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# Education, capabilities and social justice

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### Education, capabilities and social justice

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The capability approach, as developed in the work of Amartya Sen, provides a very useful way, given the complexity of diverse societies in the world, to think about social justice and a particular component of social justice, gender equality in education. Sen has developed the capability approach as a critical engagement with two groups of writers (Sen, 1999). Firstly, he takes issue with the approaches to evaluating social policy that focus on the aggregated benefits an initiative has for the whole society or for future generations, without regard to how it affects individuals. According to these views, for example, investing in education for women and girls is justified by its benefits not for them, but for the societies they live in. These approaches to evaluation do not look at whether any adult or child has been discriminated against in the provision of education, because the education is not *for* those individuals but for a larger grouping – the community, then nation, future generations. These views might be weakly interested in gender equality in education, but only in so far it is needed to ensure a range of social benefits.

In Sen's engagement with the work of Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2000) he criticises an approach to social justice that seek to pre-specify a list of goods that all societies should aim for assuming a universal notion of human nature (Sen, 1993, 47). While Sen says he has no objection to work that takes this direction, he proposes a more flexible approach that leaves open to each society, through a process of public deliberation to decide on a range of social goods including the amount and form of schooling. Sen is committed to human rights and engages sympathetically with the work of moral and political philosophers and economists working in this area who assert the importance of a universal criterion of human wellbeing, but Sen argues cogently that a list cannot be pre-specified without some form of public consultation, and the form and content of the specification will be different in different contexts.

Sen's alternative, the capability approach, is concerned with evaluating social policy, including education, without ignoring individual aspirations or dictating social benchmarks. He argues that we must evaluate policy in the space of capabilities, which he defines as valued 'beings and doings'. The foundational idea is that what matters to people is that they are able to achieve actual functionings, that is 'the actual living that people manage to achieve' (Sen, 1992, 52). Walking is a functioning, so are eating, reading, writing and talking. The concept of functionings reflects the various things a person may value doing or being varying from the basic (being adequately nourished) to the very complex (being able to take part in the life of the community). Sen argues that when we make interpersonal comparisons of wellbeing we should find a measure which incorporates references to functionings, that is what has been achieved, but also reflects the intuition that what matters is not merely achieving the functioning but being free to achieve it. So we should look at 'the freedom to achieve actual livings that one can have a reason to value' (Sen, 1999, 18) or, to put it another way, 'substantive freedoms' or 'the capabilities' to choose a life one has reason to value

(Sen, 1992, 40). A person's capability refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve.

Sen's work on capabilities has developed out of a critical engagement with welfare economics. Sen conceptualised capabilities partly in response to a general pessimism that welfare economics could not deliver useful forms of interpersonal comparison (Sen, 2002, 70-71 78-79). The implication of what were seen as the weak informational base of welfare economics entailed that it was impossible to develop policy on schooling for example, as one could not know how schooling was valued by all individuals in a particular society, how schooling was ranked relative to other important goods, for example that girls remain at home and help with housework rather than go to school, or whether aspirations for or against schooling were the 'real' views of an individual, or the views they had to adopt because of powerful customs that dictated appropriate behaviour. Sen's capability approach sought to answer the question regarding what kind of comparisons could be made regarding quality of life between people and what kind of information could provide for those comparisons.

The kind of answer he provides is best illustrated through his contribution to debates on social justice. A broad range of writers concerned with social justice have argued over whether equality or social justice or the fulfilment of human rights between people should be assessed in terms of resources or welfare (Clayton and William, 2002, 8-13). Arguments which make the claim that what is to be compared is access to resources point out that the extent to which individuals have equal command over resources, for example actual places in school and the actual rights and capacity to take up those places, is the most appropriate measurement. Those who use an argument based on welfare suggest it is not resources that should be compared, because the ways people use those resources differ, but the way a person gives weight to a conception of fulfilling preferences and opportunities available for using resources, to that end (Arneson, 2002, 183). For example opportunities for passing six years of school at a certain level could be compared. However how, an individual regards passing six years at school, and whether it is valued or not is not evident from such comparisons. Sen shifts the argument by saying we need to look further than resources or opportunities, we need to make interpersonal comparisons in the 'space of capabilities' that is we need to look at the freedom people have to formulate capabilities 'valued doings and beings' and thus convert resources into functionings they value. Thus agency and freedom to make up one's mind about schooling as a valued end and convert one's aspirations regarding schooling into valued achievements lie at the heart of Sen's capability approach and distinguish it from other positions. While Sen argues that such decisions must be taken by each individual, how a society comes to decide on what are the valued capabilities and what resources should sustain this is a matter for each society and there may be considerable variation between societies and between different levels of governance in any particular society. An issue the capability approach has to confront is what happens when individuals in articulating 'valued beings and doings' merely reflect what is expected of them, for example women do not claim adequate education for themselves or their daughters because they believe that it is appropriate for women not to be educated or only educated to a very low level. The capability approach presents a partial answer to this by suggesting that more valued states are those that expand capabilities and that a very strenuous process of public debate and discussion

