Preface

Let me begin by saying that it is a privilege to be asked to query the relationship of capabilities and social development among those whose efforts have been so central to arguments that favor the capabilities approach as a means to address poverty, gender inequality, and social injustice. It is also a privilege to be asked to illuminate the role that sociologists can play in this debate in ways that might advance how we understand both the justification and implementation of the capabilities approach.

Introduction

Despite the increasing numbers of sociologists, anthropologists and women’s studies specialists exploring questions related to development and change, including those now working in development institutions, it is curious that so few have contributed to discussions about capabilities – as approach, method, and evaluative tool (Gasper 2002). Instead, on-going debate is largely circumscribed by economics and philosophy, a fact that is hardly surprising given that Amartya Sen was the original architect of a capabilities approach, and both he and Martha Nussbaum are among its key proponents (Sen 1979/1980; Nussbaum and Sen 1993). Importantly, their contributions have generated sustained academic and policy dialogue extending well beyond their initial framings, focusing on questions of measurement, universalism, the value of a list of central human capabilities or selection bias in identifying capabilities, deliberative democracy, and freedom. The character of discussion suggests the accepted centrality of the capabilities approach to some current analyses of development, equity, and gender and social justice. Its partial institutionalization in the formulation of a Human Development Index as a new development indicator also suggests its contemporary salience.

Not unexpectedly, after a period of relative silence about questions of poverty and development, particularly following the debates of the 1970s and their focus on the New International Economic Order and “basic needs,” and what Gilbert Rist (1997:205) would call “a toned-down form of IMF proscriptions to maintain the internal and external balance of high-debt countries in the language of

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1 Draft paper for the MSU Conference on Ethics and Development, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, 10-13 April 2005
2 To be sure, political scientists, notable Ingrid Robeyns, social demographers (Arends-Kuenning and Amin) and those writing on education (Unterhalter 2001) and health (Anand and Dolan 2005) have engaged in debate with economists and philosophers but, importantly, they do so on the terrain already established by them. See also the special issue of Studies in Comparative International Development (2002) for a different framing.
3 There is an enormous literature here in journals that include Journal of Human Development, and special issues of Feminist Economics, Journal of International Development, Studies in Comparative International Development, Social Science and Medicine, and, noted in a footnote in Robeyns (2005), four international conferences on the capability approach held since 2001, a website www.capabilityapproach.org; and the Human Development and Capability Association launched in September 2004 (www.hd-ca.org).
structural adjustment with a human face,” a discourse of human development based on the capabilities approach ignited a flurry of (re)thinking about poverty, its intra-national and comparative configurations, and the pressure placed on multi and bilateral aid dependent recipient countries to meet new standards for development resources. The focus on human development and the theoretical contribution offered by the capabilities approach creatively connects academic theorizing with strategic policy and program intervention.4 It also provides the basis for the shift from economic to human development with a commitment to expanding individual choices in ways that enable people to lead the lives that they value (UNDP 1990; 1997; 2000). But, absent from most of these discussions of capabilities and human development is attention to the concept of development itself, although within the human development framework, development is viewed as “a process of enlarging human choices” (UNDP 1990:10) or, as Sen (1988:11) had argued earlier,

the concept of development is so essential to economics in general. Economic problems do, of course, involve logistic issues, and a lot of it is undoubtedly “engineering” of one kind or another. On the other hand, the success of all this has to be judged ultimately in terms of what it does to the lives of human beings. The enhancement of living conditions must clearly be an essential — if not the essential — object of the entire economic exercise and that enhancement is an integral part of the concept of development. [And, as he continues,] the concept of development — whether explicitly put forward or discussed by implication — has to be examined in this broad perspective related to economics in general, rather than only in terms of “development economics” narrowly defined.5

Sen then differentiates the indicators useful for understanding development highlighting the difference between growth and distribution or market and non-market means of well-being. As he (1988:15) concludes: “the assessment of development cannot be a matter only of quantification of the means of achievement. The concept of development has to take note of the actual achievement themselves.” Sen (1988:20) then cautions his readers: “One of the difficulties in adequately characterizing the concept of development arises from the essential role of evaluation in that concept. What is or is not regarded as a case of “development” depends inescapably on the notion of what things are valuable to promote.” Adding this caveat, while clarifying, generates the plausible assumption that development is a state or status of being that can be referenced to a person, collectivity, or national entity. But, even recognizing these cautions associated with the possible meanings of development, the concept itself remains ambiguous.

Greater specificity is offered by other social science literature where (social) development is understood as “a process of planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development” understood as progressive and universal (Midgley 1995). This definition shares the basic assumptions of Sen’s approach but differs in its suggestion that development be understood as a process rather an endpoint or outcome, although its product, too, is the securing of well-being and (domestic) equity. Such a contemporary frame is remarkable in echoing U.S. President Truman’s inaugural observations: “We

4 A recent theme exploring poverty focuses on social exclusion.
5 This is a debate between development economics and economics.
must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. … The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing” (Truman Inaugural Address in Esteva 1992:6).

