



# Development

## *“a misconceived theory can kill”*

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## I. Introduction

Human capabilities are partly created or undermined by development policies, markets, and other social arrangements. Put differently, human freedom is partly 'human'-made. Sen's philosophical writings propose the expansion of human capabilities and freedoms as an objective for social arrangements, and argue that this objective satisfies certain considerations better than Rawlsian primary goods or utility measures. In approaching development, the chain of exploration can also be reversed. The policies, practices, analyses, and measures that guide development institutions can be scrutinized to uncover which truly aim at human freedoms, and how true their aim might be. Much of Sen's development writings engage or draw on investigations of this form. By such inspection the oversights of development theories might be uncovered and corrected. Such work is terribly salient, for lives are at stake. In development, Sen observes, "a misconceived theory can kill" (Sen 1999a: 209).

Sen's writings on development include nine books, eight co-authored books and over 100 articles addressing economic development, poverty measurement, famines and hunger, gender inequalities, education, health, employment, population and the environment, written over more than 40 years. His bestselling *Development as Freedom* synthesizes previous work and provides an introduction to this approach. Sen has also presented his approach in overview articles, as have others (Sen 1980a, 1983a, 1984, Sen 1985b, Sen 1985a, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990a, Crocker 1992, 1995, Qizilbash 1996, Alkire 2005, Clark 2005, Robeyns 2005). Given the abundance of writings, this chapter can only synthesize a few key insights regarding concrete actions to expand people's capabilities, and the method of analysis. Here, attention is paid to capability expansion not primarily as a criterion of justice (although of course reflections on justice can be informed by this analysis), but as evidence that development has occurred. Development thus defined can be investigated independently of whether governments and institutions articulate their objectives in terms of expanding capabilities, or increasing economic growth, or any other possible sets of social goals.

The first section of this chapter orients the reader to the relationship between development and freedoms. The second section demonstrates how Sen uses aspects of the capability approach in relation to poverty measurement, the market, education, gender, population and reason, health, and hunger.

The trouble with overviews is that instead of distilling an essence they tend merely to shed all charms of style, and lose not only the playfulness of the conversation but a chorus of counterarguments and subtleties as well. So although I can see no way around this predicament let me at least acknowledge what has been lost, and urge readers to rush out to fetch the original texts – which tend to be far juicier reading than this chapter lets on.

### Terms

Sen's 'capability approach' has developed over 25 years. It has employed core terms of capabilities, functionings, well-being and agency. More recent writings emphasize the terminology of freedoms, particularly opportunity freedoms and process freedoms (which may be personal or systemic) (Sen 1999a, Sen 2002b: Ch 19-21). Thus before beginning it may be useful to reiterate the key terms.

*Capabilities* "represent the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another... to choose from possible livings" (Sen 1992b: 40).

Capabilities are “the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value” (Sen 1999a: 87).

*Freedom*, when used to describe a social or economic objective – in the phrase *Development as Freedom* for example – is an ‘irreducibly plural concept’ (Sen 2002b: 585). Two overlapping kinds of freedom are of particular note. *Process freedom* relates to “freedom of action and decisions” (Sen 1999a: 17) and other procedural considerations, and may be considered at the personal level or at the systemic level. *Opportunity freedom* relates to the opportunities that are available to people which they value and have reason to value – their freedom to achieve valued outcomes. Although the terms are not synonymous, opportunity freedoms are closely related to capabilities, and process freedoms are related to agency and the conditions in which people and groups can exert agency.

*Development* pertains to positive processes of social, economic and political change that expand valued capabilities (Sen 2003a). Although development is most often associated with poorer countries, Sen’s capability approach and the related human development approach applies equally to rich countries. Indeed *Development as Freedom* is replete with examples from such ‘developed’ countries as the UK, Japan, the USA, and Italy.

### **Beyond Economic Development**

“So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only.”<sup>1</sup> It is with this sentence from Immanuel Kant’s work that Sen begins an exposition of development. The status of human beings as “ends” of development must be reiterated, Sen argues, because human beings “also happen to be – directly or indirectly—the primary means of all production”. In fact, the dominant approach to economic development regards people *principally* as means. For example, the economic planning and policy making by which development advances largely appreciates “production and prosperity as the essence of progress” hence considers “the expansion of real income and ... economic growth as the characteristics of successful development.”<sup>2</sup> People are valued insofar as they advance growth and prosperity.

In contrast, Sen’s approach to development firmly places economic growth and real income in the category of means. So Sen often cites with approval Aristotle’s observation that “wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else” (Sen 1990a: 44 citing (Aristotle 1984): book I, sect. 5). Rather than aiming only for economic growth or the expansion of markets or real income or wealth, Sen argues that the objective of development should be the expansion of people’s capabilities – of their real freedoms, their opportunities to achieve and enjoy states of affairs that they value and have reason to value. Income, market expansion, and growth are useful to the extent that they promote these intrinsically valuable ends. Given this emphasis, Sen’s and related approaches to development are often referred to as “human development” to distinguish them from growth-oriented development.

To wrest the orientation of development away from income and economic growth alone might seem an elementary move. It is certainly preliminary, and Sen and others’ work further specify this move conceptually as well as methodologically. Empirical studies demonstrate the difference this change in orientation makes. But it is worth pausing to study why Sen’s writings on

<sup>1</sup> (Sen 1990a): 41 citing (Kant 1785): sect. II; (Kant 1909): 47. Note that Sen’s understanding of well-being, and it would seem, of ‘humanity’ is broader than Kant’s.

