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### Capability Deprivation

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### Abstract and Keywords

This article examines capability deprivation as the basis for analyzing poverty. The capability approach, developed initially by Amartya Sen, questions the “informational space” on which considerations of poverty, inequality, justice, and so forth, should be based. According to the capability approach, the appropriate “space” for analyzing poverty is not what people have, nor how they feel, but what they can do and be. After providing an overview of the concepts that comprise the capability approach, this article discusses three key questions within the literature regarding the nature of the approach, namely: the question of functioning and/or capabilities, the question of a capability list, and the question of aggregation. It also describes some prominent empirical applications that have been inspired by the capability approach and concludes with an assessment of the current state-of-the-art literature on the capability approach.

Keywords: capability deprivation, poverty, capability approach, Amartya Sen, informational space, inequality, justice, functioning, capabilities, aggregation

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## Introduction

IN focusing on capability deprivation as the basis for analyzing poverty, the capability approach makes a break from the dominant income-centric tradition of poverty analysis. Developed initially by the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, the capability approach questions the “informational space” on which considerations of poverty, inequality, justice, and so forth, should be based—encapsulated in the title of the 1979 Tanner lecture in which Sen first outlined the approach: *Equality of What?* (Sen 1982).

The appropriate “space” for analyzing poverty, according to the capability approach, is not what people *have*, nor how they *feel*, but what they can *do* and *be*. The capability

approach requires us to ask: What, in understanding poverty, is our ultimate concern? Sen argues that while people's incomes (or, more broadly, their resource holdings) are important, they are only of *instrumental* importance: important because of what they allow a person to do or be. In contrast, what a person can do or be is *intrinsically* important (e.g., Sen 2009)—our ultimate concern when analyzing poverty.

Nothing of great import turns on this distinction as long as a person's resources are a good measure of what they can do and be. But the capability approach holds that this is unlikely to be the case because people have different needs, which means that they may require different amounts of resources in order to achieve the same beings and doings (Sen calls these variations "conversion factors") and because some important ends (such as the ability to avoid discrimination, for example) may not respond sensitively to differences in resources at all. The existence of conversion factors and the nonmonetary nature of some dimensions of well-being offer two reasons for making a shift away from income-centric analysis.

The capability approach offers a flexible framework for social assessment, and one which can be applied in a range of fields—that is, analyzing poverty is just one of its possible applications (as we will see when we turn to empirical applications). Nonetheless, its potential relevance for analyzing poverty is considerable because of the continued (p. 76) dominance of income-centric analysis—whether this is in terms of the World Bank's "dollar a day" approach in developing countries (e.g., Ravallion, Chen and Sangraula 2009), or the use of relative income poverty lines of, say, 60 percent of median income within European poverty analysis (see Nolan and Whelan 2011 for a discussion).

The contribution of the capability approach lies in its insistence that we consider what it is about the problem of poverty that should command our attention; in pointing to some important deficiencies of standard income-centric approaches; and in offering an alternative way of understanding poverty that focuses on impoverished lives and not just depleted wallets (Sen 2000).

In this chapter, we present the concepts that comprise the capability approach, discuss some key questions within the literature regarding the nature of the approach, and provide an overview of some prominent empirical applications that have been inspired by the capability approach. These themes form the basis of the three sections that follow. The chapter closes with a discussion about the current state-of-the-art literature on the capability approach, which identifies some issues for future research.

## Theory

According to Sen, there are various “spaces” in which well-being may be considered. One option is to focus on a person’s *resources*. Alternatively, we may wish to consider what people *can do* with the resources at their disposal. Or, we may decide that the relevant “space” is the *utility they derive* from what they do. The first option corresponds to the metric of “primary goods” as outlined in John Rawls’s (1971) *Theory of Justice*, which Rawls defines as “rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth” (1971:92), but which, for the most part, Sen interprets as income and wealth. The third space reflects the philosophical tradition of utilitarianism, the foundations of which date back centuries (e.g., Bentham 1948), but which is in the midst of a resurgence in recent years (e.g., Layard 2006).

