

# 4 *Beyond individual freedom and agency: structures of living together in the capability approach to development*

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## Introduction

It was a typical summer evening in Talamanca, a small village in the Bri-Bri indigenous reserve in the south of Costa Rica, near the Panamanian border. I had the privilege of accompanying a group of lawyers from the Costa Rican Court of Justice who were working on a popular education project about the Costa Rican constitution. On that evening, some indigenous people met with us in the well-lighted education centre of the village in order to tell us some stories of their lives. With the musical background of animal life in the surrounding equatorial forest, an elderly farmer told us how a primary school had been created in the village in the 1950s. He also shared his experience of how, after falling seriously ill in the 1970s, he was taken by helicopter to the nearby city where he received free medical treatment and how, after remaining for many weeks in hospital without any result, he was cured by going to see the traditional healer of his indigenous community. A young indigenous lady reported how she received support from the Costa Rican state university in her efforts to translate the Bri-Bri language into written form, as well as to write the legends and traditions of her people. The young lady's ten-year-old boy proudly taught us how to breed iguanas (after school, the young boy was helping his family in their iguana breeding farm supported by a government programme designed to protect endangered species). As the evening

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unfolded, so did my understanding of Costa Rica's achievements in promoting the capabilities that people have reason to choose and value.

Costa Rica is a well-known case in development circles of how a country with limited economic resources has been able to provide high levels of quality of life for its people, or in other words has been able to expand the capabilities they have reason to choose and value (Garnier *et al.* 1997; Mesa-Lago 2000a, 2000b). Costa Ricans widely enjoy the capability to live long and healthy lives (life expectancy has increased by thirty years in half a century and reached seventy-six years in 2000), the capability to read and write (the proportion of illiterate people has been reduced from 27 per cent in 1940 to 4 per cent in 2000), the capability to be healthy (infant mortality rates have decreased from 137 per thousand in 1940 to 13 per thousand in 1995, health insurance coverage has expanded from 0 per cent in 1940 to 84 per cent in 1990, the coverage of basic services is almost complete in both rural and urban areas), and the capability to live in a clean and rich natural environment (a large surface of the country's superfcies have been declared protected natural areas in order to preserve the rich bio-diversity of its forests).<sup>2</sup>

The thrust of Sen's capability approach to development is that development be judged 'in terms of the expansion of substantive human freedoms' (Drèze and Sen 2002: 3). These substantive human freedoms are 'seen in the form of individual capabilities to do things that a person has reason to value' (Sen 1999a: 56). Hence, the development of Costa Rica is to be assessed in terms of what Costa Ricans are able to do or be, such as being able to read and write, to live in a clean environment, to live long and healthy lives, or to participate in the life of the community. But is it sufficient to assess development achievements in the space of individual freedoms or individual capabilities, as is implied by Sen's capability approach to development?

Although Sen's capability approach has shifted the informational basis of quality of life assessment from income to the capability space, this chapter argues that, by placing individual subjects at the centre stage of his capability approach, Sen maintains a conceptual tension between the individual and his or her society. That tension can survive at the theoretical level but cannot be maintained when the capability approach to development becomes a guiding theory for development

<sup>2</sup> Data in this paragraph are taken from CEPAL 2001, Estado de la Nación 2001 and Garnier *et al.* 1997.

practice. This tension becomes especially unsustainable in three areas. First, there is a strong rationale for extending the evaluative space of development to non-individual or collective capabilities, and not only insofar as they contribute to guaranteeing the capabilities of individual subjects. Second, because individual value judgements critically depend on a collective framework that gives rise to them and sustains them, assessing development in terms of the capabilities that individuals have reason to choose and value requires setting the subject of development beyond individual subjects. Third, if individual agency is to be central in promoting individual capabilities, as it is in Sen's capability approach, then development theory cannot ignore the socio-historical conditions that make individual agency possible. In that respect, the chapter introduces the notion of socio-historical agency as central in the promotion of capabilities.