<sup>2</sup> (Sen 1990a) this and previous quotes.

development often begin with a forceful clarification of the relationship between means and ends. It seems arguable that several significant features follow from the shift in objective: First, the *focal variable* shifts. Traditionally, development focused on income or consumption; here the focal variables are people's capabilities – which comprise a wider set of dimensions, not all of which are necessarily the subject of public policy. Second, considerably greater attention is given to the role of *human agency*, public debates and social movements in making social choices and advancing development goals. Third, *procedural* considerations such as human rights, democracy, equity, and sustainability supplement the traditional focus on efficiency.

Taking these in order:

### **Focal variables**

When development is defined by economic growth, and a healthy economy is one that is growing strongly, then the unit of analysis is evident: the economy. This may be the national economy, or the economy of a particular region or sector. The currency of assessment is likewise clear: growth in income per capita. In contrast, if development is defined by real freedoms, and a healthy economy is one that contributes to the expansion or growth in diverse people's real freedoms, then the analysis shifts to each person affected by the economy and the currency of assessment becomes their capabilities. Questions of how to prioritize and weight, aggregate and evaluate distributions of different capabilities, the capabilities of different people, and people's capabilities in different time periods, must be addressed explicitly.

Sen's writings on capability undergird this shift to a "people-centred" approach by providing a conceptual sub-structure. This conceptual framework could support not only Sen's writings but also a range of related broader approaches including the basic human needs approach (Ghai and International Labour Office 1977, Streeten and World Bank 1981, Stewart 1985) and some approaches based on human rights or ubuntu. Indeed, Sen carefully distinguished this approach from utilitarianism and revealed preference theories, which underlie support for economic growth, as well as from resource-based approaches.

By shifting the objective of development from a unitary, tangible measure that can be aggregated (income), to diverse human capabilities, which vary across people and across time, and are to some degree incommensurable, Sen's approach shifts 'development' onto ethical ground. The term 'human development' is often used to signal this shift. The objective now relates to "what life we lead and what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be" (Sen, Muellbauer et al. 1987: 16) – topics on which people's reasoned views differ. The information that is morally relevant to the assessment of social arrangements also expands quite significantly, and can include non-economic and non-material aspects of life such as cultural activities, dignity, self-respect, and other meaningful activities and states (Sen 1979, Sen 1985b, 1999a).

It may be worth underlining this last point explicitly, if only to counter potential misunderstandings. Human development is *not* defined by the inclusion of health and education in development analyses. It is more than this. Deprivations with respect to health and education are indeed core elements of development, and have been recognized by participatory, social exclusion, capability, and income approaches among others. Furthermore, as we shall see, the Human Development Index and the Human Poverty Index give prominence to health and education, and were developed by a team including Sen in order to contrast human development with income-based evaluations of development. However the indices were also shaped by feasibility considerations, including data constraints on internationally comparable data, and the need to have a terribly simple and compelling public message. Health and education do not exhaust the kinds of capabilities that are relevant to development analyses. In fact, a growing

body of research demonstrates that people, including people who are ‘absolutely poor’ in material terms, value dimensions such as safety from violence, livelihoods, agency, and relationships fundamentally. The 2004 *Human Development Report* also proposed cultural liberties (a term that encompasses social, cultural, and religious freedoms) as a fourth ‘pillar’ of human development.

The focal variables of development differ from income not only in their plurality, but also in the fact that the freedoms that comprise the ‘objective’ of development in any given context depend in part upon the values of the referent population. Capabilities are freedoms that people *value and have reason to value*. Value judgments are entailed in the identification of freedoms at the individual and collective level, in the prioritization among capabilities that can be created or undermined by development processes, and in the distribution of widely valued capabilities among different people and groups. Furthermore, as these judgments may evolve – for example with new information or because the referent population has changed – existing priorities should, Sen argues, be the subject of explicit scrutiny and ongoing public discussion.<sup>3</sup>

### Agency and Public Engagement

In this approach to development, people are to be considered and involved not merely as self-interested utility maximisers, but as agents who contribute to social choices and value judgements, as well as to development activities. An agent is “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 1999a: 19). While agency may be used to further activities that expand the actor’s own utility function (what Adam Smith called *sympathy*), in other situations people’s agency (*commitment*) may drive “a wedge between personal choice and personal welfare, and much of traditional economic theory relies on the identity of the two”. The capability approach innovates beyond development theory in introducing – and indeed emphasizing – commitment-based agency (Sen 1977).

When Drèze and Sen apply the capabilities approach to the Indian situation in their book *India: Development and Participation* agency figures centrally.

The approach used in this book is much concerned with the opportunities that people have to improve the quality of their lives. It is essentially a ‘people-centered’ 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 (Drèze and Sen 2002: 6).

It may be useful to observe a few characteristics of agency. First, agency is not limited to decision-making control; it also includes situations of effective power, in which decisions are “exercised in line with what we would have chosen and because of it” (Sen 1985b: 211). Second, effective power is often held by groups rather than individuals: “Given the interdependences of social living, many liberties are not separately exercisable, and effective power may have to be seen in terms of what all, or nearly all, members of the group would have chosen...” (Sen 1985b: 211). Third, agency may be exercised to advance the well-being of the agent and the agent’s family or community, but it might equally well be exercised to advance some other-regarding aims the person values and has reason to value, such as to comfort victims of a disaster, or to protect an endangered species. Fourth, a fully worked out account of agency might also include some assessment of the responsibility of an agent – based on their role in creating the situation, and on their effective power and their imperfect obligations towards others (Sen 1983b, Sen 1985b).