The broad claims of development have been the focus of debate for the past four decades, but, during the past decade, have come under attack by those who challenge its universal claims, its ahistoricity, and its persistent failure to alleviate poverty and global inequality. Post development thinkers (Ferguson 1994; Escobar 1995; Rahnema with Bawtree 1996; Rist 1997; Gupta 1998; Peet and Hartwick 1999), in particular, have taken a strong stand against monism and teleology in the definition of development – as only industrialization or economic growth or social revolution. Despite this, development as practice, project, and goal, continues to provide a seductive frame of reference. I situate Sen among those who recognizes the historical failure of development but who nonetheless is seduced by its promise (Feldman and Gellert 2005).

Recognizing the promise associated with development, the following discussion focuses on the adequacy of Midgley’s definition for understanding capabilities and, perhaps more importantly, for devising interventions for realizing the ability for people to be “all they can be and do.” For example, there is little doubt that globalization\(^6\) represents both a new discursive framework for understanding development among and within nation-states, as well as a new set of practices and foci of intervention. While debates about globalization continue, there is little disagreement that new social relations among peoples and states characterize development at the present juncture. Believers in hyper-globalization, for instance, argue for a withering of the control once held by national-states and sees in globalization an increasing standardization of cultures and meanings. In contrast, there are those who argue for significantly less dramatic changes in the global political economy, but tend to agree on the unprecedented intensity of global relations, new constraints on national autonomy, and recognition of the unevenness of the process. Moreover, there is increased recognition that various resistances, both within national formations and cross-nationally, will continue to shape the kinds of relations that characterize the global community. This is revealed clearly at economic forums such as Seattle 1999 and the annual Davos World Economic Forums, and in the now annual World Social Forum gatherings where efforts are organized to challenge the increasing control embedded in the IMF, the WTO, and the World Bank. These counter-movements, whether transnationally or locally organized, challenge the assumed autonomy of the nation-state with their rallying cry that “another world is possible.”

If there is agreement on this changing face of the development context or in the kinds of autonomy now enjoyed by national states and bureaucratic authorities, then it is difficult to speak

\(^6\) It is possible to view the globalization debate, within sociology and anthropology at least, as subsuming discussions of development and reframing debate as one concerned with whether the neoliberal market economy is good or bad for individual well-being, poverty reduction, or social sustainability, or, conversely, as a way to alleviate economic and social insecurity.
generally about the relationship between capabilities and social development because the environment for planned intervention or “engineering” is continually being constituted and reconstituted. As Feldman and Gellert (2005) suggest, even if the definition and goals of development were (universally) agreed upon, their institutionalization within particular contexts are likely to reflect diverse and complex products and processes. Thus, it is important to historicize the concept of development, what we refer to today as the triumph of neo-liberalism, and to examine its relationship to what might be considered the (smaller) triumph of human capabilities. Are they, and if so how are they, constituted relationally? To explore the relationship between capabilities and social development requires that we recognize the need to problematize and historicize development as an ongoing and changing social project. I therefore will use the present occasion to query the notion of development and its taken-for-grantedness in debates on capabilities and development.

To accomplish this task I examine two interrelated issues. First, I offer a brief, and therefore truncated, genealogy of capabilities and then summarize the various meanings of development, and social development in particular. Second, I relate the neo-liberal commitment to individualism to the salience of the capabilities framework in securing the premises of neo-liberal reform. This section provides the basis for viewing the capabilities approach as instrumentalist rather than as an alternative to the neo-liberal development project, mindful and appreciative, to be sure, of the great advance over economic indices alone that is offered by rethinking relations of inequality in the framework of capabilities, freedom, and deliberative democracy.

To be sure, there is a significant body of research by economic and development sociologists that has been central to debates on human capital formation and the potential of export production, micro-credit, and increases in women’s education as means to reduce poverty and fertility. Participation in these activities is also viewed as a means to enhance women’s bargaining power within the household and in the public sector through increased representation in political decision-making. Much of this work is indebted to the contributions of Sen, not only for his role in rethinking famines, cooperative conflicts, and household bargaining, but also for identifying the determinants of the more than one million missing women, corresponding, to be sure, to his understanding of difference, entitlements, and justice. As Sen observes, inequality can yield a diagnosis of injustice only through some theory (or theories) of justice (Sen 1999:260). This connection is evident when Sen argues that tolerance of gender inequality is closely related to notions of legitimacy and correctness and to normative understandings of gender difference.

