



The Capability Approach

Concepts, Measures and Applications

EDITED BY

Flavio Comim, Mozaffar Qizilbash
and Sabina Alkire

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The Capability Approach

The capability approach developed by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has become an important new paradigm in thinking about development. However, despite its theoretical and philosophical attractiveness, there has been scepticism about the usefulness of the approach for purposes of measurement and policy analysis. This volume addresses these issues in the context of poverty and justice. Part I offers a set of conceptual essays, some of which debate the strength of the often misunderstood individual focus of the capability approach. Part II investigates the techniques by which we can measure and compare capabilities, and how we can integrate them into poverty comparisons and policy advice. Finally, Part III looks at how we can apply the capability approach to different regions and contexts. Written by a team of international scholars, *The Capability Approach* is a valuable resource for researchers and graduate students concerned with the debate over the value of the capability approach and its potential applications.

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Acronyms

| | |
|--------|--|
| APF | adaptive preference formation |
| ANOVA | analysis of variance |
| BI | Bamako Initiative |
| CA | capability approach |
| CVP | Chakriya Vikas Pranali |
| DPEP | District Primary Education Programme |
| EGS | Education Guarantee Scheme |
| ECHP | European Community Household Panel |
| EU | European Union |
| FHH | female-headed household |
| GDI | gender-related development index |
| GDP | gross domestic product |
| GNP | gross national product |
| HCI | Head-Count Index |
| HP | Himachal Pradesh |
| HLSS | Household Living Standard Survey |
| HDI | Human Development Index |
| HDI | Human Development Indicator |
| IF | Institution-Freedom |
| INE | Instituto Nacional de Estatística |
| IFPRI | International Food Policy Research Institute |
| MP | Madhya Pradesh |
| MHH | male-headed household |
| MANOVA | Multivariate Analysis of Variance |
| MSF | Médecins Sans Frontières |
| MDGS | Millennium Development Goals |
| MIMIC | multiple indicators and multiple causes |
| NFE | non-formal education |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development |
| PRI | panchayati raj institutions |

| | |
|--------|---|
| PSBH | Panel Study of Belgian Households |
| PGI | Poverty Gap Index |
| SEM | Structural Equation Modelling |
| SPGI | Squared Poverty Gap Index |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Program |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| VEC | Village Education Committee |

Acknowledgements

In 2001 a conference was organised at the University of Cambridge to study concepts, measures and applications of Amartya Sen's capability approach. The conference – entitled 'Justice and Poverty: Examining Sen's Capability Approach' – was hosted by St Edmund's, New Hall and Lucy Cavendish colleges and sponsored by the British Academy. Particular thanks go to the heads of these three Cambridge colleges, respectively, Sir Brian Heap, Mrs Anne Lonsdale and Baroness Perry of Southwark, for their encouragement and support.

The conference was conceived and convened by Frank Carey and Flavio Comim, and organised by Angels Varea and Kohei Watanabe. It involved thirty-eight paper presentations, as well as working group sessions on different topics. Amartya Sen, Sabina Alkire and Mozaffar Qizilbash gave the three invited talks. Frank Carey made a series of inspirational and humane interventions, inviting participants not merely to exchange intellectual ideas but also to think concretely about how these might serve the poorest of the poor. Carey's comments set a moral tone that ran through the event. The conference culminated in a plenary session at which Professor Sen addressed issues raised by working groups. We are particularly grateful to Professor Sen for his generosity and engagement.

This conference proved to be a turning point in organising scholars interested in the capability approach. Conferences have been held every year subsequently, with the 2002 conference on 'Promoting Women's Capabilities: Examining Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach' also organised under the leadership of Frank Carey and Flavio Comim in Cambridge. Annual conferences now provide the primary opportunity for members of the Human Development and Capability Association (HDCA), which was launched in 2004, to meet and exchange ideas. It is to that Association that all profits from this book will be donated.

Once papers were submitted for consideration, the three editors divided these between them, with Comim and Qizilbash taking

primary responsibility for oversight of the refereeing of individual papers, while each editor also took responsibility for comments on his or her own paper. The entire volume was also subjected to anonymous review by Cambridge University Press. From 2006 Alkire saw the manuscript through to production.

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Introduction

SABINA ALKIRE, MOZAFFAR QIZILBASH
AND FLAVIO COMIM

Amartya Sen's capability approach has generated remarkable interest in recent years. This volume brings together a selection of papers initially presented at an international conference on the capability approach (CA) held at St Edmund's College, Cambridge in 2001. This conference marked an important turning point in research on the capability approach. It brought together many young scholars who were interested in the approach as well as others who had been working on it for some time. The conference was initially motivated by issues relating to the usefulness of the approach in the particular contexts of poverty and injustice. However, conference papers covered a wide range of topics relating to concepts, measurement and other applications. In this volume, the papers are categorised in terms of these broad and overlapping areas. In 2002 a follow-up conference explored Martha Nussbaum's version of the approach, and annual conferences have been held in subsequent years.¹ Numerous initiatives have since emerged, including the Human Development and Capability Association (www.hd-ca.org). In part as a result of these initiatives, but also quite independently of them, a large literature on the capability approach has emerged.

Amartya Sen's 1980 Tanner lecture, 'Equality of What?', set out a broad agenda for debate and further research. While the approach has been extensively discussed, Sabina Alkire suggests in Chapter 1 that work in this area is still at a relatively early stage. The drawing on the cover of this volume – a version of Jean-François Millet's 'Les Premiers Pas de l'Enfance' ('The First Steps of Childhood') – shows a child taking its first tentative steps, supported by her mother. Only time will tell

¹ Nussbaum 1988, Nussbaum 1990, Nussbaum 1992, Nussbaum 1993, Nussbaum and Sen 1993, Nussbaum 1995, Nussbaum 1995, Nussbaum, Glover and World Institute for Development Economics Research 1995, Nussbaum 1998, Nussbaum 1998, Nussbaum 2000, Nussbaum 2000, Nussbaum 2001, Nussbaum 2002, Nussbaum 2003, Nussbaum 2005, Nussbaum 2006.

whether this image provides an appropriate metaphor for this early phase of work on the capability approach. Part of the value of bringing together a set of papers in a volume of this sort is that these papers allow us to assess how far the approach has gone and to define – however tentatively – potential directions for work on the approach. The volume brings together a diverse set of voices, each of which engages with the approach in its distinct manner. However, we emphasise that many of the chapters engage critically with different aspects of the approach, freely questioning and wrestling with it. Indeed, such critical engagement is a common theme of this volume. We hope to bring out the flavour and nature of this engagement in what follows through reference to relevant chapters in this introduction.

At this stage, it is not entirely foreseeable which directions will be pursued in future work on the capability approach and how fruitful they will turn out to be. If we return to the Millet crayon drawing, part of what engages our attention is the unpredictability of the child's first steps and the hope – and anxiety – that unpredictability generates. The steps of a child are powered by its unique curiosity, temperament and circumstances. Similar unpredictability is evident in the emerging literature on the capability approach. It is part of what makes this literature both intriguing and exciting. We hope that this volume will convey some of that excitement.

Concepts

The central concepts involved in the capability approach are capability and functioning. Functionings are what Sen (1999: 75) calls 'the various things a person may value being and doing'. Examples include being adequately nourished, being in good health, avoiding escapable morbidity, being happy, having self-respect, and taking part in the life of the community (Sen 1992: 39). There is no definitive list of basic functionings because different sets will be relevant to different groups and in distinct settings (Sen 2005: 157–160). A person's capability 'represents the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve' (Sen 1992: 40). To this degree, the person's capability reflects her freedom or (real) opportunities. Sen has used these concepts to analyse the quality of life, egalitarian justice and poverty *inter alia*. He has demonstrated the insights which arise from a capability or functioning-based analysis in comparison

with analyses which exclusively use information on resources, or income, or ‘utility’ (when this is understood as happiness or desire satisfaction). The capability approach thus broadens the informational basis used in normative evaluations.

To illustrate some of these ideas, consider the quality of life of the painter Vincent Van Gogh, in the winter of 1889. At that time Van Gogh painted an interpretation of Millet’s ‘The First Steps of Childhood’.² It is certainly true that Van Gogh had little income and that he was heavily dependent on his brother for financial support. However, if we considered his position *only* as regards income or resources we would have a very limited understanding of the quality of his life. In the months when he was working on this painting – as well as other paintings based on Millet’s work – he was extremely unwell and had recurrent fits. To this degree, he was clearly deprived in terms of Sen’s functioning ‘being in good health’. In addition, these paintings were created in the asylum of Saint-Rémy de Provence where he did not have people who could sit for portraits. As a consequence, his brother Theo sent him some black and white reproductions of works by Millet and Eugène Delacroix, which he worked from. Van Gogh’s choice of ‘The First Steps of Childhood’ as a subject reflected the limited opportunities or capability he had. His limited opportunities involved a form of disadvantage which may not be adequately captured through an analysis which merely checked his level of ‘utility’ (in terms of happiness or desire satisfaction), partly because he may have learned to adjust to the circumstances he found himself in.

