

## **Well-being as flourishing in the capabilities approach**

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Since 1990 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has adopted the Capabilities Approach as a theoretical framework to evaluate human development. Similar initiatives that intend to make comparisons between countries on quality of life issues have also broad their informational base. In this paper I will clarify the concept of well-being, within the Capabilities Approach, and provide an account of its basic dimensions based on Nussbaum's list of capabilities.

### **The Capabilities Approach as a framework to measure development**

The Capabilities Approach developed by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (Sen 1977, 1984, 1999, 2009) and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1987, 2000, 2006, 2011) in the early 80s has revolutionized the way of understanding human development. The Capabilities Approach emphasizes that economic growth and per capita income are not the ends but the means of development. Thus human development is understood by the Capabilities Approach in terms of well-being and quality of life instead of being focused on quantitative issues such as incomes or commodities solely. Therefore the notion of development, within the Capabilities Approach, shifts from a quantitative perspective to a qualitative point of view.

The core idea of the Capabilities Approach stems from an empirical observation: one country can show a good rate of economic growth, however the same country can show

alarming poverty or pollution rates, famines or political freedoms deprivations. As Sen argues, such countries cannot be considered developed from the point of view of the Capabilities Approach. For this reason, Amartya Sen questions the neoclassical concept of development held during the XX century and poses the question in a different way:

Development of what?

Development for what?

The answer given by Sen is that development has to be *Human* development; therefore it has to have a real impact on improving people lives. Economic growth is just a mean to the goal of development: the actual goal of development is increasing people's wellbeing and quality of life. In terms of Sen: the goal of Human Development is that people can be able to pursue and achieve the life they have reasons to value, i.e. the life they have reasons to choose. Hence the goal of development should be providing the favourable institutional conditions so that people can achieve this objective: that people can have the real opportunity to effectively achieve the lives they value.

In this theoretical framework emerged the concept of "capability". Sen introduces his concept of capability for the first time in his article "Equality of What?" (Sen 1979) published in 1979 as the key concept of his new proposal intended to become an alternative model to neoclassical models of development based on economic growth. This article meant a turning point in Sen's thought, setting aside his previous interest in Social Choice theory and focusing on ethical problems.

Capability in Sen's theory is the set of vectors which entails the combination of functionings that a human being choose, the functionings are the set of valuable beings and doings a human being can choose from. Therefore, in Sen's view, the goal of development is the expansion of freedom, which the author has largely discussed in his book "Development as freedom" (Sen 1999), the aim of development should be to guarantee the real opportunities for people realize the life they have reasons to value. In this view Freedom is also the end and the means of development: in order to achieve the goal of freedom, instrumental freedoms should be promoted and guaranteed.

In particular, the Capabilities Approach developed by Sen and Nussbaum possesses a twofold objective:

- a) To be used as an alternative model of development to the economic models held during the XX century and especially to the economic utilitarianism.

- b) To be used as a framework to make comparisons between countries related to quality of life issues.

Since 1990 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has adopted the CA as a theoretical framework for evaluating development progress and quality of life and is using new indicators apart from the GDP such as the Human Development Index (HDI), since 1990, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) and the Gender Inequality Index (GII) since 2010, which have broadened their informational base considerably. The HDI is a composite index that measures average achievements in three basic dimensions of human development, aggregating country level functioning attainments of three attributes: a decent living standard measured by GDP per capita, a long and healthy life measured by life expectancy at birth, and knowledge measured by the educational attainment rate (adult literacy rate and combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment rates) (Chakravarty 2005).

The first Human Development Report (HDR) was launched by Mahbub ul Haq in 1990 with the explicit purpose to shift the focus of development economics from national income accounting to people centered policies (M. U. Haq, 1995). The HDRs, launched by Sen and ul Haq, have significantly influenced policies carried out by international organisms as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (des Gasper 2002). Similar initiatives, following the same line, such as the Sarkozy Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress or the GNH (Gross National Happiness Index) in Buthan are clear examples of this new rationality at the welfare and wellbeing realm, therefore show the interest of different countries to evaluate wellbeing and quality of life in order to adjust their public policy to improve real and effectively the life of their citizens. Furthermore, various projects to collect data and measure development, quality of life and happiness according to multidimensional factors with the aim to guide public policy are being currently undertaken. As an example, the OECD Better Life Index, the project developed by HILDA survey in Melbourne or the operationalization of the Capabilities Approach and Multidimensional Poverty Measurement carried out at OPHI (Oxford Poverty Human Development Initiative) at the University of Oxford.

Nevertheless, the design of the methodologies this initiatives use is complex and certain paradoxes are being observed in the processed data while comparing the different indicators from a multidimensional point of view: countries showing a considerable degree of citizenry satisfaction with public policies have significantly higher suicide rates; other countries with

successful employment policy present deficiencies in access to health care system, and others with good social systems evidence alarming rates of pollution. This circumstance shows the urgency to face two issues:

- a) The relevance of accurately and empirically-based defining the material content of normative concepts such as wellbeing, happiness or quality of life with the aim to advise on the design of the measurement methodologies and social reports to guide public decision-making processes.
- b) The necessity to enable new channels for public participation and outline new methodologies for gathering information about what citizens really value.

