Using the Capability Approach: Prospective and Evaluative Analyses
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The focal question

The focal question of the Conference that gave rise to this volume was how Amartya Sen’s capability approach, which appears to have captured the interest of many, could be put to use in confronting poverties and injustices systematically and at a significant level. The often-discussed issue beneath that question is whether the research sparked by the capability approach gives rise to more effective practical methodologies to address pressing social problems. Of course ensuing applications are not the only grounds on which to examine a proposition – its theoretical implications, its measurability, or its conceptual coherence might also be fruitfully examined, for example. The extent to which specific applications and techniques embody the conceptual approach – their accuracy and limitations – might also be of interest. But in the context of poverty and justice it would appear directly relevant to evaluate concrete applications and consequences, whatever else we also examine. Such a sharp focus might generate anxiety. For even if income approaches to poverty reduction shed but a pale light on the subject, it may be that, after scrutiny, we must concede that the capability approach in practice can do no better – or, perhaps, that we do not yet know.

Yet this seems a necessary question. Many have been attracted to the ‘promise’ that the capability approach and Development as Freedom seem to hold. Some writings assert its benefits (at times with rather more enthusiasm than evidence) or suggest that the approach be extended in a particular direction, or respond to certain pressing questions. The studies in this volume often demonstrate a more constructive and proactive tack. They view the capability approach as a work in progress, develop various applications of it, critically examine which insights various techniques embody, and/or debate whether and how these analyses demonstrably differ from alternative approaches. If this matter-of-fact methodology is adopted, it does not matter one whit whether the authors of such research were ostensibly ‘critical of’ Sen’s capability approach or appeared to harbor some affection for it. The value-added of the capability approach in comparison with alternative approaches would be (or fail to be) evident in the empirical analyses and applications and policies to which it gives rise – indeed in the capabilities that were (or were not) expanded. The proof would be in the pudding.
While the demand for exquisite pudding seems inexhaustible, the demand for a more robust approach to poverty reduction is not too feeble either. There seems to be a confluence of political and intellectual forces seeking to advance development activities in ways not unsympathetic to the capability approach. For example some development agencies, NGOs, and governments are sustaining their support for the Millennium Declaration and associated Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – in which poverty is defined as multidimensional, and encompasses a range of functionings rather than income alone. Some national poverty reduction strategies are harnessing democratic public debate about priorities and processes, and including the poor in the debate. Some direct poverty reduction activities seek to empower poor persons to be active agents in social and political structures, as well as within the home. However imperfect the initiatives are that advance the MDGs, democratic practices, or empowerment (for example), they signal that there might be a demand for adequate applications of the capability approach. Further, they signal the value of using the approach well, lest the practical applications settle for something less.

However, the focal question is actually quite difficult to assess: does the research sparked by the capability approach give rise to more effective practical methodologies to address significant social problems. More to the point, the question might be mistakenly construed. The difficulty in part relates to the different views of what in fact the capability approach is – for there are broader and narrower interpretations of it – and what aspects of it various applications or techniques instantiate. It also overlooks some lacunae in the approach, where it needs to borrow from other areas of research or where cross-fertilization with parallel new literature has not yet taken place. But most of all, the question, in the commonly articulated way that I have phrased it, is not actually an appropriate question for assessing the capability approach – at least not when this is understood as an evaluative framework. Rather, the question is, itself, a fundamental application of the capability approach. A primary evaluative role of the capability approach is precisely to assess which of two states of affairs have expanded human freedoms to a greater extent or what kinds of freedoms they have, respectively, expanded (or contracted). Is the capability approach a baker or a taster; a pudding-maker, or the puddings’ judge?

1 Parts of this chapter are taken from the keynote address in Cambridge 2001; the remainder of that address has been published as Alkire 2005. I am grateful for comments from the participants in the 2001 Capability Conference in Cambridge, as well as for particular comments from Ingrid Robeyns, Mozaffar Qizilbash, Séverine Deneulin.
This chapter maps, for the purposes of discussion, the possible conceptual boundaries of the capability approach – and notes significant boundary disputes. It refracts the major discussions on individualism and on the use of the capability approach that appear in other papers in this volume and in the surrounding literature, and proposes some salient research questions and areas.

**Evaluative Framework: Limitations**

The capability approach is a normative proposition. The proposition is this: that social arrangements should be primarily evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value. Put simply, progress, or development, or poverty reduction, occurs when people have greater freedoms.

