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From Development Theory to Practice

The ‘true’ histories of the past uncover the buried potentialities of the present. [...] [T]here is only a history of the potentialities of the present. History, in this sense, explores the field of the ‘imaginative’ variations, which surround the present and the real that we take for granted in everyday life.

Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, p. 295

Sen’s freedom-centred approach to development is an approach which is concerned with ‘the expansion of substantive human freedoms’ (Drèze and Sen, 2002, p. 3), which holds ‘individual agency [as] ultimately central to addressing these deprivations [of substantive human freedoms]’ (Sen, 1999b, p. xi), and which ‘cannot be dissociated from participation’ (Sen, 1999b, p. 249). I have argued in the previous chapters that, for the capability approach to be a guiding theory for development praxis, for it to provide theoretical insights for orienting policies towards the removal of unfreedoms, it will need to be ‘thickened’ with a certain vision of the good life, with certain moral principles which assess the extent to which political freedom has been conducive to the removal of unfreedoms, and with an analysis of the structure of a country’s socio-historical agency (an analysis of a country’s collective capability to remove unfreedoms). The next chapters will illustrate these theoretical arguments. More specifically, they will illustrate that, without an explicit acknowledgment of the central role of socio-historical agency in promoting human well-being, without thickening the capability approach with socio-historical narratives which render an account of that agency, the capability approach does not shed sufficient light on the processes through which some countries have more successfully than others promoted human freedoms.
5.1 Development theory and practice

So far, I have examined whether Sen’s freedom-centred approach to development is an adequate theoretical framework for guiding development praxis – development praxis being understood as action undertaken in a political community in view of the ‘good life, with and for others and in just institutions’ (section 1.4). But the relevance of examining a theory in its capacity to guide praxis has yet to be scrutinized. Indeed, one might express serious doubts whether a development theory can ever serve as an ethical guide for the practice of development, whether policy decision-makers ever refer to ethical guidelines before making their decisions (or whether they take Development as Freedom as their key reference book!). Serious concerns might also arise regarding the relevance of assessing development policies which have been implemented in the past according to a normative theoretical framework developed decades later. For example, the policy-makers who influenced Costa Rica’s human development at the nineteenth century did not have Sen’s capability approach to tell them how to make decisions. Neither did they have a ‘development theory’ readily available in academic think tanks from which they could derive policy ideas. What then is the use, one might wonder, of examining the adequacy of a development theory in guiding development practice, and in enabling development practice to become development praxis, that is, in enabling development action to become ethical action?

Three replies can be made to these concerns. First, past experience suggests that development practice is not disconnected from development theory. A body of evidence does indeed exist regarding the influence of the underlying ideas in development theories upon actual policy decisions.\(^1\) Insofar as ideas contained in development theories influence the ideological context in which policy decision-makers are socialized,\(^2\) and insofar as it is only from the social context in which policy-makers live that they can draw meanings and values for their actions, ideas which underpin a powerful development theory do influence policy decisions by influencing the prevalent values in which policy decisions are made. There are however some conditions needed for a development theory to be able to influence practice, namely it must be well theoretically developed and rests upon values which are in tune with the prevailing values and interests of the day.\(^3\) Since decisions are made according to the underlying values in a society and since development theories affect these values, the way Sen’s capability approach is theoretically framed is therefore a matter of direct practical implication.