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Sen’s Capability Approach as a framework to the practice of development

Alexandre Apsan Frediani

Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach is increasingly influential in the literature of development economics. It has contributed to development discourse by strengthening the multidimensional approach to poverty analysis and stressing the importance of focusing on agency and empowerment. Nevertheless, the Capability Approach has not yet been applied comprehensively beyond development economics. This article assesses the contribution of the Capability Approach to the field of development planning, by comparing it with the rights-based approach (RBA) and the sustainable-livelihoods framework (SLF). The article argues that by focusing on the capability space, power relations, and participation, the Capability Approach has the potential to become a normative framework to radicalise development practices.
relações de poder e participação, a Abordagem da Capacidade tem potencial para se tornar um sistema normativo para radicalizar as práticas de desenvolvimento.

El Método de Capacidades de Sen como un marco para la práctica del desarrollo

El Método de Capacidades de Amartya Sen ocupa un lugar cada vez más importante en la literatura sobre economía del desarrollo. Ha contribuido a construir el discurso relacionado con el desarrollo consolidando el enfoque multidimensional del análisis de la pobreza y centrando la mirada en los conceptos de apropiación y de empoderamiento. Sin embargo, este método no ha sido aplicado sistemáticamente más allá de la economía del desarrollo. Este ensayo analiza el aporte del Método de Capacidades en el área de la planeación del desarrollo, comparándolo con el Método Basado en Derechos (RBA en inglés) y con el Marco de los Medios de Sustento (LFS en inglés). El ensayo sostiene que, al centrarse en las capacidades, las relaciones de poder y la participación, el Método de Capacidades puede convertirse en una guía que revolucionaría la práctica del desarrollo.

KEY WORDS: Aid; Methods; Rights

Introduction: the limitations of development practices

According to Sachs (1992: 1), ‘development has grown obsolete’. Fifty years after development co-operation began, much of the population in low- and middle-income nations still live in vulnerable environments, coping with hunger and insecurity, and dying of preventable diseases. Can we imagine development alternatives that could transform rhetoric into change? Or is there a more substantial problem with the development project as such which requires the formulation of alternatives to development, as Escobar (1992) argues?

Post-development analyses point out that ‘development’ is the means to Westernise developing countries. Under the banner of helping the poor, ‘universal values’ and ideologies, normally associated with the development of international capitalism, are imposed through subtle mechanisms such as governance programmes and poverty-alleviation policies. Critics have also stressed how radical development alternatives are co-opted and appropriated, leading to reformism and the perpetuation of ‘business as usual’. Instead of changing situations of subordination and oppression, concepts such as ‘participation’ have been used in an instrumental manner, reproducing rather than challenging processes of exploitation.

While providing crucial critiques of the practice of development, post-development writers do not set out any alternative. It is argued that overcoming processes of subordination is not about ‘development alternatives’, but about ‘alternatives to development’ through supporting local grassroots organisations. However, as Pieterse (2000) argues, ‘under the heading of “post” thinking, this is actually profoundly conservative’ (2000: 182). The focus on the local resonates not only with conservative localism but also with market-enablement practices that perceive the local organisations as efficient implementers of ‘populist neo-liberal’ policies. Well-mobilised community-based organisations (CBOs) can be subcontracted, whether to collect solid waste or to provide nurseries and other social services, within an overall strategy of cost-reduction and community enablement rather than one of transformation and empowerment.

This article therefore assumes that ‘alternatives to development’ might in reality perpetuate the processes criticised by post-development writers, and may also generate ‘business as usual’. This author’s premise is that radical development alternatives are needed to challenge rather than sustain current practices. The article provides a different perspective on Amartya Sen’s
Capability Approach, in order to contribute to articulating a development approach that radicalises the practice of development. The first section outlines the main components of the Capability Approach. The second adapts the Capability Approach to the elaboration of a development framework. Finally the article addresses the similarities, differences, and complementarities between the Capability Approach and other approaches to development.

