

Development as Freedom: A Theoretical Exposition of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes *Development as Freedom* by Amartya Sen as one of the most groundbreaking theoretical contributions to the field of development studies. Departing from traditional theories that defined development in terms of growth, industrialization, economic capital, and GDP, the paper asserts that Sen redefined development in terms of enhancing human freedoms and capabilities. Through qualitative analytical review based on interpretivism and critical development theories, the paper highlights how Sen's theory is located within a wider discourse of modernization, welfare economics, neoliberalism, dependency theory, feminist development theory, postcolonialism, and human development approaches. The paper explains how Sen's model redirected focus from output to individuals' abilities to be and do something meaningful in life, thus defining poverty as *capability deprivation* as opposed to *income inadequacy*. Additionally, it discusses the role of Sen's capability theory in influencing institutions such as Human Development Theory, multidimensional poverty approaches, and capability models advocated by UNDP. Nevertheless, the paper addresses significant criticism of Development as Freedom, including its failure to adequately consider structural inequality, capitalism, coloniality, dependency, and challenges in empirical freedom measurement. Relying on development realities in Africa, the paper suggests that capability expansion is essential in conceptualizing multidimensional deprivation in Africa despite the necessity of integrating freedom with structural contexts shaping inequality. In conclusion, the paper argues that Development as Freedom is among the most powerful and humanistic frameworks in development theory since it forces development scholarship to engage more profound issues of dignity, participation, agency, justice, and human flourishing in an unequal society, but has its limitations when applied to African development contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Very few interventions in development theory have shaken the intellectual foundations of development discourse to quite the same extent as Amartya Sen's vision of development as freedom. Prior to the rise of Sen's development theory, much of development discourse revolved around approaches that viewed growth, industrialization, capital formation, and modernization as indicators of socio-economic development. According to classical modernization theory, development is essentially a process of moving from a traditional society to modernity via industrialization, urbanization, technological advancements, and economic growth (Rostow, 1960; Lewis, 1955). Development success could thus be evaluated using such measures as gross domestic product (GDP), per capita income, productivity growth, export performance, and infrastructure development. Even when emphasis was placed on reducing poverty, it was assumed that economic growth would eventually lead to improved welfare. Organizations such as the World Bank and IMF, especially during the era of structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s, emphasized growth-led development based on liberalization, privatization, efficient markets, and macroeconomic stability. But lurking behind the intellectual neatness of growth-led development models was an increasingly obvious paradox: that many societies were developing economically without developing socially, politically, and psychologically. Growth was occurring, but at the expense of human capabilities, equality, participatory governance, and social security. Wealth was

increasing while deprivation was growing. Countries were modernizing quantitatively but leaving large numbers of people behind substantively. In such a state of intellectual and ethical dilemma, it is no surprise that Sen's intervention was so groundbreaking; it was not simply a new way to measure development, but a whole new way to conceptualize development.

Sen's argument challenged the existing development theory in part because it refocused development discussion away from material outputs to the freedoms that people have to live the kind of lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). Sen's development as freedom concept meant that development was not essentially about national growth, but about increasing human capabilities, freedoms, and agency. Poverty was thus not just a matter of income levels, but of basic capabilities deprivation. Democracy was not just about voting procedures, but about public reasoning, participation, and human flourishing. Education mattered not only because it increased labor productivity, but because it enhanced human freedoms. And health not just because of its economic value, but because it was itself a vital component of human development. Development as freedom thus marked a major break from simplistic growth-centered approaches to development, as Sen emphasized that people should be seen not only as producers of material goods, but as the very ends of development itself. This shift was echoed by other critical approaches that were gaining momentum in development studies during the period, including critiques of growth models, welfare economics, and modernization assumptions (Streeten et al., 1981; ul Haq, 1995). Over time, Sen's work would go on to significantly shape UNDP's Human Development Reports, multi-dimensional poverty analysis, welfare economics, social policy, human development, rights-based development, and human security and social justice.

But criticism of Development as Freedom has continued, and it is partly due to this that the framework has become increasingly intellectually relevant. Political economists, dependency theorists, post-development scholars, postcolonial scholars, and feminists, among others, have all contributed significantly to these discussions. Praise for the concept comes primarily from scholars who have praised the humanizing effect of Sen's work and noted how it restored humanity, ethics, dignity, and human agency to development analysis (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2005). Martha Nussbaum, for example, extended the capabilities framework to questions of gender justice, bodily autonomy, and women's substantive freedoms in order to argue that development has to take account of the freedoms of marginalized groups (Nussbaum, 2000; 2011). Human development scholars, in turn, have greatly appreciated Sen's move away from solely income-centered measures and his advocacy for focusing on what people are really capable of being and doing. Critics of the capabilities approach, however, include scholars such as political economists and dependency theorists, who accuse Sen of overlooking global capitalism, class divisions, inequalities, imperialism, debt dependency, and unequal incorporation into the world economy (Amin, 1974; Rodney, 1972). Post-development and postcolonial theorists have criticized Sen for his language of "freedom," which they see as implicitly reproducing liberal assumptions that come out of Western thought, ignoring colonial legacies, epistemic inequalities, and the politics of knowledge production (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994). Some critics have questioned Sen on methodology and operational issues, in particular how to measure and compare freedoms and capabilities (Gasper, 2002; Robeyns, 2005). It should be clear that these criticisms are not peripheral; they go right to the heart of Sen's argument.

It is with this broader intellectual background that this paper is concerned. Specifically, it will be argued in this paper that Development as Freedom is still one of the most revolutionary theories in development studies in terms of its approach to development. But this paper will further argue that the contemporary significance of the Sen framework rests on reading it in dialogue with feminist capability scholars, multidimensional poverty theorists, human development thinkers, political economists, postcolonial scholars, and the realities of development in Africa. The paper will thus argue that Sen's development theory is indispensable, yet far from sufficient on its own. Economic growth alone is inadequate for explaining development, but neither can development be understood in abstraction from the structural, historical, and economic forces of power, inequality, colonialism, etc. This paper aims to achieve two things by situating Sen's contributions in the broader scholarly context of human development, capability deprivation, governance, inequality, structural constraints, and the future of development theory in a context of increasingly globalization.

METHODS

Theories of development have never existed in the form of a quiet academic pursuit. From its very beginning, the study of development has always involved passionate academic disagreements over what development itself means, how it is to be measured, who is empowered through its realization, and why so many societies remain impoverished and marginalized despite several decades of economic growth and policy action. Development as Freedom emerges precisely out of these ongoing debates. To grapple with Sen's theories therefore means engaging not just the author himself, but a whole host of ideas, concepts, assumptions, and perspectives through which development has been imagined, defended, criticized, and reinvented over time. This is why the present paper adopts a qualitative theory-based analytic review methodology rooted in interpretivist social science and critical development studies. The aim of the paper is not the statistical analysis of empirical data, but rather a rigorous interrogation of ideas, assumptions, concepts, and theoretical claims relating to the capability approach and its position within current development theory. Indeed, an analytic review of this sort is particularly well-suited to the present topic because, as noted by Snyder (2019), a theoretical focus usually demands an approach that reorients existing scholarship around a conceptual issue in such a way as to yield interpretive insights rather than mere descriptive summaries. As Grant and Booth (2009) likewise observe, theoretical domains often require review because ideas themselves are formed through engagement, criticism, and revision rather than simply evidence-based accumulation. The choice of analytic methodology is thus crucial in this case because Sen's work spans economics, ethics, political philosophy, welfare theory, democracy, public policy, and social justice in ways that cannot be understood via a purely economistic reading.

The analytical orientation of the paper also takes shape based on the realization that development theory develops through intellectual dispute rather than consensus. As noted above, Sen intervened in development discourse partly as a result of his disillusionment with prevailing growth-oriented development strategies that measured progress in terms of rising income levels without adequately accounting for deprivation, inequality, vulnerability, participation, and human dignity. Nonetheless, in criticizing growth-centered approaches, Sen's framework also sparked further controversy in its own right, especially over issues of freedom, capability, justice, measurement, and power. Some feminists, such as Martha Nussbaum, were pleased that Sen emphasized human capability but criticized him for failing to produce a more definite normative list of essential capabilities needed for human thriving (Nussbaum, 2000; 2011). Other analysts, including Ingrid Robeyns and Sabina Alkire, endeavored to develop operational principles to guide the application of the capability approach in multidimensional poverty analysis and human development metrics (Robeyns, 2005; Alkire, 2005). Meanwhile, some human development scholars like Mahbub ul Haq and Sakiko Fukuda-Parr used Sen's ideas to develop policy frameworks within institutionalized development practice via the Human Development Reports (ul Haq, 1995; Fukuda-Parr, 2003). Finally, some political economy and postcolonial analysts have criticized Sen's emphasis on freedom for often overlooking the structural contexts of capitalism, imperialism, dependency, unequal exchange, and colonialism that also matter in development (Amin, 1974; Escobar, 1995). None of this is irrelevant to Development as Freedom; indeed, such debates are integral to it. The methodological approach employed in the paper therefore involves the development of a dialogic analysis in which scholars will be placed in conversation with one another so that the capability approach can be seen as a developing tradition subject to ongoing critique, elaboration, and reinterpretation.