Demographers, too, are key contributors to discussions of poverty reduction, rather than gender equity per se, as they illuminate relationships among women’s education, fertility, migration, employment, children’s education, and enhancements of women’s bargaining power. Moreover, feminist discussions of the differential gender effects of globalization are central to analyses of gender inequality, particularly as they concern social capital formation, credit access, informal employment,
labor market segmentation, and identification of the effects of economic globalization (Elson 1991; 1992; 1999; Beneria and Feldman 1992; Rai 2002). The WID, GAD, and more recent empowerment literature speak directly to the differential and often contradictory consequences of development assistance for women and men (Feldman 1992; Miller and Razavi 1995). 

However, I would like to situate my remarks today on the terrain of historical and comparative sociology and the meanings attendant to development as a social project. Such a focus will highlight the changing character of development interventions as these constitute the political and bureaucratic context in which the challenges posed by the capabilities approach are enacted. In so doing, I will outline how the commitment to a capabilities approach presumes a particular economic formation -- a nation-state system characterized by uneven development within a global structure of capitalism. I will argue that the approach also presumes the end of history because it takes the liberal assumptions of economic change – modernization, development, and capitalism – as given rather than either open to contestation or an outcome of sustained negotiation over the direction and configuration of the economy. This should not be conflated with a critique of the strong reformist impulse in the capabilities approach, not only as a means of measuring development success, but also as a way to contest the structural effects of prior development initiatives.

Capabilities

In his Tanner Lecture on Human Values (1979), Sen poses the critical connection between economics and moral philosophy and recognizes “the fundamental diversity of human beings [which] have very deep consequences [that affect] not merely the utilitarian conception of social good, but [also] the Rawlsian conception of equality.” The displacement of commodities and utility with functionings and capabilities was introduced in this essay, as was Sen’s recognition of “basic capability equality.” Basic capability equality is built on a critical engagement with the claims of utilitarian equality, total utility equality, and Rawlsian equality. But, Sen is clear: alone or in combination, these suggestive offerings have been insufficient as a framework for building equality. In its stead, Sen offers a perspective whose core claim is that development should be evaluated in terms of “the expansion of the ‘capabilities’ of people to lead the kinds of lives they value – and have reason to value” (Sen 1999:18), with its evaluative claims focused on people’s functionings, that is, their “doings and beings,” and not on utilities or primary goods but on substantive freedoms. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles)” (Sen 1999:75).

As Sen outlines, “If the object is to concentrate on the individual’s real opportunity to pursue her objectives … then account would have to be taken not only of the primary goods the persons respectively hold, but also of the relevant personal characteristics that govern the conversion of primary goods into the person’s ability to promote her ends” (Sen 1999:74). And, as he continues, While the combination of a person’s functionings reflects her actual achievements, the

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8 See Rosen (2002) for an analysis of a single industry and its global and contradictory effects on women.
capability set represents the freedom to achieve: the alternative functioning combinations from which this person can choose. ... [And, as Sen continues, the] evaluative focus of this “capability approach” can be either on the realized functioning (what a person is actually able to do) or on the capability set of alternatives she has (her real opportunities). The two give different types of information – the former about the things a person does and the latter about the things a person is substantively free to do” (Ibid. 75).

Alkire summarizes the distinction clearly: “we are really interested in what persons are actually able to do or be – that is, in their functionings -- not in the pounds of rice they consume” (Alkire 2002:6).

Goods, in other words, are relevant for the ways in which they allow people to achieve different “doings” or “beings,” called functioning. The set of functionings available to a person represents her capability set where capability is closely related to the idea of opportunity or advantage (Basu and Lopez-Calva 2002). As Sen (1995:266) summarizes it: “The ‘capability perspective’ involves concentration on freedoms to achieve in general and the capabilities to function in particular.” This perspective, whether in Martha Nussbaum or Sen’s framing, acknowledges a debt to Aristotle: “A good human life would not only require adequate functioning in terms of ‘nutrition and growth,’ a purely animal feature, but the possibility of exercising choice and practical reason” (in Basu and Lopez-Calva 2002:7 see also Stewart and Deneulin 2002)). But, this “good human life” depends on providing conditions that can facilitate people’s ability to lead flourishing lives, as Sen is always sure to emphasize (Stewart and Deneulin 2002).

Basu and Lopez-Calva⁹ (2002) note that the distinctiveness of Sen’s capabilities approach is its discord with traditional welfare economics. Walsh confirms this:

It is important that the non-economist reader be alerted to the fact that Sen’s analysis of inequality in terms of capabilities that we require for our most important functionings and the attainment of our goals, together with his critique of utilitarianism, constitute, in their full development in his works, a critique of the whole approach of orthodox economics to questions of human well-being, inequality, and the “efficiency” or optimality of economic societies (1995:558).

Des Gasper (2002:430) suggestively remarks, borrowing perhaps from Dudley Seers,¹⁰ that this represents the “dethroning [of] economic growth as the centerpiece” of development.

