

Unpacking the socio-historical construction of the Capability Approach and its consequences in terms of applicability and relevance in developing contexts

The case of self-realization, freedom and agency in Kathmandu urban slums

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Socio-historical origins of the Capability Approach

History of a concept

The concept of *capability* was first exposed by Amartya Sen in the early 1980s and presented as a ground-breaking tool in the landscape of moral theories of justice as it tried to achieve equality in one's understanding of human well-being and capacities. It explored the notion of individual capacities and entitlements, stating that individuals reached freedom through living the lives they value and have reasons to value. Rather than using the traditional space of income, commodities, utility or primary goods, Sen argued – against popular theories of social justice at the time, such as John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* – that the *capability space* was the most appropriate space in which to assess welfare in an equal way, encompassing the influence of individual characteristics, individual freedom and wants.

Obtaining equality in the space of primary goods – '*things that every rational man is presumed to want*' – or in a utilitarian space – '*having an equal distribution of commodities among individuals*' – entailed having a primary focus on goods and commodities, the possessions of which did not automatically implied a direct and proportional increase in well-being. The idea that equal access to commodities did not automatically give rise to similar outcomes, and that opportunities could be objectively constrained by talent, discrimination, handicap or other external circumstances (Walzer, 1983; Held, 1994) led Sen to consider capabilities as a workable alternative to achieve objective interpersonal comparisons – especially in the case of poverty analysis.

The Capability Approach therefore introduced the *necessary space* to conceptualize the influence of interpersonal variations of personal characteristics, or the variations in the social environment, which can affect the convertibility of commodities and possessions to outcomes or particular ends. As not all goods and commodities contribute to well-being, a further advantage of using the capability space to assess welfare lies in the absence of reliance on market data – which allows the introduction of more abstract or non-marketable goods (health, education, absence of threat, security, etc.) in the assessment of well-being across individuals (Sen, 1985).

Individual variations and external influences being accounted for, the Capability Approach claims its superiority from its potential applicability to any cultural or social contexts, as it conceptualizes well-being and allows interpersonal comparisons regardless of how the needs and wants are expressed in particular situations. To a large extent, the Capability Approach has been shaped around Methodological Individualism – a philosophical position arguing that social phenomena can be accounted for by solely investigating the actions of individuals; social institutions being understood as a simple aggregation of individual dispositions. One of the consequences of anchoring the capability space in this perspective lies in the extent to which individual liberty has been set as a priority when assessing well-being across individuals (Burchardt, 2006); by contrast, the freedom to choose has remained an important determinant of the way in which individuals find their position in society, informing the setting of individual freedoms through an understanding of institutional structures. As Dean

(2003) argues, rights, freedoms and to a logical extent capabilities, are based on a predominantly liberal view of society.

Consequently, the socio-historical construction of the Capability Approach has been mostly embedded in liberalism and individualism – which led to the acceptance and use of the concept in the Western world but also beyond, in differentiated contexts where the sole actions of individuals are explored as if they showed and revealed the full extent of the influence of social institutions or external circumstances. As one's advocates a particular view about local institutions and social ecosystems, considerations of cultural differences tend to evaporate. In the specific case of the Capability Approach, liberalism and individualism serve as the bases for understanding agents' capabilities – while the societal processes around capabilities are understood as peripheral, although shaping the need for individual valuation pursued by the agent (Deneulin and Stewart, 2000).

Freedom and Agency in the Capability Approach

The definition of freedom in the Capability Approach has been framed by the epistemological approach taken by Sen and its proponents. As well-being equates *in simple terms* to living a life of genuine choice, the approach to freedom has been one of *self-direction*, encompassing the capacity to shape one's path as an individual with particular characteristics and circumstances. Freedom therefore does not relate to rights or similar accounts of *de jure* freedom – freedom in the Capability Approach is understood as *effective* freedom, the use of which gives access to *actual/real* opportunities.