This involves drawing extensively on the core literature related to capability theory, human development theory, political economy, feminist development studies, and critical development theory in order to place Sen in the broader context of development theory. This entails reading seminal works by Sen himself, including *Poverty and Famines* (1981), *Commodities and Capabilities* (1985), *Inequality Reexamined* (1992), *Development as Freedom* (1999), and *The Idea of Justice* (2009). It also entails critically engaging with key interventions by authors such as Nussbaum, Robeyns, Alkire, Fukuda-Parr, Gasper, Haq, among others, who either elaborated, defended, implemented, or challenged various aspects of the capability framework. Furthermore, the capability framework will also be scrutinized via critiques offered in dependency theory, post-development, and African political economy literature. Specifically, it will be asked whether Sen's freedom-based paradigm is sufficient for comprehending the structural contexts shaping development in the Global South. Notably, the theoretical framework informing this analysis rests on the premise that development is

neither a series of economic statistics nor a philosophical abstraction divorced from material circumstances. Instead, it is a complex and controversial process involving dimensions of power, agency, justice, inequality, institutional capacity, participation, and human possibility. The methodological orientation thus aims not merely to explain Sen's theory but to thoroughly analyze it.

RESULTS

Intellectual Genealogy of Development as Freedom

Development as Freedom was not an isolated intellectual breakthrough that appeared out of nowhere. Rather, it represents the culmination of several decades of frustration with prevailing theories of welfare economics, development measurement, and social justice. To properly understand Sen's contribution, it is first important to grasp the intellectual environment within which it occurred. Throughout much of the post-Second World War period, development theory remained deeply influenced by modernization thought and economics of growth. Development came to be seen primarily as the process of industrialization, capital accumulation, technology diffusion, and increased national income (Rostow, 1960; Lewis, 1955). The field of welfare economics, in turn, retained a strong utilitarian tradition rooted in the ideas of Jeremy Bentham and subsequent developments of neoclassical economics, where social progress was assessed in terms of utility maximization, preference satisfaction, or economic achievements (Drèze & Sen, 2002). In practice, this resulted in the prevalence of economic criteria for measuring development success, such as increases in GDP, exports, savings, or productivity, often neglecting more fundamental questions of inequality, vulnerability, dignity, participation, and human well-being. However, by the 1960s and 1970s, it became clear that significant problems existed with this conceptual framework, as many countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa registered measurable economic growth alongside poverty, unemployment, oppression, hunger, social exclusion, and growing inequality. There was something profoundly wrong with a conceptualization of development that could allow for growth in income along with human deprivation on a massive scale. These were some of the concerns that guided Sen's intellectual development.

In addition to rejecting mainstream welfare economics, Sen criticized utilitarian approaches to the assessment of human welfare for several reasons. Firstly, classical utilitarianism assessed the degree of welfare in terms of happiness, satisfaction of desires, or maximization of utility. The problem with this approach was in its inherent inability to capture the complexity of human life, particularly the lives of people experiencing chronic deprivations. Individuals oppressed by extreme conditions often adjusted their expectations to accommodate them (Sen, 1985; 1992). Simply put, oppressed populations might report satisfaction not because of flourishing but because they are used to suffering. Sen suggested that such reliance on utility or preference satisfaction would make it impossible to identify underlying injustices. In fact, someone experiencing starvation would hardly be capable of enjoying genuine well-being, even if his/her subjective sense of dissatisfaction appeared low due to a lack of expectations. Thus, Sen found himself entering a larger philosophical debate about equality and justice, where his views partially overlapped with John Rawls' Theory of Justice. While also criticizing utilitarianism in favour of justice and equality, Rawls was primarily concerned with distribution of primary goods rather than the capabilities of achieving them (Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1992). Two individuals could have the same amounts of goods but different freedoms depending on their age, health, social and political conditions, and other factors. The idea of "equality of what?" became fundamental for Sen's work on human capabilities.

The intellectual move from welfare economics to capability analysis became evident in Sen's research of famine and entitlement problems. Until then, the conventional approach considered famine to be a consequence of scarcity or lack of aggregate food production. This position was decisively rebutted in Sen's *Poverty and Famines* (1981). By analyzing famines in Bengal, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and the Sahel, Sen showed that people starve not because of lack of food but because they have lost entitlements to acquire food. In case of Bengal, wartime inflation, labour displacement, speculation, and markets failures caused people, especially poor rural labourers and fisherman, to lose their entitlements to buy food (Sen, 1981). This was a profound insight that changed the way famines were understood. First of all, it emphasized the importance of entitlement issues, including vulnerability and access to resources. Second, Sen's work became a turning point for development

studies, demonstrating that aggregates could disguise severe human deprivations. A country could have a lot of food, while still experiencing food insecurity; likewise, it could witness economic growth without development. This is also one of the early steps toward Development as Freedom because Sen was beginning to suggest that what truly matters is the freedom to convert resources into meaningful forms of living.

The concept of conversion of resources into functionings becomes crucial in *Commodities and Capabilities* (1985), which provided the conceptual basis for Sen's later work on development. According to Sen, commodities per se have no value; rather, their value depends on freedoms that they allow. For instance, a bicycle is valuable not because of the mere fact of ownership but because it provides an individual with the possibility of mobility. Similarly, income gains value because of the potential opportunities created by income. Sen's key innovation is thus a distinction between functionings, i.e. ways of living, and capabilities, i.e. real freedoms to achieve them. Being educated, healthy, politically engaged, mobile, and living with dignity are examples of functionings, while capabilities include freedoms to achieve these states (Sen, 1985). This distinction was of great importance since it moved development theory away from the focus on means. No longer limited to measuring income growth and resource abundance, development needed to assess whether individuals have freedoms to lead meaningful lives. The emphasis on capability also brought an important aspect of agency into development theory. Rather than passive subjects of welfare economics, individuals became active agents capable of determining their fate and participating in social change. In this way, Sen laid the foundation for his wider theory of development.

By the time *Development as Freedom* appeared in 1999, earlier ideas had been developed into an overarching framework for understanding development. Specifically, Sen explicitly claimed that freedom is the goal and means of development (Sen, 1999). This was a radical break with the previous development theory because freedom stopped playing a secondary role and became the primary end of development. Political freedoms, social opportunities, economic facilities, transparency guarantees, and protective security became components of development in a broad sense. Democracy is vital not only instrumentally but also in terms of intrinsic value. Education and healthcare are important not merely as tools of increasing economic efficiency but also for expanding human capability. Poverty becomes not only an issue of low income but capability deprivation. This was a fundamental change that positioned human beings as the centre of development analysis in an unprecedented way. Nevertheless, the advantage of Sen's approach is in its flexibility. Contrary to economic approaches to development that were widely prevalent before, Sen managed to retain the multidimensional and context-dependent character of development. At the same time, this made *Development as Freedom* controversial because critics argued that Sen failed to specify a comprehensive list of essential capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000; Gasper, 2002). Yet, even those who disagree with specific aspects of Sen's philosophy recognized its transformative influence on development theory. After *Development as Freedom*, it became virtually impossible to discuss economic development in isolation from broader issues of human well-being, participation, justice, and freedom.

Core Propositions of Development as Freedom

In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen asserts an ostensibly simplistic yet revolutionary premise: development is not primarily about expanding income, industrial production, or technology, but about expanding human freedom (Sen, 1999). While the proposition may seem straightforward, its implication for development theory is vast since it fundamentally reframes the relation among economics, politics, welfare, and human well-being. Prior to Sen's critique, mainstream development paradigms tended to regard economic growth as the primary goal and primary indicator of development (Rostow, 1960; Lewis, 1955). Modernization theorists, neoclassical economists, and even some Marxist developmentalists tended to posit that industrialization, capital accumulation, productivity growth, and increasing national income would eventually lead to improving human well-being. While Sen agrees with the importance of economic growth, he does not endorse its reductionist interpretation as either the end or the means of development. Instead, wealth is valuable only if it increases human freedoms in a manner that allows people to pursue their life plans in valued ways. Countries could experience significant GDP growth but still fail to realize the freedoms of many citizens to participate in politics, receive adequate nutrition, feel secure, gain knowledge, or determine the conditions of

their own lives. Accordingly, development should not be assessed in terms of the amount of resources societies amass, but in terms of whether individuals possess the capacity to transform resources into meaningful living.

