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The circumstances of agency

A relational view of poverty

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The human development paradigm that inspires the growing international consensus on poverty and development conceptually bounds our thinking about the problem of poverty and its solutions in particular and inappropriate ways. We question, among other things, the almost exclusive focus on individualistic wellbeing and ill-being, and the neglect of people's agency, in practice if not in theory. We propose to re-conceptualise freedom and poverty in relational terms. It is argued that by (re-)emphasising the relational character of un-freedom, we also put local political processes around the reproduction and reduction of poverty centre stage. We conclude with a brief overview of implications for policy and research on poverty.

'Ultimately', wrote Sen in the early 1980s,

> the process of economic development has to be concerned with what people can or cannot do, e.g. whether they can enjoy a long life, escape avoidable morbidity, be well nourished, be able to read, write and communicate, take part in literary and scientific pursuits, and so forth. It has to do, in Marx's words, with 'replacing the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances'. (1983, 754)

Since then, Sen's work on human development, and that of others, has contributed to the foundation of an unprecedented international consensus on the meaning of poverty and development. By the end of the twentieth century, this consensus had been operationalised inter alia in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). We now have an internationally agreed yardstick to judge countries' performance in terms of sometimes quite specific indicators and targets, many of them cited by Sen in the extract quoted above. The MDGs have in turn been cast as part of a much broader international agenda built around the general objective of realising conditions that would enable people to live 'in larger freedom' (Annan, 2005; United Nations 2005). To live 'in larger freedom' means, among other things, to be 'free from want', which is then operationalised in terms of the 'wants' specified in the Millennium Declaration.

In this article we would like to point to some specific traits of the paradigm behind this international consensus, and the way in which it conceptually bounds our thinking of the problem of poverty and its possible solutions. We propose to relocate these boundaries by taking another look at freedom, and at Sen's capability approach.

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First, we will examine whether and to what extent the MDGs can be seen as an operationalisation of the capability approach. We argue that, whereas the MDGs can be seen as representing 'real' freedoms as opposed to merely formal freedoms, the current view of development has fixed a list of objectives to be reached at the cost of depoliticising development. More particularly, Sen's emphasis on agency and on the crucial importance of political processes in determining 'what people have reason to value' is pre-empted by fixing an *ex ante* list of objectives and targets. Thus, the MDGs reflect a rather truncated reading of the capability approach.

Second, we take issue with the idea of freedom propounded by the capability approach. Though there is much in Sen's argument about the primacy of politics in defining development, it may be asked to what extent this translates into a sufficiently rich conceptualisation of how political processes evolve in real time and real space. At this point, the analysis could be considerably enriched by an alternative, relational perspective on freedom.

In the concluding part, we explore the implications of this largely theoretical exercise for research and policy.

Wellbeing and agency

The MDGs and the capability approach (CA) concur on defining poverty and wellbeing in broader terms than income alone. While the target to halve the percentage of people living below the dollar-a-day frontier is perhaps the best known aspect of the MDGs, the whole picture reflects a conceptualisation of poverty as a multidimensional and non-monetary reality. The basic argument for going beyond income/consumption is that this is too rough as a measure of what people can effectively do and be. Capabilities can be defined here as 'specific, effectively resourced capacities which [people] can deploy in actual circumstances' (O'Neil, 2001, 189). Sen argues that, for a set of different reasons, people with the same income do *not* necessarily share the same level of wellbeing. Formally, those with similar incomes enjoy the same levels of 'freedoms'; they have the same purchasing power. But this formal freedom is not to be confused with *real* freedom, because different factors intervene in the conversion of income into capabilities (see Table 1).

Sen argues that 'different sources of variation in the relation between income and wellbeing make opulence – in the sense of high real income – a limited guide to welfare and the quality of life' (Sen, 1999, 71). Sen refers here not only to additional 'means' like public or social goods,[1] which are at people's disposal without being reflected in their income. He also refers to the different *needs* people have, as particular persons, as inhabitants of particular regions or as members of particular communities and

1 Or, for that matter, a number of public 'bads', like street violence or environmental pollution, which affect people's capabilities negatively.

Table 1 Sources of parametric variation between earnings and capabilities to function

Type	Description
Personal heterogeneities	People have disparate physical characteristics connected with disability, illness, age or gender, which make their needs diverse.
Environmental diversities	Variations in climate can influence what a person gets out of a given level of income.
Variations in social climate	Variations in the presence of public goods and in social capital.
Differences in relational perspective	Being relatively poor in a rich community can prevent a person from achieving certain elementary 'functionings' (such as taking part in the life of the community).
Distribution within the family	Distributional rules within a family can make a major difference to the attainment and predicaments of individual members.

Source: Sen, 1999, 70–1.

households. What counts is not what you have or what you have access to; it is what you can do and be, given your abilities and needs. The CA can, in this sense, be read as an operationalisation of Marx's utopian 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' (Sen, 1992, 120–1).

