THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN AMARTYA SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH

B. HARI JULIAWAN*

Abstract: Amartya Sen introduces the concept of capabilities, i.e. what people are able to do and to be, as a non-economic measure in the development evaluation. This essay seeks to explore how this concept deals with the issues of values and politics, which in many cases determines people's identity. The main argument is that the concept of capabilities is built around a certain individualistic view of human beings, whereas identity suggests a more complex picture. As such, Sen's capability approach cannot properly address the issue of identity and risks losing important insights which may contribute to people's well-being.

Keywords: Amartya Sen, capability approach, identity, development, justice.

Abstrak: Amartya Sen memperkenalkan konsep kapabilitas, yakni apa yang dapat dilakukan oleh seseorang dan bagaimana ia dapat menjadi dirinya, sebagai tolok ukur non-ekonomik dalam evaluasi pembangunan. Artikel ini berupaya mengkaji bagaimana konsep ini dapat diselaraskan dengan nilai-nilai identitas dan politik, yang dalam banyak hal menentukan apa yang dianggap oleh banyak orang sebagai nilai. Argumen yang dikemukakan dalam artikel ini adalah bahwa konsep mengenai kapabilitas dibangun atas sebuah pandangan individualistik mengenai manusia, sementara identitas menyiratkan sebuah gambaran yang lebih kompleks. Dipahami secara demikian, pendekatan kapabilitas Sen tidak dapat menanggapi permasalahan identitas secara memadai dan beresiko kehilangan *insight* penting yang justru dapat memberi sumbangan bagi kesejahteraan manusia.

Kata-kata kunci: Amartya Sen, pendekatan kapabilitas, identitas, perkembangan, keadilan.

* *B. Hari Juliawan, Program Pascasarjana Ilmu Religi dan Budaya, Universitas Sanata Dharma, Yogyakarta. E-mail: benny.juliawan@usd.ac.id.*

INTRODUCTION

Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* suggests that freedom should be at the heart of all development.[1] Sen's idea of freedom uniquely combines the kind of freedom that is entrenched in economics, i.e. freedom to choose, with a different space over which choice is made, i.e. the notion of beings and doings. Sen's approach is known as the capability approach, and it has invited fruitful debates and contributions that often stretch beyond the confinement of the economics discipline. The latest incarnation of this approach has found its way into the UNDP's flagship Human Development Report in the form of the Multidimensional Poverty Index, which will feature in the annual report starting from the 2011 edition.

This essay intends to take seriously the invitation to look into the wider issues in development from the point of view of the capability approach. In particular it will deal with the problems of identity. The notion of identity may refer to different strands of social theories, but what is of chief concern here is how people value their identity and its consequences for people's well-being. It is precisely at this point that Sen's capability approach is seriously challenged. As it will become clear in the course of this essay, Sen's capability approach engages individuals in a particular way that is nearly immune to the social and cultural complexity that surrounds the issues of identity.

Thus, the main question for this essay is how the capability approach (henceforth CA) deals with the issues of identity in the pursuit of human well-being. Inevitably, the attempt to answer this question will expose some strengths and limits of the CA. The essay will begin with an outline of the core features of the CA, followed by an examination of the nature of identity. Afterwards how the CA could engage the problems of identity will be discussed. The discussion will become the central part of this essay, which will end with a conclusion.

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1 See Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH

To understand properly the core features of the CA, we need to put them in the context of Sen's engagement with the previous traditions in development thinking. That context will be elaborated below in three ways.

EQUALITY OF CAPABILITIES

Sen introduced the CA in the early 1980s to engage with prominent theories of justice, especially utilitarianism and Rawlesian welfarism. In this debate the main question concerns the kind of equality that everyone should have, as the title of Sen's 1979 *Tanner Lectures* "Equality of What?" aptly catches the essence. Sen offers equality of capabilities as alternative to utility or Rawls' primary goods.