Capability and functioning remain intimately connected but independently useful concepts in Sen’s writings. Because capability is a collection of functionings a person can achieve, capability is evaluated in the ‘space’ of functionings, thus functionings are integral elements of capabilities. However, the focus on capability directs our attention to freedom and opportunity – which functionings cannot do. Sen does not claim that capability is all that matters; functionings retain ongoing value in themselves. He also leaves open the relative importance of capability as opposed to functionings as well as the relative weights to be given to different capabilities or

² Van Gogh’s interpretation is to be found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

functionings (Sen 1992: 49–53 and 1999: 76–77). These are some of a range of ways in which the approach is intentionally open-ended and incomplete.

In addition to capability and functioning, Sen defines a third core concept, agency. On his account, an agent is ‘someone who acts and brings about change’ (Sen 1999: 19). The agency aspect is important in assessing ‘what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important’ (Sen 1985: 203). In some writings, agency – as well as capability – figures centrally. For example, the approach adopted in Drèze and Sen’s book *India: Development and Participation* as well as many of Sen’s single-authored writings ‘puts human agency (rather than organisations such as markets or governments) at the centre of the stage’ (2002: 6). When Roland de Leeuw notes that Van Gogh initially had as a ‘social objective’ that his Millet paintings would be presented to a local school – presumably to expose young people to Millet’s work – it is agency which is relevant (de Leeuw 1996: 466). Of course, Van Gogh’s aim if realised would also mark an achievement in terms of functionings, as regards ‘taking part in the life of the community’.

Sen uses a range of distinctions in his writings on freedom and development. To clarify his conceptual framework and to avoid potential confusion, we introduce two further terms: ‘opportunity freedom’ and ‘process freedom’ (Sen 1999; 2002: chapters 19–21). While ‘opportunity freedom’ refers to what people have opportunity or ability to achieve, ‘process freedom’ refers to ‘the *process* through which things happen’ (Sen 2002: 585). Clearly capability is closely related to opportunity freedom; agency relates to personal process freedoms.

As might be expected given the richness of foundational concepts, several interpretations of the scope of the capability approach are used in the wider literature and indeed in this book. These can be charted between two poles: one narrow and one broad, with the broad subsuming the narrow. The capability approach proposes that the comparison or evaluation of advantage or deprivation (whether or not through measurement) should occur in the space of capabilities *inter alia* (rather than simply utility or commodities), or in some sensible approximation of capabilities such as a vector of achieved functionings. The *narrow* interpretation sees the approach primarily as identifying capability and functionings as the primary informational space for certain exercises. The *broad* interpretation views the

capability approach as providing a more extensive and demanding evaluative framework, for example by introducing human rights or plural principles beyond the expansion of capabilities – principles which embody other values or concerns such as equity, sustainability or responsibility.

Both interpretations can be found in Sen's writings. Like the narrow interpretation, the *broad* interpretation argues that the quality of life should be evaluated primarily in the space of capabilities. However, information on capabilities alone is not sufficient. Other considerations (such as rights, process or agency) would enter the overall evaluation of states of affairs in this framework. To illustrate, consider an example which Sen has used recently. The example starts from the well-known claim that in similar conditions women live longer than men. It might be possible, Sen suggests, to equalise people's capability as regards their life chances. However, pursuing such equality, perhaps by discriminating against women in the distribution of health care, would violate process freedom (Sen 2002: 660–661 and 2005: 156; see also Tsuchiya and Williams 2005). On a narrow interpretation, this example can be used to illustrate the limits of the capability approach. By contrast, on a broad interpretation, the very same example might be used to show how the capability approach introduces additional distributional considerations (see also Sen 1985 and 2000). In both the narrow and broad interpretations, the capability approach is viewed as a tool for evaluation – comparing situations with respect to the real opportunities they offer, among other things.

Sen (1984, 1990 and 1999) also frames the objective of development as an 'expansion of capabilities'. This has led to an interest in identifying courses of action or policies that would further this objective. So going beyond the capability approach as an *evaluative space* or *framework*, we can identify a third preoccupation in the literature on the capability approach and, relatedly, human development which focuses on generating *prospective* policies, activities and recommendations. This preoccupation is central to the discussion in the section on measurement and other applications later in this introduction. The chapters in this volume, nonetheless, span all three aspects of the literature.

Much of the philosophical literature is concerned with debates relating to the capability approach as an evaluative space and its relationship to, and perceived merits and weaknesses in comparison with, other approaches. Contributions have included a wide range of

papers on justice, happiness, needs and opportunities.³ Chapters by Alkire, Mozaffar Qizilbash and Ingrid Robeyns engage critically with these issues. Alkire traces the boundaries of the approach and distinguishes evaluative and prospective aspects. Robeyns investigates the ability of the capability approach to address feminist concerns and shows that it can be seen as a 'gender-sensitive evaluative framework'. She expresses a worry raised elsewhere in the literature about the 'under-specified' nature of the approach.⁴ Qizilbash considers the extent to which Sen's approach contrasts with the views of happiness, poverty and gender justice in John Stuart Mill's writings. He finds the two approaches remarkably similar in spite of the fact that one is a leading critic, while the other is one of the founders, of utilitarianism.

Another theme in the debate is the relationship between the individual and society in Sen's writings on capability.⁵ Chapters by Alkire, Séverine Deneulin, Robeyns and Miriam Teschl and Laurent Derobert engage critically with this debate at the conceptual level. Alkire argues that many criticisms of the so-called 'individualism' of the capability approach arise when the capability approach is drawn upon to generate 'prospective' recommendations (rather than evaluations in the broad or narrow sense). She clarifies that prospective recommendations generated in the capability literature inevitably draw upon institutions and intermediary processes and do not posit Robeyns' methodological individualism, so the criticisms, while accurate in substance, misattribute an individualism that the capability approach lacks.

Deneulin is unconvinced that Sen's capability approach can give sufficient importance to what Charles Taylor has called 'irreducibly plural goods'. She puts forward the notion of 'socio-historical agency' as central

³ Cohen 1989, Cohen 1993, Anderson 1995, Qizilbash 1996, Qizilbash 1996, Alkire and Black 1997, Qizilbash 1997, Qizilbash 1998, Anderson 1999, Anderson 2000, Arneson 2000, Alkire 2002, Qizilbash 2002, Anderson 2003, Sumner 2004, McGillivray 2005, Stewart 1988, Doyal and Gough 1991, Doyal and Gough 1992, Rawls 1993, Sugden 1993, Gasper 1996, Sugden 1998, Dworkin 2000, Pogge 2002, Roemer 2002, Robeyns 2003, Sugden 2003, Griffin 1986, Pattanaik and Xu 1990, Pattanaik and Xu 1998, Pattanaik and Xu 2000, Pattanaik and Xu 2000, Carter and Ricciardi 2001, Pettit 2001, Sen 2001, Carter 2004, Olsaretti 2005, Robeyns 2005, Robeyns 2005, Robeyns 2005, Beitz 1986, Arneson 1989, Rawls and Kelly 2001, Comim 2005, Alkire 2006, Sumner 2006.

⁴ See Hill 2003, Qizilbash 2005.

⁵ Gore (1997), Evans (2002), Stewart and Deneulin (2002), Sen (2002), Gasper and van Staeveren (2003) and Stewart (2005) *inter alia*.

in the promotion of capabilities, bringing into perspective an empirical illustration of capability expansion in Costa Rica. Her chapter can be read as making the case for a further broadening of the informational basis of the capability approach – when this is used as the basis for prescriptions – to include Paul Ricoeur’s notion of ‘structures of living together’ which belong to a particular historical community but are irreducible to individual relations. Deneulin’s argument suggests that in its current form the approach is not just incomplete but potentially misleading.

Robeyns distinguishes between ethical individualism – where the ultimate unit of concern is the individual – and methodological and ontological individualism – which hold that social phenomena can be explained by reference to individuals alone, and that society is merely a sum of its individual parts. She defends ethical individualism, arguing that it is necessary for an adequate account of the wellbeing of women and children. Teschl and Derobert explore how a person’s agency and identity influences their choice of functionings from their ‘capability set’ – the set of vectors of functioning from which they choose. They note the powerful role that a person’s diverse social identities can have in influencing their choices. In spite of the apparent contrast between Sen’s alleged ‘individualism’ and the focus on community in the ‘communitarian’ literature, Teschl and Derobert find that Sen’s position is closer to that of one leading figure in that literature – Michael Sandel – than either Sen or Sandel might acknowledge.

Measures and applications

Given that evaluation of capability raises a challenging array of issues of measurement, aggregation, comparison, vagueness, etc., it is with good reason that a growing literature explores these issues. Sen has distinguished three ways in which the capability perspective can inform empirical and quantitative measurement work: the ‘direct approach’ – which ‘takes the form of directly examining and comparing vectors of functionings or capabilities’; the ‘supplementary approach’ – which involves ‘use of traditional procedures of interpersonal comparisons in income spaces but supplements them with capability considerations’; and the ‘indirect approach’ – which ‘remains focussed on the familiar space of incomes, appropriately adjusted’ (Sen 1999: 82–3). *Each of these approaches is seen as a way of giving ‘practical shape to the foundational concern’* (Sen 1999: 81).