In addition to appreciating Sen’s challenge to analyses of well-being that are limited to the command over goods and services, Gasper also values Sen’s distinction between achievement and freedom. As Sen (1999:264) himself acknowledges, “Primary goods are the means to the freedom to achieve, and cannot be taken as indicators of freedoms themselves.”¹¹ Sen’s attention to questions of

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⁹ Basu and Lopez-Calva (2002:15-33) summarize Sen’s framework by emphasizing his understanding of the bases of a moral system as that “concerned not just with “good things,” but “with what these good things do to human being.” Second, that goods “have an instrumental value in that they allow individuals to ‘function which represents the state of a person, a set of things that she manages to do or to be in her life.Capabilities reflect the alternative combination of functionings that a person can achieve, from which the individual will choose one collection. Well-being will be defined as the quality of a person’s being, based on those functionings the person can indeed choose from.”

¹⁰ Noted in Stewart and Deneulin (2002:62)

¹¹ This view of freedom is linked to Sen’s understanding of justice and his critique of utilitarianism as an efficiency oriented approach that concentrated on promoting the maximum sum total of utilities, no matter how unequally
freedom – both positive freedom and negative freedom, agency freedom and well-being freedom – reveal a debt to Isaiah Berlin (1969) who differentiated freedom in the sense of not being prevented from doing something and the actual ability to do something (Sen 1985; 1990; Crocker 1995:183; Prendergast 2004), the latter point being central to creating the conditions that enable people to be all they can be and do. To highlight the value of freedom to Sen’s understanding of capabilities, Basu and Lopez-Calva (2002:9) quote T. H. Green:

... when we speak of freedom we do not mean merely freedom from restraint or compulsion…. When we speak of freedom as something to be so highly prized, we mean a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying, and that, too, something that we do or enjoy in common with others.

In outlining these definitional distinctions, Basu and Lopez-Calva concur with others who note that, because the freedom of one person may depend on the preferences of another, capabilities may be difficult to deploy in evaluating social states or societies. Another difficulty with the capabilities approach is what Robeyns (2005) outlines as the problems attendant to the selection of capabilities for quality of life measurements. In a thoughtful survey of the approach,\(^1\) she (2005:93-96) offers the following: the capabilities approach is a “normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society.” Framed within liberal theory, the approach “evaluates policies according to their impact on people’s capabilities” and rejects theories that rely exclusively on utility and that exclude non-utility information from moral judgments. As she concludes, the capabilities framework has been institutionalized as a measure of progress and development and a guideline highlighting criteria for reducing poverty, increasing gender equity, and enabling a more just social environment.

Importantly, Robeyns also argues that the capabilities approach differs from instrumentalist approaches, including that of human capital, because rather than focusing on achieving particular outcomes, its goal is to enhance people’s opportunities and choices. To realize this goal, both context and normative practices and expectations need to be included in assessment as well as planned intervention. Education is supported, for example, because educated women have been shown to reduce their fertility and increase their productive capacity, thereby enhancing their well-being, agency, and empowerment (Arends-Keunning and Amin 2001). According to the capabilities approach, these goals are part of a focus on creating conditions that provide people the ability “to lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have” (Sen 1997:1959). Robeyns acknowledges, too, the benefit that declines in fertility offer women, including expanding opportunities beyond their roles as mothers. Thus, the approach contributes to changing gender relations and enhancing women’s participation choices.

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\(^{12}\) The argument made is that the capabilities approach is a growth industry with discussion and analyses dispersed across an array of journals and texts. Robeyns is clear, however, that there is need for cross disciplinary work that would include sociology,
Two points that distinguish the capabilities approach are especially worthy of comment. First, while human capital approaches indeed take a different relationship to the question of outcomes than do those focused on capabilities, human capital practitioners, too, explore the benefits of increases in education for reducing fertility and improving productive capacity. Yet, human capital practitioners do not tie these outcomes, or investments, to enhancing women’s substantive choices and opportunities. They neither open a space for deliberative practices that include women, nor do they identify constraints that inhibit realizing capabilities. The approaches are similar, however, in their focus on the individual as the measure of success, an important point to which I will return below.

Yet, in comparing various approaches to development, it would be important to show how project and investment goals are constituted historically and imagined as appropriate to a particular, normative, set of desired social relations and practices. Such an accounting would help to explain why goals that enhance opportunities for market participation as individual workers and as members of small families – characteristics of the modern bourgeois, neoliberal social formation – may be given priority over investments in collective or cooperative production relations. It also would help to identify a reformist impulse or limitation of these opportunities for the social whole. Finally, it would help to reveal such investments as instrumental in realizing the goals of the dominant paradigm.