should be conducted with wide participation so that the nature of what expanded capabilities are is openly determined this might entail an examination of the ways in which gendered institutions prevent women converting capabilities into functionings. Thus the capability approach highlights the importance of public scrutiny and discussion using a wide range of information as a counterbalance to the difficulty that limits on aspiration might be developed and sustained in private settings.

But what if women have access to the same capabilities, but are less ambitious or do not value education as much as men do, and therefore end up spending less time in education? The capability approach would investigate a number of aspects of this situation. First, the capability approach would argue that women and men really should have the same effective freedom to education - that is, not only formally and legally, but also in terms of being liberated from other constraints such as being forced to do excessive amounts of domestic labour or to care for smaller siblings. Assume now that boys and girls or women and men do have the same effective freedom or capability to education, but that girls are told by their parents or wider community, that there is no need for them to go to school, either because they will be married at a young age or because education for girls and women is not valued or seen as a drain on a household's resources. In that case, social customs and the prevailing ethos shrink girls' capability to education, hence the real or effective freedom is reduced to a pro-forma opportunity. But what if the girls themselves are not interested to educate themselves, that is, they don't value education? The capability approach would argue in those cases that social norms and cultural values that influence these girls' preferences, ambitions and aspirations, and thus the choices that they make from their capability sets themselves have to be judged on whether they are just or not. In theoretical terms, it is not difficult to argue that women and girls should get the same chances to pursue education, and they should not be brought up to believe or they should not be told that education is nothing for them. In practical settings, the capability approach would recommend that these norms and cultural values are debated and critically scrutinised. This is why Sen does not advocate capabilities that we value as such, but capabilities that we have reason to value, that is, that we value after self-reflection and open debate. Thus, the capability approach is more than simply a proposal to focus on people's capabilities, but also entails a critical engagement with all social, cultural and other factors that shape people's preferences, expectations and perceptions, and that thus influence which choices are made from the freedoms that we have.

However a number of commentators have expanded Sen's discussion elaborating the ways in which such self reflection and public debate might take place (Alkire, 2002, 43; Robeyns, 2002, 11) Different approaches are offered by Alkire and Robeyns. Robeyns suggests a number of criteria that can shape public debate on how relevant capabilities can be selected in any particular setting. These entail public discussion both about capabilities and about how capabilities are to be discussed, sensitivity to the context in which the capability approach is to be applied, for example local settings with complex gender histories regarding gender equality in education, an approach to thinking about the list both in the ideal, that is the longed for far-away future, and in the soon to be implemented future, and that the list of capabilities should include all that are relevant. Thus it would be insufficient to include only limited education when capabilities regarding health, safety, good social relations and respect might be very necessary to sustain participation in education. (Robeyns, 2003, 15-18) Her expansion of Sen thus entails some principles for regulating debate with regard to the selection of capabilities thus ensuring aspects of low evaluation of needs are appropriately counterbalanced.

Alkire chooses to supplement Sen's notion of capabilities with ideas about practical reason, that is a form of deep moral reflection on the reasons for action and the

dimensions of value for a group (Alkire, 2002, 43-59). In Alkire's view utilising practical reason will allow for an articulation of capabilities and public consultation would allow assessments of how expansions of capabilities are to be articulated and expanded. Alkire's answer to the question of who defines needs differs from Robeyns in its conviction regarding the importance of practical reason to any discussion of expanding capabilities. Implicit in her view is an idea that self harm would not be a reason for action and that the use of practical reason would be a defence against women choosing badly for themselves or their daughters. The possibility that they might however, is counterbalanced with ideas about wide public scrutiny, similar in intent if not in form to those suggested by Robeyns.

