

Critical Perspectives on Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach

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Abstract

This paper examines the significant critiques and debates surrounding Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach, which has become influential in development economics and welfare theory. While Sen’s framework represents a substantial contribution to understanding human well-being beyond income metrics, scholars have raised important concerns regarding its practical implementation, theoretical foundations, and cross-cultural applicability. This paper synthesizes key criticisms from philosophers, economists, and development practitioners, evaluating the approach’s methodological challenges, potential Western bias, and questions of measurability. The analysis demonstrates that while the Capability Approach offers valuable conceptual insights, its operationalization remains contested within academic and policy circles.

The paper ends with “The End”

1 Introduction

Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach, developed through his influential work beginning in the 1980s, fundamentally reoriented development economics by shifting focus from income and utility to human capabilities and freedoms [13, 14]. The framework posits that well-being should be evaluated not merely by resources or subjective satisfaction, but by individuals’ substantive freedoms to achieve valued functionings. Despite its widespread adoption by institutions including the United Nations Development Programme, the approach has generated substantial scholarly debate regarding its theoretical coherence, practical applicability, and cultural assumptions [7, 10].

This article examines major lines of critique directed at Sen’s framework, organized into three primary categories: methodological and measurement challenges, concerns regarding individualism and social structures, and questions of cultural universality. Each critique reveals tensions between the approach’s philosophical ambitions and its operational constraints in policy contexts.

2 The Problem of Operationalization

The most frequently cited limitation of the Capability Approach concerns its operationalization for empirical research and policy implementation [11, 16]. Sen deliberately maintained his framework at a high level of abstraction, refusing to specify a definitive list of capabilities or provide a clear aggregation rule for comparing capability sets. This philosophical openness, while theoretically motivated, creates substantial practical difficulties for researchers and policymakers seeking to measure well-being or evaluate interventions.

2.1 Measurement Challenges

Critics argue that the inherent complexity of assessing genuine capabilities, as opposed to achieved functionings, renders the approach empirically intractable [16]. Unlike income or even subjective well-being measures, capabilities require evaluating the full set of potential functionings available

to individuals, accounting for conversion factors that transform resources into actual freedoms. This informational demand far exceeds what can be practically observed or measured in most contexts.

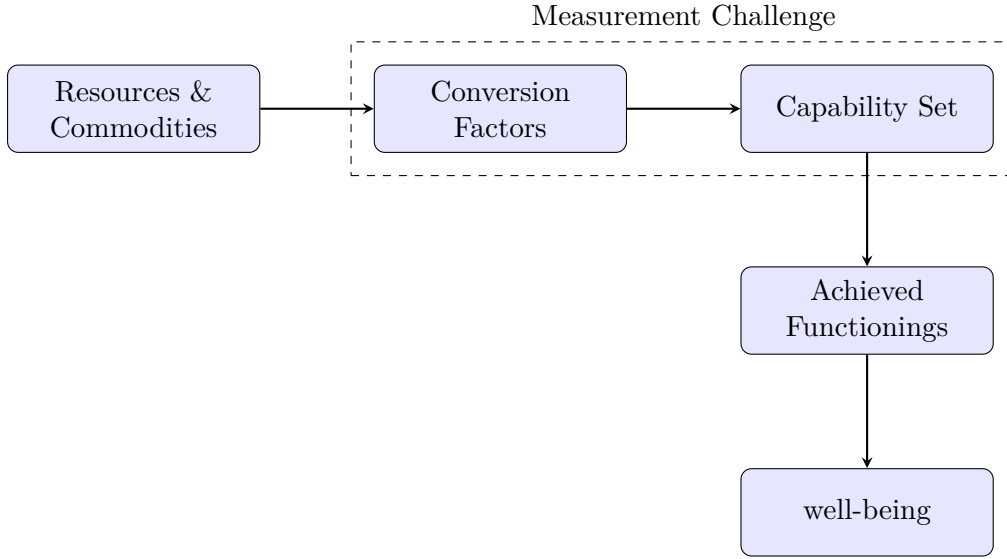


Figure 1: The Capability Approach framework highlighting the measurement challenge of assessing capability sets versus achieved functionings.

The distinction between capabilities and functionings, central to Sen’s framework, proves particularly problematic. While functionings represent what individuals actually do or are, capabilities represent what they could potentially do or be. Observing achieved functionings provides limited insight into the full range of available options, yet directly measuring hypothetical alternatives presents obvious methodological obstacles.