Introducing the Capability Approach

The Capability Approach has been explored in a variety of ways in the literature. Sen (1999) attributes the origins of the focus of ‘development as freedom’ to the early motivations of economics. The literature acknowledges Sen’s attempt to break from utilitarianism by expanding the informational basis for development, moving from an income-led definition of development to one based on multiple ends. This article hopes to contribute to this literature by elaborating on how to apply the Capability Approach to programming and evaluation of development practices.

Capability Approach as an evaluative framework

Various scholars have adopted Sen’s ideas and developed them into the Capability Approach, an attempt to develop a broad normative framework for the evaluation of individual wellbeing and social arrangements (Alkire 2002; Clark 2002; Nussbaum 2000; Qizilbesh 2002; Robeyns 2006; Sen 1999). The core characteristic of the Capability Approach is to move away from the income-led evaluation methods and focus on people’s ability to achieve the things that they value. Wellbeing can thus be measured by assessing people’s freedom and choices, rather than their income or consumption. According to Sen (1985) and then Clark (2002), the focus on utility or resources can be misleading, as what is essential is not the sum total of commodities, but what these do to people. By focusing on freedom, Sen (1985) argues that the Capability Approach acknowledges that people differ in their capacity to convert goods into valuable achievements due to personal and locational factors and social arrangements.

Capability: informational space for making evaluative judgements

According to Sen (1992), the Capability Approach broadens the informational space for making evaluative judgements by acknowledging the multidimensional nature of human wellbeing. In the field of development, many other approaches have been moving away from the income-led definition of poverty by including people’s perceptions and accepting the multiple facets of poverty. Deneulin and Stewart (2002), however, argue that these miss out the philosophical justification of the Capability Approach, at the core of which is the concept that ‘development is about providing conditions which facilitate people’s ability to lead flourishing lives’ (Deneulin and Stewart 2002: 62).

Capability: components of the approach

The concepts of functionings and capabilities are essential components of Sen’s Capability Approach, as Gasper (2002) shows. Sen describes the various components or aspects of a person’s life as functionings. ‘A functioning is an achievement of a person: what he or she manages to do or to be, and any such functioning reflects, as it were, a part of the state of that person’ (Sen 2005: 5). According to Alkire (2003: 5), ‘functionings is an umbrella term for the resources and activities and attitudes people spontaneously recognize to be important – such as poise, knowledge, a warm friendship, an educated mind, a good job’.
Capabilities are the freedoms that people have to achieve the lifestyle that they have reason to value. Gore (1997) notes that while ‘functionings’ refers to achievements, ‘capabilities’ refers to the opportunity set. Sen (1992) further argues that evaluation of wellbeing should be measured within the space of capabilities and not functionings, and that evaluation should thus focus on opportunities and not achievements. In order to explain the need to focus on choice, Sen (1992) illustrates the difference by using the example of a person who starves as a result of fasting versus one who starves because of lack of access to food. In terms of functionings, both persons would be at the same level of deprivation, while a focus on opportunity would portray a more realistic vision of people’s ability to achieve the things that they value. Thus, Sen (1992) distinguishes between ‘doing x’ and ‘choosing to do x and doing it’.

**Capability: agency freedom and wellbeing**

Robeyns (2003) argues that an evaluation of social arrangements based on Sen’s writings would be concerned not only with choice, but also with the forces that contribute to convert capabilities into realised functionings. Freedom is understood as a concept comprising components of both wellbeing and agency. Wellbeing freedom is concerned with objectives that a person values for his/her wellbeing. Agency is concerned with the individual’s freedom to choose and bring about the things that he/she values. To clarify the difference, Sen (1992) argues that agency includes states of affairs that do not necessarily contribute to one’s wellbeing. In this case, the focus of evaluation should be not on levels of wellbeing but on the processes that affect people’s freedom to realise valued choices. Thus structural and personal conditions affecting an individual’s ability to choose need to be taken into consideration in an evaluation exercise. These structural and personal conditions work as conversion factors, influencing the way that choices become achievements. Agency freedom is affected by three conversion factors: personal characteristics (such as metabolism, physical condition, sex, reading skills, intelligence), social characteristics (such as public policies, social norms, discriminating practices, gender roles, societal hierarchies, power relations), and environmental characteristics (such as climate, infrastructure, institutions, public goods) (Robeyns 2003).