### Individual freedom in Sen's capability approach

By situating the evaluative space of quality of life in the capability space, that is in what individuals are able to be or do, Sen's capability approach implies that individuals are to be considered as the very subjects of development, both as ends and means of development. Development is to be assessed 'in terms of whether the freedoms that individuals have are enhanced' and development is to be achieved through the 'free agency of individuals' (Sen 1999a: 4). Speaking of the deep afflictions that affect mankind in terms of hunger, malnutrition, preventable diseases, poverty and oppression, Sen underlines the point that 'we have to recognise the role of *individual freedoms* of different kinds in counteracting these afflictions. Indeed, *individual agency* is, ultimately, central to addressing these deprivations' (Sen 1999a: xii).<sup>3</sup>

Even if individual subjects are at the core of development, both as the ends and means of development, the capability approach does not consider them as detached from the social setting in which individuals breathe and live. Sen's capability approach does not separate the 'thoughts, choices and actions' of individual human beings from the society in which they live, since individuals are 'quintessentially social creatures' (Sen 2002: 81). This leads Sen to introduce the notion of 'socially dependent individual capabilities' (Sen 2002: 85), and to assert

<sup>3</sup> Italics added.

that the freedom and agency that each individual enjoys are ‘inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us’ (Sen 1999a: xii). Individual freedoms are inescapably linked to the existence of social arrangements, and ‘our opportunities and prospects depend crucially on what institutions exist and how they function’ (Sen 1999a:142).

Institutions or societal arrangements are of central importance for promoting the freedoms of individuals. For example, the capability of Costa Ricans to be healthy is crucially dependent on the existence of key welfare institutions. The capability of Costa Ricans to live in a clean environment is deeply connected to the collective belief that biodiversity cannot be forsaken for economic interests, and to the existence of a legal and enforcement framework reflecting that collective belief. Equally, the capability of indigenous people to maintain their language and traditions cannot be made possible without an adequate legal framework that fully protects and implements the rights of cultural minorities. This is why, in Sen’s capability approach to development, individual freedom is ‘quintessentially a social product’, because ‘there is a two-way relation between (1) social arrangements [such as economic, social and political opportunities] to expand individual freedoms and (2) the use of individual freedoms . . . to make the social arrangements more appropriate and effective’ (Sen 1999a: 31). Development and the expansion of freedoms cannot occur without the presence of key institutions such as the market, public services, the judiciary, political parties, the media, etc. As Sen puts it, such ‘a freedom-centred view [of development] calls for an institutionally integrated approach’ (Drèze and Sen 2002: 20).

Despite the crucial role of social arrangements in the construction of individual freedoms themselves, Sen is very reluctant to approach development with a supra-individual subject. Even if social arrangements or institutions are seen as very important elements in enhancing or impeding individual freedoms, they are still to be ‘investigated in terms of their contribution to enhancing and guaranteeing the substantive freedoms of individuals’ (Sen 1999a: xiii). Institutions do crucially contribute to our freedoms, but ‘their roles can be sensibly evaluated in the light of their contributions to our freedom’ (Sen 1999a: 142). Sen (2002) underlines that all actions finally bear upon the lives that human beings live, lives which are lived only by individuals and not by some supra-individual subject.

Gore (1997) has developed a forceful critique of Sen's focus on individual capabilities as the informational basis for well-being evaluation and development assessment. He has argued that, like the informational basis of utility and opulence, 'functionings and capabilities [in Sen's capability approach] are seen as objects of value which individuals have [and] which are disembodied from the institutional contexts of human activity' (Gore 1997: 235), and that, hence, Sen's capability approach does not take into account the intrinsic value that these institutional contexts have for individual human well-being. Although the capability approach includes social elements by, for example, including social capabilities (such as the capability to participate in the life of the community or to appear in public without shame), or by insisting on the importance of social arrangements in providing the conditions through which individual capabilities will be exercised, Gore argues that the capability approach remains individualist because the 'goodness or badness of social arrangements or states of affairs is evaluated on the basis of what is good or bad *for* individual well-being and freedom and [because it] is also reduced to the good *of* those individuals' (Gore 1997: 242). In agreement with Sen, Gore affirms that the evaluation of states of affairs is to be assessed on the basis of what is good or bad for individuals, but he objects that the valuable constituents of individual human well-being are to be seen in terms of individual properties only. Individual lives contain collective goods as well, and therefore individual human well-being is also to be assessed on the basis of these collective goods.

