

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF CAPABILITY APPROACH AND ITS APPLICATION

[Dr. Kiran V. Jadhav](#)

Head & Assistant Professor, Department of Economics
Bhavan's H. Somani College, Chowpatty, Mumbai -7

Journal Samvakti Journal of Research in Business Management
<https://www.sjrbm.samvaktijournals.com>
Volume 1 Issue 1 (2020); Page No : 1 - 8

Discipline Human Resource Management

Date Received : April 9, 2020

Publication Date : May 24, 2020

Paper Type : Article

Journal ID : 202004.293.49113.22

doi : 10.46402/202004.293.49113.227

doi URL : <https://dx.doi.org/10.46402/202004.293.49113.227>

Access Type : Open Access ([Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](#))

© 2020 [Dr. Kiran V. Jadhav](#); with publication rights granted to [Samvakti Journals](#)

ABSTRACT:

The capability approach, by Amartya Sen, has laid the novel foundation in the field of Economics and measuring and evaluating the well-being in all the aspects of the human life. The nature of development of economics has moved towards its central feature of the process of development and has become more inclusive. The development or the well-being of a person is now seen to be the expansion of the freedom to lead a life or do things the person value. The capability approach has been developed and nourished by many after Amartya Sen and now is applied and used an effective tool for evaluation in various disciplines. This paper elaborates the capability approach in the viewpoint of Sen and glance on various applications of the same.

Keywords: Capability approach, poverty, inequality, evaluation method, development economics

INTRODUCTION:

The fundamental of the capability approach is found in the origin of development economics, as a separate branch of economics, particularly growth economics. It was basically revolving around the growth of income; which was then considered a the ends as the important factor in the well-being of all. The growth of income, hence, was the leader in the evaluation of well-being or the so-called development. [4][5][6][9][11][13][17][18][19] pointed out that the focus of these offspring on growth economic had been mainly

towards the growth of incomes and consequently all the ends, having different aspects, was examined in these ways.

The economics of development, as Sen explained, has changed and moved to another dimension which is taking into account the freedom to do things and live a life which is valued by the person and therefore it becomes more inclusive in nature for the development approach. The notion of freedom is more development centric than other growing income-related concepts; it examines the opportunities a person has in achieving the life he or she wants or things he or she wants to do. This process leads to the concept of capability which then formulates the capability approach. Sen's approach thereby sees the concept of development in terms of expansion of capabilities which allows a person to choose from the alternatives available to him or her. The chosen alternative refers to one of the functionings, which in turn, are the doing or beings the person can achieve or has achieved. The set of these 'functionings' forms the capability of the person. This capability is now the focal point of the development and subsequently is used to define or determine the state of being or doing.

The need for capability approach may well be seen in critiques of Sen on traditional economic concepts like utility, opulence, primary goods, income etc. are popularly used for judging the individual satisfaction and well-being. In keeping with him, the most concern with the utilitarian approach is that it disputes with the interpersonal distribution of the sum of the utilities derived by the community. Therefore the utility concept has been found a great deal equality conscious and it raises the questions on equating marginal besides as total utilities derived by all the individuals.^[13] In keeping with Foster and Sen, though the interpersonal comparison becomes easier in terms of utility approach, it doesn't help very much as the sole personal gain would be possible compare but the question of relative gains and also the same available with the alternatives remain unanswered.^[5] The capability approach arises as an alternative to all those approaches which encounter the problems associated with the measurement of well-being, interpersonal comparison, personal gains and losses so on. It focuses not only the chosen from the alternatives but the whole set and also the opportunity which is endorsed by the liberty enjoyed by the person.

The development can be now seen in the expansion of capabilities and more specifically human capabilities. ^{[1][3][6][7]}The expansion of these capabilities surmounts the deprivations from the life of human beings. The main objectives of the development or economic development are then seen in terms of alleviating various deprivations from human lives. These deprivations might be varying and depending upon the nature and needs of the concerned people. The deprivation could be in education, health, lifestyle, hunger, nutrition, equality etc. The process of development thereafter involves dealing with these deprivations and expanding the opportunities and set of alternatives of functionings which then can be termed as the expansion of capabilities.

