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# **The Capability Approach and the Politics of a Social Conception of Wellbeing**

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## **Summary**

The paper discusses the potential and pitfalls of Sen’s capability approach. It discusses areas where the capability approach has made a significant contribution to the social sciences. However, the paper argues that the approach fails to take into account the social construction of meaning. It is these social meanings which gives us a basis from which we know what we value and judge how satisfied we feel about what we are able to achieve. From this viewpoint a person’s state of wellbeing (or illbeing) is socially and psychologically co-constituted in specific social and cultural contexts. This entails that the reality of trade-offs between competing conceptions of wellbeing has to be confronted, and that therefore such social conception of wellbeing is also profoundly political.

**Keywords:** capability approach, social wellbeing, reasoning, conflict

## **1. Introduction**

The economist Amartya Sen introduced the concept of ‘capabilities’ in the 1980s as a way of thinking about wellbeing that departed from the narrow utilitarian approach which has come to dominate modern economics. The concept has been developed into what is now widely known as ‘the capability approach’; a framework which accommodates social, economic and political analysis and which holds that the wellbeing of a person ought to be assessed in the space of capabilities. The capability approach has become increasingly influential in how we understand and evaluate social and economic development and the ways that this impacts upon human beings across the world. In this paper we seek to review some of the strengths of the approach and also explore ways in which it can be broadened to address one of its main

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critiques: that it is founded in a weak conception of society and ‘the social’ (see Gore 1997; Evans 2002).

The capability approach contains three main concepts: functionings, capabilities and agency. *Functionings* are the valuable activities and states that become a person’s wellbeing – such as a healthy body, being safe, being educated, having a good job, being able to move and visit people. Sen defines functionings as ‘the various things a person may value doing or being’ (Sen, 1999: 75). *Capabilities* refer to the freedom one has to do these valuable activities or reach these valuable states. Sen defines the concept of capability as ‘the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another... to choose from possible livings’ (Sen, 1992: 40). Or, in an alternative definition, capabilities are ‘the substantive freedoms’ a person ‘enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value’ (Sen, 1999: 87). The notion of capability has thus become closely related to that of freedom, which Sen defines as ‘the real opportunity that we have to accomplish what we value’ (1992: 31). Sen distinguishes this opportunity aspect of freedom from the process aspect which is ‘the freedom involved in the process itself’ (2002: 10). This relates to the concept of *agency*, which for Sen is the ability to pursue goals that one has reason to value. This way of viewing agency provokes two simple but key observations that will provide points of departure for our later discussion of a social conception of wellbeing. The first is that ‘freedoms to and from’ are entirely defined through our relationships to other persons. The second is that what we value is built from the meanings that we share with others.

Our emphasis on the social character of shared meanings draws our attention to the fact that in some of Sen’s writing there is a tendency to conflate ‘doings’ and ‘beings’. They are often talked of in the same breath with insufficient space for consideration of how we are to understand the relationships between the two (McGregor 2007). In this paper we argue that the socially constructed meanings that are essential for all human life, are what translate our ‘havings’ and ‘doings’ into states of ‘being’. These social meanings provide us with basis from which we know what we value and judge how satisfied we feel about what we are able to achieve. From this viewpoint a person’s state of wellbeing (or illbeing) is socially and psychologically co-constituted in specific social and cultural contexts. This entails that the reality of trade-offs between competing conceptions of wellbeing has to be confronted, and that therefore such social conception of wellbeing is also profoundly political.

## 2. Sen's capability approach

A key normative argument of the capability approach is that social arrangements should aim to expand people's capabilities, that is, their freedom to undertake or achieve valuable doings and beings, and in doing so those arrangements should respect people's agency. Applying this idea to the evaluation of public policy, a policy would be considered successful if it led to an expansion of peoples' freedoms to do or be what they have reason to value, and had not infringed on their freedom to be agents of their own lives. A social policy which, for example, brought improved health care but which involved a government forcing those who did not agree with the policy to comply with it would not be considered successful from the perspective of the capability approach, even if it had expanded people's opportunities to live healthier lives. Sen argues at length in *Development as Freedom*, that freedom should be both the ends and means of development.

The first major manifestation of the influence of the capability approach was signalled by the publication of the *Human Development Report* (HDR) by the UNDP in 1990. In the subsequent annual HDRs the analysis and measurement of human development has grown in sophistication. During the last decade, the capability approach has enjoyed further widening popularity across the social sciences, in philosophy and even in theology. In economics, it is used as an alternative to the neo-classical economic framework and its narrow vision of human behaviour focused on individual utility maximisation. Human development measures are used in poverty and inequality analysis as an alternative to monetary measures. In political sciences, the capability approach is used to highlight the economic and social influences on politics, such as the impact of economic inequality on political participation. In philosophy, the capability approach has put the idea of positive freedom at the centre stage. Theologians engage with the approach as a theory in social ethics that bears many similarities to theological ethics.

