

Agency, Capability and Development Ethics

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Abstract

Development as a concept hogs the limelight in the present-day socio-political and economic deliberations. The globe is divided on the lines of development. And there are certain critical issues related to development that needs to be addressed. Development Ethics is the field of ethical inquiry on development, which tries to answer: what ought to be development? And look towards solutions for complex problems facing mankind. This paper discusses the relation between Amartya Sen's *capability* and development. The focus being on the dimensions of agency, related to capability, that can shape the ethics of development.

Keywords: Development Ethics, Capability Approach, Agency

Introduction

Nations and regions are divided on the lines of 'developing' and 'developed'. What exactly is development? In simple words, beyond technical jargons, it is the change for the better. But then, who are the people deciding what is better and for whom? Development as a concept today is faced with many issues; sustainability, equal distribution of resources and cost to benefit ratio for people being affected by 'development' are some of the many problems. Development Ethics is the field of ethical inquiry on development, which tries to answer: what ought to be development? And look towards solutions for complex problems facing mankind so eager for betterment. To begin with, the paper introduces, in brief, Development Ethics. Then the concept of capability and development is discussed based on Amartya Sen's work. In the third section agency and responsibility in relation to ethics of development is discussed, further dwelling into the concepts of Socio-historic agency. To conclude, the paper reiterates the important role that 'agency-oriented' capability approach has in understanding Development Ethics.

Development Ethics: What is it?

Crocker (1998) defines development ethics¹ to be ‘ethical reflections on the means and end of socio-economic changes in poor countries and regions.’² Denis Goulet is one of the pioneers in this discipline with works reflective of his vast on field experience of relating policy making and values concerning it.

Goulet (2006) observes that ‘contemporary political thinking tends to be strictly Machiavellian (politics has nothing to do with ethics and vice-versa), or to pursue a vision of justice shrouded in a Utopian halo because it is not deeply embedded in a world of real constraints, in a domain as important as that of development—however odd it may seem—ethics has not assumed its full responsibility and begun to play its proper normative role.’³ Goulet further says that ‘if we do not deal with these issues of development ethics then universal prosperity and fraternity will remain an unrealised dream and become the new ‘opium of the people’.’⁴ Goulet (1996) takes us through the experiences in world development, in the 20th century and observes that when after the World War II, development in a sense of better life became the primary goal of the world community at large and basically those running the show. These concerns for development lead to institutional models and dynamic ideas being transferred from rich or developed countries to poor or underdeveloped countries. But then Goulet observes that our experiences made us realize within no time that ‘success in development depends most critically on a society’s own effort to change its policies, social structure, institution, and values.’⁵ Another point that Goulet (1996) observes is that not everyone views development in material terms. He points out the example of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire for whom development is the ‘ability of powerless masses to begin to shape their own destiny as subjects, not merely objects, of history.’ But then the study of development has not been a value-laden philosophical pursuit rather a technical examination of how to be efficient to the greatest extent in using resources.⁶ Amartya Sen points this as the ‘engineering’ approach of economics which is concerned with ‘primary logistic issues’ and not with ‘ultimate ends and such questions such as what may foster ‘the good of man’ or ‘how should one live’.’⁷

Goulet has pointed out that Lebert wrote in 1959⁸, ‘the problem of the distribution of goods is secondary compared to the problems of preparing men to receive them’⁹, this seems to come close on heels with what capability approach wants to specify. Further Lebert has observed that the discipline of development is the study concerned with how to achieve a ‘more human economy’. Now how do we understand the phrases ‘more human’ and ‘less human’? Goulet, following Lebert, says that ‘more human’ and ‘less human’ must be understood by taking into the consideration the important distinction between ‘to have more’ and ‘to be more’. As societies are more human that is more developed, not when people ‘have more’ rather when they are enabled ‘to be more’.¹⁰

Another important aspect is that discussions about ethics in present day society must deal with economics and this is what Amartya Sen (1990) does when he puts

forward the serious distancing between economics and ethics and says that he has been critical of economics which does not take into consideration ethical issues, but he does not suggest that these problems have been dealt in a satisfactory manner in ethics itself. What Sen observes is that some of these ethical considerations can be helpfully analysed in detail using approaches and procedures of economics and economics too can gain largely from ethical considerations.¹¹

Development ethics stands out as an area of study that tries to question the basics of policy making in the present-day world, but it should not be taken to be a new concern, rather it may be considered as a refined concern for well-being and quality of life.