Gore bases his argument on Charles Taylor's concept of 'irreducibly social goods' (Taylor 1995). Irreducibly social goods are objects of value which cannot be decomposed into individual occurrences, or expressed in terms of individual characteristics. They cannot be reduced to individual acts or choices, since these individual acts or choices are understandable only against a background of practices, understanding, and meaning. For example, the word 'beautiful' can be understood, and has a meaning, only against a further background of meaning. Women with large hips were once upon a time considered as the standard of beauty, while in other contexts only slim women could qualify as being beautiful. Without the irreducibly social good of a language code and cultural practices, an individual uttering the word 'beautiful' would be incomprehensible. Among these irreducibly social goods, one finds, for example, language codes, institutional norms,

aesthetic values, ethnic belonging, and cultural or political practices inherent in a given society.<sup>4</sup> According to Gore, the capability approach critically fails to recognise the intrinsic value of these irreducibly social goods, and incorporates them only to the extent to which they affect individual properties. Although irreducibly social goods remain components of individual lives, because these goods have an intrinsic value to human well-being, the informational basis of development, Gore argues, needs to go beyond individual capabilities and incorporate these.

Sen has strongly rejected the critique advanced by Gore, and asserts that his capability approach does indeed include the intrinsic importance and value of irreducibly social goods in the evaluation of individual well-being. For example, the capability approach considers democratic freedom, or the ability to take part in and to influence the decisions that affect the life of the community, as a good that cannot be reduced to individual characteristics and that has its locus in the society itself. Sen stresses that democratic freedom is ‘a significant *ingredient* – a critically important *component* – of individual capabilities’ (Sen 2002: 79). Thus, the level of democracy that characterises a society is an irreducibly social good that fully enters as an ingredient in individual human well-being. However, the importance and value of democratic freedom are relevant only to the extent that it enters as a component of individual human well-being, to the extent that it makes the lives of individuals better. There remains a strong rationale for including irreducibly social goods in the informational basis of development for reasons that go beyond their intrinsic value to the lives of individuals.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor (1995) strongly distinguishes the notion of irreducibly social goods from the economic conception of public goods. Like public goods (such as national defence or a dam), irreducibly social goods cannot be secured for one person without being secured for a whole group, but the goods that public goods are producing are the goods of individuals. Taylor gives the examples of a dam and a culture. The dam itself is not good, only its effects are, and its effects are good to individuals. In contrast, an irreducibly social good like a culture cannot be instrumentally valuable to individual goods like a dam would be. Irreducibly social goods cannot be judged through their effects, and are not instrumental to a purpose they serve. A valuable culture, unlike the dam is an irreducible feature of society as a whole, while the dam is only an instrument and not a feature of society at all.

### Structures of living together

It may appear to be a contradiction that a good can at the same time be an irreducibly social good, that is, a good irreducible to any individual component or characteristic, and remain a component of individual lives. Yet this contradiction constitutes the definitional core of irreducibly social goods: they exist beyond individuals but owe their existence to them. Irreducibly social goods could not exist without being endorsed by individuals, since anything that happens does so because individuals make it happen. For example, a language would not exist if individuals had never spoken it, a social norm would not exist if individuals did not endorse that norm in regulating their actions, a particular form of ethnicity would not exist if individuals did not bear the characteristic feature of that ethnicity, etc. But the fact that irreducibly social goods exist only when supported by individuals does not imply that they do not have an existence well beyond individual actions and decisions. For example, although a football team cannot exist without its constitutive elements and cannot win a match without the participation of its players, the football match cannot be reduced to the actions of its players, and the value of the actions of a football team is greater than the value of the actions of its individual members taken separately.