2.2 The List Debate

Martha Nussbaum’s response to operationalization concerns involved proposing a specific list of central human capabilities [6]. However, her solution generated its own critique. Sen rejected fixed lists as insufficiently responsive to contextual variation and democratic deliberation [15]. Critics argue this disagreement reveals a fundamental tension within capability theory: without specification, the approach lacks practical utility, yet specification risks imposing controversial value judgments or undermining the framework’s philosophical appeal [8].

3 Individualism and Structural Critique

Feminist scholars and sociologists have challenged the Capability Approach for its emphasis on individual freedom and agency while potentially under-theorizing social relationships, power structures, and collective dimensions of well-being [2, 3]. These critiques suggest that Sen’s framework, despite acknowledging social conversion factors, remains fundamentally individualistic in its evaluative focus.

3.1 Relational Dimensions

Critics contend that the approach inadequately addresses how capabilities are constituted through social relationships rather than simply constrained by them [3]. Many human functionings that Sen and Nussbaum identify as valuable, such as affiliation, care, or political participation, are

inherently relational rather than individual achievements. The framework’s analytical focus on individual capability sets may obscure the interdependent nature of human flourishing.

Furthermore, feminist scholars argue that the approach’s emphasis on choice and agency can inadvertently place responsibility on individuals for structural disadvantages [2]. When capabilities are framed primarily as individual freedoms, this may deflect attention from collective action, institutional transformation, or redistributive policies necessary to address systematic oppression.

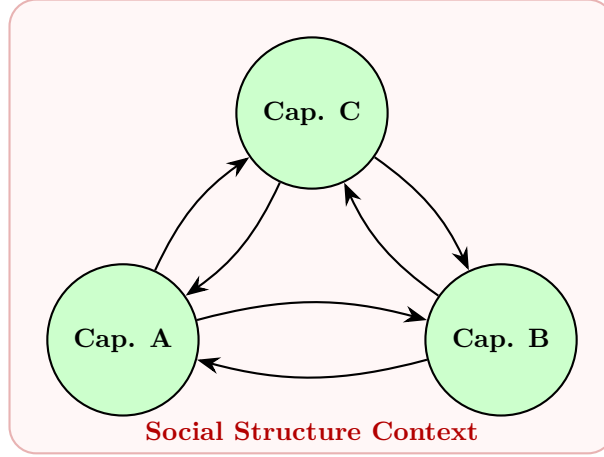


Figure 2: Schematic representation of the critique that social structures and interdependencies between capabilities receive insufficient attention in Sen’s individualistic framework.

3.2 Community and Collective Capabilities

Related concerns emerge regarding community-level well-being and collective capabilities [5]. Sen’s framework struggles to accommodate situations where group identity, solidarity, or collective achievement constitute important dimensions of human flourishing that cannot be reduced to aggregated individual capabilities. Indigenous communities, for instance, may prioritize cultural continuity or collective land rights in ways that the individualistic capability framework cannot readily capture.

4 Cultural Relativism and Universalism

The Capability Approach aspires to provide an evaluative framework applicable across diverse cultural contexts, yet critics question whether it successfully navigates between cultural imperialism and relativism [4]. This challenge manifests in debates over which capabilities should be considered universally valuable and who possesses the authority to make such determinations.

4.1 Western Liberal Bias

Some scholars contend that despite claims to cultural neutrality, the Capability Approach reflects distinctly Western liberal values emphasizing individual autonomy, rational choice, and freedom [4]. Alternative cultural traditions may prioritize duty, harmony, collective well-being, or spiritual development in ways that sit uneasily with Sen’s emphasis on expanding individual choice sets. The framework’s valorization of agency and freedom as central to well-being may not resonate equally across all cultural contexts.

4.2 The Procedural Solution and Its Limits

Sen’s response to concerns about cultural imperialism emphasizes democratic deliberation and public reasoning as mechanisms for determining relevant capabilities within specific contexts [15].

However, critics argue this procedural solution generates its own difficulties. It presupposes liberal democratic institutions and norms of rational discourse that may not exist or be valued universally. Moreover, the framework provides limited guidance for situations where democratic processes produce outcomes that violate what Sen considers basic capabilities.

