
Modelling Amartya Sen's Capability Approach: An Interdisciplinary and Contemporary Account

Pablo Garcés-Velástegui

Abstract: Amartya Sen's Capability Approach is a normative framework for the assessment of social states. Inspired in economics and philosophy, it proposes to move from opulence-centric indicators to people's quality of life. Its focus on people has stood the test of time, the rigor of science, and the challenge of practice. Although its original conceptual model has proven persuasive in the last three decades, it has also been further elaborated by contributions from different disciplines. Speaking to and engaging different audiences is a virtue of the approach but it has also dispersed the debate. Accounting for main contributions in an interdisciplinary and accessible way is the purpose of this paper. The current model expands on the core aspects of the CA, namely capabilities, functionings, agency, and conversion factors, and adds the relevant aspect of rationality as well as the dynamics among all categories. This shows an increasing interest in explanation as well as understanding. In both elements, as well as in all of its main aspects, there seems to be still room for growth.

Keywords: Amartya Sen; capability; freedom; agency; rationality, reasoning.

1. Introduction

The Capability Approach (CA) is a conceptual framework suggesting how to think about development. Challenging the economic tradition, focusing exclusively on opulence or the command over resources captured in pecuniary variables, it places people, and their lives, at the center of development. It posits that the end of development is people and that, as such, assessments of social states ought to focus on their quality of life. In this sense, the CA has moved from a focus on the means to the ends of development.

Amartya Sen (1999), the CA's main contributor, has sought to redefine development as freedom. To that end, the CA has placed the opportunity to achieve as well as achievements at the locus of attention, highlighting thereby the dimensions that make life worthwhile. Two questions lie at the heart of the approach, namely, what are people free to do and be? (Alkire and Deneulin 2010), and what have people chosen to do and be? (Robeyns 2017).

Inspired in economics and philosophy, it has enriched the dominant convention with a rich account of human beings and human agency. Highlighting the diversity of people's ends as well as their plurality, the CA defies the

axiomatic rational choice model. It moves beyond utility and opens the black box of preferences.

Hence, the CA has consolidated as that, an approach, a normative device guiding what development should be, perhaps with some vague intuitions as to how to attain it. In this sense, it has been regarded as "primarily a framework for thought" (Robeyns 2005, 96). It is, therefore, not an explanatory theory of development. That is, it neither proposes a social state as a desirable final destination, nor does it elaborate on the logical and desired steps of how to get there.

Several scholars and practitioners have added to his efforts, building an ever-growing body of work. The efforts have been twofold, addressing both theoretical as well as empirical issues. Additionally, although the approach finds its roots in economics and philosophy, it has proven so influential so as to engage in a rich interdisciplinary dialogue that has sought to explore and flesh out some of its most important aspects. Talking across disciplines certainly increases the potential of the CA to mature as the debate becomes that much more enriched. At the same time, however, there is the risk of missing the potential of this richness if these often dispersed efforts were not to be integrated into the discussion. In this sense, attempting to garner these efforts and to make sense out of them is a necessary and urgent task.

That is the aim of this paper, and its focus is to provide and account of the progress made by the CA at the theoretical level. Paying attention to theory has intrinsic as well as instrumental value. Intrinsically, shedding light on how the CA has evolved conceptually and depicting its current state is useful in and of itself to improve the normative understanding of and contribution to development. Instrumentally, the clarity gained can more adequately guide empirical research as well as development practice.

Consequently, this paper seeks to build a current conceptual model based on Sen's work as well as on the main theoretical contributions to the CA in the last decades. As such, it presents an argument based on a selection of what are arguably the most relevant additions to the approach, rather than providing an account of the debate. This undertaking seems particularly timely as the approach celebrates its 30th anniversary. To do so, it is structured into four sections, each building on the previous one, according to the most prominent concepts in the approach. The first section presents Sen's seminal proposal and basic model, addressing the capabilities and functionings at the evaluative space, agency and well-being as motivation, and conversion factor as intervening elements. The sec-

ond section constructs the current model and follows the discussion presented in the previous one addressing: i) developments within capability (freedoms) and functionings (achievements); ii) considerations about conversion factors; iii) a discussion about agency; and, iv) rationality and reasoning. The third section points to themes still warranting attention. The last section concludes.

2. Development as freedom: the basic model

The CA focuses on people and their lives. It has proven to be an influential framework, challenging the dominant money-centered convention, and inspiring global efforts to address urgent social issues. Differing from measures of opulence, which focus on the means instead of on the ends of development, for the CA, income (or wealth) *per capita* is only instrumentally important; that is, it is only valuable to the extent it enables the achievement of intrinsically valuable aspects of life. This, perhaps common sensical view, nowadays was not so evident a few decades ago. Indeed, until 1998 the World Bank published its annual World Development Report with a ranking of countries based on their economic growth. By 1990, capability ideas gained sufficient traction leading to the issuance of the Human Development Reports¹ from then on by the United Nations Development Program. In this section, the main concepts of the CA are presented as elaborated by Sen, showing just why it has been so compelling.