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<sup>3</sup> The kinds of value judgements under discussion are non-compulsive; see (Sen 1967)

This account of human agency differs significantly from *homo oeconomicus*. For example, the assumption that a single self-interested motivation will adequately predict human behavior is no longer either sufficient or required (Sen 1977, Alkire and Deneulin 2002). Individuals are viewed not only as centres of their own well-being (which they aim to optimize) but also as actors and agents, whose activities (including but not limited to buying and selling) advance or constrain development. Furthermore, agents can act as *means* for reducing their own poverty directly, or for confronting poverty in their society. Sen writes, “individual agency is, ultimately, central to addressing these deprivations. On the other hand, the freedom of agency that we individually have is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us” (Sen 1999a: xvi -xvii). Thus a central objective of development, alongside the expansion of capabilities, is the cultivation and support of agency as an end and as a means: “Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development” (Sen 1999a: 18).

In sum, there is a two-way relationship between people as agents, and development – which is partly created by human agency. Freedoms and capabilities “can be enhanced by public policy, but also, on the other side, the direction of public policy can be influenced by the effective use of participatory capabilities by the public” (Sen 1999a: 18). Thus people’s agency, values, and reflections form an integral and active part of the development process. Indeed the interrelationship between development and freedom – the ways in which more freedoms create a means to development as well as shaping its end – provides a distinctive core in Sen’s approach.

### **Plural Principles and Justice Comparisons**

Sen’s approach to development subordinates economic growth and market expansion within the larger framework of human freedom, which entails a wider informational basis, and, as we shall briefly observe, a substantially wider rationality. The capability approach identifies a space for the evaluation of social welfare and development that is, it argues, superior to utility or commodities. To advance *development* requires more than merely the identification of a space, however. It requires the comparison of different states of affairs, even if these are incomplete or only generate partial orderings. Traditional economics employs efficiency as the primary criterion, embodied in the principle of Pareto Optimality. Comparisons may also employ considerations such as the equity of their capability distributions across class, or gender, or social groups; or the extent to which certain fundamental rights are respected; or the extent to which a political process is transparent and can be influenced by vigorous public debate. Sen argues that plural principles such as these – which are components of a wider ethical rationality – can be introduced into a ‘consequential evaluation’ (focused, at least in part, on expanding people’s capabilities) (see Sen 2000).

For example, human rights – including social, cultural, economic, political, and civil rights – can be incorporated into the evaluation of states of affairs, which allows rights (or the infringement of rights) to be considered in comparing alternative courses of action (Sen 1982: 5-39, 1983b: 113-32, 2004). Equity is also to be included, as we shall see in the section on missing women. Another principle that might be considered is the prevention of capability contractions – which might be called human security. Earlier we noted that the objective of human development is to expand human capabilities. As laudable as this buoyant and progressive objective is, Sen also observes that it “is far too upbeat to focus on rearguard actions needed to secure what has to be safeguarded.” In other situations, including war and conflict or financial crisis or an epidemic, “the notion of human security becomes particularly relevant.”



Principles such as human rights, equity, protection from downside risk, and others thus complement the principle of efficiency and capability expansion in this approach.

Development, then, is concerned with expanding people's freedoms and capabilities, with treating people as agents, and with plural principles of assessment. These considerations might be brought together by a different approach to justice, which Sen refers to as 'comparative'. A comparative approach to justice functions by undertaking pairwise comparison and ranking of alternative societal arrangements in terms of justice (whether some arrangement is 'less just' or 'more just' than another). A comparative approach also allows "systematic room for incompleteness" – because some principles may conflict, some data may be missing, and also people will differ in their assessment of the appropriate principles. Despite these limitations, a maximizing yet incomplete comparative approach could be used to identify and reject options that are clearly inferior to others according multiple principles or considerations.

## II. Development Writings

This section surveys some of Sen's empirical contributions to different topics that fall, broadly, within development as sketched above. The development framework just sketched indicates the *direction* towards which these contributions extend development analyses that were current at the different times of writing (they are not presented chronologically), but in some cases, such as the Sen-Index we will address next, the particular contribution is quite an initial step of an ongoing literature that involved many other authors. The purpose of this section is to provide readers with a guide to well-known insights found in Sen's development writings – regarding poverty measurement, markets, the market, basic education, cooperative conflicts, missing women, population and reason, health and hunger – rather than to give a more general overview of each topic.

### Poverty Measurement I – Sen Index

The simplest and most pervasive poverty measure – still – is the 'head-count' ratio which reports the percentage of the population who fall below a [income] poverty line (e.g. "34% of the population are poor"). When this measure is used to guide policy, however, several flaws appear. Sen's initial work on poverty measurement did not focus on measuring capabilities but rather on the income-based poverty measures. In particular he drew attention to the insensitivity of the headcount index to the depth of poverty. Assume there are gradations of poverty among those who live beneath the poverty line. When poverty is measured only by a head-count ratio, it appears to be as much of a triumph to lift one person who was \$3 below the poverty line above it as it is to lift one person who was \$300 below it. Thus policy makers will naturally try to reduce poverty 'the most' by focusing their efforts on the people who are nearest to the poverty line or whose condition is easiest to alleviate. A related problem is that if some of those living beneath the poverty line were further impoverished while the poverty of a few near to the poverty line was reduced, this would count, again, as a victory, because the measure is insensitive to the 'distribution' of poverty below the poverty line.

In response, a second class of poverty measures were developed that focus on the depth of poverty – usually by measuring the 'gap' between the person's income (for example – other indicators could be used) and the [income] poverty line. The measure, which averages the poverty gap for all of the poor persons, is indeed sensitive to the 'depth' of poverty. The 'Sen-Index' is a measure of income poverty that reflects the distribution of poverty among the poor (Sen 1973, 1976, Sen and Foster 1997). The 'Sen-Index' combines three

measures into one: the head-count ratio, the poverty-gap measure, and a measure of distribution of income among the poor (the Gini coefficient). The measure gave rise to a considerable literature,<sup>4</sup> which applied and also modified and improved the Sen-Index so that it could satisfy some properties that the original measure could not – in particular ‘sub-group decomposability’ which is relevant in some – but by no means all – contexts.