Concept of Capability:

The capability is the set of functionings as said above which defines the doings and being a person achieve in his or her life. The person has the freedom to choose from these functionings and therefore it conveys the opportunities available to the person. The capability hence communicates the freedom and the real opportunities of the person and therefore is the basic concept in understanding the process of development. It vents the available range of options for a person from which he or she can decide on a kind of life led or to lead.

The capability has both intrinsic and instrumental importance.^[4] In the former case, the expansion of basic capabilities is important as it utters the development in itself and on the other hand it can also be used achieving many other basic objectives in the process of development. In the earlier case, economic development of human development has the main objective of getting away from the deprivations or expanding the basic capabilities and in the latter case, it further could be instrumental in achieving the overall growth and development of the economy.

While defining capability in the words of Sen, 'a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another'.^[19] it exhibits the degree or extent of freedom enjoyed by the person about his doings and beings. A person in his daily life might be doing many things and able to achieve his beings. The present doing and being is chosen among all the alternatives available to him or her. Therefore, every person carries or possess a collection which could be consumed, exploited, or made use of in his or her daily life. The group of all the collections forms his functioning, which differs from person to person and depending upon his or her own choices. The freedom in this way plays an important role in achieving his doings and beings and subsequently determines his capability.

The capability approach could be looked at in two ways; one may focus on realised functioning or on the real opportunities enjoyed by the person as indicated by the collection of his functionings.^[20] The former refers to the ability of the person for his beings and doings, on the other hand, the latter as clear in it, the set of functionings from which he or she can choose from. The capability of the person is expressed in the realised functioning; it is the chosen doing or being from among all the alternatives available to him or her. Therefore, his or her well-being is seen in the present state of being or doing. The focus, in this case, will be on the present state of being or doing as the person himself or herself has chosen the same. The real opportunity approach is a much-expanded version of the capability approach. Its focus is not just the chosen alternative but the group of alternatives from which he or she will be choosing from.

The capability approach is also related to the evaluation of living of person in terms of his actual beings or doings in order to achieve his various valuable functionings. (Sen 1993)^[18] According to him, it provides an informational base which could be used for critically seeing the individual or social advantages for the being as part of the institution

or society etc. The informational space provided by the capability approach is different from all other approaches such as classical utility approach, absolute or relative opulence, primary goods, equality of resources approaches etc.

List of Capabilities:

Though the said approach provides an informational base and more specifically an evaluative space, there is no fixed list of capabilities provided by those who have propounded it. Nevertheless, there are attempts by Martha Nussbaum, Paul Anand and many others; Amartya Sen has mentioned many of them in his different writings. He has clearly said that in reality there should not be any such set of capabilities as it depends upon nature and evaluation objectives. The underlying concerns and values should be focused on forming the capability approach in the evaluation exercises.^[19] Some of the important functionings as mentioned by Sen ^[11] ^[13] ^[17] ^[18] ^[19] are being well-nourished, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, having self-respect, being able to take part in the life of the community, decently clothed, minimally educated, properly sheltered, being in good health, being happy, being free from avoidable disease, to appear in public without shame etc. He pointed out that the assessment of the well-being of the person should be formed in such a way that its primary focus is on all such relevant functionings which are the constituent elements of his or her present beings or doings. The attempt by Martha Nussbaum can be seen in her ten central human capabilities^[18] which consists of Life, Bodily Health, Bodily Integrity, Senses, Imagination and Thought, Play, Affiliation, Practical Reasons, Emotion, Species and Control over one's life. This list has been used worldwide in various studies for the evaluation purpose and one of them was 'The Capability Approach: developing an instrument for evaluating public health intervention' at the University of Glasgow.^[7] The study made use of British Household data to capture the capabilities and used ten central human capabilities^[12] for the evaluation of public health interventions. But to be specific, Sen^[20] has clearly disapproved to have a fixed list of capability or a universal list as he argued as above, the selection of the functionings to form a capability set which has to be evaluated should be depending upon the underlying values and objectives of evaluation exercise by the competent authority. Therefore, instead of having a universal list, he advocated for having a separate list which shall emphasize the underlining and constituted factors of the programme to be evaluated.^[11]