Thus the capability approach provides an evaluative (often also called normative) framework for assessing alternative policies or programs or options. An evaluative framework in this sense compares two or more states of affairs with respect to a limited set of variables. These might be capability sets or key functionings such as being able to be healthy, well-nourished, safe; being able to make your views heard or have a livelihood. Such analyses enable pairwise comparison of alternatives or states of affairs, and inform a subsequent normative choice.

As we discussed in the introduction, this framework can be interpreted in narrow or broad ways:

- The *narrow* interpretation sees the approach primarily as identifying capability and functionings as the primary informational space for certain exercises.

- The *broad* interpretation views the capability approach also as introducing capabilities as the primary informational space. As capabilities are heterogeneous, to compare states of affairs requires principles such as equity or sustainability or responsibility in addition to the traditional efficiency. As the identification and prioritization of capabilities entails value judgments and as comparison using plural principles may generate partial orderings, a third component of the broad approach may be the process or of social choice (democracy, committee, participation, etc).

In either interpretation, the capability approach might be likened to a sophisticated balance upon which two states of affairs or alternative courses of action can be analysed and compared. Unlike a simple balance that may only gauge the weight of one kind of vegetables at a time, the

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capability approach – in theory – gauges the weights of plural variables (n-tuples of functionings) simultaneously. In a narrow view, in which information is restricted to capability sets alone, it asks, for each course of action, questions such as which capabilities expanded or contracted? – for how many people? – by how much and for how long? To deepen assessment, the variables might be compared against several criteria, not ‘capability expansion’ alone. Thus in a broader view other questions would be assessed such as – were human rights protected? – could people participate? In either view, the balance will often be comparing incommensurable capabilities. A mango may be greater in weight, sweeter in taste and roughly equal in texture in comparison with an avocado. Alternatively a state of affairs may be better in terms of educational capabilities but worse in terms of health capabilities, or educational capabilities could be better for some groups and worse for others.

Because of this complexity, in many cases the balance (capability approach) will be unable to identify one course of action as ‘best’ as a whole – dominating one or several others in every respect. It may be able to discard a set of options that are clearly worse but the final ordering will be incomplete. From the set of possible ‘better’ options, an informed value judgement will need to be made between the alternatives (the process of this decision will vary, although it should be open to public scrutiny and debate), and such a choice both exercises freedom and creates identity. Even in this case, the capability approach “balance” has done a great deal of work in clarifying the salient valuational issues that inhere in alternatives, as well as in ruling out courses of action that are dominated entirely by other alternatives.

Understood as an evaluative framework, the capability is actually a limited structure. Its limitations are regularly overlooked. In particular, many who use the capability approach understandably intend that it will (also) generate a set of alternative activities, policies, or institutions that would expand capabilities more than the current set, or than a set generated by a traditional or alternative approach.

I would argue that we may need to separate two emphases: prospective, and evaluative. Both are important but distinct, and the distinctions are noteworthy. The capability approach as an evaluative framework undertakes comparative assessments of states of affairs by comparing capabilities or freedoms (inter alia). A prospective application of the capability approach, in

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contrast, is a working set of the policies, activities, and recommendations that are, at any given time, most likely to generate considerable capability expansion – together with the processes by which these policies/activities/recommendations are generated and the contexts in which they will be more likely to deliver these benefits. The prospective approach thus relates to the project of advancing *Development as Freedom* as well as to many applications advocated in the *Human Development Reports*, in *Hunger and Public Action, India: Development and Participation* and elsewhere. It might draw on the predictive tradition within economics, insofar as accurate predictions are used to inform recommendations. To these two we might add a third, *descriptive* analyses (Sen 2004), but it seems sufficient to the purposes of this paper to confine attention to these two.

The terms ‘prospective’ and ‘evaluative’ are only possible words, and one hesitates to pick any terms in a discussion with a long legacy within economics, development economics, and other disciplines. John Neville Keynes, in *The Scope and Method of Political Economy*, cites three roles of political economy: positive, normative, and what he calls “an art” (which provides rules as to how to attain given ends). In a twice-reprinted article on economic methodology, Sen describes instead description, prediction (concerned also with causality), and evaluation. “At the very least, the subject of economics includes three diverse, though interrelated, exercises: (1) predicting the future and causally explaining past events, (2) choosing appropriate descriptions of states and events in the past and the present, and (3) providing normative evaluation of states, institutions, and policies” (p 584). Other exercises might be considered in addition to these three, “such as using economic arguments for political advocacy (Myrdal, 1953; 1958) or seeing ‘the rhetoric of economics’ as an object of direct importance.” (p 585) Sen also acknowledges various overlaps between the three; for example some, but not all, descriptive exercises have *implicit predictive content* (p 586-7). We will return to this point later.

