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WELLBEING, JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT ETHICS

Séverine Deneulin

WELLBEING, JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT ETHICS

The question of the meaning of progress and development is back on the political agenda. How to frame answers and search for new alternatives when socialism and liberalism no longer provide a satisfactory framework? This book introduces in an accessible way the capability approach, first articulated by Amartya Sen in the early 1980s. Written for an international audience, but rooted in the Latin American reality – a region with a history of movements for social justice – the book argues that the capability approach provides the most encompassing and promising ethical framework to date with which to construct action for improving people's wellbeing and reducing injustices in the world.

Comprehensive, practical and nuanced in its treatment of the capability approach, this highly original volume gives students, researchers and professionals in the field of development an innovative framing of the capability approach as a 'language' for action and provides specific examples of how it has made a difference.

Séverine Deneulin is Senior Lecturer in International Development, Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, UK.

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We invite book proposals which engage with a variety of fields as they relate to this ethical perspective, with a preference for those which focus on key issues or topical areas of international relevance.

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Séverine Deneulin

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Combining conceptual analysis and case studies, this book shows that poor people, their capabilities and agency, must be the foundations of the kind of thinking about well-being and justice that will prepare us for a 'post-development' world, in which the artificial constructs of North and South are replaced by the much more tangible and universal divides between haves and have-nots.

Duncan Green, Oxfam International

Within the world of development policy, there has been a very well-justified push for the so-called 'evidence-based policy making'. However, this entails the risk of creating an illusion of 'objectivity', which hides the system of ethical values behind specific prescriptions. This book does a great job of providing a solid normative framework for policy: widening the set of effective options people have to live the life they have reason to value. Many of the practical implications of such a framework are discussed in this work, which hopefully will become a reference for anyone engaged in the difficult task of policy advice.

Luis F. Lopez-Calva, Lead Economist and Regional Poverty Advisor, Europe and Central Asia Region, World Bank

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This book is the result of more than a decade of friendships and exchange of ideas with members of the Human Development and Capability Association (HDCA). It was at St Edmund's College in Cambridge (UK) that scattered individuals working on the capability approach met for the first time in June 2001 to share their research. Amartya Sen was the main guest speaker. We enjoyed it so much that we decided to hold another conference at the same place the following year, this time with Martha Nussbaum. The number of participants doubled and we decided to meet again in Pavia (Italy) the following year. The informal gathering of about 70 individuals in 2001 led to the formation of an academic association in 2004. HDCA now counts more than 700 members in more than 70 countries.

This book has benefited from discussions over the years with Frances Stewart, Sabina Alkire, Jean-Luc Dubois, Ingrid Robeyns, Elaine Unterhalter, Mozaffar Qizilbash, Des Gasper, Flavio Comim, Solava Ibrahim, Melanie Walker, Mario Biggeri, Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti, Jean-François Trani and many other HDCA members. I am very grateful to Ann Mitchell and Areli Valencia for allowing me to use their research and for their comments on Chapter 4, and to Ilse Oosterlaken, Augusto Zampini, Andrea Baertl, Krushil Watene and Dana Bates for commenting on the manuscript. And, last but not least, I am greatly indebted to the students of the MSc in Wellbeing and International Development at the University of Bath in the UK and the MSc in International Cooperation and Development at the University of Bethlehem in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Since 2007, they have

brought me a constant supply of fresh energy to write and teach on the capability approach.

Chapter 1 contains material from 'Ethics and Development: An Introduction from the Perspective of the Capability Approach', *Geography Compass*, 2013, 7(3): 217–27; Chapter 3 contains material from 'Recovering Nussbaum's Aristotelian Roots', *International Journal of Social Economics*, 2013, 40(7): 624–32. I thank Wiley-Blackwell and Emerald Group Publishing for their kind permission to reproduce some parts of these articles. The basic argument of this book was first set out in a Festschrift written for Richard Jolly entitled 'Constructing new policy narratives: The capability approach as normative language', which is due to be published by Oxford University Press in a volume edited by Frances Stewart and Giovanni Andrea Cornia.

INTRODUCTION

Background

'Another world is possible'. This was the motto of the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 2001. Since then, discontent with the way economic, social and political relations are structured, whether at the local, national or global level, has intensified in many parts of the world. From deforestation and logging in the Philippines, to land being taken from farmers to make room for mining activities in India, Myanmar, Peru, Ecuador or Madagascar, to the irresponsible financial speculation and the bank bailouts with taxpayers' money, to tax dodging and financial offshore centres, the list of grievances worldwide is endless. Despite their geographical spread, these grievances have a common thread: they express dissatisfaction with economic, political and social arrangements which are perceived to benefit a privileged minority disregarding the majority of the population as well as the shared natural environment in which all, privileged or not, live.