Application of Capability Approach:

The capability approach has been considered as a multidimensional concept. (Comim et al 2008)^[3] It does not concentrate just on one benefit which may be expressed either in utility or in opulence; consider a factor as assumed to be governed by a particular factor; it goes beyond it and considers all possible factor. All those factors or functionings which are forming the capability of the person are most possibly undertaken in the purview for the assessment of the well-being of the person. There are various applications, himself discussed by Sen in his writings; include poverty, individual

differences, inequality, the standard of living, education income, justice, health, social security, human development, women empowerment etc. which are touched upon for their efficacy and extent of deprivations and their role in the well-being for the nation.

The poverty has been viewed in the standard criteria i.e. lowliness of income but in the capability framework, since the individual advantage is seen in the capability achievement, it is nothing but the deprivation of basic capability. In this approach, the income is just seen as an instrument of getting away from the basic capability, therefore, seen as one of the functioning of the individual. The level of income of the individual cannot be taken as a cause of poverty as even after having a good sum of money in hand in a rich county, for example, may be causing him to be in poverty as compared to the other people in the country. In terms of capability, it is the deprivation of the same which is affecting his lowness of income. The evaluation of public policy then has to be taken not in terms of increasing the income level of the people but it should be whether it is enhancing the capabilities of the individuals which could further lead him to come out from the poverty i.e. basic capability deprivation. (Sen 1999)^[19]. The concept of poverty is viewed as lack of real opportunity which is subject to the social constraints, personal circumstances etc.^[4] The level of income and the possession of wealth are not just the determinants of the extent of poverty; they are the factors which causes the deprivation of capability as can be seen in terms of lacking real opportunities.

The inequality and its extent are also seen as having different capability set for every individual. It is not just dependent upon the respective income, wealth and utilities. The concept of inequality is generally studied with income factor but the capability approach sees it in wealth, opportunities, achievements, freedom, education and health etc. (Sen 1992)^[20]. The approach insists that every individual has different characteristics with the natural and social environment and other external features; they also differ in physical and mental abilities. These all affect the state of equality in every aspect and hence the inequality should be viewed or evaluated not just on the basis of income, wealth or utility but should be focusing on all such characteristics of the individual. The selection of relevant variables as above gives much-expanded evaluative space which makes the concept more understanding.

As per the capability approach, there are some of the social variables which significantly contributes to achieving the well-being and give an expanded set of opportunities for all individuals in the country.^{[6][7][8][9][14][15]} It is argued that the main cause behind the poor economies is deprivations of basic social achievement viz. education and health, for all of the developing and underdeveloped countries. The economic opportunities and all other relevant spaces could be widened by expanding the capabilities by extending and promoting good education and health facilities for all. These social variables broaden the person's effective freedom and hence carries intrinsic importance in itself. They are also instrumental in developing the economic opportunities which are valued most by all the individuals. The capabilities and the sets of functionings are significantly expanded with the widened social values as in education and health.

The discussion ends up in the employment of a rational framework which overcomes the biases of traditional methodologies in evaluating the individual or population wellbeing. The assessment takes place not by caring about the satisfaction or the possession of commodities or wealth but attributes the well-being to the real freedom enjoyed by the person or the entire population. The operationalisation of the framework depends on its objectives; it requires to derive the capability set. This capability set determines the real freedom enjoyed by the target population. This set thus unveils the real opportunities for the said population. Therefore this set is taken into consideration for evaluation and then a required methodology is applied for the finding out the facts about the well-being of the said population. The evaluation exercise also requires the sourcing of data to supplement the value of the capability set to be evaluated. This data or information could then be processed then the reliability of the chosen capability set might be established and therefore the conclusions might be drawn in its bases.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The capability approach has been widely used as an effective alternative for the evaluation especially public policies and decisions across the world. The most used applications are the evaluation of public health policies, educational policies and relevant interventions etc. The capability approach offers a much wider dimensional framework and provides a wider space for the evaluation of the impact of any programme. Rather than depending upon the conventional evaluative methods; it has brought a richer set of variables to give a real picture of the existing state of being. The approach has also made possible the individual comparison between the persons and has posed itself as a multidimensional concept and an effective measurement tool worldwide. Although there is no fixed list of capabilities which could be used for the evaluative exercises; there are plenty of attempts is being made by experts in this field.