Utilitarian theory had hitherto been the dominant moral philosophy in economics. It operates with incomes as the measurement of human welfare or utility, and utility maximisation is assumed to be the objective of economic activity. The moral imperative is to guarantee that each individual is able to maximise his or her satisfaction. Views differ on whether one can compare individual utilities, and so it is highly debatable whether one can make a judgment on income distribution, with income equality not always reflecting individual utility. John Rawls' justice as fairness theory challenges the utilitarian view by proposing a different space for equality, that is equality of basic liberties in the forms of "primary goods," i.e. liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect.[2] Unequal distribution of goods is justified only if it promotes the greatest benefit for the least advantaged.

Neither the utilitarian nor the Rawlesian criteria for justice satisfy Sen. Rawls' primary goods "suffer from fetishist handicap," Sen rebukes, for Rawls treats what is of instrumental value (that is goods) as having intrinsic value.[3] Rawls is still concerned with good things rather than

2 See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

3 Amartya Sen, *Choice, Welfare and Measurement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 368.

with what these good things do for human beings. Likewise, Sen criticises the utility approach for using a measurement that focuses only on a person's mental reaction such as satisfaction or happiness and fails to look into more active qualities such as the person's capabilities.

Utility, income, and basic goods are all the kinds of information which are given the most weight in the approaches discussed above. Sen calls that space of information "informational base." For Sen the informational base for evaluating justice should be the capabilities to lead the kind of life a person wants. Capability is defined as the substantive freedom to achieve a combination of beings and doings (what people are able to be and to do), and what a person succeeds in doing and being with the capabilities available for him or her are called "functionings." The evaluative focus of the CA can be either on the capability set (real opportunity) someone has or on the realized functionings. Thus, in contrast to the emphasis on commodities, the CA focuses not on the commodities themselves but on the qualities that they provide. As for the utility measurement, Sen argues that that measurement is deeply unfair to those suffering from persistent deprivation, as they will surely adjust their level of utility to the deprivation, resulting in a low level of aspiration.

Individual capabilities are determined by personal characteristics and social arrangements through the process of entitlement. Entitlement is the ownership and command that someone can establish over a given set of resources.[4] Therefore, a person's resources as well as social endowments determine the range of capabilities that she or he has. These include knowledge, physical characteristics, and environment as well as social, political, and economic institutions that surround the individual.

Social Choice Exercise

Another way of seeing Sen's CA is by looking at the shift of attention from the resources inputs to the outputs of development in the effort to

4 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 162.

measure well-being.[5] Personal utility approach and the CA focus on the outcomes, while other approaches which emphasise primary goods, commodity bundles, income and resources holding, clearly put prime weight on the inputs. The emphasis on the inputs seems to be too universalistic, relying on a generalization that turns a blind eye to individual differences. On the other hand, concentrating on the utility is deemed too subjective, leaving too much to personal judgment.

The core features of the CA, however, are not totally concerned with the outcomes since capabilities refer to potentials rather than actualities. In other words, a capability is a non-utility effect of goods which Cohen calls "midware" as it is in a certain sense midway between goods and utility.[6] Thus, in assessing one's well-being we must look at the person's condition in abstraction from the utility she or he gets from certain goods. Taking Sen's favourite example, it is the person's being nourished which is the centre of attention rather than the supply of food or the satisfaction the person gets out of eating food.

The "midware" position allows the CA to be less subjective than the utility approach and to offer more choices than the primary goods approach. Suggesting a middle position, Sen opens up a space for public discussion to determine which functionings should receive more weight and how much weight should be placed on the capabilities compared with other relevant considerations. In short, the CA encourages a social choice exercise in indexing capability bundles rather than setting a homogenous evaluative criterion for all or leaving it totally to individual preferences.

ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS

Sen's approach is laid upon a strong moral foundation which is derived from Aristotle's ethics. While the other approaches value material

5 Frances Stewart and Severine Deneulin, "Amartya Sen's Contribution to Development Thinking," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 37 / 2 (2002): 62.