At the global level, inequality has increased dramatically over the last 200 years. The global Gini coefficient was estimated to have risen from 0.43 in 1820 to reach 0.707 in 2002 – the coefficient is 0 when all assets are shared equally and 1 when owned by one person. When financial assets, property and savings were added to income, the coefficient was estimated at 0.899 in 2000.[1] In the United Kingdom, the gap between average pay and high pay has increased to such a level that in 2012, the average executive salary was 185 times that of the average salary.[2] Globally in 2012, one out of eight people in the world suffered from hunger, despite a global capacity to feed

everyone.[3] Norway, the country currently enjoying the highest level of development as measured by life expectancy, schooling and income, currently consumes more than 3.1 times what would be required for global environmental sustainability.[4]

Against this picture of gloom, searches for new ways of relating to each other in economic and social exchanges are springing up. In France, local communities are increasingly forming producer or consumer associations or cooperatives so as to guarantee a fairer price to all and encourage sustainable farming methods (Pelenc *et al.* 2013). In Mexico, the Zapatistas are creating new forms of political relations in autonomous communities where hierarchy is replaced by rotating power and decisions oriented at more egalitarian relations between people and greater respect for the environment (Stahler-Sholk 2007). At the global level, *Via Campesina* is a network of more than 150 national farmers' organizations over five continents to promote small-scale sustainable agriculture and influence national and international agriculture-related policy to guarantee food sovereignty and the rights to food and to land (Borras 2010, Desmarais 2008, Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010).

In parallel to these initiatives aimed at transforming structures of production and consumption in view of the wellbeing of all and the future of the planet, there are also initiatives aimed at transforming the meaning of progress, from material growth to human growth. Progress is not about what an economy produces or consumes, in other words about the growth of a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but about what these production and consumption activities do to people and their environment. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was a global trendsetter in the early 1990s with its Human Development Index to measure the wealth of nations by indicators of health, education and living standards (UNDP 2010). In 2007, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched its 'Measuring the Progress of Societies Initiative' to develop new indicators of progress to include work–life balance, education, environmental protection, health and living conditions. Its Better Life Index seeks to replace GDP growth as a measure of progress.[5] The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan measures its progress with a Gross National Happiness Index, which includes indicators related to mental health, spirituality, quality of relationships and culture.[6] The Office for National Statistics in the UK is currently computing a National Wellbeing Index to measure how well the country is doing in various domains such as life satisfaction, employment, environment, economic security and health.[7]

All the above initiatives, whether aimed at transforming or creating new economic, social and political structures or at measuring progress differently, are set against a rejection of the two grand narratives which have divided the

world for most of the twentieth century and have provided so far a framework which people could draw on to construct their realities and their future. Socialism, with its promise of an all-encompassing state as the guarantor of wellbeing, had denied people a fundamental aspect of their humanity: their agency or ability to shape their own lives and the world around them. Liberalism, with its promise of an all-encompassing individual freedom as the guarantor of wellbeing, denied people another fundamental aspect of their humanity: their interrelatedness or the quality of their shared existence. The reality of the world today calls for a new framework which people could draw on to shape their social and political action, while respecting their agency and providing support for their wellbeing in a shared social, political and economic environment.

Aims

The aim of this book is to introduce in an accessible way a framework which may provide us with the necessary conceptual tools to help frame social and political action and transform current institutional arrangements on the basis of these two fundamental aspects of our humanity: agency and wellbeing, for humans to decide what it means to live well in relation to each other, and how to do so. The book argues that the capability approach provides such a framework, which could help transform or create different social, economic and political arrangements from the ones which deepen inequality, undermine people's opportunities to live well and destroy the environment.

The concept of capability first appeared in 1979 in Amartya Sen's Tanner Lecture, 'Equality of What?' (Sen 1980). If we are concerned about equality, Sen argued, then the most appropriate space to assess it is not that of income or resources but that of 'capabilites', or opportunities people have to reach certain beings and doings. Measuring inequality in terms of income is not to be discarded but income is only a means to other ends such as buying food to be healthy, a house to be sheltered and be hospitable to others, or books to be educated and informed. By focusing on the means – income – we risk losing sight of the end – the type of lives that we are living and how well we are or do.