This aspect of Sen's approach is best explained in light of his distinction between functionings and capabilities (Sen, 1985; 1992). Functionings refer to the various "beings and doings" that people realize – being healthy, being educated, engaging in politics, moving freely, living with dignity, avoiding early mortality, or contributing meaningfully to society (Sen, 1999). Capabilities, however, refer to the freedoms that people exercise in realizing functionings. This distinction is significant because mere possession of resources does not entail the capacity to make good use of them. Two people with identical incomes might experience vastly different opportunities based on their social conditions, health, gender relations, disabilities, political disenfranchisement, or institutional support. An individual with a disability might need more resources to achieve the same freedom of movement as someone without any disability. Similarly, women in deeply patriarchal societies might formally possess equal rights, but their actual capacity to exercise those rights might be severely restricted by cultural norms and social relations. Consequently, Sen's approach differs sharply from utilitarian perspectives that focus on utility or subjective satisfaction and resource-focused perspectives that merely emphasize distribution. Rather, what matters is not only what people possess but also what they actually can become and achieve.

One of the most radical aspects of Sen's theoretical framework lies in the way it fundamentally reconceptualizes human beings within development theory. Earlier development paradigms tended to see populations as passive objects of interventions aimed at welfare provision, economic growth, and development delivery. Sen, by contrast, rejects the paternalist notion of development by emphasizing human agency. Humans are not passive subjects of development; rather, they are active agents capable of transforming social, political, and economic structures. Agency, in Sen's approach, refers to people's ability to pursue goals and values that they have reasons to value (Sen, 1999). This emphasis on agency has profound implications because it directly ties development to participation, democracy, public discourse, and political voice. Development cannot be conceived as something that populations receive from outside through technocratic planning; rather, it is inherently linked to the expansion of individuals' abilities to influence the conditions of their lives. In this respect, Sen's perspective shares much with participatory development approaches associated with authors like Robert Chambers (Chambers, 1997), who criticized the top-down approaches of mainstream development for sidelining local voices and lived experiences. Nevertheless, Sen's approach transcends participation as a concept by embedding agency in an ethical and political framework premised on human freedom. Development is thus intrinsically linked to issues of citizenship, public debate, accountability, and democratic inclusion.

The centrality of freedom is further highlighted in Sen's assertion that freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development (Sen, 1999). This dual conceptualization constitutes one of the defining contributions of Sen's approach because it breaks down the traditional dichotomy between development outcomes and processes. Freedom is not simply a reward that societies reap after developing; rather, it is integral to development. Specifically, Sen identifies five interconnected instrumental freedoms as the means of development: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security. Political freedoms refer to civil liberties, political participation, freedom of expression, and accountability. Economic facilities refer to the opportunity to deploy resources, markets, employment, and productive structures to enhance conditions. Social opportunities refer to access to education, healthcare, and other services required for capability enhancement. Transparency guarantees refer to openness, trust, access to information, and protections against corruption and opacity. Finally, protective security refers to social safety nets, welfare programs, unemployment insurance, famine prevention, and vulnerability protections. Sen's key argument is that freedoms are interconnected rather than discrete variables. Education facilitates participation, political freedoms increase accountability, transparency decreases corruption, healthcare improves productivity, and social security reduces vulnerability. Development thus emerges as an interconnected process rather than a linear series of economic events.

Another significant aspect of Development as Freedom is Sen's analysis of democracy and public reasoning. Unlike technocratic and authoritarian development approaches, Sen places great emphasis on political freedom.

In response to the assertion that authoritarian regimes might facilitate development faster by curtailing political freedoms, Sen contends that democracy possesses both intrinsic and instrumental value (Sen, 1999). Intrinsic value derives from the fact that participation and freedom of expression are integral to human dignity. Instrumental value derives from the capacity to criticize, hold accountable, and compel governments to address human suffering. Sen famously argues that no substantial famine has occurred in a functional democracy with a relatively free press because democracies generate pressures for action before catastrophes occur (Sen, 1981; 1999). This argument revolutionized the discourse on development governance by tying political freedom to human welfare outcomes. Development was not separate from democratic accountability. At the same time, Sen avoids equating democracy simply with elections. Instead, he emphasizes public reasoning as a vital mechanism that enables societies to deliberate, discuss, and scrutinize the development process.

The deepest contribution of Development as Freedom is perhaps its ability to humanize development theory itself. Sen's approach emerged in reaction to the moral vacuity that often characterized purely growth-oriented approaches. By recasting development as a process of capability expansion and freedom realization, Sen reintroduced ethical inquiry into development theory without sacrificing analytical rigidity. The framework posits that issues of justice, dignity, inequality, exclusion, and human flourishing are not ancillary moral considerations that need to be addressed after economic growth; rather, they are central to assessing whether development has truly taken place. This helps explain the deep impact of Sen's ideas on the emergence of the Human Development paradigm pioneered by Mahbub ul Haq and the United Nations Development Programme (ul Haq, 1995). The Human Development Index represented dissatisfaction with GDP as an exclusive indicator by incorporating indicators of health and education. Nevertheless, these institutional applications capture only a small fraction of the larger philosophical revolution. Ultimately, Development as Freedom asks a deeper question than previous approaches dared to ask: not merely whether economies grow, but whether human beings become more free, capable, safe, and empowered.

Development as Freedom in Dialogue with Earlier Development Theories

Perhaps one of the reasons why Development as Freedom has gained so much traction within development studies is that Sen's framework did not only propose a novel conception of development, but fundamentally questioned many of the assumptions that had defined earlier development theories for decades. In many ways, Sen's work can be interpreted as an intellectual dialogue with the prevailing paradigms that preceded him—sometimes agreeing with them partially, sometimes correcting them, and at other times diverging sharply from them altogether. This dialogical quality is crucial since Sen did not come out of thin air; on the contrary, his intervention has gained its power precisely because it addressed the weaknesses of modernization theory, welfare economics, neoliberalism, basic needs approaches, and even some streams of political economy analysis. As such, Development as Freedom occupies a unique place within development theory—it is simultaneously a critique of economism and an attempt to develop a more morally informed, human-focused approach for measuring social progress.

In many ways, Sen's most radical departure from earlier development theory came from classical modernization theory and its premise that economic growth and industrialization inherently lead to human progress. Modernization theorists such as Walt Rostow have envisioned development as a linear process that unfolds across several stages, ultimately resulting in mass consumption, industrial maturity, and modern economic organization (Rostow, 1960). Likewise, Arthur Lewis proposed that structural transformation through labour transfer from traditional agricultural sectors to modern industrial sectors represents the main driving force behind development (Lewis, 1955). These theories emerged in the post-war optimism of industrial capitalism and assumed that economic growth was the most effective way to help "traditional" societies become modern. While Sen did not disagree with the importance of growth, industrialization, and technological advancement per se, he critically engaged with the assumption that economic growth is a sufficient indicator of development. Indeed, it is possible for a society to quickly industrialize while at the same time reproducing severe inequality, political oppression, poor health care, educational exclusion, environmental degradation, and social instability. In other words, societies might become economically richer without actually becoming more developed. As such, Sen questioned the modernist tendency to take human welfare for granted

in the context of economic change. Human progress must be measured directly through expanded freedoms and capabilities.

In addition, Sen's approach differed substantially from utilitarian welfare economics, a tradition that dominated economic theory and policy evaluation in the 20th century. Traditional utilitarian theories associated with Bentham, as well as neoclassical economists, usually estimated welfare through utility, happiness, or preference satisfaction. For Sen, however, utilitarianism represented an extremely limited approach since it overlooked how deprivation influences human expectations (Sen, 1985; 1992). A person who has experienced years of poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion may adapt psychologically to suffering and report contentment regardless of profound injustice. Such a phenomenon of adaptive preferences has become central to Sen's criticism of welfare economics. An individual who suffers from malnutrition may express moderate aspirations not because life is good but because persistent hardship has conditioned low ambitions. If welfare is measured through psychological satisfaction, then structural injustice will remain concealed beneath stable preferences. In this way, Sen's capability approach arose partly as an attempt to overcome such a limitation by shifting from mere psychological satisfaction to substantive freedoms and opportunities. Moreover, Sen's framework enters into an important dialogue with the theory of justice proposed by John Rawls. Rawls had already questioned utilitarianism by emphasizing fairness and equal access to primary goods (Rawls, 1971). Sen appreciated the significance of this contribution, but he also noted that distributing primary goods equally would not ensure equal freedom because different people have varying abilities to transform primary goods into desired results. Therefore, equality could not be assessed through goods or resources alone; it had to be evaluated through capabilities themselves. Sen's famous question—"equality of what"—represented a decisive intervention within both welfare economics and political philosophy.