The primary concepts of the capability approach are functionings and capabilities. A “functioning” is something a person succeeds in “doing or being” (Sen 1999:75), such as participating in the life of society, being healthy, being happy, and so forth; while a person’s “capability” refers to the “alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection” (Sen 1993:31). Conceived this way, a person’s capability comprises both the outcomes that actually occur (i.e., a person’s actual functionings) and the alternative outcomes that *could* have been achieved given different choices. The distinction between functionings and capability is thus between “achievements on the one hand, and freedoms or valuable options from which one can choose on the other” (Robeyns 2005a:95).

To understand *why* Sen claims we should focus on functionings and capabilities, we return to the comparison with resources and with utility. The primary advantages of focusing on people’s resources are that they provide a clear and common metric in (p. 77) which to evaluate advantage and disadvantage, and that a resource-centric perspective allows analysts to remain neutral toward the diverse conceptions of the good life that people hold (see especially Rawls 1971). There is a great variation in people’s conception of the good life, argued Rawls, but whatever their ends, primary goods are the relevant means (1971:92). Thus, by focusing on *means*, one can avoid the necessity of specifying the good life prior to social assessment.

However, Sen argues that resource-centric approaches neglect another important source of variation—namely the variation *between means and ends*, or what Sen has labeled “conversion factors.” He claims that “the relationship between resources and poverty is both variable and deeply contingent on the characteristics of the respective people and the environment in which they live—both natural and social” (Sen 2009:254). For example, someone with a disability might need *more* income in order to achieve the *same*

*functioning* as a nondisabled person (2009:256), and such variation is, Sen argues, likely to be extremely pervasive. In essence, conversion factors reflect the differing needs that people have, and they are problematic from an evaluative point of view because they mean that we do not know what a person *can do* or *be* with the resources at their disposal. Furthermore, since some capabilities are not “purchased” or related to resources in any straightforward way, it may not be possible to draw inferences about them based on a person’s resources at all. And since people’s capabilities and functionings are *intrinsically* important, while their resources are only *instrumentally* important—indeed, the importance of resources is as a means to functionings and capabilities and is thus both instrumental and contingent (Sen 2009:233)—this implies we cannot rely on standard resource-based approaches to analysis, argues Sen. These arguments have particular relevance for poverty analysis given the continued dominance income-centric approaches to understanding poverty.

Turning to utility, Sen argues that this too is the wrong metric with which to engage in interpersonal evaluation because of its sheer *adaptability*, particularly in the face of adverse conditions. In an oft-quoted passage, Sen (1987:11) noted that

the fulfilment of a person’s desires may or may not be indicative of a high level of well-being or of standard of living. The battered slave, the broken unemployed, the hopeless destitute, the tamed housewife, may have the courage to desire little, but the fulfilment of those disciplined desires is not a sign of great success and cannot be treated in the same way as the fulfilment of the confident and demanding desires of the better placed.

On many occasions, adapting one’s desires to feasible possibilities can be a sensible psychological mechanism (Burchardt 2009), but for the analyst it must call into question the extent to which utility can, on its own, provide an evaluative measure for poverty and well-being. The point here is not that happiness does not matter at all, but rather that it is not the only thing that matters, and that it is not suitable as an overall measure.

**(p. 78)** The capability approach, then, focuses on each person’s capabilities and functionings, and Sen views the process of development as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy (1999:36). In conceptualizing capability as a set of the alternative combinations of functionings a person is able to achieve, Sen’s concept is analogous to an opportunity set in the field of social choice theory. To expand a person’s capability set is to expand their real opportunity to achieve a variety of functionings. The capability set thus provides a measure of real opportunity (to achieve alternative forms of living) *without* retreating from ends to means (Robeyns and van der Veen 2007). It offers a way to respect the plurality of ends that people hold while also accounting for the variation in converting resources (or means) into functionings (or ends). Sen notes, “A

person's advantage in terms of opportunities is judged to be lower than that of another if she has less capability—less real opportunity—to achieve those things that she has reason to value" (Sen 2009:231). Such a conception places value not only on the outcomes that do, in fact, occur but also on the *extent of choice* for people to live in various ways.

In addition to the concept of capability, which is intended to capture the "opportunity" aspect of freedom, Sen also discusses the "process" aspect of a person's freedom. Whereas the concepts of capabilities and functionings focus respectively on what a person can do and does do (irrespective of how these opportunities came about), the process aspect of freedom is likened to "having the levers of control in one's own hands (no matter whether this enhances the actual opportunities of achieving our objectives" (1993b:522). This process aspect of freedom focuses on the extent of one's autonomy and immunity from the interference of others (e.g., Sen 1993b) and is thus related to the "negative" tradition of liberty.

