

# **WORKING PAPERS**

## **WHAT IS THE CAPABILITY APPROACH? ITS CORE, RATIONALE, PARTNERS AND DANGERS**

Des Gasper

June 2006

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**Institute of Social Studies**

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## **1 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE CAPABILITY APPROACH – AND DOES IT MATTER?**

A difficulty in discussing and teaching the capability approach lies in knowing what it is. What does it contain, defined in what way? What does it not contain? Is it simply a proposition about an appropriate space in which social arrangements should be evaluated (Alkire 2005a), or does it for example include implied conceptions of the good (Deneulin 2002) and of human personhood (Giovanola 2005)? How does it relate to ‘development as freedom’ and the human development approach? Do they stand and fall together, or are they separable?

For years the closest to an integrated statement of the capability approach has been a standard length paper by Amartya Sen from the late 1980s, published later in the volume *The Quality of Life* (1993). At that stage Sen was presenting an approach in socio-economic valuation that gives an alternative to measurement of income, expenditure, or satisfaction. Since then the capability approach (CA) has grown enormously. It contains ambiguities and unclear boundaries. Sen has not presented an updated equivalent statement; and the collection of his key relevant papers since 1984 remains in process. His ideas continue to evolve, as seen in moves in preferred language from ‘capability’, through (positive) ‘freedoms’, to ‘the opportunity- and process- aspects of freedom’. Martha Nussbaum has provided, like Sen, various papers and lecture series, but for her quite distinct ‘capabilities’ approach. There too we await a comprehensive presentation that was promised in *Women and Human Development* (2000).

Here is the easiest ambiguity to clarify: ‘the capability approach’ refers to Sen’s work, and ‘the capabilities approach’ to Nussbaum’s (see e.g. Nussbaum 2000, Gasper 1997). Yet even their close associate Hilary Putnam writes of the ‘capabilities approach’ (2002: vii) when he in fact refers to Sen’s work. ‘Capability’ is the full set of attainable alternative lives that face a person; it is a counterpart to the conventional microeconomics notion of an opportunity set defined in commodities space, but is instead defined in the space of functionings. ‘Capabilities’, in contrast, conveys a more concrete focus on specific attainable functionings in a life, and connects to ordinary language’s reference to persons’ skills and powers and the current business jargon of ‘core capabilities’.

Other matters of specification are more difficult. Since Sen’s capability approach has been self-consciously lightly explicitly specified, it can as Robeyns

(2000, 2003) noted, be variously elaborated. Further, as it spreads in a variety of fields of practice it naturally evolves. Adjustments, extensions, partnerships and working simplifications are required. Some that are made may endanger the rationale of the approach; for example, if GDP per capita is reinstated as the supposed measure (or proxy) for human freedoms/capabilities in a supposedly separate sphere of 'material aspects of welfare' (e.g. Kuklys & Robeyns 2004). Elsewhere, subjective well-being measures may become re-endorsed (see the discussion in Teschl & Comim 2005). We need a formulation of the approach which reflects its rationale and can adequately guide its applications, elaborations and evolution.

This paper offers a specification of current core elements of the capability approach from Sen. The purpose is not to fix CA, which should be encouraged to grow; instead it is to promote growth, through aiding self-awareness, clarity, and learning. I have taken into account and critically analyse a series of recent formulations published by some of Sen's close associates (e.g., Alkire 2002, 2005a; Robeyns 2000, 2005; Kuklys & Robeyns 2004). Section 2 begins with the approach's rationale based in the problematique of well-being and the attractions of emphasising human agency. Section 3 looks at the component features of the CA as an evaluation approach, to show how it is more than merely a criterion. The larger task of specifying underlying assumptions of the approach as a contribution in normatively-oriented humanistic social science, for example its stances on methodology and personhood, is left for another occasion. Section 4 locates and anchors CA within a system of partner or cognate discourses from the human development family. Section 5 looks at how CA's abstracted concepts fare in practice. Section 6 reviews the main arguments and the dangers that face CA, not least that vague specification can bring overconfidence and misguided choices in operationalization.

Does vagueness about the content of the capability approach and about how it relates to other bodies of work – human development, human security, 'development as freedom', Sen's work as a whole – really matter? Underdefinition allows everyone to perceive space for themselves in a project. It gives, fittingly, a lot of freedom for people of varied backgrounds to grow out from a small kernel in diverse ways, according to their interests and skills. Nussbaum's more specific sister version perhaps shows the risks and resistance to identifying areas where one must in practice make choices and then proposing some specific choices. But underdefinition also has disadvantages for a research programme: the programme remains hard to

communicate, to teach, to use with at least some potential cooperators, and to assess and therefore improve. It remains unpersuasive to those who look for clarity, let alone precision. The risk increases that ‘anything goes’ during the inevitable simplifications in operationalization. In policy programmes too, lack of clarity on core principles allows all to claim the CA mantle yet may only briefly defer divisions.

## **2 RATIONALE OF THE CAPABILITY APPROACH**

Sen’s approach arose from a dissatisfaction with subjective states and command over resources as concepts or measures of well-being or advantage; and from the wish for a concept that presents persons as reasoning agents with the right to make choices.

### *The well-being problematic*

Four main considerations, then, support the capability approach:

1. The capability approach captures the intuitively attractive idea that people should be equal with respect to effective freedom and so has some initial plausibility.
2. Because it is attentive to the fact that preferences and values are sometimes adaptive, it compares favorably with views that focus on "subjective" achievements.
3. Because it is attentive to issues of responsibility and diversity of aims, it contrasts favorably with views that focus on achievements (however understood).
4. Because it is attentive to diversity in abilities to transform means into achievements, it is preferable to views that focus on equality of means (J. Cohen 1993: 7).

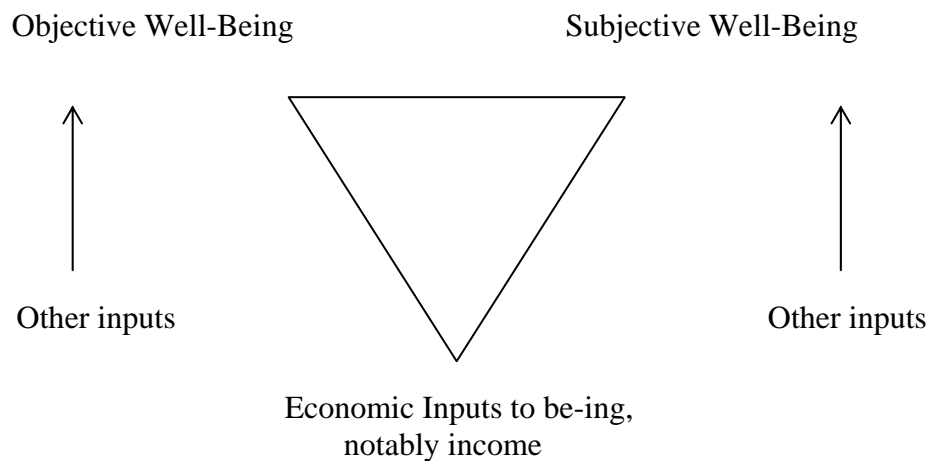
Reflecting on what would be a normatively relevant concept of (in)equality, Sen had asked ‘equality of what?’. He compared various concepts of advantage – in other words, concepts of the ‘what’ whose distribution we evaluate. He argued that normative priority could not attach to (a) satisfactions, because these subjective outcomes are too dependent on personality, acculturation, prior expectations and other framing factors; nor, more generally, to (b) any other sort of outcome, because outcomes depend on how well people have used their opportunities; nor to (c) any sort of input or means, because their sufficiency and relevance varies according to the nature of the person concerned. Instead priority should be given to (d) the effective freedoms which people have to achieve prioritised outcomes.

Settling on a focus by finding arguments in its favour and arguments against each alternative, leaves open the possibility that strong arguments also exist against



the category that has been placed at the end of the line waiting to collect the prize. Qizilbash (1997) pointed out, for example, that effective freedoms depend partly on a person's capacities built up through his/her own efforts, so that lack of capability does not necessarily establish a claim against others. Therefore whether capability has normative priority or is simply one more normatively relevant category remains open for discussion. We return to this in section 3. In practice, the capability approach gives normative priority to capability; otherwise why call it 'the capability approach'?