Perhaps more significant for the current discussion, however, is the way in which the capabilities approach imagines social development. Practitioners of the capabilities approach, with their concern for normative choices and outcomes, for instance, may indeed challenge “local” norms in situations in which women’s employment is in conflict with the norms of purdah and women’s public exclusion. But, such reforms fail to challenge the broader neoliberal framework where such norms are instantiated. This has the effect of leaving neoliberal assumptions and normativity in tact.13

By contrast, offering opportunities that depend, for example, on skills rather than literacy training, or on collective or cooperative rather than individual enterprise development, may contribute to securing work, building self-esteem, and enhancing women’s bargaining power. It would also be more likely to challenge the mode and direction of the contemporary production paradigm, one that seeks to extend capitalist production relations and individual and autonomous responsibility into all aspects of social life. Moreover, attention to and investments in such alternative institutional arrangements might reignite debates on land reform and/or the role of multinational capital in transforming extant production regimes and open up new choices for national planners and decision-makers. Said differently, there may be households that can no longer engage in subsistence forms of production as an alternative to large-scale industrial agriculture but that may nonetheless desire to do so. Yet, new investments in agriculture may be discouraged if measures of development success and appropriate parameters of capabilities and functionings are delimited by the frame of neoliberalism. For example, in circumstances where agriculture is privatized and concentrated, there may be a

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13 By employment I include all forms of waged and unwaged labor but importantly, breaks with normativity are centered on “modern sector work” and in this sense, it supports the neoliberal project of individual autonomy and responsibility, while securing a cheap labor force for global production.
concomitant erosion of the choices people can make and the kinds of investments that are valued. Thus, while it is indeed the case that the capabilities approach is more sensitive to context than is human or social capital initiatives, a focus on "getting capabilities right" (which are defined within a particular political formation) can elide debate about the constraints imposed by the political economy of market reform.14 What one might conclude from this is that when the capabilities approach supports the education of people to enable them to better compete, as well as to seek opportunities and imagine choices and desires in an increasingly internationalized marketplace,15 it takes the contemporary historical formation as given, even as it seeks to reform some of its negative attributes.

This means that when comparing various approaches to development, it would be important to show how project and investment goals are constituted historically and imagined as appropriate to a particular, normative, set of desired social relations and practices. Such an accounting would help to explain why goals that enhance opportunities for market participation as individual workers and as members of small families – characteristics of the modern bourgeois, neoliberal social formation – may be given priority over investments in collective or cooperative production relations. Such an accounting would also help to recognize the reformist impulse or limitations of these opportunities for the social whole; and finally, it would reveal such investments to be instrumental in realizing the goals of the dominant paradigm.

In a related vein, Robeyns responds to the charge that Sen’s capabilities approach is individualistic by distinguishing between ontological and ethical individualism. She argues that ontological individualism is a claim about the nature of human beings that does not depend on contextual or institutional relations to constitute understanding of social life, since social life is merely the aggregation of individuals. Ethical individualism, in contrast, is a position consistent with approaches such as the capabilities approach since it accounts for the social embeddedness of the individual. Methodological individualism, too, recognizes that individuals are affected by their social worlds. But, as Weber (1968) reminds us, explanation resides in individual actions that are explained through reference to individual intentionality. In his Preface to Development and Freedom, Sen (1999:xii) argues for the place individual agency in development in this way:

…the freedom of agency that we individually have is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities available to us. There is a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements. It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom. To counter the problems that we face, we have to see individual freedom as a social commitment.

For me, recognizing “deep complementary” differs from relationality or constitutiveness. Thus, I agree with Stewart and Deneulin’s charge (2002), as well as that of Evans (2002), that Sen’s approach is

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14 Deneulin and Stewart (2002:66) make a similar point: “Sen tends to avoid political economy, which results in an apparent (and knowing Sen it can only be apparent) naivete in his treatment of both democracy ... and modern capitalism.”

15 I use the term international here to signal the ways in which the unemployment of educated youth within particular countries is often mediated by employment in the global labor market.
one based on methodological individualism, even as Sen rejects this charge in his response to Stewart and Deneulin (2002:81):

Social influences can stifle the understanding of inequality and muffle the voice of protest. This is one reason why we have to celebrate political activism related to class-based resistance, or anti-racist struggles, or feminist challenges, as an integral part of the process of social justice. ... Nothing can be more remote from methodological individualism, with its reliance on detached and separated individuals.

Thus, despite acknowledging the importance of collective action and resistance, and claims of complementarity, on the question of ethical individualism in the capabilities approach, the debate has yet to be resolved (Evans 2002; Stewart and Deneulin 2002; Sen 2002; Prendergast 2004).

In fact, these epistemological concerns continue to be important for interpreting the design of policies and programs for change, two areas where Robeyns calls for collaboration across the disciplines – sociology, anthropology, history, and gender and cultural studies – in order to more fully understand the importance of institutions, collectivities and context in identifying policies and programs that can contribute to enabling people to be all they can be. Robeyns suggested division of labor is appealing in terms of substantive expertise, but it is important to recognize that cross-disciplinary inquiry may not escape the problem since epistemological premises are readily shared among disciplines. Thus, the solution is not to be found in a call for interdisciplinary research but in sustained reflection on the question of the relationship between structure and agency.