Sen's engagement with neoliberal development theory is equally complex. Since the late 1970s, neoliberal ideas began to increasingly reshape development policy worldwide through structural adjustment programs, market liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and austerity measures advocated by international organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank. Neoliberal scholars claimed that economic freedom, competition, and reduced government intervention would foster efficiency, investment, and economic growth, which would eventually improve welfare outcomes. Like liberalists, Sen was a staunch advocate of individual freedom and autonomy, which has sometimes led critics to interpret his framework as a liberal approach to development. However, such interpretations overlook the profound ethical and institutional dimensions of Sen's argument. Unlike narrow neoliberal approaches, Sen did not limit freedom to market choice. Economic freedom matters, but so do education, health care, political participation, social security, transparency, and governmental accountability. On the contrary, Sen stressed that markets themselves presuppose social freedoms and institutional support to operate meaningfully (Sen, 1999). It is impossible for people to exercise freedom in markets if they lack nutrition, literacy, and political inclusion. Sen's approach thus diverges radically from neoliberal orthodoxy by asserting that substantive freedom requires active social investments and institutional commitments instead of mere market liberalization.

Interestingly enough, Development as Freedom also shares certain convergence with early Basic Needs approaches that emerged in the 1970s. According to basic needs theorists, development policies should focus on providing essential services to populations, such as food, housing, health care, water, sanitation, and education (Streeten et al., 1981). This theory resonates closely with Sen's idea because both approaches criticize the economic reduction of development to income growth alone. However, Sen distinguishes himself from basic needs approaches in one key respect. Basic Needs theorists can sometimes fall into the trap of treating the population as passive beneficiaries of welfare provision, whereas Sen's capability approach underscores agency, choice, and substantive freedom. The question is not just whether people have access to various services, but whether they have opportunities to shape and realize a fulfilling life. Development is thus not limited to satisfying minimum physiological needs; it involves human capability and participation. This subtle difference transforms development from a paternalistic provision of welfare into a broader empowerment process.

Yet perhaps the most crucial intellectual tension concerning Development as Freedom arises in the context of dependency theory, Marxist political economy, and postcolonial critiques of development. According to

scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, Walter Rodney, and Immanuel Wallerstein, underdevelopment cannot be understood without taking into account the unequal structures of global capitalism, colonialism, dependency, and unequal exchange (Frank, 1967; Amin, 1974; Rodney, 1972; Wallerstein, 2004). From these perspectives, poverty in the Global South is not merely the lack of human freedom and capability; it is the historical product of exploitation, extraction, debt dependency, imperial domination, and structural inequality inherent in the world system. Sen's framework has often faced criticism for its supposed disregard of such structural factors. While Sen devotes significant attention to deprivation, exclusion, and institutional failure, critics have accused Development as Freedom of prioritizing the expansion of individual capabilities over the interrogation of the global capitalist structures that constrain these capabilities from the outset. Post-development scholars such as Arturo Escobar similarly questioned whether liberal-humanist frameworks of development adequately challenge the colonial histories and epistemological hierarchies underpinning development discourse (Escobar, 1995). These criticisms are certainly valid, but they reveal important analytical tensions. While freedom is indispensable, it operates within an unequal political and economic system that determines which freedoms expand and which freedoms remain constrained.

Nonetheless, one of the reasons why Sen's framework continues to gain traction despite these critiques is that it provides a theoretical space where development theory can become more human-oriented without becoming economistic or ideologically rigid. Development as Freedom does not prescribe any deterministic model for development; instead, it reorients the questions that development theory should ask. Whereas earlier theories focused exclusively on whether economies grew, Sen urged scholars and policymakers to consider whether humans became more capable, secure, educated, politically included, and influential in shaping their living conditions.

From Capability Theory to Human Development

One of the best examples of the intellectual strength of Sen's Development as Freedom is that the model was not just a theory in philosophy and welfare economics, it became institutionalized within the practice of global development policymaking. Few development theories ever accomplished this feat. Whereas many theoretical paradigms tend to stay within academic discussion, Sen's capability approach was institutionalized into the discourse of international development policy through the establishment of the Human Development paradigm by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This move from capability theory to human development as an official international discourse is remarkable because it indicates that Sen's Development as Freedom not only transformed the academic understanding of development, but also how global development policy works. However, this transformation did not happen without difficulties because it required reinterpretation, simplification, negotiation, and at times conflict between the philosophical richness of capability theory and its practical implementation as global policy. Thus, the evolution from capability theory to human development represents both Sen's intellectual triumph and the challenges of institutionalization.

Mahbub ul Haq, the Pakistani economist and development thinker who became the author of the Human Development Report in 1990, was the main person responsible for the institutionalization of the capability approach into global development policy. Unlike Sen, ul Haq was concerned with the inadequacies of economic indicators of development such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which focused on economic growth and considered rising national income as sufficient evidence of development despite widespread poverty, inequality, illiteracy, poor healthcare, and vulnerability (ul Haq, 1995). Both thinkers shared a conviction that development was about expanding people's choices rather than growing economies. The compatibility of their philosophies formed the basis of the Human Development paradigm. The first Human Development Report made it clear that "people are the real wealth of nations," implying a radical departure from previous development models based on production and accumulation (UNDP, 1990). Development was no longer seen as a linear process of growth, but a complex process of expanding human capabilities and multiplying people's options. Health, education, participation, dignity, and longevity became the core development priorities rather than secondary social consequences of economic growth. On many accounts, the Human Development paradigm was a practical application of Sen's philosophical argument within international development governance.

The most apparent effect of the institutionalization of Development as Freedom was the introduction of the Human Development Index (HDI), an index that tried to complement GDP-based indicators of development with three fundamental dimensions of human well-being: life expectancy, education, and income (UNDP, 1990). Theoretically, the HDI embodied Sen's insistence that development ought to be evaluated on the grounds of human capabilities, not GDP. A country could be considered economically prosperous, yet if its population had low literacy, poor health outcomes, and limited life expectancy, it would not be developed in human terms. The HDI therefore challenged the dominant economic indicators of development with a more humanized measurement instrument. In addition to the HDI, other measures were introduced, such as the Gender Development Index (GDI), Gender Inequality Index (GII), Inequality-adjusted HDI (IHDI), and Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). These innovations changed global policy debates dramatically by introducing the multidimensionality of development as an analytical tool. National governments started justifying their policies not only in terms of economic growth, but also in terms of education access, maternal health, social protection, gender equality, and poverty alleviation. Hence, Sen's approach influenced global development policy not only ethically but politically as well.

However, the institutionalization of Development as Freedom produced important theoretical disagreements. Sen never liked the idea of reducing the capability approach to a set of measurable indicators because he was afraid that the reductionist logic would simplify the rich concept of human freedom (Sen, 1999). Capabilities were meant to refer to actual substantive options and real freedoms, many of which were difficult to quantify. Yet policymakers needed indicators to compare countries, allocate resources, evaluate progress, and develop interventions. This tension between philosophical depth and policy applicability became the primary issue of debate among Human Development scholars. Philosophers such as Ingrid Robeyns and Sabina Alkire recognized that while the capability theory offered a robust normative framework, the translation of capabilities into measurement indicators implied difficult choices concerning which dimensions were important, how they should be weighted, and what kinds of values could define development priorities (Robeyns, 2005; Alkire, 2005). Martha Nussbaum took another direction to respond to this challenge by offering a detailed list of the core human capabilities including bodily health, bodily integrity, political participation, emotions, practical reason, and affiliation which she believed to be indispensable for human dignity across societies (Nussbaum, 2000; 2011). By contrast, Sen was adamant not to prescribe any universal list and preferred democratic deliberation and contextual interpretation instead. The dispute raised an important question of how capability theory could preserve flexibility and context sensitivity while still allowing for quantification and applicability in policy-making.