3. The ends of development: freedom and achievement

Development entails evaluation. This is because the concept of ‘development’ is descriptive as well as normative. It not only conveys the notion of change but it suggests the idea of good change (Chambers 2005). As such, it points to the categories, variables and indicators that matter and the direction of the change, or where and how that change should be attested. Thus, a social state needs to be evaluated in those terms to corroborate that it has in fact developed. For the CA, the evaluative spaces are capabilities and functionings. The latter are ‘doings’ and ‘beings’ that people value and have reason to value (Sen 1999). They are achieved states and, as such, they are constitutive of a person’s being (Sen 1990). They can also be regarded as reflected-upon valuable types of lives (Sen 1993) and, accordingly, living can be considered of inter-related doings and beings (Sen 1992).

Functionings are multidimensional. From elementary ones like being free from avoidable sickness or being well nourished to complex ones like being able to present oneself in public without shame, functionings highlight incommensurability of human experience (Sen 1999). Hence, they reject the simplistic attention to only one dimension, and the use of single indicators, as in the measurement of opulence.

They are also personal, reflecting individual’s values and their notion of the good. They focus on a wide array of reflected upon valuable doings and beings, ideally chosen by the individual. If so, those achievements speak

volumes about people’s morality.

Capability, in turn, is an individual’s vector of potential functionings (Sen 1999). The label seeks to convey the importance of someone’s capability to function (Sen 1992). In this sense, it comprises all the possible functionings available to a person and from which she can choose. Hence, capability denotes the freedom people have to pursue different lives regarded as valuable after reflection (Sen 1993).

Capability, thus, goes beyond functionings, referring to the freedom to achieve. “Freedom can be distinguished *both* from the *means* that sustain it and from the *achievements* that it sustains” (Sen 1992, 86, emphasis in the original). Because of this, Sen (1999) has argued that ideally social states ought to be assessed in the space of capabilities, redefining development as freedom.

By focusing capabilities as well as achievements, Sen (1997) recognizes the importance of the process, not only the results. Given two individuals with identical preferences and types of life, i.e. functionings, there is certainly a difference if that life has been imposed on one individual and has been the product of reflective choice, from other valuable options, for the other one. Hence, looking solely at outcomes may prove myopic. Sen (1997) refers to the latter as ‘culmination outcomes’, as opposed to the farsighted ‘comprehensive outcomes.’ For the CA, the improvement in people’s lives is an expansion of their freedom. Thus, enlarging people’s choices in all dimensions of life is what development is all about (Haq 1995).

In this sense, for the CA functionings are relevant as well. The actual exercise of choice is relevant for social assessments. As important as capability is, an exclusive focus on it would not be informative about social outcomes. An individual’s doings and beings, as well as her freedom to choose them, are part of a valuable life (Crocker and Robeyns 2010).

The emphasis on capability also shows the CA’s focus on plurality. Much like functionings, capabilities are personal, since they are sets of achievements, which constitute a person’s life. Additionally, it emphasizes plurality by acknowledging that a wide array of doings and beings can be valuable after reflection, and therefore many types of life can be legitimate. This certainly includes material opulence, which is factored in the analysis, but only instrumentally, as long as it can contribute to the achievement of intrinsically valuable objectives. Put simply, for the CA, whether it is a state or an individual, more than the level of opulence, what matters is how it is used (Sen 1999). Therefore, it entails a move from the means of development to its ends.

Although Sen’s work does not establish how to generate functionings and capability, i.e. the determinants for the enjoyment of freedom and achievement of outcomes as well as the causal logic associating them, he does suggest some interrelations in the case of the latter. Albeit freedoms are distinct, they are interdependent and expansions on some can lead to improvements in others. Therefore, freedom is the primary end and the principal means of development (Sen 1999). These are, respectively, the constitutive and instrumental roles of freedom in development (Sen 1999).

Significantly, Sen (1988) also emphasizes the distinc-

tion between negative and positive freedoms. Negative freedoms refer to the absence of hindrances to the exercise of choice. As such, they depict the state of 'being free from.' The attention here is placed on the appropriateness of the processes ruling social conduct. Positive freedoms, in turn, focus on the effective opportunity people have to achieve. Thus, they denote the state of 'being free to.' The emphasis here is on meaningful exercises of choice. Hence, they can be a relevant functioning² (Sen 1988). Indeed, 'refined functionings' take into account the options available (Sen 1988). Although both negative and positive freedoms are important, the latter are closer to the assessment of people's quality of life and, therefore, figure more prominently.

4. Intervening elements to development's ends: internal and external

Translating resources into capability or functionings is not immediate. It is mediated by conversion factors. These are features of the individual or the context that intervene in the enjoyment of freedoms and the fulfilment of achievements. Sen (1999) categorizes conversion factors as the following: i) personal heterogeneities; ii) environmental diversities; iii) variations in social climate; iv) differences in relational perspectives; and, v) distribution within the family. They can be summarized as personal (ethnicity, gender, age, class, etc.) or internal conversion factors, as well as environmental (living on a rural or urban area) and social (observing religious prescriptions, living a patriarchal society, etc.) or external conversion factors (Robeyns 2005).