6 G.A. Cohen, "Equality of What? On Welfare, Goods, and Capabilities," in *The Quality*

supplies and achievement, Sen asserts, quoting Aristotle, that "wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else."[7] This is a statement of the non-material *telos*, and Sen goes on to define it in the Aristotelian view of the human good which is to "first ascertain the function of man" and then proceeds to explore "life in the sense of activity."[8] The stress on activity disqualifies the mere reading of mental states as in utilitarian procedures. The strength of the moral foundation is also reflected in the fact that the concern of the CA is not limited to poverty reduction. The enlargement of capabilities is relevant for all different levels of income and appeals to human dignity beyond opulence.

Following closely the line of thoughts in the CA, almost instantly we will notice that the whole framework evolves around the individual. Right from the start, the individual marshals and selects among the range of capabilities, and eventually comes out in the end as a freer individual. The capabilities are individual and so is the freedom. It is true that Sen mentions social arrangements and public endowments as determinants of individual capabilities, but in the end what matters to him is the individual. This feature will be shown to have serious consequences when the essay discusses the role of identity in people's well-being.

IDENTITY

It is now widely accepted that identity is a matter of social construction and therefore contingent and temporary in nature. Identity is defined as a set of significant traits with which people identify themselves. The traits can be religious, ethnic, national, regional, or a combination of two or more characteristics. Life-style, sexual orientation, and hobby are sometimes considered as important ingredients of identity, but this essay does not include them whenever it discusses identity. The proper

of Life, edited by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 18.

7 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, p. 14.

8 Amartya Sen, *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*, p. 46.

traits of identity may date back to antiquity, and owe much to historical events ranging from slavery and colonial occupation, to recent political and economic development such as globalisation to evolve into what we now call identity. Two classic examples are the caste system in India and tribalism in Africa. Caste was just one category among many others of organising and representing identity in pre-colonial India. Under the colonial rule, caste became a systematic and powerful representation of identity and served the colonial interest in social order.[9] With the same token, tribalism was consolidated to justify the British rule over a primitive society in Southern Africa, a kind of "divide-and-rule" tactics.[10] Both caste system and tribalism have since become the defining characteristics in the colonial and postcolonial societies and politics.

People's identity is not something that is static or fixed. Its dynamic character, however, does not imply that identity plays marginal role in people's existence. On the contrary, identity is a lived experience and strongly felt by many people. It has inspired people to do various actions in history which can be deemed heroic and extraordinary, or simply stupid and barbarous. In this section we will discuss why people value their identity (hence, identity values) and how identity becomes instrumental in the struggle for pursuing well-being (hence, identity politics).

WHY DO PEOPLE VALUE THEIR IDENTITY?

It is quite puzzling to many that in the modern world of reason and global interconnectedness people still cling to particular identities which often carry a primordial nuance. Supposedly primordial characteristics no longer bear any importance in people's lives as they are deemed irrational, narrow, and without basis. Yet the fact is that strongly felt identities persist and become an enduring character of plural societies. Global interconnectedness only adds to the plurality but does not reduce

9 See Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

10 See Leroy Vail, ed. *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London: Currey, 1989).

the problematic coexistence among groups, which is true in advanced modern societies such as those in the Western world as well as in the troubled world of many developing countries.

People do value their identity and act accordingly. This is understandable because identity is of great importance to their well-being, at least for two reasons.[11] Identity and group membership provide people with meaningful choice about how to lead their lives in the sense that "familiarity with a culture determines the boundaries of the imaginable."[12] When investigating the revival of Pentecostalism in Western Nigeria, Marshall concludes that religious identity is a way of symbolically constructing reality.[13] It enables people to relate to society and history in a meaningful way. If the culture or group values are decaying or dis-criminated against, the opportunities and options open to its members will also shrink. Another reason is that cultural identity provides an anchor for self-identification and the safety of effortless secure belonging. It implies that people's dignity is sustained by the respect and the chance of flourishing that is received by their culture.