Multidimensional poverty research revealed this question further. Traditionally, poverty measures tended to focus on income thresholds and treat poverty as scarcity of economic resources. Capabilities scholars criticized this reductionism because poverty manifested itself in different forms: health, education, nutrition, housing, participation, security, and social inclusion. Following the insights provided by Sen, Alkire and Foster elaborated on multidimensional poverty methodologies aimed at capturing overlapping deprivations in human capabilities rather than income deficit (Alkire & Foster, 2011). This was a methodological advancement because it recognized that poverty affected people in various ways. An individual might have income above the poverty line but still lacked access to healthcare, sanitation, quality education, or political protection. The capability approach therefore enriched the definition and measurement of poverty substantially. However, some critics doubted whether sophisticated indices ran the risk of technocratizing the originally ethical and political capability theory. Several scholars were skeptical of whether freedom remained a philosophical concept once it became embedded in composite indicators and statistical dashboards. They feared that as soon as freedom became measured and managed through policy-making instruments, its ethical and political essence would dissipate within bureaucratic measurement techniques (Gasper, 2002; Fukuda-Parr, 2003).

Despite these issues, the impact of the Human Development paradigm proved to be historically significant because it transformed the scope of global development discourse radically. Prior to the emergence of capability-informed human development thinking, it was common for states and development institutions to praise development mostly based on GDP statistics while ignoring the reality of human deprivation elsewhere. However, following Sen and the Human Development Reports, such an evaluative technique became less feasible academically. Issues of inequality, gender justice, education access, healthcare, vulnerability,

participation, and social security started entering development policy debates actively. This change was particularly important for the Global South where many countries had already experienced rapid economic growth without corresponding improvements in human welfare. In African states, for instance, capability-oriented approaches highlighted the fact that countries could grow economically while still suffering from severe shortcomings in maternal healthcare, youth employment, democratic accountability, education quality, food security, and social protection. Development thus gradually became not only about expanding economies but also about expanding human capabilities.

Nonetheless, the institutionalization of Sen's ideas highlighted the limitations of technocratic development governance. Capability enhancement required more than just measurement, it relied on political institutions, social relations, power structures, historical conditions, and struggles over resources and representation. This is why scholars from political economy and postcolonial traditions criticized capability approaches for not addressing sufficiently the structures of structural inequality, capitalism, debt dependency, and global hierarchies that limited the exercise of human freedom in the Global South (Amin, 1974; Escobar, 1995). Therefore, the Human Development paradigm existed in productive tension: it successfully humanized development measurement and policy discourse, but it also threatened to become incorporated into the institutional mechanisms of managing deprivation without fundamentally changing the structures generating it. Nevertheless, the transition from Development as Freedom to Human Development was one of the most critical intellectual transformations in development studies because it irrevocably expanded the definition of development beyond growth.

Measuring Freedom? Capability Theory, Indicators, and the Problem of Operationalization

One of the most enduring challenges in the discussion on Development as Freedom has been the issue of whether freedom can be measured without impoverishing it conceptually. Indeed, Sen's capability theory owes much of its theoretical strength to its willingness to move away from income, utility, commodities, or preference satisfaction and toward the substantive abilities of people to be and do certain things (Sen, 1985, 1992, 1999). But this is precisely where it poses its greatest measurement challenge. Capabilities represent real opportunities, not realized functionings, and the former is often less straightforward to quantify than the latter (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2005, 2017). Achievements like being educated, being nourished, having a roof over one's head, taking part in politics, or enjoying good health can be quantified using indicators, but capabilities are about the freedoms to choose between alternative possible functionings, regardless of which actual life is chosen (Sen, 1992; Alkire, 2005). This is an elegant theoretical insight but poses serious empirical challenges. According to Robeyns (2005), the capability approach can be best viewed as a wide-ranging framework rather than a set of indicators, while Gasper (2002) wonders whether its flexibility allows too much to be left unspecified for practical application in human development analysis. Thus, the debate starts from an actual dilemma: the closer one attempts to follow Sen's conceptual understanding of freedom, the more challenging it becomes to create reliable indicators; the easier one makes freedom to measure, the more likely it will lose its theoretical substance.

It is understandable that Sen himself has been reluctant to develop a fixed list of capabilities or an index of capabilities, despite the fact that international development institutions need exactly such tools for monitoring, comparison, and policymaking. Rather than relying on a predetermined list, Sen advocated the importance of public reasoning, democratic deliberation, and contextual selection of relevant capabilities (Sen, 1999, 2009). Nussbaum (2000, 2011), while agreeing with Sen on the importance of human dignity, believed that his reluctance to develop a list of central human capabilities has been a weakness. Instead, she proposed her own list of basic human capabilities, including life, bodily health, bodily integrity, practical reason, affiliation, emotions, control over one's environment, and political participation. Robeyns (2005, 2017) took a middle position on the matter, suggesting that capability selection should be explicit, justified, context-sensitive, and accountable. Similarly, Alkire (2005, 2007), coming from the side of the empirical researcher, argued that the capability approach can inform empirical development research as long as it is transparent regarding the selection criteria, dimensions, weights, and value judgments. The difference of opinion in the discussion is significant. Sen fears that fixed lists can be paternalistic or insufficiently attentive to context, Nussbaum is worried about excessive flexibility that might leave some vulnerable populations unprotected, while Alkire and

Robeyns emphasize that the operationalization of freedom should not flatten its philosophical richness (Nussbaum, 2000; Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2005). Thus, operationalization of freedom turns out to be a deeply normative exercise.

The institutionalization of the capability approach in the Human Development Index demonstrates both the strength and the limitations of the idea. Introduced in the first Human Development Report, the HDI aimed to challenge the dominant GDP-centered development discourse by combining three components: health, education, and income (UNDP, 1990; ul Haq, 1995). The simplicity and effectiveness of the index have made it politically powerful in that it has offered an alternative indicator to national income. Even in 2023/2024, the UNDP's Human Development Report emphasizes that human development is unevenly recovering after the pandemic in the global context, with low-HDI countries lagging behind, while very high-HDI countries are recovering faster (UNDP, 2024). This is relevant for the Sen argument because it illustrates that income-based development narratives can mislead people by making them believe that their human capabilities are expanding even when they are not. On the other hand, the HDI inevitably remains incomplete because it fails to capture political freedoms, gender social norms, insecurity, public reasoning, environmental vulnerability, corruption, or freedom from humiliation. This is why Fukuda-Parr (2003) believes that while human development indices have succeeded in shifting the focus from income, there is always a risk that the richness of human development might be oversimplified in order to fit a small number of quantifiable achievements. Thus, HDI is a powerful political and communicational tool, but it only partially measures the Senian vision of freedom.

The Multidimensional Poverty Index represents a more advanced step towards operationalizing freedom deprivation. Developed by Alkire and Foster (2011), the MPI uses a counting approach that determines who is poor based on multiple deprivations across various dimensions, combined with within-dimension deprivation cutoffs and an across-dimension poverty cutoff. It was essential because it shifted poverty research from income poverty to multidimensional poverty, enabling policymakers to recognize overlapping deprivations in health, education, and living standards (Alkire & Foster, 2011). The empirical importance of the change is evident from the Global MPI Report for 2024, which suggests that there are about 1.1 billion people who experience multidimensional poverty in 112 countries, with almost half of them being children. Common deprivations among these people include inadequate housing, sanitation, electricity, cooking fuel, nutrition, and schooling (UNDP & OPHI, 2024). According to the report, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa together account for 83.2% of multidimensionally poor people, with the latter accounting for a disproportionately large share compared to its presence in the MPI sample (UNDP & OPHI, 2024). These numbers illustrate the significance of the deprivation argument in Sen and confirm that a purely income-focused poverty measure is irrelevant for African development studies: a family can be non-income-poor but severely deprived of freedoms in terms of sanitation, electricity, schooling, adequate housing, health, or nutrition. From this perspective, the MPI is one of the closest successors to Development as Freedom.