Conversion factors add to the CA's focus on human diversity. In addition to the variety of possible ends, which has been mentioned above, these factors point to the array the possible means. The former has been referred to as inter-end variation and the latter as inter-individual variation (Sen 1992). Inter-end variation has been briefly addressed above in the discussions regarding freedom. It underlines the legitimacy of a multiplicity of doings and beings, or possible types of live that people value and have reason to value. Inter-individual variation is highlighted by conversion factors. Even with identical ends, different individuals embedded in different social and environmental contexts are likely to need different amounts and kinds of resources to reach them. Hence, inter-individual variation challenges the conventional assumption found in welfare economic theory, that all people are fundamentally similar, holding the same maximal potentials (Sen 1992), perhaps best conveyed in the belief that 'all men (humans) are created equal'.

Inter-end variation is related to inter-individual variation. The effective opportunity of substantial freedom that a person may enjoy to lead a life she values and has reason to value depends on two elements: i) the ends that she has; and, ii) the power she has to translate the resources at her disposal into those ends (Sen 1992). Both depend on her personal features and those of her context.

5. Motivations for development's ends: self- and other-regarding

Capabilities and functionings can take place in two aspects: agency and well-being, which denote an individual's motivation. Well-being refers to a person's welfare (Sen 1993). It captures exclusively its personal 'wellness' (Sen 1992). Hence, well-being indicates the possibilities and actualities related to a person's own states.

Agency casts a wider net and captures what an individual does or can do in the pursuit of any of her goals³. This includes, of course, self-regarding (well-being) as well as other-regarding objectives (Crocker and Robeyns 2010). Agency, therefore, entails an assessment of "what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good" (Sen 1985, 206).

Furthermore, Sen (1999, 19) regards agency "[...] in its older – and 'grander' – sense as someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well". The emphasis is on treating people as being able to have some degree of control over their lives and destinies. The CA opposes regarding people merely as passive recipients of policy (Sen 1999).

Importantly, as perhaps the discussion has suggested, capability and functionings can be expressed in terms of agency and well-being (see Table 1). Well-being achievement is perhaps the most salient because of its relation to personal welfare. Indeed, the wellness of a person's being depends on what she does and is (Sen 1992). Well-being freedom is related to the previous discussion. Since capability is a vector all possible functionings, and the latter are constitutive to a persons' being, then well-being capability is a person's freedom to have well-being⁴ (Sen 1992). Therefore, well-being achievement and freedom are not independent from one another. The former depends on the latter, i.e. achievements depend on the process that brings them about.

Table 1. Combination of agency and Well-being with functionings and capability

		Motivations	
		Well-being	Agency
Evaluative space	Functionings	Well-being achievement	Agency achievement
	Capability	Well-being freedom	Agency freedom

Source: adapted from Crocker & Robeyns (2010). Elaboration: author.

The manifestation of functionings and capabilities within agency leads to similar conclusions. Agency achievement encompass all the doings and beings people value and have reason to value. As such, it covers all the goals constituting an individual's being, which Sen (2007) argues are a manifestation of her identity.

Therefore, agency, and concomitantly, well-being, functionings are about fulfilling objectives and values. As Sen (1992, 56) has put it:

A person’s agency achievement refers to the realization of goals and values she has reasons to pursue, whether or not they are connected with her own well-being. A person as an agent need not be guided only by her own well-being, and agency achievement refers to the person’s success in the pursuit of the totality of her considered goals and objectives.

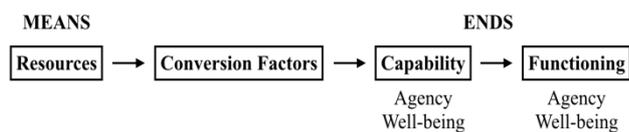
The relation between agency and freedom also highlights the intrinsic value of choice. It denotes the actual opportunity that an individual has to fulfil their duly considered valuable goals, whether self- or other- regarding.

Agency and well-being are related, distinguishable and interdependent (Sen 1992). Agency is a superset of well-being. Self-regarding objectives can legitimately be goals that a person values and has reason to value and they can be (to different extents) separated from other-regarding ones. At the same time, the achievement of other-regarding goals can increase a person’s well-being. Similarly, the failure to achieve other-regarding goals can prove detrimental to an individual’s well-being.

Additionally, although these motivations can coincide in direction, it is possible for agency and well-being may move in different directions as well. For instance, the fulfilling an agency achievement, e.g. saving someone’s life by donating an organ, can come at a cost to well-being achievement, e.g. one’s own health.

Consequently, the CA’s move of focus from the means to the ends to development highlights also the intervening factors mediating the attainment of those ends and distinguishes the different motivations guiding actions towards them. This discussion has summarized the approach’s basic conceptual model, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Illustration of the CA’s original model moving from means to ends.



