Is the capability approach too individualistic? This question has haunted the minds of a non-negligible number of proponents of the human development/capability approach over the last few years. It has also sparked a fruitful debate. In a paper reviewing the two positions, Alkire (2007) writes that the answer depends on the purpose at hand. For evaluative purposes, the ultimate unit of moral concern for assessing states of affairs remains the individual human being, for “the intrinsic satisfactions that occur in a life must occur in an individual’s life”, even if “in terms of causal connections, they depend on social interactions with others” (Sen, 2002, p. 85). However, for proscriptive purposes, the approach would need to incorporate an explicit evaluation of collective processes which lead to the expansion of individual freedoms. The evaluative/proscriptive distinction introduced by Alkire closely resembles the distinction made by Sen between the ‘intrinsic’ and the ‘instrumental’ role of freedoms: “Freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means” (Sen, 1999, p. 10). One of the outcomes of the debate over the alleged individualism of the capability approach (CA) is that we must enrich the analysis of the process of development with due attention to processes of collective action, without however neglecting the agent-oriented view of CA.

Exploring the quintessentially social nature of individual freedom and agency, the two pillars of CA, might appear as a superfluous exercise which is stating the obvious. Who is to dispute indeed that the thoughts, choices and actions of individual human beings cannot be separated from the particular society in which they live and from the complex web of social relationships which construct who they are? Even the most individual act of ingurgitating food into one’s body is inherently collective. Georg Simmel (1910), and Albert Hirschman in his wake (1998), explore the fine irony that one of the most individual human activities of food intake is in fact surrounded by one of thickest layers of habits, conventions and rituals connected to eating in almost any culture. Ignorance of this
layer may lead to conceiving the problem of hunger as ‘just’ an individual problem of malnourishment and, then, to target the individuals confronted with this problem.¹

Yet, accounts of CA can differ substantially in the way in which they incorporate this in their analysis. Many accounts essentially reproduce the view that conceives of achieved well-being as the combined outcome of (1) a capability set and (2) free individual choice. This dual view renders more complex, but does not fundamentally challenge, the economists’ view that people consume a combination of goods subject to a budget constraint. Individuals are ‘socially dependent’ on others for their capability set, but from that point onwards, they can exert free choice. This point thus neatly separates the society’s responsibility for an individual’s well-being and the individual’s own responsibility. The advantage of defining development in terms of individual freedom is that public action should take responsibility for all that is not individually chosen.

But such a view becomes untenable once one takes into account that capabilities are also function of people’s voluntary engagement in social relationships. Several authors in this special issue documented this aspect. Jérôme Ballet, Jean-Luc Dubois and François-Régis Mahieu make a distinction for instance between abstract ‘individuals’ and socially situated and committed ‘persons’ endowed with –or who at least invested in— the social recognition necessary to claim crucial entitlements. It is essential that people do actively participate in the making of their personality, precisely the voluntary character of this commitment earns you social recognition and entitlement. In the process, one has of course also already contributed to the realisation of others’ freedoms. As stated by De Herdt and Abega, enrolling others in one’s projects overlaps significantly with being enrolled oneself. In this way, one’s freedom becomes thoroughly entangled with another’s.

This is not to say that ‘individuals’ can become the ‘persons’ of their own choosing. Ballet et al. present different philosophers’ views on this, and in the end they seem to converge towards the view that it is difficult to renege on the obligations one has vis-à-vis others: individual freedom is something coming only after one’s social obligations have been fulfilled. A similar impression emerges from the contribution by Pinar Uyan-Semerci. She reconsiders Martha Nussbaum’s list of central human capabilities from the perspective of Turkish women living in migrant settlements in the outskirts of Istanbul. She concludes that these women do not experience their wellbeing in terms of
individual freedoms. Their very autonomy and agency is expressed in non-individual terms. They have, she notes, “crowded selves”. The upshot is that one is not sure whether the individual freedoms ultimately gained are not already pre-empted by the duties one must commit in order to live in dignity.

This may be the case for some particular subordinate groups like the women interviewed by Uyan-Semerci, says Frances Cleaver, but it is important to acknowledge that the obligations one must fulfil to become a ‘good’ person do not only vary between but also within societies. Social responsibilities are heterogeneous realities, also because interactions take place in a plurality of spheres. Hence, depending on the sphere under consideration, people may have vastly unequal power either to be exempt from some obligations or entitled to enforce them onto others or, conversely, to renegotiate them. The concept of ‘political capabilities’ as developed in De Herdt and Abega might be useful here for analysing the variety of ways in which individuals can weigh on the multiple processes of rule-making in different social sites.

At first sight, CA can accommodate these issues by making skilful use of the category of ‘differences in relational perspective’, one of the parametric sources of variation between the ‘means’ at one’s disposal and what can do and be with them (Sen, 1992). Indeed, it would already be an important step to recognize not only that some people are unable to appear in public without shame, but that this ability differs from public to public and from ‘person’ to ‘person’ (to use Ballet et al.’s term). Yet, this leaves three problems unresolved.