Still, the MPI is an excellent example of the difficult choices that need to be made during capability deprivation measurement. Any multidimensional index needs to select dimensions, indicators, deprivation cutoffs, weights, and aggregation procedures (Alkire & Foster, 2011; Alkire et al., 2015). These steps are technically inevitable but never neutral. A poverty index that considers schooling and sanitation but ignores political freedoms, safety, land rights, care burdens, disabilities, and exposure to violence misses significant dimensions of deprivation (Robeyns, 2005; Nussbaum, 2011). It is particularly crucial for African development research where deprivation is influenced not only by the lack of education, health, and income in households but by debt burden, weak institutions, conflict, ecological shocks, global economic inequality, gender norms, and uneven state formation (Mkandawire, 2001; Amin, 1974; Rodney, 1972). New global development data demonstrate this point as well. The UNDP 2023/2024 Human Development Report highlights that human development recovery has become uneven and polarized, with the least-developed countries lagging behind others, while the process of global interdependence continues under conditions of inequality and distrust (UNDP, 2024). Likewise, the World Bank warns that Sub-Saharan Africa's growth has not been enough to significantly reduce poverty, with debt distress, climate shocks, conflict, and limited job creation restraining development (World Bank, 2024). These trends complicate capability measurement because they prove that freedoms are not just household-level achievements but also the product of political economy processes.

In this situation, capability measurement should be recognized as essential but insufficient. Indices like HDI and MPI play an indispensable role in cross-country comparisons, monitoring, targeting, and advocacy (UNDP, 1990; Alkire & Foster, 2011; UNDP & OPHI, 2024). Still, they should be supplemented with qualitative research, participatory approaches, political economy analysis, and contextual interpretations if they are to be consistent with Sen's original vision (Chambers, 1997; Robeyns, 2017; Alkire et al., 2015). Practically speaking, measuring freedom requires not just developing an index but exploring how people understand deprivation, which freedoms they value, why they are blocked, and whose interests are served by depriving them of their freedoms. In African development research, this implies that capability indicators should be connected to governance, gender relations, social protection, public finances, democratic accountability, and historical inequality.

Thus, the attempt to quantify freedom reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of Sen's approach. Development as Freedom is brilliant in that it expands the evaluative scope of development policy beyond income and forces scholars to pay attention to what people are actually able to achieve. It is fragile because the freedoms it values most highly—freedom of choice, freedom of agency, freedom of participation, and freedom from insecurity—cannot be easily captured by any indicators. The solution is neither to dismiss measurement nor to reify it. Sen's approach is most compelling when it acknowledges both the necessity and insufficiency of numerical indices. Freedom must be measured because development policies need evidence. Still, freedom must also be interpreted because human lives cannot be summarized by numbers.

Feminist, Postcolonial and Social Justice Extensions of Development as Freedom

The intellectual vitality of Development as Freedom is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that the capability approach itself developed significantly after Sen. As Sen's theory gained prominence, a range of scholars across disciplines continued to build upon, critique and expand the capabilities framework in various directions, creating an interdisciplinary school of thought. This development is not surprising considering the fact that Sen himself always maintained that the capability approach could never offer a closed system; in other words, Sen intentionally made his theory open-ended in terms of which basic capabilities are prioritized, what the definition of the good life might look like in specific contexts, and what methods are necessary to interpret deprivation (Sen, 1999; 2009). The open-endedness of the framework provided room for further research in terms of capabilities' conceptual and empirical content. Consequently, Development as Freedom was inevitably connected to the broader set of questions revolving around gender justice, social exclusion, identity, recognition, epistemic power, coloniality, and structural inequality.

One of the earliest significant theoretical contributions to the capabilities approach came from feminist scholars who identified a range of weaknesses and limitations inherent in Sen's theory. Although Sen himself had analyzed cases of gender inequality through his work on missing women, intra-household income distribution, and adaptive preferences (Sen, 1990), feminist philosophers argued that capability deprivation for women tends to manifest itself primarily as deeply entrenched social norms and invisible power relations. Martha Nussbaum became one of the most important figures of feminist extension of Sen's theory because she attempted to develop a normatively clear list of essential capabilities based on human dignity and gender equality (Nussbaum, 2000; 2011). Unlike Sen, who advocated for contextual flexibility, Nussbaum proposed more concrete categories including bodily health, bodily integrity, emotional development, practical reason, political participation, affiliation, and control over one's environment. The necessity of Nussbaum's extension of the capability framework can largely be traced to the fact that many women continue to suffer severe deprivation even in conditions of legal equality. Restrictions on women's right to education, mobility, political participation, inheritance, and reproductive control create serious constraints on freedom even if there is economic growth and development. Thus, feminist capability scholars revealed a significant limitation of previous development theories according to which economic development necessarily means overcoming patriarchy and gender discrimination. Women may make significant contributions to economic survival without enjoying basic human capabilities such as education, political participation, bodily integrity, mobility, and property ownership.

In addition to expanding Sen's approach towards gender justice and inequality, feminist philosophers contributed to the theory of adaptive preferences as well. Although Sen himself argued that deprivation often

shapes expectations over the course of many years of oppression, he did not analyze the psychological aspect of adaptation. Feminist scholars suggested that women socialized in patriarchal societies tend to internalize social norms as natural even when their own freedoms are restricted. For instance, Nussbaum (2000) claimed that a deprived woman may be unaware of her condition because the social structure surrounding her normalizes inequality. This idea is highly relevant to African development studies because gender deprivation and poverty intersect with numerous other factors that influence women's capabilities. According to UN Women (2024), in Sub-Saharan Africa women are forced to perform significantly higher numbers of unpaid domestic care work and suffer serious restrictions on employment, education, political participation, and other freedoms. At the same time, the World Health Organization estimated that nearly 70 percent of maternal mortality happens in Sub-Saharan Africa (WHO, 2023). Thus, feminism contributed to capability theory by showing that women are severely deprived in spite of economic growth.

At the same time, scholars such as Ingrid Robeyns further extended the capabilities approach through integrating it with institutional inequality and social justice studies. Specifically, Robeyns (2005; 2017) argued that capabilities help to measure whether certain institutions create equal opportunities and freedom for all social groups. Thus, capability theory moved beyond individual outcomes and started addressing more complex questions of disability, social exclusion, democratic participation, recognition, and other issues related to capability deprivation. Scholars in disability studies noted that the traditional welfare approach to development did not adequately take into account the fact that various individuals need different amounts of resources to enjoy equal freedoms. Two equally rich individuals can have significantly different capabilities due to differences in healthcare, discrimination, accessibility, etc. At the same time, the issue of recognition and participation became increasingly important in terms of defining development. Social justice scholars maintained that deprivation cannot be interpreted as material poverty, but as a failure to engage citizens with politics, civil society, and public discussions. In other words, development started to be conceptualized as both improvement of living standards and expansion of capabilities that allow social participation.

Finally, perhaps one of the most profound critiques of Development as Freedom came from postcolonial and decolonial scholars. On the one hand, many postcolonial philosophers were happy with Sen's shift away from economic reductionism; on the other hand, they believed that capability theory did not adequately acknowledge the power relations and global structures involved in deprivation in the Global South. In particular, Arturo Escobar (1995) claimed that development discourse historically worked as a form of Western epistemic power in which the West portrayed non-Western societies as deficient and in need of assistance. From this perspective, development even in its human-centered approach tended to operate as reproducing liberal notions of freedom, rationality, and progress that had been established in the context of Western societies. Similarly, James Ferguson (1994) argued that development discourses tend to depoliticize social relations between states and societies by framing political problems as technical issues that should be solved by administrative measures. These scholars do not oppose freedom per se; however, they claim that the Western liberal view of freedom fails to adequately interpret realities of the Global South characterized by racial inequality, colonial legacy, unequal capitalism, and epistemic power relations.

Dependency theorists and African political economy scholars made similar arguments concerning development as freedom. For instance, authors such as Samir Amin (1974), Walter Rodney (1972), and Thandika Mkandawire (2001) claimed that African underdevelopment must be considered in the context of unequal trade, dependency on debt and foreign aid, extractive economies, and unequal integration into the global market. Consequently, it becomes difficult to say whether capability-based freedom can really address structural conditions that produce deprivation. For example, when analyzing contemporary development conditions in Africa, it becomes obvious that freedom is limited not only by poverty at the level of households, but also by weak health systems, unemployment, inadequate climate adaptation, lack of technology, insecurity, and governance problems. In other words, African youth, although educated, faces a number of significant obstacles in realizing their freedoms and capabilities because of various institutional structures.

Thus, feminist, postcolonial, social justice, and political economy extensions of Development as Freedom neither rejected nor undermined Sen's theory; rather, they expanded its scope. These scholars embraced Sen's focus on human capabilities as an analytical tool in measuring development. However, they maintained that

freedom cannot be viewed merely as individual choice; on the contrary, human capabilities are socially, politically, historically, and economically conditioned and unevenly distributed throughout society. Feminist philosophers showed that freedom must involve a broader set of issues, including patriarchy, social inequalities, gender norms, and invisible deprivation. Social justice scholars argued that freedom is about more than material well-being; it is about democratic engagement, institutional equality, and social recognition. Decolonial and African political economists criticized capability approach by revealing historical power relations and structures that shape freedoms.