Thus, in order to obtain a clearer idea of the quality of life, to get closer to the 'capability set' or the set of functionings people have reason to value, information on income must at least be supplemented by other information, e.g. on these functionings themselves. This is precisely what is represented by the MDGs. To be sure, Sen makes an important distinction between what people are *able* to do and be – their capability set – on the one hand, and the functionings they have effectively *realised*, on the other. Achieved functionings already reflect achieved wellbeing, whereas capabilities reflect wellbeing *freedom* (Sen, 1985, 1992). Though in some cases it may be logical

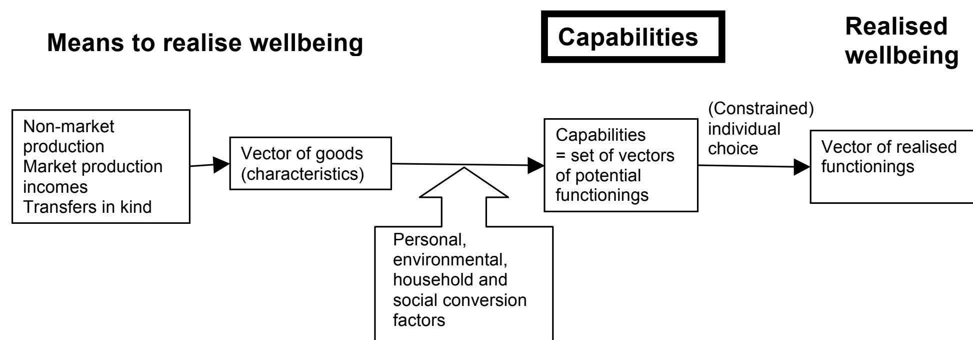

Figure 1 Connecting means, freedoms and achievements
Source: Based on Robeyns, 2003, 12.

to consider achievement as a proxy for freedom (Sen, 1998), theoretically they must be distinguished. Figure 1, which is taken from Robeyns (2003), clarifies the connection between income, the means to achieve, the real freedom to achieve and, finally, achievements themselves. While, arguably, the capability set is not directly observable (Stewart and Ranis, 2006), the framework at least allows us to connect the unobservable to a whole range of possible measures of wellbeing.

At the same time, however, the CA can be used to point to a crucial weakness in the MDG-related discourse on development. The CA redefines the terms of the development debate and points to some crucial instances where important *political* choices must be made. There is no scientific ground, for instance, to give particular weights to certain capabilities, or to exclude other capabilities as being irrelevant. There is no scientific reason to specify the weight of formal and substantial freedoms in our definition of wellbeing; these things cannot be decided at a desk or in a statistical office, or for that matter at DAC-OECD headquarters. And there is no ultimate scientific basis, finally, for comparing the wellbeing of different individuals and the way in which individual freedoms could be aggregated. Even the weight of future generations in any welfare function must, in Sen's mind, be assessed through the political process. Sen's argument is that there is no shortcut to 'open public discussion and critical scrutiny' (Sen, 1999, 81) in making social choice. Whereas mainstream economics teaches us to make those choices in a purportedly positivist and scientific way, Sen has won the Nobel Prize by arguing that, ultimately, social choice is politically based, not scientific. 'Post-Sen', argues Peter Evans, 'it is hard to resurrect either the anonymous aggregation of individual exchanges via the market or top–down technocratic analysis of needs as sufficient summaries of society's economic goals' (2005, 96).

True, it could be argued that the DAC-OECD, the World Bank and the IMF have simply prepared the MDG debate in the UN plenary, where all countries have subscribed to them. Also, it could be argued that, given the state of the world, a UN Assembly is the best proxy for a global process of open public discussion and critical scrutiny. And the UN representatives have a convincing case when they argue that the level of 'ownership' of the Millennium Declaration is higher than the level of ownership of an average poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP), the latter being discussed by much smaller political circles than the former[2] and being extruded out of a process of debt cancellation. But none of these arguments give due account to Sen's emphasis on the importance of democratic political processes in operationalising the objective of development. Sen is so insistent on this because development has not only to do with moving from point A to B; it has also to do with *who* is making this move. Sen's endorsement of Marx's utopian wish to replace 'the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circum-

2 This argument was put forward by UN representative Eveline Herfkens during a debate about the MDGs at Antwerp University, 15 October 2005.

stances' already reflects that concern. Two decades later, it is formulated in terms of agency:

> Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development. The concern here relates to what we may call the 'agency aspect' of the individual… This work is particularly concerned with the agency role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions (varying from taking part in the market to being involved, directly or indirectly, in individual or joint activities in political and other spheres). (Sen, 1999, 19)

Sen's concern with agency is arguably a cornerstone of the way in which he thinks about making social choice (Crocker, 2005), but if so, it is clear also that development cannot be fixed once and for all and at a dubiously global level, allowing donors to align themselves and, ironically, to acquire more agency. In this sense, the MDGs clearly fit within what Norman Long describes as the 'cargo' image of development intervention (2001, 33–4). They represent the common agenda of those agencies specialising in 'bringing' development to the poor.

