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The Capability Approach and Human Development

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What is the Capability Approach?

- Sen's capability approach proposes that **social arrangements should be primarily evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value.**
- “The focus here is on the freedom that a person actually has to do this or be that – things that he or she may value doing or being.” *Idea of Justice* 232

What is the Capability Approach?

Stiglitz Sen Fitoussi Report's definition, 2009

The notion of *capabilities*... conceives a person's life as a combination of various “doings and beings” (functionings) and of his or her freedom to choose among these functionings (capabilities). Some of these capabilities may be quite elementary, such as being adequately nourished and escaping premature mortality, while others may be more complex, such as having the literacy required to participate actively in political life. The foundations of the capability approach, which has strong roots in philosophical notions of social justice, reflect a focus on human ends and on respecting the individual's ability to pursue and realise the goals that he or she values; a rejection of the economic model of individuals acting to maximise their self-interest heedless of relationships and emotions; an emphasis on the complementarities between various capabilities; and a recognition of human diversity, which draws attention to the role played by ethical principles in the design of the “good” society.

What is the Capability Approach?

Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi Report's definition, 2009

1. Is a focus on **human ends**, and on the importance of **respecting people's ability** to pursue and realise the goals that he or she values.
2. Is the rejection of the economic model of individuals acting to maximize their self-interest heedless of **relationships and emotions**, and a recognition of the **diversity** of human needs and priorities. p 151

What is the Capability Approach?

Stiglitz Sen Fitoussi Report's definition, 2009

3. Is an emphasis on the **complementarities** between the various capabilities for the same person (while **valuable in themselves**, many of these capabilities are also **means** of expanding others, and leveraging these interconnections increases quality of life) and their dependence on the characteristics of others and on the environment where people live (e.g. illness may spread from one person to another and be influenced by public health and medical programmes).

4. A last feature of the capability approach is the role of **moral considerations and ethical principles**, and its central concern with **justice**, in the form of either bringing each person above a given threshold for each capability, or assuring equal opportunities to all in the “capability space” (Alkire 2003). p 152