The capability approach, thus as developed by Sen and others, would seek to consider gender equality in education in terms of an expansion of capabilities, an expansion of the ways in which capabilities are discussed, and the fora in which those discussions take place. It is thus an extremely demanding approach, but one which talks to Sen's concern with human rights entailing not only the fulfilment of needs, like education but also attention to the ways in which needs are formulated and the respect we owe and give each other in that process (Sen, 1994, 38) , a respect which entails consideration of gender equity.

Sen therefore argues that in developing and assessing social policy we must look at individual formulations of well-being and the social arrangements for this, while allowing for a range of other complex differences between individuals. He also highlights the need for using a range of different forms of information gathering to ascertain views regarding capabilities (Sen, 2002, 84-6). Thus thinking about gender equality in education in relation to the capability approach suggests we are concerned not just with some predetermined form of education (a resource based view) and standardised measurement of gender equality, possibly linked to access or achievement, but rather with the nature of education valued by individual women and men and the conditions that allow them to express these views and realise these valued 'beings and doings'.

Governments using the capability approach therefore have an obligation to establish and sustain the conditions for each and every individual, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, race or regional location, to achieve valued outcomes. These may entail acquiring a certain level of educational attainment, but they undoubtedly entail ensuring the freedoms that allow valued outcomes to be articulated and achieved. Thus, for example, failing to ensure conditions where sexual violence in and on the way to school can be identified and eradicated, would be a failure to ensure freedom for valued outcomes. Similarly, failure to ensure opportunities for a particular group to participate in decision-making about valued outcomes would also be a limitation on freedoms or capabilities. Although Sen's capability approach highlights the importance of diverse social settings where capabilities will be articulated, it emphasises the importance of free forms of discussion and association in articulating capabilities. Sen writes about development as freedom because the freedom to think, talk and act concerning what one values is a meaning of development closer to a concern with human flourishing than narrower notions of a certain level of GDP per capita or a pre-specified level of resource provision.

Sometimes it is important to assess functionings rather than capabilities, for example in a famine or in a situation where schooling has been withdrawn from certain groups,

as happened in Afghanistan under the Taliban or in South Africa under apartheid. But assessing functionings, rather than capabilities, can be very misleading, especially when making comparisons between people in different social circumstances. A malnourished woman in Malawi has a different capability set than a self-starved British model. A woman failed for not completing her Year 1 Literacy exams because teachers have not been paid and are not at work has a different capability set from a woman who fails because she decides to take a holiday in the week of the exams. Focusing only on the functionings – how much is eaten or whether or not the exams were passed - leads to inadequate attention to features of social justice relating to individual agency and freedom and the crucial differences in the examples given.

### **Education and capabilities: thinking about adults**

Sen’s writing on education is dispersed in a number of works, not all of which deal with the full implications of the capability approach for thinking about education. The capability approach actually entails two different senses of education that are sometimes confused. Firstly education can be seen as a form of functioning or well being achievement, for example completing four years of basic education. This is sometimes referred to as thinking about education as schooling. However education can also be thought of as part of the process of exercising agency, that is using reflection, information, understanding and the recognition of one’s right to exercise these capacities in order to formulate the ‘valued beings and doings’ entailed in the concept of capabilities. Lastly a level of education of organisations is also implied by the idea of capabilities pointing to the need to secure the conditions for achieving certain functionings and the exercise of agency (Unterhalter, 2003, 16-18). Sen distinguishes well being achievement; well being freedom; agency achievement; and agency freedom (Alkire, 2002, 6-8). If we map these onto adult education and the problem of gender inequality, thinking about capabilities entails distinguishing between the following:

<b>Aspects of capabilities</b>	<b>Aspect of education</b>
Well being achievement	Passing year 1 in an adult literacy class; this may secure the chance of better health, inclusion in local decision making bodies, esteem of one’s peers etc.
Wellbeing freedom	The conditions to pass year 1, for example lack of discrimination or harassment in the classroom from the teacher or other learners, freedom to walk safely to and from class, freedom from discrimination or violence because one has attended class (and may not have time to complete all tasks normally assigned in a family or work setting), being able to concentrate in class (not too hungry, too tired, too anxious), being able to access the content of the lesson through appropriate pedagogies and

	learning materials that i.a. take account of gendered styles of learning, being able to study in a well managed programme with sufficient resources (skill of teacher, time for classes, money for teacher, materials, buildings as appropriate)
Agency achievement	Exercising individual agency, that is choosing to go to adult education classes as part of an informed consideration regarding passing year 1 as an outcome to be valued.
Agency freedom	Having the conditions to exercise agency, that is access to information, the chance for discussion and evaluation, the freedom to make up one's mind without violence or shame.