By accepting the role of conversion factors affecting the process of realising the things that one values, the Capability Approach includes social and structural elements in the evaluative process. Nevertheless many authors have criticised Sen’s writings for being too focused on the individual. Sen refuses to accept the role of collective capabilities, and researchers argue that in so doing he is excluding group or collective freedoms (Gore 1997; Deneulin and Stewart 2002). Gore (1997) argues, however, that the Capability Approach cannot be labelled as excessively individualistic in any simple way, since as well as agency and conversion factors, Sen identifies social functionings (such as ‘taking part in the life of the community’, ‘communicating’, ‘being well-integrated in society’, and – using Adam Smith’s famous example – ‘appearing in public without shame’). Gore (1997) argues that Sen’s approach is individualistic in the sense that it measures wellbeing in terms of an individual’s ability, not recognising the role of collective resources. Gore (1997) defends the concept of ‘irreducibly social goods’, defined as objects of value that cannot be dismantled into individual occurrences. In other words, there are capabilities that are properties of societies or groups rather than of individuals. Therefore Stewart (2005) and Ibrahim (2006) propose the concepts of group and collective capabilities.

**Capability: openness and incompleteness**

While not explicitly accepting the concept of collective capabilities, Sen (1992, 1993) argues that the Capability Approach is deliberatively incomplete, as it does not specify a list of
valuable capabilities or functionings. Furthermore, he does not provide clear practical guidelines to practitioners or researchers on how to assess or identify capabilities (Comin 2001). Sugden (1993) criticises this incompleteness by arguing that the breadth and the multidimensional and context-dependent nature of the approach prevent it from having practical and operational significance. Such criticisms led authors to propose a list of capabilities that sought to operationalise Sen’s approach. Nussbaum (2000) argues that it is necessary to identify a list of ‘functional capabilities’. On the other hand, Qizilbash (2002) argues that a list compiled by Nussbaum is too complete and thus vulnerable to the criticism that it is too universal and does not take into account individual and cultural differences. Meanwhile Alkire (2002) outlines approaches that reach a middle ground between Sen and Nussbaum. She argues for an irreducible list of elements that would be present at any functioning identified by individuals with different preferences.

Sen responds to these criticisms by arguing that ‘an agreement on the usability of the Capability Approach – an agreement on the nature of the “space” of value-objects – need not presuppose an agreement on how the valuational exercise may be completed’ (1993: 48). Sen (2005) also refuses to accept a fixed list of capabilities by arguing:

_The problem is not with listing important capabilities, but with insisting on one predetermined canonical list of capabilities, chosen by theorists without any general social discussion or public reasoning. To have such a fixed list, emanating entirely from pure theory, is to deny the possibility of fruitful public participation on what should be included and why._ (2005:158)

**Capability: identifying and assessing capabilities**

Alkire (2007) proposes five mechanisms to identify capabilities and poverty dimensions. Table 1 describes different processes of identifying capabilities, which will be relevant in different contexts and purposes of study. However, if the Capability Approach is to focus on what people value, participatory methods are needed to reveal people’s aspirations and their freedom to achieve them (Crocker 2007). Biggeri et al. (2006) applied the Capability Approach through participatory methods to examine the wellbeing of children, revealing dimensions that were not present in normative assumptions. Frediani (2007) has examined some of the links between the Capability Approach through participatory methods, by using both approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Identifying capabilities and poverty dimensions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Existing data or convention</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Normative assumptions</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Public ‘consensus’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 On-going deliberative participatory processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Empirical evidence regarding people’s values</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Alkire 2007: 7)
to evaluate a squatter-settlement upgrading project. Furthermore, while having complementarities and similarities, participatory methods and the Capability Approach also face common challenges, such as the localised, individualistic, and instrumental nature of their application (see Frediani 2006, 2007).

Adapting and applying the Capability Approach

The above review of the Capability Approach indicates some of its components and concepts that would need to be adapted in order to elaborate an approach to development. To become a radical development alternative, the Capability Approach needs to address local and structural processes; the conceptual framework needs clear components that can be used by development practitioners, while remaining open and not imposing universal values; and participation and qualitative information need to be incorporated in the process of elaborating or evaluating policies and projects. To address such demands, this article proposes: (a) a focus on the conversion factors, transforming resources into achieved functionings; (b) the incorporation of power-relations analysis in such processes; and (c) mechanisms to include participatory methods in the application of the Capability Approach.