We can summarise a number of the ways in which the capability approach represents a new approach in the social sciences. First, it argues for human beings and their quality of life to be the central focus of policy; whereas previously there has been a tendency for the means to promote the quality of life to be treated as ends in themselves (for example, economic growth). Second, it conceives human freedom and the ability to make decisions that affect one's life as central to human dignity; whereas before policy interventions and their associated analytical frameworks have tended towards treating humans as objects and

recipients of policies. Third, the capability approach re-establishes ethics at the heart of the social sciences and policy-making; whereas previously analysis and policy thinking have tended towards over-privileging technical reasoning and a technocratic approach. Fourth, the capability approach is an approach and not a theory. It therefore allows for significant flexibility in interpretation and use and in doing so it often provides a way of reframing many of the problematics of the social sciences<sup>4</sup>.

Despite its far reaching potential for the social sciences and policy-making, the capability approach does not come perfectly formed. Its main weakness, we argue, arises largely from its distinctive liberal foundation and the character of its emphasis on freedom. It exalts a particular conception of human freedom as the ultimate value of human life. Yet, we must comprehend freedom in relation to its *telos* or its aim. Rather than an individualised form of wellbeing, as we perceive in Sen's arguments, we argue here that a broader and more socially informed *telos* is required: this encompasses both the good of oneself and others, including future generations.

Analytically, and as both Gore and Evans have pointed out, the capability approach as advanced by Sen ultimately conceives of human freedom in an individualistic light. This logically relates to the ethical individualism of the approach, where individual freedoms provide the yardstick for evaluating social arrangements. Yet as human beings we live together, and by doing so we create 'irreducibly social goods' (Taylor 1995) which sustain human life, for better or for worse. We argue that a more complex and social ethic is required for the evaluation of a more rounded and social conception of human wellbeing, since failing to include 'irreducibly social goods' in such an evaluation pays insufficient attention to the fabric of society that makes human life possible. The frameworks of meaning that we use for individual reasoning are a fundamental form of 'irreducibly social good' that the capability approach must seek to take better account of.

Despite the fact that reasoning is central to the capability approach, the approach does not offer a coherent and systematic treatment of the meanings that enable and shape reasoning

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<sup>4</sup> Evans (2008) notes three main virtues of Sen's capability approach: its analytical underpinnings of conventional economics, its focus on public deliberation and its strong foothold in the policy world. These virtues are discussed within our five areas of potential.

and of the powers which influence it. Sen recognises that what some people have ‘reason to value’ might conflict with what others have reason to value and this leads him to resist offering a list of core valued human freedoms (Nussbaum 2000:13). But, what some people have reason to value might be detrimental to the freedoms of others and more broadly they may not be for the good of society.

In the grandest functionalist sense the challenge of human society is for human beings to find ways of organising and structuring their relationships with each other so that we are able to successfully live together. The forms of shared meaning which shape these relationships are a vital element of the structuring of our societies. As Bourdieu’s explanation of *habitus* suggests (Bourdieu 1977), these meanings operate at conscious and unconscious levels. They are conveyed by our cultures and are manifest with increasing degrees of formalisation in societal institutions which appear in a variety of forms, from societal norms and formal laws to the written and unwritten rules of organisations. At a basic level such meanings and relationships must enable us to meet the challenges of winning food and shelter from the planet, but also, moving beyond that, to live together in a meaningful way, which some would argue must necessarily involve the effort to minimise human suffering. This does not suggest that human society at any time in history has been successful in minimising suffering and indeed a key observation here is that the struggle to live together can in itself generate violence and consequently human suffering – taking the extreme example of the vision of human society after an unspecified environmental catastrophe presented by McCarthy in his novel ‘The Road’. Many wars have been justified on the grounds that they are the route to future peace and prosperity. The values of ‘freedom’ and of ‘living together’ can conflict with each other and as such any analysis of the ways in which we construct our wellbeing must necessarily explore the ways in which different social meanings are at play in the trade-offs that must be made between valuable freedoms and the challenges of living together.

While the capability approach has much to offer to the social sciences, assessing policies only in terms of individual freedoms, as its central message has become, is, we argue, extremely restrictive for how we understand the day to day struggles that people undertake in pursuit of their wellbeing. In order to better appreciate these decisions, deliberations and struggles we need a social conception of human wellbeing. This must acknowledge both its objective and subjective dimensions; it must take account simultaneously of its individual and collective character; and it must allow us to apprehend both its dynamic and static dimensions.

### 3. Key strengths of the capability approach

#### 3.1 Human beings as ends

The essence of the capability approach can be summarized in a very simple sentence: ‘The standard of living lies in the living and not in the possession of commodities’ (Sen, 1985: 6). As we have noted the approach emerged as a radical critique of increasingly narrow utilitarianism which had become dominant in economics and particularly where it conceived poverty and inequality in terms of the income that households command or the commodities they possess. Sen gives five reasons for which incomes and commodities viewed narrowly are inadequate for assessing quality of life (1999: 70-1): 1) Heterogeneity: physical and biological differences between human beings will mean that they will have different requirements if their needs are to be met; 2) Environmental diversity: differences in physical environments will mean that human beings in different places will require different combinations of commodities if their needs are to be met; 3) Variations in social context: the different social arrangements that prevail in different societies will affect the translation of incomes or commodity into human development outcomes; 4) Differences in relational perspectives: e.g. differences in customs and habits mean different commodity requirements for achieving the ‘capability to appear in public without shame’; 5) Distribution within the family: e.g. the family income might be used to buy food and school equipment for boys but not for girls.