In order to maintain the interconnection between individual actions and irreducibly social goods, the notion of ‘structures of living together’, introduced by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, appears, in my opinion, more appropriate in the context of development to refer to the reality of irreducibly social goods. Structures of living together can be defined as structures which belong to a particular historical community, which provide the conditions for individual lives to flourish, and which are irreducible to interpersonal relations and yet bound up with these.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the notion of irreducibly social goods, the notion of structures of living together directly suggests that irreducibly social goods emerge from the fact that individuals are living together, and that this fact constitutes the very condition under which individual

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur’s original definition refers to the notion of institution: ‘By institution, we understand the structure of *living together* as this belongs to a historical community, a structure irreducible to interpersonal relations and yet bound up with these.’ (Ricoeur 1992: 194).

human lives may flourish. But the basic idea is the same. Although sustained by individual components, these structures of living together have an autonomous existence and cannot be reduced to the features of the individuals living in these structures. Referring again to the example of the term 'beautiful', the word has a meaning only against a structure of living together, namely a language. Although a language and its meaning depend on individuals speaking that language and endorsing its meaning, the language has an existence beyond individuals. No individual word would be understood if that structure of living together did not exist. Even apparently individual properties such as personal autonomy cannot exist without certain structures of living together that support personal autonomy (see Raz 1986: 204–6). As Charles Taylor (1995: 135–6) summarises it: 'In one sense, perhaps, all acts and choices are individual. They are, however, only the acts and choices they are against the background of practices and understandings. But this *langue* cannot be reduced to a set of acts, choices, or indeed other predicates of individuals. Its locus is a society.'

It must be noted that, as structures emerge from human beings living together in a particular community, these structures need not always be oriented towards the good living of society. Structures of living together can have a negative effect upon the good living of its members, such as structures of inequalities and oppression caused by an unequal distribution of power. All these are features of a society upon which an individual has little control but which, nonetheless, constrain or promote his or her actions.

I began this chapter with a brief assessment of Costa Rica's success in the light of Sen's capability approach to development. Examining the reasons for Costa Rica's development success illustrates how ignoring structures of living together in the assessment of development misses out a crucial aspect of development.

The reasons that the human development literature has often advanced to explain a country's success in achieving high levels of capabilities are mainly the scope and nature of the public spending in key areas, such as health and education (see for example Ghai 2000; Stewart *et al.* 2000). Costa Rica has obviously fared very well in having adequate public action oriented towards the expansion of individual capabilities. It has the highest social spending ratio in Latin America, it has social services accessible to the whole population in both rural and urban areas alike, and it has a strong emphasis on primary health

services and primary education (Mesa-Largo 2000b). Yet, this public action has not emerged from a vacuum.

While Sen has often emphasised that the degree of democratic freedom is central in understanding the social development path of countries (see Alkire 2002: 129–143; Sen 1999b), he does not explore the reasons why some democratic countries are more able than others to take the necessary public action to promote individual capabilities.<sup>6</sup> This chapter argues that, beyond democratic freedom, it is the existence of certain structures of living together which explains the successes and failures of countries to promote the capabilities that people have reason to choose and value.

For example, the various individual capabilities of the inhabitants of the Costa Rican village described in the introduction exist only through a multiplicity of certain structures of living together that have been built up throughout Costa Rica's history.<sup>7</sup> The capability of the inhabitants of the village to read and write has its roots in the certain productive and social structure that was characteristic of Costa Rica at the end of the nineteenth century. This led the government, guided by a liberal elite, to take the decision to impose universal primary education for boys and girls, in rural and urban areas alike (Mesa-Largo 2000a). The poor economic conditions of the country, and the egalitarian character of its productive structure, together with a certain motivational structure of the political elite of the time, allowed this irrevocable decision to be taken without much opposition from the economic elite (IADB 1994).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the capability of the inhabitants of the village to enjoy efficient health services is due to the social

<sup>6</sup> For example, after Costa Rica and Uruguay, Colombia is the third Latin American country that has the most long-standing democracy. Yet, the exercise of democratic freedom in Columbia has not led to the same level of social achievements one could find in other Latin American countries, even those that have known long periods of dictatorships such as Argentina (see Whitehead 2002).

<sup>7</sup> A more detailed description of the reasons behind Costa Rica's development can be found in Deneulin 2005.