The capability approach is hence an approach to assess equality from the perspective of capabilities. The success of, for example, an employment policy which has introduced a minimum wage, is to be assessed not according to whether the policy has increased national income but whether it has increased people's capabilities, or opportunities they have to be or do what they have reason to value, such as opportunities to pursue knowledge, participate in the life of the community, appreciate beauty, engage in meaningful work, be

healthy, move freely from place to place, be adequately nourished, play and rest, to name a few of what people may have reason to value being or doing. According to this approach, a state of affairs in which people are able to do or be what they have reason to value, is better than another state in which they are not able to achieve valuable beings or doings. By providing such an evaluation framework, the capability approach offers a horizon which people can look at when they engage in social and political action in their striving for living well on a shared planet.

This book provides a critical overview of what the capability approach is, and discusses its revolutionary nature. It introduces the capability approach as a normative language for social and political action. It is a language because it contains some basic recurrent words and grammar – wellbeing, capabilities, functionings, agency, public reasoning – and it is normative because the words are used to construct moral judgements. Should the Peruvian government give agro-business exporters a special tax regime? Should the Panamanian government invest financial resources in building hydroelectric dams on its rivers? Should the Argentinian government have an expansionary monetary policy? The capability approach is concerned with these policy questions and, as the book will tease out, it can help provide some outline answers.

As a normative language, the capability approach is relevant for making moral judgements not only at the policy but also at the individual level. In his Nobel Lecture for the Prize of Economics, Gary Becker told his audience that he had had the insight of applying utilitarian economic theory to crime, one area for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize, when he arrived late for an oral examination and had to decide whether to park in a paying car park and arrive late, or park illegally and arrive on time (Becker 1993). He calculated the probability of getting fined, compared the cost of the fine with that of the parking and that of arriving late at the examination, and decided to park illegally. Using the capability approach would have led to a rather different moral judgement and decision. In contrast to Becker's approach, Sen's approach would use information about agency, or the pursuit of goals one has reason to value, and people's capabilities. Acting in view of respecting the law (assuming that respect for the rule of law is a goal one has reason to value) and therefore paying for parking in the car park, is as relevant as information in the decision process as the probability of being fined or the penalty of arriving late for an examination. Or assuming the parking space available near the examination place was a disabled parking, considerations about the capability of other people to go from place to place would also enter in the decision-making process.

As a normative language, which provides some basic words and grammar, the book presents the capability approach as versatile. How its keywords are

combined and which words are important is context-dependent. Each context of analysis will yield different uses and interpretations. When used in the fields of education, health or disability, when discussed in the disciplines of economics, philosophy, sociology, law, theology or engineering (such as technology design), when used as an evaluation framework for assessing the situation of women in Africa, unemployed young people in Germany or indigenous peoples in the Andes, the capability approach, so the book argues, will be used and interpreted differently. The keywords and grammar remain the same, but the combination of these will vary according to the contexts in which the normative language is spoken, the audience to which it is addressed and the speakers who speak the sentences and narrate the socio-economic analysis.

Scope

It has been more than thirty years since Sen introduced the word 'capability' into the social sciences. It was addressed to economists who used utility as a measure for assessing states of affairs and to philosophers who used Rawls's primary goods as relevant information for constructing a theory of justice. The word took off and spread more widely in the 1990s to other audiences, due in part to the collaboration with classicist and philosopher Martha Nussbaum and their joint project at the World Institute for Development Economics Research in Helsinki on assessing quality of life (which led to the publication in 1993 of the edited volume by Nussbaum and Sen, *The Quality of Life*, published by Clarendon Press). Both Sen and Nussbaum wrote prolifically in the 1980s and 1990s about assessing states of affairs and making moral judgements and decisions from the perspective of capabilities. Sen vowed in 1979 'not to desist from doing some propaganda on its behalf' (Sen 1980: 197), and he has indeed not desisted since then.

The word 'capability' has now taken a life of its own, despite its unattractiveness and the difficulty of translating it in other languages.[8] In the early 2000s, a growing number of young academics conducted their doctoral research on the capability approach, and the first international conference on the capability approach was held in June 2001 in Cambridge, UK, and has been held annually ever since in various locations worldwide. In 2004 the Human Development and Capability Association (HDCA) was formed to advance research on the capability approach and promote its use in economic and social analysis and public decision-making.

