Toward Poverty as Relative Capability

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Sen: Poverty as Absolute Capability

- Previous definitions have been relative, with respect to various currencies (commodities, income, resources, etc)

- Sen argues for a definition based on absolute capability
  - Also that relative currency deprivation often causes absolute capability deprivation

My Objective

- Show that instead of relative currency or absolute capability, poverty should be defined by relative capability

1. Formalize a general form of absolute and relative capability definitions
   a. Show that a relative framework is more robust

2. Problematize absolute definitions

Formalizing Capability Definitions

- Absolute. For a set of capabilities X, define poverty as a lack of any capability in X.
  - Different definitions will use different X
  - Encapsulates relative currency definitions

- Relative. For a function P which takes a context and gives us X, define poverty **in a particular context** as a lack of any capability in the X given by P for that context.
  - X is not fixed within a definition
  - Someone can be poor in one context but not in another

Robustness

Claim: Any absolute capability definition can be represented with a relative capability definition

If we have definition Absolute(X), we can define P(context) to always be the same X. Then Relative(P) in every context will be identical to Absolute(X).

Then unless we have good reason to believe that poverty is best described by an absolute definition, we should focus on relative definitions.

Conceptual Ethics: Goals of a Definition

1. Normative Force: The definition should make it obvious that there is a duty of justice to address poverty.
2. Inclusivity: The definition should include everyone to whom that duty exists.

- We want our definition to aid in the task of alleviating poverty.

- I take Normative Force to be primary.

Problematizing Absolute Definitions

- Take some X that we think includes the capabilities an absolute definition certainly needs for Inclusivity.
- Now consider a society where one of these capabilities is not possible.
  - If we use the same X, our definition lacks Normative Force
  - If we restrict X, our definition lacks Inclusivity

[chuckling] And when everyone's poor ...

...no one will be.