None of this argues that incomes and commodities are not important and ongoing research on the social and cultural construction of wellbeing across four different developing countries confirms that in all of the societies and cultures studied income is very important for people’s wellbeing (McGregor et al. 2006).<sup>5</sup> But income is not all and the research goes on to confirm that it is recognised as a *means* to further human ends. This point has been the major message of the *Human Development Reports* to policy makers: development is about people and not just about per capita incomes and goods. In the words of the first Report: ‘The basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. This may appear to be a simple truth. But it is often forgotten in the immediate concern with the accumulation of commodities and financial wealth’ (UNDP, 1990: 9).

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<sup>5</sup> The Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council to review the validity of the concept of wellbeing in developing countries and then to apply the findings of that review in empirical studies in four countries: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand ([www.welldev.org.uk](http://www.welldev.org.uk)). Background to the research can be found in Gough and McGregor (2007).

Development is thus not about what people have but about what they are able to do and to be with what they have, such as living long and healthy lives, being educated, having a voice to participate in decisions which affect their lives. There is little human progress if a country has grown wealthier but the majority of its population are unable to enjoy anything resembling a good life because of inequalities in access to the services that would provide them with adequate health care or education. It is possible for high economic growth rates to generate economic prosperity and then mask a dynamic of social change that produces greater poverty and distress. But, despite the capability approach's powerful message, growth of incomes per capita has a remarkable ability to reassert itself as the core point on the agenda of policy-makers.<sup>6</sup>

An alternative set of measures that have attracted growing attention across the social sciences and in policy circles are measures of subjective wellbeing or 'happiness' (see Layard 2005, or the 'Gross National Happiness', 'Happy Planet' indices or the OECD Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies<sup>7</sup>). The capability approach, however, stands ambivalently in relation to subjective evaluations of quality of life. It does not ignore the 'capability to be happy' as a valuable capability that people may 'have reason to value'<sup>8</sup> but it warns of the dangers of using happiness as an adequate indicator of quality of life. A person may be made to feel happy as an adaptation to cope with their dire life circumstances. In some aspects of their lives slum dwellers in Calcutta have been found to report themselves happier than middle-class Europeans, despite that they live in squalid accommodation trying to make ends meet on a daily basis (Biswas-Diener and Diener 2001). Somewhat contradictorily, given the emphasis on 'the reason to value', the capability approach argues that what matters is the quality of the life that people are actually living, defined by its objective conditions (whether people have access to health, education, can protest, vote, etc.) and not how they subjectively

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<sup>6</sup> See the Report of the Commission on Growth and Development to be published on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2008, information at <http://www.growthcommission.org>.

<sup>7</sup> The 'Gross Happiness Index' has been pioneered by the Kingdom of Bhutan as the objective of its policies (see <http://www.grossinternationalhappiness.org>). The 'Happy Planet Index' has been designed by the New Economics Foundation in the UK to measure the 'progress' of nations (see <http://www.happyplanetindex.org>). For the OECD measuring progress project, see <http://www.oecd.org/oecdworldforum>.

<sup>8</sup> 'In the capability-based assessment of justice, individual claims are not to be assessed in terms of the resources or primary goods the persons respectively hold, but by the freedoms they actually enjoy to choose the lives that they have reason to value' (Sen, 1992: 81).

feel about their lives. This flirts with the problem of accusing the poor of experiencing ‘false consciousness’.

This is dangerous territory as there are many well recognized problems with the simplifications and tendencies that are induced by the ‘false consciousness’ approach (see Lockwood 1981, Scott 1975). Such an approach enables researchers and policy makers to discount or devalue the meanings and understandings that form the basis for poor people’s decisions and actions and in doing so opens the way for forms of paternalism where there is an assertion of ‘superior’ values and meanings which arise from higher authority or from a position of more enlightened understanding. What would seem more appropriate are those approaches which engage with people’s perceptions more constructively in terms of ‘adaptive preferences’ or what psychologists refer to as ‘response shift’ (Appadurai 2004; Camfield and McGregor 2004; Clark 2007; Elster 1983; Lukes 2005; Sen 2002). Both the ‘adaptive preferences’ and ‘response shift’ literatures focus our attention on understanding the malleability and changing nature of the meanings that people operate with to assess their quality of life and which represent a basis for their actions. Neither of the approaches suggests that the meanings that some people operate with are more authentic than those of others, but that such meanings are socially constructed through our relations to others. Nor do they deny the possibility that some meanings serve the interests of existing distributions of power within a given society.