From this perspective, we read the emerging practices under what is called the New Development Paradigm as an attempt to articulate a set of *more effective and efficient* strategies to bring development to the poor. If the paradigm were to be successful, it could perhaps bring a specific type of wellbeing, but at the same time the agency role of the presumed poor *themselves* would have been denied and undermined rather than stimulated. The complete absence of any reference to indicators of political rights and democratic decision making in the MDG list is a case in point. Thereby, the MDGs risk becoming the new bible for development technocrats and practitioners. As the list of targets is clearly defined, beyond any doubt and endorsed by all, there seems to be no need to revive local public debates about priorities between capabilities, freedoms or individuals. At least, this is the way in which the MDGs have been incorporated into development practice: as a list of indisputable, universal targets against which all development projects and programmes are to be assessed.[3] The same goes for the PRSP process. The fundamental underlying calendar for the establishment of a PRSP is determined by international financial commitments, but nothing implies that the calendar set by processes of democratisation coincides with it. A clear example of this is the case of the Congo, where the PRSP has been prepared during the end-phase of a long-term political transition; nothing guarantees that the newly elected government will feel bound by the commitments made by an interim government whose character was, by definition, undemocratic.

3 See our own evaluation of the Belgian Social Fund for an account of Belgian technical cooperation (Tshimanga, De Herdt and Kamavu, 2006).

Agency and freedom

Thus, Sen defines development as 'a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. In this approach, expansion of freedom is viewed as both *the primary end* and *the principal means* of development' (1999, 36, italics in original). This rehearses an earlier claim that:

> Freedom is central to the process of development for two distinct reasons: (1) *the evaluative reason*: assessment of progress has to be done primarily in terms of whether freedoms that people have are enhanced; (2) *the effectiveness reason*: achievement of development is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of people. (1999, 4, italics in original)

We agree with this dual conception of freedom as both wellbeing and agency, but we also think that whereas the 'end' aspect of freedom can be usefully understood at the level of the individual, the agency aspect is to be understood primarily at a supra-individual level. Sen (and Marx) tend to conceptualise the 'end' aspect of freedom from an individual perspective; ultimately it is the wellbeing of each human being that counts. Sen also insists on 'the agency role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions' (1999, 19), but if we take seriously the importance of collective action in social change, individual agency can only become part of the 'means' of development when we explicitly take into account the way in which this individual agency is connected with others.

Though Sen does not follow this route, his careful distinction between freedom and achievement on one hand, and between wellbeing and agency on the other, is not inconsistent with an understanding of the 'end' of development in terms of *wellbeing* freedom (and achievement) as an individual-level characteristic, and *agency* freedom (and achievement) as a supra-individual phenomenon. We will develop this argument in the form of three propositions.

Proposition #1: agency freedom is an attribute of relationships, not of individuals

If we pursue Sen's critique of income as an incomplete and insufficiently specific measure of (or in fact constraint on) freedom, given people's differential needs, we must acknowledge that the *individual* capability set could remain incomplete and deficient when it comes to judging agency freedom. In almost all relevant contexts, the actual circumstances in which people are functioning are primarily determined *by and together with* other human beings. Indeed, human agency depends crucially upon the capacity to enrol other human beings in one's 'projects' (Long, 2001, 17). In the interdependent world, freedom is not 'given', and people must actively engage in social practices to realise it. In the words of the German sociologist Georg Simmel:

> Freedom is not a solipsist being but a sociological doing, not a state in which an individual finds himself in but a relatedness, however freely engaged in from the perspective of the individual … Within our relationships, freedom shows itself as a continuous process of liberation. (Simmel, 1908, 57)

To be sure, Sen himself asserts the importance of social arrangements in enabling people to do and be what they have reason to value. He emphasises the 'quintessentially social' character of people (Sen, 2002, 81). Ultimately, however, he fails to step out of the economist's way of thinking, which neatly conceptualises individuals as separate from the environment that impacts upon them (Townsend, 1985, 668; Zimmerman, 2005). Although the capability approach refreshingly complicates the concept of the 'set of constraints' in an attempt to allow for a more accurate understanding of the different circumstances each individual is facing, it continues to frame the 'individual' and the 'circumstances' as stabilised and analytically separable entities. However, once we understand and accept the quintessentially *interactive* nature of the relationship between people and the others who are part of their environment, this way of thinking cannot but run into difficulties. Individuals in part change in response to circumstances of their own creation; they adapt to them *while at the same time continuously recreating them*, and it is precisely in the way in which these two-way interactions occur that one can identify freedom.