**Figure 1**  
**The well-being puzzle triangle: inputs and outcomes (source: Gasper 2005a)**



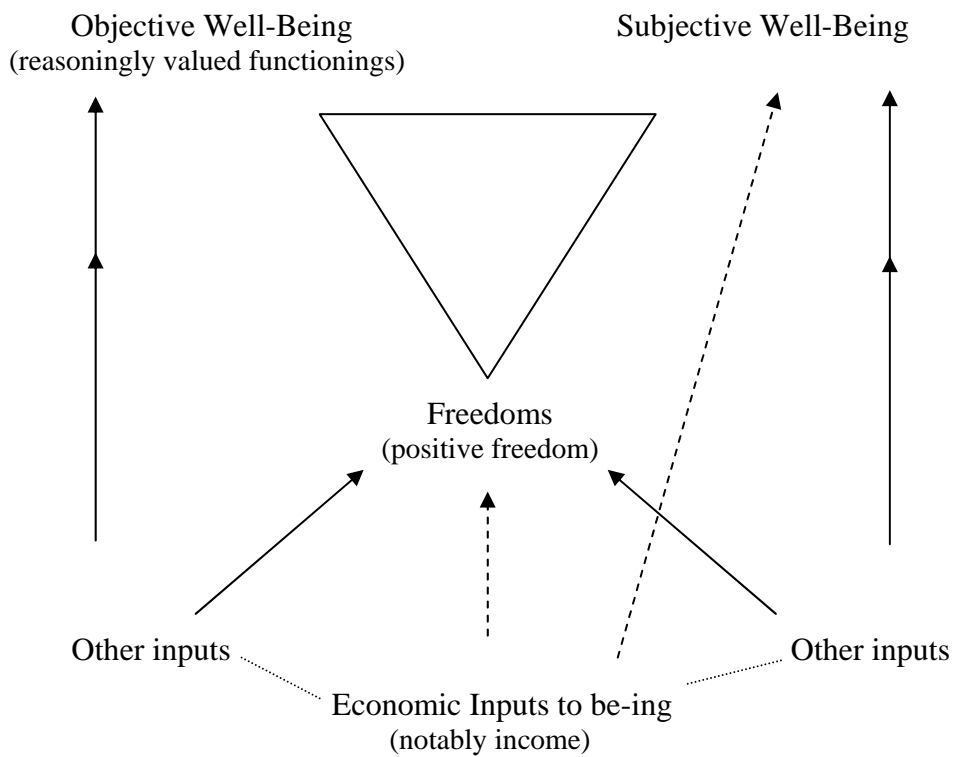
Cohen's 'four main considerations' are reflected in figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 indicates the classic problematique around well-being. Economic 'inputs' to living (notably possessions and income) have patchy relationships to both objective well-being (OWB: achievement/functionings in non-feelings dimensions that are reflectively valued as important, e.g. physical and mental health, longevity, security) and well-being (SWB: feelings of happiness, satisfaction or fulfilment).<sup>1</sup> In addition, subjective and objective well-being in these senses are not well correlated. Hence the sides of the triangle are not marked by arrows. Reasons include: that well-being is fundamentally

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<sup>1</sup> If one dropped the 'non-feelings' condition for 'objective well-being' then the SWB and OWB categories would overlap, when feelings of happiness and satisfaction are amongst the reflective priorities of the mandated decision-maker. If, further, the mandated decision-maker is a person choosing for her self, then OWB overlaps in character also with reflectively considered as opposed to directly felt SWB, without being identical to it. We will see these aspects, but also others, in Sen's capability notion. 'Subjective' refers here to what is being measured, not how it is measured: SWB research has found that SWB can be reliably measured, including by self-report. That is a separate question from whether the feelings are a good reflection of a person's situation.

influenced by not just economic inputs (money and things directly obtainable with money), but also ‘non-economic’ factors such as family relations, friendships, beliefs, purposeful activity, exercise and health, and so on; that sometimes economic inputs have no significant or sustained direct impact on objective- or even subjective well-being; and that acquiring more economic inputs is quite often indirectly competitive with maintaining or increasing the relevant ‘non-economic’ factors or inputs (Gasper 2005a).

**Figure 2**  
**Sen’s addition of attention to potential outcomes**



Sen extended this discussion by adding the category of potentials to that of achievements; specifically, potential functionings, not actual functionings as measured in studies of objective well-being in most work on social indicators and quality of life. As shown in figure 2, inputs contribute to opportunities for achieving functionings and satisfactions but do not guarantee their achievement.<sup>2</sup> Whether opportunities promote well-being depends on how they are used. Sen expects that

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<sup>2</sup> Direct connections could exist from the holding of economic inputs through to subjective well-being if ownership is a source of satisfaction (hence the long dotted line in fig. 2); and then through to objective well being, if say subjective satisfaction is good for health.

freedoms conduce to both objective and subjective well-being but that the outcomes are not guaranteed, and he anyway grants freedoms an independent normative status.

The non-guaranteed links in figure 2 concern not only those along the sides of the triangle, notably the use of freedoms. The middle bottom arrow is not reliable. The operation of an economic system, and the generation of economic inputs to being, can not only compete against maintenance of other inputs vital for well-being, but can contribute to un-freedoms through moulding of preferences. Jon Elster rather than Sen has emphasised this: ‘There certainly comes a point beyond which the frustrating search for material welfare no longer represents a liberation from adaptive preferences, but rather an enslavement to addictive preferences’ (Elster 1982: 233).

Sen’s capability approach originated then in a wish for welfare economics to join other social and human sciences (including health sciences) in looking at OWB, not merely at the economic inputs to living or at SWB. The dissatisfaction with SWB arose from adaptive preferences (when people come to take hardship for granted or luxury for granted), but also from the wider range of framing factors that influence SWB by moulding preferences and satisfactions, from infancy onwards, even if preferences become somewhat more fixed in adulthood. The dissatisfaction applies therefore even for reflectively reasoningly discursively self-assessed SWB, not only for directly experienced happiness, even if less so.<sup>3</sup>

Within OWB, Sen focused in a novel way. He focuses primarily, at least in his theoretical writing, on ‘capability’ – access to OWB – rather than on OWB achievement. This capability category is a complex hybrid. It is not an SWB variant, since even if self-assessed it concerns not feelings but instead options for achievement; and like all variants of the potentially misleadingly named OWB category, it is normative, for it involves an accounting in terms of normatively prioritized aspects of being. But it is not a standard OWB measure, at least not in Sen’s theoretical writings. It means the access to those functionings ‘which people have reason to value’. Which people? What constitutes reason? We will come to this later.

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<sup>3</sup> The procedural contrast between these types of (hedonic) SWB is not identical to Ryan & Deci’s widely used substantive contrast between eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. The latter means feelings of happiness; the former concerns feelings of meaningfulness, purposefulness and fulfilment.

*The 'agency' emphasis in this approach to well-being*

'The capability approach captures the intuitively attractive idea that people should be equal with respect to effective freedom', said Cohen (1993: 7). The idea attracts because it uses a picture of persons as agents who have their own goals (including not only for themselves), make their own choices, and are not mere receptacles for resource-inputs and satisfaction; who, in Aristotelian language, live through the exercise of practical reason.

The focus on freedom covers the process aspect of freedom, not only the opportunity aspect of freedom. The 'capability' label that Sen chose for the latter aspect might not then be adequate as label for the whole approach; indeed he for a while switched to a large extent to freedom language. However, while not amending his opportunity-freedom definition of capability and never refining usage in the way that Nussbaum does to distinguish different aspects of capability, Sen's concern for agency has been protected by the connotations of the term 'capability', connotations which Nussbaum makes explicit. One cannot have capability in the sense of opportunity-freedom if one lacks capability in the agency senses, of capacity and skills to think and act.

### **3 SPECIFICATION, I: CAPABILITY APPROACH OR CAPABILITY CRITERION? - FEATURES OF 'THE' CAPABILITY APPROACH AS A VALUATION APPROACH**

I suggest that the approach has six major features, although it is ambiguous about the fourth and the sixth.<sup>4</sup>

- 1 An orientation to use a broad variety of sources of information.
- 2 A language, with novel categories, to describe that variety.
- 3 A prioritization amongst categories, notably the prioritization of capability. In an extreme variant, only capability matters.
- 4 A principle that prioritization of capabilities for individuals is to be reasoned.
- 5 A principle that prioritization for groups is to be by public debate and democratic decision.
- 6 The categories of basic capabilities and threshold levels.

Standing at the margin of the approach is the idea of a list of basic capabilities.