In this introduction, we interpret the notion of ‘application’ broadly so that it covers the various ways in which a conceptual approach can be given a practical shape or value. Applications matter, not only because intellectual effort can contribute to practical change and inform policy-making but also because they can reshape understanding and contribute towards better conceptualisations of social phenomena and assessment procedures. Some applications involve measurement, but measurability is not a necessary condition for giving practical shape or value to a conceptual approach. The wide range of capability applications described in this book may contribute to shaping and illuminating the insights of the capability approach and can provide further refinements of its conceptual foundations.

The measurement literature includes examples of the direct, indirect and supplementary approaches at work. The direct approach is the most ambitious way of applying the capability approach. Attempts to pursue it typically address the multi-dimensional nature of wellbeing, inequality or poverty when these are understood in terms of capability or functionings. For this reason, some applications of the capability approach are close relatives of other approaches to multi-dimensional measurement. A large literature on such multi-dimensional measurement of wellbeing, poverty and inequality has emerged.⁶

Some of the issues which arise for multi-dimensional measurement are illustrated in Figure 0.1 with respect to poverty. The vertical axis represents achievement in terms of some indicator(s) for some domains. The horizontal axis shows the time across which achievement is measured, which may include future as well as present poverty. A specific level, or range of levels, of achievement constitutes a poverty threshold, or fuzzy poverty band, for each domain which may change

⁶ Bourguignon and Chakravarty 1999, 2003, Majumdar and Subramanian 2001, Majumdar and Subramanian 2002, Atkinson 2003, Kuklys 2005, Pattanaik and Xu 1990, Schokkaert and Van Ootegem 1990, Klemischahler 1993, Foster 1994, Gravel 1994, Puppe 1995, Chakraborty 1996, Chiappero-Martinetti 1996, Dutta and Sen 1996, Puppe 1996, Bossert 1997, Diener and Suh 1997, Ok 1997, Brandolini and D’Alessio 1998, Gravel 1998, Ok and Kranich 1998, Pattanaik and Xu 1998, Qizilbash 1998, Sugden 1998, van Hees and Wissenburg 1999, Bossert 2000, Burchardt 2000, Chiappero-Martinetti 2000, Cummins 2000, Klasen 2000, Pattanaik and Xu 2000, Gekker 2001, Fleurbaey 2002, Fleurbaey 2002, Atkinson 2003, Cummins 2003, Robeyns 2003, Sugden 2003, Qizilbash 2004, Robeyns 2004, Drèze and Sen 1989, Drèze and Sen 1991, Drèze and Sen 1991, Drèze and Sen 1997, Tsui 1999, Drèze and Sen 2002, Tsui 2002, Grusky, Kanbur and Sen 2006.

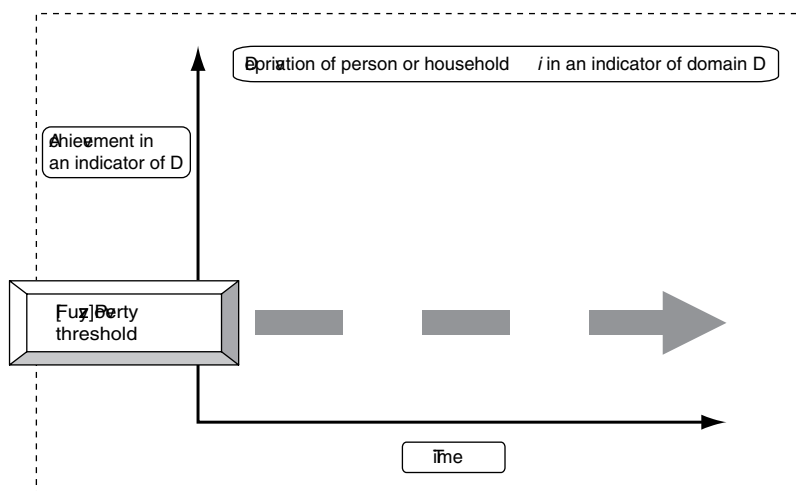


Figure 0.1 Schematic overview of multi-dimensional poverty for individual i

over time. This is represented by the broken arrow in the diagram. If a person or group falls within the fuzzy poverty band it is ambiguous whether they are poor. Multidimensional measurement would include information of this sort for each dimension.

Recurrent questions in this literature comprise the following. Which are the *domains* or dimensions that will be included, and on what basis?⁷ Which *indicator(s)* best represent each domain or functioning, and on what grounds will these be selected? What is the poverty *threshold* for each indicator, or, if a fuzzy threshold is defined, what are the upper and lower boundaries of the fuzzy poverty band? How does one represent the *interaction* between different indicators and the interactions between dimensions of poverty and identify substitutes and complements? In those cases in which it is necessary to aggregate across domains, how is this achieved and what *relative weights* are set for various domains? And how does one *aggregate* across individuals? Various approaches to multi-dimensional poverty measurement propose clear answers to these questions. A multi-dimensional measure of poverty – the human poverty index – which Sen developed with Sudhir Anand (Anand and Sen 1997) is an example of such a particular measure which is inspired by the capability approach. Decisions about

⁷ Alkire 2002, Robeyns 2005, Clark 2003, Clark 2005.

the selection of dimensions, indicators and weights are made in all the multi-dimensional measures of human development – most obviously in the Human Development Index (or HDI), developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – and related measures of gender inequality (McGillivray and White 1993; Anand *et al.* 1994; Streeten 1994; Anand *et al.* 1995; Anand and Sen 1997; Anand and Sen 2000; Anand and Sen 2000; Sen 2000; World Bank 2000; Ogwang and Abdou 2003; McGillivray 2005).

While there is a significant overlap between applications of the capability approach and other approaches to multi-dimensional measurement, the capability approach is distinctive inasmuch as it stresses that capabilities and functionings have value in themselves: ‘intrinsic value’. Income, by contrast, is seen as having ‘instrumental value’ – value as a means to the realisation of other ends. While some ‘indirect’ applications of the capability approach use income as a proxy measure for certain capabilities (see Anand and Sen 2000 and Klasen 2000), income is not usually seen as a dimension of wellbeing itself. Furthermore, the fact that income has an instrumental rather than intrinsic value can influence the form in which income enters into a multi-dimensional measure.⁸ This is one among a number of instances where the capability approach as a conceptual framework has implications for measurement. Tracing out such implications is a central theme of Flavio Comim’s chapter. Drawing on the writings of both Nussbaum and Sen, he shows the relevance of the approach – understood broadly as an extensive evaluative framework – to measurement issues. Comim also illustrates his claims in various concrete contexts, discussing empirical work carried out in research projects aiming to measure capabilities.

Figure 0.1 also allows us to address a question which has been neglected in the literature on capability: how to handle time? It locates any individual’s or group’s achievement in a relevant dimension in time. If relevant information is available across time, we would then be able to judge whether a person’s failure to achieve a minimally adequate level in some dimension is merely temporary or ‘chronic’. This would be one way to link work on capability to work on ‘chronic poverty’ (Hulme and Shepherd 2003). By locating people or groups in time, Figure 0.1 illustrates how one might study capability dynamics. It also allows one to consider whether or not a person or group situated at

⁸ Anand and Sen 2000: 99–102 discuss this point in relation to the HDI.

some point in time might become poor in the future. Such ‘vulnerability’ is a rich research theme (Morduch 1994; Dercon and Krishnan 2000) which has just started to be explored in the literature on the capability approach. While some commentators have discussed how time might be addressed in the capability perspective (Comim 2005), there is scope for further work on these topics. In Chapter 8, Fotis Papadopoulos and Panos Tsakloglou address the time dimension explicitly. They develop an approach to the measurement of social exclusion using the capability approach. They discuss some practical problems involved in using the CA: from an elaboration of a list of functionings and weighting issues to an evaluation of chosen capabilities. In their chapter, if deprivation in certain dimensions occurs for a number of periods in time, it constitutes social exclusion.⁹

Applications of the capability approach have also used techniques to capture the vagueness of notions such as poverty, wellbeing and inequality more explicitly than other work on multi-dimensional measurement. Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti argues that the capability approach’s ability to address complex problems without imposing artificial precision is a strength and that fuzzy measures provide one technique by which to capture this strength in empirical analyses – for example of poverty. Sara Lelli compares fuzzy measures with factor analysis using Belgian data. She investigates the empirical consequences of using particular techniques to the operationalisation of the capability approach. She shows how factor analysis could be a helpful device for defining a limited number of easily interpretable dimensions of capabilities and how fuzzy set analysis could be used to qualify the transition from membership to non-membership among different capabilities’ characteristics. She finds that the results that emerge from using these two techniques are remarkably similar. Qizilbash suggests that fuzzy poverty measures might be understood as measures of ‘vulnerability’, though he contrasts such ‘vulnerability’ from other definitions in much recent work.