Source: based on Sen (1999) and Robeyns (2005). Elaboration: author

Importantly, Sen’s own views seem to have changed throughout his work. Sen (1999) has referred to the CA as freedom-centered and agency-oriented, and perhaps the most relevant change for current purposes pertains to freedom and agency themselves. Until 1992, Sen (see e.g. Sen 1982, 1992) addressed the issue of effective control, entailing people playing a role in their capability and achievements, and rejected the idea of freedom as control as restrictive. “Many freedoms take the form of our ability to get what we value and want, without the levers of control being *directly* operated by us” (Sen 1992, 64, emphasis in the original). This had an impact in agency and led to the differentiation between ‘instrumental agency success’ and ‘realized agency success’. While the former is concerned with the agent themselves being in charge of bringing about an achievement, the latter is broader and captures the agent’s achievements regardless of whether they participated in their coming about. Sen (1992), in

rejecting freedom as control, associated ‘effective freedom’ to the idea of realized agency success.

Although not directly addressed in the literature, this distinction seemed useful in order to provide a wide account of human behaviour. There are groups in society particularly important for the CA because they can be especially vulnerable to capability deprivation whose agency could have been accounted for by that differentiation, until 1992. This is the case of people who have others deciding for them, such as children, the elderly and people with disabilities. The achievement of these subject could arguably be accounted for by realized agency success and the broader notion of effective freedom. However, the use of instrumental and realized agency success has been dropped thereafter, suggesting that capability freedom neither rejects freedom as control anymore nor opposes the exclusive focus on instrumental agency success. In fact, as the discussion thus far and the model presented in Figure 1 suggest, it seems to embrace both. As such, the original framework seems to either apply mainly on healthy and able adults or, at least, leave significant segments of society without explicit attention.

6. Freedom, agency, and rationality: an evolving model

Sen’s contribution to development research and practice has proven persuasive. Perhaps the best example are the Human Development Reports and a growing literature across various disciplines engaging in a prolific debate seeking to add to the CA’s project. Its advantages notwithstanding, some aspects of Sen’s framework have deserved additional elaboration. Therefore, over the last three decades, scholars from different disciplines have sought to explore those themes and complement the original proposal. Accordingly, following the structure of the previous section, in order to build the CA’s current conceptual model, this section discusses the main contributions in terms of capability and functionings, conversion factors, agency, and rationality.

This discussion is selective and multidisciplinary. It is selective because, due to the space restrictions, only the most relevant conceptual additions to the CA can be covered. There is a constantly growing literature seeking to enrich the framework the revision of which cannot be exhausted in the following pages. Therefore, this discussion focuses on the theoretical debate dealing with the CA itself. The empirical literature is, thus, not included. As useful as applications can be, they are usually accompanied by complementary explanatory theories and, hence, their findings either relate more to the former than to the approach or it is difficult to draw a clear line. It is multidisciplinary because, although the approach can be regarded as an offspring of economics and philosophy, it has proven successful in transcending these disciplines and igniting a significant debate in others. This can be regarded as a success indeed because development issues seem to be, at least, multi- and inter-disciplinary in nature. Accordingly, from different perspectives and disciplines, the CA has been subjected to scrutiny, which has led to important contributions.

7. Capability and functionings

The literature has expanded on the discussion regarding the CA's evaluative space. As mentioned above, Sen (1999) has suggested that capabilities are not only the ends of development but also some of its most important means. From that instrumental perspective, Sen (1999) explores five broad types of freedoms, namely, political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security. Their value is intrinsic as well as instrumental. Each can advance an individual's capability to function and they can all complement each other, with increases in one leading to increases in another one.

Following this intuition Wolff and de-Shalit (2013) have highlighted that this applies for achievements and deprivations as well⁵. As it regards functionings, whenever they contribute to the attainment of others are referred to as 'fertile functionings' (see Figure 2). Perhaps the most evident example is having disposable income since it can greatly contribute to other achievements. The authors propose a less evident example, namely, good humor. Provided that a person lives in a society that values humor, such functioning can improve a person's social skills in school, university, and the labor market, increasing their likelihood to succeed in each of them and, therefore, have a better quality of life.

Similarly, the same applies in the case of deprivations, as there are patterns of disadvantage that emerge and persist. Those disadvantages that can lead to increases in the probability of other deprivations are referred to as 'corrosive disadvantages', which can be dynamic and intergenerational (Wolff and de-Shalit 2013). As in the case of functionings, income or its absence can be an illustration. Lack of money is an example since it curtails people's access to consumption of good and services important for people's quality of life, e.g. school and health. A more telling illustration is suggested by the authors: less educated parents have the tendency to talk less to their children and use a narrower vocabulary, which reduces children's school performance, decreasing the likelihood to succeed at university and thus, to find a better job.

In this sense, the conceptual discussion regarding capabilities and functionings seems to have followed the CA's proposal post-1992. That is, the embrace of freedom as control is consolidated, and the recognition solely of instrumental agency success reified. While the former leads to a virtual association between it and what before 1992 was regarded as a "narrow" view of effective freedom, the latter places rather exacting demands on human agency.

Be that as it may, the policy relevance of the insights gained in the explanation of some functionings and deprivations can hardly be overstated. Identifying fertile functionings and corrosive disadvantages can contribute to more effective (social) policies since various dimensions of people's quality of life can indirectly benefit from a direct intervention in one dimension. Similarly, they can contribute to more efficient policy making via improving the expenditure of scarce resources, since they can point to the areas and aspects where each dollar is likely to deliver better results.