In a practical sense, then, the opportunity and process aspects of freedom can be used to distinguish between opportunities which may be "given" to a person, and other opportunities where people themselves have been central to choosing particular options (for example, through a deliberative or participative process). By extending the focus of freedom to include process freedoms, the capability approach can assess the conditions under which people's capabilities come about and are exercised—whether the person was consulted, was passive, discriminated against, part of a collective decision-making process, and so forth.

However, while the primary concepts of the capability approach are each reasonably clear, there are a number of ambiguities about how they should be applied, as we will see in the next section. These ambiguities reflect the fact that Sen's articulation of the approach is "deliberately incomplete"; certain aspects of the approach have not been determined by Sen, and their specific form is likely to be influenced by the particular context of application. These ambiguities have resulted in particular debates within the capability literature regarding a number of "key questions," which we discuss in the next section.

The deliberately incomplete nature of the capability approach ensures that it is a flexible framework for social assessment and can be applied in a range of fields and disciplines. Sen's background is as an economist and philosopher, and this is reflected in (p. 79) his use of the approach to discuss comparative quality of life assessment. Other authors have drawn on the approach for different purposes. Another prominent capability theorist, Martha Nussbaum, intends her capabilities approach to form the basis of a partial theory of justice—to identify a set of constitutional guarantees that all people, she argues, have a right to demand from their governments (2000a; 2006). Nussbaum offers a "thicker"

conception than Sen, adopting a distinct—and in many cases more specific—position regarding some of the important debates within the capability literature. Thus, while the core concepts of the approach are relatively clear, there remain a number of important questions about how these concepts work together, and how they should be employed and operationalized in practice.

## Key Questions in the Capability Literature

Sen's decision to leave the capability approach "deliberately incomplete" has meant that further conceptual work is required before it can be adequately applied. It has also resulted in a number of debates within the capability literature and something of a bifurcation between conceptual papers that treat the approach as problematic and in need of supplementation, and empirical (particularly quantitative) papers that attempt to apply the approach, which are often relatively silent on these challenges. Three key questions that feature prominently within this literature will be discussed here. These are the question of whether to focus on functionings or capabilities, the question of a capability list, and the question of aggregation.

### The Question of Functioning and/or Capabilities

The first question concerns the relative weight we should give to the concepts of functionings and capabilities, and contributions to this debate address both conceptual and practical considerations. The purpose of the concept of capability, we have noted, is to provide a measure of *opportunity* in a way that overcomes the problems associated with conversion factors. As such, a focus on capabilities, which reflect opportunities, rather than on functionings, or outcomes, would be consistent with recognizing that our ethical focus in assessment should be on the *constraints* that people face and not on the particular choices they make. Martha Nussbaum, for example, is unambiguous in her preference for the capability concept, arguing that it respects the conceptions of the good that people hold and thus avoids the charge of paternalism (Nussbaum 2000a:87–88; see also Robeyns 2005a:101). One comparison frequently invoked by Sen in justifying the priority of capabilities over functionings is between a person who starves and another who fasts—Gandhi is sometimes identified as the latter. While both may share (p. 80) the same (lack of) functioning, the person who fasts possesses the *capability* to be well-nourished, while the person who starves does not.

However, normative arguments have also been put forward for focusing on people's functionings. Gandjour (2008) has argued that, in a dynamic perspective, "some

functionings are not only the result of capabilities, but also their prerequisite” (Gandjour 2008:345), claiming that there is a mutual dependency and reinforcement between functionings and capabilities. Gandjour’s point is that it may be problematic to confine our normative attention solely to capabilities when we know that actual achievement of certain functionings (in terms of mental and physical health, and education) may be required in order to guarantee capability formation in the future.

Other, more practical reasons have also been offered for focusing on a person’s functionings: most notably because of the difficulty in actually capturing a capability set in operational terms (Kuklys and Robeyns 2005; Basu 1987). Indeed, some authors have questioned whether capabilities can be measured directly at all (Comim 2008; Krishnakumar 2007) due to the inclusion of nonchosen functioning vectors within the capability set, which the approach deems constitutive of an individual’s well-being. This helps explain why empirical applications focus overwhelmingly on functionings (for a review, see Kuklys 2005; but also Arndt and Volkert 2007)—and this includes Sen’s own empirical applications of the approach (e.g., Drèze and Sen 1989, 2002).