**Prospective and Evaluative Analyses: Complementarities**

One inherent limitation an evaluative framework may be that it focuses on comparing and fully assessing alternatives in terms of their effects on human capabilities and other relevant variables, rather than on making recommendations. Of course evaluations may and often do feed into recommendations, but the *focus* of the exercise is different and importantly so. An evaluation

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5 The second of these might be disputed by Lionel Robbins, who wrote, “Whatever Economics is concerned with, it is *not* concerned with the causes of material welfare as such.” Robbins, L. C. R. (1932). *An essay on the nature & significance of economic science*. London, Macmillan & co., limited. page 9
takes time patiently to explore the benefits and disbenefits of different states of affairs / courses of actions as these appear to diverse groups and to people in different situations or with different values. It asks, of these two situations, which is more desirable, even, more just? It does so knowing that often there will not be a single “best” answer, but some partial ranking among alternatives may be feasible.

Evaluative analyses are fundamentally concerned with comparisons of states of affairs at one point in time or with streams of capability-related benefits and costs of states of affairs across several time periods. They refer, ultimately, to information on how people’s capabilities expanded and contracted. Because of this focus, information on causal chains only enters insofar as they affect endstates. Naturally, as Sen has argued, a sufficiently rich description of outcomes may include some account of their generative processes – such as whether they respected human rights (goal rights) or unfolded through a participatory process. But the primary evaluative focus is whether capabilities have expanded, rather than how and why such expansion occurred.

Yet, as was noted above, another question that rightly attracts many is precisely which alternatives would advance human capabilities more fully, which prospective recommendations could or should arise from the capability approach. Prospective analyses have a different emphasis: one on causality, probability, and assumptions. Their main objective is not to compare two states of affairs but to identify which concrete actions are likely to generate a greater stream of expanded capabilities, the better state of affairs.

Prospective analyses cover an equally essential set of questions related to issues of process and causality (how and why): what incremental changes to existing institutional, social, cultural, political and economic structures would expand certain capabilities, and how durable, equitable, and sustainable such expansions would be. Prospective analyses identify the highly productive investments that will leverage a greater yield of capabilities than alternatives.

A central example of prospective analysis is the kind of empirical scrutiny that underlies the identification and advocacy of ‘instrumental freedoms’ in Development as Freedom. 6

6 Development as Freedom identifies five ‘instrumental freedoms’ that “tend to contribute to the general capability of a person to live more freely.” They are:
   (1) political freedoms, e.g. democracy, the freedom to scrutinize and criticize authorities, to enjoy a free press and multi-party elections.
   (2) economic facilities, e.g. people’s opportunity to have and use economic resources or entitlements.
Instrumental freedoms are a class of freedoms that, in addition to forming part of the objective or “end” of development are also “crucially effective means” to the expansion of other salient capabilities. Sen argues that instrumental freedoms can be identified empirically: “This acknowledgement [of freedom as a crucially effective means] can be based on empirical analysis of the consequences of - and the interconnections between - freedoms of distinct kinds, and on extensive empirical evidence that indicates that freedoms of different types typically help to sustain each other.”

Of course these two analyses are inter-related and indeed overlapping. A good example of this is Ruggeri-Laderchi’s capabilities production function in this volume. It crosses the boundary while maintaining conceptual clarity, being an empirical estimation of capabilities in which poverty is defined exclusively in capability space (and to that extent, an evaluation) but including a production function in order that the analysis generate useful policy advice. Similarly, Sehnbrook’s paper in this volume develops an index that includes fuller set of indicators for work-related capabilities, but it develops this for the purpose of policy recommendation in Chile.

The capability approach evaluates which course of action expanded capabilities more; whereas prospective applications of the capability approach and human development recommend and advocate courses of action that expand capabilities more than alternative courses of action.

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(3) *social opportunities*, e.g. people’s ability to have health care, to be educated, and to live in a society where others likewise enjoy these goods.

(4) *transparency guarantees*, e.g. the ability to trust others and to know that the information one receives is clear and honestly disclosed.

(5) *protective security*, e.g. social protections for vulnerable people that prevent abject deprivation.