8. Conversion factors

The CA makes a considerable contribution to the study of development by paying much needed attention to human diversity. Beyond capabilities and functionings, it does so by including conversion factors, as aspects mediating the translation from the means to the ends of development. This inclusion also goes a long way in suggesting a framework for the dynamics between agents and structures. In this sense, an account is provided for the relationship between people and their contexts (social and environmental), at least, as it relates to outcomes in people's quality of life.

Although conversion factors are, to a large extent, independent of each other, they interact with one another. For instance, an individual with physical impairment or mental disability, a personal characteristic affecting negatively their ability to convert resources into functionings and/or capabilities, can see their situation worsen if they are located in a rural area with poor road and communication conditions, an external environmental feature also affecting negatively a person's ability to convert resources into freedoms and/or achievements.

In this sense, the stress has been on regarding them mainly as hindrances or obstacles to reach freedom and achievements. Indeed, Sen's famous example of the use of a bicycle is telling in this regard. The personal characteristic of being a woman and the social feature of living in a patriarchal community that prohibits her use of a bicycle, would not allow her to achieve the functioning of mobility by cycling. Against this backdrop Hvinden and Halvorsen (2017) have taken conversion factors to task and have argued that they can be regarded as enablements as well (see Figure 2). An illustration can be the social characteristic of establishing the same wage for the same work and, regardless of the personal characteristic (sex) the functioning of earning an equal salary could be achieved.

Moreover, there is not only interaction but interdependence between types of conversion factors. Hvinden and Halvorsen (2017) exemplify this by noting that an individual's reading or math skills depends to a large extent on their access to a system of universal education and the quality of its service. Hence, social features can affect personal ones. The inverse relation could also hold, in time, since better educated individuals are likely to be more effective in generating social change. This enrichment of the notion enhances the CA's contribution to the interplay between agents and structures, in particular to provide an account of social change or the lack of it. Given that social change has been conventionally theorized without taking into account the interdependence of conversion factors, this inclusion can enable a richer understanding of unexpected phenomena (Hvinden and Halvorsen 2017).

In this sense, conversion factors are interdependent personal and contextual features that can curtail or facilitate a person's attainment of their desired and reflected-upon goals and, as such, can aid in understanding how change in social structures does not happen when it is likely to do so and vice versa⁶.

Conversion factors, therefore, can be consequential to

account for the human behaviour of people, incorporating the dynamics between agents and structures. Of particular interest can be the interplay between internal conversion factors with external ones. At first sight, it would be argued that personal features could solve the problem posed by those groups that have been omitted by the exclusion of realized agency success. However, conversion factors seem to apply to agents, to people who are choosing and acting. But what about people who cannot be ‘agents’, i.e. those who have others acting on their behalf? The question is left open.

9. Agency

Agency conveys the degree to which individuals can engage with their environments and change them to attain their goals⁷. Therefore, for the CA, agency itself is valuable, due to its interwovenness with freedom. Should functionings be the only aspects of value, it would not matter how they come about or who is choosing them. However, as was mentioned above, this is of the utmost importance. Therefore, associating agency with the aforementioned capability of political participation, singled out by Sen (1999) as one particularly relevant, it has been argued that agency’s value could be stated in the same terms (Alkire 2009; Crocker and Robeyns 2010), namely, i) intrinsically, instrumentally; and, constructively.

Intrinsically, agency is valuable in and of itself because it enables people to be in control of their lives. Without it, individuals could be “living as well-fed, well-clothed, and well-entertained vassals” (Drèze and Sen 2002, 288). Hence, “[...] free agency itself a constitutive part of development” (Sen 1999, 4).

Instrumentally, agency is valuable for the capabilities and functionings it can lead to. Individuals, exercising their agency, can help themselves to overcome situations of deprivation. Additionally, like capabilities, agency is an end as well as important means for analogous ends. Thus, free agency “[...] contributes to the strengthening of free agencies of other kinds (Sen 1999, 4).

Constructively, agency enables people to duly consider, choose, and shape their values. This shows the importance of reasoning for agency (more on this in the next section). Thus, agency allows critical (self) assessment, as in the case of weighting capabilities and other values (Sen 1999; Crocker and Robeyns 2010), taking place in the selection of relevant functionings or capabilities, a problem for which there is no escape (Sen 1992).

That agency, for the CA, echoing capabilities such participation and democracy, is significant because of “(1) its *intrinsic importance*, (2) its *instrumental contributions*, and (3) its *constructive role* in the creation of values and norms” (Alkire 2009, 456) underscores its scope as well as its limitations. One the one hand, it indeed regards people as in charge of their destinies (Sen 1999). This is normatively sound and empirically sound (Le Grand 2003). On the other hand, it appears to leave out those who cannot be in charge of their destinies and have surrogated that role to others, voluntarily or involuntarily, e.g. infants and people with mental disabilities. These cases are certainly not negligible and in fact relevant for an ap-

proach concerned with capability deprivation. Hence, to provide an adequate account for them is normatively imperative and empirically necessary.