While a number of studies look at a comprehensive set of dimensions of wellbeing, inequality and poverty, others focus on a smaller subset of such capabilities or functionings. Work which selects such a subset of capabilities or functionings often shows that approaches that focus on

⁹ For an alternative approach to the measurement of social exclusion using the CA, see Bossert, D’Ambrosio and Peragine 2004.

income alone are inadequate. Many of Sen's applications of the capability approach have taken this form (Sen 1984; Drèze and Sen 2002). Using Peruvian household survey data, Caterina Ruggeri Laderchi explores the policy relevance of using indicators of, and 'production functions' for, health and education rather than income. Because these capabilities are particularly significant, she takes the position that indicators of morbidity and functional illiteracy are adequate indicators for them. She finds that capability analyses provide more policy-adequate guidance than income analyses. In the context of Mozambique, Giorgio Ardeni and Antonio Andracchio explore one of the central tenets of the CA, that resources are imperfect indicators of wellbeing, arguing that women in female-headed households are not necessarily poorer than men in the space of resources, but that they are much more vulnerable when seen in the space of functionings (such as health and education), providing evidence for a phenomenon known as 'feminisation of poverty'. Kirsten Sehnbruch uses the capability approach to develop a broad index of the 'quality of employment'. She shows that, in the context of the Chilean labour market, this index illuminates a range of policy-relevant issues which would otherwise not be highlighted.

These chapters are among a range of applications of the capability approach that empirically demonstrate the relative strength of analysis and accuracy of policy advice that arise from a reliance on functionings rather than monetary measures, and suggests that these replace or at least supplement standard income, expenditure or consumption measures.¹⁰ At the very least, the findings in these chapters thus make a strong case for using what Sen calls the 'supplementary approach' in certain contexts. In fact, such an approach seems to be implicit in a wide range of policy contexts, as can be seen in the formulation of the 'Millennium Development Goals' (where income poverty headcount indices are supplemented by a wide range of other indicators). Finally, there is now a significant econometrics literature which focuses on the question of how one might adjust income measures to reflect the different rates at which individuals transform income into capability and functioning. This literature pursues what Sen calls the 'indirect

¹⁰ For a summary of applications of the approach which distinguish the distinct nature of findings and policy conclusions see Kuklys 2005: 25–28. See also Chiappero-Martinetti's chart in this volume (Table 9.1).

approach'. It has been insightful in the context of disability (Kuklys 2005; Zaidi and Burchardt 2005) and may be useful in other contexts.

In some attempts to apply the capability approach, the question of where information on *freedom* enters – as agency measures for specific dimensions¹¹ or in other ways – also arises. Often it is also noted that while achieved functionings are easily observed, a person's capability is not. Some of those who are sceptical about the usefulness of the capability approach view this problem as a fatal flaw. Others – including Sen (1999: 81–82 and 131) and some contributors to this volume (including Comim, Ruggeri Laderchi and Chiappero-Martinetti) – follow a more constructive strategy. While there have also been some attempts to focus specifically on capability rather than functionings in applied work, this is an area where there is scope for further work.¹² However, worries about this issue have not held back work on measurement which is guided by the capability perspective. For those researchers who are looking for tools to use in applying that perspective, the literature provides a rich menu of options, or at least a starting point and set of challenges, for further work. If capability-based measurement is in its early stages then the tools which are at hand may be somewhat rudimentary – rather like the spade and barrow in Millet's 'The First Steps of Childhood' – but there are already many such tools as well as clearly defined possibilities for the use and development of techniques which can be explored.

As noted at the beginning of this section, while measurement can help to make a conceptual approach an object of practical value, measurement is not a necessary condition for the application of such an approach. While much of the conceptual and measurement literature has focused on the capability approach as identifying an appropriate space for evaluation, as noted earlier a rich literature has also emerged on generating prospective policies, activities and recommendations, particularly in the context of development conceived as capability expansion. The capability approach has proven to be a powerful tool in this arena quite independent of any work on measurement. At the most general level the approach has changed the language of policy work and public discussion on topics such as poverty, the quality of life and inequality. Part of the reason for this change has been the success of Sen's work on hunger and on the Indian

¹¹ Alkire 2005.

¹² Haverman and Bershader 2001, Burchardt 2005 and Xu 2002.

economy, much of it co-authored with Jean Drèze (Drèze and Sen 1989 and 2002). However, Sen's collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme on various *Human Development Reports* has also led to the widespread use of the language of capability at the policy level and in public discussion and debate. While the HDI has been the most visible form in which the capability approach has had an impact on the policy world, this change in the language of policy and public discussion also needs to be noted.

There are many different areas such as health,¹³ disability¹⁴ and education¹⁵ where the capability perspective has influenced the language of policy and public discussion. To illustrate, in the context of education the use of capabilities language has been introduced alongside the widespread use of the notion of 'human capital'. Because the capability approach focuses on the intrinsic value of various abilities and is not merely concerned with skills which are of instrumental use, it introduces a new dimension to some educational debates. While the use of the capability perspective in discussions about education may be fruitful, existing applications of the approach have also been criticised. In this volume, Elaine Unterhalter extends Sen's views on the role of education to enhance human wellbeing. She argues that education appears under-theorised in the capability approach. One could follow Robeyns' suggestion by supplementing the CA with additional theories. However, Unterhalter argues that the operationalisation of the CA by inclusion of complementary social theories could be 'problematic' as these theories could modify the features of the evaluative space used for normative assessments and how it is understood. She takes issue with Drèze and Sen's apparent equation of *schooling* with substantive freedom because of the many suboptimal or even harmful effects that poor-quality schools may have because of gender bias, violence, incendiary curricula, and so on.

Aside from having a pervasive influence on the language of public policy and discussion, specific policy proposals have also been generated by the capability approach. To this degree, conceptualising deprivation in terms of capability or functionings has an instrumental importance (Sen 1999: 131–132). In *Development as Freedom*, Sen challenges a

¹³ Sen 2002, Sen 2002, Anand, Peter and Sen 2004, Anand and Dolan 2005.

¹⁴ Burchardt 2004, Terzi 2005, Terzi 2005, Nussbaum 2006.

¹⁵ Unterhalter 2003, Walker 2003, Walker 2006.

policy which focuses on lowness of income as a criterion for a transfer or subsidy. He suggests that while there are well-known incentive problems associated with income-targeted policies – particularly to do with the manipulation of information – focusing on capability or functioning deprivation may avoid these problems. There have been exceptional cases where even a focus on capability deprivation may not get round this problem – such as famine situations where a child has been used as a ‘meal ticket’ (Sen 1999: 133). However, such cases are likely to be rare. Tom De Herdt evaluates this argument in the context of the relative ineffectiveness of a food relief project run by *Médecins Sans Frontiers* in Kinshasa in the Congo. The data cited in his chapter do suggest that parents might use their children as a ‘meal ticket’. However, De Herdt claims that if one includes capabilities such as ‘the ability to appear in public without shame’ (which Sen often cites), one can explain the data without resorting to the ‘meal ticket’ argument. De Herdt explores the use of capability-oriented reasoning in understanding incentive incompatibilities in eradicating malnutrition among children, and proposes indicators for programme performance – a common theme of this book.

Several other chapters engage with the policy dimension of Sen’s work as it is articulated in *Development as Freedom* in particular. Significantly, at the level of policy prescriptions, *Development as Freedom* identifies five ‘instrumental freedoms’ which can be seen as ‘crucially effective means’ to the expansion of other salient capabilities. Instrumental freedoms include political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security (Sen 1999: 38–40). In this work, as in related work on hunger and the Indian economy, Sen explores the important role that institutions, including democratic institutions and the market, play in development. He also emphasises the critical importance of agency, which can be expressed in public debate, social movements and democratic practice. The book thus explores applications that put human freedom more at the centre of development and, importantly, are feasible. Nonetheless, Kanchan Chopra and Anantha Kumar Duraipappah, and Santosh Mehrotra suggest that the capability approach is incomplete without studies of the role that institutions play in supporting the evolution of capabilities over time. In the context of two case studies in India, Chopra and Duraipappah illustrate the importance of informal institutions in facilitating capability expansion. Mehrotra engages with

democratic arrangements and the nature of participatory interventions in the characterisation of instrumental freedoms in India. Echoing Sen's emphasis on the importance of the practice of democracy, Mehrotra argues that certain forms of local participation are crucial during exercises of democratic decentralisation in order for these to realise the promised expansion of capabilities. His concern with successful social interventions in operationalising the CA is shared by many other contributors in this book.

Finally, Jean-Luc Dubois and Sophie Rousseau, and Shahin Yaqub stress the importance of time. Dubois and Rousseau see capability as a useful concept in the context of poverty policy. They argue that enhancing capabilities can be a poverty-prevention policy primarily because it can reduce a person's vulnerability (understood as the probability of having his/her own situation worsening in the face of a dramatic event). Dubois and Rousseau engage critically with the capability approach by suggesting that its static emphasis to date is insufficient. Shahin Yaqub explores 'the lifecourse approach to capabilities'. He argues that interventions which affect capabilities at an early stage in life can be a crucial factor in influencing the chances that a person will escape poverty at a later stage in life. He shows how time affects individuals' command over commodities, their 'personal utilisation functions' and the implications of their choices. Thus policies which aim at capability expansion must consider the lifecourse in prioritising interventions.

