

The Sen difference

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Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's economic and philosophical insights are now making a breakthrough across the world to influence governments, international institutions, policymakers, researchers, activists and the general public.

SEN'S idea of entitlement, born out of his analysis of the causes of famines, is a conceptual forerunner to what is today more popularly known as the capability approach. While most traditional economic theories narrowly associate development with growth in gross national product, a rise in personal incomes, or rapid industrialisation and technological advancement, Sen's



message is fairly simple and profound:

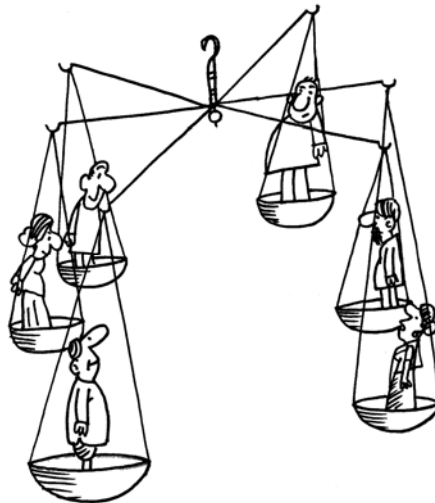
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there is more to development than just economic growth; development, in fact, should focus on the expansion of people's capabilities to achieve different valuable human functionings. Sen's capability approach, in other words, claims to raise more pertinent questions overlooked by conventional theories: how well is the income and wealth of a society distributed among its different sections (class, race, caste, gender, and so on)? What are the social and economic opportunities available to citizens in leading a life of their choice? What are the personal and social conditions that facilitate or hinder the individual's ability to transform resources into different functionings? Answering these questions re-orient the way we think about a wide range of issues: the quality of life, living standards, poverty, inequality, development and gender issues.

Sen's intention of introducing the criterion of 'capabilities' as a target for public policies is to capture two interrelated aspects. The first one is the enhancement of capacities or powers of people as human beings; these could range from the most fundamental ones required to fulfill nutritional and health needs to more complex ones required for social and political participation.

Income and wealth cannot be a straightforward indication of a person's quality of life; they are but a means to achieve different human functionings, a life of social, economic and political freedoms.

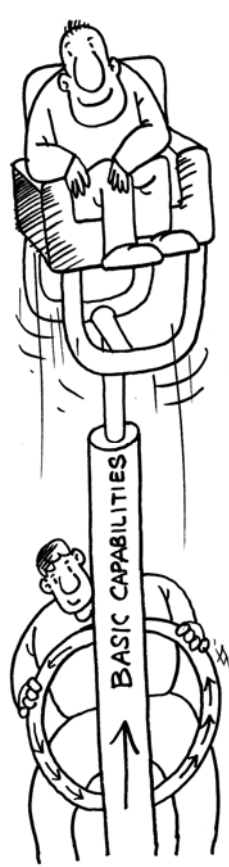
The second one refers to the opportunities that



people have to nurture and to exercise their capacities; people's capacities could indeed be enhanced or hampered depending on the opportunities they face in their family and society. A female child growing up in a Dalit family in rural India, for instance, is likely to face fewer opportunities for education, employment and social life than most of her counterparts; a citizen of some of the European countries receives more support from the state social security system in times of illness and unemployment than someone in the United States; a child born in Ethiopia has a much lower life expectancy and facilities for health care at birth than a child born, say, in any of the Scandinavian countries.

Sen is not a believer in overarching universal values that every country and culture in the world could endorse and implement in the same way. He upholds cultural sensitivity and has deep faith in the value of public discussion and participation at all levels: it is ultimately each society through democratic deliberation that should decide on what capabilities should merit public policy attention. Nevertheless, Sen has repeatedly referred to a number of basic capabilities that no society and the world community can afford to ignore: nutrition, health, literacy, self-respect and political participation. Paying attention to these basic capabilities of people and promoting them through coherent public policies, for him, is a matter of justice.

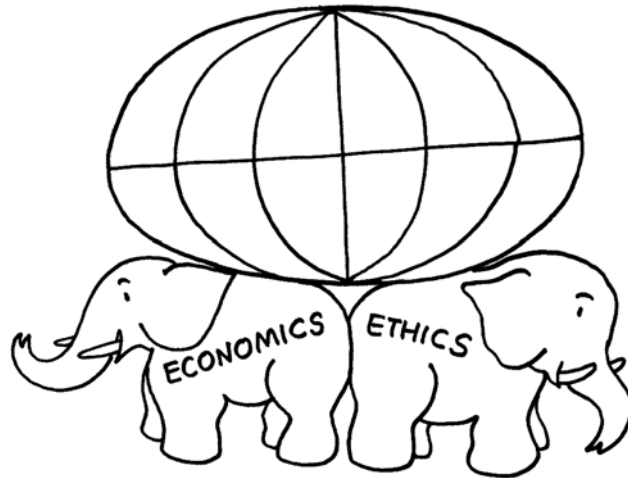
Today, the capability approach seems to have captured the imagination of a wide network of thinkers and practitioners from both developed and developing countries. While an intellectual community of



economists, social scientists and philosophers tries to examine critically and extend further the theoretical underpinnings of Sen's capability approach, a group of policymakers, researchers and activists tries to apply them to areas varying from poverty analysis to gender equality to sustainable development.

