

# Capability Approach

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# The Capability Approach

In, *Inequality Re-examined*, 1992, Amartya Sen states: 'A person's capability to achieve functioning that he or she has reason to value provides a general approach to the evaluation of social arrangements, & this yields a particular way of viewing the assessment of equality & inequality'. The key idea of the capability approach is that social arrangements should aim to expand people's capabilities – their freedom to promote or achieve what they value doing & being. 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.

# Sen's Capability Approach: what is novel?


- It focus on **space of capabilities & functionings**, not resources or utility
- It emphasise valued **ends not only means**
- It compare **capability sets not just chosen** functionings (opportunity vs. achievement)
- It include **process freedoms, as well as outcomes**

# The central terms in the Capability Approach are: Functionings, Capabilities & Agency

**Functionings** are defined as ‘the various things a person may value **doing or being**’ (Sen 1999). In other words, functionings are valuable activities & states that make up people’s well-being – such as being healthy & well nourished, being safe, being educated, having a good job, being able to visit loved ones. They are also related to goods & 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.

# The central terms in the capability approach are: Functionings, Capabilities & Agency

- **Capability refers to the freedom to enjoy various functionings. In particular,** capability is defined as ‘the various combinations of functionings (beings & 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). Put differently, capabilities are, ‘the substantive freedoms [a person] enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value’ (Sen, 1999).
- **Agency is the ability to pursue goals that one values & has reason to value.** An agent is ‘someone who acts & brings about change.’ (Sen, 1999)



**Capabilities** are “the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for [a person] to achieve.” Put differently, they are “the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value.” Capabilities are a kind of opportunity freedom. Just like a person with much money in her pocket can buy many different things, a person with many capabilities could enjoy many different activities, pursue different life paths. For this reason the capability set has been compared to a budget set.

So capabilities describe the real actual possibilities open to a person. As TH 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.

# Capabilities vs. Functionings

- There are several ways to answer this question, Why focus on capabilities rather than functionings? Many of them refer to the 'distortions' that could arise if we focus *only on functionings or needs*.
- One problem is that if we only tried to eradicate deprivation, we could do so by force, by coercion, or domination, or colonialism. People & groups, rich or poor, across time, have valued their freedom to shape their future not only politically but also socially & economically. Also, some deprivation can be chosen in order to enjoy another kind of fulfillment. A person who is fasting is in a state of undernutrition, which may seem very similar to a person who is starving. But in the one case, the fasting person could eat & chooses not to; whereas the starving person would eat if she could.

# Agency

- Agency refers to a person's ability to pursue & realize goals that he or she values & has reason to value. An agent is "someone who acts & brings about change." 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." Agency expands the horizons of concern beyond a person's own wellbeing, to include concerns such as saving the spotted owl or helping others. In this perspective, people are viewed to be active, creative, & able to act on behalf of their aspirations.



Agency is related to other approaches that stress *self-determination, authentic self direction, autonomy & so on*. The concern for agency means that participation, public debate, democratic practice, & empowerment are to be fostered alongside well-being.

Agency is inescapably plural in both concept & measurement. In Sen.'s view:

1. Agency is exercised with respect to the goals the person values & 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 & of art & 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 creating or sustaining a state of affairs should be incorporated into his or her evaluation of how to act as an agent.

# Contrast with Utility

- 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-fulfillment the most. That sounds good as everyone wants to be happy. Yet our mental utility states (for example) may not track in any predictable fashion the things we really *value*. A *poor devout widow may become* serenely reconciled with her circumstances. Her desires are modest, & small (\$100) improvements to her situation bring tremendous joy. Indeed her happiness is far greater than a rich person is likely experience by an income rise of \$1000. If we only measure utility or happiness, there are 4+6 important questions & distinctions which we will miss.

# Contrast 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 & so on. These approaches recognize the fundamental importance of commodities & material goods to our well-being in the short- & long-term.

They identify valid connections between resources & capabilities, & argue that, in order to expand capabilities & sustain these expansions, certain resources are required. In many cases, these analyses are utterly apt, & will form, as we shall see, an integral aspect of the human development approach. Another approach to economic policy is to try focus on income or resources.

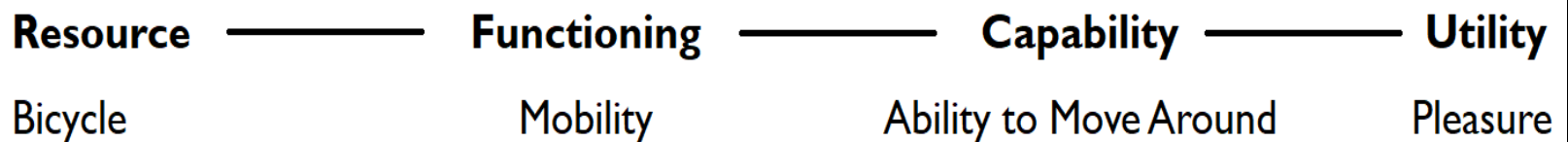
A problem with this is that measuring resources is different from measuring functionings. The same *amount of rice* (or other goods), will be converted into radically different levels of physical vigor for a child, in the case of a disabled teenager, as against an agricultural worker, or an elderly person. We are really interested in what persons are actually able to do or be – that is, in their functionings – not in how many pounds of rice they consume.

Another problem, outlined earlier, is that there are things people value other than increased resources. The process of maximizing resources may have social costs (changes in culture & lifestyle) which 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 & creative lives. This may appear to be a simple truth. But it is often forgotten in the immediate concern with the accumulation of commodities & financial wealth.**

## Putting it all together with example:

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 & 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 or is not permitted to ride), 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 & pedal over to a friend's house for lunch – thus having this capability contributes to happiness or utility.





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; & a bicycle can be useless if you cannot balance, so *capability represents the most accurate* space in which to investigate & advance the various forms of human wellbeing.

# Which Capabilities?

- If social or economic arrangements aim to promote capabilities, rather than income or utility, which capabilities should they promote? Authors applying the capabilities approach have offered a range of ways to select relevant & important capabilities.
- Sen argues that there cannot be a 'canonical' list; the set of focal functionings or capabilities that people value will have to be set & re-set again & again, depending on the purpose of the exercise.

An example of this would be the Human Development Index (HDI). Its authors wanted a very crude index, but one that was a better indicator of well-being & capability than GNP per capita, & could be built using data that were available for most countries in the world. The resulting HDI includes **income, literacy & schooling, & life expectancy** – not because these alone are important, but because they give a better indication of well-being than income alone.

Martha Nussbaum has proposed ten central human capabilities that should provide the basis for “constitutional principles that should be respected & implemented by the governments of all nations.” Like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – which is perhaps the most famous of lists – these ten capabilities could draw attention within the legal framework to things people value.

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 & domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction & for choice in matters of reproduction.

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

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

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

7 Affiliation: (A) Being able to live with & toward others, to recognize & 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 & political speech). (B) Having the social bases of self-respect & 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 & in relation to animals, plants, & the world of nature.

9. Play: Being able to laugh, to play & 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 & association. (B) Material: Being able to hold property (both land & movable goods), & 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 & seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason & entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

But more often than not, capabilities will have to be selected by a community, by a team, or by a researcher. **The key questions to keep in mind when selecting capabilities are:**

- which capabilities do the people who will enjoy them *value* (& attach a high priority to). Often this must be explored directly.
- which capabilities are relevant to the policy, project, or institution; which may be affected directly or indirectly.

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