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<sup>4</sup> This section elaborates and refines the specification in Gasper 2004b, chapter 7, and draws also on Gasper 2002, Gasper & van Staveren 2003.

### *Feature 1 – Orientation to a broad variety of sources of information*

The first feature is the principle that there are more types of information relevant for the assessment of well-being and quality of life than those considered in mainstream economics (people's assets, incomes, purchases, and stated or imputed levels of satisfaction or preference-fulfilment). The root of the capability approach is an insistence on referring to a wide range of types of information, notably about how people actually live – what they do and are – and their freedom – what they are able to do and be. Sen further stresses that besides (possible) outcomes we must consider the inter-personal distribution of outcomes, persons' rights, and other features of the decision situation.

Sometimes this first feature is downgraded in use, if the focus narrows to only capability. Sometimes it is emphasised, as when Comim (2005) reviews reasons whether to bring back in the much more easily measured SWB category.

Taking into account more types of information is no breakthrough for the capability approach. It has been done since at least the 1960s, in enormous streams of work on social indicators, quality of life, and varieties of subjective well-being. Sen's contribution is instead to help to focus, organise and rationalise that work. Vitaly, he has '(la)belled the cat' of conventional policy economics literature, by drawing out and naming its utilitarian elements and assumptions, and showing how it excludes swathes of relevant information.<sup>5</sup> He then builds an alternative approach to valuation, grounded in an explicit philosophical perspective. He has highlighted the alternative by giving it a name and a distinctive language; this profiles the approach and its categories and assists cumulative work. The approach thus certainly contains also features 2 and 3 below: a language, within which a concept of capability is given evaluative priority.

### *Feature 2 – A set of categories*

Sen's family of categories constitutes a language for discussing this wider range of considerations. He added several concepts to those conventional in micro- and welfare economics (income, goods, and utility). One could list each new concept as a distinct

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<sup>5</sup> To 'bell the cat' means, in English, to identify and make noticeable a potential menace – as by putting a bell around the neck of a cat.

component of the approach; but since they are interlinked we should treat them as a family, a language. The main concepts are as follows.

*Functionings* are components of how a person lives – for example, one’s health status, or arguing about one’s rights. Together a set (or n-tuple) of such functionings makes up a person’s life. A person’s *capability* is (definition I): the set of alternative n-tuples of functionings she could attain (‘capability set’), in other words the alternative lives open to her, the extent of her positive freedom; or (definition II): the valuation of her positive freedom, her access to OWB, based on the range and quality of attainable reasonably valued outcomes she has to choose between. Sen has generally used definition I, but with constant stress on ‘the capability to achieve valuable functionings’ (1993: 31) and on judgement of opportunity-freedom according to the opportunities to attain what ‘one has reason to value’ (e.g. 2002: 519). Leading exponents such as Alkire and Robeyns in their recent expositions adopt definition II, which gives ‘capability’ a selective, value-guided character; as, implicitly, does the UN definition of development as expansion of capabilities. Expanded opportunities for life-paths which are reasonably disvalued do not raise ‘capability’ by definition II.<sup>6</sup>

*Capabilities* in the plural refers for Sen to the particular functionings that may be attainable for a person; for example, the ability to speak up about one’s rights. Sen argues that an agent’s situation can be relevantly evaluated in a number of ways: (1) by her own valued functionings (‘*well-being achievement*’), not merely her utility (satisfaction or preference fulfilment, actual or imputed); (2) by the outcomes in terms of her values, including for other people, beings and things (‘*agency achievement*’); and by what she is *able* to achieve, both in terms of her own well-being (3 – ‘*well-being freedom*’) and of her actual values (4 – ‘*agency freedom*’), including her values for other people, beings and things. His primary category of capability was well-being freedom, which concerns the functionings that a person can herself attain.

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<sup>6</sup> Robeyns: ‘the freedoms or *valuable* opportunities (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they want to lead’ (2005: 95; emphasis added); and Alkire: ‘Capability refers to a person or group’s freedom to promote or achieve *valuable* functionings’ (2005a: 121; emphasis added). However, Alkire’s next sentence cites Sen using definition I (‘[Capability] represents the various combinations of functionings that the the person can achieve’, 1992: 40), and we find almost identical formulations by him in *Development as Freedom* (Sen 1999: 75) and *On Economic Inequality* (Sen & Foster 1998: 200).

*Feature 3: A stance concerning which levels have ethical priority*

Sen and most other proponents of the capability approach seem to typically rank spaces in which to measure well-being and equity as follows (in descending order):

- (i) capability (as personal Well-Being Freedom), the valuation of the set of life paths a person *could* follow; placed first because of a priority to freedom and self-responsibility;
- (ii) (valued) functionings: how people *actually* live;
- (iii-1) utility, whether interpreted as declared feelings of satisfaction, or the fulfilment of preferences, or the fact of choice: all these are placed lower, because choices and preferences may have been formed without much reflection or in situations of deprivation of exposure, information or options. We cannot presume a person's satisfaction from her choices, since agents do not only make conscious and error-free choices. Despite these dangers, satisfaction can still be treated as a significant type of functioning;
- (iii-2) goods/commodities used – this criterion is ranked low because goods/commodities are means not ends, and because people have different needs and wants.

Sometimes proponents declare that the CA involves only commitment to capability as a relevant space, not to its priority, but they commonly then elsewhere accord it priority, as is implied by the very name 'Capability Approach'. Sen himself often acknowledges the relevance of several types of information (see e.g. Sen 2002: 83-4), but typically gives priority to capability (e.g., Sen 1999: 3, 76). Alkire starts cautiously: 'If equality is to be demanded in any space – and most theories of justice advocate equality in some space – it is to be demanded in the space of capabilities' (Alkire 2005a: 122).<sup>7</sup> Then she asserts priority: 'social states should be defined *primarily* in the space of human capabilities' (ibid.: 125; emphasis added). Comim is unambiguous: priority to capability space provides the "normative anchor" for assessing HWB [human well-being, and] is at the core of the contribution of the CA, that does more than simply argue for a broader informational space in making

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<sup>7</sup> 'The space of capabilities' in fact covers two spaces: those of well-being freedom and agency freedom. Alkire earlier lists also well-being achievement and agency achievement when referring to 'the internal plurality of capability space' (2005a: 122), but would not strictly include these achievement spaces as capability spaces.

normative evaluations’ (Comim 2005: 165). Three possible more detailed formulations deserve mention.

*Variant 3B: Priority to capability as a policy rule*

The normative priority given to capability could be interpreted as a policy rule to give people freedom and ‘let them make their own mistakes’, rather than as an evaluative rule that ‘capabilities deserve more value-weighting than do functionings’. Capability (WBF) is then seen as an appropriate measure of advantage, of how advantaged a person is, rather than of well-being (WBA), even though it might well contribute to the latter. In contrast, Functionings concern well-being. The very term ‘functioning’ better matches ‘being’. Such a policy rule is not relevant for children, but becomes more so as they learn and mature.

*Variant 3C: A claim that we should look only at the capability level*

This more extreme version of feature 3 is not the mainstream but is quite widespread in discussion of human development, seen in formulations like ‘development is the expansion of capabilities’. For Alkire (2005a: 117): ‘according to the capability approach, *the* objective of both justice and poverty reduction (for example) should be to expand the freedom that deprived people have to enjoy “valuable beings and doings”’ (emphasis added). Sen sometimes has similar formulations (e.g.: ‘The issue ultimately, is what freedom does have a person have...’; Sen 2000: 29). But he appears overwhelmingly a pluralist: e.g., ‘happiness is of obvious and direct relevance to well-being, [although] it is inadequate as a [sole] representation of well-being’ (1985: 189). Comim argues that subjective information should be attended to because the spirit of the capability approach is to use multiple types of information, not just one (2005: 231).

*Variant 3D: Prioritizing should be situation-dependent, not situation-independent*

For Robeyns, in judging people’s advantage, one should look at ‘the space of functionings and/or capabilities, depending on the issue at hand’ (2005: 103). This is Sen’s usual style. Which space is relevant and has priority will depend on the case. In relation to ‘young children or the mentally disabled’ or ‘all situations of extreme material and bodily deprivation in very poor societies or communities’ – a series of enormously important contexts – the space of functionings is often more appropriate (Robeyns 2005: 101).



