Freedom and Agency: Milestones of Human Development

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Learning Outcomes

Critically Exploring:

- The importance of human freedoms
- The Role of People's Agency
- The Potentials and Challenges of exercising individual and collective agency
- What is the Role of External Actors in promoting freedoms and agency?

Why Explore Agency and Freedom?

- Expanding Human Freedoms:
  - Individuals have different identities, value systems and different 'lives that they value and have reason to value'
- Exercise of Human Agency:
  - Poor people aspire for better lives, not only for themselves, but also for those around them.
- Contestation of Unequal Power Relations
  - Relational approach
- Use of Public Sphere (Habermas)
- Citizenship and Social Inclusion

Missing the Obvious?

The success of poor people’s agency to help them escape their poverty depends mainly on: the incentives and structures in the wider society as well as the assets and capabilities - both individual and collective - that the poor can pool together in pursuit of their goals. (Narayan, 2007, 15)

Outline

- The Capability Approach: A Quick Recap
  - Capabilities vs. Functionings
  - Contributions of the CA
  - Critiques of the CA

- Key Tenets of the Capability Approach:
  - Human Freedoms
  - Human Agency

- Exercising Agency and Widening Freedoms:
  - Case Study 1: Agency for Urban Poor's Rights
  - Case Study 2: Agency for Gender Rights

The Capability Approach: Intro

- The Capability Approach is NOT a theory, but “a normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies and proposals about social change in society” (Robeyns, 2009, 61).
- The CA is used in various fields: development studies, welfare economics, social policy and political philosophy
- The CA's normative proposition: “societal arrangements should be primarily evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value” (Alkire, 2009, 32).
Functionings

- Functionings are achievements: what the individual is "succeeding in doing or being" (Sen, 1987a, 19).
- Elementary or Complex: e.g. nutrition vs. having self-respect
- Functionings are "only instrumentally valued [...] to the extent that [they] helps the achievement of the things that we do value (viz. capabilities)" (Sen, 1984, 84).
- "The conversion of commodity-characteristics into personal achievements or functionings depends on a variety of factors: personal and social" (Sen, 1987a, 17).

Capabilities

- Human capabilities are "the various alternative functioning bundles an individual can achieve through choice" (Sen, 1987, 18).
- Functionings can be intrinsically and instrumentally valuable
- Functionings lead to well-being, while capabilities represent the person's freedoms and choices to achieve this well-being
- The distinction between functionings and capabilities is mainly that between the "realized and the effectively possible [...] achievements [...] and freedoms or valuable options" (Robeyns, 2005, 95).

From Entitlements to Capabilities to Achievements

Capabilities are beings and doings that people value and have reason to value [problematic?]

Capabilities shift the focus from achievements to opportunities

Note: Capabilities refer to “what people are actually able to do or to be” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 5).

Why the Capability Approach?

- Overcoming defects of the orthodox views and BN approach
- Capability expansion affected by Economic Growth and Basic Needs
- Income as a means rather than an end in itself
- Shifting the focus from means (such as having income to buy food) to ends (being well-nourished)

Why the Capability Approach?

- Recognizing the multiplicity of valuables
- Accounting for interpersonal variations in the valuation of human well-being
- Instead of imposing a "set definition of human well-being", the CA leaves it to people through democratic processes and public reasoning to choose their valuable beings and doing
- Forming conceptual root of the human development paradigm
Importance of Capability Approach for Human Development

- Sen views human development as a process of enlarging "capabilities" and HDRs focus on "choices".
- Topics of HDRs, such as gender equality, poverty, human rights, and democracy, parallel Sen's work on freedom, participation, and agency.
- Promoting a more multi-dimensional definition of poverty as capability deprivation.

Both approaches- CA and HD- stress two aspects:

- **Evaluative aspect**: the improvement of human lives as the ultimate goal of any development strategy.
- **Agency aspect**: stressing the role of the people in achieving these improvements.

⇒ Adopting a freedom-centered and agent-oriented view of Development.

Human Development - 1990

Defining human development:

Human development is a process of enlarging people's choices. The most critical ones are to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living. Additional choices include political freedom, guaranteed human rights, and self-respect — what Adam Smith called the ability to mix with others without being "ashamed to appear in public" (box 1.1).

Human Development - 2010

Human development is the expansion of people's freedoms to live long, healthy and creative lives, to advance other goals they have reason to value, and to engage actively in shaping development equitably and sustainably on a shared planet. People are both the beneficiaries and the drivers of human development, as individuals and in groups.