Finally, to recall, Sen’s (1999) adherence to the older and grander notion of agency suggests two relevant elements, namely choice and reflection. In this sense, the theoretical literature seems to have supported the CA’s notion of agency emphasizing choice or the bringing about of personal aims and goals, and virtually paying relatively much less attention their judgment, whether personal or otherwise, or the reflective component of agency. The debate about agency has not meant significant changes to the CA’s conceptual model. It has however, paved the way to what is arguably one of the most significant contribution of late, namely, the role of rationality or reasoning. This is the issue taken up next.

10. Rationality (as reasoning and non-reasoning)

Throughout his proposal, Sen emphasizes the importance of reason. To recall, he constantly specifies that functionings are types of life that people value and, importantly, have *reason* to value. Despite this emphasis, only recently has there been an in-depth elaboration about what this means for the CA. Garcés (2020) fills that void by fleshing out the capability agent, establishing the relation it has as part of agency and with freedom. Based on Sen’s wider work, the argument stresses the significance that rationality has for Sen and specifies that he redefines it as reasoning. Therefore, it is pointed out that Sen (2002, 4) defines rationality as “subjecting one’s choices – of actions as well as of objectives, values and priorities – to reasoned scrutiny.” Moreover, Sen (2009, 180, emphasis in the original) expands on this later stating that: “[...] rationality is primarily a matter of basing – explicitly or by implication – our choices on reasoning that we can reflectively sustain, and it demands that our choices, as well as our actions and objectives, values and priorities, can survive our own seriously undertaken critical scrutiny”. That is, for the CA *de gustibus est disputandum*. Rationality, so redefined, becomes a particularly significant personal characteristic or internal conversion factor and plays a major role in the CA’s model, particularly in respect to freedom and other conversion factors (see Figure 2). On the one hand rationality and freedom are interdependent. Rationality depends on freedom because i) in order to scrutinize one’s preferences, first options have to be available, ii) when many options are available, rationality has to be able to accommodate the variety of reasons and preferences supporting a choice; and, iii) that scrutiny can be improved with every instance of choice. Freedom is dependent on rationality since it needs some idea of an individual’s preferences and the reasons supporting them.

On the other hand, rationality and conversion factors can also be interdependent. External (social) conversion factors influence what rationality is and the criteria upon which that scrutiny is carried out. That is, social context frames the possibilities of rationality. At the same time, the scrutiny to which personal preferences is subjected can induce social change (Garcés 2020). This is because individual values and preferences are not generated in a

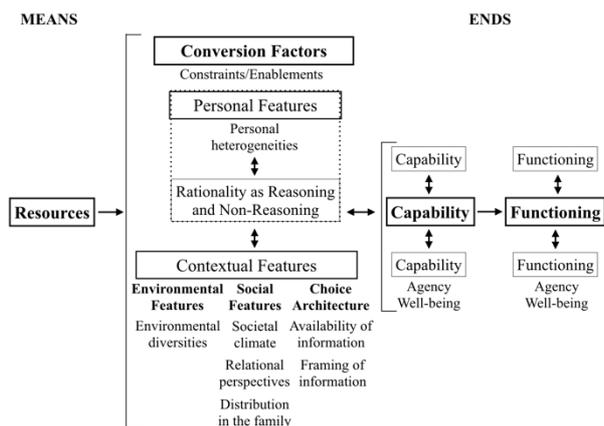
vacuum but are influenced by social institutions and customs. Therefore, revisions on personal preferences can lead to revised choices and revision on social preferences.

The same applies to internal conversion factors since personal characteristics can affect the degree of that scrutiny and self-scrutiny can affect those features. To illustrate, an illiterate adult person may find their self-scrutiny rather restricted (specially compared with someone with average years of education for their age group). However, as their consideration of own values and preferences may prompt them to become literate (should he have the adequate social and institutional support required to fulfil that goal).

As such, it is demonstrated that the CA challenges the dominant rational agent, as advanced by rational choice theory and suggests that it proposes a *reasoning agent* (Garcés 2020). Sen (1977) explicitly rejects the conventional formulaic assumptions governing the treatment of human beings and their action, arguing that they turn them into 'rational fool'. Hence, for the CA, humans are not the egoistic, calculative and atomistic *homo economicus* proposed by the most rigid versions of rational choice theory, but rather multimotivated, multidimensional, plural, reflective choosers (Garcés 2020).

This, nonetheless, does not guarantee that people make optimal decisions and reach welfare outcomes. This is because, whether in deliberate or habitual decisions, people fail (Kahneman 2011). This aspect, until recently unexplored within the CA, has been complemented by the insights gained in behavioural economics, which exposes the how humans actually behave and deviate from the axioms of full rationality proposed by rational choice theory, the dominant approach (Corr and Plagnol 2019). Because the CA's notion of rationality as reasoning focuses on reflective action, such account adds to the CA's internal conversion factors in two aspects: i) non-reflective action; and, ii) failures in both reflective and non-reflective action (Garcés-Velástegui, 2022; forthcoming). Furthermore, because behavioural economics has also found that these failures, to a great extent, depend on the setting in which decision-making takes place, these insights also enrich the CA's external conversion factors with the inclusion of the choice architecture (Garcés-Velástegui, 2022; forthcoming)

Figure 2. Illustration of the CA's conceptual model including the role of rationality as reasoning and non-reasoning as an internal conversion factor and choice architecture as an external conversion factor



Source: based on Sen (1999), Sen (2009), Robeyns (2005), Wolff and de-Shalit (2013), Hvinden and Halvorsen (2017), and Garcés-Velástegui (forthcoming). Elaboration: author.