### Poverty measurement.

Sen has argued since the 1980s that poverty should be conceived not as lowness of income but rather in terms of capability deprivation. “What the capability perspective does in poverty analysis is to enhance the understanding of the nature and causes of poverty and deprivation by shifting primary attention away from *means* to *ends* that people have reason to pursue, and, correspondingly, to the *freedoms* to be able to satisfy these ends” (Sen 1999a: 90). Clearly income is a key feature of poverty, and is correlated with other kinds of impoverishment. However the statistical connection is imperfect, and policies may be better crafted by considering their contribution to human freedoms.<sup>5</sup>

Considerable evidence can be brought to bear showing the imperfections of a statistical relationship between income and capabilities. For example, “the relationship between income and capability would be strongly affected by the age of the person..., by gender and social roles (e.g., through special responsibilities of maternity and also custom-determined family obligations), by location (e.g., by proneness to flooding or drought, or by insecurity and violence...), by epidemiological atmosphere....and by other variations over which a person may have no – or only limited – control (Sen 1999a: 88). Another example of the inadequacy of income as a proxy for freedom is that measures of income per household will obscure inequalities of distribution within the household – such as discrimination against girl children – that direct measures of nutrition and health would reveal.

The important point to note is that the valuation of income is entirely as a means to other ends and also that it is one means among others...Income is, of course, a crucially important means, but its importance lies in the fact that it helps the person to do the things that she values doing and to achieve states of being that she has reasons to desire. The worth of incomes cannot stand separated from these deeper concerns, and a society that respects individual well-being and freedom must take note of these concerns in making interpersonal comparisons as well as social evaluations (Sen 1997: 384-401).

Furthermore, persons who are capability deprived – disabled or ill for example – may both have greater difficulty in earning an income, and may require more income than others. On the positive side, however, persons with greater capabilities – for example in health and education – not only enjoy these direct benefits but have also been shown to be, on the whole, more productive economically as well. For these reasons, Sen argues that policies of poverty reduction, even if they employ income measures for certain approximations, should aim at capability expansion.

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<sup>4</sup> References to the secondary literature are also in (Sen and Foster 1997): 171 fn 86. More recent measurement work has extended these considerations in multidimensional space. See (Alkire and Foster 2007, Kakwani and Silber 2008a, b)

<sup>5</sup> In *Development as Freedom* Sen cites a study by Sudhir Anand and Martin Ravallion. Their study first documented a correlation between life expectancy and income – a common observation – but then went on to show that the correlation worked through the incomes of the poor and public expenditure – especially expenditures related to basic health. These variables explained all of the relevant correlation. (Sen 1999a: 44)



In a similar way Sen argues that policies to reduce inequality should be framed with respect to capabilities rather than income alone. For example, European income inequality is relatively low, but this obscures very high rates of unemployment. In contrast American income inequality is high, but unemployment rates are far lower (implying a lower inequality in the opportunity to be employed). Thus to focus only on reducing income inequality would be to overlook the European unemployment problem altogether. Similarly the income inequality between African American men and women and other American citizens is considerable, although African Americans are still better off, in terms of income, than citizens in developing countries. However the life expectancy of African American men is *lower* than people in China, or Kerala, Sri Lanka, Costa Rica, Jamaica, and many other countries. A policy merely to reduce income inequality in America would overlook this intense health deprivation. Comparing inequalities in other spaces – for example undernourishment, infant mortality or adult literacy in select states of India or countries in Africa – similarly brings to light stark and distinct patterns that income comparisons would overlook, but that are relevant for policy.

Thus the application of Sen's framework to issues of poverty requires a re-framing of the means and ends involved. "Policy debates have indeed been distorted by over-emphasis on income poverty and income inequality, to the neglect of deprivations that relate to other variables, such as unemployment, ill health, lack of education, and social exclusion" (Sen 1999a: 108). When a broader range of capabilities are considered, then of course policies will embody value judgements as to the relative importance of diverse capabilities. Here, too, Sen's approach brings a distinctive view, in advocating public participation and discussion of the priorities embodied by public policy.

The pioneering poverty measure designed to provoke such debates is the Human Development Index or HDI released in 1990. The HDI combines three components: measures of basic education, longevity, and income. The index was created as a summary measure of development to contrast with the dominant measure, GNP per capita and raise questions at a popular level about the objectives of development. Mahbub ul Haq, the director of the newly created Human Development Report Office of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) called for an index "of the same level of vulgarity as the GNP - just one number - but a measure that is not as blind to social aspect of human lives as the GNP is" (Sen 1998). The index was crafted by a group including Sudhir Anand and Sen (1994), and every year the *Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Program ranks all countries according to this index.

### **The Market**

Sen views the market as "a basic arrangement through which people can interact with each other and undertake mutually advantageous activities" (Sen 1999a: 142).

Sen contrasts his view with an approach in which the market expansion is promoted almost without qualifications. His first contrast is positive towards the market, and addresses the *reasons* that markets are worthwhile. While the dominant view values markets because of the results they produce, Sen argues that the freedoms to buy, sell, exchange, seek employment, and transact have value themselves, quite separately from valued market outcomes. Bonded labor, feudalism, the prohibition of female employment in some areas, and the denial of economic freedom under communism, all represent violations of the very freedoms that markets introduce.