From capabilities to a capability space

The applications of the Capability Approach so far have mainly focused on the listing of capabilities and evaluating the impact of policies upon them. This focus was motivated by the wish to list concrete dimensions of wellbeing in order to generate tangible indicators against which to examine people’s freedoms. By focusing on indicators, however, the process elements affecting people’s freedom, such as underlying social and political conditions, are not clearly articulated. The failure to unpack the concept of capability leads to the unresolved debates on collective vs. individual capabilities and universal vs. local capabilities. Furthermore, the Capability Approach remains at a level of abstraction from policies and projects that makes it difficult for practitioners to apply and assess the value that it adds to the design and evaluation of projects.

This article proposes a slightly different perspective on the Capability Approach, focusing on resources and their transformation into achieved functionings. These resources can be tangible (such as schools, transport, and houses) or intangible (such as policies). The transformation of resources is affected by a series of conversion factors which vary from context to context, person to person. Instead of focusing on capabilities, this application focuses on the capability space, which includes people’s choice, ability, and opportunity to transform resources into achieved functionings. Within the capability space are included individual, local, and structural factors. Individual factors are associated with one’s individual capacities, which could be physical conditions, levels of literacy, and so forth. For example, blindness and illiteracy are individual factors influencing a person’s ability to transform print newspapers into increased awareness. Local factors can be associated with facilities and collective norms. For example, the provision of a football pitch in a neighbourhood does not mean that local children will have more space for leisure, as adults might control the use of the pitch and not allow children to play there.

Last but not least are the structural factors shaping the capability space. Market mechanisms and the political structure are examples of some of the underlying structural processes that affect people’s freedoms. Therefore in the application of the Capability Approach to assess the wellbeing of small producers of milk in Uganda, for instance, it is necessary to take into account the impact of subsidies given to milk producers in the industrialised world. If land
regularisation of informal settlements in developing countries is the resource assessed through the Capability Approach, the structural factors relate to the formal market forces entering such settlements due to regularisation, pushing out the poorest by raising the price of property. The purpose of highlighting these three levels of conversion factors is to clarify the diverse issues that comprise the capability space. These three levels are interconnected, shaping and influencing each other.

This drive towards elaborating a framework in the field of development that can focus on the process of making and realising choices, incorporating diversity and multiplicity while sustaining conceptual building blocks, resonates with Ostrom’s (2005) application of the Institutional Analysis and Development framework. Ostrom (2005) elaborates on the Action Arena, which is where institutions, communities, and rules operate, affecting the process of making/realising choices. Nevertheless, the two approaches differ in the sense that one focuses on wellbeing and agency and the other focuses mainly on the operations of institutions. To illustrate this understanding of the Capability Approach, Figure 1 analyses the process of transforming the resource ‘bike’ into functionings.

In this context, the framework is applied to measure the impact of a project that provides bicycles for residents of a squatter settlement. The functionings are the various things that people value, their dimensions of wellbeing, listed here as security, mobility, income, leisure, inner peace, and health. The first component of the capability space is choice. Can residents from that squatter settlement choose another type of transport if they so wish, such as a bus? Would they ride a bike because of the lack of alternatives or by choice? The next components of the capability space are the ability and opportunity to use the bike. The individual factors relate, for example, to residents’ physical conditions, since some might have a disability that impedes them from using a bike. Local factors such as collective norms might also affect the conversion of resources. For example, in certain contexts it might be unacceptable for women to ride bikes, or it may be unsafe to do so in some neighbourhoods. Finally, structural factors also influence this process of conversion. For instance, the security and conditions of roads or the availability of cycle paths would also influence one’s freedom to ride a bike.