Agency has a somehow similar definition and stands out as one of the main pillar supporting an approach to well-being in the capability space. Agency encompasses an additional dimension compared to freedom, stating that “*what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important*” aligns with the concept of capability (Sen, 1985). Sen also adds that agency is embedded in the actions of “*someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well*” (Sen, 1999).

As a result, the influence of social institutions – which can be understood as broadly as the family, the kin system, the social group or wider political institutions – or the influence of external circumstances on a person's ability to act on what he/she value and has reason to value, are absent from the set of factors investigated in the capability space – although defined as present and acting as shapers of the type of freedom and agency individuals experience. Freedom and agency, when anchored in liberalism and individualism perspectives, are therefore not understood as *absolute* and *unconditional* concepts but rather act as ‘guarantors’ of a certain degree of choice and freedom when it comes to living a valued life.

This idea refers partly to the concept of ‘valuation neglect’, and the extent to which freedom and agency remain delimited within the space of what a person values, leaving aside the full set of values and potential achievements a person could assess before making a judgment and taking action. Agency is considered as *complete, total*, as far as it is fully expressed in this

delimited space: “Achievements can be judged in terms of [one’s] own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well” (Sen, 1999). ‘Valuation neglect’ therefore intervenes and interacts further with the notions of agency and freedom through the *dispositions* of a person to, for instance, be happy with small comforts, or limit his/her envies to goals that seem ‘realistic’. As a consequence, the dispositions for formulating value judgments about a certain life or another, a certain type of activity or another, further limit and narrow the space for agency within which capabilities are assessed – in other words, some of the possibilities, opportunities, are neglected as part of the activity of choosing a valuable life.

Eventually, the socio-historical construction of the Capability Approach can be equated to a new representation of choice, in which the influence of external factors and circumstances are left aside from the investigation of reasons behind choices. Assumptions relating to these influences being captured in individual choices can therefore turn the capability space to an ineffective space for assessing individual well-being in different cultural contexts. Neglecting the motivations and the factors shaping these motivations highlights a consequent gap in the capability space, which is that choice cannot – as a common rule – be assumed to reflect a person’s well-being without considering obligations, external circumstances, institutional rules, etc.

Capabilities and International Development

“Development can be seen as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” (opening sentence, *Development as Freedom*, Sen, 1999). Whilst the construction of capabilities as a widely-used concept cannot be disentangled from its anchor in International Development, it remains nevertheless important to identify the rationale behind using the capability space as a metric for well-being in developing contexts.

Uses of the capability metric in different cultural contexts

A key contemporary issue in International Development lies in questioning the adequacy for using the Capability Approach in differentiated cultural contexts. When reviewing the literature, it can be seen that Sen’s approach has made major contributions to the research and practices of human development in areas as diverse as poverty reduction, gender studies, education, health issues and democracy.

As underlined in the previous section, it seems that capabilities are potentially applicable to any cultural or social contexts, as they allow interpersonal comparisons of well-being regardless of how the needs and wants are expressed in particular situations. As Deneulin (2006) points out, “if the capability approach is a theory guiding and assessing development policies according to the capabilities people have reason to choose and value, given the structures of inequality within which people express their ‘good reasons’ to value certain capabilities, it seems that the approach crucially requires a critical account of the ‘good reasons’ people may have to value certain capabilities”. As societies tend to give different meanings to needs and wants, to freedom as being such a want, or to agency and self-

realization, a crucial question to ask focuses on whether the Capability Approach can account for the diversity of circumstances in which individuals experience well-being, and the extent to which the freedom and agency approach to valuing a certain type of living over another is generalizable to any set of values. Following on this idea, Binder (2009) explains: “*Given the wide scope of its application and the possible different conceptions of well-being among different persons, groups, societies and cultures it would seem obvious to question whether the capability approach is flexible enough to take such differences into account. To what extent can the framework, which is rather general, be fruitfully applied in different cultural settings? Is it sufficiently flexible to accommodate cultural differences?*”.