Even kinship is both a 'circumstance' into which an individual just happens to be born, and a set of obligations with which one must be actively engaged in order to activate it. Sara Berry notes that 'consanguinity and common heritage were points of entry into potentially productive relationships, rather than guarantees of entitlement… People may be born into certain relationships, but unless they nurture and maintain them, they will lose their vitality, becoming "kinship" only in name' (Berry, 2005, 6). At the same time, each particular kinship relationship will be shaped by the reinterpretation and re-enactment of the bonds and interactions between concrete individuals of kin. These ideas are *not* consistent with the assumption that agency freedom – or its converse, poverty – is an individual attribute. The capability approach seriously criticises –or, rather, enriches – income-based approaches to freedom, but basically it concurs with neoclassical approaches in their definition of freedom, as something like (but more complicated than) disposable income that you can assign to an individual. If, in contrast, we focus on the quintessentially interactive nature of people's agency, freedom can only be a characteristic of a *social relationship* rather than something which can be attributed to isolated *individuals*.

In terms of Robeyns's conceptualisation (Figure 2), this means that the connection between the 'means' and the 'ends' must not be seen as solely a one-way connection from left to right: in reality, we have to look at this connection as an ongoing cycle in which 'means' are transformed into 'ends' (i.e., doings and beings), which in turn generate particular 'means', and so on. 'Ends' and 'means' become two insepa-

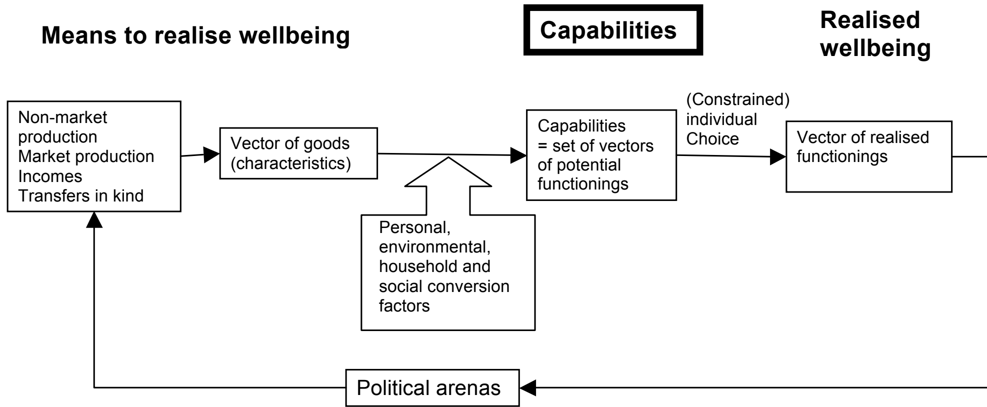

Figure 2 From the means to the achievements and back again

rable parts of an ongoing spiral. By concentrating on the conversion of means into achievements, one does not do justice to the converse impact of doings and beings on means and resources, i.e. that part of the picture that visualises the 'sociological doing' involved in one's liberation.

Proposition #2: agency freedom as voice

This crucial theme of 'sociological doing' can be linked to the literature on institutions. Again, Sen provides for a starting point here. Though Sen never clarifies what he means by 'social arrangements', his use of the concept is consistent with the concept of 'institutional arrangement' coined in the New Institutional Economics literature: it denotes a specific arrangement between individuals from which they may derive particular (unequal) rights and entitlements. In turn, specific arrangements fit within the 'rules of the game' as set by the broader institutional environment. He then conceptualises public political organisations as clearly separated from private social arrangements and as the realm where the private rules of the game are purportedly fixed, enforced and eventually altered. This distinction between private social arrangements on the one hand and political institutions on the other also reappears in the distinction made by Onora O'Neil between primary and secondary agents of justice; the former become the guarantors of the rights of the latter. But as lamented by O'Neil (2001), there is no place in such a model to identify injustices committed by primary agents of justice, whether either wilfully, or because they are incapable of playing their role as primary agents of justice, or both. In such a case, states become part of the problem instead of part of the solution. This is the case for many developing countries.

In contrast to such an old-style dualistic view of public and private institutions, we propose a conceptualisation of social arrangements in terms of three intertwined but analytically distinct layers.

To begin with, social arrangements do not form in a social void; people do not meet in a random fashion. To the extent that different factors (varying from physical distance to the way in which space and time is socially organised) already pattern social interaction in particular ways, social encounters are already to a certain extent 'arranged' even before they materialise. Thus, a particular social arrangement should be analysed *also* as a particular node in a wider network or set of networks. People's entitlements do not only depend on the rules of the games they play; they also depend on the networks they are involved in. It may be interesting, in this regard, to make use of Charles Tilly's distinction between 'exploitation' and 'opportunity hoarding' as two mechanisms generating inequality (Tilly, 1998; 2005). Exploitation refers to a situation in which powerful people are, somehow, able to realise a cooperative arrangement by appropriating for themselves a disproportionate part of the surplus. Opportunity hoarding, on the other hand, has to do with closing off access to a valuable resource to 'others', however defined, in whatever way (Tilly, 2005, 74).

