Amartya Sen’s Contribution to Development Thinking*

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Development as Freedom (DaF) presents an overview of Sen’s thinking about development, pulling together ingredients familiar from his previous work. Assessing this book, then, comes close to evaluating Sen’s contribution to development thinking. Undoubtedly, the contribution is of major importance, and we shall spend the first part of this essay explaining why we believe this to be the case. Yet there remain problems, both at a theoretical and political/policy level, which mean, in our view, that for some important issues in contemporary development, one has to go beyond Sen. Why we believe this will form the second part of the essay.

Amartya Sen’s major achievement lies in his capabilities (variously termed “freedoms”) approach. In this he not only presents a philosophical alternative to the utilitarianism which underpins so much of economics, but, in so doing, also offers an alternative development objective which can be used to inform a wide range of issues, from markets to gender, democracy to poverty. In brief he argues that “for many evaluative purposes, the appropriate ‘space’ is neither that of utilities (as claimed by welfarists), nor that of primary goods (as demanded by Rawls), but that of substantive freedoms—the capabilities—to choose a life one has reason to value” (74).

For many years, almost since “development economics” as a subject began to be discussed, critics have struggled against the domination of income maximization as the single objective of economic development. Growth of Gross

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National Product (GNP) might occur along with growing unemployment, worsening income distribution, even (though this is rare) rising incidence of monetary poverty, poor provision of social services, deteriorating indicators of health and nutrition, and so on. One of the earliest to point to the defects of GNP was Dudley Seers, who argued for the “dethronement of GNP.” Seers himself suggested replacing the income-maximization objective with employment growth, but that is clearly a very narrow and unsatisfactory measure of success. There followed a succession of suggestions for alternatives: for example, weighting income to give more significance to the incomes of the poor (Chenery et al. 1979); devising a measure of the Physical Quality of Life (PQLI), which included infant mortality, life expectancy, and adult literacy (Morris 1979); assessing the provision of Basic Needs (BN), either by looking at the actual bundle of BN goods and services provided (BN I [ILO 1976]), or by measuring the “full life,” indicated for example by life expectancy and a measure of educational achievement (BN II [Streeten et al. 1981; Stewart 1985]). These (and others not listed here) pointed towards the need to improve on GNP in two ways: one was to give priority to the poorer sections of society over the richer; the other to look beyond income to the quality of life (QOL), because income is just a means (albeit often an effective one) for improving life conditions, and the translation of income to quality of life is by no means an automatic one.

While these alternatives all gave greater weight to resources going to the poor than did GNP maximization, only the PQLI and BN II approach moved away from the use of inputs to that of outcomes, i.e., indicators of quality of life itself, as a way of assessing well-being. But while moral outrage justifiably inspired the BN and PQLI approaches, they did not offer any substantive philosophical justification for the objectives they put forward. Not only did this weaken their appeal as an alternative to the complex (if flawed) utilitarian edifice, but it also meant that their message was necessarily confined to poor people in poor societies.

In contrast, Sen’s capabilities approach has a much stronger philosophical foundation: his approach builds on that of Aristotle in arguing that development is about providing conditions which facilitate people’s ability to lead flourishing lives. Moreover, he has been a most effective critic of the purely consequentialist views of the utilitarians, and their failure to recognize agency, or acknowledge that individual needs, capacities, and context must enter into an assessment of well-being, not just utility or happiness. Sen agrees with Rawls on the priority to be given to free choice (hence the emphasis on capabilities as an objective—what people may choose to be or do, rather than on functionings—what people actually are or do), but rejects Rawls’s focus on primary goods, which are the same for everyone and thus do not allow for varying rates of conversion from goods to individual QOL, depending on the circumstances of the individual. Moreover, unlike the BN approach, the enlargement of capabilities is an objective which extends well beyond poor people and poor societies, with implications for people and societies at all levels of income. Thus, in contrast to the other approaches which move away from the income-maximization objective, Sen’s capabilities approach meets most of the