Sen (1992:112) has suggested that in some cases it may be possible to use information about a person’s functionings to draw inferences about their capabilities, since, at least for relatively basic functionings, such as avoiding starvation, for example, lacking the relevant functioning is usually indicative of lacking the relevant capability.

It may be argued that, where such inferences are drawn, one should be explicit that this is the case and defend the assumptions which such inferences rely on. Burchardt (2006: 13–14) has suggested a tricotomy of (1) situations in which all differences in outcomes might reasonably be attributed to differences in capabilities (such as where a person is assaulted); (2) situations where differences in preferences *may* result in differences in outcomes, but where for the purposes of public policy it may be possible to assume that any differences are a result of differing levels of capabilities; and (3) situations in which additional evidence may be needed in order to determine whether differences in outcomes are genuinely a result of differences in capability.

Others, however, have criticized this practice of drawing inferences about a person’s capability from data on their functionings. Comim (2008:174) argues that focusing on functionings while at the same time stressing the ethical importance of capabilities “seems to frustrate theoretical arguments about the importance of capabilities vis-à-vis functionings (Sen 1981:209). If at the end of the day we are pushed into using functionings when applying the CA, then the idea of capability seems to have less practical relevance.”

One alternative to choosing between capabilities and functionings is to rely on what Sen has called “refined” functionings, or “a functioning which takes note of the available

alternatives” (Robeyns 2006:354; see also Sen 2009:237) For example, we might focus on whether a person does, in fact, participate in certain social (p. 81) activities (i.e., their functioning in this domain) but *also* look at the extent of choice they had in whether to participate.

There is, thus, some flexibility in terms of whether one focuses on functionings, “refined” functionings, capabilities, or even some combination of these (e.g., Sen 2009:236; Vizard and Burchardt 2007; Robeyns 2006), and the precise context of application is likely to influence the balance between these concepts (Sen 2009:232). It is important to recognize, however, that it is the concept of capability which attracts ethical attention, and the arguments in favor of a focus on functionings are either entirely practical (in terms of aiding empirical application) or are dependent on the concept of capability in some way (e.g., a lack of functioning now may restrict one’s future capability; a lack of functioning is indicative of a lack of capability; a refined functioning takes account of the available alternatives, and so forth).

### The Question of a Capability List

The second key question in the capability literature is that of *which* dimensions we are interested in. The fact that something may be formulated as a capability does not mean that we should devote much concern to it (Sen 1993:44–46): some capabilities are trivial, such as the capability to use a particular kind of washing powder (Sen 1992:44); others are manifestly bad, such as the capability for cruelty (Nussbaum 2011:25). Thus, there is an inescapable question of *valuation*, although there is no agreement on *how* valuation should occur or *who* should conduct the valuation.

Sen himself has neither provided a list of capabilities and their respective weightings nor suggested the method by which this might occur, save that the choices involved should be explicit and should be subject to public participation and scrutiny. Indeed, he has been critical of the idea of a capability list, arguing that “to have such a fixed list, emanating from pure theory, is to deny the possibility of fruitful public participation on what should be included and why” (Sen 2006:362) and that “pure theory cannot ‘freeze’ a list of capabilities for all societies for all time to come, irrespective of what the citizens come to understand and value” (Sen 2006:363).

In the UK, Burchardt and Vizard (2011) adopted a deliberative approach in constructing their capability-based framework for monitoring equality and human rights in England, Scotland, and Wales. They drew on a “minimum core” of dimensions from existing human rights frameworks and subsequently engaged in deliberative consultation with the



general public and with groups at risk of discrimination and disadvantage in order to refine and expand on this core.

The desirability of adopting a purely participatory approach has been questioned, however, because the selection of capabilities in participatory deliberation may be subject to adaption (Gasper 2007; Clark 2005), because those involved—and particularly people living in poverty—may lack the necessary knowledge to consider potential alternative lifestyles (Clark 2005), and because participation may become dominated by the “organised poor” (Arndt and Volkert 2009:17). It is for these reasons that Burchardt and (p. 82) Vizard (2011:92–93) prioritize preexisting international human rights standards over participative process, noting that participatory deliberations are often “‘imperfect’ due to resource and time constraints and/or are ‘non-ideal’ in terms of their underlying democratic conditions and representation” (Burchardt and Vizard 2011:100).