3 Key Components of Human Development – 2010

- **Wellbeing**: Expanding people's real freedoms.
- **Empowerment and Agency**: Enabling people and groups to affect change.
- **Justice**: Expanding equity, sustainability, and respect for human rights.

Human Development Paradigm

- Human Development as "both the process of widening people's choices and the level of their achieved well-being" (UNDP, 1990, 10 [emphasis in original]).
- Human Development goes beyond basic needs satisfaction to emphasizing participatory and dynamic and equitable processes.

⇒ Development has to be of the people, by the people, for the people (HDR, 1991, 13).
Contributions of the Capability Approach

- A New Paradigm – Lens to View Development
- Multidimensionality of Human Life
- Human Diversity
- Focus on Ends not Means
- People as Agents
- Emphasis on Social Justice
- Explicit Value Judgments:
  - The CA leaves it to people to choose their valuable beings and doing what they 'value and have reason to value'
  - But: problem of adaptive preferences?
- Incompleteness:
  - Sen refuses to draw a list of capabilities and values public discussions and democratic processes: a blessing or curse?

Critiques of the Capability Approach

- Is the Capability Approach too Paternalistic?
  - Who judges what ‘one values and has reason to value’?
  - Overcoming the adaptive preference problem

- Is the Capability Approach too ‘realistic’?
  - Does it take people’s aspirations into account?
  - What about all the constraints that the poor have on their choices?

- Is the Capability Approach a useful Policy Tool?
  - Measuring and Identifying Capabilities is difficult
  - Which Capabilities are Important? How to prioritize them?
  - How can the capability approach be operationalised and become ‘policy-friendly’?

- Is the Capability Approach too individualistic?
  - The CA focuses only on individual freedoms and acts of agency
  - What about collective action to promote freedoms and generate new collective capabilities?

- The Role of collectivities in capabilities formation and expansion
- The need to account for aspirations and not just capabilities
- The inherent value judgments involved in ‘assessing’ which capabilities matter
- The need to work on rendering the capability approach more ‘policy-friendly’ to be able to challenge other competing paradigms

To Sum up:

Credits of the Capability Approach

- The Role of collectivities in capabilities formation and expansion
- The need to account for aspirations and not just capabilities
- The inherent value judgments involved in ‘assessing’ which capabilities matter
- The need to work on rendering the capability approach more ‘policy-friendly’ to be able to challenge other competing paradigms
The CA in a Nutshell

“This freedom-centered understanding of economics and of the process of development is very much an agent-oriented view […] Individuals need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programs. There is indeed a strong rationale for recognizing the positive role of free and sustainable agency”

(Sen, 1999, 11)[my emphasis].

Human Freedoms

“Development can be seen ... as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy"

(Sen, 1999, 1).

“Freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means” (Sen, 1999, 10).

Why Freedom?

The Importance of Human Choice

- Emphasizing the instrumental and intrinsic role of human freedoms

- Freedoms are essential for two main reasons:
  - Evaluation: any achievement should be evaluated according to the level of freedom it enhances.
  - Effectiveness: freedom is required to enhance the effectiveness of development efforts.

- Any development strategy should aim to remove any sources of unfreedoms such as poverty, tyranny and social disorder.

- Freedom is affected by economic opportunities, political rights, educational and health conditions and other institutional arrangements (Sen, 1999, 1-4).

⇒ Freedom is considered a Tool for effective development as well as a “Benchmark” to evaluate these development efforts.
“Freedom is not just a matter of having a larger number of alternatives; it depends on what kind of alternatives they are” (Sen, 1990).

Sen does not only care about the provision of human freedoms, but also about the quality of these freedoms.

Political Freedoms

The opportunities of citizens to choose who governs them and according to which principles.

These freedoms enable citizens to criticize public policies and express their views and their needs freely.

Economic Facilities

The opportunities that individuals have to utilize their economic resources by consuming, producing or exchanging these facilities.

They depend mainly on the person's entitlements as well as prices and market mechanisms.

Access to finance is also crucial for the realization of these freedoms.

3 Other Instrumental Freedoms

- **Social Opportunities** include education, health and other basic services that affect the quality of life of any individual.

- **Transparency Guarantees** stress the need for openness and accountability that people have in dealing with each other under a transparent, clear and accountable system.

- **Protective security** is the safety net and social protection for the poor, such as unemployment benefits and other allowances for the elderly, which rescue them from misery and extreme deprivation.