*Feature 4: Priority capabilities are those which ‘people have reason to value’*

When we come to prioritise amongst capabilities, for a person, the criterion is: priority to ‘what people have reason to value’. This feature contains two, potentially competitive, principles: an emphasis on reason, and a liberal valuation that people should choose for themselves. Competition between them arises when people choose in poorly reasoned ways. ‘Reason’ carries here the connotation of ‘good reason’ or ‘well-reasoned’, otherwise the phrase ‘have reason to’ would be superfluous: ‘what people value’ would suffice. It does not connote that good reasoning can draw one conclusion only.

The potential tension between principles of reason and own-choice is more veiled when we talk of ‘people’, ‘we’ and ‘they’, rather than of ‘individuals’, ‘a person’, ‘one’ or ‘she’. It remains unspecified whether in a group process authorized agents will draw reasoned conclusions for others. Sen sometimes writes ‘what we value’ (e.g., 1992: 31), which is on its own ambiguous: Is there to be multi-person valuation of each person’s state? Is he referring on to cases of public debate about public policy? Robeyns rightly observes that: ‘the capability approach is a clearly a theory within the liberal school of thought in political philosophy’ (Robeyns 2005: 95); liberalism is though a large kingdom of species. Sen has throughout his career been insistently a reflective liberal, propounding that valuation is to be a reflective informed exercise, not simply assertion of whatever one currently directly feels; it is to be value judgement in the true sense. He characteristically writes of what ‘one has reason to value’ (e.g., 1999: 74), and his most famous book could strictly be called ‘Development as Reasoned Freedom’. One implication, pursued especially by Nussbaum, concerns the importance of capabilities *for* valuing, including capabilities for reasoning.

So common, however, is the variant formulation which dissolves the tension by dropping the words ‘have reason to’, that we must note it separately.

*Variant 4B: Priority capabilities are those which people value, or even simply want*

Alkire presents an unqualified liberal variant: ‘the capability approach is a proposition, and the proposition is this: that social arrangements should be evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value’ (Alkire 2005a: 122), the ‘freedoms to do and be what they value’ (p.125). Evaluation is to be by the people themselves, no one else; and by what they value, not necessarily

have reason to value. Robeyns presents a yet more liberal formulation: ‘What is ultimately important is that people have the freedoms or valuable opportunities (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they *want* to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be.’ (2005: 95; emphasis added). Undesirable wants – for example, to suppress women or blacks or immigrants or non co-religionists – disappear here from view.

Part of the rationale for the CA was that SWB is an unreliable yardstick. The more that CA reintroduces preferences into its evaluative calculus, as the principle for selecting and prioritizing capabilities, the more it must face the issues of adaptive and moulded preferences (see e.g. Teschl & Comim 2005). The implication should be at least to emphasise informed and educated preference and capable choice – issues examined by authors such as Brandt, Nussbaum and Scitovsky, but perhaps not yet sufficiently mainstreamed in the capability approach.

Taking distance from individuals’ direct preferences and felt utility reflects that the capability approach is a language in and for public policy discourse. Given that it works at a policy level with a capability currency, how to operationalize ideas such as informed and educated preferences about capabilities, in multi-person and intra- and inter-organizational settings, is not automatically obvious. This leads us to features 5 and 6.

#### *Feature 5: Public procedures for prioritizing and threshold-setting*

Sen incorporates a stress on public discussion and decision procedures for prioritizing which and whose capabilities (e.g., 1999: 148). This is for where a criterion of ‘whatever people have reason to value’ in individual deliberations does not suffice – where markets, complemented by adequate support for capacities in information receipt and assessment, preference assessment and decision-making, cannot satisfactorily handle society’s choices; in other words, for the classic realms of public goods and public policy. Public discussion is also important for educating the preferences at work in markets.

Robeyns notes that ‘In Sen’s case, it is not at all clear how these processes of public reasoning and democracy are going to take place ... at present not enough work seems to have been carried out on the kind of democratic institutions that the “capability approach in practice” would require’ (2005: 106, 107). One of the approach’s relatively empty boxes is called democracy. Not coincidentally, we saw

that the distinction between features 4 and 5 is often blurred. Since the approach is quintessentially a public policy approach—for individuals are unlikely to decide against their own preferences – feature 5 is more central: group decision making for groups, not for solitary individuals. It requires more evidence-based attention to forms of democracy, not only wishful thinking.

*Feature 6: A category, and even a list, of basic capabilities*

Pre-set lists of priority capabilities could be competitive with feature 5, public procedures for prioritization; lists could, however, emerge from such procedures. Sen makes no such formal list, unlike Nussbaum. But in practice, Sen and the HDRs use notions of *basic capabilities* (basic for survival or dignity) and *required thresholds* for minimum necessary attainment (e.g., Anand & Sen 2000: 85; and in the HDRs' specification of equity). His list of five basic 'instrumental freedoms' is also not so different (Sen 1999: 38ff.). As Stewart and Deneulin note, 'In practical work, Sen [accepts] that to be healthy, well nourished, and educated are basic capabilities, which, presumably, he would argue, would always get democratic support. In effect, this shifts the approach to one that is almost identical with the BN [basic needs approach]', except that it is has much broader scope and a more elaborate philosophical foundation (2002: 64).

The problem is this. In human history the health, nourishment and education of all groups of the population do not always receive democratic support: some groups can be, unnecessarily, excluded: victimized for example on grounds of ethnicity, caste or religion. Feature 6 guards against those cases where agents' reasoning leads or is led towards behaviour seriously damaging to the agents or to others. The function of a notion and list of basics is to entrench – perhaps in a constitution or bill of rights – and protect some fundamentals against the incursions of power. Feature 6 reduces to feature 5 if 'basic' is only a label for the priorities chosen through feature 5's procedures within a political community. We refer though to something more: to a special priority category that has an entrenched status, a moral and constitutional precedence, above the normal political deliberations: the set of rights that cannot be taken away, even by an ordinary majority.

Sen thus works with: (a) a category of 'basic capabilities'; (b) an incomplete list of basic capabilities, not derived by bottom-up democratic decision-making; and (c) an acceptance of the idea of more extensive lists, provided that they are derived by

democratic decision-making case-by-case in each era in each political community. This recognition will not remove all the disagreement with Nussbaum over lists, especially if Sen holds to an idealized notion of democracy; but it does considerably limit it. Conversely, Nussbaum's rather too sweeping advocacy of a list does not exhaust the case for lists.

Much disagreement can be removed by better distinguishing types of list. Lists come in many types: as proposed definitive statements or as indicative suggestions; as exact prescriptions or as requiring local interpretation; as purportedly complete or explicitly partial statements (see figure 3). Insofar as a priorities list is vague, incomplete or, especially, indicative then it becomes more compatible with feature 5: democratic political process. Arguably, Nussbaum should redefine her proposed list further in that direction, to make it more relevant. Still, there are limits to that direction: a list of basic capabilities that did not at all constrain ordinary political process would have no point. The purpose of a list such as Nussbaum's, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is precisely to set limits. She may confuse that valid and essential role with the question of the appropriate form for her individual contribution to the debate, where a stress on its indicative nature would be more effective (Gasper 2003).

**Fig. 3**  
**Types of lists of priorities, with illustrations**

		PURPORTEDLY DEFINITIVE	PURPORTEDLY INDICATIVE
EXACT	Complete (relative to the specified purpose)	<i>Some religious systems</i>	
	Incomplete	<i>Some other religious systems</i>	<i>Millennium Development Goals<sup>8</sup></i>
VAGUE	Complete (relative to the specified purpose)	<i>Nussbaum's list as sometimes presented</i>	<i>Nussbaum's list as occasionally presented</i>
	Incomplete	<i>Universal Declaration of Human Rights</i>	<i>Nussbaum should redefine thus</i>

Let us distinguish then at least: (1) Lists of basic capabilities that constrain the operation of a state, that are set domestically, and for example included in the national constitution; (2) A list of basic capabilities that constrains states, set internationally,

<sup>8</sup> The MDGs are indicative (they can be adapted in specifics by each country) but not vague (for they have highly specific targets).

incomplete but covering central priorities for, say, health and education; such as perhaps in the MDGs; and (3) A list of basic capabilities, set internationally to constrain states, and extensive in scope, such as Nussbaum's or – more extensive still – the Universal Declaration of 1948.

### *Review*

Several points arise from the specification exercise.

First, the capability approach would hardly deserve to be called an approach if it consisted of a single feature, whether a catholic stance on types of information (feature 1) or a normative prioritization of just one type (feature 3). In the latter case we should speak only of the capability criterion, not of an approach. It is the attempt to approach policy realities that merits the term 'capability *approach*'. This occurs through features 4 to 6, which are thus integral parts of the 'approach'.