Major Critiques and Limitations of Development as Freedom

While Development as Freedom had a tremendous impact on development studies, welfare economics, public policies, and international development practices, the book received its fair share of criticism. Indeed, the significance of Development as Freedom, in part, rests precisely on the fact that it sparked an enormous debate among various scholarly communities. Critics attacked Sen's capability approach on a range of grounds, including its conceptual ambiguity, operational limits, lack of sufficient engagement with structures of power and historical processes, liberal philosophical underpinnings, and the problem of translating freedom-based analysis into practical politics. Some of these critiques came from capability theory scholars attempting to strengthen Sen's framework. Others were raised in the context of critiques from political economy, Marxist, post-development, decolonial, and institutional approaches that saw capability theory as failing to address the role of structures and historical processes in shaping inequalities under global capitalism. Notably, however, these scholars did not completely reject Sen's theoretical framework; instead, they acknowledged the significance of his groundbreaking human-centered perspective on development but claimed that there was more to explore beyond it.

Among the major criticisms associated with the capability approach, one can find the conceptual openness of the framework itself. Indeed, in his effort to develop a theoretically flexible and pluralistic framework, Sen did not attempt to produce a universally valid list of capabilities. Rather, he argued that capability sets should emerge from deliberation and discussion in the community and should be interpreted contextually (Sen, 1999; 2009). While Sen's approach provided a remarkable theoretical opening that enabled the capability approach to travel throughout various communities and societies, critics found it problematic for its openness and conceptual indeterminacy (Gasper, 2002; Sugden, 1993). Without clear prioritizations, selections, and trade-offs in terms of capabilities, the approach lacked the necessary specificity and consistency required by empirical work. In this regard, Martha Nussbaum attempted to provide the missing normative foundation by proposing her own set of basic capabilities necessary for a dignified human life (Nussbaum, 2000; 2011). However, this attempt met criticism for the risks it posed to the flexibility and openness of capability approach. Indeed, critics worried that universal lists of capabilities may be based on culturally specific liberal assumptions, thus limiting space for negotiation and discussion (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 2004).

A second group of critiques relates to the operational aspects of capabilities and freedoms in the empirical development context. To recall, capabilities refer to opportunities as opposed to achievements, thus leaving little room for measurement in the classical sense. While new methodologies, such as Human Development Index and Multidimensional Poverty Index, represent remarkable innovation for development studies, they risk simplifying and trivializing the philosophy behind the concept of capabilities. Freedom, recognition, dignity, agency, and participation are hard to measure using standard metrics; as a result, freedom in an ostensibly well-performing country might be severely lacking even if all its citizens enjoyed high education and good health. Moreover, the process of constructing multidimensional poverty indices raises numerous methodological challenges involving choice and combination of indicators, weighting, aggregation, and definition of deprivation thresholds (Alkire & Foster, 2011). Such choices are hardly politically neutral as they determine which forms of suffering become institutionalized. Therefore, critics worry that capability theory risks turning into technocratic mode of monitoring deprivation through indicators rather than engaging in complex socio-political reality of human freedoms.

The most challenging critiques come from political economy, Marxist, dependency theory, and post-colonial traditions. Specifically, the criticism is directed at the fact that Sen tends to pay insufficient attention to

capitalism and global hierarchies in reproducing deprivation in the Global South. For instance, dependency theorists see underdevelopment not as lack of capability but rather as active reproduction under historically shaped relationships with the rest of the world (Amin, 1974; Frank, 1967). Similarly, from the world systems theory perspective of Immanuel Wallerstein (2004), inequalities between core and periphery are structurally determined through organization of global capital flows. Hence, freedom cannot be analyzed from an individual perspective, given that opportunities themselves exist in a context of unequal global economic and social relations. Accordingly, scholars in these traditions argue that Sen's framework focuses on expanding individual capabilities rather than on analyzing their historically shaped structural contexts in which capabilities and opportunities become limited. For example, even in the presence of educational opportunities and access to healthcare services, poor peasants may suffer from unequal land relations, debt dependency, exploitation, and market volatility.

Building on dependency theory, post-colonial and decolonial thinkers critically analyze universalist assumptions inherent in Sen's capability framework. Arguing that development discourse has served to construct the identity of the Global South as deficient and in need of guidance, Arturo Escobar (1995) demonstrates how development discourse constructs its subjects in ways that reproduce the very forms of power it attempts to overcome. In a similar way, James Ferguson (1994) shows how development organizations depoliticize issues of inequalities through reductionism and instrumentalization. Seen from this perspective, even freedom-oriented development may continue to rely on epistemologically hegemonic understanding of human agency, rationality, progress, and development. In other words, decolonial theories invite us to ask a number of crucial questions. Namely, whose conception of freedom serves the basis for capability framework? Can liberal idea of agency account for relational and collective conceptions of well-being? Does development discourse continue to impose epistemic hierarchies in favor of some types of knowledge over others? Decolonial and postcolonial theorists found these questions particularly relevant in the context of African development research.

One of the major criticisms that can be directed at capability approach concerns its focus on expansion of capabilities and freedoms while leaving redistribution of wealth and political power unclear. Specifically, Nancy Fraser (2003) distinguishes between the concepts of redistribution and recognition, arguing that a proper conception of justice needs to include both dimensions. Socialist and radical political economy thinkers also criticize Sen for insufficient attention to the material mechanisms of inequality reproduction under capitalism. Even if education, health care, and political freedoms are officially recognized and made accessible, opportunities will remain unequal due to class division and other socially stratifying factors. In societies where wealth is extremely concentrated in the hands of a few elites, the freedom of the majority may be severely constrained in terms of political power, social mobility, and economic opportunities. Criticism along these lines gained new momentum in the aftermath of global financial crisis, increased concentration of wealth, and growing debate on the consequences of neoliberal globalization.

These critiques become apparent in the African development context. Indeed, despite implementation of various capability-oriented reforms in education, health care, poverty reduction, and social services, African nations continue facing structural unemployment, debt dependency, unequal global economic relationships, climate-related vulnerabilities, and fragility of their industrial base. Indeed, according to the African Development Bank (2024), despite demographic growth and expansion of education opportunities, Sub-Saharan countries are still facing significant youth unemployment and underemployment rates. Similarly, the World Bank (2024) acknowledges that economic growth has been insufficiently inclusive in terms of poverty and vulnerability reduction. These findings raise the question of whether freedom can indeed be promoted within structurally vulnerable contexts characterized by external dependencies. In other words, these criticisms bring out the fundamental question: Can freedom exist within structures of dependency?

Despite all the above-cited criticism, no scholar would deny the significance of Development as Freedom in redefining development. Indeed, as noted earlier, Sen was widely credited with shifting development research away from narrow GDP-centred perspectives towards broader and more sophisticated discussions of agency, capabilities, dignity, and justice. From this perspective, the significance of Development as Freedom lies, in large measure, in the fact that it pushed development studies to ask the more human-oriented questions

regarding poverty, deprivation, inequality, social participation, and opportunities. Simultaneously, these criticisms serve as a reminder of how complicated human freedom can be in a context of capitalism, patriarchy, coloniality, global inequality, and historical constraints.

DISCUSSION: DEVELOPMENT AS FREEDOM AND AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT REALITIES

There may be few regions where the potential and the limits of Development as Freedom are more clearly illustrated than Africa. On one hand, Sen's emphasis on substantive freedoms over economic development is highly useful in studying the African situation since the problems faced in developing countries there often cannot be explained by income measures alone. While economic poverty is certainly a major feature of Africa, its developmental issues have more to do with healthcare, education, food security, social exclusion, gender inequality, conflict, infrastructure, and ecological challenges. In this way, Sen's definition of development and his claim that the core of the problem is not wealth but freedom offer a particularly insightful perspective on studying African development challenges. On the other hand, Sen's capability theory is exposed to the limitations of capability theory itself in that capability deprivation on the continent is a product of the country's colonial past, dependence on foreign capital, uneven integration into the world economy, fragile state system, extractive politics, and international conditionality, all of which make a purely capability-oriented framework inadequate. The challenge posed by Africa to Development as Freedom is in forcing us to confront the political economic critique and postcolonial perspectives head-on – to ask ourselves how substantive human freedom can develop within a context of structural inequalities.