<sup>8</sup> It is precisely because of this particular structure of the elite, which did not have to assess its power on the military, that Costa Rica was able to take the decision to suppress its army in 1948. The abolition of the army, far from being a deliberate decision to generate more resources towards social areas, has to be seen within the background of the particular structures of living together that characterised Costa Rica. A similar decision in other countries would have been impossible (see, for example, Torres 2001).

and power structure of Costa Rica and the motivational structures that have inhabited certain leaders at key moments.

The Costa Rican social security system and the provision for universal health services that emerged at the beginning of the 1940s were the results of the actions of a particular leader (Calderón) who had the vision to introduce a social security scheme. Calderón was able to carry out his vision through a key alliance with the communists which enabled him to overcome the opposition of a small economic elite (Wilson 1998). These two decisions, for universal primary education and social security, emerged from the particular motivational and power structures of the Costa Rican society, and opened the path for an even more powerful structure of living together in promoting capabilities, that of a society whose identity is built on its welfare institutions. This social democratic identity has led to the progressive development of complex welfare institutions guaranteeing the conditions for Costa Ricans to exercise key valuable capabilities. (For a description of the evolution of welfare institutions in Costa Rica, see Mesa-Largo 2000a, 2000b; Seligson *et al.* 1997.) Such identity acts as a strong collective capability that belongs to the Costa Rican society as a whole beyond individual reach and control, and explains the high levels of human well-being that Costa Ricans enjoy.

In the light of the Costa Rican development path, assessing development on the basis of individual capabilities, or irreducibly social goods that are of intrinsic value to individual lives such as the capability to maintain one's language and culture or the capability to participate in the political life, would miss out an important component of the development process itself. It would miss out certain structures of living together that make the whole process of development and expansion of individual capabilities possible.

Although Gore's critique was directed at underlining the need to include structures of living together as components of individual human well-being, he did not address Sen's view that states of affairs should be evaluated only according to their goodness or badness *for* individuals. This position, known as ethical individualism (Robeyns 2000), holds that, when evaluating states of affairs, the effects of states of affairs on individuals are what matters, and therefore individual subjects are to be the unit of moral concern. It hence suffices to evaluate structures of living together by looking at their effects, positive or negative, upon individual features such as individual freedoms.

Examining the reasons why individual Costa Ricans enjoy high levels of human freedoms inclines us to conclude that the reality of development is not well captured by ethical individualism, insofar as ethical individualism leads to an excessive focus on existing individual lives, and directs attention away from the examination of the structures of living together and the historical explications of these structures, which are not only responsible for the conditions of life of individuals today but have also affected past generations and will affect future ones. Structures of living together are thus not only to be assessed because they are good for individuals, but also according to whether they promote the collective structures which help individuals to flourish. Beyond the individual capabilities of Costa Ricans to read and write, to live long and healthy lives, to live in a non-polluted environment, to enjoy high levels of democratic freedom, there are collective capabilities which belong to the Costa Rican society (and not to individual Costa Ricans), and in part constitute the conditions of existence of individual capabilities. Because structures of living together belong to a social group of which individuals are members, development cannot be assessed only in terms of whether the freedoms of the individual members of that social group have been enhanced, but has also to be assessed in terms of whether the (collective) freedoms of that social group or collectivity to promote individual freedoms have been enhanced.

One could object that assessing collective structures according to whether they generate collective structures which themselves lead to individual flourishing is still instrumental to individual human well-being. It still ultimately judges development by individuals' lives, and hence such a position is still ethically individualistic, since ultimately the evaluation of states of affairs depends on their effects upon the lives of individuals. However, although this position still appears instrumental and judges states of affairs according to their effects upon individuals, because this position acknowledges that structures of living together constitute the condition of existence of individual lives, this position goes beyond ethical individualism. Individuals are not the *only* unit of moral concern. Structures of living together are units of moral concern *too*. Failing to include them explicitly in the evaluation of states of affairs leads to the loss of important information for development.