Concluding remarks

This book engages with a wide range of issues from disputed conceptual points to very practical concerns about public policy and discussion. This introduction has attempted to highlight certain gaps in the literature and pathways which might be pursued. At the same time, it has gathered together some of the themes in the diverse chapters. Critical engagement with Sen's writings on capability emerges as a central theme. So while we have stopped well short of summarising the chapters, our introductory remarks aim rather at enticing readers to look more closely at the chapters that follow. Just as 'The First Steps of Childhood' mark the end of a phase in a human life and hint at possibilities, we hope that this book allows readers to appreciate what has been achieved while anticipating and encouraging further research on the capability approach.

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1 *Using the capability approach: prospective and evaluative analyses*¹

SABINA ALKIRE

‘Anxiety is the mark of spiritual insecurity. It is the fruit of unanswered questions. But questions cannot go unanswered unless they first be asked. And there is a far worse anxiety, a far worse insecurity, which comes from being afraid to ask the right questions – because they might turn out to have no answer. One of the moral diseases we communicate to one another in society comes from huddling together in the pale light of an insufficient answer to a question we are afraid to ask.’²

The focal question

The focal question of the conference that gave rise to this volume was how Amartya Sen’s capability approach, which appears to have captured the interest of many, could be put to use in confronting poverties and injustices systematically and at a significant level. The often-discussed issue beneath that question is whether the research sparked by the capability approach gives rise to more effective practical methodologies to address pressing social problems. Of course ensuing applications are not the only grounds on which to examine a proposition – its theoretical implications, its measurability, or its conceptual coherence might also be fruitfully examined, for example. The extent to which specific applications and techniques embody the approach – their accuracy and limitations – might also be of interest. But in the context of poverty and justice it would appear directly relevant to evaluate

¹ Parts of this chapter are taken from the keynote address in Cambridge 2001; the remainder of that address has been published as Alkire 2005. I am grateful for input from the participants in the 2001 Capability Conference in Cambridge, research assistance from Afsan Bhadelia, as well as particular comments from Séverine Deneulin, Ingrid Robeyns, Mozaffar Qizilbash, and Amartya Sen. Errors remain my own.

² Merton 1955: xiii.

concrete applications and consequences, whatever else we also examine. Such a sharp focus might generate anxiety. For even if income approaches to poverty reduction shed but a pale light on the subject, it may be that, after scrutiny, we must concede that the capability approach in practice can do no better – or, perhaps, that we do not yet know.

Yet this seems a necessary question. Many have been attracted to the ‘promise’ that the capability approach and *Development as Freedom* seem to hold. Some writings assert its benefits (at times with rather more enthusiasm than evidence) or suggest that the approach be extended in a particular direction, or respond to certain pressing questions. The studies in this volume often demonstrate a more constructive and proactive tack. They view the capability approach as a work in progress, develop various applications of it, critically examine which insights various techniques embody, and/or debate whether and how these analyses demonstrably differ from alternative approaches. If this matter-of-fact methodology is adopted, it does not matter one whit whether the authors of such research were ostensibly ‘critical of’ Sen’s capability approach or appeared to harbor some affection for it. The value-added of the capability approach in comparison with alternative approaches would be (or fail to be) evident in the empirical analyses and applications and policies to which it gives rise – indeed in the capabilities that were (or were not) expanded. The proof would be in the pudding.

While the demand for exquisite pudding seems inexhaustible, the demand for a more robust approach to poverty reduction is not too feeble either. There seems to be a confluence of political and intellectual forces seeking to advance development activities in ways not unsympathetic to the capability approach. For example, some development agencies, non-government organizations (NGOs), and governments are sustaining their support for the Millennium Declaration and associated Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – in which poverty is defined as multidimensional and encompasses a range of functionings rather than income alone. Some national poverty reduction strategies are harnessing democratic public debate about priorities and processes, and including the poor in the debate. Some direct poverty reduction activities seek to empower poor persons to be active agents in social and political structures, as well as within the home. However imperfect the initiatives are that advance the MDGs, democratic practices, or empowerment (for example), they signal that there might be a

demand for adequate applications of the capability approach. Further, they signal the importance of using the approach well, lest the practical applications settle for something less.

However, the focal question is actually quite difficult to assess: *does* the research sparked by the capability approach give rise to more effective practical methodologies to address significant social problems? More to the point, *the question might be mistakenly construed*. The difficulty in part relates to the different views of what in fact the capability approach *is* – for there are broader and narrower interpretations of it – and what aspects of it various applications or techniques instantiate. It also overlooks some lacunae in the approach, where it needs to borrow from other areas of research or where cross-fertilization with parallel new literature has not yet taken place. But most of all, the question, in the commonly articulated way that I have phrased it, is not actually an appropriate question for *assessing* the capability approach – at least not when this is understood as an evaluative framework. Rather, the question is, itself, a fundamental *application* of the capability approach. A primary evaluative role of the capability approach is precisely to assess which of two states of affairs have expanded human freedoms to a greater extent or what kinds of freedoms have expanded (or contracted) in each. Is the capability approach a baker or a taster; a pudding-maker or the puddings' judge?

This chapter maps, for the purposes of discussion, the possible conceptual boundaries of the capability approach – and notes significant boundary disputes. It refracts the major discussions on individualism and on the use of the capability approach that appear in other chapters and in the surrounding literature, and proposes some salient research questions and areas.

Evaluative framework: limitations

The capability approach gives rise to a normative proposition. The proposition is this: that social arrangements should be primarily evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value. Put simply, progress, or development, or poverty reduction, occurs when people have greater freedoms.

Thus, in addition to providing descriptive information, the capability approach provides an evaluative (often also called normative)

framework for assessing alternative policies or programs or options.³ An evaluative framework in this sense compares two or more states of affairs with respect to a limited set of variables. These might be capability sets or key functionings such as being able to be healthy, well nourished, safe; being able to make your views heard or have a livelihood. Such analyses enable pairwise comparison of alternatives or states of affairs, and inform a subsequent normative choice.

As we discussed in the introduction, this framework can be interpreted in narrow or broad ways:

- The *narrow* interpretation sees the approach primarily as identifying capability and functionings as the primary informational space for certain exercises.
- The *broad* interpretation also views capabilities as the primary informational space but is considerably more demanding. As capabilities are heterogeneous, to compare states of affairs requires *principles* such as equity or sustainability or responsibility in addition to the traditional efficiency. As the identification and prioritization of capabilities entails value judgements, and as comparison using plural principles may generate partial orderings, a third component of the broad approach may be the *process of social choice* (democracy, committee, participation, etc).

In either interpretation, the capability approach might be likened to a sophisticated balance upon which two states of affairs or alternative courses of action can be analysed and compared. Unlike a simple balance that may gauge the weight of only one kind of vegetable at a time, the capability approach – in theory – gauges the weights of plural variables (n-tuples of functionings) simultaneously. In a narrow view, in which information is restricted to capability sets alone, it asks, for each course of action, questions such as which capabilities expanded or contracted? For how many people? By how much and for how long? To deepen assessment, the variables might be compared against several criteria, not ‘capability expansion’ alone. Thus in a broader view other questions would be assessed, such as were human rights protected? Could people participate? In either view, the balance will often be comparing incommensurable capabilities. A mango may be greater in weight, sweeter in taste and roughly equal in texture in comparison

³ Robeyns 2005, Sen 1992.

with an avocado. Alternatively a state of affairs may be better in terms of educational capabilities but worse in terms of health capabilities, or educational capabilities could be better for some groups and worse for others.

Because of this complexity, in many cases the balance (capability approach) will be unable to identify one course of action as 'best' as a whole – dominating one or several others in every respect. It may be able to discard a set of options that is clearly worse.⁴ From the set of possible 'better' options, an informed value judgement will need to be made between the alternatives (the process of this decision will vary, although it should be open to public scrutiny and debate), and such a choice both exercises freedom and creates identity. Even in this case, the capability approach 'balance' has done a great deal of work in clarifying the salient valuational issues that inhere in alternatives, as well as in ruling out courses of action that are dominated entirely by other alternatives.

Understood as an evaluative framework, the capability is actually a limited structure. Its limitations are regularly overlooked. In particular, many who use the capability approach understandably intend that it will (also) *generate* a set of alternative activities, policies, or institutions that would expand capabilities more than the current set, or than a set generated by a traditional or alternative approach.

I would argue that we may need to separate two emphases: **prospective**, and **evaluative**. Both are important but distinct, and the distinctions are noteworthy. The capability approach as an *evaluative framework* undertakes comparative assessments of states of affairs by comparing capabilities or freedoms (*inter alia*). A *prospective application* of the capability approach, in contrast, is a working set of the policies, activities, and recommendations that are considered, at any given time, most likely to generate considerable capability expansion – together with the processes by which these policies/activities/recommendations are generated and the contexts in which they will be more likely to deliver these benefits. The prospective approach thus relates to the project of advancing *Development as Freedom* as well as to many applications advocated in the *Human Development Reports*, in *Hunger and Public Action*, *India: Development and Participation* and elsewhere. It might draw on the predictive tradition within economics, insofar as accurate

⁴ Sen 1997.

predictions are used to inform recommendations. To these two we should add a third relevant application of the capability approach, *descriptive* analyses, but it seems sufficient to the purposes of this chapter to confine attention to these two.