A second characteristic of the perfect market is Pareto optimality, which is a type of efficiency in which no person's utility can be increased without someone else's utility being reduced. This efficiency result, Sen demonstrates, can also be reached if persons' well-being is considered in the space of valuable capabilities. But as is well-known, Pareto optimality is a limited notion even of efficiency, and is blind to the distribution of utilities or goods or freedoms. Sen argues that

markets outcomes should *both* be considered according to efficiency and equity (and at times according to other principles as well) (Sen 2000). That way any conflicts or tradeoffs between efficiency and equity (for example) can be deliberated together, and social priorities set in full view of all relevant considerations.

Considerations of capability equity are particularly important because vested interests with much to gain will try to skew markets in their own favor (and often succeed in doing so): “Political influence in search of economic gain is a very real phenomenon in the world in which we live” (Sen 1999a: 122 ref Dani Rodrik). Thus the highlighting and debate of inequities (and other shortcomings of the market), and the introduction of certain market restrictions, is an important component underlying well-functioning markets themselves. Sen thus advocates public discussion not only to deliberate equity-efficiency trade-offs, but also to protect markets against special interests. “In the test of open democracy, public interest may well have excellent prospects of winning against the spirited advocacy of the small coterie of vested interests...the remedy has to lie in more freedom – including that of public discussion and participatory political decisions” (Sen 1999a: 123).

Finally, although much of economic development rightly focuses on market expansion, markets are by no means sufficient institutions for advancing human freedoms. Vigorous, well-supported non-market institutions are required for the provision of public goods such as public health, defense, police, and in many cases basic education. Many low-income countries have managed to invest in strong social systems, and indeed these provide a strong foundation for equitable growth – which shows again the interconnections between these institutions and markets. A final feature of this approach, coming back again to the perspective freedom, is “to see people – even beneficiaries – as agents rather than as motionless patients” (Sen 1999a: 137).

## Education

Education can have intrinsic value, as a capability people deeply enjoy – the ability to read a new poem, to satisfy their curiosity on some subject, to deepen their understanding of history and of world affairs for example. It is also astoundingly useful. Literacy, for example, enables people better to navigate in society – they can become aware of their legal rights; take out a bank loan; secure better employment, write to family and loved ones, engage with new technologies. Education can also be a ‘catalyst of social change’ (Drèze and Sen 2002: 143) – enabling people to overcome historical inequalities due to class, gender, caste, race, disability, and so on. Indeed disadvantaged groups in India widely perceive education to be “the most promising means of upward mobility for their children” (Drèze and Sen 2002: 144). Furthermore, an educated populace can be empowered to undertake public action, to lobby, vote, organize campaigns, and make their values and demands heard effectively. As the title of an article ‘To Build A Country Build a Schoolhouse’ might suggest, Sen, and Drèze and Sen, repeatedly and emphatically underline the fundamental importance of education. “It is hard to overstate the need for unequivocal rejection of...dismissive views of the value of education. A firm commitment to the widespread and equitable provision of basic education is the first requirement of rapid progress in eradicating educational deprivation in India” (Drèze and Sen 2002: 146, see Sen 2002c).

A clear reason for emphasizing education lies in the educational deprivations that so many face. Taking the example of India, Drèze and Sen observed that half of the adult population are unable to read and write. Further, literacy is unequally spread by gender and geography, with 86% female literacy in the Indian state of Kerala compared with 20% in Rajasthan. Illiteracy rises sharply in rural areas, and among scheduled castes and tribes. Further, while school attendance increased significantly in the 1990s, the progress did not benefit all of these groups equally.

Moreover, in some areas teachers are often absent; the quality of education is, in other cases, extremely poor.

Having established that educational capabilities should be expanded, the question is how? The analysis in Drèze and Sen demonstrates the thorough, many-faceted kind of analysis which explores connections between development actions and human capabilities. Here are some of the footprints of that exploration. One possible cause of low education is that education is not a valued capability in the eyes of the parents and the communities. However a parent survey found keen interest among parents in children's education and indeed in girls' education also. Another possibility was that the need for child labor prohibited 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 weak motivation and accountability of government teachers – either 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. 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 (Drèze and Sen 2002: 166). The analysis implied there might be reason 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 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 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 a 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” (Drèze and Sen 2002: 187).

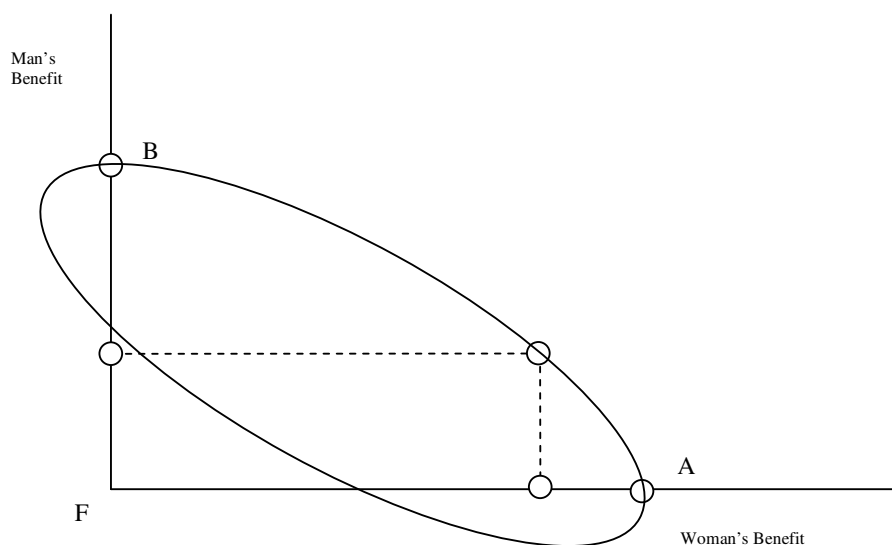
This account of education and development gives the flavour of Sen's method of investigating a development priority. It considers the possible *value* of education – intrinsically as well as instrumentally, and the *deprivations* that many experience in education, and examines why. Is it that basic education 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 and teachers as well as public institutions in this example) could undertake as *agents* in order to redress the situation. In this case, drawing on the example of HP, these include political action and direct involvement.