Accounting for cultural diversity: A space deliberately left open?

Discussions about capabilities have encompassed different aspects over the past decades – as approach, method and/or evaluative tool (Gasper 2002). While the Capability Approach as a philosophical theory has been much discussed against theories of social justice or theories of welfare, the use and practice of the capability space as a space for assessing and evaluating well-being across individuals has mainly been limited to a policy and academic dialogue accepting the idea that no definite list of central human capabilities could be established nor final.

The Capability Approach is therefore *deliberately* incomplete – although it has been operationalized in different contexts over the years. The value of functionings and the conversion factors turning opportunities into *actual/real* opportunities have taken various meanings in each operationalization process, and as Sen has been pointing out on several occasions, the incompleteness of the approach is what allows accommodating all possible views on the meanings of well-being, across contexts and individuals. As Binder (2009) emphasizes, “*(...) these lacunae make it possible to fill the blank spaces according to the purpose of the exercise and the concrete (cultural) context under consideration*”.

Culture is understood here as a common set of values, specific to a particular context where norms and practices are expressed in a relatively consistent way. Values can encompass religious, historical or political aspects, and are embedded in people’s behaviours and attitudes in a way which allows individuals to recognize the expression of the agreed set of values in others’ actions. In the Capability Approach, a bundle of *beings* and *doings* defines a person’s state, and can range from basic states such as *being in a secured context* to *being an active member of a community* – and given the number of possibilities for a person to *be* and *do*, a relevant question arises relating to the extent to which culture (sets of values, norms and practices) defines and shapes the relative importance of *beings* and *doings* from one person to another. An important aspect to consider when unpacking the reasons behind individuals’ choices in relation to the sort of living they value lies in the relative worth or importance assigned to the different alternatives a person is faced with.

Consequently, social and cultural practices tend to have a significant role in shaping one’s capacity to convert a set of opportunities (opportunity for local political involvement, leadership skills) into actual capabilities (being an active member in a community). Conversion factors encompass the influence of a wide range of norms and values (preferences for local political leader with a specific ethnic background, social networking

aspects of political participation, religious values) which might affect community practices. Accounting for cultural diversity is not easily achieved in a single conceptual framework such as the Capability framework – although flexibility in the understanding of what makes a person choosing a certain type of living over another could potentially be sufficient to accommodate cultural differences. As explained by Binder (2009):“(…) *In some societies men are not supposed to wear skirts. In this case men will not be able to derive the functioning ‘being clothed’ as well as the functioning of ‘appearing in public without shame’ simultaneously from the commodity skirt. In this case a prevailing norm restricts the set of feasible functionings open to a person via social conversion factors. Alternatively, it may be the case that cultural practices increase the scope of functionings which can be derived from a certain characteristic of a commodity. One example may be traditional knowledge of how to use certain plants for medical and other purposes*”.

Leaving the space open for different cultural dimensions to be expressed in a person’s set of alternative choices therefore implies a conception of well-being which is not only based on what a person is able to be and do, but which considers the value ascribed to different functionings as a discrete, individual-based and informed choice across individuals, groups, societies and cultures. Cultural practices are seen as social structures the individual is – to a large extent – aware of, and understood as active decision-making components in how a person values a type of living over another. As a space *deliberately left open*, the Capability Approach nonetheless raises the issue of the limitations introduced by the presence of cultural influences and their relative influence on conversion factors – and whether these are consciously integrated in the decision-making processes of socially and culturally-embedded agents.