### *3.2 Human freedom and agency*

In addition to placing human beings at the centre of economic and social processes, the capability approach has brought concern for human freedom to the fore. This is of tremendous importance since it directly challenges the depoliticising tendencies of much development thinking, but it is also a double-edged sword. In the early 1980s, another prominent approach on the international development policy agenda was the ‘basic needs’. This shared a similar objective to the capability approach of resituating human beings, and their quality of life, at the heart of development policies. Its protagonists defined it as ‘an approach that attempts to provide the opportunities for the full physical, mental, and social development of human personality and then derives the ways of achieving this objective’ (Streeten et al., 1981: 33). The capability approach adds to this but questions the sense of separating basic needs from recognition of the importance of human freedom and agency. It is argued that the basic needs agenda was pragmatically restricted to lower order basic needs because this is what was

politically and intellectually feasible at that time (Alkire 2002, Gasper 2007). But as Maslow himself latterly recognised the notion of a hierarchy of needs is indefensible and the relationship between lower order needs, such as food and shelter, and higher order needs, such as freedom and agency, is more complex in people's lives than a simplistic hierarchy would suggest.

Human freedom lies at the core of the capability approach in its focus on capabilities and not functionings for social evaluation. Sen often refers to the starving child/fasting monk example. Both have the same level of functioning, both are undernourished, but one has the freedom to eat if he chose to and the other hasn't. This is one of the major innovations of the capability approach in the social sciences, to bring this idea of positive freedom to social evaluation. This is what Sen calls wellbeing freedom, 'one's freedom to achieve those things that are constitutive of one's well-being' (1992: 57). The success of policies depends on promoting this wellbeing freedom. In other words, the aim of policies is not to push people into achieving things that are valued by others or reaching states that are considered valuable by others (such as being educated, healthy, well nourished and so forth) but to give them the opportunities to achieve what they value. While the approach warns against the crude imposition of values by higher authorities it does not help us understand where the values of the 'free' individual come from.

According to Sen (1992: 150), the capability approach makes a two-fold contribution to the social sciences: in the areas of wellbeing evaluation and assessment of freedom. On the one hand, 'it shifts the focus from the space of means in the form of commodities and resources to that of functionings which are seen as *constitutive* elements of human well-being'. On the other, 'it makes it possible to take note of the set of alternative functioning vectors from which the person can choose. The capability set can be seen as the overall freedom a person enjoys to pursue her well-being.' Sen concludes that this freedom 'can be seen as being constitutive of the goodness of the society which we have reasons to pursue' (1992: 151). Or as he has more recently summarized: 'This approach focuses on the substantive freedoms that people have, rather than only on the particular outcomes with which they end up. For responsible adults, the concentration on freedom rather than only achievement has some merit, and it can provide a general framework for analysing individual advantage and deprivation in a contemporary society' (2002: 83).

Using that conception of freedom, the *Human Development Reports* have erroneously translated the more academically obscure concept of ‘capabilities’ into the more commonly recognised concept of ‘choices’, and in doing so have greatly contributed to confusion. The Report defines human development ‘as both the process of widening people’s choices and the level of their achieved well-being’ (UNDP 1990: 9). Such simplification associate ‘choices’ with whatever choices people wish to make. As such it over-emphasises the liberal foundations of the capabilities approach and with it increases the possibility of the approach being perceived as libertarian in its outlook.

What is at stake here in this poor translation is the meaning that we ascribe to freedom in any given social and cultural context. That is, as the capability approach suggests, there may be an abstract notion of freedom that we can regard as universal, in as much as it can be generally defined to be applicable to any human being in any society, but freedom as people experience it can only be manifest in the relationships with others in specific societies. It is those relationships and the meanings that shape them that make it possible for us each to judge whether or not we are free. Thus, in specific societies the meanings that operate in respect of freedom also incorporate meanings about what we must do and be in order to live together. From this perspective, and if we are to value differences in cultures, then we must recognise that the specific behaviours and actions that represent freedom in one cultural context could represent social irresponsibility in another. This does not open the way for unbridled cultural relativism but highlights the need for a framework which recognises universal principles but does not use these as a means of automatically devaluing specific cultural forms and values.

If development is about giving people opportunities to do and to be not what they wish, but what they ‘have reason to value’, one needs to explore what it is that we have reason to value. Sen’s formulation the capability approach refrains from taking a particular position regarding the valuable capabilities that public policy should promote. It is in that sense that the capability approach as enunciated by Sen is deliberately and fundamentally incomplete (Sen, 1992: 49). This we suggest is because his development of the approach focuses more on the challenges of freedom than on the challenges of living together.