Second, the approach not only contains multiple features but allows of various selections and combinations of the features. So we find various versions in use. We could easily therefore talk of capability approaches, rather than of 'the' CA.

Third, some of the features are potentially in tension, internally or with each other: feature 1 calls for broad information while feature 3 calls for normative priority to (and sometimes even a sole focus on) capability; feature 4 calls for both reason and value; feature 6 tries to limit or structure the space for the political determination of priorities that was introduced by feature 5. The tensions are not necessarily failings but reflect the realities of policy practice and attempts to construct a balanced system. The conflicting pulls increase the scope for very different versions of the approach.

Lastly, the tensions have sometimes been managed by vagueness or ambiguity. Proponents can adopt an elastic specification: sometimes only feature 1 is avowed, to indicate modesty and wide relevance, but at other times several or all features are embraced, to indicate the approach's power. Fleurbaey is not the only reader who feels 'some ambiguity in Sen's formulation in [*Development as Freedom*] about whether his proposal is more a useful framework within which debates can take place, or a particular approach which must be defended against rivals' (2002: 73). It could be more helpful to clearly distinguish and work with both constructs, indeed with several variants, rather than struggle on with supposedly one, vague and confusing entity. The point applies on a larger scale too, beyond the six features we mentioned. Alkire, after identification of the CA with feature 3 ('the capability

approach is a proposition...'; 2005a: 122, cited with variant 4B earlier) suggests 'that further developments of the capability approach should consider [Sen's other] conceptual writings and should not restrict attention to the bare definitions of capability and functioning and the proposition already outlined' (2005a: 123). She sees the approach as providing relevant categories across many related areas, while leaving specific weighting and application to informed participants (p.128).

The six features we discussed have been those in the foreground of the capability approach led by Sen. To look at its background assumptions, concerning methodology, personhood and value would require another paper or papers.<sup>9</sup> Here Section 5 will look instead at the core concept of capability (part of feature 2) and at the exercise of moving from an abstracted and notional entity through to choices in the real world. In doing so we will touch further on features 3 to 6 – priority ranking of spaces; and priority ranking of capabilities by reason, preference, political process, and/or the political institutionalization of an entrenched category of 'basics' – though not in terms of their philosophical status, but as elements in the exercise of connecting the capability concept to practice. Before that, section 4 connects the capability approach to some closely related discourses.

#### **4 PARTNERS: CAPABILITY 'APPROACH' OR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT APPROACH? – LOCATING AND ANCHORING THE CA WITHIN A SET OF COGNATE DISCOURSE**

*'Development as Freedom'*

Two other features might arguably be added to the list of main features in the capability approach. They figure centrally in Sen's work of the past decade, notably in the book *Development as Freedom*.

One is the category of 'process freedom'. Sen's capability concept concerns 'opportunity freedom': the range of favourably valued life opportunities which are attainable for a person. It refers to attainable end-states. Process freedom concerns the person's role in decisionmaking. Alkire (2005b) suggests that we should in general describe and compare alternatives in terms of both criteria.<sup>10</sup> Formally speaking,

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<sup>9</sup> A start is made in Gasper (2002), sections 5 and 6, and Gasper (2003). The latter paper contrasts Sen's and Nussbaum's approaches by reference to their positions in a series of background dimensions.

<sup>10</sup> She notes however that process freedom would not be a central concern in many vital cases involving young children (nutrition, immunization, primary school attendance) (Alkire 2005b: 8).

however, Sen considers process freedom as outside his conception of capability. It falls outside the capability approach, but within a wider theoretical construction – ‘development as freedom’. If Sen adopted a richer conceptualization of capability, like Nussbaum’s which includes attention to the potentials and skills which are the basis of agency, it would feel natural to still include process freedom concerns under the capability approach heading.

*Development as Freedom* and the associated work contain more than a normative definition of development as freedom and a relabelling of the capability criterion as ‘opportunity freedom’. Unlike CA, it essays also an explanatory theory of development: that the path to development is freedom. If development is defined as freedom, risk of tautology looms; similarly if we judge whether people were really free according to when they developed. Substantively, emphasis is placed on five proposed key ‘instrumental freedoms’ and their hypothesised complementarity as a set of factors that contain a normative and explanatory core of good human development. The five are: political freedoms; economic facilities; social opportunities; transparency guarantees; and protective security (Sen 1999: 38-40). This model is a second candidate for addition to our specification of key features of the capability approach. But it goes beyond evaluation, and one can wait to see if it wins much support and endures. At present, it could figure as part of a distinctly labelled special variant.

Various commentators now argue that the label ‘the capability approach’ is inadequate. Jerome Segal (1998) suggested instead ‘the functioning and capability approach’; for not only is functioning nearly always the operational proxy for capability, it has normative significance in itself, including for most CA proponents. Ingrid Robeyns (2005) proposes as we saw a priority status for functionings in a huge swathe of work, on grounds of inherent appropriateness not only of practical ease. David Crocker has suggested that we refer instead to ‘the agency approach’, since Sen’s framework stresses the agent’s capacity to formulate and pursue reasoned objectives. Sen for a while preferred the ‘development as freedom’ label for popular audiences. That encountered significant criticism, and Sen has stayed instead with the label ‘Capability’ in the name of the new Human Development and Capability Association for research. This paper focuses accordingly.

### *Human Development and Human Security*

How does Sen's CA fit into the larger story of work on human development? The Human Development approach (HDA) bears the imprints of Mahbub ul Haq, Paul Streeten, Richard Jolly and others, not only of Sen, although he is the main progenitor of many aspects, including the Human Development Index and recent attempts to connect to human rights and culture. Both approaches are deliberately specified in a broad-brush, open way. Sen describes the Human Development Approach as not a Hinayana (Little Vehicle) but a Mahayana (Great Vehicle) school, one that readily accommodates many variants. Its Human Security offspring is equally broad, which has brought some vagueness and confusion in usage.

Sen's CA is an evaluation approach. The HDA is much more, being also an approach to explanation and to policy, which uses CA as an evaluation approach and as one guide to identify what is important to explain and to include in a policy framework. HDA likewise includes Sen's entitlements analysis as part of its explanatory armoury, for investigating issues indicated as normatively important. Thus not only has HDA broadened the range of objectives routinely considered in development debate and planning, it broadens the scope of analyses and breaks out from conventional disciplinary and national boundaries. Epitomized by the work of Haq (e.g., 1999), it attempts 'joined-up thinking' not distorted by those boundaries (Gasper & Truong 2005). In addition, the HD approach takes a step towards 'joined-up feeling', for its field of valuative reference is all humans, wheresoever in the world.

Its sibling or offspring, Human Security discourse goes further, by a focus on securing the basics of decent human lives, through attention to stability, peace, and sufficiency for all. This more concrete focus strengthens its roles in promoting fellow-feeling, motivation and action (Gasper 2005b). The Human Security elaboration of thinking about human development and capabilities is less risk-prone than the highly generalized 'Development as Freedom' path, in which dangers of inappropriate operationalization of the capability approach are heightened (Gasper & van Staveren 2003).

Dreze and Sen's joint work (1989, 2002) provides a happier balance. Writing in particular policy contexts with which they are closely familiar, Dreze and Sen make judicious practical choices about balancing different factors in explanation, about operationalization and measurement, value priorities, and choice of policy means. The



wider range of values used in evaluation still has a unifying focus, on how individuals live and can live. This focus energizes and guides the work. Firstly, in choice of topic, we see a priority attention to human issues of hunger, longevity, health, abilities to understand and communicate, security and freedom. Secondly, along the pathways of analysis, attention goes to the distinctive situations of different groups (such as different occupational groups' access to food, and women's and girls' access to health services), and causes and effects are traced through--regardless of disciplinary tradition--to people's functionings and capabilities. Thirdly, the data analysis is led by concern for socio-economic significance above statistical significance (McCloskey & Ziliak 1996). Fourthly, in policy design, the focus on clear high-level ends brings an innovative and broad perspective on means – thus for example, the capability approach gives much attention 'to inputs other than food as determinants of nutritional functioning and capability' (Dreze & Sen 1989: 44) – and an orientation to employing 'an adequate plurality' of policy means in order to respect the specific capability determinants of specific groups (ibid: 102). Lastly, the need to respect, promote and employ human agency is a continuing illuminating theme in the policy analysis: in the stress on women's education, which has now become standard worldwide; in the demonstration of the greater longrun efficacy of education and discussion than coercion in population policy; and in showing how a democratic culture of public information can 'help citizens to take an interest in the lives of each other' (Dreze & Sen 2002: 378) which underlies democracies' lesser proneness to famine.