Those reasons also serve to explain why people sometimes see their identity as real and having objective grounding in reality although it is actually a social construction. In fact, the effectiveness of identity as a group binder lies in it being seen as real.[14] Social theorists would easily dismiss this as an exercise in essentialism. However, for those people identity is real and so are the qualities that are embedded in it such as superiority over other groups.

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11 See Avishai Margalit and Joseph Raz, "National Self-Determination," in *The Rights of Minority Cultures*, edited by Will Kymlicka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

12 Avishai Margalit and Joseph Raz, "National Self-Determination," p. 86.

13 See Ruth Marshall, "Power in the Name of Jesus: Transformation and Pentecostalism in Western Nigeria 'Revisited,'" in *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-Century Africa*, edited by Terence Ranger and Olufemi Vaughan (London: Macmillan, 1993).

14 Frances Stewart, "Group and Capabilities," *Journal of Human Development*, Vol. 6, 2 (2005): 187.

THE INSTRUMENTAL ROLE OF IDENTITY

The effectiveness of identity has led to its use as a political vehicle. Nationalist agenda have never completely succeeded in covering different aspirations that compete for recognition. Different groups within society have asked and fought to be recognised along a particular identity apart from their shared nationality. They mobilize themselves along the lines which do not always coincide with national identity. This political mobilization takes different forms such as political parties competing in a free election as well as violent conflicts or civil wars.

At the heart of this process are at least two kinds of competition that need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, there is a competition for recognition. Recognition is the demand that other people acknowledge and respect the person's defining characteristics as a human being. As Charles Taylor explains, behind the claim for recognition lies a philosophy of difference which is developed around Rousseau's idea of authenticity that each of us has an original way of being human.[15] Each person is called to live his or her life in a particular way and not in imitation of anyone else's life. The person in this statement can also represent a people. Authenticity refers to a particular good way of life that each person or people should be free to pursue. The fact that it rose to prominence in the modern period does not mean that before then there was no need of recognition. Rather, it was simply taken for granted, whereas now the modern world has been deprived of the comfort of closed community where everyone has his or her place secured.

The demand for recognition challenges the modern philosophy of moral universalism which asserts that there is the same moral good for everyone. Moral universalism seems to promote equality and non-discrimination. But being blind to the differences among people, it fails to recognise special needs which are essential for the survival of some particular groups in society. Besides, moral universalism is always in

15 See Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and The Politics of Recognition: An Essay* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

the danger of being hijacked by the majority in society, effectively ignoring minorities. Thus, equality in this case amounts to suppression while difference is equal to freedom. It is true that differences have always been part of daily life and therefore difficult to avoid, but it is only now that it has become a moral goal. This is what Kenan Malik cynically calls the shift "from the right to be equal to the right to be different."[16]

The second kind of competition is for resources. Groups compete not only for recognition but also for material rewards which may be in the forms of political participation, economic assets, employment, income, and social services.[17] As equal resource distribution is elusive, groups mobilize themselves and fight for greater access to the resources. This does not imply that inequalities necessarily precede identity-based grouping. But when they happen, they provide the basis for conflict. Some people, however, think that identity is merely instrumental in the fight for resources. Several decades ago Glazer and Moynihan observed that the weight of ethnic conflicts had shifted from emphasis on cultural difference to an emphasis on socio-economic interests along with the rise of the welfare state, i.e. that the state has become the direct arbiter of economic welfare.[18] The previous class-based claim for resources is often ineffective and consequently people mobilise by ethnic groups rather than interest groups to make claims on the resources of many states. The state answers accordingly by channelling benefits via ethnic categories; hence, identity politics is reproduced.