The terms ‘prospective’ and ‘evaluative’ are only possible words, and one hesitates to pick any terms in a discussion with a long legacy within economics, development economics, and other disciplines. John Neville Keynes, in *The Scope and Method of Political Economy*, cites three roles of political economy: positive, normative, and what he calls ‘an art’ (which provides rules as to how to attain given ends).⁵ In a twice-reprinted article on economic methodology, Sen describes instead description, prediction (concerned also with causality), and evaluation. ‘At the very least, the subject of economics includes three diverse, though interrelated, exercises: (1) predicting the future and causally explaining past events, (2) choosing appropriate descriptions of states and events in the past and the present, and (3) providing normative evaluation of states, institutions, and policies’ (p. 584).⁶ Other exercises might be considered in addition to these three, ‘such as using economic arguments for political advocacy (Myrdal, 1953; 1958) or seeing “the rhetoric of economics” as an object of direct importance’ (p. 585). Sen also acknowledges various overlaps between the three: for example some but not all descriptive exercises have *implicit predictive content* (pp. 586–7). We will return to this point later.

Prospective and evaluative analyses: complementarities

One inherent limitation of an evaluative framework may be that it focuses on comparing and fully assessing alternatives in terms of their effects on human capabilities and other relevant variables, rather than on making recommendations. Of course evaluations may and often do feed into recommendations, but the *focus* of the exercise is different and importantly so. An evaluation takes time patiently to explore the benefits and disbenefits of different states of affairs/courses of actions as these appear to diverse groups and to people in different situations or with different values. It asks, of these two situations, which is more

⁵ Colander 1992.

⁶ The second of these might be disputed by Lionel Robbins, who wrote, ‘Whatever Economics is concerned with, it is *not* concerned with the causes of material welfare as such’ (Robbins 1932, p. 9).

desirable, even, more just? It does so knowing that often there will not be a single ‘best’ answer, but some partial ranking among alternatives may be feasible.

Evaluative analyses are fundamentally concerned with comparisons of states of affairs at one point in time or with streams of capability-related benefits and costs of states of affairs across several time periods. They refer, ultimately, to information on how people’s capabilities expanded and contracted. Because of this focus, information on causal chains enters only insofar as it affects endstates. Naturally, as Sen has argued, a sufficiently rich description of outcomes may include some account of their generative processes – such as whether they respected human rights (goal rights) or unfolded through a participatory process. But the primary evaluative focus is *whether* capabilities have expanded, rather than *how and why* such expansion occurred.

Yet, as was noted above, another question that rightly attracts many is precisely which alternatives would *advance* human capabilities more fully, which *prospective* recommendations could or should arise from the capability approach. Prospective analyses have a different emphasis: one on causality, probability, and assumptions. Their main objective is not to compare two states of affairs but to identify which concrete actions are likely to generate a greater stream of expanded capabilities, the better state of affairs.

Prospective analyses cover an equally essential set of questions related to issues of process and causality (how and why): what incremental changes to existing institutional, social, cultural, political and economic structures would expand certain capabilities, and how durable, equitable, and sustainable such expansions would be. Prospective analyses identify the highly productive investments that will leverage a greater yield of capabilities than alternatives.

A central example of prospective analysis is the kind of empirical scrutiny that underlies the identification and advocacy of ‘instrumental freedoms’ in *Development as Freedom*.⁷ Instrumental freedoms are a class of freedoms that, in addition to forming part of the objective or

⁷ *Development as Freedom* identifies five ‘instrumental freedoms’ that ‘tend to contribute to the general capability of a person to live more freely’. They are:

- 1) *Political freedoms*, e.g. democracy, the freedom to scrutinize and criticize authorities, to enjoy a free press and multi-party elections.
- 2) *Economic facilities*, e.g. people’s opportunity to have and use economic resources or entitlements.

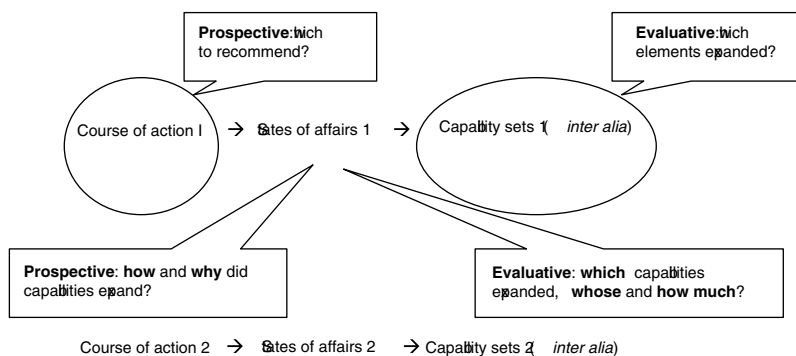


Figure 1.1 'Prospective and Evaluative Analyses: Distinct but integrally related'

'end' of development, are also 'crucially effective means' to the expansion of other salient capabilities.⁸ Sen argues that instrumental freedoms can be identified empirically: 'This acknowledgement [of freedom as a crucially effective means] can be based on empirical analysis of the consequences of – and the interconnections between – freedoms of distinct kinds, and on extensive empirical evidence that indicates that freedoms of different types typically help to sustain each other.'⁹

Of course these two analyses are inter-related and indeed overlapping. A good example of this is Ruggeri Laderchi's capabilities production function in this volume. It crosses the boundary while maintaining conceptual clarity, being an empirical estimation of capabilities in which poverty is defined exclusively in capability space (and to that extent, an evaluation) but including a production function in order that the analysis generates useful policy advice. Similarly, Sehnbruch's chapter develops an index that includes a fuller set of indicators for

- 3) *Social opportunities*, e.g. people's ability to have health care, to be educated, and to live in a society where others likewise enjoy these goods.
- 4) *Transparency guarantees*, e.g. the ability to trust others and to know that the information one receives is clear and honestly disclosed.
- 5) *Protective security*, e.g. social protections for vulnerable people that prevent subject deprivation.

Sen 1999: 38–40.

⁸ IADB 'Ethics' p. 10.

⁹ IADB pp. 10–11; the footnote reads: 'The evidence is discussed in Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*.'

work-related capabilities, but it develops this for the purpose of policy recommendation in Chile.

The capability approach evaluates which course of action expanded capabilities more, whereas prospective applications of the capability approach and human development recommend and advocate courses of action that expand capabilities more than alternative courses of action.

Implications: the individualism criticism

One motivation for distinguishing the evaluative and prospective foci is that several major ‘boundary disputes’ of the capability approach concern this distinction. One such dispute focuses on the alleged individualism of Sen’s approach. Critics argue forcefully that an evaluative framework whose constituent elements are the capabilities of *people* (individuals) is misleading (see Deneulin, Dubois and Rousseau, and Teschl and Derobert in this book, and De Herdt and Deneulin 2007). The main force of this criticism is that, although the capability approach’s emphasis may be purely evaluative, the larger context of many evaluations is indeed to guide prospective recommendations. And, the critics argue, prospective analyses and recommendations that do not carefully scrutinize the role of collective actions, institutions, and other social structures in creating individual capabilities will be deeply flawed. Below I state the debate in its own terms, then explore how the prospective–evaluative distinction relates to this debate.

Ethical individualism

In Chapter 3 Robeyns explains that Sen’s capability approach embraces ethical individualism but does not defend methodological or ontological individualism. This distinction is of cross-cutting importance, precisely because the ‘individual’ focus of the capability approach is often misunderstood or inaccurately criticized. Robeyns’ distinction is this: *ethical individualism* ‘postulates that individuals, and only individuals, are the *ultimate* units of moral concern. This, of course, does not imply that we should not evaluate social structures and societal properties, but ethical individualism implies that these structures and institutions will be evaluated *in virtue of* the causal importance that they have for individuals’ well-being’. *Ontological individualism* – which Robeyns argues the capability approach does not support and nor should

feminists – holds that ‘society is built up from only individuals and nothing than individuals, and hence is nothing more than the sum of individuals and their properties’. Explanatory or *methodological individualism* presumes ‘that all social phenomena can be explained in terms of individuals and their properties’.

Robeyns argues that feminists should support ethical individualism – because moral theories that take an alternative unit of moral concern such as the family, the social group, or the community will systematically overlook any existing or potential inequalities *within* these units. For example, the deprivations particular to women and children have regularly been overlooked by analyses that focus on the household unit. Further, she observes a key factor which others neglect – hence the tremendous value of this chapter. She observes that ‘a commitment to ethical individualism is not incompatible with an account of personhood that recognizes the connections between people, their social relations, and their social embedment’. Criticisms that Sen’s capability approach is ontologically or methodologically individualist thus misconstrue the approach.