Further, there is some value in the view that politics is not so much located in 'separate' institutions as in a separate layer surrounding any institutional arrangement. That is to say, all social arrangements can be described both as nodes in social networks, as the 'rules of the game', and as 'political arenas' where these rules are permanently questioned, doubted, contested, imposed, deflected and accepted (Bastiaensen et al., 2005). Politics is present anywhere where social actors interact on common issues (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 1998, 240). We borrowed the concept of political arenas from development sociology (Long, 2001; Olivier de Sardan, 2005); the 'continuous process of liberation' as denoted by Simmel finds its reflection precisely in the diverse ways in which the 'rules of the game' are put into practice, contested, renegotiated and altered *in the process.*

Given that human agency at least partially depends upon the capacity to mobilise cooperation and approval by others, it is our contention that freedom has to do with the differential possibility people have in their ability to exert voice in a particular relationship. More precisely, individuals will be dominated by 'chance and circumstance' to the degree that they have a limited 'ability to question, challenge, propose and ultimately usher in new ways of doing things' (Bebbington, 1999; 2034). Voice is of particular importance in ushering in a change in the unequal ways in which individuals connect, resulting in various processes of opportunity hoarding, and a change in the unequal ways in which they divide the surplus among themselves, resulting in processes of exploitation.

It has sometimes been argued that a move away from identifying freedom or poverty in terms of individual attributes would be contrary to ethical individualism:

that is, the postulate that 'individuals, and only individuals, are the units of moral concern' (Robeyns, 2007; 107). The position defended here does, however, not contradict ethical individualism at all. Indeed, the attractiveness of the idea of freedom as non-domination is precisely grounded in the importance of every individual's voice and ability to be a co-creator of the environment that shapes perspectives and opportunities.[4] But 'exerting voice' is evidently a characteristic of a relationship; it cannot be attributed to an individual.

Voice is to be understood here as a necessary complement to *exit* and *loyalty*, two other ways of characterising an interaction between different subjects, as developed by Hirschman (1976). In a symmetrical relationship, A as well as B are as free to conform to (loyalty) or contest (voice) the other's expectations. They can also withdraw from the relationship (exit). Conversely, people in marginalised positions lack 'voice to express their views and get results skewed to their own welfare in the political debates that surround wealth and welfare' (Appadurai, 2004, 63). Appadurai interprets the relations entertained by the 'poor' as oscillating between loyalty and exit:

> poor people have a deeply ambivalent relationship to the dominant norms of the societies in which they live. Even when they are not obviously hostile to these norms, they often show forms of irony, distance and cynicism about these norms. This sense of irony, which allows the poor to maintain some dignity in the worst conditions of oppression and inequality, is one side of their involvement in the dominant cultural norms. The other side is compliance, not mere surface compliance but fairly deep moral attachment to norms and beliefs that directly support their own degradation. Thus, many untouchables in India comply with the degrading exclusionary rules and practices of caste because they subscribe in some way to the larger order of norms and metaphysical propositions which dictate their compliance: these include ideas about fate, rebirth, caste duty and sacred social hierarchies.' (Appadurai, 2004, 65).

To be sure, Sen himself does emphasise the importance of *voice* as an important constituent of wellbeing, but there he does at least implicitly connect voice to the presence of a democratic system and public (state) decision-making. Such a view reduces the relevant realm of voice to the state, and the determinants of voice to classic political freedoms and civic liberties. As already noted above, the claim that politics is present anywhere that social actors interact on common issues allows a recognition of the state as an important political site and democracy as a set of important incentives, but also allows us to go beyond such a truncated view of politics. Further, we reiterate that

4 Our position does not contest ethical individualism so much as the separation many ethically individualistic accounts implicitly introduce between ethical and political analysis. If it is true that, in the end, local practices determine the way in which resources are produced, distributed and consumed, and that these practices are in turn evolving in response to local voices, the value of ethical discourses will ultimately be determined by the effect they have on those voices.

in our conception the ability to exert voice is not, as liberal political thought would have it, an individual attribute, but profoundly relational. We concur with Appadurai, who treats:

> voice as a cultural capacity, not just as a generalised and universal democratic virtue, because for voice to take effect it must engage social, political and economic issues in terms of ideologies, doctrines and norms which are widely shared and credible, even by the rich and powerful. Furthermore, voice must be expressed in terms of actions and performances which have local cultural force. There is no shortcut to empowerment. It has to take some local cultural form to have resonance, mobilise adherents, and capture the public space of debate. (Appadurai, 2004, 66–7)