![Figure 1: Capability space](Source: compiled by the author)
Such conversion factors are assessed here in relation not only to their impact on enhancing mobility, but also to the other functionings, which may be aspirations that are in the process of being achieved or potential aspirations, not necessarily being pursued. In the context of the bike, the user might have the freedom to use it for leisure but choose not to do so, opting to use it merely to transport goods and generate income. In this case, the bike is contributing to the achievement of the functioning income, while leisure is a potential aspiration. Functionings have intrinsic and instrumental values. In the context of the bike, mobility is an end in itself, but it is also a means to generate income or achieve inner peace. The evaluative space is people’s choice, ability, and opportunity to use the bike to contribute to the achievement of the various functionings identified, whether actually pursued or merely potential.

Agency and power

Figure 1 also stresses the importance of two components underlying the capability space and the identification of functionings: power and agency. As argued above, agency is addressed in the Capability Approach literature as one of the pillars of the investigation and expansion of freedom. The concept of agency is directly related to relations of power. It is argued here that by incorporating power relations into the Approach, structural and collective norms are explicitly incorporated in the process of evaluating or planning policies and development projects.

Agency is normally associated with one’s ability to choose. Crocker (2007) defined it as a special type of capability which underpins the whole process of the Capability Approach. The literature has stressed the importance of the concept of collective agency, which is associated with groups’ ability to make claims (Ibrahim 2006). Meanwhile the concept of power has attracted many different definitions, from the focus on encroachments on individuals to the focus on structural mechanisms and knowledge.

Eyben (2004) reviews the literature on power relations and provides a comprehensive approach to link power and poverty reduction, which resonates with this application of the Capability Approach. She identifies five main perceptions of power that are useful for development practice: power to, power over, power with, power as knowledge, and power structure (see Table 2).

While Eyben associates Amartya Sen’s writings with the conceptualisation of power as power to, it is argued here that to assess the process of transforming resources into functionings it is necessary to take into consideration the five notions of power. If capabilities are perceived as capacities, then it is correct to argue that the Capability Approach only addresses people’s power to achieve the things that they value. But as the capability space is compiled by the various things that influence the conversion of resources into functionings, power over, power with, and power structure become fundamental components that need to be unpacked. Nevertheless, Ibrahim and Alkire (2007), while acknowledging these various processes of power influencing agency, focus their measurement analysis on people’s abilities to act, rather than on the structural preconditions for agency.

Furthermore, power also shapes people’s ability to identify the things that they value. Sen (1999) calls this process ‘adaptive preferences’. Such a concept has a direct link to the idea of ‘false consciousness’, which according to Lukes (1974) impedes people from knowing their real interests. The Freirean pedagogical tradition has argued that people need access to knowledge to develop a critical consciousness and overcome processes of domination.

This understanding of the Capability Approach incorporates power analysis to make visible the various types of power that operate in the process of valuing and achieving functionings. However, the operational question remains that of how the capability approach can be


**Table 2: Conceiving power**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of power</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power to</td>
<td><em>Power to</em> is related to one’s ability to choose and act as one wishes. According to Eyben (2004), this conception has been the approach taken by the World Bank, in its liberal focus on autonomy. Thus, such perception has led to the idea of empowerment as an instrument to enhance efficiency, rather than overcoming structural patterns of domination and subordination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power over</td>
<td><em>Power over</em> takes into account the relational components of power. The three dimensions of power by Steven Lukes (1974) elaborate on how power is exerted. Such literature has been assimilated by the critics of participation, by analysing how participatory processes of decision making might be perpetuating power imbalances, rather than challenging them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power with</td>
<td><em>Power with</em> ‘is a term that describes common ground among different interests and the building of collective strength through organization and the development of shared values and strategies’ (Eyben 2004: 22). Therefore here power is also understood as a positive strength to the process of change. As identified by Scott (1985), the subordinates have mechanisms of resistance and acquire power through collective action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power as knowledge</td>
<td><em>Power as knowledge</em> is based on Foucault’s writings which perceive the production of knowledge associated with the production of power relations. Thus discourses are created and reproduced through power and knowledge. Post-development critiques apply such analysis of power to argue that approaches to development and tools are seen as means to the perpetuation of existing discourses of domination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power structure</td>
<td><em>Power structure</em> is associated with the ‘fundamental systematic forces’ that define the rules of the game that power relations operate. Eyben (2004) also defines such systematic forces as relations of power that repeat themselves continuously, forming a pattern and becoming institutionalised.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: based on Eyben 2004)

applied, and which tools can be used to unpack the relations of power operating in a certain context.