Decision-making and poverty: Limitations of a Capability-based approach

As “*the presence of norms can cause the value of functionings to depend on the capability set of which they form part*” (Binder, 2009), a practical way of testing the assumptions of this research lies in exploring the different values assigned to functionings when exposed to the presence of norms in socially and culturally-influenced contexts. The following case study presents a reflection and early findings relating to applying a Capability-based approach to the understanding of decision-making processes in poverty contexts, and in particular slum areas: *Is the capability space sufficiently flexible to accommodate for the cultural differences relating to how people choose and value one type of living over another in poverty contexts? Is the overarching focus on individual freedom and agency applicable to differentiated contexts such as the poverty space?*

Capabilities and poverty: A study of slum areas

To focus on poverty contexts implies a specific understanding of a social group and its particular cultural attributes, as explored through the lens of a geographically-bounded area in the case of slum areas. As an enclosed space with individuals sharing similar living

conditions, the slum emerges as a convenient entity to study, where differentiated views on cultural norms and practices are expressed through diverse origins, geographically or ethnically, of individuals who choose to migrate to a large city. Building upon the specifics of Kathmandu urban slums, a common definition of slum settlements relates to the ability of rural migrants to 'find a place', to fit in a social fabric which is not always prepared to integrate a large migrant population. An important component affecting the capability space in the case Kathmandu urban slum areas therefore lies in the constraints and absence of choice for slum dwellers to occupy this part of the city, while a particular cultural context arises from the patchwork of social and cultural origins of migrants and the sharing of impoverished social conditions.

Mapping the set of alternatives and possibilities of *being* and *doing* in slum areas is used here as a proxy for understanding the decision-making processes at play in people's strategies for making a living. The Capability Approach is therefore a convenient entry point to assessing values and valued life outcomes of individuals sharing similar living conditions and likely to have the broad characteristics of a social group. Urban slums encompass different aspects and reasons for valuing a type of living over another; and whether a Capability-based approach can unravel the complexities of decisions, freedom to act and agency in one's life trajectory – as it does in liberal and individualist societies by investigating the actions of individuals from the perspective of individual liberties – is a crucial aspect to testing the suitability of the capability space in differentiated cultural contexts.

Tensions between the individual and the collective

A key limitation, as further illustrated in the case study below, lies in the extent to which focusing on the freedom and individual liberties of the agent – when it comes to choosing a type of living over another – is not enough to account for the diversity of circumstances. For instance, decision-making processes in poverty contexts show that freedom does not exactly reflect what is valued by the individuals themselves, but rather encompass other aspects of the lives agents value – aspects which derive from more *collective* dimensions of decision-making, and which cannot be captured at the individual level as defined in the capability framework.

As underlined by Sen and Dreze (2002), "*the [capability] approach is essentially a 'people-centred' approach, which puts human agency (rather than organizations such as markets or governments) at the centre of the stage. The crucial role of social opportunities is to expand the realm of human agency and freedom, both as an end in itself and as a means of further expansion of freedom*". The extent to which social opportunities are influenced by social circumstances, various cultural understandings of what an 'opportunity' is and the different meanings given to the conversion factors which help convert opportunities into 'actual' opportunities, illustrates the potential tensions between *individually-based and -measured capabilities* and the *collective aspects defining access to capabilities* in various social situations.

The case of self-realization, freedom and agency in Kathmandu urban slums

A collection of semi-structured interviews is presented and analyzed in this section as evidence of a coherent set of meanings about a specific topic area, providing insights relating to how slum dwellers in the urban areas of Kathmandu make a living and value their lives. This fieldwork research was conducted from January to April 2013 and gathered the life stories and perceptions of 50 families living in the Thapathali slum area. Evidence presented in this section reflects information collected using semi-structured interviews and life trajectory methodologies with 50 head of household respondents, transcribed in a written collection of texts. Shortcomings related to language and translation from Nepali to English have been addressed as far as it was made possible by keeping the level of language and vocabulary set of the interviewees.

Asking from an individual to define and list his/her capabilities proved difficult as the social context, the family's influence, the extended kin system, the cultural values and religious beliefs were constantly brought up as reasons for living the life people valued. The lack of capabilities to access more 'formal lives', with higher living standards, access to health facilities, electricity, drinking water, education – all definitions of 'valuable lives' included, was flagged up by respondents and to a certain extent, the idea that 'valuable' was linked to the social environment in which individuals took part raised as an obvious and manifest finding of the survey.