This incompleteness has been the core area of divergence from Martha Nussbaum’s version of the approach; what she calls the ‘capabilities approach’. She argues that this incompleteness causes the capability approach to encounter the same deficiencies as the preference approach,

for ‘just as people can be taught not to want or miss the things their culture has taught them they should not or could not have, so too they can be taught not to value certain functionings as constituents of their good living’ (Nussbaum 1988: 175). She argues that some content must be given to the ‘capabilities that people have reason to choose and value’, so that equal freedom for all can be respected. She reasons that what people consider valuable can be the product of structures of inequality and discrimination, and that not all human freedoms are equally valuable. She proposes a list of ten central human capabilities (2000: 78-80). But despite being more directive than Sen in defining what people have reason to value, her capabilities approach remains centred on human freedom. As she writes in relation to her list: ‘Such an approach does not ignore the value of choice, since what we aim at is to make them capable of choosing to act in these ways, not simply to push them into so acting. This means (1) that we will define our goal in terms of capabilities, not actual functioning; and (2) that one of the capabilities we must most centrally consider in each area of life is the capability of choosing’. (Nussbaum, 1988: 153)

Sen has no objection to Nussbaum’s project of eliminating the incompleteness of his approach, but he fears that this might become ‘the only route’ and ‘may be tremendously overspecified’ (1993: 47). His objections are not concerned with listing important capabilities, but with fixing one pre-determined list at the theoretical level. Doing so, he argues, would be ‘to deny the possibility of fruitful participation on what should be included and why’ (Sen, 2004a: 77).

This emphasis on ‘the possibility of fruitful participation’ is another way in which freedom is central to the capability approach. People are not passive objects of generous social welfare provision but are active subjects of transformation. There is no genuine development without respecting people’s freedom to make decisions about their lives. It is the people themselves who decide what kind of development they would wish to happen. People are to be empowered so that they themselves may define their local priorities as well as choose the best means to meet these. For example, referring to the choice between cultural tradition and poverty on the one hand and modernity and material prosperity on the other hand, Sen (1999: 31) writes that, ‘If a traditional way of life has to be sacrificed to escape grinding poverty or minuscule longevity, then it is the people directly involved who must have the opportunity to participate in deciding what should be chosen.’ This agency aspect is particularly expressed

through public debate and participation in democratic decision-making – to specify the valuable ends of policies and to determine the means to achieve these.

### 3.3 *The centrality of an ethical foundation*

A third major contribution of the capability approach to the social sciences is to have re-established their normative foundations. There is no separation between ethics and economics between facts and value judgements (Putnam 2002). The process of development itself is a value-laden enterprise, for what counts as development is built on different visions of a good future and is inevitably ‘based on a particular class of values’ (Nussbaum and Sen, 1989: 299). The capability approach thus reasserts the centrality of value judgements about the ‘good life’ and the ‘good society’; judgements which, since Adam Smith, neo-classical economists have progressively buried beneath mathematical functions and apparently benign axioms.

In his book *Ethics and Economics*, Sen describes the ethical foundations of economics that he is trying to recover with his capability approach:

Economics has had two rather different origins, both related to politics, but related in rather different ways, concerned respectively with ‘ethics’, on the one hand, and with what may be called ‘engineering’, on the other. [...] The ‘engineering’ approach is characterized by being concerned with primarily logistic issues rather than with ultimate ends and such questions as what may foster ‘the good of man’ or ‘how should one live’. The ends are taken as fairly straightforwardly given, and the object of the exercise is to find the appropriate means to serve them.’ (1987: 3-4)

Such reflection on the ends of policy-making, and human action more generally, is one of the hallmarks of the capability approach. It is founded on a principle of ‘ethical rationality’. The rationality underpinning policy decision-making entirely bears upon the goodness of the objectives, a goodness that is never clear-cut and is always open-ended. This contrasts with instrumental rationality, which had become dominant in the applied social sciences, which bears upon deciding the best means towards a single objective whose value is not questioned. As Sen puts it, a decision taken according to instrumental rationality would then be similar to ‘a decision expert whose response to seeing a man engaged in slicing his toes with a blunt knife is to rush to advise him that he should use a sharper knife to better serve his evident objective’ (1995: 16).

The capability approach does not wholly reject instrumental rationality. It is useful, but only when there are clearly defined goals that have already been submitted to ethical reasoning, and when there are no disagreements about the means. This is however an unlikely circumstance in the real world and is reminiscent of the neo-classical assumptions of the conditions for perfect competition. Competing meanings, goals and views on wellbeing are a political reality and as such politics and reasoned public deliberation might more accurately be understood as processes of adversity, accommodation and ‘partisan mutual adjustment’ (Lindblom 1965). Even if, for example, health care is agreed to be a condition for human well-being which every human being should have access to, opinions will still remain divided on which kind of healthcare (curative or preventative) and whether it should be provided through universal public provisioning or private health services. Majone (1989) complements Lindblom’s thesis by clarifying that in these inevitably political processes it is possible to identify a role for expert evidence and academic argument, but ultimately the process of choosing the best means to reach the agreed objective will have embedded in it value judgements about the good society.

Although policy decision-making cannot escape the need for value judgements many economic policies for both developed and developing countries have been presented as an unavoidable technical solution to a problem. This turn of the social sciences, of course, has also been reinforced over the long haul by the bureaucratisation of public policy and the embedding of technocratic expertise within bureaucracies, but this still does not fully obscure the fact that hidden behind this screen of depoliticisation, technocratic discourses disguise value judgements about the good society (Ferguson 1990).