Many evaluations of education programmes in general and of gender equality in education in particular look only at a very narrow meaning of wellbeing achievement, for example passing a test at a certain level. The concerns of the capability approach entail thinking about how conditions in education relate to wider social processes and the issue of the exercise of agency.

### **Education and capabilities: thinking about children**

The capability approach is concerned with agency and freedoms and this poses a difficult question with regard to the education of children. How can one think of the education of children in these terms, given their youth and childishness? . Is it inappropriate to use the capability approach to think about children's education?

Writing about children's rights draws attention to the need to distinguish between welfare rights and agency rights. (Brighouse, 2002, 32) While for adults a key component of our thinking about the substantive content of rights is concerned with the exercise of agency in relation to those rights (making rights have many features in common with capabilities), for children, who cannot yet exercise agency, we owe them concern with their welfare, and generally this accords with views about our valued 'beings and doings'. Part of the provision for the welfare rights of children concerns protecting their interests and working out how to adjudicate between the welfare rights of children and the agency rights of adults. For example a girl has a right to education, because it protects her interests in living a healthier life, in understanding something of the society and the world in which she lives, and in developing her capacity to communicate and defend her interests, and in developing her sense of agency as she grows older. Are these to be weighted more heavily than the interests of the adults in the community in which she is growing up? Their interests might concern valuing beliefs and practices that prohibit or limit the education of girls. While we need a full theory of justice to decide such issues, what the capability approach alerts us to is the importance of developing the conditions for wellbeing freedom and agency freedom for children and adults, such that girls and boys can experience education (a form of welfare) in ways that will enhance their wellbeing and agency (capabilities) as adults. In an interview Sen has argued for

compulsory schooling in similar term highlighting that ‘it will give [the] children, when grown up, much more freedom, and therefore the education argument is a future oriented argument’ .(Saito, 2003, 27) Thus the capability approach, points us towards evaluating not simple outputs, like test scores, but complex arrangements relating to what is valued in relation to interests protected and the nature of freedom for children in particular settings. This seems to indicate the importance of attending to aspect of developing freedoms in relation to curriculum content and pedagogies and the resources that support these, not just to questions of access.

### **Gender inequality, education and capability deprivation**

A number of commentators concerned with gender equality point out that Sen’s capability approach does not provide a set of prescriptions; it only sets out a general framework, not a substantive theory ( Nussbaum, 2000, 70; Alkire, 2002, 28-30; Robeyns, 2003, 12-15) These writers have all in different ways tried to point out how the capabilities approach might be operationalised either by using it normatively to specify central capabilities which inform Constitution-making, evaluatively in relation to work with small and medium sized projects, or accountably by defining principles through which relevant capabilities can be selected for evaluation. All these commentators share Sen’s key concerns with individuals, agency and freedom. They also all acknowledge the complexity of gender inequality and the ways that this is both located in the forms of social arrangements, like the hierarchies relating to decision-making in education, and in the ways in which groups, like women and girls in many contexts, who have experienced many centuries of discrimination and subordination, have a very diminished sense of agency.

The capability approach in education requires us to think about the gendered constraints on functionings and freedoms in educational organisations, like schools or adult literacy classes. It also draws attention to how sometimes, despite relatively high levels of education for girls and women, the legal system, the forms of political participation and economic ownership, or employment and leisure practices limit agency and ‘substantive’ freedom of girls and women, thus entailing capability deprivation. In some societies a good proportion of women do complete twelve years of schooling, but then encounter prohibitions on inheritance and property ownership, discrimination in relation to employment and assumptions about the food they will eat and how leisure time will be used. These arrangements are sometimes normalised, confirmed, or barely challenged by the form and content of what is learned at school.

The capability approach in education alerts us to the importance of an expanded notion of freedom and agency and the extent to which these are inappropriately limited by forms of social arrangement. Indicators like ‘years of full-time schooling’ are related to, but by no means capture, these values. Gender inequality in social arrangements might constrain women from participating in family decision-making, might prevent them contributing to community, work-place or national discussions of important issues, one consequence of which might be that their interests are neglected when decisions on a course of action are taken.