For the new Human Development and Capability Association, which defines human development largely in terms of capability, 'Human Development and Security Association' might have been a title with more information content. It would have pointed to the aspects that the sister discourse of human security adds (Gasper 2005b). 'Capability' remains though the highlighted label. What, one must then check, is the capability 'approach' an approach to? If it sees itself as an approach to the understanding, evaluation and promotion of human well-being, then the label 'Human Development and Capability' is agreeable and encouraging. It brings an onus on the capability approach to continue to extend and adapt.

## **5 OPERATIONALIZATION: FROM THE PURITY OF CONCEPTS TO THE DEMANDS OF PRACTICE**

### *‘Operationalization’*

The operationalization of an approach includes its institutionalization and its conversion into feasible procedures of application, sometimes including quantification. Both institutionalization and application involve adaptations to fit specific contexts. Sometimes adaptation involves simplification but equally often it requires complication, instead or in addition.

In looking at experiences in development policy with the dissemination of new policy-related approaches, McNeill (2005) finds three standard dangers. First, fatal conceptual fuzziness may emerge as all and sundry take up and twist the approach’s terms. Second, sometimes in reaction, academics far from the policy frontline can over-refine the approach and the debate, rendering it arcane and remote to potential users. Third, as ‘practical men’ go their own way in operationalization, the approach can become bastardized and lose its rationale. McNeill thinks that the Human Development approach has been spared somewhat from the first danger, evisceration of meaning, because it has had a focus and edge through being explicitly opposed to taking economic growth as top priority. In addition its concepts have a fairly rich theoretical basis from the capability approach. Similarly, it has fared relatively well on the third front because its theoreticians have been involved with operationalization too.

Looking more narrowly, at the capability approach, one might be less sanguine. The approach may not have been worked out yet as carefully as it requires, perhaps because of tendencies to become a sect, a church, something that Haq warned against. We do not, it is true, require sharp definitions for all purposes. Often major advances occur despite obscurities, as seen in the history of economic theory with terms like ‘utility’ and ‘value’. The very vagueness can draw in people from diverse backgrounds. We do need sufficient contrast with existing concepts to steer attention in new directions. The capability concept and criterion serve at least as procedural injunctions: look at reasoningly valued opportunities rather than at (only) outcomes or unassessed opportunities, and keep this in mind to guide the judgements that are involved in practice. Problems arise though when basic issues of rationale and formulation are not sufficiently considered before or during practice,

‘operationalization’. Dangers in leaving the capability approach vague and highly flexible could include failure to develop and refine theory, and proneness to operationalize by reversion to familiar, conservative forms that are not consistent with the approach’s rationale. Operationalization could become dominated by:

- economism, as in a notion of a separate sphere of ‘economic welfare’
- unreflective liberalism, as in a tendency to weaken the ‘have reason to value’ clause, into just ‘value’ or ‘want’, and to adopt unreflective versions of SWB
- a preoccupation with quantification above institutionalization, despite the interest in democracy
- considerations of ease of availability of data (such as SWB statements).

Several of these dangers may arise with the Human Development Index. An approach that began by distancing itself from GNP per capita, here brings that into its (popularly perceived) core. While granting the other strengths of the Index – calculability, palatability, and a vivid message – this is a serious price to pay, for it tacitly undermines the capability approach’s original rationale.<sup>11</sup> An input category (income) whose relation to both subjective well-being and (other) valued functionings has been shown to be often very weak and unreliable, becomes reinstated as one supposed aspect of well-being or as a good proxy for that aspect (Gasper 2005a). Hopefully that tendency will be well countered in other work.

Let us look at key problems that arise in trying to work with the concept of ‘capability’ and at the available responses.

#### *The central concept: capability – problems and dangers*

Several aspects of Sen’s ‘capability’ concept make it difficult to work with. The concept draws on but diverges from everyday language. As a result, a number of notions need to be distinguished, as Nussbaum does: (a) inborn potentials, or P-capabilities, (b) trained potentials which constitute skills, abilities and aptitudes, or S-capabilities, and (c) Sen’s sense, attainable outcomes or O-capabilities, which are the joint implication of environmental opportunities and a person’s abilities.<sup>12</sup> Everyday

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<sup>11</sup> The Human Development Index in fact applies a major discount to per capita incomes above the international average, but this is not known to its main audiences and anyway does not obviate the main objections to GNP figures as welfare measures: that, besides ignoring distribution, they count as benefits 1. huge ranges of things which are costs, and 2. things whose growth displaces non-monetized things that would have been of greater benefit.

<sup>12</sup> P = potential; S = skill, O = option or opportunity; see Gasper (1997, 2002, or 2003).

language mostly uses sense (b), but Sen has not elaborated his vocabulary to make this clear, nor related his usage to the different vocabulary in fields of education and training.<sup>13</sup> Although Nussbaum's labels for the concepts of capability are prone to being misunderstood, this is remediable. We discuss next four aspects that are more difficult.

First, 'capability' is a hypothetical concept, and the notion of 'attainable' is hard to specify. Second, 'capability' must in use be an evaluative concept for we need to focus on attainable *favourably valued* functionings n-tuples, not simply all attainable n-tuples. The set of favourably valued opportunities is however hard to identify or compare. Third, it is an unusual intermediary between OWB and SWB concepts, though closer to the former than the latter, which are descriptive concepts about the feelings attached to actual functionings. Fourth, it has two versions: well-being freedom and agency freedom; and draws on the appeal of the latter while being mostly elaborated in terms of the former.

#### *The elusiveness of an opportunity concept*

The capability concept concerns attainable opportunities. It refers to what could be, to the future. It lacks an explicit time-dimension: implicitly well-being freedom refers to the rest of an agent's life, and agency freedom refers to the rest of history, if the agent cares for subsequent generations, subsequent life and non-life, or ongoing general causes. Long extended chains in capability analysis are indeed not merely possible, they are the rule. Perhaps the most central capabilities concern health and those conveyed through education. Both cases involve long extended processes.<sup>14</sup>

Since 'capabilities are an inherently prospective idea... This interpretation brings in the issue of the uncertainty of current and future alternatives. What matters for the measurement of capabilities is not only the possibility, but also the *probability* to achieve an n-tuple of functionings. This raises, in turn, other questions such as the proper time horizon in the evaluation of capabilities and the opportunity to

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<sup>13</sup> Note, for example, a substantial body of work in British vocation-oriented education which called itself 'the capabilities approach', and the Latin American work on 'capacitation' (introduced in Carmen 2000).

<sup>14</sup> This contributes to the syndrome wherein health (a set of functionings) and education (a set of inputs, or of S-capabilities) become each referred to as (O-)capabilities. For example, Robeyns 2005: 95-6, '[The capability approach] asks whether [1a] people are being healthy [*a functioning*], and whether the means or resources necessary for [1b] this *capability* are present ... It asks whether [2a] people are well-nourished [*a functioning*], and whether the conditions for [2b] this *capability*...are being met.' (Italics and enumeration added)

allow for varying time horizons for different functionings' (Brandolini and D'Alessio 2000: 14). Harder yet, questions arise about the meaning of 'can achieve'. 'Can achieve' under what assumptions about the rest of the world? 'Can attain' when we take into account the person's mental frailties (Harrison 2001: 15)?

If we could formulate such hypothetical scenarios, perhaps using fuzzy set concepts, how could we plausibly estimate them? How can one say what are the life-opportunities open to a specific person?

The knowledge of capability sets required for judging whether [a science teacher's] capability set is better or worse than someone else's requires information that is simply unavailable. It is not a conventional problem of asymmetric information -- as though the science teacher knows his capability set, but lacks appropriate incentives for revealing it. The problem is that he has no access to it.

Indeed the problem is not merely epistemological. Why suppose that people face determinate capability sets, that there is a determinate answer to the question: What would have happened had the teacher decided to stick with physics, or try his hand as an actor? Whatever the metaphysics of the case, our evidence never reaches the full range of alternatives lying within reach, but extends to actual functioning and a limited range of counterfactual variations (Cohen 1993: 9).<sup>15</sup>

One can only proceed by using simplifying and standardizing assumptions. In particular, one might have to look at representative standard individuals, not idiosyncratic real individuals, and use standard human values, not idiosyncratic individual preferences.