No such thing as a set of capabilities slum dwellers were lacking or missing to achieve the type of living they valued could be developed *without mentioning collectively-defined approaches* to the quest for 'formal living'. For these reasons, this section presents a practical case from Kathmandu, Nepal, with the objective of unpacking the tensions between individually- and collectively- defined capabilities.

(1) The Capability Approach considers the *freedom* of choosing a life one's has reasons to value as the main determinant of slum dwellers' strive for self-realization. However, *reasons* for valuing a certain life over another engage with broader processes at the collective level.

Based on the collected interviews, it appears that further aspects of *reasons* for valuing a certain life are expressed as part of collective processes taking place at household, extended family and community levels, building upon the idea of a need for an *extended space* to conceptualize the influence of variations in the social environment which affect the convertibility of commodities and possessions to outcomes or particular ends.

The feeling of belonging to a community seems to be more important in the valuation of certain opportunities compared to others, than individual ways or individually-designed strategies for making a living: *"I feel I belong here because I have friends in this community and there are no tensions as everyone has the same kind of living"; "Sometimes we go and search for construction work in groups. It is usually better to go as a group for the good relationships between fellow workers"; "Being a street vendor is fine, it is a common job here, many people do it"; "Formal work is better, because people don't point their fingers at you".*

Getting the approval from the community when acting upon a certain set of livelihood strategies is therefore an important determinant and factor influencing the conversion of opportunities into *actual* capabilities. The lack of one's capacity to try a different strategy seems to be constrained by the views of the community relating to what defines a *worthy* occupation, enhancing one's social status in the context of the slum settlement. Fitting into the social norm, even though *locally defined* at the slum level, can have more importance than the content of the occupation itself: *"Working in a meat shop is not exactly considered as a good occupation. It is just for sustaining the family. My husband is doing this job because he knows how to do it. That's what he knows how to do. (...) People from Thapathali order meat from us for festival times, we do not feel bad for doing this job"*.

The importance of belonging to a social group, based on a set of collectively-defined norms, therefore establishes a clear distinction between what is 'valuable' in terms of opportunities at the individual level and what is 'valuable' in terms of actual capabilities at the collective level. The poverty context in which these values are shaped reflects the importance of having similar livelihood strategies as a guarantee for social cohesion within a social group as small and heterogeneous as a slum settlement in an urban setting (*"People's lives are very homogenous. No one is more successful than the others"*).

A worthwhile life therefore encompasses a sense of belonging to one's personal environment, which can be expressed at the household, the extended kin or the social group levels. Norms and practices related to *women* is an accurate illustration of the influence of culture on conversion factors: *"Working from home means I can take care of the baby. I don't earn much. But it is a woman occupation"; "Intellectual work is better than physical work, because it can be done from home. It is good for women"; "Women going abroad for work is not considered good. I'd rather not do it"*.

Fitting in the religious cultural practices also influences the shape of the decision-making space in the context of Kathmandu urban slums; complying with the social expenses relating to religious festivals in order to fulfill a social and religious duty is a collectively-defined practice. There is a collective preference for living a life the wider community has reasons to value: *"When we run out of money, we prefer not to take a loan because we know we cannot repay. Children work and help, they do mechanics, repairing jobs in motorcycle workshops for instance. (...) Periods of hardship are around festival times. Last time was six months ago. We had to buy new clothes"*.

A further aspect of valuing a certain life over another lies in the **values slum dwellers assign to the collective organization of their micro-level society** – beyond the importance of individual freedom and liberties: *"He [my husband] is doing iron work, small pots made in iron. He learned the skills from his family during his childhood. That's what people from his caste do and have in terms of skills"; "My husband has a good social status with his work because he fulfills a need in society, based on his caste occupation"*. A functionalist approach is therefore predominant in certain social groups, and the idea of 'valuable' is then deeply anchored in its relations to the social environment, the collective, in which individuals take part.