In this sense, the reasoning or capability agent highlights the nuanced notion of agency within the CA. Nevertheless, as much as it moves beyond the rational choice model, the CA's notion of agency seems to still have room for improvement. As a multimotivated, multidimensional, plural, reflective chooser, the reasoning agent still suggests a rather limited application to those who can and do in fact choose reflectively, i.e. it appears to be mostly restricted to abled adults. That being so, there are capability-relevant groups in society that continue to be unaccounted for, those who have others choosing and reflecting for them, such as the elderly and individuals with certain illnesses, and people with mental disabilities.

11. Discussion and themes warranting attention

Sen's CA has been subjected to no small scrutiny and criticism. It has been argued that there are the literature points to three broad areas where further work is needed: practical compromises, selection and valuation, and under-theorization (Garcés-Velástegui 2020a). Practical compromises refer to the empirical challenge posed by some aspects of the CA, mostly capabilities and how the approach has admitted the possibility different levels of strictness in applications. As such, it does not impact the conceptual model and thus is not addressed here. Selection and valuation refer to the relevant capabilities and functionings. Sen (2004) has notoriously refrained from proposing a definitive list arguing that the CA's notion of agency demands that any list should depend on the purposes of the exercise and be subjected to those affected by it. In this regard, the main contribution has been Martha Nussbaum's (2000), who proposes ten capabilities that ought to be included in the constitutions of all countries (and thus hers is referred to as 'the capabilities [plural] approach'), namely: i) Life; ii) Bodily Health; iii) Bodily Integrity; iv) Senses, Imagination, and Thought; v) Emotions; vi) Practical Reason; vii) Affiliation; viii) Other Species; ix) Play; and, x) Control over One's Environment. However, this proposal has become its own stream, referred to as the *capabilities* (emphasis on the plural) approach. Therefore, it does not warrant any further elaboration in this discussion.

Similarly, Sen's CA has been criticized in terms of its exclusive attention to individual outcomes. It has been argued that collective capabilities (and arguably functionings) are also relevant, particularly in development contexts (Ibrahim 2006). Collective capabilities are the product of social interaction and denote freedoms that can only be obtained and enjoyed collectively. Unions exemplify this argument as they enable reaching outcomes (freedoms or functionings) that people individually could not. As such, they are arguably intrinsically instrumentally valuable. While their intrinsic value lies in these capabilities improving people's lives, their instrumental value lies in their ability to lead to individual outcomes (Ibrahim 2006). Although Sen has not endorsed the inclusion of

these capabilities, there is a growing literature that seek to articulate this proposal cogently with his ideas.

In this sense, unsurprisingly, the conceptual debate has mainly dealt with the third critique, under-theorization. Perhaps Robeyns (2008, 94) has put the need to work in this area most clearly:

The underspecified character of the capability approach requires that, before the capability approach can be applied for specific normative analyses, it has to be supplemented with additional theories. These theories include ontological theories about certain aspects of social and individual lives, and explanatory theories giving accounts of why states and processes are the way they are and how we should understand them. These supplementary theories also include normative accounts of the three conversion factors in the capability approach, and a normative theory of choice and personal responsibility.

As stated initially, the CA is a framework addressing the issue ‘what is development’, and the literature expanding on it has mostly emphasized explanation. The different contributions reviewed in this paper have sought to complement the CA by addressing the issue ‘how to get there’. As such, they have focused on different themes of the approach and enriched the explanatory account within them. Thus, the attention has turned around mainly the investigation of causal links and insights. Interestingly, the latest accounts suggest the convenience of moving beyond exclusive attention to measurement and observables (such as choice) and including meaning and unobservables (reasons and preferences) via interpretive accounts to bring that project to fruition.

This state of affairs touches upon ontological issues (even more so if collective capabilities are admitted), another area under-theorized within the CA. Sen has abstained from addressing any discussion regarding the philosophy of science in its approach but has suggested that issue to be important in his wider work (Sen 1993). “Philosophy plays a necessary but not always obvious role in empirical inquiry” (Webb 2012, 45). Indeed, such elaboration would not only enrich the conceptual model but, by so doing, it would guide the conduct of applications of the approach. Efforts in this regard are still incipient. Martins (2007, 2009) suggests critical realism as an alternative in this regard. Nonetheless, the jury is still out concerning the pertinence of this proposal with the original model, let alone the current one. Tackling this issue, however, seems particularly relevant for the CA because it would point how to implement applications inspired by it, and this resonates deeply with its quintessentially practice-oriented and policy-intended nature.