1999: 38 - 40

7 IADB “Ethics”… p 10

8 IADB p 10-11; the footnote reads: ‘the evidence is discussed in Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom’
Implications: The individualism criticism

One motivation for distinguishing the ‘evaluative and prospective foci is that several major ‘boundary disputes’ of the capability approach concern this distinction. One such dispute focuses on the alleged individualism of Sen’s approach. Critics argue forcefully that an evaluative framework whose constituent elements are the capabilities of people (individuals) is misleading [(Gore 1997; Evans 2002; Stewart and Deneulin 2002; Gasper and van Staveren 2003; Stewart 2005; Deneulin 2006) – see also (Sen 2002), and Déneulin, Dubois and Rousseau, and Derobert and Teschl in this book]. The main force of this criticism is that, although the capability approach’s emphasis may be purely evaluative, the larger context of many evaluations is indeed to guide prospective recommendations. And, the critics argue, prospective analyses and recommendations that do not carefully scrutinize the role of collective actions, institutions, and other social structures in creating individual capabilities, will be deeply flawed. Below I state the debate in its own terms, and then explore how the prospective-evaluative distinction relates to this debate.

Ethical Individualism

In this volume Robeyns explains that Sen’s capability approach embraces ethical individualism but does not defend methodological or ontological individualism. This distinction is of cross-cutting importance, precisely because the ‘individual’ focus of the capability approach is often misunderstood or inaccurately criticised. Robeyns’ distinction is this: ethical individualism “postulates that individuals, and only individuals, are the ultimate units of moral concern. … This, of course, does not imply that we should not evaluate social structures and societal properties, but ethical individualism implies that these structures and institutions will be evaluated in virtue of the causal importance that they have for individuals’ well-being.”

Ontological individualism - which Robeyns argues the capability approach does not support and nor should feminists – holds that “society is built up from only individuals and nothing than individuals, and hence is nothing more than the sum of individuals and their properties.”

Explanatory or methodological individualism presumes “that all social phenomena can be explained in terms of individuals and their properties.”

Robeyns argues that feminists should support ethical individualism – because moral theories that take an alternative unit of moral concern such as the family, the social group, or the community,
will systematically overlook any existing or potential inequalities within these units. For example, the deprivations particular to women and children have regularly been overlooked by analyses that focus on the household unit. Further, she observes a key factor which others neglect – hence the tremendous value of this paper. She observes that "a commitment to ethical individualism is not incompatible with an account of personhood that recognises the connections between people, their social relations, and their social embedment." Criticisms that Sen’s capability approach is ontologically or methodologically individualist thus misconstrue the approach.

It may be observed, in light of the previous discussion, that ethical individualism pertains to the capability approach as an evaluative framework – (and often, as a critical piece of a theory of justice). It does not speak to the task of how to promote capabilities – the task of human development, of creating ‘development as freedom’. As was mentioned above, most individualist criticisms of the capability approach’s individualism focus on this latter task (and at times allege, contra Robeyns and also inaccurately, that the capability approach requires that prospective recommendations to expand capabilities be methodologically individualist). Because a great deal of cross-cutting practical relevance turns on these criticisms it would be useful to consider them carefully.

**Critiques**

Séverine Deneulin criticizes the capability approach for focusing too much on evaluative rather than prospective analysis (these terms are not, however, employed). While not methodologically individualist, the capability approach exudes too little interest in conditions of capability expansion. She argues in this volume that without studying structures of living together, the capability approach is unable to generate the kind of recommendations needed to promote capabilities; thus it cannot advance its own objective of expanding capabilities. “In the light of the Costa Rican development path, assessing development on the basis of individual capabilities, or irreducibly social goods that are of intrinsic value to individual lives…would miss out …certain structures of living together that make the whole process of development and expansion of individual capabilities possible” (p x). In other words, an evaluative analysis that accurately analysed individuals’ capabilities would ‘miss out’ the institutions or movements or public policies that in part created and sustained those very capabilities, and this information might be deeply relevant to others who are attempting to expand those same capabilities.
This omission would not be particularly important if the capability approach was always used merely to compare and evaluate states of affairs, but this is not the case – it has what Sen referred to as “implicit predictive content”. In practice, Deneulin observes, the capability approach often “becomes a guiding theory for development practice”. As Ruggeri-Laderchi and Sehnbrook’s chapters demonstrate, the empirical evaluation feeds into policy advice. Yet because the capability approach is intended as an evaluative framework, and focuses only on individual capabilities, Deneulin makes the further claim that it “directs attention away from the examination of the structures of living together and historical explications of these structures, which are responsible not only for the conditions of life of individuals today but have also affected past generations and will affect future ones”9 (p x).