Not all authors have pursued a deliberative approach, however. In her work establishing basic constitutional guarantees, Martha Nussbaum has put forward a list of 10 central human capabilities which, she claims, citizens of any nation can legitimately demand from their governments “as a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires” (2000b:222, see also 2011, 2006, 2000a). These capabilities are life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one’s environment. These 10 capabilities are philosophically derived, based on “years of cross-cultural discussion” (2000b:231), and the list itself remains open and contested, subject to change and revision in the future (2006:75–77). While there is not an explicit role for participatory processes, there is, nonetheless, an appeal to impartiality—the idea that people with diverse religious or metaphysical convictions can achieve an “overlapping consensus” about the importance of the capabilities she specifies (Nussbaum 2006:6). Nussbaum’s approach has been criticized by Robeyns, however, for lacking democratic legitimacy (2006), who has also questioned whether, in practice, an overlapping consensus to support Nussbaum’s list of central human capabilities can be attained (Robeyns 2005b: 206–7).

Robeyns (2005b:205–6; 2006:356) has put forward “procedural criteria” for the selection of capabilities: (1) providing a clear list of capabilities, the selection of which is justified (explicit formulation); (2) proving clarity about the method that has generated the list, so that this can be scrutinized by others (methodological justification); (3) where the capability list is nonideal, for example due to data constraints, providing both ideal and nonideal capability lists (different levels of generality); and (4) all important capabilities should be included (exhaustion and nonreduction). These criteria have been described by Burchardt and Vizard (2011:111) as “good practice” guidelines.

For some, the lack of a capability list raises yet more questions about whether the approach can be properly operationalized. Sugden, for example, notes that “[g]iven the rich array of functionings that Sen takes to be relevant, given the extent of disagreement among reasonable people about the nature of the good life, and given the unresolved problem of how to value sets, it is natural to ask how far Sen’s framework is operational” (1993:1953; a question that Sen acknowledges is relevant, see Sen 2005a:vii).

The lack of an agreed capability list presents an acute problem for applied analysis. In practice, the selection of functioning dimensions is frequently performed in an ad-hoc manner and in accordance with the preferences of the analyst (Kuklys 2005), particularly in quantitative applications, where the selection is likely to be influenced by the limitations of secondary data (Robeyns 2006). In his own empirical work, Sen has restricted himself to a focus on certain basic capabilities that, he argues, would be included in any reasonable list of valued capabilities (Sen 2005b:159; Drèze and Sen 1989, 2002).

(p. 83) Finally, though it is often claimed that the *context* of application will have an important role to play in determining the relevant dimensions, it is nonetheless the case that many “lists” of dimensions of well-being, capability inspired and otherwise, have been shown to display a considerable degree of overlap *despite* the rather distinct contexts in which they were created. As Alkire notes, “natural areas of consensus seem to emerge” (2010:19, 2002) when dimensions of well-being are selected. On the one hand, this perhaps suggests that the context dependence of particular lists should not be overestimated; on the other, the identification of a shared component to many lists, created in different countries and for different purposes, arguably adds to the normative force that there are certain dimensions that are constitutive of human well-being.

## The Question of Aggregation

In addition to the question of *what* the relevant dimensions are, there remain further questions: Should the valued dimensions be aggregated into an overall measure, and if so, how? Some authors have stressed the *inherent plurality* of human capabilities. In her capabilities approach, Martha Nussbaum adopts this position, arguing that her capability list is one of distinct, individual capabilities and that a trade-off between them cannot occur (2000a:81). In a similar vein, Burchardt and Vizard (2011:106, see also Burchardt 2009, 2006:15) preserve the multidimensional structure of their Equality Measurement Framework in order to reflect “the intrinsic value and importance of each domain.”

If these arguments in favor of retaining multidimensionality are theoretical, others are practical: Ravallion (2011), for example, has likened multidimensional poverty indices to replacing the dials on a car dashboard with a single dial that would summarize all information—and in the process create total confusion (slow down or get fuel?). Sen (1999:103) himself has noted that a “constructed aggregate may often be far less interesting for policy analysis than the substantive pattern of diverse performances.” But Jenkins (2011:28) notes that while “[d]isaggregated information is useful in some circumstances, ... there is a high demand for aggregate summaries,” arguing that the problems inherent in aggregating multidimensional information offers one reason to prefer income-centric over multidimensional poverty analysis.