Capability and Development

Capability approach is a theoretical framework that puts forward two core normative claims, firstly, the claim that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance, and secondly, that freedom to achieve well-being is to be understood in terms of peoples capabilities, that is, their real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value.¹² Capability approach is based on a key analytical distinction between the means and the ends of well-being and development. The ends are considered to have intrinsic importance, whereas the means are instrumental as a guiding force to reach the goal of increased well-being, justice and development. But then in concrete real-life situations this distinction is blurred. As we can see that there are many ends which at the same time are also the means to other ends, for instance the capability of being in good health is an end in itself, but then it is also a means to the capability to work.¹³ Thus in the capability approach, the needs of well-being, justice and development are to be conceptualized in terms of people's freedom to choose their *functionings*.¹⁴

Sabina Alkire (2009) observes that human capabilities are 'partly created or undermined by development policies, markets and other social arrangements.' She further says human freedom is 'human' made. Sen's philosophical writings focus on 'expansion of human capabilities and freedoms as an objective for social arrangements.' Sen's writings also focus on how objectives arising from considerations of capabilities and freedom have an edge over other approaches to well-being, such as Rawlsian approach focusing on primary goods and utility approach based on psychological standards, such as happiness. Further looking into the numerous works that Sen has produced over the past three and half decades on capability based approach and development, we see that Sen has scrutinized policies, practices and measures that are guiding institutions that aim for human freedom. Sen looks into how truly these institutions aim for human freedom. Sen has given utmost importance in this aspect because human lives depend on principles of development that these institutions vouch for.¹⁵ Just because the so called 'development' fails to provide human freedom, Sen observes that development in this sense is 'a misconceived theory' that can kill.¹⁶

Alkire observes that Sen's (1999) *Development as Freedom* stands out as a work that 'synthesizes' earlier works by Sen and introduces this approach. When we look into the work *Development as Freedom*, Alkire says, we shall see freedom when used to describe a social or economic objective is an 'irreducibly plural concept'. We can further observe two types of freedom which do overlap each other. First is process freedom which is to be considered at the personal level or at a systematic level and is 'freedom of action and decision'. Second is opportunity freedom which is the freedom people must have to achieve their valued outcomes. Process freedoms are 'related to agency and the conditions in which people can exert agency' and opportunity freedoms are 'closely related to capabilities.' And development 'pertains to positive processes of social, economic, and political change that expand valued capabilities.'¹⁷

Amartya Sen (1999) points out 'two general attitudes' to the process of development. First is the 'hard-knocks attitude', which sees development as a fierce process and thus there is 'a world in which wisdom demands toughness'. This type of development mainly focuses on GDP growth and market economy and does not take into consideration issues such as protection of poor and disabled, social service for the people at large and many other issues that can be called 'soft-headed'. This attitude is contrasted by the second attitude which sees development 'as essentially a 'friendly' process'. Sen sides with the second attitude and this is understood by the approach that he has taken to establish his capability approach that is by rejecting resourcist and welfarian approaches to well-being at large.¹⁸

Amartya Sen (1999) argues that 'poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely the lowness of incomes.' But then development studies have always put lowness of incomes as identification of poverty.¹⁹ But then Sen warns us against having a view that poverty as capability deprivation would mean denial of the importance of income in understanding poverty. It may be the case that the lack of income is itself the main reason for capability deprivation.²⁰