Those two kinds of competition show how competing groups in society seek not only survival but also group flourishing. These goals are perceived in terms of both material aspects and non-material ones. In

16 Malik deplores the shift toward postmodern relativism that colours much of the debate in this area. Of course, relativism is not the only way to theorise difference. See Keenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 261.

17 See Frances Stewart, "Crisis Prevention: Tackling Horizontal Inequalities," *Oxford Development Studies* 28/3 (2000): 245-262.

18 See Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Harvard University Press, 1975).

the context of the nation-state, these groups demand special treatments or what is often called affirmative policies on the part of the state. Kymlicka calls them "group-differentiated rights," i.e. rights accorded on the basis of cultural membership, while Levy sees them as measures in the name of cultural justice.[19]

To summarise this section, identity offers social, political and economic benefits in two respects. On the one hand, it gives people some sense of belonging, familiar surrounding with high levels of trust and reciprocity, and dignity. That is why they value their identity strongly. Instrumentally, identity also provides a basis for countering past discrimination and therefore for helping the underprivileged. On the other hand, the same identity can be the source of suppression and violence. Internally group members may want to impose restrictions on individual freedom to prevent dissent within the group. Externally a group may not want to see other groups become more dominant so it deliberately discriminates against them or even tries to wipe out their existence altogether. In any case the positive and negative impacts generated by identity indicate the significance of some social, cultural or political structures in the life of the individual. This last point will prove crucial in the next section.

THE FAILURE OF METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM

Having considered both the nature of the CA and the phenomenon of identity, in this section we will investigate how the former deals with the latter. In the CA framework the notion of identity as such is almost non-existent, but its features are employed in two separate spaces. First, it manifests in the personal and public endowments that determine individual capabilities through the process of entitlement. Physical and psychological characteristics together with social and cultural institutions

19 Quoted in Simon Caney, "Equal Treatment, Exceptions and Cultural Diversity," in *Multiculturalism Reconsidered*, edited by Paul Kelly (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002). See Will Kymlicka, *Multiculturalism Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000).

such as caste, gender, kinship, and religion may all inform a person's identity which then plays a part in determining individual capabilities.

The inclusion of factors other than 'factors of production' in the entitlement process is an important achievement in the CA. Indeed, Sen's important contribution is to bring in different processes of appropriation other than production and sale (market entitlements). Thus, social relations, household allocation, dissemination, are also ways that open up and define the possibilities for the individual. Unfortunately, Sen does not elaborate how entitlements are exchanged or even disputed in providing a particular basis for individual capabilities. It is as if the process were not problematic that he does not treat it sufficiently. Let us imagine a situation where the government wants to establish a national park in an area which is prone to animal poaching and illegal logging. The same area happens to be the traditional farming and hunting ground of a local ethnic group. The government plan, which will entitle the larger society to a more natural environment, would effectively deprive the group of the food entitlement that they have traditionally had for generations. Sen is not really bothered by the complexity of the issue, and it becomes doubtful therefore whether the entitlement processes significantly affect the individual that Sen imagines in his approach.

The second space is the process in which a person decides to give weight to particular functioning vectors. Here, identity is translated into the kind of information and influence that help the individual to come to the decision about the kind of life that he or she wants. This is a question of cultural influence in which particular norms, unspoken rules of behaviour, and institutionalised systems of rewards and penalties supply the considerations that a person takes. However, the language of capability overcomes cultural plurality because when we speak of what people are able to do and to be, we do not privilege any tradition. There is no culture in which people do not ask themselves what they are able to do and what opportunities they have.

Sen deliberately leaves this space open and encourages social choice exercise which "requires public discussion and a democratic understanding and acceptance."[20] Sen does acknowledge that individual behaviour is influenced not just by self-interest but also by social identification and concern for others, and the social choice exercise is meant to permit different valuational exercises.[21] All the influence and possibilities are put on the table and discussed in a democratic manner. However, Sen points out that in the end a person is still able to reason beyond particular cultural tradition, as his *Romanes Lecture* for 1998 "Reason before Identity" suggests. He does not really leave the process to the people without prescribing the result. It implies that for Sen public discussion is actually the space to neutralise the influence of identity on the capacity to reason with the latter emerging victorious.