### *3.4 An approach not a theory*

A final strength of the capability approach is that it is not a social development theory and even less a theory of justice. In its essence, it does nothing more than propose that we evaluate social arrangements in the space of capabilities. Reviewing the capability approach, Alkire (2005) states that its major insight lies in the affirmation that ‘the objective of both justice and poverty reduction should be to expand the freedom that deprived people have to enjoy “valuable doings and beings”’ (p. 117):

[T]he capability *approach* is a proposition, and the proposition is this: that social arrangements should be evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they

value. If equality in social arrangements is to be demanded in any space – and most theories of justice advocate equality in some space – it is to be demanded in the space of capabilities. (Alkire, 2005: 122)

The capability approach thus limits itself to focusing on the informational basis for ethical judgements and does not advocate some specific way of identifying what people might have reason to value. In another overview article, Robeyns (2005) sees the capability approach as ‘primarily and mainly a framework for thought’, as a ‘broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements’ (p. 94). She argues that poverty, inequality, wellbeing, development, marginalization or oppression are not social phenomenon that the capability approach seeks to explain, but seeks to conceptualise in the light of individual freedom. This is why, she argues, the approach cannot be ranged under the heading ‘theory’. Referring to the links between the capability approach and theories of justice, Sen argues that the idea of capability refers to ‘characteristics of individual advantages’ but that it ‘fall[s] short of telling us enough about the fairness of or equity of the processes involved’ (2004b: 336). The capability approach limits itself to finding an alternative evaluative space (to utility) for assessing human well-being, and is not concerned with the fairness, equity and efficiency of the processes involved in expanding freedoms.

In his most recent article entitled ‘What do we want from a theory of justice?’, Sen further reinforces this position. He distinguishes transcendental and comparative approaches to justice. The former focuses on ‘identifying perfectly just societal arrangements’, and the latter on ‘ranking alternative societal arrangements (whether some arrangement is “less just” or “more just”)’ (2006: 216). He argues that the transcendental question of “What is a just society”, central to a theory of justice, ‘is not a good starting point for a useful theory of justice’ (p. 226). He opts in favour of the comparative approach, which the capability approach underpins. He gives the example of health care in the United States to illustrate his argument that a comparative approach to justice would be already a great step forward in making the US a ‘better’ or more ‘just’ society and one does not need a theory of justice for promoting justice.

Being an approach instead of a theory not only adds to its potential range of application but it also renders it non-partisan. It is an evaluation framework that is not attached to a political programme about building a particular type of societal arrangements that would serve one or other view of what is ‘just’ or ‘unjust’. The only criteria for judgement of these arrangements, whether dependent on free markets or state direction, would be whether they expand the

‘capabilities that people have reason to value’. In this sense the capability approach can be consistent with a variety of different theories.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. Freedom and the *telos* of living well together**

As we have argued above, the translation of ‘capabilities’ or freedoms into ‘choices’ is problematic at political and policy levels. Also, referring back to the ‘false consciousness’ conundrum, there is the issue of understanding whether the person’s lack of functioning is the result of choice or not. How can we observe that a malnourished person is so out of choice or out of circumstances? Sen acknowledges this: ‘Ideally, the capability approach should take note of the full extent of freedom to choose between different functioning bundles, but limits of practicality may often force the analysis to be confined to examining the achieved functioning bundle only’ (1992: 53). The capability approach also acknowledges that the focus on freedom might not be necessary in situations where no-one would reasonably choose not to exercise a capability, such as for example the capability to live in a malaria-free environment. Moreover, there are some situations in which it does not make much common sense to talk about ‘freedom to choose between different functioning bundles’, such as situations of extreme deprivation or threats of violence.

Even if it accommodates exceptions, the capability approach does not recognize that reaching a certain state of being and freedom of choice might not always be good for the person or good for society. In his pioneering work on *Human Scale Development* Manfred Max-Neef (1991) categorized some forms of needs satisfiers that people use as ‘inhibitors’, ‘pseudo-satisfiers’, or ‘violators’. This kind of recognition has been further developed by more recent work by Tim Kasser and others who argue, and then provide evidence for the view that some of the individual choices that are entailed in a materialist lifestyle are actually harmful to wellbeing (Kasser 2002; Kasser et al 2004). As such it is possible to envisage situations where a focus on freedom of choice might result in people lowering their wellbeing.

In terms of our living together in society, the commitment of the capability approach to freedom, without giving it contents or a *telos*, is not tenable. As political anthropology has

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<sup>9</sup> See Evans (2008) who integrates the capability approach with institutional theory in order to fill in the unexplored area of the influence of collective action, institution building and culture on the expansion of the capability to live healthy lives.

demonstrated law-making and norm enforcement is present in all societies, from the simplest to the most sophisticated, and encouraging people to function in one particular way or another takes ethical priority over giving them the opportunity to function as they so choose. The concept of ‘externalities’ used by economics further points to the limitations of a non-teleological conception of freedom.