12. Conclusions

The CA has transcended the theoretical debate and made a great contribution to development research and practice. Perhaps the best example of this is the growing literature turning around it as well as the Human Development Reports (including the Human Development Index) inspired by it. Despite being the offspring of economics and philosophy, it has been able to transcend these disciplines and engage with many others. Presumably, part of its per-

suasiveness is precisely its ability to speak to a wide array of audiences. Such approach has created fertile soil on which to sow and, as this paper has sought to highlight, to harvest.

The CA has made considerable progress, particularly in the last decade or so, and its current conceptual model shows as much. To build it, due to space constraints, rather than presenting a chronological or thematic debate, a selection of the what are arguably the most relevant theoretical contributions of the literature, has been discussed.

The recognition of capabilities and functionings, as well as unfreedoms and deprivations, as means leading to the attainment of other freedoms and achievements can contribute to explanation of desirable quality of life outcomes and, thereby inform policy. The same could be said about shedding light on the interdependence among conversion factors because, by contributing to the explanation of unexpected phenomena, it points to the additional elements affecting the potential outcomes of policy. Moreover, expanding on the relevance of agency for the CA is not only normatively cogent but empirically warranted. Not only is it adequate to treat people as agents and not merely patients subjected to policies, but they do in fact have (different degrees of) control over their lives and act in the pursuit of their own benefit and that of others. Finally, exposing the role of rationality, as reasoning, within the CA points to a rather interesting direction for empirical applications of the approach, as it requires opening the black box of preferences and incorporating meaning and interpretation in the analysis. This complements the account of agency and, given its centrality for the approach, can enhance policies that treat it as a means and/or as an end of development.

At the same time, the original model has maintained its validity. The fact that it has not suffered fundamental changes but additions, many of which are fleshed out from Sen’s own work, speaks volumes of the soundness of the approach. This is even more noteworthy in light of the increasing attention that it has received from multiple disciplines.

Certainly, the contributions made to the CA in the last three decades have not exhausted the themes worth scrutinizing. In fact, all of them point to promising avenues for future research. Wolff and de-Shalit (2013, 133) asserts “the causal pathways which bind forms of disadvantage together need investigation”. Similarly, Hvinden and Halvorsen (2017, 14, emphasis in the original) indicate the potential in conversion factors for sociology aiming for “a better understanding of agency/structure dynamics seen as *virtuous or vicious circles*.” Additionally, here are multiple areas that could benefit from the engagement of scholars and practitioners alike. One of particular interest that has been pointed out in this paper, and others (see e.g. Robeyns 2005) is the philosophy of science. Although the latest insights added to the CA point to a movement beyond positivism, it is less clear towards where. Apropos of this, Garcés (2020) points that there is incipient work being carried out associated with critical realism and even less so related to pragmatism.

One aspect in particular deserving of attention has been mentioned throughout in this paper: the inclusion of people with what would be called ‘surrogated agency’. It

could be helpful to revise the idea of 'realized agency success' or provide an alternative. Perhaps such inclusion would have little impact in the model, but since such cases are precisely the concern of the CA, it is one that is normatively imperative and empirically necessary.

The relevance of these insights for development practice can hardly be overstated. Development is about making a change and the focus on expanding the model in explanatory ways all but confirms the nature of the field. The contributions of the past thirty years have sought to pave the way for the generation of capabilitarian change. Scholars and practitioners would do well to learn from them, and contribute to them, if their intent is to produce human development.

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Notes

- "(...) there is no consensus as to a conceptually clear distinction between human development and the capability approach, nor is it obvious that such a distinction is useful or required" (Alkire, 2010, 22, emphasis in the original).
- Sen (1988, 17) states: "the list of functionings need not include "choosing" as such, but the value of choosing will be reflected in the evaluation by making that evaluation depend both on the chosen n-tuple of functionings, and on the nature and the range of the capability set itself."
- Although equally valuable, the relationship between agency and well-being can be at odds. There may be conflict when the pursuit of the former curtails the latter, or vice versa. There is a trade-off in such cases.
- As Sen (1992) points out, well-being capability can be assessed as desirable for instrumental as well as intrinsic reasons. Instrumentally, as argued in this section, it reflects the real opportunities people have to achieve well-being. In this sense, it shows the hand that people have been dealt. Intrinsically, it is worth highlighting the value that freedom has in and of itself. "A good society is also a society of freedom" (Sen, 1992, 41).
- In their work, Wolff and de-Shalit (2013) identify also disadvantages that cluster and accumulate over time. These are referred to as *clustering* or *dynamic clustering*. They, however, suggest only correlation, not causation and, as such, do not warrant incorporation in the discussion of a conceptual model.
- Hvinden and Halvorsen's (2017) argument goes a step farther and, based on other streams of the literature, suggest a "model of the dynamic relationships between multi-layered structural conditions", that includes a feedback process. This is because the purpose of the authors is to put the CA to good use in sociology. The latter seems still incipient and therefore not included in this paper.
- "At least four categories have emerged from the CA's agency, namely, as global or multidimensional, as direct control or effective power, as privileging well-being (self- regarding commitments) or other-regarding commitments, and as autonomy or ability" (Alkire in Garcés-Velástegui, 2020b, 10).