A bit ironically, voice implies a degree of loyalty to 'widely shared and credible ideologies, doctrines and norms'. Logically so; the ability to exert voice is crucially determined by others' listening and taking it seriously. The value of a particular narrative depends on having an interested and ultimately convinced audience. There is a presumption here that 'the stock of ideologies, doctrines and norms' present in society is sufficiently heterogeneous, ambiguous and pluriform to allow for several narratives about the same practices, and consequently there is some leeway in reinterpreting the justification for such particular practices. Every public transcript that legitimises a particular social arrangement as just and reasonable is always accompanied by a set of hidden transcripts that cultivate alternative ideas about justice and order, and legitimise particular ways to contest domination and, eventually, redress experienced injustices (Scott, 1990). In her analysis of property rights in Kumawu, Ghana, Sara Berry, for example, notices how land rights are closely connected to particular narratives; and, consequently, how conflicts over land are crucially determined by the particular version of 'hearsay' which is permitted by the court. Berry concludes that:

> Where property rights are defined through ongoing processes of negotiation, people are more likely to gain reasonably secure access to land by participating in the negotiations, and the accompanying proliferation of historical precedents, than by settling on a single story which secures some people's rights at the expense of others… Policy makers might be better employed in discussing ways to enhance the efficiency and accessibility of facilities to mediate contested claims, than pursuing the chimera of definitive rules and maps. (Berry, 1997, 1237)

If we define development as agency freedom, agency freedom as voice, and voice as a relational aspect, development has to do less with defining the 'right' institutions for growth or, for that matter, pro-poor growth, than with giving the floor to alternative conceptions of 'right' and 'wrong',[5] and to procedural rules at all levels that allow

5 Notice that the idea that conceptions of 'right' and 'wrong' ultimately determine the way in which social arrangements allocate rights and duties to different actors, suggests that there is 'something more' than mere self-interest

such alternative views to surge and to be put into relation through socio-constructive political processes.

Proposition #3: differential agency and voice

As noted above, the capability approach forcefully argues that people with different objective needs and situated in different social contexts face different 'conversion factors', as Sen calls them, to convert income into wellbeing. It could be interesting to explore how these 'sources of parametric variability' impact on people's differential agency. Table 2 gives examples of people's differential ability to participate in the labour market.

Table 2 Sources of parametric variance when turning doings into earnings

Type	Description
Personal heterogeneities	The disabled have comparatively greater difficulty with earning an income.
Environmental diversities	Cultivating cash crops may be much less rewarding in more remote areas.
Variations in social climate	Regions can differ markedly in the availability of income-earning opportunities.
Differences in relational perspectives	The ability to appear in public without shame can critically determine people's differential access to the labour market.
Distribution within the family	Certain household members engage in income-earning activities while others do not, other things remaining equal.

All of these sources of parametric variance in converting income into capabilities also arguably play a role in converting doings into earnings. It is also logical to suppose that participation in the labour market is comparable to participation in or access to other kinds of private or public resources.

Because the same sources of parametric variance may play a role in both the conversion of income into capabilities and the conversion of doings into earnings, they provide for a framework to identify *inequality traps*. For example, in the case of old age there is a 'coupling' of weak income-*earning* ability and weak income-*using* ability, causing the disadvantaged position of this group to be reinforced (Sen, 1999, 119). We also acknowledge Martin Ravallion's definition of pro-poor growth, in this context, as growth realised by policies that try to eliminate the causes behind inequality traps (Ravallion, 2003; World Bank, 2005). In particular, Jalan and Ravallion's work on spatial inequality traps in China (1997) – which suggests that remoteness impacts in several mutually-reinforcing ways on wellbeing – can readily be cited as a source

when it comes to explaining human behaviour. The ultimate characteristic of voice is that it activates this 'something more', and that it does so to the extent it can make the terms of the arrangement public (Hirschman, 1976, 387; Douglas, 1987, 50; Tilly, 1998).

of parametric variance, together with other work on remote areas (Duncan and Lamborghini, 1994; Bird et al., 2002). But the above framework also allows integration of an impressive amount of work on the connection between agency and perhaps more common parameters like disability, old age, social capital and intra-household inequalities.

Yet, we also think that the scope of this framework can be considerably enriched by taking a closer view of the conversion factor Sen denoted as 'differences in relational perspectives'. In describing this factor, Sen systematically refers to the intrinsic as well as the instrumental importance of what Adam Smith called 'ability to appear in public without shame'. Though we agree about the importance of this dimension of wellbeing and about the fact that the absolute level of income is by itself an insufficient measure of wellbeing for this very reason, we also think that Sen's account of 'differences in relational perspective' deserves to be extended. Especially, we think that the all-or-nothing character of this parameter needs to be rethought.