Just as government intervention is reluctantly accepted in neo-classical economics when externalities need to be corrected, we must consider what the role of government would be in taking actions against people’s choices which have adverse consequences for the wellbeing of others and for the good functioning of society. There is a growing body of evidence and argumentation that individual freedoms can sometimes have negative impacts on the greater wellbeing of all, whether in the present or in the future. The most prominent example is in the literature on environmental change, where it is now largely accepted that CO2 generating lifestyles of some are having and will have drastic consequences for the wellbeing of others through adverse climate change.<sup>10</sup> Avner Offer in his work *The Challenge of Affluence* explores a number of other ways in which processes of social change associated with the growth of affluence in the UK and USA can be understood to cause individual choice to focus on short term, hedonistic gains. In doing this, he argues, these processes serve to erode important institutions of commitment in our societies and this is reflected in the growth of social problems experienced by affluent societies. He also argues that the inequality which arises out of myopic and self-serving behaviour produces social arrangements that are damaging to the wellbeing of those at the bottom end of the distribution.

Given that individual choices almost always have consequences for others, given that an individual never lives alone and that human choices are deeply interconnected with others’ lives, a political and policy focus on individual capabilities rather than on the consequences of particular functionings could result in important wellbeing losses for some. This makes the ethical individualistic stance of the capability approach unsustainable.

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<sup>10</sup> See the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment at <http://www.millenniumassessment.org>, the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change Assessment Report at <http://www.ipcc.ch>, or the 2007/2008 Human Development Report at <http://hdr.undp.org/en>.

Ethical individualism ‘postulates that individuals, and only individuals, are the *ultimate* units of moral concern’ (Robeyns 2005: 107, 2008: 90). Robeyns argues that the capability approach is ethically individualistic in the sense that social structures and institutions have to be ‘evaluated *in virtue of* the causal importance that they have for individual well-being’ (*ibid.*). As Sen (1999: xii-xiii) puts it, even if the freedoms individuals enjoy are ‘inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us’, these arrangements or institutions remain nevertheless to be ‘investigated in terms of their contribution to enhancing and guaranteeing the substantive freedoms of individuals’. The reason for the capability approach’s commitment to ethical individualism is that a focus on groups or institutions may hide forms of oppression and inequalities within the group (Alkire 2008).

However, if limits to the freedoms of some people results in wellbeing improvements for many others, either presently or in the future, then this information cannot be omitted from the evaluation space of wellbeing, or included only implicitly to the extent that they subsequently affect individual freedoms. Looking historically it is clear that present freedoms have often been won at the cost of great sacrifices of freedoms in the past. The ideas of the French Revolution, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, for example, are now celebrated throughout the world for their intrinsic value, but the costs of the Revolution on thousands of lives were considerable. Despite the violence through which these ideas came to be impressed on society, they have now become valuable in their own right, even if the struggle for them led to a reduction of many individual freedoms at the time.

Recognizing the interconnection between each person’s wellbeing in both space and time highlights the limitations of ethical individualism for assessing wellbeing. Because of its interdependent and dynamic character, because of its spatial and temporal dimensions, the wellbeing of one group of individuals/persons in the present is often founded in the illbeing and struggle of others before them or of others in other places. The construction of a person’s wellbeing intrinsically contains an inter-personal or inter-subjective dimension. As we stated at the outset, our ‘freedoms to and from’ are entirely defined through our relationships to

others. Moreover, what one, as an individual considers a ‘valuable capability’ is profoundly built on the meanings that we share with others in society.<sup>11</sup>

As we have noted, it is those shared meanings that allow us to translate our ‘havings’ into ‘doings’ and then into ‘beings’. The same ‘doings’ can have different wellbeing outcomes depending on the social meanings that are play in the relationships within which the person finds herself. For example, having to work hard can have strong affirmative value for a person’s wellbeing in terms of her sense of competence, but equally her work may be regarded by others as demeaning. In Bangladesh, although weaving requires both considerable skill and hard work, the Muslim adoption of caste thinking, means that weaving is regarded as a low status activity. Thus though weavers may enjoy their work and take personal pride in it, they have to accommodate societal views and meanings which encourage them to consider their work otherwise. Thus weavers in Bangladesh live with conflicting evaluations of their being: the pride in their skills one the one hand and the acceptance of the low status it confers on them in society on the other. It is these social meanings, which constitute and are transmitted through the cultures that we live in, which guide us as to what is to be valued and what is not. Our ability to decide on what valuable functionings constitute our wellbeing is shaped by our conscious and sub-conscious exposure to irreducibly social, shared meanings.<sup>12</sup>

The social meanings through which we can conceive of wellbeing must also be recognised as being dynamic. They are in a process of ongoing construction and modification through all our relationships in society, at all levels, such as our relationships with members of our families, our relationships through the political discourses of our nation states and our relationships with actors in the globalised media. This means that our notions of wellbeing are ever changing. We adapt our ideas in the short run through direct negotiations with others and in the longer run through our participation in changes in tastes and norms at national and global level. This dynamic social generation of meanings is not sufficiently taken into

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<sup>11</sup> This also lies at the core of the Self Determination Theory developed by the psychologist Richard Ryan and others, and which is concerned with the ‘the processes of internalization, through which external regulation and values become integrated into the self’ (Ryan et al, 2008: 146). See also Deci and Ryan (2000).

