to human well-being if no effort were to be made at specifying further the functionings and capabilities that should promoted. She notes that, 'just as people can be taught not to want or miss the things their culture has taught them they should not or could not have, so too can (they) be taught not to value certain functionings as constituents of their good living' (Nussbaum, 1988: 175).

Since what people consider to be valuable and relevant can often be the product of structures of inequality and discrimination, and because not all human freedoms are equally valuable – for example, the freedom to pollute is not of equal value to the freedom to care for the environment -- she argues that one needs to go beyond the incompleteness of Sen's capability approach so that equal freedom for all can be respected.

She grounds her version of the capability approach on what she calls an 'internalist essentialist' position. Insofar as we recognize human beings as human, there should be an essentialist basis for any view about what human life properly consists of and what deprives it of its full human character. Her list of central human capabilities is as follows (Nussbaum, 2000: 78-80):

1. Life: Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely.

2. Bodily health: Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.

3. Bodily integrity: Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.

4. Senses, imagination, and thought: Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason; being able to use imagination and thought; being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise; being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain.

5. Emotions: Being able to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude and justified anger, not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety.

6. Practical reason: Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life (this includes liberty of conscience and of religious observance).

7. Affiliation: A. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another (this includes freedom of assembly and political speech). B. Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others (this includes non-discrimination).

8. Other species: Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

9. Play: Being able to laugh, to play, and to enjoy recreational activities.

10. Control over one's environment: A. Political: Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and

association. B. Material: Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

Sen has no objection to Nussbaum's project of eliminating the incompleteness of his approach, but he fears that this might become 'the only route' and 'may be tremendously overspecified' (1993: 47). His objections are not concerned with listing important capabilities, but with fixing one pre-determined list at a theoretical level. Doing so, he argues, would be 'to deny the possibility of fruitful participation on what should be included and why' (Sen, 2004: 77). He advocates that lists of valuable capabilities should be context-dependent. The key questions to keep in mind when selecting capabilities are: 1) which capabilities do the people who will enjoy them *value* (and attach a high priority to); and 2) which capabilities are relevant to a given policy, project or institution?

Questions[14]

2.1 How does income help you to achieve things you consider to be valuable? What do you consider to be valuable to do or be in life that income does not influence?

2.2 If you were to assess the well-being of people in your country, what information would you include? Why?

2.3 How do you compare Nussbaum's version of the capability approach to Sen's? Is her version more practicable on the level of public policy? Are there any other models you consider more workable in terms of international public policy?

2.4 Tartal is a high-income country. Its per capita GDP is 19,000 (PPP US$), which places it below the IMF's classification of an 'advanced economy', but its growth rate is 2 per cent

per annum, suggesting a promising future in terms of development. Nevertheless, despite these statistics, there are a vast number of cultural and ethnic groups that have not equally shared in Tartal's growth performance.

The country gained its independence in 1887 and adopted a new constitution in 1901. After a tumultuous political history during most of the twentieth century, it deposed a 20-year dictatorship in 1982 and established democracy in 1985. Since then, the country has attempted to use its abundance of resource-rich land to modernize, globalise and achieve greater economic development.

Tartal's current population is 150 million, with about 60 million under the age of 25 and a population growth rate of 1 per cent. Almost 70 per cent of its residents reside in rural areas, although there has been recent migration to large cities that has increased the urban population dramatically. The largest metropolitan city is the capital of Mani, with a population of 10 million; the second largest city is Safa, with a population of 7 million. Both cities are on the Pacific coastline, emphasizing the divide between an urban, prosperous coast and a rural, impoverished interior.

About 50 per cent of the population is considered 'white' or of 'mixed' European ancestry, while another 50 per cent of the population is considered indigenous. Although Tartal is one of the world's largest economies, it has high levels of poverty, illiteracy and persistent malnutrition. While the average income is very high, the way in which this income is distributed within the country remains highly unequal, with the top 10 per cent of the population accounting for 30 per cent of the country's income, and with a mere 1 percent of the country's income going to the poorest 10 per cent. Also, the women in

Tartal are severely restricted in terms of their 'freedoms' to choose in economic, social and cultural realms. Only 8 per cent of parliamentary seats are held by women.

The fast pace of economic growth has also been at the cost of environmental considerations. The environment is polluted with industrial effluents; agriculture is affected by the overuse of chemicals; and forests are depleted. The biodiversity of the country is threatened by ignorance and a neglect to preserve the country's rich natural resources.

The country's democratic system of governance is not fully participatory, with the media being stifled and people not having a say in the major decisions that affect their lives. The adult literacy rate is estimated at 65 per cent but it remains at only 30 per cent among indigenous people. This illiteracy further heightens the critical lack of indigenous participation in government.

Questions for discussion:

- Can we consider Tartal to be a 'developed' country? Discuss.
- What data would you use to assess the success of Tartal's development?

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Endnotes

[1] The term *ubuntu* originates in the Bantu language and conveys the meaning that one is only a human being through one's relationship with others. It has often been used for reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa, and stresses the importance of caring for others and harmony between people.

[2] Liberation theology has its roots in Latin American Christianity in the 1960s, and is centred upon the question: how do we make sense of a compassionate and loving God in a world marked by poverty, oppression, injustice, inequality and environmental destruction? Islam also has its own form of liberation theology.

[3] For an intellectual biography of Mahbub ul Haq, see Ul Haq and Ponzio (2008).

[4] Available at www.commonwealthclub.org/archive/20thcentury/68-01kennedy-speech.html

[5] The report is available at www.unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf.

[6] New Economics Foundation (2007), 'The Happy Planet Index: an index of human well-being and environmental impact', www.neweconomics.org/gen/

[7] The Independent, 8 September 2007.

[8] The description of the four principles has been written by Seeta Prahbu.

[9] This principle could be ranged under the 'equity principle' as it deals with intergenerational equity.

[10] Amartya Sen's curriculum vitae can be found at www.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/sen, and his autobiography at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economics/laureates/1998.

[11] See Deneulin (2006) and Gore (1997) for a discussion on irreducibly social goods in the context of the capability approach.

[12] See Alkire (2008) for further discussion of this.

[13] These are drawn from Sen's *Wellbeing, Agency and Freedom* (1985); see also Alkire's *Concepts and Measures of Agency* (2008).

[14] Question 2.3 has been written by Lila Shahani, and 2.4 by Seeta Prahbu.