As is evident from this brief discussion, I have taken Sen’s template rather uncritically, and avoided fully engaging the rich insights offered by Gasper (2002) and others (Robeyns 2005; Deneulin 2005) who question the theoretical status of the capabilities approach and identify limitations in the framework of what Gasper specifies as the SCA (as distinct from CA). Outlining the approach, however, should be sufficient to appreciate the importance of continuing to refine the concept of capabilities and freedom in relation to a historicized understanding of development. It should also prove sufficient to address a key question before us today: what is the relationship between a capabilities approach and a “thick” understanding of development?

Social Development

To begin, it is worth recalling the meanings of development. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, development is the “gradual advancement through progressive stages, growth from within as in nations proceed in a course of Development, their later manifestations being potentially present in the earliest elements.” And, from the same entry, “… the bringing out of the latent capabilities (of anything), or “... the act or process of developing.” A number of points are worth emphasizing here. One is that development is understood as a progressive and apparently natural process of change, the latent capabilities of change present in historical evolution itself. Two, and crucially important for the discussion to follow, development is an act, an intervention, the bringing out of, or the act of developing. This framing puts human agency and relations of intervention centrally in the process of

16 S. LUCAS Secularia, 1862 in OED online 2005.
“doing” development as a social project and contextualizes and complicates human development as merely “the process of enlarging people’s choices, by expanding human functionings and capabilities (UNDP 2000:17).

There is no doubt agreement on development as relations of intervention toward improvement, bringing modernity – in social relations, institutions, and political practices - to the not yet modern. This point is suggestively developed by Ferguson’s (1994) identification of a “development industry” that was generated in response to the crises of both development theory and its practices. Let me briefly elaborate this point in an effort to provide a more robust understanding of the concept of development in discussions of capabilities.

What is not included in the OED’s definition of development, however, is the role of intervention (contra Sen’s use of the term engineering), or what, in other words, would be called doing development from the outside in. Intervention, in other words, is “bringing to” what others are either dependent on or “should have.” Development is, in short, a relation of power, even when recipients desire what is shared. Intervention or the practices of development include the extension of development aid and assistance to others and its articulation and institutionalization in different sites. What remains largely unaccounted for in this definition is specification of the processes and relations that attend to development; that is, what is transformed or perhaps lost, as well as added, in the institutionalization of particular interventions. To be sure, the literature is replete with examples of agricultural transformation and relations of production in response to the transfer of technology and new farming practices, or the consequences of global culture on consumption and desire, but there is less attention to how the experience of loss relates to people’s choices and assessments of economic and social security.

In the current debate on the capabilities approach as well there is limited discussion of the context(s) of these relations and the unequal power that characterize relations of dependence. Yet, understanding these contexts and relations of power is crucial for an adequate appreciation of the specificities of reception and whether and how target groups are mobilized to participate and encouraged to engage in ways that increase their opportunities to realize the kinds of lives that they (should) value. This could be accomplished by modifying institutions and practices in ways that correspond to people’s perceived needs, desires, and expectations, or, following debate and deliberation, may be constituted to actually correspond to people’s actual needs, expectations, and desires. At the level of the collective, ignoring the role power relations and relations of dependence play in assessments of achievements and capabilities can lead to a failure to understand the very

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17 The industry includes support for graduate and professional programs to train students in development studies and related foci (e.g.; NGO management and participatory action research), as well as support for journals and forums to attend to the needs and desires of the development industry.

18 Some postcolonial literature begins to address this, see, for example, Nandy (1983)

19 This is important whether dependencies reflect intra-state, inter-state, or other collective (e.g., household) structures.
constitution of state capacities, institutional and infrastructural resources, and political interests that
are crucial for creating a context in which capabilities can be realized.

Attention to these aspects of the development project need not devolve into ideological or
political debate but instead ought to depend on taking into account the changing interests and
conditions, such as institutional formations and forms of accumulation and consumption, that condition
the choice of intervention and its reception. This suggests that even if one were able to clearly read
off “interests” that include boosting production and exports or accessing new markets, “it remains
impossible to simply read off actual events from these known interests as if the one were simply an
effect of the other” (Ferguson 1994:16).20

Likewise, it would be insufficient to claim that such interests are simply external to the task of
creating institutions, providing resources, and changing conditions in ways that may “enable people to
be all they can be and do.” Said differently, general statements about interests (of agencies, states,
elites, and other constituencies or actors) are as problematic as are general calls for constitutional and
institutional reform, since the latter, too, must account for the particular contexts in which such reforms
are actually likely to be incorporated and adopted. If such reforms are to help transform capacity and
accountability in aid recipient countries, then Sen’s attention to democratic deliberation (even if under-
specified) is crucial for its realization, as is attention to the historically specific institutional and cultural
relations that shape the complex meanings of a given social reform.