A number of insights generated by capability theory and Sen himself are particularly useful in examining poverty in Africa. Sen argued that poverty is better understood as a deprivation of capabilities rather than lack of income or insufficient consumption (Sen, 1999). This insight is extremely valuable because it enables analysts to focus not just on economic deprivation of many households, but on the multiple deprivations that affect millions of people on the continent. Indeed, according to the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, about 534 million multidimensionally poor people live in Sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for almost half of the world's total multidimensionally poor (UNDP & OPHI, 2024). These people suffer from nutritional deficiencies, poor sanitation, no access to electricity and healthcare, and lack of educational opportunities, among others. A family may escape monetary poverty by a margin but still lack safe drinking water, maternal care, proper education, or employment options. By focusing on capability deprivation, we can thus see that many of the problems faced in developing African economies are not merely issues of earning enough money, but of having substantive opportunities to improve lives.

Another example that highlights the significance of Sen's ideas in the context of African studies is the topic of health and healthcare services availability. One of Sen's key arguments was that the capability to maintain good health is not merely a means of expanding productive capacity, but a freedom of being in its own right (Sen, 1999). However, healthcare deprivation continues to affect much of Africa to this day. For instance, the World Health Organization claims that about 70% of global maternal deaths take place in Sub-Saharan Africa despite all the attempts at improving the situation globally (WHO, 2023). Preventable diseases, malnutrition, poor healthcare facilities, insufficient numbers of medical professionals, and unequal distribution of health services are just some of the factors affecting the lives of millions of people. These factors strongly support Sen's ideas about capability deprivation in that they show how economic growth does not automatically result in expanded freedom of the population. Despite several decades of fast growth in GDP for some African economies, they continue to lack a functional healthcare system, adequate health services, and access to maternal and pediatric healthcare (World Bank, 2024).

In the area of education, Sen's perspective proves highly relevant to the African context due to two key features of education. First, Sen considered literacy and learning capabilities as important substantive freedoms, which implies that development and capability enhancement go hand in hand. Indeed, primary school enrollment has been steadily rising in Africa in recent decades thanks to increased investments in education both domestically and internationally (UNESCO, 2024). Second, capability approach helps understand whether educational opportunities lead to substantive changes in the lives of those who get to attend classes in primary schools.

Even though educational enrolment rates have risen considerably, millions of students still suffer from poor learning environments and educational quality in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2024). Also, large proportions of young and educated Africans continue to face problems of employment and underemployment (African Development Bank, 2024). Clearly, simply increasing the number of enrolled students is not enough to expand human freedoms. There needs to be more economic opportunities available for educated people.

When discussing gender in Africa in light of capability theory, Sen and his followers were particularly instrumental. Capability theories proved very helpful in showing the extent to which women are deprived of many basic capabilities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite legal and policy progress in this area, many females are still discriminated against in access to agricultural lands, representation in political institutions, financial assets, employment, and education. According to UN Women (2024), women living in Sub-Saharan Africa continue to spend much more time on unpaid work and care compared to men and often represent the majority of those engaged in informal work in the economy. Furthermore, gender-based violence, forced marriage, high maternity mortality, and inadequate reproductive health services are all factors of substantial deprivation of females in African countries. Sen's concept of adaptive preferences is especially pertinent here given that deeply rooted patriarchy in Sub-Saharan Africa shapes the way people think about what constitutes freedom and capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1990). Capability theory thus allows expanding gender debate beyond economic and employment opportunities to other domains such as personal safety, mobility, voice, and participation.

On the political side, Development as Freedom contributes greatly to understanding the complex political realities of African countries. Sen's perspective helps explain how democratic engagement, public reasonableness, and political liberties play an integral role in the process of development in African countries. It helps explain why the presence of authoritarianism, corruption, violence, and poor governance is crucial for development prospects (Sen, 1999). Freedom of speech, information, participation, and access to political deliberation enable African citizens to engage with their governments, raise issues related to poor infrastructure, healthcare, education, nutrition, etc., and demand change where necessary. However, the realities of governance in Sub-Saharan Africa prove that capability approach has its limitations in terms of explaining development. While elections take place regularly, clientelism, neopatrimonialism, ethnic discrimination, elite capture, and fragility of the political system are all factors that restrict political freedom of African citizens (Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Bayart, 2009). Capability deprivation may thus be political and not economic in nature even if laws guarantee civil liberties to individuals.

Climate change has made capability theory particularly relevant to African development in recent years. With frequent droughts, floods, desertification, hunger, food insecurity, ecological damage, pollution, and displacement of populations, capability deprivation is evident in various areas. Millions of people displaced by climate factors and armed conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa are evidence of how climate crisis affects African development prospects (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2024). Here again, capability approach makes clear that ecological vulnerabilities affect freedom to live an autonomous and healthy life, obtain education, secure employment, etc. A farmer family might suffer from recurring droughts not just economically, but in terms of having enough to eat, education of the children, access to healthcare, and future opportunities. However, the climate crisis is a politically motivated problem because African countries generate relatively small volumes of greenhouse gases and face extreme climatic challenges. This reinforces political economy critique of Sen's theory.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the main argument of this paper has been that Development as Freedom represents one of the most significant theoretical shifts in the field of contemporary development studies since it has fundamentally reoriented the meaning, purpose, and standards of development itself. Unlike prior paradigms that equated development with such criteria as industrialization, economic growth, capital accumulation, or modernization, Development as Freedom reoriented development toward a new paradigm centered on human beings, as well as more specifically on the capabilities of individuals (Sen, 1999). By reorienting development toward human freedoms, the capability approach questioned the idea of reducing human wellbeing to variables such as

income, utility, or economic measures, arguing instead that development must be defined according to what people are actually able to be and do. Consequently, poverty could no longer be understood simply in terms of lack of income; democracy extended beyond the level of electoral processes; education and healthcare were reframed as intrinsic freedoms instead of productivity tools; and development was conceptualized as the expansion of the capabilities that would allow people to lead lives worth living. Ultimately, the concept of development had been radically expanded as a result of Development as Freedom, giving birth to the Human Development paradigm, multidimensional poverty analysis, and capability-based approaches to public policy and welfare assessment (ul Haq, 1995; UNDP, 1990; Alkire & Foster, 2011).

Moreover, the paper has shown that the enduring power of Sen's theoretical paradigm extends far beyond its initial formulation because of the richness of critique and discussion generated around Development as Freedom by other theories of development such as feminist theory, political economy, postcolonial studies, human development, and African development. Feminist capability scholars advanced the theoretical approach by highlighting gender-specific forms of deprivation that are frequently overlooked by economics and by bringing issues of bodily integrity, reproductive care work, social mores, and adaptation to central importance (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2005). On the other hand, political economists and dependency scholars questioned whether capability expansion was sufficient for tackling the structural dimensions of global capitalism, debt dependency, unequal exchange, and underdevelopment characterizing the Global South (Amin, 1974; Wallerstein, 2004). Moreover, postcolonial and decolonial scholars further critiqued the capability approach by analyzing the epistemological assumptions embedded within development discourse, asking fundamental questions such as whose freedoms matter, which forms of knowledge are legitimate, and what role continues to be played by colonial legacies within the institutions and frameworks of development (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994). Far from detracting from the significance of Sen's contribution to development theory, these debates only reveal the living and contested nature of Sen's theory of human capabilities that is constantly enriched by conversations and contestation within the broad field of development.

In addition, the African context explored within this paper exemplifies both the relevance and limitations of Development as Freedom. The capability approach presents an extremely useful framework for studying multidimensional deprivation in Africa precisely because African development challenges are not adequately captured by simple income statistics. Indeed, examples of poverty, lack of healthcare access, education inequality, youth unemployment, gender-based violence, ecological vulnerabilities, displacement, and political marginalization demonstrate the extent to which development in Africa is characterized by capability deprivation that is frequently ignored by conventional growth-oriented metrics (UNDP & OPHI, 2024; WHO, 2023). At the same time, it is clear that the capability approach suffers from its overly individualistic interpretation of freedom, given that capabilities in Africa are significantly conditioned by colonial legacy, weak institutions, debt burden, uneven industrialization, climate vulnerability, and limited integration into the global system (Rodney, 1972; Mkandawire, 2001). Therefore, the capability approach is analytically most powerful when it is accompanied by an array of perspectives emphasizing the structural dimensions of deprivation and inequality in the Global South, including those of feminist capability theory, political economy, ecology, and decolonial theory. After all, human freedom must be studied within the context of the structures within which freedom itself is organized, constrained, and negotiated.

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