### **Education as an intrinsic good for women and men**

It is widely held in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in documentation associated with the EFA movement, with the Millennium Development Targets and in the Constitutions of many countries that education is an intrinsic good for women and men. But sometimes these statements appear merely rhetorical. Education is good partly because it helps secure other 'goods', for example securing a job, contributing to increased income, protecting one's own health or the health of a child, participating in decision-making fora. But education is also a 'good' for women and men, because education is good in itself. All other things being equal an educated person, who can access a range of different ways of thinking about issues and participate fully in the life of a society has a more fulfilling life, than an uneducated person, who is barred from this, even though the educated person may not benefit financially. This analysis does not rest on any particular assumptions about what the content or form of education is, as in many different societies there are different ways of thinking about the nature of education.

The capabilities approach helps us understand the nature of the intrinsic good of education, because it helps us distinguish those aspects of education that are linked to schooling and intertwined with achieved functionings, for example skills to undertake a certain kind of work or command a certain income or stand for local government, and those aspects of education that are part of a wider concern with substantive freedoms, possibly valuing considering a range of different viewpoints from newspapers, books, television and radio, valuing being able to participate in discussions of what should be taught and learned, valuing being regarded as an educated person. The capability approach gives much greater value to the second meaning of education than earlier approaches that tended to measure the value of education, only for example in how it contributed to increased GDP per capita.

However, the capability approach, by valuing for each individual substantive freedoms, agency, a sense of identity and empowerment also alerts us to ways in which background conditions can limit these. For example inefficient distribution of resources for schooling – not only lack of money, buildings or equipment, but also lack of understanding regarding how to teach in gender equitable ways that are sensitive to class or race or regional differences – might result in adequate achievement of functionings, but a failure of capabilities. This might happen because certain children have not been able to develop a sense of education as an intrinsic good, linked to notions of capabilities. Similarly placing an extra burden of domestic work on girls in families, restricting the amount of food they can eat, prohibiting women from participating in decision-making or discrimination against women at work all constrain a sense of identity, agency and freedom, and thus limit the intrinsic good of education for women and men. While the capabilities approach is sensitive to these background conditions, understanding and acting on this in policy and practice, requires considerable historical and sociological knowledge of the gender regimes of particular contexts to complement the kind of insights the capability approach yields.

A number of writers, including Sen, have considered how to operationalise the capabilities approach so that it can be used for inter-personal comparisons in a range of different setting. The Human Development Index used by the UNDP links aspects of education with other indicators of well being linked to health and wealth in order to provide inter-country comparisons. Sabina Alkire has used the capability approach in evaluating small scale village projects in Pakistan, working with community groups

using participatory methodologies to assess three different income generating projects including a literacy scheme. She shows that while conventional cost benefit analysis highlight certain gains made through the projects, an analysis using the capability approach poses questions and generates a wider range of insights about what participants value. These entail thinking about long-term valued goals (capabilities), the short-term functionings needed to achieve those goals, the freedom from outside interference that is necessary to achieve capabilities, and the ways that expanded capabilities in relation to a particular project can be mapped onto expanded wider capabilities (Alkire, 2002, 281).

If we apply this approach to operationalising the capabilities approach in relation to education in, say multiethnic societies, marked by considerable levels of gender and ethnic inequality we might look at education policy and practice at a national, regional or local level and ask firstly whether through a process of consultation open to all (irrespective of ethnicity or gender), and well facilitated to bring out the views of individuals who are often silenced and who do not have skills in articulating their views, long-term valued goals concerning education for girls and boys, women and men have been articulated. Secondly we would need to consider whether particular steps (including appropriate resources) to achieve those goals have been put in place and whether these steps are adequate for all, given the long history of this hypothetical society of discrimination in terms of ethnicity and gender. It might be that achieving certain functionings requires more resources for girls and women than boys and men. A process of public consultation could clarify why this was so and how some aspects of inequality allowed the whole society to achieve goals it viewed as valuable. Thirdly we would need to look at whether strategies are in place that will safeguard participants in the education initiative from, for example intimidation, violence, withdrawal of resources by hostile groups at the local level or from groups at a higher level, say regional or national or international. This might be a very complex process as some violence is family based, and some proceeds through use of long established hierarchies, where forms of obedience or acquiescence are deeply entrenched. Yet again the capability approach alerts us to using public scrutiny and discussion to consider how this aspect of freedom linked to capabilities might be enhanced. Lastly the policy analyst would need to look at ways in which the articulation of goals in this education initiative mesh with processes to articulate wider goals of what is valued for all in the society. Again this might be a very difficult process given the history of this hypothetical society, but once again it is through a process of public debate that decisions on this can be reached.

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