To begin with, it is of course important to identify that specific group of people who are *absolutely* unable to appear in public, but there are reasons to make room for a more differentiated picture.[6] As mentioned by Adam Smith:

> Custom … has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them. In Scotland, custom has rendered [leather shoes] a necessary of life to the lowest order of men; but not to the same order of women, who may, without any discredit, walk about barefooted. (Smith, 1791, 471)

Thus, depending on their gender category, men and women faced different 'conversion factors' to translate their income into particular capabilities in eighteenth-century Scotland. Ironically, in Smith's example women seem to be *advantaged* vis-à-vis men in the sense that the same level of income would in fact allow them to attain a higher level of wellbeing, if we apply Sen's argument. But in fact, it is more reasonable to assume that lower expectations of 'custom' vis-à-vis women's footwear suggest that women are expected to lower their expectations in terms of what 'custom' finds reasonable to offer to them. Conversely, on the basis of Smith's description of it, we might conclude that there was in general more gender equity in England than in Scotland at the end of the eighteenth century. Note anyhow that there is no social exclusion of women in an *absolute* sense; women are fully allowed to appear in public without any shame, and it will even cost them less. But they can do this, however, only at the social price of visibly marking their inferiority to men. As Appadurai would have it, women and men face different *terms of recognition*, a different 'framework within which they negotiate

6 What follows has been developed in much more detail elsewhere (see De Herdt, 2008).

their interactions with other social groups' (World Bank, 2005, 21).[7] Facing different terms of recognition, we can expect them to be relatively more exploited as well as to suffer relatively more from opportunity hoarding. According to Charles Tilly, this is precisely why gender distinctions are sometimes overlapping with processes generating inequality: they give this inequality a durable character. Both anthropologist Mary Douglas (1987) and sociologist Charles Tilly (1998; 2005) argue that hierarchically related categories are made more resistant to change precisely *because* they are applied in a variety of social contexts. Thus, gender distinctions can rather easily be emulated to structure unequal arrangements because they are already applied in a very large and diverse set of contexts. Douglas adds that the strongest structuring devices are those which establish an analogy with the non-human world:

> There needs to be an analogy by which the formal structure of a crucial set of social relations is found in the physical world, or in the supernatural world, or in eternity, anywhere, so long as it is not seen as a socially contrived arrangement. When the analogy is applied back and forth from one set of social relations to another and from these back to nature, its recurring formal structure becomes easily recognised and endowed with self-validating truth. (1987, 49)

Note that the criterion of 'gender' is used here not to refer to differences in physical characteristics between women and men; in as far as these physical characteristics play a role in converting resources into capabilities and back again, they are captured under the heading of 'personal heterogeneities'. Most differences, inequalities indeed, in the ability of women and men to convert resources into capabilities have nothing to do with physical characteristics; gender is predominantly a social marker. The fact that there is an analogy with physical differences strengthens the social importance of the marker, but does not causally explain it. Distinctions on the basis of gender do not differ here from other distinctions under the heading of personal heterogeneities such as age, disability or illness; each of these social categories have clear physical markers that also point to objectified differences in need. But there are others physical markers as well, like race, place of birth, native ethnicity and citizenship, family background, or ability to speak Oxford English. Depending on the social context, these markers categorise people; they connect role expectations to each category and cause people to appear in public in ways specific to the category to which they are supposed to belong.[8]

7 As Smith already remarked, probably supposing his readers to be male, 'To talk to a woman as we would to a man is improper: it is expected that their company should inspire us with more gaiety, more pleasantry, and more attention; and an entire insensibility to the fair sex, renders a man contemptible in some measure even to the men' (Smith, 1759, I.II.4).

8 Interestingly, Sen does mention the phenomenon, e.g. where he discusses differences in life expectancy between black and white Americans (Sen, 1999, 22–3). He notes that the life expectancy of female black Americans is

Further, it may be valuable not only to conceive 'differences in relational perspectives' in a much more differentiated way, but to stress that there may be a lot of variability in the ways in which different social sites 'activate' certain identities and make abstractions of others. Some markers, like gender, may be strong, but none of them is absolute.[9] It is a useful hypothesis that there is much local variability in the way in which the precise marker(s) are used in a particular organisation or social site, or at a particular point in time. This depends in part on the ease with which such markers can be borrowed, to the extent that those local power holders can tap into broader epistemic communities. But in the end, the value of a marker is determined at the local level, and much depends on the degree to which it is convincing as a local narrative of inequality. It also depends on the extent to which these markers generate a useful discourse that allows the subalterns to organise themselves as a counterforce and put pressure on existing arrangements. At this point it is useful to recall Norman Long's insistence that actors are 'hardly ever completely enrolled in the 'project' of some other person, or persons' (Long, 2001, 17). There is always some room for manoeuvre, and if we take agency and freedom seriously, it is this room for manoeuvre (of the poor) that we have to start to identify and cultivate. In as much as voice has to do with the ability to question prevailing norms and customs and, ultimately, to usher in new ways of doing things, it suggests a different way of thinking about poverty reduction. The use of these social categories as devices to structure access and opportunities must be questioned.