(2) At the social group level, acting upon opportunities is shaped by a whole set of collective factors, and the notion of living a worthwhile life is more defined by imitative behaviors rather than individual freedoms.

The slum settlement can be defined as a micro-level society where aspirations, norms and value systems are locally shaped. The influence of social institutions – which can be understood as broadly as the family, the kin system, the social group or wider political institutions – on a person's ability to act on what he/she value and has reason to value are deemed important in the poverty space of Kathmandu urban slums. Shaping the type of freedom and agency individuals experience, the value and belief systems act as influencers of the extent to which freedom and agency remain delimited within the space of what a person values, leaving aside the full set of values and potential achievements a person could assess before making a judgment and deciding on his/her type of living.

'Valuation neglect' shows the extent to which the *dispositions* of slum dwellers to strive for further opportunities are limited by their own interpretation of their situation. Formulating value judgments about a certain life or another, or about a certain type of activity or another, demonstrates the narrowness of the space for agency within which capabilities are assessed: *"There is a good community spirit. No social class as such, everyone is struggling the same"*, *"Everyone in this slum is similar, good clothing and good food is enough to live a simple and happy life"* – it is therefore likely that some of the possibilities, opportunities, are neglected as part of the activity of choosing a valuable life.

There also seems to be a very limited space for individual decision-making, as the societal processes around capabilities are the important factors shaping *the need for individual valuation* pursued by the agent – therefore influencing the *aspirations* of these agents: *"Here most people do the same jobs. There are no new strategies, no role model. (...) Most people are working in the construction sector. So it is seen as a good job by everyone. People find that this job fits them"*; *"Most people are doing the same job. Construction work. They do not judge each other. Construction work is good enough because people do not have any other skills anyway"*. The influence of the social structure at the micro-level makes the kinship, the community and the social group responsible for reproducing imitative strategies (*"There are no role models, everyone is kind of doing the same activities. It helps with solidarity. (...) People who want to do something new, they take trainings, but it is not for everyone"*). As a result, there is a notion of self-realization which does not involve the individual as an isolated agent making conscious decisions for him/herself: the sole actions of individuals cannot be explored as if they showed and revealed the full extent of the influence of social institutions or external circumstances on one's life, but they rather indicate the collective constraints (or enabling factors) in converting opportunities into capabilities, which is a missing aspect of the Capability Approach.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research is not to list the different aspects and determinants of reasons for valuing a type of living over another, nor the means for achieving this type of living; it

rather tries to understand the broader dynamics at play in the definition of value and valued life outcomes for individuals and social groups belonging to various cultural contexts. This conceptual paper therefore reflects the need to question what is meant by *capabilities* in different social situations, and the extent to which reading these contexts through the lens of freedom, agency, self-realization, individually- and collectively-defined values is adding in terms of insights to our understanding of the livings of the studied populations.

The applicability of the Capability Approach has been widely questioned and tested in a range of social situations, contexts and locations – which should allow for an overarching study of the different ways in which *capabilities* were defined in these studies. Accounting for the local differences and parallel social dynamics – and their influence on the definition of freedom, agency and self-realization – the Capability Approach could capture locally-defined values and valued outcomes, along with the mechanisms and external factors shaping them. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that such an approach would entail shifting the focus from an individual-based to a social-system-based investigation of what determines and influences people's decisions and reasons for living the way they do.

Consequently, flagging up the issue of the Capability Approach as being a 'Western-based' concept reinforces the idea that the approaches to tailoring the *concept of capability* to different strands of International Development and Development Studies may encompass a common bias – a bias relating to the socio-historical construction of a concept which, in spite of its apparent generalizability, presents a range of risks as to how collective norms, identities and belief systems are incorporated in defining the lives people value and how they achieve to arrange these lives for themselves.

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