Sen's thinking seems to have recently evolved in that direction, moving away from an ethically individualistic approach. In response

to critiques accusing his capability approach of focusing ‘on individuals and their relation to an overall social context, and not on collectivities’ (Evans 2002: 56), Sen seems to have incorporated these critiques into his thinking and moved away from the language of individual capabilities. He now asserts that there do indeed exist capabilities that belong to collectivities and that can only with difficulty be reduced to individual capabilities: ‘There are genuine collective capabilities such as the capability of a world nuclear power to kill the entire population of the world though nuclear bombing. Similarly, the capability of Hutu activists to decimate the Tutsis is a *collective capability since the ability to do this is not a part of any individual Hutu’s life (interdependent as it is)*. There could be also more positive collective capabilities such as the capability of humanity as a whole to cut child mortality drastically’ (Sen 2002: 85).<sup>9</sup>

Does Sen’s capability approach now contain an insoluble contradiction? Can it affirm the importance and value of *collective* capabilities, while also affirming the importance and value of ‘socially dependent individual capabilities’ (Sen 2002: 81) which, Sen insists, ‘have to be distinguished from what are genuinely “collective capabilities” (Sen 2002: 85)’? It seems difficult to understand why Sen’s capability approach should rest on the evaluation of states of affairs in terms of whether the freedoms of (socially interdependent) individuals have been enhanced, and not in terms of whether the freedoms of the collective wholes in which individuals live (such as the freedom of the Hutus not to kill Tutsis) have been enhanced.

If the capability approach is to say something about the success of development policies in bringing about certain outcomes, the informational basis for assessing development cannot only remain at the level of its individual outcomes but has also to include the (collective) processes that are responsible for these outcomes, such as, for example, the power structure of a particular country, its existing social norms, its particular national identity, or its particular political and democratic history. Structures of living together, by the very fact of transcending individual human actions, need to be identified, because they are properties of a collectivity rather than a property of individuals, and these collective capabilities provide the conditions for individual lives to flourish. In addition to the distinction between valuable capabilities

<sup>9</sup> Italics are mine.

(such as the capability to be healthy) and non-valuable capabilities (such as the capability to commit homicide), one would need to distinguish valuable from non-valuable structures of living together, or what Sen has now called collective capabilities that made these individual capabilities possible (such as the valuable collective capability of eradicating child mortality, or the negative collective capability of an ethnic group to kill another ethnic group). Moreover, because individual lives and choices are so affected by structures of living together, one cannot assume that their choices, including what they value, are independent of these structures. I now turn to this point that will further point towards the need to pay explicit attention to collective capabilities.

### Meaning and values

Sen's capability approach does of course recognise this deep entanglement between choices and structures. For example, the capability to move around in a particular society strongly depends upon the presence of public transport, the availability of road infrastructures and the degree of peace in that society. If someone possesses a bike, he will be less able to exercise his capability to move around in a society where civil war rages and where roads have not been maintained than a person who would similarly choose to move around in a peaceful Western European country (Robeyns 2000: 17). But if the latter person has witnessed a terrible traffic accident involving a cyclist, and subsequently is psychologically unable to ride a bicycle again, could one conclude that that person freely chose not to ride a bike? Nussbaum (2000: 88) notes in the context of the capability for play and leisure that people should be free to lead a workaholic life should they choose to do so. But one might wonder to what extent a young professional who apparently *freely* chooses a workaholic life has really made a free decision and not a constrained decision given the work culture of her society. The capability approach seems to pay little attention to how the capability to make free choices should be treated, beyond the provision of adequate information.

As these examples show, the capability approach needs to be able to distinguish to what extent one is free to exercise a certain capability and to what extent this choice is constrained by social norms. But the capability approach does not seem to offer a framework to evaluate

whether people have the capability to make free choices. Nussbaum (2000: 82) has emphasised that the capability for practical reason is a pre-condition for the exercise of freedom, but the problem is that one needs to be free in order to be able to access practical reason, and if practical reason is what is thought to enhance freedom, the approach ends up in a circle. If women, when offered literacy classes, refuse to make use of the opportunities after having been offered all the adequate information regarding the value of them attending the classes, can one conclude that they have the capability for knowledge?