It is hard not to have the impression that the CA rests on the fragile belief in the rationality of political deliberation. Public discussion is just another name for politics, and it certainly means more than just an open and democratic public space where the better argument prevails and guides the choice. In exercising their freedom in the CA framework, people are thought to be ungrounded, acting as free wheeling units. This is simply untrue. The fact is, people are grounded in society and identities for good or ill, as has been elaborated earlier, and make choices in this context. Likewise, arguments are pregnant with assumptions, memories of a brutal or glorious past, fear and hope for the future, not all of which are rational. To ignore them amounts to political naiveté and risks losing the valuable aspects which may contribute to people's well-being.

Thus, in the "social choice exercise," the CA fails to appreciate fully the role of identity values and identity politics in people's political actions and choices. This failure seems to be embedded in its assumption of the concept of a human being. As briefly mentioned earlier in the essay, the

20 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, p. 79.

21 See Amartya Sen, "Reason Before Identity," *The Romanes Lecture for 1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

CA is individualist in its orientation. The individual is the dominant agent in enacting the causal sequence of events from endowments to the ultimate well-being. Sen does mention the role of public or social endowments such as environment and social institutions, but all these are seen as mere ingredients of the final action by the individual who also emerges as the sole gainer. As such, the CA is "an example of methodological individualism" which explains all social phenomena in terms of what individuals think, choose and do.[22]

Sen portrays a human being as an autonomous individual with a near perfect capacity for processing information and as the ultimate judge. Such individualism contrasts with the picture of a human being that emerges from the consideration of identity values and politics. The notion of identity signifies a complex network of relationships that not only provides an environment, in which an individual choice takes place, but actually constitutes the individual. By definition, the individual cannot be autonomous from the structures that enable his or her existence. Human being is a being-with-others, and individual actions can only be explained in their context of that being-with-others. It is not suggested here that the collective is analytically and essentially more important than the individual (collectivism rather than individualism). Rather, both should be understood in their mutual dependence, in which the individual is constrained and at the same time enabled by the collective which is in turn reproduced by the individual. Sen's concept of a human being, although is not completely ignorant of this consideration, does not engage it seriously. His reference to "social choice exercise" is seriously too thin to tackle the plurality of opinions, let alone ways of life or traditions.

The methodological individualism embedded in the CA gives way to several serious consequences. Firstly, it cannot explain what Evans calls "collective capabilities" or "group capabilities."[23] These are

22 Frances Stewart and Severine Deneulin, "Amartya Sen's Contribution to Development Thinking": 66.

23 See Peter Evans, "Collective Capabilities, Culture and Amartya Sen's Development

capabilities for collective action that individuals are not capable of doing unless they organise themselves as a group. Hutu individuals would not have been capable of genocide had it not been for the collective rampage sustained by clan allegiance and networks. Likewise, in many traditional societies land ownership is attributed to communities and not individuals. Of course, ultimately individual members of the community are the beneficiaries, but the ownership is possible only through some kind of collective rights. Once again, the CA is strictly individualist that it cannot properly address this issue. At best, social phenomena are treated as the aggregation of individual interests and judgments, whereas collective capabilities show that the group is more than the sum of individual actions. The group has an independent existence, although, of course, this existence is constructed from individual actions. What is meant by "more than the sum of individual actions" has been formulated by social scientists as "social capital," i.e. the networks and norms that facilitate collective action.[24] Economists have even begun to use the language of externalities, public goods and transaction cost to conceptualise the same phenomenon.