It may be observed, in light of the previous discussion, that ethical individualism pertains to the capability approach as an evaluative framework (and often, as a critical piece of a theory of justice). It does not speak to the task of *how to promote capabilities* – the task of human development, of creating ‘development as freedom’. As mentioned above, most individualist criticisms of the capability approach’s individualism focus on this latter task (and at times allege, contra Robeyns and also inaccurately, that the capability approach requires that prospective recommendations to expand capabilities be methodologically individualist). Because a great deal of cross-cutting practical relevance turns on these criticisms it would be useful to consider them carefully.

Critiques

Séverine Deneulin criticizes the capability approach for focusing too much on evaluative rather than prospective analysis (these terms are not, however, employed). While not methodologically individualist, the capability approach exudes too little interest in conditions of capability expansion. She argues in Chapter 4 that without studying structures of living together, the capability approach is unable to generate the kind of recommendations needed to *promote* capabilities; thus it

cannot advance its own objective of expanding capabilities. 'In the light of the Costa Rican development path, assessing development on the basis of individual capabilities, or irreducibly social goods that are of intrinsic value to individual lives . . . would miss out . . . certain structures of living together that make the whole process of development and expansion of individual capabilities possible' (p. 114). In other words, an evaluative analysis that accurately analysed individuals' capabilities would 'miss out' the institutions or movements or public policies that in part created and sustained those very capabilities, and this information might be deeply relevant to others who are attempting to expand those same capabilities.

This omission would not be particularly important if the capability approach was always used merely to compare and evaluate states of affairs, but this is not the case – it has what Sen referred to as 'implicit predictive content'. In practice, Deneulin observes, the capability approach often 'becomes a guiding theory for development practice'. As Ruggeri Laderchi and Sehnbruch's chapters demonstrate, the empirical evaluation feeds into policy advice. Yet because the capability approach is intended as an evaluative framework, and focuses only on individual capabilities, Deneulin makes the further claim that it 'directs attention *away* from the examination of the structures of living together and historical explications of these structures, which are responsible not only for the conditions of life of individuals today but have also affected past generations and will affect future ones' (p. 115).¹⁰

Deneulin remains unconvinced that the capability approach can ascribe adequate importance to what Charles Taylor calls 'irreducibly social goods', which might include aesthetic values as well as cultural and political practices. To extend the informational basis of the capability approach, she draws on Paul Ricoeur's notion of 'structures of living together' (Ricoeur 1992) – 'structures which belong to a particular historical community, which provide the conditions for individual lives to flourish, and which are irreducible to individual relations and yet bound up with these' – to recognize the importance of such goods for development. She argues that an evaluation of Costa Rica's success based on individual capability expansion alone would inevitably miss the role that structures of living together played in facilitating the exercise of agency of certain individuals whose actions built that

¹⁰ Italics mine.

success.¹¹ It is crucial to this argument that the value of these structures does not derive entirely from the intrinsic value they have for human flourishing – they also have an instrumental value, affecting the future stream of freedoms that a community will be able to enjoy.

What Deneulin challenges is not ethical individualism – for her approach ‘still *ultimately* judges development by individuals’ lives’. She challenges the assumption (which she ascribes to those using the capability approach) that evaluation can be delinked from prescription. Should the informational set required for an evaluative assessment be chosen because it has best identified the objectives of ultimate value? Or should it be chosen because it provides sufficient information on which to base further recommendations? Sen’s and Robeyn’s defense of the capability space has focussed on the former; Deneulin’s critique arises from her focus on the latter.

Frances Stewart also advocates that the research and policy agenda related to the capability approach give more attention to ‘groups’ and to ‘group capabilities’. In ‘Groups and Capabilities’ she defines groups as ‘ways of categorising people in ways that represent common affiliations or identities’.¹² She identifies three ways that group membership affects people’s capabilities. First, the benefits of belonging to a group may be of intrinsic importance, thus expanding people’s well-being – to provide self-esteem, positive human relationships and so on. Also, a person’s capabilities may be directly affected by ‘how well the group they identify with is doing’ (p. 187). Second, ‘groups are important instrumentally in determining efficiency and resource shares’. For example, collective action groups of poor persons can enable them to expand many quite different capabilities (p. 189). Third, ‘groups influence values and choices. Groups could also exert negative influences on capabilities through these same three mechanisms. Given these three critical roles, analysis of what makes for “good” groups and what makes for “bad” groups becomes a critical part of any research agenda, and of policies towards the promotion of capabilities and human well-being’ (p. 190).

Leaving aside Stewart’s point on the influence of groups on values – a point which merits inspection and reflection but lies beyond the scope

¹¹ In his analysis de Herdt does consider the relationship between shame and agency. To some degree, this seems to account for the relationship between social and historical conditions and agency which is central to Deneulin’s concerns.

¹² Stewart 2005, p. 186. See also Stewart 1996, Stewart and Deneulin 2002.

of this chapter – we can observe that Deneulin’s and Stewart’s criticisms of the capability approach stem from their intention to *use* the approach in a ‘prospective’ sense: to create recommendations as to, as Stewart puts it, ‘the promotion of capabilities and human well-being’. Their criticisms are not, actually, criticisms of the individualism of the capability approach. Rather, they are criticisms that the capability approach’s focus on evaluative analysis leaves unspecified the methods of prospective analysis. In particular, it does not specify the importance of including groups, and structures of living together, in prospective analyses. This is indeed a criticism, but of a different kind. To remedy this they suggest that the vocabulary of capabilities acknowledge group or collective capabilities – a suggestion echoed by others¹³ – and that greater attention be paid to the production of capabilities by groups and collective activities. Deneulin makes the stronger claim that the capability approach’s emphasis on information on capabilities ‘directs attention away’ from attention to the very structures that might be most relevant.

These salient issues will be discussed below:

1. Should we talk about collective or group capabilities?
2. How can ‘prospective analyses’ of the capability approach proceed?
3. Does the focus on individual capabilities divert attention from prospective analyses?

Terms: collective and group capabilities

One proposition that many have put forward is that the language of capabilities should include the capabilities of groups or collectivities. Indeed many would argue that collective capabilities are of intrinsic importance – meaning by ‘intrinsic importance’ what Stewart identified, namely they indicate capabilities that individuals would not be able to enjoy, directly or indirectly, *except* through their participation in the group. In this case, the term ‘collective’ or ‘group’ serves to acknowledge and draw the analysts’ attention to the fact that the person’s enjoyment of these capabilities (causally) is – at present and probably also in the future – contingent upon their participation in the group, so changes to the group are very likely to affect this person’s

¹³ Evans 2002, Ibrahim 2006, De Herdt and Deneulin 2007.

capabilities. This title would thus convey something of importance: ‘Not only is this freedom a “being or doing” I value and have reason to value; *I could not enjoy it alone*, without the group.’ Stewart gives this example: ‘In a study of a sex-workers association in Calcutta, Gooptu found that an enhanced sense of self-respect was an important outcome of the formation of this group. As one member put it, “I felt I was released from a closed room and could see the sunlight”’ (Gooptu 2002, p. 236). Such information on the provenance of existing capabilities is vital, Stewart and Deneulin argue, to the design of social structures that promote such capabilities.

Moreover the term captures something of the person’s experience. For example, consider a good community chamber orchestra in which Ana plays the viola. It has just given a breathtaking performance in which the chamber group, as it were, spoke the music as one voice and even seemed to breathe together. The musicians also get along quite well, and several are friends. Ana deeply values her participation in this group, in which she is inspired, challenged, able to express herself musically, and enjoy friendships. It could be accurate to refer to her capability as her individual ‘capability to play viola in a challenging chamber group’ plus her ‘capability to enjoy friendships with chamber group members’. Yet the words that come to Ana’s mind are different – she would say that she values ‘our capability to play good chamber music together’. Much of the aversion to the so-called ‘individualism’ of the capability approach may rest in part on this dissonance between a person’s immediate experience of the group as inherent to the capability (collective marketing group, savings and credit group, family, indigenous or cultural community) and the language of individual capabilities. Collective terms better reflect the experience.

Yet the same term, group or collective capabilities, could also be understood as claiming (asserting) that every member of the group/collectivity who enjoyed those capabilities valued them.¹⁴ It is this kind of assertion of which Sen and Robeyns, as feminists, are wary, and for this reason are reluctant to endorse the term or ascribe ‘intrinsic’ importance to social structures. If instead Ana detested playing the viola (although she could), did not like the members at all, and was forced to play in the chamber group because her grandfather was first

¹⁴ This could also be an example of the group influencing a person’s own values and preferences, which Stewart raises but which we will not take up now.

violinist, she might still play beautifully in the breathtaking concert. And her grandfather might then declaim that all group members enjoyed ‘the capability to play good chamber music together’, omitting the fact that Ana did not value that capability at all! In this situation, the locus of the value judgement (that c_1 is a collective capability) might lie with the group leader or with a subset of group members, who make this claim on behalf of others. By appearing to ascribe intrinsic importance to collective capabilities (without consulting all those implicated), this approach forfeits the ability to give a more nuanced and differentiated account of how any given social structure (family, group, tradition), at any given point in time, affects diverse members of it. Robeyns argues that feminists should endorse Sen’s ethical individualism, that ultimately the capability approach must focus on individuals. Thus we can accurately assess the capabilities each person actually values and has reason to value, and not stop short at the border of groups – which can, unfortunately, be considerably more destructive towards some members than Ana’s grandfather.