First, this way of dealing with the socially related character of wellbeing suggests that as long as one sticks to the capability space, all will be fine. As long as one compares people in terms of doings and beings, this would obviate any worry about differences in relational perspective. Thus, when Townsend posed the problem as follows:

“as members of society (and hence of network of sub-groups) people have needs which can only be defined by virtue of the obligations, associations and customs of such membership […] Are not nutritional requirements dependent on the work roles exacted of people at different points in history and in different cultures, and dependent too upon the levels of extra work
activities to which custom expects people to conform? What are the requirements for?” (1985, pp. 662-7)

Sen would reply that we have to look at anthropometric indicators, not at the calorie content of the food consumed. Different work roles may be reflected in different calorie needs, but if in the end people have the same Body Mass Index this would result in a similar level of well-being. But the problem with this reply is that it does not take into account the underlying injustice in socially determined requirements to access food. Interestingly, where Sen discusses differences in life expectancy between black and white Americans (1999, pp. 22-23), he notes that life expectancy of female black Americans is comparable to that of women in Kerala. But precisely the comparison makes clear that the mere individual-level difference in opportunities is only part of the information contained in these data: Black American women are living in the same society as their white-coloured counterparts, the difference in life expectancy is in part the result of a different treatment by the same institutions. The comparison between black and white American women is therefore adding information about another dimension of deprivation than the comparison between American and Indian women. A focus on this additional dimension is not new, in development studies it goes back at least to the notion of structural violence coined by Johan Galtung: “in a society where life expectancy is twice as high in the upper class as in the lower classes, violence is exercised even if there are no concrete actors one can point to directly attacking others, as when one person kills another” (Galtung 1969, pp. 169–171, our emphasis). When the focus is on such underlying injustices, the central object of evaluation is a relationship. True, purely individual-level inabilities may play a role also in determining the way one can relate to others – able-bodiedness is described as key to the effective exercise of agency by Cleaver— but then, these capabilities enter again as means rather than as ends. Note however that a focus on relational injustices stays intimately connected to the principle of “each person as an end” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 5) or that “each is to count for one, none for more than one” (Pettit, 1998, p. 110).

A second problem has to do with the prospective use of the capability approach. As mentioned above, CA does certainly not preclude a focus on inter-group contrasts (Sen, 1999, p. 6) or horizontal
inequality (Stewart, 2005). Such an approach can indeed scrutinize the differences in achievement between broad categories like ethnic groups, gender or race, but from a prospective perspective, this is where CA becomes silent and the work starts. CA cannot give due account to the precise causal connections between these social markers and the way in which they are instrumentalised to affirm unequal treatment. These causal connections can vary significantly over time, between localities and even between persons, as documented by Cleaver.

Charles Tilly’s work on durable inequalities provides for some building blocks to pursue analysis along these lines (Tilly, 1998). In this volume, he applies this framework to discuss the (rarely if ever discussed) ability to “take part in scientific and literary pursuits”. Most of us scientists and intellectuals really abhor being put on the same heap with racists, sexists, fundamentalists and nationalists, yet the way in which we construct and enact our ideas about what it means to be a scientist is arguably responsible for an extremely skewed scientific debate dominated by white male Anglo-Saxons. In Tilly’s words, the way in which we define our identities also structures processes of exploitation and opportunity hoarding. People who individually ‘pass’ and are allowed to take part in literary pursuits without belonging to this group do not necessarily change this reality, they may also confirm and reproduce it (Tilly, 2006). Moving out of relational kinds of poverty cannot be conceived but at a collective level.

Third and finally, the blurring of the above-described dual model that so nicely separates public responsibilities and private choices has profound policy implications: the private and the public, the personal and the political, risk becoming intimately connected. This is, we think, only a logical implication of the agent-oriented view promoted by Sen. A general warning, not unwelcome in the era of the Millennium Development Goals, is that the entrepreneurs of public action give due attention at least as much to the how as to the what question (Pritchett and Woolcock, 2004).

Sen argues that the idea of the importance of political rights “relates, in the end, to the respect that we owe each other as fellow human beings…What matters, finally, is how we see each other” (1994, p. 38). But if this is what finally matters, formal social, political and economic rights do certainly not deplete the range of possibilities to enhance human agency. If the way we see each other is function of our positioning in a social fabric marked by cleavages and social boundaries,
development has to do with the ways in which these boundaries are defined, reaffirmed, reproduced, challenged, contested and ignored. There is a role here for researchers in international development too. Marianne T. Hill critically examines the processes through which research in the field of human development/capability approach becomes policy recommendation. Beyond the ordinary ways in which research is bridged with policy, Hill emphasises the role of researchers to engage in the work of strengthening the bonds between people and to create responsive and responsible social networks.

In development contexts, the how-problem is compounded as the relationship between donors and beneficiaries of aid seems to be characterized by built-in relational asymmetries. Sony Pellissery and Sylvia I. Bergh discuss several cases of participatory processes and find that a key factor for the success of such processes is the way in which they are interacting with other social structures. The theme of participation is also taken up by De Herdt and Abega, where it is connected to a broader framework for pro-poor policy change at the intersection between individual political rights, public policies and relational political capabilities.

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\[1\] A significant part of Sen’s contributions to Western scientific pursuits have indeed been devoted to criticize such dismal thinking on the problem of hunger (Sen 1981).

References