Deneulin remains unconvinced that the capability approach can ascribe adequate importance to Charles Taylor calls ‘irreducibly social goods’, which might include aesthetic values as well as cultural and political practices. To extend the informational basis of the capability approach, she draws on Paul Ricoeur’s notion of ‘structures of living together’ (Ricoeur, 1992) - ‘structures which to belong to a particular historical community, which provide the conditions for individual lives to flourish, and which are irreducible to individual relations and yet bound up with these’ - to recognise the importance of such goods for development. She argues that an evaluation of Costa Rica’s success based on individual capability expansion alone would inevitably miss the role that structures of living together played in facilitating the exercise of agency of certain individuals whose actions built that success.10 It is crucial to this argument that the value of these structures does not derive entirely from the intrinsic value they have for human flourishing – they also have an instrumental value, affecting the future stream of freedoms that a community will be able to enjoy.

What Deneulin challenges is not ethical individualism – for her approach “still ultimately judges development by individuals’ lives.” She challenges the assumption that evaluation can be delinked from prescription. Should the informational set required for an evaluative assessment be chosen because it has best identified the objectives of ultimate value? Or should it be chosen because it provides sufficient information on which to base further recommendations? Sen’s and

9 *ital mine*

10 In his analysis de Herdt does consider the relationship between shame and agency. To some degree, this seems to account for the relationship between social and historical conditions and agency which is central to Deneulin’s concerns.
Robeyn’s defense of the capability space has focused on the former; Deneulin’s critique arises from her focus on the latter.

Frances Stewart also advocates that the research and policy agenda related to the capability approach give more attention to ‘groups’ and to ‘group capabilities.’ In “Groups and Capabilities” she defines groups as “ways of categorising people in ways that represent common affiliations or identities.”¹¹ She identifies three ways that group membership affects people’s capabilities. First, the benefits of belonging to a group may be of intrinsic importance thus expand people’s well-being – to provide self esteem, positive human relationships and so on. Also, a person’s capabilities may be directly affected by “how well the group they identify with is doing.” (p 187) Second, “groups are important instrumentally in determining efficiency and resource shares.” For example, collective action groups of poor persons can enable them to expand many quite different capabilities (189). And third, “groups influence values and choices. Groups could also exert negative influences on capabilities through these same three mechanisms. Given these three critical roles, analysis of what makes for ‘good’ groups and what makes for ‘bad’ groups becomes a critical part of any research agenda, and of policies towards the promotion of capabilities and human well-being.” (190).

Leaving aside Stewart’s point on the influence of groups on values – a point which merits inspection and reflection but lies beyond the scope of this chapter – we can observe that Deneulin’s and Stewart’s criticisms of the capability approach stem from their intention to use the approach in a “prospective” sense: to create recommendations as to, as Stewart puts it, “the promotion of capabilities and human well-being.” Their criticisms are not, actually, criticisms of the individualism of the capability approach. Rather, they are criticisms that the capability approach’s focus on evaluative analysis leaves unspecified the methods of prospective analysis. In particular, it does not specify the importance of including groups, and structures of living together, in prospective analyses. This is indeed a criticism, but of a different kind. To remedy this they suggest that the vocabulary of capabilities acknowledge group or collective capabilities – a suggestion echoed by others¹² – and that greater attention be paid to the production of


capabilities by groups and collective activities. Deneulin makes the stronger claim that the capability approach’s emphasis on information on capabilities “directs attention away” from attention to the very structures that might be most relevant.

These salient issues will be discussed below:

*Should we talk about collective or group capabilities*

*How can ‘prospective analyses’ of the capability approach proceed?*

*Does the focus on individual capabilities divert attention from prospective analyses?*

**Terms: Collective and Group Capabilities**

One proposition that many have put forward is that the language of capabilities should include the capabilities of groups or collectivities. Indeed many would argue that collective capabilities are of intrinsic importance – meaning by “intrinsic importance” what Stewart identified, namely they indicate capabilities that individuals would not be able to enjoy, directly or indirectly, except by their participation in the group. In this case, the term ‘collective’ or ‘group’ serves to acknowledge and draw the analysts’ attention to the fact that the person’s enjoyment of these capabilities (causally) is – at present and probably also in the future – contingent upon their participation in the group so changes to the group are very likely to affect this person’s capabilities. This title would thus convey something of importance: “not only is this freedom a ‘being or doing’ I value and have reason to value; I could not enjoy it alone, without the group.”

Stewart gives this example, “In a study of a sex-workers association in Calcutta, Gooptu found that an enhanced sense of self-respect was an important outcome of the formation of this group. As one member put it, ‘I felt I was released from a closed room and could see the sunlight’ (Gooptu, 2002, p. 236).” Such information on the provenance of existing capabilities is vital, Stewart and Deneulin argue, to the design of social structures that promote such capabilities.