The writings on the capability approach are now numbering in the hundreds if not the thousands. An academic journal, the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, is entirely dedicated to publishing papers which

engage with the approach. One may therefore wonder about the need for yet another publication on the topic. A first reason for this book is that the material which presents the approach to a non-academic audience remains limited. In 2009, a textbook entitled *An Introduction the Human Development and Capability Approach* (Deneulin 2009) was written by various members of HDCA to offer a pedagogical and accessible introduction to a student audience. In 2011, Martha Nussbaum wrote *Creating Capabilities* for a non-research oriented audience. This book similarly aims at being an accessible introduction, but with a different angle. It seeks to articulate more explicitly how the capability approach is an alternative normative language with which to frame decisions and actions, and how it offers a distinctive analysis of situations. The book aims at stimulating critical reflection on current economic and social practices and at providing a language with which to modify them within the horizon of human wellbeing, agency and just relations between people and the environment. Thus, in addition to being a presentation of what the capability approach is, the book is decision and action focused. It seeks to combine theoretical inquiry with empirical search for new economic and social practices. The question which underpins all the chapters is: how can the capability approach help us frame decisions and actions so that the reality in which we live can be closer to a situation where each person, living and to come, has opportunities to live a fulfilling human life?

A second reason for this book is that the capability approach has grown into a set of different directions over the three decades of its existence. Some see it only as a framework for assessing states of affairs; others see it as a partial theory of justice. Some see it as an exaltation of individual freedom and choice, and criticize it for not paying attention to oppressive social structures; others see it as a liberating force from oppression. This book seeks to clarify these different interpretations. It presents the capability approach not as a dogmatic set of truths which one has to adhere to in order to be faithful to it but as a flexible normative language, with some defining words and grammar, which leaves speakers free to elaborate their own analyses and responses to the reality to which they speak. The book will be mainly rooted in the Latin American reality but the reach of its argument has implications far beyond the Latin American continent.

Structure

The first chapter discusses why development, understood as the set of economic, social, cultural and political processes oriented towards improving people's lives, requires a critical reflection about the meaning of wellbeing or living well and the means to pursue it. The ethical question of how one

should live, as people in relationship with each other and the environment, is fundamental to development. With concrete policy examples, the chapter shows how answering the fundamental ethical question has been, and continues to be, a matter of intense disagreement. How to weigh the costs and benefits of different policy options? How to negotiate divergent visions of what living a 'better' human life is about? How to value the environment? How to exercise power?

The second chapter introduces the capability approach as a normative language and the distinctive perspective it brings. It focuses on its defining words of wellbeing, capability, functioning and agency, and its grammar of public reasoning to structure these keywords. It examines the capability space as an alternative evaluation space and engages with other approaches to wellbeing in the social sciences. It argues that there is no single authoritative interpretation of the capability approach and that this plurality of interpretations is one of the capability approach's greatest strengths and in tune with its agency focus. The chapter highlights two areas of interpretative differences in relation to its purpose and conception of the person.

The third chapter links the capability approach to theories of justice. From an approach for assessing states of affairs in the 1980s, it is now moving towards being a partial theory of justice and offering a framework with which to transform unjust situations. The chapter describes how the capability approach enables the articulation, at the conceptual level, of practical struggles for justice. On the basis of a social movement in Ecuador, the chapter argues that a capability-based view of justice needs to include more than capabilities as the informational basis of justice. It should include the quality of economic, social and political relations people have with each other and the natural environment.

On the basis of two selected case studies from Argentina and Peru, the fourth chapter discusses how the capability approach can concretely provide a language for imagining and creating new economic, social and political realities. For each case, it will show how the language can be used to assess a specific reality, and how such assessment on the basis of people's capabilities and quality of social, economic and political relations can help generate social and political action to transform existing relations so that people may live better lives in a shared natural environment.

The fifth chapter discusses how the capability approach is an encompassing normative language, which can borrow from other normative frameworks. It argues that, like any language, it has to be nurtured within relationships and spoken through concrete practices, without which a language does not survive. The chapter examines in particular the formation of agents who act to transform economic, social and political realities so that

they have more opportunities to be or do what they have reason to value. It illustrates how agents are formed through relationships in the case of a local social movement in the Peruvian Andes.

The book concludes by summarizing its argument. A just society, where each person is able to live well in relation to others and in a shared natural environment, remains a vision always in the making and unmaking precisely because it respects human agency.

Notes

1 Data from a UNICEF report entitled 'Global inequality: Beyond the bottom billion' at http://www.childimpact.unicef-irc.org/en/desk-reviews/global-inequality.
2 Data from the High Pay Centre at http://www.highpaycentre.org.
3 See data from https://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats and the FAO Report on the State of the World Food Insecurity 2012 at http://www.fao.org/publications/sofi/en.
4 This estimation is based on the ecological footprint of consumption, which measures the area of land and sea needed to regenerate the resources that a country consumes (UNDP 2010: 65).
5 See http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org.
6 See http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com.
7 See http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/index.html.
8 Sen (1993: 30) confessed that '[c]apability is not an awfully attractive word', and that a 'nicer word could have been chosen'.