Functionings

The various things a person may value and have reason to value doing or being

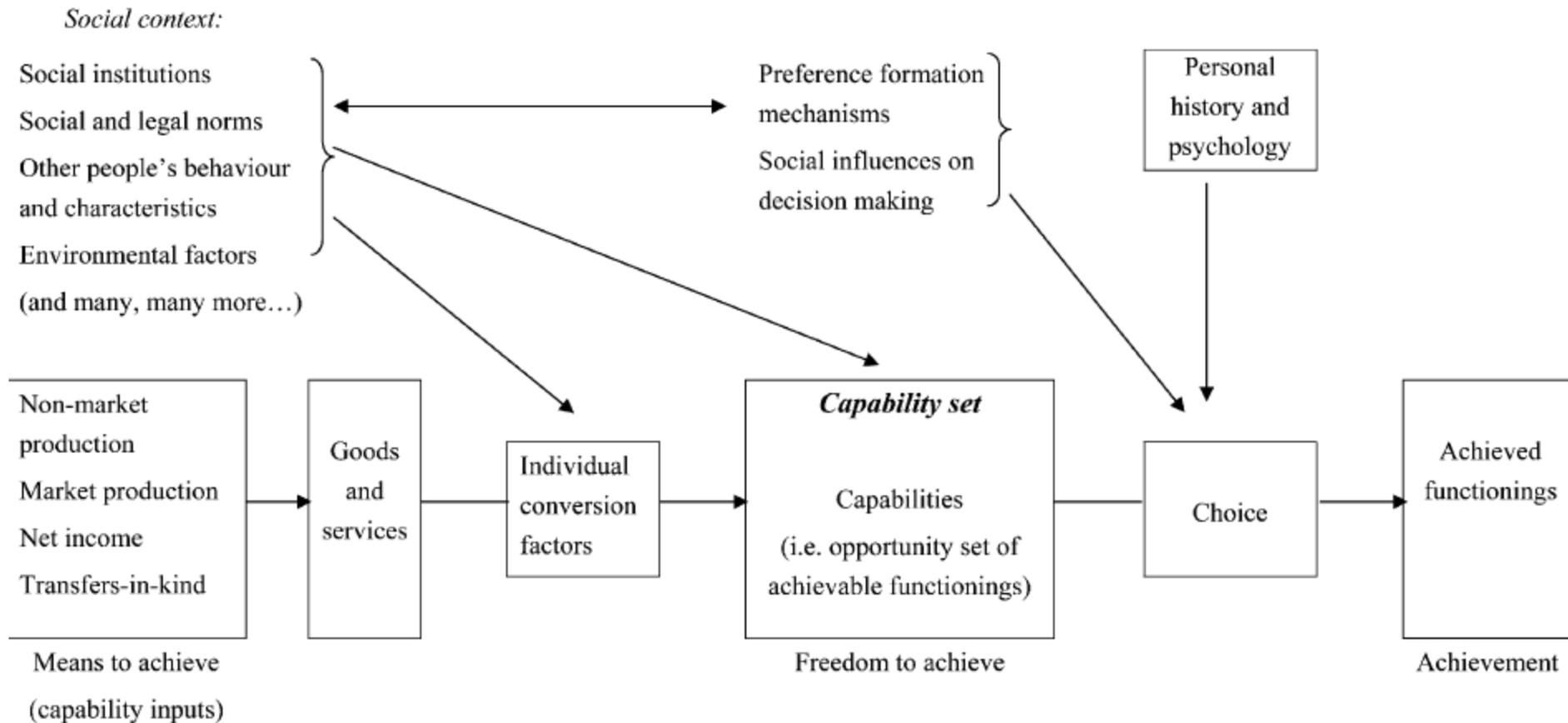
Functionings *(Stiglitz Sen Fitoussi p 151)*

Functionings is a broad term used to refer to the activities and situations that people spontaneously recognize to be important. These can also be conceived as a collection of the **observable achievements** of each person (e.g. their health, knowledge or having a meaningful job). Some of these achievements can be quite elementary, such as being safe and well-nourished, and others quite complex, such as being able to express oneself in public without shame. As people in different places and times have different values and experiences, the list of the most relevant functionings depends on circumstances and on the purpose of the exercise. In this perspective, the well-being of a person is a summary index of the person's functionings.

Why Capabilities and Functionings

Resources	Capability	Functionings	Utility
Bike	Able to ride around	Ride around	☺
Food	Able to be nourished	Nourished	☺

Ingrid Robeyns 2005: Social Influences matter!



Freedom

- “the *real opportunity* that we have to accomplish what we value”
- “The ‘good life’ is partly a life of genuine choice, and not one in which the person is forced into a particular life – however rich it might be in other respects.”

It is *authentic self-direction* – the ability to shape one’s own destiny as a person and a part of various communities.

Freedom

for Sen, Freedom has two aspects

Process Aspect:

Ability to act on behalf of what matters (agency)

Institutions, movements, democratic practice as well as each person's agency

Opportunity Aspect:

Real opportunity to achieve valued functionings, selected from among various good possibilities. (capability)

Freedom *(Stiglitz Sen Fitoussi p 151)*

Freedom requires expanding the range of information relevant for assessing people's lives beyond their observed achievements, to the full range of *opportunities* open to them. The limits of focusing on achievements for assessing QoL become obvious when considering cases where a low observed functioning (e.g. low calorie intake) reflects a choice (as in the case of fasting) or where a high level of functioning reflects the choices of a benevolent dictator. The concept of freedom emphasises the importance of **empowering people to help themselves**, and of focusing on individuals as the **actors** of their own development.

Human Development Report 2010:

“Human development is the expansion of people’s freedoms to live long, healthy and creative lives; to advance other goals they have reason to value; and to engage actively in shaping development equitably and sustainably on a shared planet.