Beginning in the year 2001, already four international conferences have been organised to carry forward the theoretical advantages of the capability approach and to provide a forum for exchanging ideas, expertise and experience of over 500 academicians and practitioners representing more than 35 countries across the world.

PHILOSOPHICAL insights do not normally have instant success. They take at least a generation to gain wider acceptance. But in the case of Sen, it seems somewhat different. Sen is not only celebrated as a leading economist and a godfather of development thinking and practice. He is also regarded as a philosopher *par excellence* on two important fronts.



First, against a growing tendency to treat economics and ethics as two separate worlds, Sen has illustrated that there could indeed be rewarding dialogue and mutually beneficial influence between the two. Much of mainstream economics begins with the idea that human beings are uncompromisingly selfish. Economists and business professionals alike are hence highly sceptical of integrating ethical values into their economic analysis and business strategies. Sen has shown that such scepticism is unfounded. His contention is that human beings are not "rational fools" to be motivated only by self-interest in their economic activities of production and exchange; they could be moved equally by other-regarding values of justice, fairness, trust, honouring of contracts and civic duty. "Basic ideas of justice," says Sen, "are not alien to social beings... space does not have to be artificially created in the human mind for the idea of justice or fairness."

Consequently, according to Sen, even to see the success of capitalism, particularly market mechanism, exclusively in terms of greedy behaviour would be to miss an important point. Business ethics that govern promises and contracts, legal norms and social institutions that ensure a climate of mutual trust and confidence for economic activities are as much important for the vital functioning of market mechanism.

Sen was able to build bridges between economics and ethics largely because of his expertise and versatility in both disciplines. He is a moral philosopher among economists and an economist in the company of philosophers. In 1989, on the occasion of the awarding of an honorary doctorate at the University of Louvain, philosopher Philip Van Parijs noted: "Professor Sen is one of the very few people who are able to convey to economists, in a language they find congenial, those philosophical insights they would be naive to ignore in discussing even the most concrete policy questions. He is also one of the very few people who are able to explain to philosophers, in a language they can

understand, those elements of economic culture which they would be foolish to neglect even at the level of abstraction they enjoy keeping to." Sen's innovative contributions in this area were acknowledged not only by his unique and joint appointment to Harvard's Economics and Philosophy departments in 1988 but also by the opening up of new avenues for interdisciplinary research in economics and philosophy.

Human beings differ from one another in a number of ways. There are, first and foremost, differences in personal characteristics such as health, age, sex and genetic endowments. Human beings also vary from one another in the types of external environment and social conditions they live in. These different elements of human diversity crucially affect the ways in



which resources such as income and wealth are transformed into relevant capabilities. A physically handicapped person, for example, might be in need of more resources to be mobile than an able-bodied person. Or, improving girls' literacy level in most poor countries might require much more than just spreading some resources around; it might, among other things, require changing the mindset of parents and social customs. Or, increasing the social and political participation of traditionally

oppressed groups would demand efforts more than just providing access to resources; it might require tackling some entrenched social, economic and political practices and structures. Since Rawls' theory works with the assumption of a liberal society with citizens having more or less equal capacities, Sen points out, inequalities and disadvantages arising from human diversities are either postponed to be settled by legislative or judicial procedures or at the most relegated as issues falling in the domain of charity.

On December 22, 1921, in his lecture to a group of economists, Mahatma Gandhi said: "In a well-ordered society, the securing of one's livelihood should be and is found to be the easiest thing in the world. Indeed, the test of orderliness in a country is not the number of millionaires it owns, but the absence of starvation among its masses." He, however, also reminded the economists that "material advancement does not necessarily mean moral progress". Sen seems to have rightly addressed Gandhi's twin concerns. His economic analysis of famines, poverty and the problems of development have indeed provided fresh insights to tackle them with determination and concerted effort. Simultaneously, Sen's wisdom has also shown that solutions to even the simplest economic problem require undivided attention to ethical inquiry and philosophical richness. ▶

About the author

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