Sen has written extensively about the deformation of *preferences* and how these could be socially deformed, but *capabilities* could be socially conditioned and equally severely deformed, even after providing adequate information concerning the wrongness of the choices. Is it a matter of accepting, then, that there is no such thing as free choice and acknowledging that all choices are, ultimately, socially conditioned? Perhaps it would suffice to answer that question by simply acknowledging that what is considered as meaningful and worthy of choice can be understood only against a background of community and history, and that free choice and value judgement are themselves to be understood as being made on the basis of certain internalised beliefs inherent in the specific structures of living together in which individuals live. So it is not a question of identifying those whose capabilities have been deformed as against 'free' individuals, but of accepting that all are subject to restraints and conditioning which affect how they exercise choices.

Somewhat independently of his capability approach, Sen (1985: 183) has discussed how meanings are dependent on social contexts, and that moral valuation depends on one's position. States of affairs (and hence capabilities) are thus always evaluated where the person situates himself. Yet he argues that this does not entail that moral evaluation is necessary relative. There are choices that can be considered as non-meaningful and even wrong. Sen writes: 'The positionality of moral valuation is perfectly consistent with objectivity of moral values. Moral valuation can be position-relative in the same way as such statements as "The sun is setting". The truth of that statement varies with the position of the person, but it cannot vary from person to person among those standing in the same position' (Sen 1985: 183–4). But if all of us, standing in the same position, value the same objectives, can we say with confidence, in an unchangeable way, that our choices

are morally (and objectively) valuable? If, for example, all poor and marginalised people who live beside an elite driven by status symbols, or who are daily invaded by consumerist ways of life through the media, value the capability for self-expression (by buying a cellular phone) rather than the capability to be adequately nourished, can that value judgement be accepted because it is shared among all people in the same position?

As Peter Evans (2002: 58) underlines, the capability approach does not seem to 'explore the ways in which influences on "mental conditioning" might systematically reflect the interests of those with greater economic clout and political power'. And Evans pursues: 'Sen acknowledges that the "sun does not set on the empire of Coca-Cola or MTV", but he does not explore the implications of these kingdoms for the ability of people to choose the kind of lives they "have reason to value".' The capabilities that people value respond to many forces, including global ones, over which individuals have no control. Rarely, if ever, do people have freedom to decide whether these global forces or new structures (norms) through which they frame their value judgements (such as, for example, consumerism) are valuable or not. How, then, can one judge, for example, the underlying social concerns of a society, as exemplified in consumerism, through which people will choose certain valuable capabilities?

In Sen's capability approach to development, the privileged structure through which people make their value judgements is through democratic deliberation. Citing Sen's example of an indigenous community which has to choose between 'a traditional way of life' and the 'escape of grinding poverty' (Sen 1999a: 31), UNESCO's *World Culture Report* quickly adds that, in today's structures of inequality, one may wonder what margins people have for 'free' decisions (UNESCO 2000: 34). There are indeed structures of inequalities and power that leave indigenous communities with little choice other than that of 'choosing' a modern way of life, or structures of inequalities and power that leave countries with little option other than that of 'choosing', or rather accepting, through democratic deliberation, to pursue development through the privatisation of public services. The capability approach to development would require an evaluation of the different structures that lead individuals or collectivities to endorse certain values rather than others. The next section examines a final rationale for explicitly including structures of living together in the informational basis of quality life.

### Individual agency and its socio-historical conditions

Political philosophers gathered under the label ‘communitarian philosophers’ (Mulhall and Swift 1992) have long discussed how human agency and freedom cannot be thought of independently of structures of living together. They argue that the latter actually form an integral part of the constitution of the self. They insist that freedom and the capacity for choice are not given, but have to be developed. Before being an agent endowed with the capability to make autonomous choices, a self has to be developed, and this cannot be done without a community, without the relationships one makes with other persons. Community is pre-existent to individuals. It is what gives meaning to the life of its members and gives them identity, in the sense that it is only from their attachment to communities that human beings draw their moral development, their identity, and the meaning of their life.