### Gender I: Cooperative conflict

Sen describes himself “in part, as a feminist economist,” (Sen, Agarwal et al. 2003: 322) and gender recurs throughout writings on many themes. Drawing on various empirical studies, Sen regularly consolidates for readers the evidence from other studies that women's agency and work affects the lives of all family members – men and children as well as others in the public. Women's empowerment, often generated by an improvement in women's education and employment and property rights, leads to important changes. For example, repeated empirical studies show that empowering women increases the proportion of resources within a family that women control; decreases fertility, and increases child survival and health.

In addition to building on previous studies, Sen develops a distinct theoretical insight on cooperative conflicts. Sen first clarified cooperative conflicts with respect to the relationship between women and men within the household, and subsequently has used this as the basis on which to scrutinize globalization. The insight is this: consider a woman Lila and a man Milo who join together and form a co-operative household. It is likely that their cooperation enables a higher standard of living than they could attain singly. At the same time, they could divide the “gains” that arise from their cooperation in many ways. In some possible scenarios, Milo would be a great deal better off with respect to his former bachelordom and Lila only marginally better; in others Lila would excel. In all situations, we presume, each person's position is better than it would be if they split up. In such situations, Sen argues, it is important to recognize the particular nature of bargaining, which he terms “cooperative conflicts” – how the gains of cooperation are divided among cooperating partners. Unlike other sorts of conflicts, these are likely to be largely implicit, and occur under the guise of cooperation that defines the relationship.

In the diagram below, position F (origin) represents the fallback position of being single. The vertical axis represents the man's benefits from the relationship; the horizontal, the woman's benefits. The oval traces the feasible outcomes for their relationship. Obviously the lower curves are dominated by the upper, so the couple is likely to choose some point along the upper curve AB. However as is readily apparent, the point they choose may well be *\*far\** better for the man than the woman or vice versa. It is in the man's interest to go as far left as possible along the curve; to the woman's to go as far right. As Sen observes, “The choice over AB is one of pure *conflict* and that between any given point on AB and the fall-back position F is one of pure *co-operation*” (Sen 1985c: 201).



Cooperative conflicts can occur not only between men and women, but between members of many groups. In order to detect and consider the disparities in members' benefits from belonging to a group or collective enterprise, Sen focuses attention on the capability of individual people rather than only considering the sum total of the household and groups. This curiosity regarding people's actual welfare within the boundary of a group recurs in many other settings, for example in considering issues of intrahousehold distribution of food.

### Gender II: Missing Women

Another significant finding on gender equality was publicized famously through the title of 100 million "missing women".<sup>6</sup> The problem arose from the following sequence of empirical observations:

- In the natural state 5% more boys than girls are born.
- "But women are hardier than men, and, given similar care, survive better at all ages" (Sen 1992c: 587).
- Not only in Europe and America, but also in Sub-Saharan Africa, women outnumber men.
- In some parts of Asia and North Africa, the gender ratio was reversed. Instead of the ratio of women to men being 1.05 (as in Europe) or 1.02 (as in Sub-Saharan Africa), it was between 0.90 (Pakistan) and 0.95 (Egypt) (Data in Sen 1992c).
- Closer examination of this inequality in 1992 suggested that women and particularly young girls were being systematically deprived of nutritional and health requirements in the countries, which increased their mortality.

To highlight the magnitude of this problem, Sen calculated the number of girls and women whose premature deaths underlay the skewed male-female ratios using the Sub-Saharan ratio as 'normal'. The evidence showed that more than 100 million women were missing from the planet.

<sup>6</sup> This finding was first published in *Hunger and Public Action* (Drèze and Sen 1989): 51f and subsequently in the *British Medical Journal*, (Sen 1992c), and revisited in (Sen 2003b). See also (Sen 1999a: 104f), Notes 319, (Sen 1990b), (Klasen 1994), (Klasen and Wink 2003), (Klasen and Wink 2002), (Croll 2001), (Hicks 2003)

This eye-catching finding generated further empirical work on the calculation itself as well as on the underlying gender inequalities it advertised.

Recently Sen returned to the issue of differential mortality, noting that while girls' survival rates had improved tremendously "this has been counterbalanced by a new female disadvantage—that in natality—through sex specific abortions aimed against the female fetus" (Sen 2003b: 1297). Because of sex specific abortions in the North and West of India, for example, sex ratios at birth have become alarmingly low – between 79.3 and 89.7 girls to 100 boys in four states. Sex selective abortion – like the undernourishment of girls – is a concrete symptom of a deeper gender bias. The empirical 100 million headline does much to publicise the new problem and encourage further examination of it.

This work explicitly introduces the principle of equity into considerations of development, alongside capability expansion. For if one were interested solely in equalizing the capability to live a long life, for example (which would not be an unreasonable position if basal equality is to be considered in capability space) (Sen 1992a), these and other 'missing women' would be the inevitable side-effect. Medical attention might be given preferentially to men – at least above a certain age – to prolong their lives, and so on. Equity introduces a more balanced framework for evaluation.

### **Population and Reason**

Sen argues that the problem of increasing population requires "more freedom, not less" (Sen 1999a: 216). In the analysis of population control, attention is steadily directed to parents as agents. The view of persons that Sen's approach draws upon is consistent with the approach outlined in education above. People are seen as agents whose values can be informed, and who can be engaged to act on their values; they are not seen as unreasonable and in need of sharp coercive control from above.