Though there's no attempt by Sen within the construction of index which could address to grasp the image of the state of being of the person whether gaining or losing, there are other endeavours like by Paul Anand and Paula Lorgelly, as discussed above, which may well be the solution for putting in place the framework for using in assessment work of any of the programmes and policies. The prominent use of the thought may well be traced within the construction of human development index by the United Nation which is employed to rank the countries in terms of the event criterion supported the essential human capabilities like education, health and standard of living etc. Though the approach remains on its infant stage, there are various developments are going down in swotting the employment and application of the potential framework across the world.

REFERENCES:

- 1) Coast J, Smith R, Lorgelly P. (2008), Should the capability approach be applied in Health Economics? *Health Economics*, 17: 667–670, Wiley Online Library.
- 2) Comim Flavio (2001), Operationalizing Sen's Capability Approach, Paper prepared for the Conference Justice and Poverty: examining Sen's Capability Approach, Cambridge 5-7 June 2001.
- 3) Comim, Flavio and Qizilbash, Mozaffar and Alkire, Sabina, *The capability approach: Concepts, measures and applications*, 2008
- 4) Dreze Jean, Sen Amartya, 'India – Economic Development and Social Opportunity', Oxford University Press, 1995
- 5) Foster James, Sen Amartya, 'on economic inequality', expanded edition with a substantial annexe, Oxford University Press, 1997
- 6) Ingrid Robeyns (2003), *Sen's Capability Approach and Gender Inequality: Electing Relevant Capabilities*, *Feminist Economics*.
- 7) Lorgelly P, Lorimer K, Fenwick E, Briggs AH (2008), *The capability Approach: developing an instrument for evaluating public health interventions. Final Report*, Section of Public Health and Health Policy, Glasgow Centre for Population Health. University of Glasgow.
- 8) Lorgelly Paula (2009), *Developing a capability measure for use in public health evaluations*, University of Glasgow.
- 9) Lorgelly Paula (2011), *Operationalizing Sen's Capability Approach: An application in public health*
- 10) Lorimer, K., Lorgelly, P., Fenwick, E., & Briggs, A. H. (2007). *Using mixed methods to operationalize the capability approach: an application in public health*, Human Development and Capability Association Conference, New School University, New York, NY, USA.
- 11) Nussbaum Martha, *Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice*, *Feminist Economics*, volume 9, 2003, issue 2-3
- 12) Nussbaum Martha, *Creating Capabilities – The Human Development Approach*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011
- 13) Nussbaum, Martha; Sen, Amartya, *The Quality of Life*. Oxford University Press. 1993
- 14) Paul Anand (2005), *Capabilities and Health*, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 31(5), 299-306
- 15) Paul Anand, (2009), *Capabilities and their Measurement*, Health Economic Research Centre, Oxford University.

- 16) Paul Anand, Graham Hunter, Ian Carter, Keith Dowding, Francesco Guala, Martin van Hees, (2009), The Measurement of Capabilities. Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, Volume 10, Issue 1
- 17) Sen Amartya, (2005), Human Rights and Capabilities, Journal of Human Development. Vol. 6, No. 2.
- 18) Sen Amartya, Development as Freedom, Oxford University Press, 1999
- 19) Sen Amartya, Inequality Reexamined, Oxford University Press, 1992
- 20) Sen Amartya, Commodities and Capabilities, Oxford University Press, 1987

End