Interestingly, the OED definition of development neither marks conjunctural moments of
transition in the process of “gradual advancement” nor does it identify periods of contestation, such as
when the latent potential of a given moment is inhibited from emerging by externalities. This might
appear, for example, when a country faces limitations on its autonomy (as in response to aid or debt
dependence) in ways that elide historical antecedents and thus constrain choice or opportunity. Nor do
such definitions of development (within particular countries) account for transformations that may
accompany global shocks or crises, e.g., the Oil Crisis of 1973 or the 1989 collapse of the Soviet
Union. Yet, development as a social project needs to account for how these “supra-national”
constraints shape functionings and capabilities and, consequently the capabilities approach. Such as
accounting requires recognition of the historically specific interventions that facilitate and structure the
institutional and social relations and meanings that constitute the current neoliberal development
paradigm.21 It also requires that we differentiate among development interventions (and their different
meanings) because different constellations of power – to set a global agenda and encourage others to
accept it – not only establish the context but also the conditions for the kinds of interventions that are
assumed to promote development and realize gender equity and freedom.

The Neoliberal Moment

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20 This reflects a critique of structural determinism even as one is claiming the constitutive relation of structure and
agency

21 Esteva’s (1992) refers to development as an “incredibly powerful semantic constellation” which guides thought
and behavior that is presently associated with growth, maturation, and expansion. See also Escobar (1995), Rist
Neo-liberalism is a political and economic project whose policies, beginning in the 1970s and
gaining prominence since 1980 under Thatcher and Reagan, have altered relations between states
and citizens. With an emphasis on market competition and the dismantling of the national regulation
of economic life in favor of market governance, neoliberalism is associated with altering the character
state regulation, advocating free enterprise in competitive global markets, facilitating the movement of
goods and capital unburdened by tariffs and regulations, and promoting the central value of
individualism over collective action. In the discourse of globalization, neoliberalism is realized by
internationalizing communication, trade, and economic organization in ways that increase the intensity
and density of exchange when compared with earlier inter-state relations and is marked by expanding
the role of international capital and transnational institutions in providing “economic” goods and
services as well as extending new cultural practices.

Built on an ideology that upholds private property, individual rights, legal equality, freedom of
choice and democratic government, neoliberalism, as a set of practices and assumptions also views
collective structures – unions and socialist and populist movements and organizations -- as
impediments to market logic. Its practitioners argue that achieving progress and social justice is best
realized by furthering free-market relations. The underlying premise of (neo)liberalism as an ideology
is one that provides the basis for competitive capitalism while valuing equality of opportunity and
opposing ascriptive statuses that restrict individual choice and deny equal access to achieving
satisfaction. This is both the context and the challenge within and against which the capabilities
approach is offered. Thus, the demand for historical specificity does not challenge Sen’s broad
concept of development as “the enhancement of living conditions [as] an essential – if not the
essential – object of the entire economic exercise” (Sen 1988:11). Rather, it argues that the kinds of
interventions offered, and the strategies sought for their implementation – however democratically
generated - need to be read against the specificities of neoliberalism for the ways it structures
meanings and practices.

To be specific, given the way the conference is organized, I think it is safe to presume that
social development, as distinct from the concept of development, refers to that which is not economic
– the social (welfare) and institutional sectors that provide the context of social life and individual
choice. Most prominently, especially regarding the substantive focus of the capabilities approach,
these sectors include education, health care, and nutrition -- those dimensions of development that
are the site of economic policy failures and the consequences of change for the poor and excluded.

Often the purview of social science research broadly defined, research on the social dimensions
of development respond to mediating, and perhaps seeking to explain, the continued costs of poverty
in the context of growth, as well as crises caused by the escalating scale of indebtedness as informal
and not yet fully commoditized relations of production are brought more completely into the market.
These concerns remain despite improvements on a number of critical social indicators – education
levels have improved and fertility rates have declined, but housing and urban squalor, indebtedness,
and underemployment remain high. It is in this context that the capabilities approach can alter how we imagine intervening to improve not only the outcomes of specific policy initiatives but also the means and values associated with them.

This leads to the question: What is the relationship between development as a field of inquiry and social development as a field of intervention? In a creative engagement with critiques of development (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Mitchell 1999; 2002), John Harriss explores the genealogy of the concept of social capital. He masterfully demonstrates that its transformation and incorporation into development practice “contributes to a hegemonic social science that systematically obscures power, class, and politics” (Harriss 2001: 2). Harriss argues that the robust view of social capital offered by James S. Coleman -- a structure of relations among people able to facilitate exchange and build reciprocity and trust in ways that can reduce transaction costs through enhanced communication and information — was refashioned by Robert Putnam who transformed the meaning of social solidarities into a technical measure of civic engagement and dislodged it as an instrument of power. As a technical measure, the concept lost its analytic robustness and now celebrates “the centrality of the market in development, and the fantasy of the ‘free’ or self-regulating market economy.” As Harriss continues, “the policies of stabilization and adjustment give rise to the kinds of contradiction that are papered over by such weasel words that relegate a symptom -- the lack of civic engagement -- into a cause.” Interestingly, Putnam continues to be viewed as the “High Priest” of social capital.