**Capability Approach, Rights-Based Approach, and Sustainable Livelihoods Framework: a comparison**

The aim of proposing the Capability Approach as a development approach is to contribute to existing frameworks in elaborating a comprehensive and radical development alternative. Two dominant frameworks in contemporary practice of development are the Rights-Based Approach (RBA) and Sustainable-Livelihoods Framework (SLF). Further research is needed to clarify the relation between these frameworks and the Capability Approach, but here we elaborate on some initial comparisons and the specific contribution of the Capability Approach.

**Rights-Based Approach**

There is a diversity of understanding about what constitutes the Rights-Based Approach (RBA) to development. The perspectives vary from a solely legal approach to guarantee the protection
of individuals and groups through international conventions and resolutions, to one that is concerned with social, cultural, and political struggles led by autonomous movements. In the latter perspective, the legal aspect is just one dimension (IDS 2003). However, the underlying motivation of the different understandings of the RBA is the protection of an agreed set of norms and values. There have been various emphases on the incorporation of rights in development thinking and practice. However, there are six overall common principles and concepts that are outlined in Table 3.

The Capability Approach and the RBA have similar normative principles of development. Both believe that development ought to concentrate on the expansion or protection of a set of agreed norms or values. While they also differ in a variety of ways, one referring to an international set of agreed rights, and the other focusing on the identification of the things that people value doing and being, proponents of RBA argue that a list of agreed norms should guide development praxis. The conceptualisations of development as freedom and the protection of rights also diverge over the process of achieving common concerns and motivations (UNDP 2000). First, as outlined by Sen (2005), the Capability Approach takes a broader evaluative space by focusing on the opportunity aspect of freedom, while the protection of human rights is concerned with securing the process of realising freedoms. Thus, while the human-rights discourse is mostly concerned with protecting the political processes of transforming choices into achievements, the Capability Approach also incorporates an analysis of people’s choices and abilities.

Table 3: Basic concepts of the rights-based approach (RBA)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The shift from needs to rights</td>
<td>According to Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi (2004), while the basic-needs approach is about more resources, infrastructure, and services, the RBA focuses on the equitable distribution of existing resources and expanding people’s access to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>People as agents of change</td>
<td>The second common principle that links most of the applications of the RBA is the perception of people as partner citizens in the development process, and not needy beneficiaries (Slim 2002).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Enhancing accountability</td>
<td>By specifying an internationally agreed set of values and norms, the RBA is explicit about its principles, thus enhancing citizens’ ability to claim their rights and hold states to account for their duties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wrestling participation and empowerment</td>
<td>One of the central objectives of the RBA is to reclaim participation and empowerment from the neo-liberal instrumentalist appropriation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Challenging power inequalities</td>
<td>As explained by Mander (2005), ‘the first distinct feature of rights-based approaches lies in the recognition of the structural causes of people’s impoverishment, of the fact that their condition is the outcome of the active denial of their rights and entitlements by social, economic and political structures and processes’ (2005: 239).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Politicisation of aid</td>
<td>Through international legal mechanisms, enhancement of participation, improving judicial systems, supporting good governance, and reflecting on power inequalities, the RBA re-politicises aid. According to O’Brien (2005), the apparent neutrality of aid is actually partisan and promotes particular political actors. Through the RBA, politics assumes centre-stage in development assistance, as aid is guided by higher, consensual, or universal political values.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: compiled by the author)
There is also a fundamental difference of application between the legalistic version of the RBA and Sen’s Capability Approach. For the root causes of poverty to be tackled, RBA supports the formulation of a set of internationally agreed norms. Sen, however, criticises universalities by refusing to identify an overarching list of basic capabilities (Sen 1999). Thus the Capability Approach is an open framework which needs to be contextualised according to the purpose of study or practice. Then, public reasoning also has a slightly different purpose in each of the approaches. RBA talks about participation in the process of contextualising and protecting rights, and Sen also identifies the need for public scrutiny in the process of identifying values.

