

**Capabilities and Human Development**

**Readings:**

- Amartya Sen (2003) "Development as Capability Expansion," in Readings in Human Development, S. Fukuda-Parr et al., eds. (New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- Martha Nussbaum (2003): Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice. Feminist Economics. pages 33-50
- Amartya Sen (2004): Capabilities, Lists and Public Reason: Continuing the Conversation. Feminist Economics. pages 77-80

**Poverty and Capability Deprivation:**

- "I would like to say that poverty is an absolute notion in the space of capabilities, but very often it will take a relative form in the space of commodities or characteristics." -Amartya Sen, 1982
- Development (or human development) as capability expansion and, conversely, poverty as capability deprivation

**The end vs means of income expansion:**

- Conventional development has been conceived in terms of income expansion.
- It is essential to ask if income growth is an end or a means to a different end.
- Even if income is an essential determinant for achieving an "enriched life", there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two.
- As a result, it is vital to delink development from pursuing higher incomes and focus directly on the ends that constitute better quality of life.

**Functioning and capability:**

- Each functioning is a valuable constitutive element of human life, like the ability to be disease free or the ability to read and write
- A life worth living is made up of a vector of such functionings
- A capability set is the set of various combinations of functionings available to a person
- Human development aims to enhance this capability set, i.e. to expand the set of possible functionings available
- Freedom to choose is an important aspect here (Development as Freedom)

**The linkage of capability with commodities and utility:**

- Commodities may be necessary for fulfilling specific functioning requirements, but there is no "one-to-one" mapping between the commodities and the functionings space
- For example, the ability to be healthy may be related to the consumption of a particular medicine (commodity), but it may also be dependent on many other factors, including public goods
- The linkage between capability and utility is even more tenuous

- Example: A poor person with long-term experience and expectation of being undernourished might feel reasonably well-off in terms of utility despite apparent deprivation

### **How do we decide on essential functioning?**

- In a situation of abject poverty, one might focus on some basic functionings about health, education, nutrition etc
- The Human Development Reports do the same by focusing on health and education
- However, there could be as essential a functioning as political freedom, which is fundamental to any society, however poor it might be
- With every extra functioning that is considered, the dimension of human development increases, increasing the complication related to aggregation

### **Basic needs and capabilities?**

- The primary need approach became prominent in the mid-1970s, with multilateral agencies like the World Bank and the ILO coming up with lists of "basic needs" which should be provided as end goals of development
- The needs were often formulated in terms of specific quantities of commodities for meeting each need
- The issue of relativism of poverty in the commodity space becomes essential here as the conversion of commodities to functionings or capabilities is not unique
- Moreover, it is alleged that the basic needs approach lacked theoretical foundations and was little more than an ad-hoc list of commodities

### **How do we measure capabilities?**

- The question of evaluating the state of achievement or deprivation with respect to the capability approach is complex
- First, there is the question of deciding on the dimensions or functionings which are important
- Second, there is the question of aggregation
- Third, the data that is available for evaluation will relate to the achieved functionings and not the set of functioning bundles available to an individual or her capability set
- The contrast between the intrinsic and instrumental views of freedom

### **Question(s)**

- Is there any reason the observed functioning bundle differs from the best available bundle (on the frontier or budget line)?
- How do we decide on a list of core functionings for evaluative purposes?

### **Question 1:**

- Possibility of voluntarily choosing to be within or below the frontier
- Example: not choosing to go to university even though university education is free and accessible otherwise

- Depending on whether one takes an instrumentalist or intrinsic view of freedom, one can have a different answer to this question

### Question 2:

- Martha Nussbaum suggests a set of central human capabilities( or functioning(s))
- Being able to lead a normal life
- Being healthy
- Having bodily integrity
- Senses, imagination and thought
- Right to emotions
- Practical reason
- Right to affiliation
- Harmony with other species
- Being able to play and enjoy recreation
- Control over one's environment: both political and material

### Some comments on the list (Nussbaum, 2003) :

- Open-ended and continuously revised
- Are reasonably broadly assigned, leaving open the possibility of being interpreted based on specific national or regional context
- It is independent of different religious and philosophical positions
- It's the right in each case that is to be guaranteed but not the actual achievement with respect to a particular functioning
- Ex: right to vote vs mandatory voting obligation
- "Sixth and finally, I insist on a rather strong separation between issues of justification and implementation. I believe that we can justify this list as a good basis for political principles worldwide. But this does not mean that we thereby license intervention with the affairs of a state that does not recognize them. It is a basis for persuasion, but I hold that military and economic sanctions are justified only in certain grave circumstances involving traditionally recognized crimes against humanity (Martha Nussbaum 2002). So it seems less objectionable to recommend something to everyone once we point out that it is part of the view that state sovereignty, grounded in the people's consent, is a significant part of the whole package." Nussbaum, 2003

### Critique of Sen (Nussbaum, 2003)

- There is an apparent tension between Sen's view on designating some functionings as essential and absolute across nations and cultures (like health and education in HDRs) and his unwillingness to specify a list of such functionings as fundamental entitlements
- **"Sen goes further, suggesting that democracy is inhibited by the endorsement of a set of central entitlements in international political debate, as when feminists insist on certain requirements of gender justice in international documents and deliberations."** (Nussbaum, 2003)

## Freedom

- What about the importance of freedom as an essential social good: development as freedom?
- Is freedom a universal good?
- Some freedoms limit others
- My freedom to enjoy exclusive access to the beach impinges on your right to access
- So ideally, there should be a categorization of freedoms as indispensable, less desirable and even deplorable
- Examples??

Can we leave the list of essential functioning(s) to individual communities?

- **"some human matters are too important to be left to whim and caprice or even to the dictates of a cultural tradition. To say that education for women, or adequate healthcare, is not justified just in case some nation believes that it is not justified seems like a capitulation to subjective preferences of the sort that Sen has opposed throughout his career. As he has repeatedly stated: capabilities have intrinsic importance. But if we believe that, we also believe it is right to say to nations that don't sufficiently recognize one of them: you too should endorse equal education for girls and understand it as a fundamental constitutional entitlement."**

## Pluralism as a case against a list of essential capabilities

- Pluralism itself presupposes a commitment to some basic cross-cultural entitlements like religious freedom, freedom of expression etc
- One can add to these rights of minorities or marginalised groups based on caste, gender and religion
- Pluralism can be respected by focusing on the capability and not functioning along with a small list of essential capabilities
- Example?

## Sen's response (Sen, 2004)

- No pre-determined list of capabilities can be drawn without public deliberation
- A list cannot be a theoretical outcome or result divorced entirely from social reality
- The relative weightage or ranking of the different capabilities: the ability to shelter oneself from natural elements vs the ability to beat hunger
- For public policy, the ranking of the above capabilities in terms of priority would be determined by the ground reality of a particular context
- There could be a practical ground for narrowing the focus on a specific set of essential capabilities in some cases: for example, HDI and its limited focus on health and education

## Why is a 'final' list of capabilities problematic?

- A working list of essential capabilities is linked to the objective in place
- Social conditions vary and not least with time when new capabilities become important
- Public deliberation can clarify and redefine the scope of specific capabilities, in effect evolving new capabilities