Indeed, one of the motivations for developing the Human Development Index, an aggregated measure of economic and social development (see discussion below), was recognition of the need to produce a simple, aggregated, people-centered measure that could rival GDP per capita. In poverty analysis more broadly, there has been something of a trend toward multidimensionality (e.g., Nolan and Whelan 2011:5), and this has included a greater focus on the creation of new multidimensional *measures* (see e.g., Alkire and Foster 2011).

If multidimensional information is to be aggregated, then this raises the question of how to determine the relevant weights for the various capabilities and, again, there have been a number of alternative approaches suggested and employed. Sen (2006) (p. 84) has emphasized the role of participation and public reasoning in determining the weights. In practice, most empirical analyses employ one of two methods when aggregating information across dimensions: in the first, the analyst specifies the weights, if only to assign them an equal weighing (e.g., UNDP 2010; Kuklys 2005); in the second, the data itself is used to construct the weights (e.g., Krishnakumar 2007). Ultimately, the idea of aggregation rests, in turn, on that of substitutability; that is, that well-being in one area can be sensibly traded off against that in another, and on this there are divergent views.

## Conclusion of Section

These three questions are prominent issues within the capability literature; of these, at least the first two (the question of functionings or capabilities; the question of a capability list) raise questions about whether the approach can be fully operationalized at all, while the third is relevant in considering the merits and demerits of multidimensional approaches vis-à-vis income-centric analysis. And yet, while the issues discussed here remain important in applying the capability approach, it is important to recognize that they are not unique to that approach. At a minimum, the question of the capability list

(which reflects questions of dimensionality) and the question of aggregation are questions for *any* multidimensional approach, a topic we return to in the concluding discussion.

## Applications

Doubts about the whether the approach can be operationalized at all have, perhaps, been eased by the emergence of actual applications inspired by the approach. Indeed, two recent applications—employing the capability approach to understand the use of mobile phones in the agricultural sector in Indonesia (Wahid and Furuholt 2012) and teacher performance in Tanzania (Tao 2013)—demonstrate the ability of the approach to support empirical analysis in a diverse range of fields.

Perhaps the most prominent of all applications is that of the UN Human Development Index (hereafter HDI), which has formed the basis of the UNDP's Human Development Reports since their inception in 1990. The HDI is an aggregated measure of income, life expectancy, and education and was proposed by the Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq to shift attention from *economic* development (as encapsulated by GDP per capita) to *human development* (which would be partially captured in HDI rankings) (see also Sen 2000b).

In focusing on income, life expectancy, and education, the HDI falls far short of the richness that the capability approach can provide. Indeed, Sen harbored significant reservations about the project initially; it was ul Haq who argued that only an (p. 85) index that resembled the simplicity of GDP per capita was capable of shifting the focus away from that measure of economic progress (Fukuda-Parr 2003). The HDI is thus a highly reductive form of the capability approach, as Sen has noted: “These are useful indicators in rough and ready work, but the real merit of the human development approach lies in the plural attention it brings to bear on development evaluation” (Sen 2000b:22).

Nonetheless, even this simple measure demonstrates the distinctiveness of an approaches focusing on income alone to one which incorporates information about people's education and life expectancy. Ranking countries in terms of their Gross National Income (GNI), on the one hand, and their Human Development Index, on the other, produces many similarities. But there are also important differences. For example, in the 2013 *Human Development Report*, New Zealand, Cuba, and Madagascar are all placed substantially higher in terms of HDI rankings compared to their GNI rankings (+25 positions or more), while the United Arab Emirates, Botswana, and Bhutan are all ranked substantially lower (–25 positions or more) than their incomes would suggest (2013:144–6).

### Developed-World Applications

The approach has also inspired a number of high-profile monitoring frameworks in developed countries. In the UK, Burchardt and Vizard's (2011) capability-based framework for monitoring equality and human rights in England, Scotland, and Wales focuses on the dimensions of life; physical security; health; education and learning; standard of living; productive and valued activities; participation, influence, and voice; individual, family, and social life; identity, expression, self-respect; and legal security.