Secondly, because it cannot explain group capabilities, the CA simply ignores possible group functions that may be beneficial for enlarging individual capabilities. Evans underlines the need for densely organised collective actions to exploit the opportunities created by regular free elections and civil rights in the context of democratisation.[25] Group capabilities are also a potent complement to the imperfect market to the extent that the market may succeed only because groups succeed.[26] In his research on the pre-existing local networks of civic engagement

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as Freedom," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 37 / 2 (2002): 54-60.

24 See Michael Woolcock, "Social Capital in Theory and Practice: Where do We Stand?," in *Social Capital and Economic Development*, edited by Jonathan Isham et al. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2002).

25 See Peter Evans, "Collective Capabilities, Culture and Amartya Sen's Development as Freedom," *Studies in Comparative International Development*.

26 See Judith Heyer et.al., eds. *Group Behaviour and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

between different communities in India, Varshney finds out that the presence of civic engagement makes conflicts manageable and even avoidable.[27] As the examples show, the identification of positive group capabilities surely helps to formulate the correct development policy and eventually increases people's well-being. The identification of negative group capabilities, on the other hand, prevents the repeat of capabilities disempowerment. Therefore, the CA loses much in failing to recognise the collective aspect of action, and if the CA is meant as a tool for advancing human welfare, it has ignored one possible avenue for that advancement.

Thirdly, the methodological individualism of the CA falls victim to the criticism of being paternalistic. With its insistence on critical autonomy and individual choice, the CA seems to claim to know the answer to all decision-making problems that may actually include cultural particularities that are foreign to outsiders and may demand a careful consideration given the cultural sensitivities involving customs, ideology, unspoken rules of behaviour and institutionalised systems of rewards and penalties. The classic example is the requirement for women's autonomy in the situation where women have always been subjected to traditional roles. Do they lack critical autonomy? The answer may be yes, but perhaps no. However, the controversy that the emphasis on individualism may cause will not serve the people who might have been helped otherwise.

Fourthly, the methodological individualism draws a very limited picture of human agency. The CA focuses too exclusively on the act of choosing, giving the impression that human action is limited to choice. In any case, Sen has not engaged seriously the theories of human agency which form the backbone of the social sciences. His idea of social choice is still confined generally within the economic discipline. The economist's view of human agency is still his main comfort zone, while he is trying

27 See Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2002).

to address a wider audience. The relationship of individuals and society is obviously much richer than that suggested as social choice.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, it has been argued that the CA has provided an alternative to the dominant economic approach in development. In the CA development is evaluated in terms of the enlargement of individual capabilities. A capability is basically freedom to achieve the states of being and the activities that are valuable in a person's life. As such, the language of capability promises an explanatory emphasis on the significance of values and aspirations that should underpin the development process. It has also been argued that identity is indeed one of the major issues in people's well-being. The notion of identity precisely signifies the space for values and the meaning of a good life for different individuals. A meaningful development process, therefore, should not ignore this issue; hence, the point of convergence for the two subjects of this essay.

Thus, how does the CA deal with the issue of identity? The CA does open up a new space for considering identity values and politics in development. However, the space is thinly substantiated and suffers from a certain individualistic liberal tendency. The main argument is that the CA operates on an individualist conception of a human being that drives the whole methodology along. Such methodological individualism fails to appreciate fully the role of identity values and identity politics in people's decision on the beings and doings that are valuable to them. It certainly fails to grasp the insights offered by the views which give priority to group success and flourishing. There are capabilities which effectively are collective goods that cannot be realised by individual choice. In any case, Sen's concept of collective action is very thin and it does not include anything on culture.

Perhaps, the CA could be enriched by giving fuller attention to its Aristotelian roots. Aristotle is one of the earliest thinkers who suggest

that a human being is basically a social animal who derives their well-being or *eudaimonia* from their membership in society either in the form of a family or that of a *polis* (city state). It is surprising, therefore, that while Aristotelian ethics has inspired thinking about community and collective ethics, Sen has completely ignored it.

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