Like social capital, the concept of capabilities confronts challenges in that its analytic bite can be readily transformed in meaning it it becomes a technical tool of measurement that, as Harriss argues, can be use to “suit the interests of global capitalism [by representing] problems that are rooted in differences of power and in class relations as purely [perhaps primarily is a more appropriate word] technical matters that can be resolved outside the political arena” (Ibid. 3). As Mitchell (1999) reminds us in his analysis of the role of international aid in Egypt, aid and assistance decisions that fall outside of public debate or public scrutiny tend to exclude challenging extant class inequalities (e.g., opening to debate land reform). Sen’s emphasis on freedom and deliberative democracy as central aspects of the capabilities approach is extremely suggestive here, even as there remains a need for its further refinement. But, in order to avoid the pitfalls of institutionalizing capabilities in ways that limit it to a technical assessment or measurement tool, it is crucial to remain attentive to the power and political interests that help to constitute its meanings and practices. It also is crucial to recognize the importance of Sen’s call for attention to the relationship between capabilities and reform, especially as he elaborates this in his commitment to freedom, deliberation, and as central features of his project.

**Conclusion**

In this brief paper, I have argued that efforts to reduce poverty and enhance social and human rights operate within specific historical and social contexts that today are framed by the uneven development of states embedded within a globalized system of production and exchange. I have
suggested that the historical status of contemporary state relations within a global complex is consequential, not only for revealing patterns of international inequality, but also of intra-national inequality and hence for the ways in which the capabilities approach can be realized as a strategic challenge to states. I also have suggested that the character of contemporary global and transnational relations contributes to shaping interventions including development assistance and aid agreements, as well as NGO program support and implementation. In other words, efforts to alter individual opportunities and outcomes are effected through both state-sponsored initiatives as well as those of civil society, through production enhancing efforts as well as governance, the latter including, but not be limited to, anti-corruption and accountability efforts. Evidence suggests that the contemporary global economy is characterized by increasing income inequality even as efforts at poverty reduction may have slightly reduced absolute poverty within particular contexts. Thus, poverty remains an urgent and difficult problem, especially if its reduction is to include enhancing gender equity and human freedom.

But, even though considerable discussion has addressed the strategic significance of different development interventions as means for reducing poverty, there has been a relative silence in discussions of capabilities about neoliberalism as a particular – rather than as a logical or inevitable -- social formation, and a product of economic and political choices that represent specific rather than general interests. As well, while there is debate over appropriate measures to assess crucial aspects and directions of growth and change, what remains largely uncontested within the capabilities approach is the assumption that development is a linear unfolding process of change toward improvement, rationality, and modernity, the cornerstones of Enlightenment and the basis of neoliberal reform. To ignore this particular character of a social formation leaves the conditions and relations that contribute to the uneven development among states within the global economy underspecified thereby contributing to naturalizing the linear progression of change with neoliberalism as its current (last?) stage.

While I acknowledge and appreciate that the capabilities approach offers an important inroad into relations of inequality, and Sen’s view of deliberative democracy draws attention to the institutional structures of inequality, the capabilities approach nonetheless focuses on the symptoms of development rather than challenging its premises. Surely the capabilities approach promises to do more than previous approaches to inequality, but without attention to the epistemic bases of the development project, it is possible that initiatives to enhance capabilities will likely only ameliorate inequality in the short term rather than transform the conditions that generate it in the first place.

In sum, I view my contribution today in the vein established by Gasper (2002), Stewart and Deneulin (2002), and Robeyns (2005) in their critical engagement with SCA – to unsettle some of the received wisdom of the “model” – and to stimulate debate that will extend current thinking. Des Gasper (2002:458) has, importantly, sought to “thicken” the concepts of the CA, giving them greater specificity, and recognizing their import as part of a “policy principle” rather than a theory. Such an
effort will contribute to the purchase that the approach has to realize the goals of intervention on behalf of the choices people have to be all they can be and do. The importance of the critique also lies in the creation of a forum for debate about the varied meanings that we employ in measuring enhanced human life and in creating strategies to encourage individual and social change. The demand for greater specification of the concepts of capabilities and freedom, as well as the meaning(s) of “human,” is central to this endeavor. I would add that attention to the diverse meanings of development also is essential to shaping measurement and offering strategies in support of a capabilities approach. I have argued, therefore, that development is best understood not as an “empty” process of change but rather as a particular and historically specific set of practices that incorporate contextualized meanings deployed to measure, create, and promote the conditions and outcomes to enable people “to be all they can be and do.”
References