Moreover the term captures something of the person’s experience. For example, consider a good community chamber orchestra in which Ana plays the viola. It has just given a breath-taking performance in which the chamber group, as it were, spoke the music as one voice and even seemed to breathe together. The musicians also get along quite well, and several are friends. Ana deeply values her participation in this group, in which she is inspired, challenged, able to express herself musically, and enjoy friendships. It could be accurate to refer to her capability as her individual “capability to play viola in a challenging chamber group” plus her “capability to enjoy friendships with chamber group members”. Yet the words that come to Ana’s mind are
different; she would say that she values “our capability to play good chamber music together”.

Much of the aversion to the so-called ‘individualism’ of the capability approach may rest in part on this dissonance between a person’s immediate experience of the group as inherent to the capability (collective marketing group, savings and credit group, family, indigenous or cultural community) and the language of individual capabilities. Collective terms better reflect the experience.

On the other hand, the same term, group or collective capabilities, could also be understood as claiming (asserting) that every member of the group/collectivity who enjoyed those capabilities valued them. It is this kind of assertion of which Sen and Robeyns, as feminists, are wary, and for this reason reluctant to endorse the term or ascribe “intrinsic” importance to social structures. If instead Ana detested playing the viola (although she could), did not like the members at all, and was forced to play in the chamber group because her grandfather was first violinist, she might still play beautifully in the breathtaking concert. And her grandfather might then declaim that all group members enjoyed “the capability to play good chamber music together”, omitting the fact that Ana did not value that capability at all! In this situation, the locus of the value judgement (that c₁ is a collective capability) might lie with the group leader or with a subset of group members, who make this claim on behalf of others. By appearing to ascribe intrinsic importance to collective capabilities (without consulting all those implicated), this approach forfeits the ability to give a more nuanced and differentiated account of how any given social structure (family, group, tradition), at any given point in time, affects diverse members of it.

Robeyns argues that feminists should endorse Sen’s ethical individualism, that ultimately the capability approach must focus on individuals. Thus we can accurately assess the capabilities each person actually values and has reason to value, and not stop short at the border of groups – which can, unfortunately, be considerably more destructive towards some members than even Ana’s grandfather.

So in favor of the term collective capabilities are two arguments:

(i) given that many descriptions have implicit prescriptive content, and that the purpose of many examinations of capability is to inform efforts to improve these, it is useful to signal to the analyst that not only is the capability valued by individual i; but without the wider social group, this capability could not be enjoyed.

(ii) When the group contributes to an individual’s capability in one of the two ‘intrinsic’ ways that Stewart describes, a collective term also ‘strikes the ear’ as being a more

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13 This could also be an example of the group influencing a person’s own values and preferences, which Stewart raises but which we will not take up now.
Against it is the position that:

(i) the term collective capabilities could assert, on behalf of each member of the group, that the capability in question was valued by each member or expanded their capabilities uniformly. In fact, participation in the group may often affect different people’s capabilities differently, and people may also value the effects of group participation differently. In particular, a group that benefits one subset of members may at the same time harm another, and a claim that a structure or group “provided a collective capability” may overlook some significant dis-benefits or heterogeneities.

The arguments under discussion are each, it seems, each reasonable and could be mutually compatible in a rich enough analysis; the outstanding question is what to call capabilities that i) a person herself values but ii) could not enjoy alone. More important than the terms used are the clarity with which the analyses consider each and every one of these insights and concerns, not omitting any, and explain the adopted terms accordingly.

Methods of Prospective Analyses

When seen as an evaluative framework, the capability approach raises a focused set of questions, some or all of which might enter the analysis: what capabilities should be selected for the evaluation; how are these to be measured or otherwise described; how are relative weights to be set; what is the timeframe of the evaluation; how are distributional issues in capability space to be discussed, and so on. In contrast prospective analyses are inherently heterogeneous, and the capability approach thus far has not explicitly specified a methodology for them. It seems that the methods will be plural and the questions will vary by discipline, level of analysis, policy audience, region and context. Déneulin Stewart, and others observe that one component of prospective analyses which will be relevant across many contexts and sectors will be the component of groups and social structures. Indeed Déneulin also traces how Sen, and Drèze and Sen’s work has actively done so. But we can see immediately that the structure of their suggestion is not confined to the individualism discussion. Many others who are engaging in prospective applications of the capability approach likewise advocate attention to ecosystems, to local institutions, to gender issues, to vulnerability, or to other considerations. So we will broaden the discussion from the incorporation of social structures in prospective analysis to the much broader discussion of how to use, apply, or (awkward though it sound) ‘operationalize’ the

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capability approach in different disciplines and contexts. As is at once evident, the question also merits much more systematic attention than can be given here.