Amartya Sen (2010)²¹ in the introduction to his essay *Beyond Liberalization: Social Opportunity and Human Capability* tries to draw a relation between human capabilities as goals and as instruments. Sen in this process talks about Nehru's 'tryst with destiny' speech²² where Nehru had focused on 'the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity' as the tasks ahead of the just independent Indian nation. Sen acknowledges the fact that a lot of achievement have been made in general areas, such as a fairly successful functioning of our multiparty democratic system, the progress amid hindrances made by the scientific community, elimination of major famines. But then Sen observes that India lags in the goals that Nehru observed. Sen points out, following Nehru's approach, that elimination of 'remediable' poverty, of ignorance, of illiteracy, of preventable diseases and of needless inequality in opportunity are to be seen as objectives that are valued for its own sake. Sen says these above-mentioned goals 'expand our freedom to lead the lives we have reason to value'. These goals are 'elementary' capabilities that have

importance of their own. Sen further points out that these goals can and do contribute to measures of economic performance, their value is not only determined by these instrumental contributions. Here Sen criticizes the tendency of taking growth rate such as GDP and GNP as the ultimate criterion for understanding issues related to 'elementary' capabilities.' Sen says that these goals have an intrinsic value and economic growth is important precisely because it helps in the improvement of capabilities. But then Sen further maintains that things that have intrinsic value can in addition also be instrumentally monumental. As Sen states that 'elementary' capabilities can help in generating economic success and thus influence the quality of life even more.²³ There is another related aspect that Sen points out, that is, in economic thinking development of education, health and other basic achievements are seen as just 'expansion of 'human resources'—the accumulation of 'human capital'—as if people were just the means of production and not its ultimate end.' Sen points out that thinking in these lines is a mistake since a person with a better life is also a better producer can never be a justification for bettering the life of a person. Sen looking back at Nehru's 'tryst with destiny' points out that 'elementary' capabilities must be recognized as valuable in-itself and this will in turn reap other benefits as discussed above.²⁴ What Sen is vouching for is that the focus is to be on 'human capability' rather than on 'human capital'. This distinction, according to Sen, has a 'significant bearing on public policy.' The 'elementary capabilities' are the social developments that must be directly counted as 'development'. The concept of 'human capital' concentrates on one aspect and needs to be supplemented by 'human capabilities.'

Ethics of Development: Agency and Responsibility

Sen has talked about agency aspect in his capability approach and has given importance to agency roles. Sen (1999) has focused on the role women's agency can play in the well-being of women. He points out that the well-being aspect and the agency aspect of women movements substantially intersect with each other. But then these two aspects are different at the foundational level, since its role of a person as an 'agent' is different from her role as someone who is at the receiving side of the action; Sen calls it being the 'patient'. But then Sen maintains that even if the agent sees herself as the patient, it does not bring a change in the agency roles of the agent. Since he observes that seeing individuals as only entities that experience well-being would be to take a 'very restricted view', in the case of the 'personhood of the women'. Thus, the understanding of agency role is central to recognizing a person as responsible. Sen has also pointed out that empirical work in the women's movement have shown how important is the role women's agency can play in improving the well-being of the women in-particular and society at large.²⁵

Sen (1999) discusses about 'individual freedom as a social commitment'²⁶ and begins by talking about the concept of God and the suffering around us, citing Russell's famous jibe that if Russell would encounter God, he would ask Him why did God give so little evidence of his existence. But then there are theologians who

have pointed out that God has reasons to want us to face with these sufferings ourselves. Sen does not go into the religious arguments but draws out one aspect from the above discussion. The aspect is ‘the claim that people themselves must have responsibility for the development and change of the world where they live.’²⁷ Sen says that he ‘appreciates the force’ behind this claim. Sen observes that people in this world living together, in a broad sense, cannot let go their responsibility about the problems that surround us.²⁸ Sen (1999) is of the view that responsibility requires freedom. Any argument in favour of social support in expanding people’s freedom can be taken as an equivalent argument for individual responsibility and not as an argument against it. A person cannot be responsible for doing a thing if she does not have the substantive freedom and capability to do that thing. Freedom and responsibility have a link that work both ways. As we can consider a person who has the freedom and capability to do a thing, the next thing that is imposed on her is the duty to consider whether to do or not to do it. This consideration part involves individual responsibility. Sen points out that ‘in a sense, freedom is both necessary and sufficient for responsibility.’²⁹