To be sure, we do not want to deny the importance of individual-level beings and doings, nor of individual-level and regional-level conversion determinants of agency, but we think that an analysis of agency freedom must ultimately study the importance of these factors in terms of the way in which they shape the political arena around institutional arrangements and the way in which these are connected to wider networks of interaction and epistemic communities.

Implications for research and policy

The general argument to broaden poverty analysis – if not to shift focus – from different aspects of wellbeing freedom towards the relational aspects of agency freedom has

comparable to the life expectancy of women in Kerala. But this comparison makes clear that the individual-level difference in opportunities is only part of the information contained in these data: Black American women are living in the same society as their white counterparts; the difference in life expectancy is in part the result of different treatment by the same institutions. The comparison between black and white American women is therefore adding more information about another dimension of deprivation than the comparison between American and Indian women.

9 This is also a basic message of Sen (2006). Although identity is discussed, the links between identity politics and unequal access to goods and resources linger in the background.

been made largely at a theoretical level. The MDGs were a welcome excuse to engage in this discussion. By way of conclusion, we discuss some other connections between theory and development policy.

First, the focus on agency freedom in relationships directs attention away from 'the poor' as the major object of development policy. Unfreedom in terms of domination by others is a relationship; it has at least two sides: the dominated and the dominant. It may be, depending on the exact empirical circumstances, more effective to restrain the dominant party in order to protect the vulnerable. And in any case it is less important to compensate the victim than to end the production of poverty. Sen aptly refers to poverty as capability deprivation, and indeed poverty becomes tractable in as far as some identifiable social arrangement actively deprives people of some capabilities. That's precisely where our kind of analysis is leading us: to a study of the institutional arrangements producing both wellbeing and poverty, and to the way in which the position of the marginalised in the political arena around these arrangements can be strengthened. In particular, we referred to exploitation and opportunity hoarding as two major types of processes leading to inequality in doings and beings, and to the role of culturally specific discourses in entrenching these processes.

Second, there is bound to be a more important political constituency for anti-poverty policies if we define poverty as domination by others. Because of its relational character, freedom as non-domination by others is much more intimately connected to discourses of fairness and justice. Depicting poverty as an injustice transforms it from a problem of bad luck or odd circumstance into a social issue: Something can and should be done about it. The challenge here is one of articulating different local sources of resistance and discourses of justice so as to give them more leverage. As we saw above, the degree of publicness of voice determines its power. There is an important role here for academics and intellectuals more broadly, in connecting different discourses and creating alliances among the underprivileged. In Mary Douglas's terms, the challenge is to find the right *analogy*.

Third, even if we define our focus on the relational aspects of agency as broadly consistent with Sen's capability approach, such a consistency exists only if we take a broad enough perspective. Sen himself sees development as 'essentially a "friendly" process' (1999, 35). He sees the expansion of freedom as both the primary end and the principal means. Once we complicate matters by casting agency primarily in terms of its interaction with others, however, this basic friendliness cannot be taken for granted. More particularly, it is very possible, and even probable, that we seriously truncate agency by focusing on wellbeing freedom only, and supposing that agency freedom will ensue. People can also achieve wellbeing by trading their agency away, by loyalty rather than by voice. It may well be the case that I am just among the lucky slaves who work for a benevolent landlord, or that I may have succeeded, through cunning and treachery, in creating the right circumstances to get access to crucial resources,

but the level of wellbeing thus realised cannot really be interpreted as an indication of development as non-domination. Thus, Geoff Wood concludes his description of the coping strategies of Afghan peasants as follows:

> the dangers of not being a client, of not being protected, of losing 'membership' of the local commander-led community are immense. Better to be with the devil you know – the Faustian bargain. Security at the price of graduation – individual or collective. Striking out on your own is just too risky. (2003, 468)

Fourth, and finally, this results in an important admonition to review international aid efforts deployed in the wake of the MDGs. To the extent the indicators incorporated in the list of MDGs are realised by chance and circumstance, people are still dominated and unfree. To be sure, clientelism is perhaps the best way of staying secure in contexts marked by fragmented markets and weak states. However, even if such a system works in terms of individual-level indicators of wellbeing, we undoubtedly stretch the concept of freedom too far if we see such indicators as measures of freedoms.[10] At most, they might be seen as indicators of a temporary settlement, the best that can be achieved in the circumstances, but one that will be overruled once conditions change.[11]

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10 See our own discussion of the evolution of wealth and wellbeing in Kinshasa (De Herdt and Tshimanga, 2005).

11 This is inspired by Avishai Margalit's (2003) defence of Abraham Lincoln, who was accused of having made a Faustian bargain in the Missouri Compromise 1820, which determined the boundary between states that allowed slavery and those where it was prohibited. Margalit argues however that 'his compromise in accepting the Constitution is akin to a prolonged truce with slavery and not to making peace with it', and therefore not really a Faustian bargain. *Mutatis mutandis*, Wood's word choice might be too hard as well.

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