Many of the chapters in this volume engage in prospective analyses although of course not by that name. At the same time many of them articulate, in one way or another, a lack of confidence regarding their methods, and a wistfulness that there might be a clear methodology for such analyses, such that they might be undertaken with confidence and rigour.15

As others’ discussion is particularly focused on Sen’s version of the capability approach we will start there. In discussing the heterogeneous methodologies appropriate for descriptive, predictive, and evaluative exercises, Sen argues (in that paper as well as elsewhere) that methodology should be guided by “what serves the goals of the inquiry” ((Sen 2004), p 595) – given that these goals will vary significantly. For example, “As far as prediction is concerned, the role of value judgments is typically rather limited” although “the importance of values in motivating predictive inquiries of different kinds has also to be acknowledged” (p 596). Sen stresses, thus, the need for methodologies to go beyond certain boundaries without specifying what they should be. In a similar vein, Malenbaum’s early review of Resources Values and Developments observes that in its introduction as well as contents, Sen “warns that the neatness and elegance of social welfare theory in traditional development economics…must now give way to the inelegances posed by real development experience. ‘Uncomfortable aspects’ of the application of theory force descriptive and predictive analysis into new institutional requirements in societies seeking economic advance.” And again, “he envisages complex tasks in disciplines not usually mastered by economic experts in growth and development” (p 403).

15 I have tried to sketch observations about these processes in Alkire, S. (2005). "Why the Capability Approach?" Journal of Human Development 6(1): 115-133. p 126ff and in Alkire 2006 “Instrumental Freedoms and Human Capabilities” mimeo (on the difficulty and procedures for undertaking empirical assessments of instrumental freedoms in terms of capabilities and plural principles).
Many have tried to distil characteristic features of Sen’s analysis. It may be sufficient for our purposes instead to give an example. Drèze and Sen explore certain structures of service provision – mostly related to nutrition, education, health care, and try to identify crucially important ‘instrumental freedoms’ for public policy investment and collective action. Their applied work, like that of an increasing volume of others’, demonstrates how prospective analyses draw on, and go well beyond, the capability approach as an evaluative framework and how such analyses do indeed examine institutions, social structures, and groups *inter alia*. The conversations that arise in response to such applications are also crucial to improving the methodologies.

**Prospective Analyses: Education in India**

The various analyses in Drèze and Sen demonstrate the thorough, many-faceted kind of analysis which explores prospective connections between development actions and human capabilities (Drèze and Sen 1989; Drèze and Sen 2002). Consider their 2002 analyses meant to inform public policy as well as advocacy priorities in India. Here are some of the footprints of that exploration – which begins with a description of the potential intrinsic value of education as well as its instrumental value in expanding other capabilities. One possible cause of low education was that education is not actually valued in the eyes of the parents and the communities. However a parent survey found keen interest among parents in children’s education and indeed among girls’ education also. Another possibility was that the need for child labor prohibited

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deprived families from sending children to school – again this was not substantiated empirically. Rather, the barriers appeared to be the affordability of books and uniforms, the distance to schools, and the anticipated returns to education – which are stronger for boys than for girls. Perhaps the strongest barrier was the low quality of education – ramshackle schools, large class sizes, a complex curriculum structure, and unmotivated teachers. Further analysis showed that a significant contribution to the low quality of education was the weak motivation and accountability of government teachers to school inspectors or to the parents and local community.

The analysis then turned to observe that the Indian constitution (Article 45) urges states to provide free and compulsory education for children up to 14 years old (exploring in passing how ‘compulsory’ education could enhance ‘freedom’). Political parties have reiterated this commitment, promising to increase educational expenditure. Instead, government of India figures show that expenditure declined from 4.4% of GDP in 1989 to 3.6% in 1997. The analysis implied there might be scope as well as cause for parents and others to demand political responses to the ramshackle schools and missing teachers.