Burchardt and Vizard (2011) argue the capability approach requires a focus not only on functionings (what people actually do and be) but also on treatment ("immunity from arbitrary interference, discrimination and other forms of detrimental treatment, such as lack of dignity and respect") and autonomy ("empowerment, choice and control in relation to critical decisions that affect a person's life"). Their framework thus includes a focus on both "process" and "opportunity" freedoms in its measurement approach.

The capability approach has provided the basis for the German government's Poverty and Wealth Reports since 2005 (Arndt and Volkert 2011). These reports focus on "high and low incomes, financial wealth and debts, education, health, housing, employment, political and social participation" (2011:320), with a particular focus on the performance of families, immigrants, disabled people, and other vulnerable groups.

Robeyns and van der Veen (2007) used the capability approach to create an index of quality of life that also takes account of sustainability. They selected dimensions that were considered to unequivocally contribute to quality of life and which were within (p. 86) the remit of government action, although they emphasized that their list is open and tentative. These dimensions are physical health; mental health; knowledge and intellectual development; labor; care; social relations; recreation; shelter; living environment; mobility; security; nondiscrimination and respect for diversity; and political participation.

Beyond these monitoring frameworks, a number of developed-world applications also serve to demonstrate the ability of the approach to motivate a concern with a range of monetary and nonmonetary capabilities. For example, Brandolini and d'Alessio (1998) used the approach to support a multidimensional poverty analysis focusing on health, education, employment, housing, social relationships, and economic resources. Bonvin and Dif-Pradalier (2010) have emphasized the importance of the capability for work and the capability for voice. Anand and colleagues have attempted to operationalize Nussbaum's list of capabilities by fielding their own UK-based survey (e.g., Anand et al. 2009), which, they suggest, demonstrates the "feasibility although non-triviality" of using the capability approach to support empirical analysis. The range of dimensions

considered in these monitoring frameworks and empirical applications gives a sense of the richness of the approach in terms of the dimensionality which may be considered.

### Developing-World Applications

Applications of the capability approach have in no way been limited to the developed world, however. Two recent developing-world applications point to the ability of the approach to focus on nonmonetary constraints to well-being. In the first, Kerstenetzky and Santos (2009) use the approach to understand how living in one of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* systematically reduces levels of well-being, *both above and below typical income poverty lines*. These authors claim that "living in a favela by itself imposes a sizable discount" on what people can do and be, with the violence associated with favelas proving to be a particular inhibitor of people's functionings in terms of their housing, health, work and schooling, trust in the police, respect and self-esteem, job opportunities, and collective action (2009:209). In the second, Biggeri Trani, and Mauro (2011) examine the nature and extent of child poverty in Afghanistan and find, demonstrating the "pattern" of disadvantages that can flow from a multidimensional perspective, that while boys and girls perform similarly on some dimensions (health; social inclusion; care, etc.), on others—in particular, education—girls displayed elevated rates of disadvantage.

In taking a broad view of the constraints that limit human lives, the capability approach is open about the policy responses which may be required to tackle capability deprivation—improving people's material resources is just one of the possible policy solutions. The point is, of course, not to suggest that people's incomes are not important; simply that the nature of an antipoverty response is not predetermined by the analytic framework. Antipoverty initiatives, in this perspective, may require increasing (p. 87) people's incomes, but they may also require the provision of public housing; the introduction of a vaccination program, and so forth.

### Between Developing and Developed Worlds

The real challenge is not simply to compare rates of poverty within the developing and developed worlds, however, but also *between* them. Here there are noticeably fewer studies, though the UN Human Development Report provides a useful starting point.

Any framework that seeks to compare the prevalence of poverty between nations must identify a common metric which will be used in order to make like-for-like comparisons. The income-centric approach, for example, seeks to account for differences in prices between countries by computing adjustments to income values so that they are expressed

in a comparable terms—typically, U.S. dollar purchasing power parity (PPP) (for a recent example, see Milanovic 2011).

Adopting a capability perspective, on the other hand, would entail comparing capabilities directly. Again, the multidimensional perspective that results can provide evidence of diverse performance in terms of poverty and deprivation. It may be that some of the dimensions are particularly relevant for poorer nations—for example, in terms of premature mortality and illiteracy—in a way that they may be less relevant for developed nations. But adopting a capability perspective also allows us to compare—in quite a tangible way—the ways in which people in poverty in rich nations may, in fact, have *lower* living standards than many in poorer countries, at least on some dimensions.