With respect to population growth, Sen presents data showing that there is still no world food crisis. Rather, food production per head has been increasing in every world region except Africa since 1974, and it has been increasing the most in Asia, the most populous region. Food availability has increased despite a drop in food prices, hence a reduction of economic incentives to produce food. Thus the 'population problem' is not that there is an impending lack of food (although it is often scarily framed that way). The real problem is that world population has ballooned, causing overcrowding and environmental strains, so in many countries fertility reduction would be desirable. This is particularly the case given the accelerating nature of population growth: "It took the world population millions of years to reach the first billion [human beings], then 123 years to get to the second, followed by 33 years to the third, 14 years to the fourth, and 13 years to the fifth billion" (Sen 1999a: 210).

But by what strategies or policies can and should population growth be slowed? Sen explores two alternative sets of policies, both of which have contemporary advocates. The first, traced to Malthus, relies on coercive practices of threats, sterilization, or the restriction of benefits to multi-children families. These policies arise from a distrust in the power of reason and planning among the wider population. In contrast, "Condorcet anticipated a voluntary reduction in fertility rates and predicted the emergence of new norms of small family size based on 'the progress of reason.'" (Sen 1999a: 214). Using comparative studies from states in China and India, it is possible to explore how quickly coercive policies – which have been used in China and some parts of India – reduced total fertility rate, in comparison with a second stream of strategies, which offer women's education and empowerment, and the availability of affordable contraceptives (investment in family planning is necessary but, as Sen discusses in relation to



Bangladesh, is insufficient without other investments in women's empowerment). Sen concludes, "There is no imminent emergency that calls for a breathless response. What is called for is systematic support for people's own decisions to reduce family size through expanding education and health care, and through economic and social development" (Sen 1994).

In the issue of population, like education, the structure of the analysis is similarly multi-faceted, tracing people's values and knowledge, drawing on empirical evidence, but consistently and steadily proposing policies that have the dual characteristics of promising instrumental success (actual reduction of fertility) while advancing freedom and respecting people as agents.

## Health

In analyses of health, considerations span the value of health to people, the indicators of good health, instrumental arrangements that best secure health as well as other capabilities, and the role of people as agents in securing their own health capabilities.

Sen takes as a starting point "the ubiquity of health as a social consideration" (Sen 2002d: 659). His observation that health appears to be deeply valued by people across cultures and generations, thus is integral to development, is hardly controversial. Pointing out the empirical connections between health and many other freedoms such as education, employment, democratic participation, and so on, Sen argues that health capabilities are also instrumentally powerful for promoting development. A range of articles also address complex issues of health equity – the distribution of health related capabilities across a population.<sup>7</sup>

But how to establish good public health outcomes? Again, in answering this question Sen scrutinizes different historical paths by which communities have achieved these expansions in such basic health capabilities as the ability to live long. Drèze and Sen identified two paths: those who have succeeded in increasing the length and quality of life *and* enjoying economic growth (*growth-mediated strategies* - e.g. South Korea and Taiwan), and those who have done so without growth (*support-led strategies* such as Sri Lanka, pre-reform China) (Drèze and Sen 1989). They observe that in a low-growth situation, poor countries can still provide basic health care because of the lower relative costs: "A poor economy may *have* less money to spend on health care and education, but it also *needs* less money to spend to provide the same services, which would cost much more in the richer countries" (Drèze and Sen 2002: 48). Analyzing the reduction of mortality in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain, for example, Sen draws attention to the striking result that the reduction of mortality and undernourishment was steepest *during* the two World Wars, when Britain adopted support-led strategies (Drèze and Sen 2002: 50). Of course – and this is important to note – it may be deeply preferable for nations *also* to experience economic growth, because this would expand other capabilities that would not be nurtured under support-led strategies. Yet in the absence of such growth public health can still be promoted.

On the basis of such empirical studies, Sen advocates public investment in health care. At the same time, the role for positive public engagement by people seen as agents not merely beneficiaries of public health programs, never slips from view. Here the example is China. China's pre-reform public health arrangements are legendary – in preventative health, barefoot doctors, collective health insurance, and medical infrastructure. Yet, overnight, in 1979, in the enthusiasm of liberalization, China dismantled its public health system. According to some estimates this swift action has left seventy percent of Chinese citizens without health insurance. Such action could not have been undertaken in a democracy – at least not without outcry and vigorous public debate and the possibility of reinstatement. Subsequent to the reform the pace of

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<sup>7</sup> (Sen 1999b, c, Klasen and Wink 2002, Sen 2002d, a, Williams 2003, Anand, Peter et al. 2004)

China's health advances has slowed, leaving its infant mortality rate of 30 per thousand, for example, still significantly above that of the Indian state of Kerala – which is 10. Life expectancy gains also slowed. From 1979 to the present, China's life expectancy rose from 68 to 71 – 73 years; in the same period India's life expectancy rose by 10 years from 54 to 64. Although in China's case democratic practices were not required to create the public health system, in the absence of such practices the 1979 reforms showed how vulnerable even the much admired health system was to a lightening swift decline (Sen 1999a).

This conclusion is unambiguously summarized in the closing sentences of a keynote address given to the World Health Assembly in 1999: “Ultimately, there is nothing as important as informed public discussion and the participation of the people in pressing for changes that can protect our lives and liberties. The public has to see itself not merely as a patient, but also as an agent of change. The penalty of inaction and apathy can be illness and death” (Sen 1999c).

## Hunger

*Poverty and Famines* opens by observing: “There is no law against dying of hunger” (Drèze and Sen 1989). Yet people's action and protests of injustice can effectively prevent famines. Sen's writings politicized famine, giving rise to a new approach to the problem.<sup>8</sup> The insight is often expressed this way: “no famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy” (Sen 1999a: 16).