*Can the capability concept only be practicably operationalized in terms of standard human values?*

'Capability' in practical use will refer not to all the opportunities the person (or group) has but to all those which she (/it) 'has reason to value'. This makes the approach's call for equality of effective freedom difficult to interpret, other than in the adapted but workable form of a call for universal attainment of target levels of basic freedoms. A call for equality of capability concerns equality of access to reasonably valued functionings, whether valued by the individual or by some legitimate social process (Features 4 and 5). But when individuals do the valuation of their situations then they each value different functionings and the criterion of equality becomes in practice unworkable, warns Thomas Pogge. Similarly, to demand 'equality in the space of capabilities' may not be relevant if we see capability as agency-freedom rather than

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<sup>15</sup> Another version of the passage is published in Cohen (1995), p.287; this version is more forceful.

own-wellbeing-freedom. How can we specify equality not in terms of ability to achieve own-wellbeing but in terms of ability to achieve one's goals? Equality in fulfilling one's ambitions? What of the person who has none, versus the person whose ambitions are immense? The approach has insisted that it is not restricted to basic capabilities alone, but concludes Pogge, in both principle and in practice 'What matters for capability theorists is each person's ability to promote typical or standard human ends – and not: each person's ability to promote his or her own particular ends' (2003: 34). This is the logic behind the MDGs and some other variants of feature 6: that universal possession of a set of basic capabilities is both a more operational and a more appropriate criterion.

*An Objective Well-Being category...that is operationalized via SWB measures?*

In a group decision context, especially in a public policy context, almost inevitably much valuing is by representatives and/or experts for others, and an operational concept of capability inclines even more towards OWB rather than SWB. Even in the private context, judgements of 'capability' will partner judgements of OWB, since

**Fig. 4**  
**Well-being judgements for an individual**  
(QOL = quality of life)

	BY FEELINGS (asking: how does the person feel?)	BY BOTH FEELINGS AND NON-FEELINGS	BY NON-FEELINGS (asking: what can and does the person do?)
SELF-JUDGEMENT – IMMEDIATE	1 – Standard hedonic SWB	5 – In some QOL* studies (usually just as one component of QOL)	9 – In some QOL* studies (usually just as one component of QOL)
SELF JUDGEMENT – REFLECTIVE	2 – Reflective hedonic SWB; and eudaimonic SWB	6 – In some QOL* studies (usually just as one component of QOL). <i>(Only a part capability measure since it is not only about attainable options)</i>	<b>10 – In some QOL* studies (usually just as one...).</b> <b>Example: Sen's capability category (since it concerns attainable options)</b>
EXTERNAL JUDGEMENT – FROM GROUP DISCUSSION	3 – Also an SWB category but hardly relevant	7 – An OWB conception	<b>11 – Another OWB- (and capability-) conception</b>
EXTERNAL MEASURE – FROM EXTERNAL AUTHORITY	4 – Externally/ scientifically judged SWB	8 – Another OWB conception	<b>12 – Typical OWB- (and another capability-) conception</b>

\* QOL = quality of life

they concern reasonably valued options not direct feelings. Figure 4 indicates this.<sup>16</sup> Covering also well-being judgements for or in a collectivity, the table indicates three different capability measures, shown in bold. Three other italicized cells have some flavour as measures of capability.

We saw that the concept of capability as opportunity freedom arose out of dissatisfaction with SWB as a valuative measure. Interestingly, some recent work within the capability approach considers rehabilitating SWB: direct personal valuations of one's life (see: Comim 2005; Comim & Teschl 2005). This is motivated by the attractions of SWB as a readily operationalizable measure, by liberal inclinations, and hope that SWB's limitations can be eliminated.

Adaptive preference concerns not only the adjustment of preferences 'downwards' to cope with scarcity, which is the case of consolation (Comim 2005: 165), but also adjustment 'upwards' in face of plenty, which is the case of jading, and in addition and more generally the moulding of preferences.<sup>17</sup> SWB literature does not show the absence or rarity of adaptive preference (Teschl & Comim, p.232), but its ubiquity, as in the steadily corroborated 'Easterlin paradox', and more generally in cultural moulding.<sup>18</sup> One recent survey for example identified Nigerians as the happiest people in the world; another cites several Latin American countries similarly. In Easterlin-paradox behaviour, the jaded affluent report no sustained improvement in felt well-being when their incomes grow beyond around US \$15,000 per capita per annum. Research has found that real income, particularly above that level, is not a good predictor of SWB over time although it has better predictive power cross-sectionally (richer people are happier than poorer people in a given country at a given time; cf. Teschl & Comim, pp. 237, 242).<sup>19</sup> Arguably, part of the explanation is not only that people beyond US\$ 15,000 per annum become inured to and unappreciative

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<sup>16</sup> As in SWB studies, we take what-is-assessed, not assessment by self/others, as the master dimension for distinguishing SWB and OWB; thus, the horizontal dimension not the vertical dimension in figure 4.

<sup>17</sup> Probably at least as important as (1) adjustment downwards of aspirations by the poor, are (2) adjustment upwards of aspirations by those who enter markets and are moulded by new influences, and (3) content shifts in aspirations, rather than gross 'upwards'/'downwards' shifts – for example, decline in aspiration in spheres of religion and family interaction while aspirations for monetarily-related achievement increase.

<sup>18</sup> SWB research shows also considerable unreliability in people's memories of their past felt well-being.

<sup>19</sup> The 'dynamic life-span perspective' would seem to endorse rather than refute the 'hedonic treadmill' (Teschl & Comim, p.239): jading or satiation of existing preferences frequently leads to emergence of new interests, and new activity, to attain the same level of fulfilment that had earlier wilted.

of good living, but that the content of what they can obtain with money beyond that level is not what, consciously or unconsciously, they find important for good living. But there is still abundant evidence of adaptive preference.<sup>20</sup> Whether preference adaptations are functional and desirable or not (Comim 2005: 165-6) is a different matter from whether SWB is a good or bad measure of wellbeing. Adaptation is often functional but renders SWB a flawed measure of wellbeing for public purposes.

*'Agency' and 'well-being' variants of capability; SWB as an agency-freedom proxy?*

Sen has two concepts of O-capability: 'well-being freedom', a person's attainable life alternatives, which can be valued in terms of those features in her own life which she values or disvalues; and 'agency freedom', the futures attainable by the person, described in terms of those features of existence (her own or anyone or anything else's) which she (dis)values. 'Agency freedom' could perhaps better be called goal-capability. While the capability approach is operationalized in terms of well-being freedom, much of its appeal may come from 'agency freedom', which is however peculiarly difficult to operationalize.

No problem arises if the two types of capability are highly and reliably correlated. But a reason for having two sets of capability concept is because they are liable to diverge. Some of Sen's examples concern situations where agency achievement and own well-being achievement are not well correlated: (i) the wife and mother who willingly subordinates her own well-being to the expectations and interests of her husband and family; and (ii) the political hunger-striker who damages her well-being in order to promote other valued goals. One can add: (iii) the consumer addicted to excess who undermines the futures of her children and grandchildren. In the first and third cases one asks how much effective freedom the agent in fact had.

Both SWB and OWB can reflect the other goals that individuals value besides their own direct well-being; the progress of a person's wider causes can influence both her happiness and her health. SWB in particular could reflect agency-achievement, which perhaps explains some of the observed divergences between the movements of economic variables, OWB, and SWB (Gasper 2005a). To return to SWB as a capability measure is, as we saw, tempting: the measure is readily available and has liberal credentials. Teschl & Comim further propose that 'given greater

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<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Easterbrook (2004).



freedom, Sen assumes that the influence of APF [adaptive preference formation] would be much reduced in the creation of people's values and wants' (2005: 235).<sup>21</sup> Is such an assumption, whether or not in fact made by Sen, plausible? How much greater freedom, and reduced how much? Will it justify rehabilitation of SWB as a capability measure for a significant set of cases?