The question for responsibility towards others does give rise to a problematic situation according to Sen. Since, when we talk about a division of responsibility that operates in such a way that it makes a person work for another person’s interest, there may be a case of loss in motivation, involvement, and self-knowledge that the person who has interest for himself may had have. Sen thus affirms that individual responsibility cannot be replaced and any affirmation of social responsibility that in any sense undermines individual responsibility is counterproductive.³⁰

Socio-Historic Agency

There is another aspect of agency that needs to be understood when we deal with agency and its role in development. Till now our discussion has focused on individual agency, we have also mentioned about groups having agency. But the aspect of socio-historical agency which has been pointed out by Deneulin (2006) has not been discussed. Certain ‘communitarian’ political philosophers³¹ have pointed out that the community and the affiliations of the individual are preconditions for her human agency. According to such a view we may consider that individual agency is always based on the social background of the agent.³² Given this understanding of individual agency, it can no longer be considered as ultimately central in the capability approach’s concern for problems related to development. We must rather consider the socio-historical agency as ultimately central in addressing problems related to development. For instance, to consider an instance pointed out by Nussbaum³³, of Vasanti who was abused by her alcoholic husband. She could have divorced her husband but then her environment in a socio-historical background does not allow her to do so. She could overcome her woes only after she was helped by women’s rights group. So, we see even if Vasanti had the individual agency she would have also needed the socio-historical agency to be able to act on her individual agency.³⁴

Deneulin (2006) observes that there could be an objection against the idea of 'socio-historical agency' that this aspect of agency does bring nothing more to the analysis of development other than bringing the fact that individual agency is dependent on the socio-historical conditions of the individual. So, the capability approach with its focus on development and the institutional changes required for it must understand that these changes are to take place under a certain historical complex of the given society. But then if this is the picture how can capability approach work towards removing unfreedoms which maybe a product of the legacy of collective history. For instance, a society bound by a caste based social outlook. How can such a society give voice to the lower castes? What if such a society does not have any structure to give voice to individual agency? How can individual agency provide hope for change, betterment, and development? It is to answer these aspects that Deneulin points out that individual agency is not something that has definite boundaries with socio-historic agency. We can find areas where they are interdependent and inseparable. So, we find individual agency is enabled by socio-historic agency, on the other hand socio-historic agency also gets structured due to the individual agency and this process continues forward. This interaction between socio-historic agency and individual agency is the base on which development stands.³⁵

There is an interesting critique of Sen by Gore (1997)³⁶, wherein he observes and finds Sen's capability approach guilty of not considering the intrinsic value of institutional setups on individual well-being. But this criticism is highly inappropriate. Though Sen (1999) has given preference to individual agency in the assessment of development. Because he believed increase in individual freedoms can enhance the overall capability that an individual and thus a society can have for development.³⁷ Sen (2002) has also considered the importance that social background on an individual can have on her capability. He talks about 'socially dependent individual capabilities.'³⁸ Sen's approach is close to the concept of Socio-historic agency and Individual agency that was discussed.³⁹ Another dimension that Deneulin (2008) observes is that Sen has given utmost importance to democratic institution and practices in his theory, and so Gore's criticism does not hold ground.⁴⁰

Somewhere in this debate between socio-historic agency and individual agency, we may realise that if the goal is public action needed for development, we must take recourse to individual agency. Maybe at times this individual agency may take the form of a collective group agency. As we have discussed that socio-historic agency shapes and in turn is shaped by individual agency, it remains in the backdrop of public action. We have been witnesses to many forms of public actions with regard to ethical questions of development, some in the form of protests, some in the form of debates and deliberations. It is public action depending on individual agency, that can bring forth development