To deepen this consideration of pro-active public action by parents the positive experience of one state – Himachal Pradesh (HP) – in furthering basic education was analysed. Between 1961 and 1991, girls literacy improved from 61% to 86% and by 1998-9, school attendance was above 97% for both girls and boys – a rate higher than that of Kerala. This advance also took place against considerable odds: HP has many remote areas that are difficult to access, has been overlooked by private or religious schools, and relied economically on child labour. While it is one of the wealthier Indian states, its educational advances were not mirrored in other states of a similar economic level such as the Punjab or Harayana. Drèze and Sen trace the ‘virtuous circle’ that developed in HP. By drawing on and mobilizing on a strong tradition of local cooperation and collaboration for shared ends, groups created a politically salient impetus to invest in education; a relatively egalitarian economic structure assured that the expansion of education occurred relatively evenly, and that teachers and students were of similar status. Furthermore, because women in HP do regularly work outside the home, education increased their economic


17 Drèze and Sen 2002 p 166
capacity, which provided a balanced incentive for girls and boys to attend school and, similarly, to teach school.

On the basis of this analysis of the educational shortcomings, Drèze and Sen advocate political mobilisation in support of basic education, that would work locally as well as through formal political and economic channels:

“What is perhaps most striking of all is that the failures of government policy over an extended period have provoked so little political challenge. … The fact that the government was able to get away with so much in the field of elementary education relates to the lack of political power of the illiterate masses…It also reflects the fact…that the social value of basic education has been neglected not only by government authorities but also in social and political movements.”

This account of education and development gives one example prospective analyses. It first considered the possible value of education – intrinsically as well as instrumentally – then examined the deprivations that many experience in education, and their causes. Is it that basic education is not valued by the relevant group (parents and students)? Are they blocked from taking advantage of it, thus lack the real freedom to be educated although they may have formal access? Or are there institutional reasons for non-attendance – in this case deep flaws in the public education system itself? Having diagnosed, as it were, core issues, the analysis turns to actions that people (parents and students as well as public institutions and NGOs) could undertake as agents in order to redress the situation.

Unterhalter’s chapter, in this volume, while appreciating the above analysis, also raises omitted considerations that, she argues on the basis of the South African experience, must also be taken into consideration – analyses that uncover the lack of uniformity in the quality and safety of schooling, and also distinguish between the benefits of schooling processes, skills, and outcomes. This kind of discussion – on the methodology and included/omitted variables as well as on the ensuing policy advice – seems certain to advance the capability approach in a ‘prospective’ sense. But is it enough?

Possible ways forward
What is evident in the example from Drèze and Sen is that the methodology used for their prospective analysis is indeed wide-ranging and incorporates consideration for institutions and structures of living together to some extent, as well as other considerations that others might
advocate. It is also clear that the methodology was context specific and appropriate to the particular analysis; no attempt was made to articulate a methodology that could be implemented uniformly. Underspecification has its dangers (much like the weakness of having an unspecified list of capabilities). If methods for prospective analyses are too open-ended, and researchers must create them anew in each context, then there is a real, practical possibility that they will (unwittingly or deliberately) omit critical variables, or overemphasize others. It seems that the authors in this volume and related literature are calling for a more systematic, long term, even painstaking development of plural methodologies, across disciplines and regions and institutions and levels of analysis, that are consistent with the capability approach and draw on the strongest techniques. The specification of appropriate methodologies for prospective analyses may assist resulting analyses to carry critical force.

**Evaluation of the ‘evaluative framework’**

A final question is whether the focus on individual capabilities as the ultimate space in which to evaluate states of affairs diverts attention from prospective analyses, and thus endangers the approach’s efficacy in its own terms. This is a good question.

Yet given the arguments above and the observations of the increasing number of applications of the capability approach, it seems that we are really quite far from living in a danger zone on that point. In many cases both kinds of information will be complementary and indeed essential for a full analysis. Still, a clear account of the form of analyses that authors are undertaking – whether it is evaluative of prospective for example (or predictive or descriptive if those terms are more relevant) might give them more liberty to investigate the relevant interconnections with gusto and confidence, and to communicate to the readers the limitations as well as reach of their conclusion.

A few lines in Alexander Pope’s poem *The Dunciad* describe:

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If we were to picture the scale of poetic justice “in the hands of the poorest person each of us know,”21 then the primary aim of those focused on using Sen’s capability approach as the basis of prospective recommendations, is clear: to make solid pudding. Doing so entails enthusiastic involvement by discerning bakers and tasters alike.

Poetic Justice, with her lifted scale,
Where in nice balance truth with gold she weighs,
And solid pudding against empty praise.20

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20 Alexander Pope *The Dunciad*. Book i. Line 52
21 Frank Carey, host of the 2001 conference, asked each participant, at the start and close of the event, to picture the poorest person they knew, and ask how that person would benefit from their research, and their participation in the conference.
Cited References