The notions of wellbeing, happiness and quality of life are closely related not only to both emotional mental states of the individual as to the socioeconomic conditions in which they live as evidenced by HILDA survey, but also possess ethical implications

## **Well-being, subjective well-being and welfare**

These initiatives need to define the empirical and material content of notions such as well-being and quality of life. Nevertheless, well-being is a complex and broad concept (Parfit, 1984, Griffin 1986, Crisp 2001), which differs from the notions of welfare and subjective well-being (SWB). Some authors hold that well-being can not be reduced to a mere feeling of happiness, pleasure or subjective satisfaction (Seagal 1991, Dasgupta 1993, 34–44) but well-being also includes the things which are constitutive of our flourishing (O’Neill 1993,24, Nussbaum 2001, 2006, 2011, Alkire 2002). Furthermore, as Sen points out, one may be committed to goals which concern other people’s well-being as a part of one’s well-being (Sen 1999, 2009). In this sense, well-being is a normative concept because reflects a set of valuable dimensions (Des Gasper 2004, 12, Doyal and Gough 1991).

In particular, the concept of well-being in the capabilities approach, as Sen puts it, is understood as “the life one has reasons to value”. This “good life” entails a set of “doings and beings” which are considered valuable by the citizens and therefore should be protected and promoted. The normative stand in Sen’s point of view stems from the idea “reasons to value”. Therefore not all the “beings and doings” a person is capable of are considered part of this concept of well-being and in this sense the approach differs from the notion of happiness or subjective well-being that is perceived as some sort of self-fulfilling or

desires fulfilling view. Also is different from the concept of welfare, because this idea is focused on commodities and the possibilities to provide them, the concept of well-being in Sen's approach grounds in what makes a human life worthy, what are those beings and doings that can be reasonable valued. In short, what are the capabilities that when turn into functionings lead to a good life.

However, at this point Sen's theory remains incomplete, because it may seem not only reasonable but also necessary that this approach must be supplement by an account of human functioning in order to determine what these "valuable beings and doings are". Although we do not encounter such a theory of human functioning in Sen's theory, other authors as Martha Nussbaum have carried out this task.

### **Nussbaum's concept of flourishing**

The concept of flourishing plays a pivotal role in Nussbaum's theory because it articulates both the factual and the normative constituent of life. Nussbaum captures this idea, whose theoretical basis grounds in the Aristotelian teleology to generate her theory. Flourishing is the activity by which everything in a process may potentially be upgraded according to its very own and most perfect end.

Flourishing is regarded as the activity which involves the deployment of all the possibilities, which is closely linked to the concept of capabilities: everything that is potential is capable of developing and updating (*ontological level*). But it is also capable to evolve naturally according to some notion of good to its most perfect end (*normative level*).

Therefore, the notion of well-being in this context means the development of the beings and doings a human being is capable of according to some idea of good. Based on this notion of well-being as flourishing, Nussbaum articulates her theory of human functioning, which is meant to be used as the framework of a theory of justice and outlines her list of capabilities. The method to elicit her list and provide a Theory of Human Functioning proceeds in two steps:

- 1) First she exposes what features characterize a human being everywhere and in any time and she emphasizes ten characteristics.
- 2) From the previous characteristics she draws her list of capabilities arguing that from this features it is possible to define areas of experience in which human beings can make choices and constitute the valuable dimensions of human life.

This list (Nussbaum 2000, 2006, 2011) is based on a particular conception of the human being as capable and needy; hence the list includes limits and expectations. Furthermore, the list is shaped as a set of “valuable things and doings”:

- 1) *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length and not dying prematurely, or before one’s life is so reduced as to be not worth living.
- 2) *Bodily Health*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health, to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
- 3) *Bodily Integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
- 4) *Sense, Imagination and Thought*. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason – and to do these things in a “truly human” way. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one’s own choice, religious, literary, musical and so forth. Being able to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain.
- 5) *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude and justified anger. Not having one’s emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.
- 6) *Practical reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life. This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.
- 7) *Affiliation*. This capability is twofold:
  - a) Being able to live with and towards other, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.

- b) Having the social bases of self-respect and non humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.
- 8) *Other Species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants and the world of nature.
- 9) *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
- 10) *Control over one's environment*. This capability is twofold:
- a) Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.
  - b) Material. Being able to hold property (both law and movable goods) and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

Nussbaum's list does not only provide and account of what is a human life, rather she outlines what is a fully human life, a good life that is being-well, that it's worthy. She adds an evaluative element to the characteristics of the figure of human being. Therefore from the concept of flourishing she stems the idea that a human being possesses capabilities that can be able to be transformed into functionings and these are the valuable dimensions that constitute the well-being of human beings or in Nussbaum's terms a *flourishing human life*.

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