For example, in *Development as Freedom*, Sen shows how U.S. African American men have a lower “chance of reaching advanced ages than do people in the immensely poorer economies of China or the Indian state of Kerala (or in Sri Lanka, Jamaica or Costa Rica)” (Sen 1999:21). By focusing on capability deprivation *directly*, instead of relying on income proxies, we can potentially arrive at quite a different pattern of deprivation both within and between nations than if an income perspective is adopted.

## Concluding Section

This review of some empirical applications of the capability approach points to some of its defining characteristics—its multidimensionality, and its focus on both monetary and nonmonetary dimensions and constraints. These existing applications present at least something of a challenge to those who have suggested that the approach might not be suited to empirical application. Nonetheless, such applications do not imply in any sense that significant challenges do not remain, and, in the final section, we attempt to take stock of the current state-of-the-art literature and offer some final reflections.

## (p. 88) Concluding Discussion

The capability approach provides the basis for a framework for poverty analysis that adopts a multidimensional perspective and which focuses on both monetary and nonmonetary dimensions and constraints. The approach provides a strong critique of income-centric analysis and thus adopts a distinct position to much existing poverty analysis. It suggests that poverty analysis should focus on impoverished lives and not just depleted wallets (Sen 2000). As we have sought to demonstrate, the capability approach has been applied by authors working in a very wide range of fields and disciplines.

The capability approach has, since its inception, transcended disciplinary boundaries, and the variety of applications that now exist only serve to reinforce its multidisciplinary nature. However, there is a need to continue to reach out and engage with other fields and disciplines in terms of understanding the themes, problems, and questions that are shared with other researchers, including those who do not themselves adopt a capability perspective. There are important parallels between the concerns of the capability approach and other, non-capability-inspired analyses, and these need to be more clearly understood. To offer just one example—namely, the relationship between the capability approach and the field of social policy—the emphasis on *constraints* as being central to the concept of poverty, which is reflected in the focus on people’s capabilities, has also been a feature of poverty analysis within the field of social policy where indicators of material deprivation have been employed (on this see Piachaud 1981; Hick 2012 for a discussion; and Chapter 25 of this volume, “Material Deprivation and Consumption”). Similarly, Sen’s distinction between means and ends bears some resemblance to Ringen’s (1988) distinction between “indirect” (i.e., low income) and “direct” (i.e., low living standards) approaches to understanding poverty. Thus, one of the tasks required of those working with the capability approach is to more clearly locate that approach with respect to other, non-capability-inspired analyses in order to identify common problems and perhaps even shared solutions.

Questions about whether the capability approach can support empirical applications at all have perhaps lost some of their force given the emergence of actual empirical applications. But other questions regarding the ability to operationalize the approach remain; for example, what is the “distance” between what is measured and the ideal conceptual framework to which particular applications are supposed to relate? Thus, the emergence of actual capability applications does not silence questions about operationalization, but rather changes the nature of these questions and shifts their attention to whether empirical applications do justice to the conceptual aspirations of the capability approach.

The demanding nature of the capability approach means that there is typically some distance between actual applications of the capability approach and the ideal to which (p. 89) they aspire. This is likely to be a particular issue when the analysis relies on secondary data sets (Robeyns and van der Veen 2007) and undoubtedly constitutes a disadvantage of employing a capability-based framework. However, it is important to recognize that the problem of data availability is one for all multidimensional approaches, capability inspired or not, and given the current trend toward a multidimensional understanding of poverty (Nolan and Whelan 2011), enhancing the breadth of data collected in social surveys is likely to constitute an important program of work for poverty analysis in the future.



The capability approach offers the basis for understanding poverty as inherently multidimensional, focusing on what people can do and be, and not just on what they have, or how they feel. The capability approach is undoubtedly a more complex and informationally demanding approach than the income-centric approach. However, if the income-centric perspective fails to identify those individuals who experience capability deprivation; if it fails to capture the richness and breadth of the deprivations that people face; and if it fails to point toward the relevant policy solutions to remedy deprivations in what people can do and be, then this complexity can, it is argued, be justified, and the capability approach can be used in order to understand the problem of poverty.

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