Along with the discussion of socio-historical agency and how it plays a role in shaping individual agency, we should also look towards another aspect of agency

related to development, which Alkire⁴¹ brings into focus when she specifies about measures of agency. Alkire mentions effective power and control as one of the measures of agency.⁴² Effective power in a sense being the control people wielding agency can have over their goal or aim. Alkire mentions Bandura (2000) who feels that discussions about agency have focused mainly on direct exercise of personal agency. But then Alkire observes, Bandura (2000) specifies two other measures that move beyond personal agency, they are, proxy agency and collective agency. These measures are what we are concerned with regarding development. For Bandura proxy agency is a 'socially mediated mode of agency, people try to get other people who have expertise or wield influence and power to act on their behalf to get the outcomes they desire.'⁴³ Now people may have to resort to proxy agency because they do not have the capability to exercise the agency or may not have the will to do so. On the other hand, there is collective agency which pertains to outcomes 'achievable only through interdependent efforts.'⁴⁴ Now when agency is made proxy, agency in a sense undermines itself and here is where socio-historical agency may seem to have an upper hand. But then as discussed above, in the relation between individual agency and socio-historical agency, development is to be seen as a capability enhancement due to which agency can move beyond the 'proxy'.

Conclusion: Development along with 'Agency-Oriented' Capability

Sabina Alkire (2009) observes that for Sen the objective of development is to expand capabilities and to support people's agency. The concept of agency in the capability approach and its different aspects has been discussed above, but then 'what a person can do in line with his or her conception of good'⁴⁵ is in Sen's words what agency is an assessment of. Now, let us look back at how development ethics reflects itself through capability approach and agency. We have seen that Sen talks about a picture where an individual may not be laid back by his well-being. Her motivation and objectives, along the lines of her conception of good, may drive her toward pursuing further goals. This agency aspect must be the focus while dealing with development issues that need to be real in the sense of the term, that is reach the people who really need it. Capability approach and the agency within the development framework need to address development in its holistic structure, where development is a process that is living and dynamic and needs participation. In tune with this line of thought Sen has already pointed out that the active participatory agency is closely related to the nature of our values. This brings us back to the development goals and the ethical outlook that shapes them. In a surrounding where development has not taken into perspective the capability of people, the agency in search for expanding the capability is an important aspect. In Sen's analysis of the concept 'agency', focus on an aspect of agency that an individual or group has; which is impact in the society, in relation to which the agency exercised by the agent gains ground. This is exactly what theorist and practitioners of ethical development would point out. They would specify that it should be the capability of the person or group to bring about the positive development. We can also note that Sen vouching

for 'soft-headed' development where capabilities approach shall find its due place. Sen has also considered poverty and pointed out that it is not less resource that results in poverty rather it is the lack of capability and effective agency, which goes with it, that result in poverty. This aspect is again seen in Sen's observation that 'human capability' is far more important than 'human capital'. This human capability is a reflection of agency where a person or group decides or desires on the basis of their own liking. Sen's analysis of women agency playing an important role in well-being of women does bring the focus to the agency aspect of capabilities approach.

One more aspect comes into focus, while looking into agency aspect in development this is what Sen refers to as 'individual freedom as a social commitment.' The freedom that Sen is referring to is the agency-oriented capability that shall allow an individual to stand for her conception of good. This aspect that Sen discusses regarding individual agency freedom can also translate into a group agency, where like-minded individuals may try to involve themselves. This point has been the focus of what Bandura (2000) mentioned as collective agency, which must replace the proxy agency that harms development in the real terms.

Capability as a matter of what people are able to do and be, provide us with an approach towards looking into development related issues through a 'soft-headed' approach. Sen has focused on these issues since he realises that 'hard-knock' attitude lacks positive ethical outlook, since development is addressed from a narrow perspective in this attitude. The positive ethical approach on the contrary is something that the capabilities approach tries to bring into focus. In this respect an individual, or a group related to individuals, is pushed to look beyond herself as a capital and realize her capability. This realized capability then needs to translate into an agency-oriented outlook where what people value and what they consider to be good finds its reflection. It is this agency that needs to be the focus of analysis in political thinking and feature in the political discourse in our society, so that development in this world can look forward to, in the words of Marx, 'replacing the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstance.'⁴⁶

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