Monday, April 11, 2005  
Morning Breakout Session in Side Room  
Holly Dygert and Tom Mikulski, session recorders

The breakout session began with a discussion of the concept of levels introduced by Sabina Alkire in her presentation, “Instrumental Freedoms and Human Capabilities.” Lawrence Busch criticized the idea that establishing connections between different actors at different levels would be a useful way to ensure positive results in development interventions. He argued that the idea is based on a false assumption that poverty results from a lack of connections, when precisely the connections linking people to actors operating on different levels are often implicated in maintaining and reproducing poverty. He mentioned people who are born into poverty, pointing out how they are born into a definite context of specific social relations and linkages.

Allan Schmidt had a different interpretation of Sabina Alkire’s point about linkages. He understood the discussion of linkages as promoting more discrete connections between policies and programs. He argued that only by establishing these kinds of linkages can one assess whether or not an action has consequences.

The discussion moved on to different ways of evaluating well being – comparing the relative merits of consumption-based measures of development with the capabilities approach. Allan Schmid’s discussion point was restated: that good ethical questions are complicated and tricky to navigate – “they have the squirm factor” – because they imply trade-offs between the interests, and even rights, of different actors. Doubts were raised about whether the Capability Approach is helpful for addressing these ethical dilemmas. For example, how to resolve ethical dilemmas associated with removing subsidies for cotton farmers in the north. This case illustrates that there is not just one principled perspective. Instead, often the recognized interests and legitimate rights of different actors come into conflict.

Luis Camacho pointed out that countries in the global south object to subsidies in northern countries because they have been forced to get rid of their subsidies in the name of ‘free trade’.

Daniel Little challenged the notion that the Approach is limited in this area, arguing that the main strength of the Capability Approach is precisely its capacity to guide decision-making in response to these difficult kinds of ethical dilemmas. He suggested that the Capability Approach provides a principled basis for privileging certain interests and rights over others. He also pointed out, more generally, that the Capability Approach is beneficial because it challenges policy decision-making that is based on economics.

Harlan [LAST NAME?] pointed out that Sen’s approach goes beyond promoting equality, asking, “Equality of what?”

This recalled Sakiko Fukuda-Parr’s discussion points during the morning session, focusing on concerns related to how to identify key capabilities. In particular, Sakiko
Fukuda-Parr shared how they have worked within the United Nations Development Program to identify priority areas to focus on for the Human Development Report. They have tried to pick key indicators that are recognized as important widely enough that they would enjoy broad support as ‘universal’ basics. In this way, they have approached the possibility for conflicts over whether key measures are universal, and criticisms based on cultural relativism. Additionally, they have selected key priority areas that open up many functionings, as opposed to just one or two. For example, possessing the ability to read and write.

There was also some discussion about whether the Capability Approach is too simplistic, and whether one can truly address poverty without first dealing with distributional inequalities.

While much attention has focused on the Capability Approach’s attention to cultural differences in values, Des Gasper discussed the contribution that psychology can make to understanding key values. He suggested that psychology has a unique contribution to make because psychologists can study and explain how values such as autonomy, freedom, community and sympathy become important.

Stephen [?] seconded the need for research, and proposed the need for research focused on behavioral issues, as well. For him, a great asset of the approach is that it centers agency. He asked how we can motivate people to make decisions that really matter. He drew the point home by asking how we can keep the sense of urgency in discussions such as this, that often seem detached from the stark realities of how many children die each day.

Both Lawrence Busch and David Crocker questioned the role of agency in the approach, and more generally, asking what we understand to be agency and where we locate it.

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr reiterated Stephen [?]’s point that agency is primary to the approach.

However, Lawrence Busch argued that people were treating agency as an input, when it must be acknowledged as an outcome, as well: one must be empowered to act.

In response, David Crocker indicated the need to talk about moral and civic education as ways in which people can be enabled to act.

Luis Camacho reflected on the two different approaches being discussed. He contrasted Des Gasper’s suggestion that we need to study maturation more with David Crocker’s suggestion that we need to promote maturation through moral and civic education.

David Crocker advocated examining more closely how emotional states, such as happiness, influence agency. For example, when does happiness promote positive change? When does it inhibit it?
Stephen [?] added that we also need studies of the conditions under which altruism grows and becomes important.

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr discussed three different ways of defining altruism. First, many define it in terms of charity, but she pointed out that no country wants to be the recipient of charity. Secondly, she said that some see it as an insurance policy, which she does not view as useful. Instead, she advocated a third approach, which defines altruism in terms of human solidarity. She explained that in this relational approach, people are encouraged to link their own well-being with that of another person.

David Crocker suggested that reciprocity is a better way to approach altruism than solidarity, because in the case of the latter one can ultimately end up not acting in one’s self-interest.

At the end of the session, the discussion turned towards concerns related to universalism and cultural relativity, and the relationship between capabilities and human rights. For example, to what extent is what constitutes ‘the good life’ culturally variable? Are there certain capabilities or rights that must be ensured through development?

Daniel Little argued that both Sen and Nussbaum are against cultural relativism in their outlining of the Capability Approach. He asserted that Sen and Nussbaum take a strong stand against utilitarianism, arguing that economic measures of well-being are not good enough. They go further, arguing that there is a strong rationale for claiming key principles as universal human goods.

Harlan [LAST NAME?] suggested that while there are capabilities that are human rights, the question becomes at what level.

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr added that Nussbaum has all of the Universal Human Rights on her list of capabilities, along with other things like affection. In contrast, Sen argues that individuals make choices of which values are most important, and that they vary at the individual level.

The final commentary came from a theologian who called for bringing God into development.

End of breakout session.