5 Alternative Frameworks and Comparative Assessment

Understanding critiques of the Capability Approach requires situating it among alternative welfare frameworks. Traditional utilitarian approaches focus on subjective well-being or preference satisfaction, while Rawlsian theories emphasize primary goods as the appropriate evaluative space [9]. Each framework involves different trade-offs between theoretical coherence, measurability, and respect for individual values.

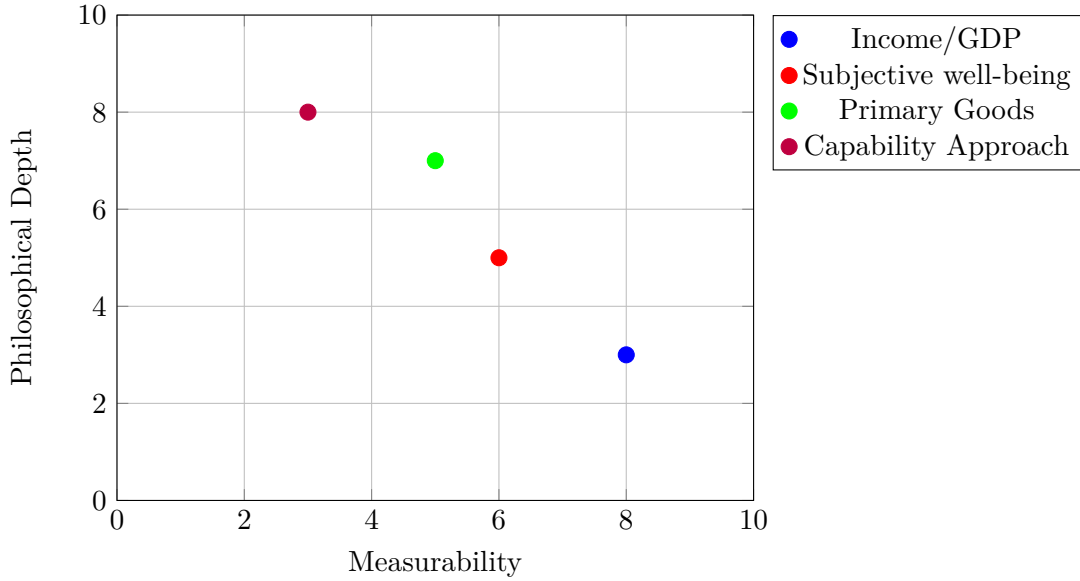


Figure 3: Comparative positioning of welfare frameworks along dimensions of measurability and philosophical depth, illustrating the Capability Approach’s trade-off.

Critics note that the Capability Approach’s theoretical sophistication comes at the cost of reduced operationalizability compared to simpler metrics. While this trade-off may be justified by the approach’s richer conception of well-being, it limits applicability in contexts requiring clear measurement protocols or cross-national comparisons.

6 Responses and Ongoing Developments

Defenders of the Capability Approach acknowledge certain limitations while arguing that critiques often misunderstand the framework’s purpose or overlook recent developments [12]. Sen explicitly positioned his approach as an evaluative framework rather than a complete theory of justice or comprehensive developmental strategy. The deliberate incompleteness regarding capability lists and aggregation rules reflects his commitment to democratic determination and contextual sensitivity rather than theoretical failure.

Subsequent scholarship has addressed some concerns through theoretical refinement and empirical innovation. Work on collective capabilities, adaptive preferences, and participatory methods for capability selection demonstrates the framework’s continued evolution [1, 5]. The successful implementation of capability-informed measures like the Human Development Index and

Multidimensional Poverty Index suggests that practical operationalization, while challenging, remains feasible.

7 Conclusion

Critical engagement with Sen's Capability Approach reveals both its significant contributions and genuine limitations. The framework's emphasis on human freedom and diverse dimensions of well-being represents a substantial advance over narrower conceptions focused solely on income or utility. However, challenges regarding measurement, individualism, and cultural applicability demonstrate that the approach cannot serve as a universal solution to all evaluative questions in development and welfare economics.

The ongoing scholarly debate surrounding these critiques indicates healthy intellectual discourse rather than fatal flaws. The Capability Approach functions most productively when understood as one valuable perspective within a pluralistic toolkit for assessing human well-being, complementing rather than replacing alternative frameworks. Future progress requires continued refinement addressing operationalization concerns while maintaining the theoretical richness that makes the approach philosophically compelling.

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