So in favor of the term collective capabilities are two arguments:

- (i) Given that many descriptions have implicit prescriptive content, and that the purpose of many examinations of capability is to inform efforts to improve these, it is useful to signal to the analyst that not only is the capability valued by individual i but without the wider social group, this capability could not be enjoyed.
- (ii) When the group contributes to an individual’s capability in one of the two ‘intrinsic’ ways that Stewart describes, a collective term also ‘strikes the ear’ as being a more accurate description of the person’s experience than describing only their own benefit.

Against it is the position that:

- (i) The term collective capabilities could assert, on behalf of each member of the group, that the capability in question was valued by each member or expanded their capabilities uniformly. In fact, participation in the group may often affect different people’s capabilities differently, and people may also value the effects of group participation differently. In particular, a group that benefits one subset of members may at the same time harm another, and a claim that a structure or group ‘provided a collective capability’ may overlook some significant dis-benefits or heterogeneities.

The arguments under discussion are each, it seems, reasonable and could be mutually compatible in a rich enough analysis; the outstanding question is what to *call* capabilities that i) a person herself values but ii) could not enjoy alone. More important than the terms used are the clarity with which the analyses consider each and every one of these insights and concerns, not omitting any, and explain the adopted terms accordingly.

Methods of prospective analyses

When seen as an evaluative framework, the capability approach raises a focused set of questions, some or all of which might enter the analysis: what capabilities should be selected for the evaluation? How are these to be measured or otherwise described? How are relative weights to be set? What is the timeframe of the evaluation? How are distributional issues in capability space to be discussed? And so on. In contrast, *prospective* analyses are inherently heterogeneous, and the capability approach thus far has not explicitly specified a methodology for them. It seems that the methods will be plural and the questions will vary by discipline, level of analysis, policy audience, region and context. Deneulin, Stewart, and others observe that one component of prospective analyses which will be relevant across many contexts and sectors will be the component of groups and social structures. Indeed Deneulin also traces how Sen, and Drèze and Sen's work has actively done so.¹⁵ But we can see immediately that the structure of their suggestion is not confined to the individualism discussion. Many others who are engaging in prospective applications of the capability approach likewise advocate attention to ecosystems, to local institutions, to gender issues, to vulnerability, or to other considerations. So we will broaden the discussion from the incorporation of social structures in prospective analysis to the much broader discussion of how to use, apply, or (awkward though it sounds) 'operationalize' the capability approach in different disciplines and contexts. As is at once evident, the question also merits much more systematic attention than can be given here.

Many of the chapters in this volume engage in prospective analyses, although of course not by that name. At the same time many of them

¹⁵ In this volume. See also Deneulin 2006, Deneulin 2002, Deneulin, Nebel and Sagovsky 2006, Stewart and Deneulin 2002.

articulate, in one way or another, a lack of confidence regarding their methods, and a wistfulness that there might be a clear methodology for such analyses, such that they might be undertaken with confidence and rigour.¹⁶

As others' discussion is particularly focussed on Sen's version of the capability approach, we will start there. In discussing the heterogeneous methodologies appropriate for descriptive, predictive, and evaluative exercises, Sen argues (in that chapter as well as elsewhere) that methodology should be guided by 'what serves the goals of the inquiry' (p. 595) – given that these goals will vary significantly. For example, 'As far as prediction is concerned, the role of value judgements is typically rather limited', although 'the importance of values in motivating predictive inquiries of different kinds has also to be acknowledged' (p. 596). Sen stresses, thus, the need for methodologies to go beyond certain boundaries without specifying what they should be. In a similar vein, Malenbaum's early review of *Resources Values and Developments* observes that in its introduction as well as contents Sen 'warns that the neatness and elegance of social welfare theory in traditional development economics . . . must now give way to the inelegances posed by real development experience. "Uncomfortable aspects" of the application of theory force descriptive and predictive analysis into new institutional requirements in societies seeking economic advance.' And again, 'he envisages complex tasks in disciplines not usually mastered by economic experts in growth and development' (p. 403).

Many have tried to distil characteristic features of Sen's analysis.¹⁷ It may be sufficient for our purposes instead to give an example. Drèze and Sen explore certain structures of service provision – mostly related to nutrition, education, and health care – and try to identify crucial 'instrumental freedoms' for public policy investment and collective action. Their applied work, like that of an increasing volume of others',

¹⁶ I have tried to sketch observations about these processes in Alkire 2005, p. 126ff and in Alkire 2006 'Instrumental Freedoms and Human Capabilities' mimeo (on the difficulty and procedures for undertaking empirical assessments of instrumental freedoms in terms of capabilities and plural principles).

¹⁷ These have been done by Alkire 2002, Atkinson 1999, Basu and López Calva 2002, Bohman 1996, Clark 2005, Crocker 2006, Crocker 1992, Crocker 1995, Fukuda-Parr 2003, Gasper 2002, Gasper 1997, Kuklys 2005, Malenbaum 1988, Nussbaum 2003, Omkarnath 1997, Pressman and Summerfield 2002, Qizilbash 1996, Robeyns 2000, Stewart 1996, Stewart and Deneulin 2002, Streeten 2000, Walsh 1995 among others.

demonstrates how prospective analyses draw on, and go well beyond, the capability approach as an evaluative framework and how such analyses do indeed examine institutions, social structures, and groups *inter alia*. The conversations that arise in response to such applications are also crucial to improving the methodologies.

Prospective analyses: education in India

The various analyses by Drèze and Sen demonstrate the thorough, many-faceted kinds of analysis which explore prospective connections between development actions and human capabilities. Consider their 2002 analyses meant to inform public policy as well as advocacy priorities in India. Here are some of the footprints of that exploration, which begins with a description of the potential intrinsic value of education as well as its instrumental value in expanding other capabilities. One possible cause of low education was that education is not actually valued in the eyes of the parents and the communities. However, a parent survey found keen interest among parents in children's education and indeed in girls' education also. Another possibility was that the need for child labor prohibited deprived families from sending children to school – again this was not substantiated empirically. Rather, the barriers appeared to be the affordability of books and uniforms, the distance to schools, and the anticipated returns to education – which are stronger for boys than for girls. Perhaps the strongest barrier was the low quality of education – ramshackle schools, large class sizes, a complex curriculum structure, and unmotivated teachers. Further analysis showed that a significant contribution to the low quality of education was the weak motivation and accountability of government teachers to school inspectors or to the parents and local community.

The analysis then turned to observe that the Indian constitution (Article 45) urges states to provide free and compulsory education for children up to 14 years old (exploring in passing how 'compulsory' education could enhance 'freedom'). Political parties have reiterated this commitment, promising to increase educational expenditure. Instead, government of India figures show that expenditure declined from 4.4 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1989 to 3.6 per cent in 1997.¹⁸ The analysis implied there might be scope as well as

¹⁸ Drèze and Sen 2002, p. 166.

cause for parents and others to demand political responses to the ramshackle schools and missing teachers.

To deepen this consideration of pro-active public action by parents, the positive experience of one state – Himachal Pradesh (HP) – in furthering basic education was analysed. Between 1961 and 1991, girls' literacy improved from 61 per cent to 86 per cent and by 1998–9, school attendance was above 97 per cent for both girls and boys – a rate higher than that of Kerala. This advance also took place against considerable odds: HP has many remote areas that are difficult to access, has been overlooked by private or religious schools, and relied economically on child labor. While it is one of the wealthier Indian states, its educational advances were not mirrored in other states of a similar economic level such as the Punjab or Hararyana. Drèze and Sen trace the 'virtuous circle' that developed in HP. By drawing on and mobilizing on a strong tradition of local cooperation and collaboration for shared ends, groups created a politically salient impetus to invest in education; a relatively egalitarian economic structure assured that the expansion of education occurred relatively evenly, and that teachers and students were of similar status. Furthermore, because women in HP do regularly work outside the home, education increased their economic capacity, which provided a balanced incentive for girls and boys to attend school and, similarly, to teach school.

On the basis of this analysis of the educational shortcomings, Drèze and Sen advocate political mobilization in support of basic education that would work locally as well as through formal political and economic channels:

What is perhaps most striking of all is that the failures of government policy over an extended period have provoked so little political challenge. . . . The fact that the government was able to get away with so much in the field of elementary education relates to the lack of political power of the illiterate masses . . . It also reflects the fact . . . that the social value of basic education has been neglected not only by government authorities but also in social and political movements.¹⁹

This account of education and development gives one example of prospective analyses. It first considers the possible *value* of education – intrinsically as well as instrumentally – then examines the *deprivations*

¹⁹ Drèze and Sen 2002, p. 187.