The proposition about the impact of freedom on APF could be sustainable as a tautology when freedom is defined accordingly, but otherwise SWB research does not seem to support this set of views. The many strong factors that distort measurement of SWB and influence the feelings of SWB that we seek to measure are ubiquitous, parts of socialization and the pursuit of goals. They can affect not only standard hedonic SWB measures but also eudaimonic SWB measures. In addition, while measurement approaches exist to counter the distortions in measurement and the contortions of feeling, measures that strongly modulate, regulate and distance subjectivity might perhaps better be described as OWB measures. Further, SWB would be a candidate proxy for agency achievement not agency freedom. Freedom not matched by achievement would often be a source of frustration, subjective ill-being, so that agency freedom and SWB can easily move in opposite directions. Income is an alternative measure of agency freedom, but extremely imperfect since so much of life passes outside the reach of money or can be undermined by it. The appeal of GNP to many governments as a performance measure is indeed not as a societal well-being measure but as a measure of power: power to acquire arms, properties, personnel, and other sources of more power.

So, whether SWB is a good variable with which to reflect agency concerns is questionable. SWB still has genuine claims to attention on grounds of inherent significance (Gasper 2004a). As in many contemporary studies of quality of life, we can simply include an SWB dimension (or dimensions) as one (or more) dimension(s) in the larger set of relevant dimensions, and add ways of measuring both ability to choose and engagement in choice.

Faced with this panoply of complications in turning Sen's capability notion into something to work with, one compares the alternatives or reduced forms. Cohen (1995) and Pogge (2003) advise that we look instead at Rawlsian primary goods,

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<sup>21</sup> Their supportive quotation says only: 'Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development' (Sen 1999: 18).

except in extreme cases of destitution or disability where Sen's arguments against a focus on means in order to assess advantage and disadvantage have special force. Fleurbaey (2002) advises that we measure functionings – as in practice is nearly always done – but including the functioning of choosing; Sen (2002) counsels him to add the functioning of having choices. Others advise in effect that we follow the MDG strategy, a modified capability approach but with a strong focus on primary goods. Finally, one might conclude that the key empirical and policy foci, besides functionings, are 'S-capabilities' – people's skills and powers – rather than, or in addition to, what people notionally can attain.

### *Institutionalization*

The points so far arise from looking at conceptual and epistemological obstacles, not yet at political and organizational obstacles. Let us return to feature 5, that prioritizations should come through public reason and debate, and specifically through participation and democratic choice.<sup>22</sup> Given the legions and diversity of relevant capabilities, and the constraints to making political choice processes simultaneously feasible, participatory and equitable, workable operationalizations of capability analysis may be very simplified in this area too. One should remember though that complex tasks can be adapted into series of simplified feasible tasks within complex systems.

Feature 6, a list of priority capabilities, is one attempt to be realistic about institutionalization. According to Robeyns, Nussbaum's emphasis on a list is part of a focus on what 'citizens have a right to demand from their government (Nussbaum, 2003a). Sen's capability approach, in contrast, need not be so focused on claims on the government, due to its wider scope. ... Nussbaum has been criticized for her belief in a benevolent government.' (Robeyns 2005: 105). In reality, legal constitutions exist more to constrain and steer governments than because of belief in their benevolence. Further, the demands advanced through a legal system, including demands to be enforced by government if that is required by the constitution or other laws, include claims against any and all members of the society, not only claims against government. Nussbaum has a theory of politics in which states and societies have

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<sup>22</sup> Deneulin (2005) warns that Sen has used the three terms public debate, participation, and democracy loosely and interchangeably.

complex institutional structures and democracy is not reducible to direct democracy and continuous plebiscites. Stress on public discourse and rational scrutiny must be combined with understandings of political power and organizational process and structure, including the roles for constitutional and other constraints on power.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS**

Sen's capability approach arose from a dissatisfaction with both of subjective states and command over resources as concepts or measures of well-being or advantage, and from the wish for a concept that presents persons as reasoners with the right to make choices; in sum, from concerns for people as diverse, thinking, adaptive agents (Section 2).

The approach contains six characteristic elements: (1) a broad orientation in valuation to use more sources of information than only information on outcomes, let alone monetizable outcomes; (2) a language—of 'capability', 'functionings' and so on—with which to insightfully structure such information; (3) a normative prioritization, to one degree or other, of the category of capability, in making decisions; (4) a reliance on reasoned valuation by persons in ordering their own capabilities, real or potential; (5) a reliance on reasoned democratic discussion by groups in ordering and selecting between opportunities for the group; and (6) elements that could set limits on the prioritizations permissible through features 4 and 5, including a category, and possibly a list of, basic capabilities. Section 3 concluded that in order to be an 'approach' the capability approach must contain more than a concept and a criterion; and that it indeed contains additional ideas about prioritization through reasoned valuation, public debate and legitimate and democratic process. Amongst the relevant possible products of such valuation, debate and process, we can say, are the Universal Declaration and the MDGs.

The catholic stance on types of information (feature 1) and the normative prioritization of one type (feature 3) are combined with an attempt to face policy realities through features 4 to 6. Features 1 and 6 are not novel; features 2 and 3 are much more so; as are—in an economics context—features 4 and 5 with their stress on reflection and debate as opposed to assumptions of given, fully-formed and fixed

preferences or of ‘de gustibus non est disputandum’ (‘tastes are not open to discussion’, the classical tag repeated by Gary Becker).

Over time, the approach’s concern for human agency has brought increasing stress on process freedom and feature 4, making one’s own choices, and/or on feature 5, participation in group choices; but feature 5 remains seriously underdeveloped.

We saw a number of tensions within the set: between features 1 and 3, within feature 4, and between features 4, 5 and 6. The tensions are not necessarily failings but reflect realities of policy practice and attempts to construct a balanced system. Tension between features 5 and 6 can be mitigated by refined specification of the character of a list of proposed priority(‘basic’) capabilities.

The tensions between, and different emphases on, these diverse elements lead to various different versions, even as presented by the same author or by authors who think they are in agreement. A shared stance that capability is a relevant informational space in evaluation is far from constituting a shared approach. Managing the tensions occurs partly through vagueness and ambiguity, which is problematic. To distinguish and work with several variants, each perhaps adapted to a different context, could be more useful, including for testing and amendment.

Tensions and dangers increase as we move from theorization to operationalization (Section 5). Sen’s capability concept is peculiarly hard to operationalize, for it concerns hypothetical attainments of (in practice, favourably valued) functionings n-tuples, and is an unusual intermediary concept, a type of OWB with an SWB flavour. Major simplifications may be required in operationalization, with a danger of inappropriate reductions when the approach’s rationale is not kept clear.<sup>23</sup>

An example of inappropriate reduction is use of the notion of a separate sphere of ‘economic welfare’, for which per capita GNP is supposedly a satisfactory indicator. Such an operationalization tacitly undermines the original rationale of the capability approach.

A second example of distortion or transformation in much operationalization is the weakening of Feature 4’s clause ‘have reason to value’, into just ‘value’ or ‘want’, and adoption of unreflective versions of SWB as measures of advantage. The paradox arises that an approach which arose by distancing itself from SWB

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<sup>23</sup> Comim (forthcoming) gives a helpful survey of measurement options which is aware of this.

sometimes now re-allies with it, as supposedly a good measure of agency achievement (or even agency freedom) or as liberally sound. This could be more than a mere fine-tuning of the balance between CA's well-being orientation and agency orientation, for the CA's very rationale lay in a distinction between considered and unconsidered lives, between reasoningly valued as opposed to directly felt well-being.

The MDGs and similar basic-capabilities-list formulations are also drastically simplified operationalizations, but potentially defensible. From Feature 3's injunction to approach development and equality with strong reference to capability, they focus appropriately on representative standard individuals, and priority aspects of access or functioning in terms of universal basic values, not idiosyncratic personal features or wishes. They form a workable point of attention, usable to put pressure on real governments and hold them accountable.

Overall, the approach's additional ideas about prioritization (features 4 and 5, even feature 6) are underdeveloped. To go beyond the familiar--that what matters is the content of living and the amounts and distribution of effective freedom, not the amounts of income and expenditure--the capability approach has to connect to more theoretical apparatus and empirical basis (see e.g. Deneulin 2006), not only implicit residues from liberal economics and philosophy.

This conclusion is endorsed, not refuted, by the thriving state of capability studies. The required theoretical and empirical deepening are being attempted. Compared to a decade back, we see a major research effort, a scientific association, regular conferences at which many disciplines, nationalities and topics are seriously represented, and policymaker attention not only within the UN system but influence in many countries and even the World Bank. There was a danger that the capability approach's success in being quickly adopted by the bigger approach to which it contributes – the human development approach – would freeze it at an immature stage. On balance however the bigger approach seems now to instil required energy, urgency, and sense of proportion.

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