

DEVELOPMENT, CAPABILITIES AND FREEDOM

Capabilities

Capabilities refer to the range of things that people can do or be in life. The most basic capabilities for human development are to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Without these, many choices are simply not available, and many opportunities in life remain inaccessible. 1

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 i.e. 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 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. 3

In the *Nicomachean ethics*, Aristotle argued that “Wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else.” That “something else” is the opportunity for people to realize their potential as human beings. Human development is about the realization of human potential. It is about what people can do and become (their capabilities) and about the freedom they have to exercise real choices in their lives.

As a people-centered approach that focuses on the expansion of people's capabilities and freedoms, the human development paradigm does not underestimate the importance of rising incomes and outputs. These are deemed only as the “means” and not the “ends” of development. However, human development concerns itself with the creation of an environment in which people can develop their full potential, and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests. It is about creating an environment in which people can develop.

This framework is based on what economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen calls “the capabilities sand functionings approach.” Not only is it important to achieve more “functionings,” but it is essential for people to have the “capabilities” or the freedom to achieve these.

In seeking that something else, human development shares a common vision with human rights. The goal is human freedom. And in pursuing capabilities and realizing rights, this freedom is vital. People must be free to exercise their choices and to participate in decision-making that affects their lives. Human development and human rights are mutually reinforcing, helping to secure the well-being and dignity of all people, building self-respect and the respect of others.

The economic growth paradigm neglected important aspects of development, such as income inequalities, unemployment, and disparities in access to public goods and services such as health and education. Especially in the 1980s, as unemployment levels escalated and access to social services deteriorated in some industrialized countries, development thinkers began to question the legitimacy of economic growth as the only measure of a nation's level of development. The development discourse has since shifted from the basic needs approach which focused mainly on incomes, public services and participation to an emphasis on human capabilities. The basic needs approach falls short because it is shaped around commodity evaluation. Important elements of life, such as the position of the poor and marginalized people and their ability to voice their views, gender power relations, the freedom to choose, etc. do not receive adequate attention.

The capability approach emphasizes human achievements and freedoms. It challenges the common view that poverty is purely a deprivation of income, and underscores the fact that human beings are both agents and beneficiaries of development, without downplaying their role as the primary means of economic productivity. The capability approach evaluates the various "functionings" in human life (what people want to do and what they aspire to be) and their capabilities to achieve these functionings". These include but are not limited to the ability to be well-nourished, escape avoidable death, be knowledgeable and be equipped to participate in the life of one's community.¹

Unfreedom

The constraints to ever expanding freedoms are termed "un-freedoms." These are barriers that exist in economic, social or political realms of society. Thus poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, tyranny, poor economic opportunities, social deprivations, poor public facilities, intolerance, ethnic centrality, repressive state apparatuses, lack of education, absence of health care, lack of security, and corruption can all be termed un-freedoms. They are all regarded equally relevant.

Other forms of unfreedom

- a) Famines continue to occur in particular regions denying people the basic freedom to survive.² Technically, a famine is a phenomenon in which a large percentage of the population of a region or country is undernourished and death by starvation becomes increasingly common. Famine is associated with naturally occurring crop failure and pestilence and artificially with war and genocide. In the past few decades the political and economic circumstances of a country more often than not, has emerged as a major cause to modern occurrences.⁴
- b) Under nutrition may affect large numbers of women and children in countries that are no longer devastated by famines.

- c) A great number of people have little access to health care, sanitary arrangements or clean water and spend their lives fighting unnecessary morbidity often succumbing to premature mortality.
- d) Even in very rich countries, there are deeply disadvantaged people, who lack basic opportunities of health care/functional education/gainful employment/economic or social security.
- e) Inequality between women and men afflicts and sometimes prematurely ends millions of women's lives and in different ways severely restrict substantive freedoms that women enjoy.

Inadequate processes and opportunities

Unfreedom can arise either through:

- a) Inadequate processes (violation of voting privileges, political and civil rights).
- b) Inadequate opportunities (absence of basic opportunities such as the capability to escape premature mortality or preventable morbidity and involuntary starvation).

It is important to avoid confining attention to appropriate procedures without worrying at all about some disadvantaged people who suffer from systematic deprivation of substantive opportunities or alternatively only to adequate opportunities without worrying about the nature of processes that bring the opportunities about.

Both processes and opportunities have importance of their own and each aspect relates to seeing development as freedom.

Development as freedom

“Development is a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.

The constitutive role of freedom:

The intrinsic importance of human freedom as the pre-eminent objective of development has to be distinguished from the instrumental effectiveness of freedom of different kinds to promote human freedom.

It concerns the way different kinds of rights, opportunities and entitlements contribute to the expansion of human freedom in general thus promoting development. Expansion of each kind of freedom must contribute to development since development itself is the process of enlarging human freedom in general.

The instrumental role of freedom

The effectiveness of freedom as an instrument lies in the fact that different kinds of freedom may greatly interrelate with one another and freedom of one type may greatly help in advancing freedom of other types

The development process when judged from the perspective of enhancing human freedom has to include removal or enhancing deprivations/unfreedoms. Assessment of development has to be informed by these considerations.

In evaluating the degree of freedom available to the individuals of a society or community, the citizen's rights and opportunities are perceived through the perspective of the five instruments, or components, of freedom. In a sense these instruments are considered to be five different and distinct types of interdependent freedoms and are seen to be instrumental because they are the principle means of accessing the rights and opportunities that help individuals to expand their freedoms and capabilities.

Five instrumental freedoms

1. *Political freedom and civil rights*: Refer to opportunities people have to determine who should govern and on what principles, possibility to scrutinize and criticize authorities, freedom of political authority and uncensored press, freedom to choose between different political parties.
2. *Economic facilities*: Refer to opportunities individuals enjoy to use resources for productivity, exchange and consumption. A person's economic entitlements depend on the resources owned and conditions of exchange (relative prices, working of markets).
3. *Social opportunities*: Refer to arrangements a society makes for education, healthcare etc which influence the individual's substantive freedom to live better. These facilities are important for living a healthy life and for more effective participation in economic and political activities.
4. *Transparency guarantees*: It deals with the need for openness that people can expect. These guarantees have a clear instrumental role in promoting financial responsibility, preventing corruption and underhand dealings.
5. *Protective security*: It is needed to provide a social safety net for preventing the vulnerable population from being reduced to abject misery, starvation and death. Examples include fixed institutional arrangements such as unemployment benefits and statutory income supplements to the poor and famine relief.

References

1. UNDP (2007) Measuring development. A primer. Guidelines and notes for statistical research, analysis and advocacy.
2. Sen Amartya (1999) Development as freedom. New York: Anchor books.
3. www.hdr.undp.org Accessed 30th July 2009

4. <http://www.solarnavigator.net/famine.htm>

Further reading:

Chapter one and two in:

Sen Amartya (1999): Development as freedom. New York: Anchor books