This body of famine studies is central to consider because it was the first to frame hunger as a political problem rather than lack of food availability or a market failure or other natural causes.

Hunger is...intolerable in the modern world in a way it could not have been in the past. This is not so much because it is more intense, but because widespread hunger is so unnecessary and unwarranted in the modern world... If politics is ‘the art of the possible’, then conquering world hunger has become a political issue in a way it could not have been in the past (Drèze and Sen 1989: 5-6).

How did this politicization – in which political action was identified as a lever for change and a source for hope – emerge?

The argument was initially built put forward in Sen's *Poverty and Famines*, later expanded into three volumes of studies, which examined physiological, market-based, economic, weather-related, and political aspects of famine as well as endemic hunger in different countries (Sen 1981); (Drèze and Sen 1990). Three observations across these studies support the politicization of famine as an issue of structural injustice.

One key *independence* that Sen established empirically and early was the independence of famine from food production and availability. For example, the famines in Bengal 1943, Ethiopia 1973 and Bangladesh 1974 all occurred in the absence of a decline in food availability (Drèze and Sen 1989: 27).

Another observation was that famine impacted different sections of the population unequally: “different groups typically do have very different commanding powers over food, and an over-all shortage brings out the contrasting powers in stark clarity” (Sen 1981: 43). This gave further evidence of injustice: that some weathered the famine intact – or even with economic gain – while others perished.

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<sup>8</sup> Sen's work on famine in particular is found in (Sen 1980b); (Sen 1981); (Sen 1991). For other work see for example (Devereux 2001); (de Waal 2004); (Drèze and Sen 1989)

A third observation related to the feasibility of a public response. Having studied successful experiences in avoiding famine, especially in India and many African countries, Drèze and Sen observe that

These experiences firmly demonstrate how easy it is to exterminate famines if public support ... is well planned on a regular basis to protect the entitlements of vulnerable groups.... It is also clear that the eradication of famines need not *await* a major breakthrough in raising the per-capita availability of food, or in radically reducing its variance (even though these goals are important in themselves and can be – and must be – promoted in the long run by well-organized public policy). Public action can decisively eliminate famines *now* (Drèze and Sen 1989: 257-8).

These observations about the injustice of famine and the potential for human response (however fallible and imperfect) enabled famine to be framed as a political issue, in the sense that action by the public at large could catalyze the necessary public and economic actions which might not arise in the absence of public outcry.

### **Public Action**

What is evident in many of the preceding analysis is not only the tremendous breadth of analysis, but also the steady appeal to people as agents: to public deliberation and debate, to protests, democratic practices, social movements, and other forms of participation that balance and complete development processes. “The case for relating public policy to a close scrutiny of its actual effects is certainly very strong, but the need to protest — to rage, to holler — is not any weaker” (Sen 2001).

Sen’s insistent focus on people as agents – whose values must be engaged in setting development objectives, whose energies will help to propel these objectives – has the effect of shifting the borders of development out from a narrowly economic space to include aspects of political engagement, which are broadly titled public action.

By public action we mean not merely the activities of the state, but also social actions taken by members of the public--both ‘collaborative’ (through civil cooperation) and ‘adversarial’ (through social criticism and political opposition. The ...reach of public action goes well beyond the doings of the state, and involves what is done *by* the public – not merely *for* the public. We also argue that the nature and effectiveness of the activities of the state can deteriorate very easily in the absence of public vigilance and activism. (Drèze and Sen 1989: vii)

Thus the reach of public action permeates well beyond participation in formal political procedures. It gestures to participation within families, community groups, informal organisations, press and the media, and other fora.

Sen’s account of the substantive value of political freedom and democratic practice demonstrates the prominence given to public action. Those who are skeptical of political freedom often ask “Why bother about the finesse of political freedoms given the overpowering grossness of intense economic needs?” (Sen 1999a: 147). The view that economic development should precede the procuring of political liberties and civil rights for the poor is a common thesis that Sen challenges both at the individual and at the collective level. As we have seen, Sen defends the direct value of human agency and thus of social and political arrangements that support its exercise. While people’s actual views on democratic practice may be difficult to test in repressive situations, evidence such as the protest against Indira Gandhi’s 1970s ‘emergency’ as well as “the struggle for democratic freedoms in South Korea, Thailand, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Burma (or Myanmar)

and elsewhere in Asia" (Sen 1999a: 151) suggest a value for it, even among the poor. Further, scrutiny of the evidence does not support the view that authoritarianism is a more efficient midwife of economic growth and prosperity than democratic practice. The evidence is ambiguous and varied, with no consistent results either of conflict or of synergy between the economic output and the political system (Sen 1999a: 122). Given this situation Sen advocates that both economic and political freedoms be pursued simultaneously.

I will not try to summarize the existing chapter, but will close with one observation on public action which applies also to the other topics that have been discussed. A number of authors have observed that Sen's account of agency, though inspiring, is incomplete. For example, it defines agency such that it relates to people's values and the common good, but in so doing excludes by definition actions that undermine the common good for personal or group gain, or express prejudice or exact vengeance, so is an important but incomplete account of human action.<sup>9</sup> This observation contains the crux of many engagements with Sen's writings in the subsequent literature: However incomplete Sen's interventions have been, across many crucial areas of development theory, they identify directions of enquiry that are considerably less misconceived than existing theories, and suggest how concrete policies, practices, analyses, and measures might aim more accurately and realistically at justice and human freedoms.

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<sup>9</sup> (Stewart 2005, Deneulin 2006, Crocker 2008)

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