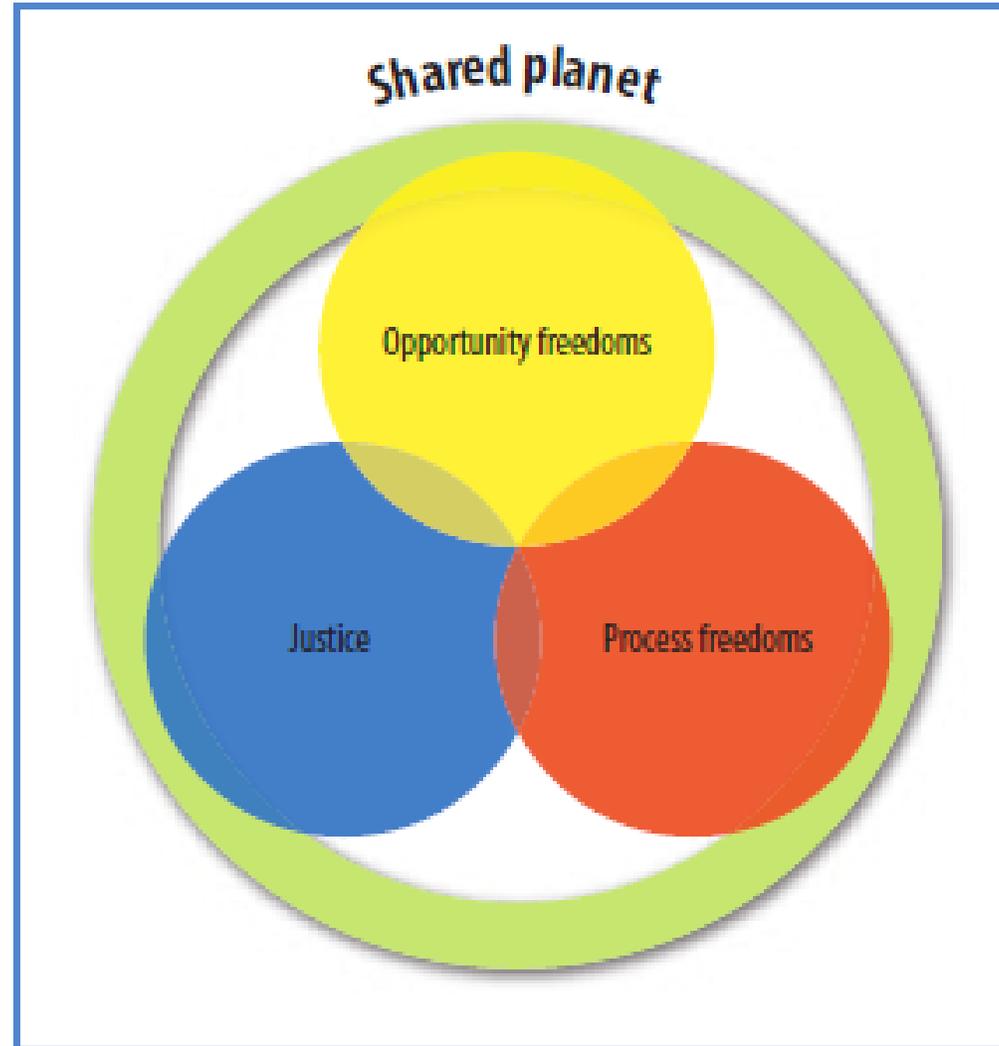
People are both the beneficiaries and the drivers of human development, as individuals and in groups.”

HD is a simpler name for capabilities

FIGURE 1.3

The human development concept—on a shared planet

Conceptual framework for human development



Source: HDRO based on Alkire 2010.

Do concepts matter?

In projects, programmes and policies, concepts become terribly salient, for lives are at stake.

In development, Sen observes, “a misconceived theory can kill”

Development as Freedom p 209