Agency is not a *tabula rasa*, but is itself the product of certain structures of living together. Insofar as human beings have the power to understand themselves, to interpret what they are and what they do, ‘the languages needed for such self-interpretation are essentially social, and community is a structural precondition of human agency’ (Mulhall and Swift 1992: 162). For example, a woman who is forced into an arranged marriage often does not have the agency to protest and rebel because the structures of living together that surround her do not provide the preconditions for her to do so. She will find her agency and ability to choose not to enter an arranged marriage only provided that, for example, the education she received at school, or government campaigns for gender equity and dignity, have given her the necessary critical skills to question the established order. In other words, she will have the individual agency to avoid arranged marriage only provided that she receives enough collective support to pursue her choice. Exercising one’s freedom of choice, like the freedom to marry the partner one wishes, will require collective action to change the structures and transform them into structures enabling individual human beings to acquire agency and exercise choice.

Referring to the example in the introduction, although writing an oral indigenous language to prevent its loss crucially depends on the individual action and agency of one young lady (in that sense, Sen is right in affirming that individual agency and action are crucial in addressing deprivations), her action is made possible only through

the quality of education that she herself received at school and through the support that she encounters with academic institutions that are willing to support her efforts. Only certain structures of living together can give rise to and can sustain her individual agency and actions to preserve the indigenous language. As Evans (2002: 56) points out: ‘In practice, my ability to choose the life I have reason to value often hangs on the possibility of my acting together with others who have reason to value similar things. The capability of choosing [and acting] itself may be, in essence, a collective rather than an individual capability.’

The necessary presence of certain structures of living together which make individual agency and action possible is even more obvious when those who are choosing and acting are country leaders. For example, the decision to introduce a social security scheme in Costa Rica at the beginning of the 1940s was made by a single individual, President Calderón (see Rosenberg 1983). However, even though Calderón had the necessary individual agency to pass bold social security reforms and other unprecedented progressive social reforms (such as a Labour Code), he could not have exercised his agency if he had not encountered the necessary collective support and necessary structures of living together to do so. It was through an alliance between his own elite party and the Communist party that the social reforms that would shape the future of Costa Rica’s social development were able to be implemented (Wilson 1998). Such a collective action would not have been made possible two decades later in the Cold War, when a very strong anti-communist culture was reigning across the world.

The choice that individuals are making appears thus to be crucially dependent upon the particular socio-historical structures in which they find themselves rather than upon a choice that inheres in their inner self. As a consequence, it seems that the capability approach to development, if its aim is to address deprivations, will have to place not individual agency as central to addressing deprivations but rather *socio-historical agency* (what individuals can do in the socio-historical reality in which they are living) as central, and this unavoidably entails a careful consideration of the particular structures of living together that constitute this socio-historical agency.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The importance of socio-historical agency in promoting development is further explored in Deneulin 2006.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that because structures of living together were constitutive of individual capabilities and of people's value judgements, there was a strong rationale to include them explicitly in the informational basis of quality of life and development. As the Costa Rican case study has illustrated, ignoring these implicit structures of living together risks hiding an important, if not the most important, factor of development and the removal of human deprivations. Had the particular structures of living together of Costa Rica been different, the country's social development would probably be very similar nowadays to that of its Central American neighbours.

The chapter has also argued that structures of living together were constitutive of individual agency and that central to addressing deprivations was not as much individual agency as the particular structures that build such agency, what I have called the socio-historical agency. Again, as the Costa Rican case study has illustrated, although its social development is due to key individual actions, these actions would not have been possible without certain implicit structures of living together.

Development is not only a matter of promoting the freedoms that individuals have and that they have reason to choose and value, but, because the subject of development is at the same time both individual and collective, is also a matter of promoting the freedoms that collectivities have and that are worthwhile for the collectivity as such. Therefore, drawing up a 'list' of valuable structures of living together that build up a country's necessary socio-historical agency to promote development, in parallel with Nussbaum's list of valuable capabilities (Nussbaum 2000: 75–77), would be a legitimate route that could be taken.

If development is about enhancing the quality of life of *human* beings, then it cannot ignore that such a human life is a life whose sustenance and meaning can come only *through others*, to paraphrase Aristotle. And it cannot ignore that the good of such a human life is brought about neither by the mere collections of private or individual actions, nor by the proper action of a collective subject which sacrifices the parts to itself. It has to acknowledge that the good of humans is brought about by an action that is common to both the collective and individuals into which it flows back, and which, in turn, must rely on it, to paraphrase Jacques Maritain.

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