As argued in the 2000 Human Development Report, the human-rights discourse complements Sen’s Capability Approach in three main ways. First, it offers a clear and legal framework to claim from other people or institutions the access to certain freedoms. The RBA therefore is seen as a mechanism for applying the expansion of freedoms. Such an application emphasises ‘the idea that others have duties to facilitate and enhance human development’ (UNDP 2000:21). Second, the RBA is seen as a tool to protect some basic rights in the process of the expansion of freedoms. As argued in the Report: ‘Individual rights express the limits on the losses that individuals can permissibly be allowed to bear, even in the promotion of noble social goals’ (UNDP 2000: 22). Third, RBA complements the Capability Approach by focusing on the scrutiny of the process of the expansion of freedoms, by monitoring the conduct of those involved in the praxis of development. As argued by Sen (2005), all three ways in which the RBA complements the Capability Approach are by its focus on the process aspect of freedom, thus addressing and safeguarding the mechanisms by which capabilities are realised.

On the other hand, rights-based commentators argue that Sen’s writings have expanded the RBA and that they have been crucial in applying the legal framework comprehensively in other spheres of development practice (Gready and Ensor 2005). Nevertheless, Sen (1999) has clearly stated the limitation of the human-rights approach, arguing that ‘...there is something a little simple-minded about the entire conceptual structure that underlies the oratory on human rights’ (1999: 227). Therefore, talking about capabilities and functionings would be broadening the spectrum of the RBA, allowing it to be applied in a variety of contexts with different purposes.

Uvin (2002) criticises the approach of redefining development in terms of a certain set of rights by arguing that it does not clarify obligations or offer any practical guidelines to tackle power relations. Thus, adopting Sen’s thinking, it ‘costs nothing’ for development agencies. Uvin (2002) concludes: ‘All of them [rights-based approaches] are to be implemented out there, in this separate place called the Third World, but do not require any critique of the global system and our place in it’ (2002: 9).

Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) also shares similar motivations to those apparent in Sen’s writings. As with the Capability Approach, the SLF emerged in the late 1980s out of the growing dissatisfaction with the income-maximisation approach. Its basic concepts emphasise some familiar features: participation, multidimensional conceptualisation of poverty, and empowerment. As with the previous approaches, SLF is also concerned with people’s potential and strengths and how they are converted into positive livelihood outcomes. This approach aims to address issues of vulnerability, risk, and insecurity. The means to combat these hardships are the assets that individuals, households, and communities have. Assets, called ‘capital’ or ‘capabilities’, include material and social resources. The accumulation of assets is
understood to constitute stocks of capital. These stocks are divided into five categories: physical; financial; human; social; and natural (see Box 1).

**Box 1: Definition of capital assets**

*Physical capital* (also known as produced or man-made capital) comprises the stock of plant, equipment, infrastructure, and other productive resources owned by individuals, the business sector, or the country itself.

*Financial capital* consists of the financial resources available to people (savings, supplies of credit).

*Human capital* includes investments in education, health, and the nutrition of individuals. Labour is a critical asset linked to investments in human capital; health status determines people’s capacity to work; and skills and education determine the returns from their labour.

*Social capital* is defined as the rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity, and trust embedded in social relations, social structures, and society’s institutional arrangements, which enable its members to achieve their individual and community objectives. Social capital is embedded in social institutions at the micro-institutional level – communities and households – as well as referring to the rules and regulations governing formalised institutions in the market place, the political system, and civil society.

*Natural capital* includes the stocks of environmentally provided assets such as soil, atmosphere, forests, minerals, water, and wetlands. In rural communities the critical productive asset for the poor is land; in urban areas it is land for shelter.

*(Source: Moser and Norton 2001: 7)*

According to DFID (1999), the SLF is: (1) people-centred, as argued by Carney *et al.* (1999), working with people ‘in a way that is congruent with their current livelihoods strategies, social environment and ability to adapt’ *(ibid.*: 8); (2) holistic and dynamic, adopting a universal approach that can adapt to different and changing contexts and purposes; (3) building on strengths and existent potentials; (4) focusing on long-term sustainability by focusing on stresses, shocks, and assets that will not undermine the natural-resource base (Carney 1998). These components of the SLF are very similar to Sen’s Capability Approach. The livelihood literature frequently employs the language of ‘capabilities’ and openly states that it has incorporated some of Sen’s concepts. However, a closer comparison between the two approaches reveals conceptual and practical differences.