These instrumental freedoms are interrelated, complementary and mutually reinforcing (Sen, 1999, 39-40).
More Importantly is Translating these Five Instrumental Freedoms into actual Policies and creating Institutions to protect them

It is not only important that a person makes a Choice or has a Freedom (Opportunity Freedom), but what is also crucial is How this Choice was made (Autonomy) and How this freedom was exercised (Process Freedom)

Opportunity Freedom

- Sen emphasizes the opportunity aspect of freedom as he focuses on "what freedom permits us to achieve", rather than "what we achieve with this freedom".
- One does not deny the importance of actual achievements of the poor, the emphasis should be more on the opportunities open to the poor and how they can seize these opportunities if they want to.

Process Freedom

- Sen distinguishes between "the processes that allow freedom of actions and decisions, and the actual opportunities that people have, given their personal and social circumstances" (Sen, 17, 1999).
- The process aspect of freedom is concerned with the equality of treatment: is the agent equally treated when s/he exercises his/her freedom?
- Not only are opportunities and achievements important, but also the process through which these opportunities are created
- Did others affect this process of choice or did the person freely choose this capability?
- This is related to the concept of ‘Autonomy’

Autonomy

What influences an individual to make a particular Choice?

There are three possible reasons/ motivations why one can make a specific choice by being motivated:

- To avoid punishment or to gain reward [Fear]
- To avoid blame, or so that other people speak well of him/her [Social Desirability]
- Reflect one's own values and/or interests [Own Choice]

The Capability Approach not only focuses on opportunities [capabilities] and achievements [functionings], but also on the processes [autonomy and agency] through which these choices are made
Agency vs. Well-being Freedoms

- Wellbeing freedom "covers the person's achievements and opportunities in the context of his or her personal advantage" (Sen, 1987c, 58-59).
- Agency freedom refers to "what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important [...] i.e. the person's conception of the good" (Sen, 1985, 203) and thus goes "beyond the pursuit of one's own well-being" (Sen, 1987, 59).

The Importance of Human Agency

- The concept of agency moves beyond individual freedoms and well-beings to the pursuit of broader communal goals.
- It views "persons as agents who have diverse valued goals and commitments on behalf both of themselves and of their society" (Alkire, 2005, 125)[emphasis added]).
- Agency emphasizes "the agency role of the individual as a member of the public" (Sen, 1999, 19).
- It stresses "the ability of the people to help themselves" (Sen, 1999, 18) and to "actively [be] involved in shaping their own destiny" (53).

How Does an Individual Become an Agent?

- The process of self-scrutinizing and critical reflection on one's own living conditions:
  - Reflect critically about his/her current status,
  - Perceive and aspire better living conditions
  - Decide and plan an act to bring about this aspired change.

Agency vs. Structure

- Giddens' Structuration Theory
- Duality between Agency and Structure
- Focusing on the reciprocal and interactive relationship between human action and social structures
- The importance of processes of social change
- 'People are intrinsically involved with society and actively enter into its constitution' (Giddens, 1984 [emphasis added])
- Social Structures come about through the acts of individual agents who reproduce these structures
Individual Agency is Not Enough!

- Studies such as ‘Voices of the Poor’ (Narayan et.al, 2000a; 2000b) have shown that the poor suffer from a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability.
- Structural and institutional factors constrain the poor’s ‘capacity to aspire’ to a better future.
- This is why many individuals, esp. in poor communities, act as agents in a collectivity to protect their freedoms and challenge unequal power relations in their society.
- Need to move beyond individual agency …

The Collective Power of the Poor

“for the less privileged attaining development as freedom requires collective action” (Evans, 2002, 56 [emphasis added]).

“The poor are weak economically and have little political power. Although particular individuals may escape poverty through their own efforts, individually most poor people have neither the assets nor the power to affect their situation significantly by such individual action. Yet collectively they can achieve much more.” (Stewart, 2005, 195 [emphasis added]).

Group formation among the poor is difficult:

“while the ability to form groups is important for the advancement of capabilities of the poor, because of their poverty the poor are particularly handicapped in forming groups.

They lack the networks, human capital and financial assets that may be needed.” (Stewart, 2005, 199).

The Challenges and Caveats of Group Formation

- The poor rarely frame their strategies as ‘poverty reduction strategies’ (Bebbington et al., 2009)
- Groups can cause conflict – creating winners and losers
- Nurturing horizontal inequalities
- Reinforcing exclusion and exploitation – unequal power relations within the groups
- Positive vs. Negative Agency: Self-help groups vs. Terrorist Groups

Dilemmas of and Limitations on Collective Agency

- Agency is not enough, the ‘opportunity structure’ and institutional climate count too! - legal structure, processes, access to information
- Lack of time, assets and resources – self-organisation as burden?
- Feelings of Vulnerability: social, cultural, political and institutional
- Formulation of Common values and goals
- Dominance of the powerful and Unequal interdependence
- Lack of representative structures and maladministration
- Dominance of personalised decision-making systems

Dilemmas of and Limitations on Collective Agency

- Dominance of dependence mentality – Why bother? wait for the state to provide
- Limited scope, impact and sustainability – how long can these organisations go?
- Symptom treatment rather than structural change – need wider policy changes rather than localised solutions
- Lack of or Dominance of Leadership
- Relationship to ‘other actors’ can be destructive at times – creating rivalries
- Difficulty of mobilization and lack of self-belief – how to convince poor people that they can make a difference?
The Success Criteria for Collective Agency?