<sup>12</sup> In that respect, Evans (2002) notes the power of global economic empires in shaping shared meanings that a consumerist life style is good, and in hence shaping what people consider to be valuable.

consideration by the capability approach, but rather is seen primarily in terms of positive or negative constraints on individual freedoms.

Our argument leads to the conclusion that the problem here lies with the conception of the individual that is at the heart of the schema. Following the spirit of the enlightenment this individual is seen as analytically separable from society. Rather we argue the capability approach can be improved by conceiving of the person at the centre of the analysis as a social human being (Douglas and Ney 1998; McGregor 2007). In this view, society must be conceived of in the person and the person must be conceived of in society. From the perspective of a social conception of wellbeing this means that how we understand to be valuable ‘freedoms to’ or ‘freedoms from’ is dependent upon shared meanings and what we are prepared to agree upon in society in order to live well together.

## **5. Conclusion**

As we have noted above the capability approach rests on the notion of reasoning, but reasoning depends upon the meanings that we share and that are constructed through our relationships in society. What is judged as valuable or not is set against a background of meanings which is a truly irreducibly social good that cannot be reduced to any individual property.<sup>13</sup> This leads us to a final observation on a weakness of the capability approach as it currently framed, which is its analysis of the processes of value reasoning.

As noted above, Sen’s version of the capability approach refuses to commit itself to specifying what valuable freedoms public policy should promote. It is through public reasoning or public discussion that each society is to determine which freedoms it should promote and to address the question of how people are to live together, locally, nationally or globally, and to choose the most adequate social arrangements that will guarantee such ‘good living together’. However, Sen’s writings remain silent regarding the possible conflicts that may arise from people’s different conceptions of wellbeing.

The diversity of people was at the core of the capability approach’s arguments that resources were an inadequate space for wellbeing evaluation. This means that social human beings

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<sup>13</sup> See Deneulin (2008) for a discussion on the reasons for which the capability approach requires an evaluation of the different collective frameworks which lead individuals to endorse certain values rather than others.

engage differently with each other and with the wider structures of society. But this diversity also means that people are differently able to conceive of, to pursue and to achieve wellbeing. The exploration of social and economic difference carried out in the empirical work of the research group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) confirms that not all visions of wellbeing and the strategies that people may wish to adopt to achieve it, will necessarily be compatible with each other. A quick look around us suggests that we cannot all simultaneously achieve all our wellbeing goals and at the same time maintain a coherent and inclusive society (or a sustainable natural environment). A social wellbeing framework and methodology give insights into the ways in which some people's views of wellbeing conflict with others and how in some circumstances the pursuit of wellbeing by some, results in the denial of the opportunities for wellbeing for others. A social conception of wellbeing is therefore also profoundly a political one. There are trade-offs to be confronted.

It is important to consider the political dynamics of such processes and trade-offs in more detail. Our ability to consent to live together in social collectivities depends in large part upon participants in value reasoning being able to reach accommodation of each others systems of meaning and value. We must expect, however, that such full accommodation cannot always be yielded, that is, that there will be 'essential contestation' (Lukes 2005). Recognising this we can understand that the systems by which value reasoning is conducted become a matter of prime importance.

Recognition of the politics of a social conception of wellbeing suggests that we must give special attention to the political systems that articulate the substantive politics of everyday life, and the political conditions through which people construct their wellbeing. From the WeD research we can recognise that Bangladesh is a successful society according to conventional indicators of development such as progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals, but that these successes have been contradicted by deteriorating wellbeing conditions for many people and particularly the poorest. This disjuncture helps us understand why the country is currently experiencing conflict and political breakdown, despite its conventional development success (Devine 2008).

The capability approach contains great potential for the social sciences and public policy. It resituates human beings, and their wellbeing, as the end concerns of economic and social processes. It is founded on the intrinsic dignity of human freedom and people's ability to be

subjects of their own lives. It re-establishes the ethical foundations of the social sciences. It offers a framework for truly multi-disciplinary analysis, and by falling short of being a social theory, it allows for a large range of applications and interpretations.

Despite this enormous potential, there are also some serious concerns, all of which relate to the social and political nature of wellbeing. In particular, the capability approach understates the practicalities of conducting value reasoning and the conflicts that may arise. For example, Israeli Jews value the capability to live in the land that is now Israel because of their shared meaning about the symbolism of the Promised Land, but Palestinians equally value the capability to live on the same land because of their shared meaning about the right to live where they have been living for centuries. A social and political conception of wellbeing calls for a reformulation of the capability approach which takes these conflicts into account and which accommodates the view that some people's gains are other's losses, for not all good things always go together.

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