First, the application of Sen’s concepts in the livelihoods approach is underdeveloped and limited. The word ‘capabilities’ is used interchangeably with ‘assets’ and at other times with ‘capital’. Thus, capabilities are related to the capacity to acquire resources. But Sen’s concept of capabilities has a broader definition. It is perceived as a space that incorporates the choice of potential achievements and which explores the process of using resources.

Therefore SLF ends up taking Sen’s concept of capabilities back to a utilitarian application. The five domains of assets are an expansion of the social-capital theory. They explore the instrumental values of people’s livelihoods in the enhancement of resources and the generation of capital. Agency is not analysed directly, and SLF does not explore more personal dimensions.
of wellbeing, such as self-realisation and freedom to appear in public without shame. Moser and Norton (2001) reflects on such limitation by arguing as follows:

\[G\]iven the highly contested nature of the concept of capital (particularly as it relates to social capital), building on Amartya Sen’s important work in this area, there may be considerable advantages in categorising human, social and political capabilities rather than capital. (Moser and Norton 2001: 19)

They also recognise that ‘...these issues are highly complex. It is recognised that they are underdeveloped in the current concept paper, and therefore are critically important areas for further analytical work’ (2001: 19). The consequence of such a limitation is an approach that is very technical and not able to address structural conditions affecting livelihoods.

On the other hand, exactly for being technical and focusing on five clear domains, SLF becomes an easier framework to apply than Sen’s Capabilities Approach. It is also easier to link with other approaches such as the RBA. In this way, SLF has a more specific and clear space within the field of development discourses. Its limitations can be addressed by combining it with other approaches, thus creating a strong tool for the process of implementing development programmes and overcoming deprivations.

**Conclusion**

During informal talks with residents of squatter settlements in Salvador da Bahia in Brazil, the following question was often posed to them: *Do you think of yourself as poor?* More than once the reply was: *I am not poor, I am weak.* Then respondents explained the different assets around them which influenced their strength to achieve the things that they valued. The shift from what makes one poor to what makes one weak lies at the crux of the Capability Approach. It is related to the openness of the goals of development and the need to focus on processes. Being *weak* is related to the idea that strengths can lead to different types of achievement. Being *poor* is associated with an absolute level, related to passivity and uniform deprivation. In contrast, being *weak* is related to ability, opportunity, choice, freedom, and thus the process aspect of development.

This article provides an understanding of the Capability Approach that seeks to contribute to the elaboration of a development alternative. Instead of focusing on capabilities, the Capability Approach is applied by focusing on the capability space that constitutes the transformation of resources into achieved functionings. Within the fundamental components of this approach are included agency, power relations, and participation. The Rights-Based Approach is enhanced by this development alternative in the focus on the aspects of opportunity as well as the process aspect of freedom. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework could overcome its utilitarian limitations by being incorporated into the Capability Approach, within the process of converting resources into what people value. Vulnerability, risks, and assets are components that shape the conversion factors of the Capability Approach.

Not assessed here, however, are the underlying limitations of producing and implementing development alternatives. This article engages with frameworks, their weaknesses and strengths, rather than the analysis of the structures within which such frameworks operate. However, the Capability Approach proposes spaces in which to incorporate such analysis in the process of development. By thinking in terms of capability space, institutional arrangements are assessed as being fundamental to the process of influencing people’s ability to achieve the things that they value. Therefore it is argued here that approaches to development can explicitly incorporate this reflexivity of their role in the process of moving from rhetoric into transformation, without being coerced, manipulated, and co-opted into preconceived goals.
The article has sought to contribute to the elaboration of a development alternative that aims to examine the realm of development, one that does not attempt to generate universal values, but is based on local contexts; a development alternative that provides a comprehensive theory which can safeguard notions of participation and empowerment; a development alternative that addresses issues of agency but also structural processes; and finally a development alternative that is operational, applicable, and useful for actors in the development process.

References


Sen’s Capability Approach as a framework to the practice of development


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