- Benefits accrue individual AND collectivity
- Local conditions are conducive – Context does matter!
- External Actors Support without Dependence
- Powerful Ideas create a collective will-power
- Enhanced sustainability, outreach and impact – benefiting whom? How many? For how long?
- Creating Collective Identities & new notions of selfhood

Role of External Actors in Grassroots-led Development

- Role of Bilateral and Multilateral Donor agencies
- Role of Local Leaders in Community Mobilization
- Role of Local and Transnational NGOs
- Role of the State?

Role of External Actors in promoting Agency: What goes wrong?

- Internal Conflicts
- Distorted Understanding of Volunteerism/grassroots participation
- Creation of Dependence on External Actors
- Lack of Sustainability, especially Financial Sustainability
- Difficulty in Mobilizing the poorest and most excluded
- The Cost of Failure is too high for the Poor
- Difficulty of Scaling-up local grassroots initiatives

How can the Poor Use their Collective Agency to Enhance their Freedoms and Promote Human Development?

Real Life Case Studies

Case Study 1: Addressing Urban Poverty

- In 1996, created as an International Network to advocate for the rights of the urban poor
- A number of federations participating from Asia, Africa and Latin America
- Aims:
  - Ending the coercive clearance of slums
  - Calling for state recognition of urban poor’s needs
  - Creating and sharing knowledge on informal settlements
- The case of Old Fadama in Accra, Ghana: In 2002, residents receive an eviction notice after the area has been declared as national disaster site
- Residents collaborate with SDI to lobby the state not to evict the residents but they accept resettlement at a later stage

Slum Eviction in Old Fadama, Ghana
Case 2: Practice of FGM in Upper Egypt

FGM and its Practice in Egypt
- FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) also known as Female Genital Cutting or Female Circumcision
- Involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia
- Performed on Girls between the age of four and twelve
- In the year 2000, 97% of women in Egypt have been subject to FGM!

Why FGM?
- Honour
- Tradition
- Myths (!)
- Religion (?)
- Poor Parenting
- Social Acceptance
- Control of Women’s Sexuality
  ⇒ Physical, Emotional and Psychological Harms

Women are often the main Advocates of FGM,
Men usually have no power/say in the practice, although they generally support it!

Advocating for the Rights of Urban Poor in Old Fadama Accra, Ghana
- Formulating letters of protest
- Adopting SDI approach focusing on savings, mediation, exchanges, partnerships and community-led enumerations
- Building national and international partnerships and dialogue with local authorities
- Mobilizing community members and strengthening community-based organisations
- Creating knowledge through new settlement surveys and profiling exercises to lobby the government

Advocating for the Rights of Urban Poor in Old Fadama Accra, Ghana
- Creating - in collaboration with the UN Advisory Group on Forced Evictions - a slum upgrading and implementing community-led solutions to housing and livelihood problems
- Carrying out drainage, roads and sanitation works
- Monitoring Public Policies with regards to slum areas
- Negotiating with national government to secure land tenure
- Sealing with set-backs and state opposition
However!!!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMkP7HO_oJA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=est5s31MevY

Different Agency Strategies to Fight FGM

Strategies for Fighting the Practice of FGM

- Communal and One-to-One Meetings
- Cooperating with Religious Leaders
- Conscientization
- Building Coalitions with Different Stakeholders
- Mobilizing Local Communities Against FGM

Through Collective Agency, People are able not only to enhance their individual capabilities, but also to protect their freedoms and gain new collective capabilities

Conclusion

- Survival Strategies or Graduation Mechanisms? – Role of people's agency and the limitations on it
- Do these organisations have a place in a Neo-liberal ‘world’? – micro-credit and saving groups' high interest rates
- Can this 'bottom-up' approach be the mainstream or is it just an add-on?
- Structural and Institutional Environment to support people's agency – dynamics of state-society relations?
- Moral Question: whose responsibility?
- Scaling up, Success and Sustainability: Can acts of collective agency be Scaled up or are they one-offs?