

CAN POVERTY BE SUCCESSFULLY ERADICATED BY TAKING INTO ACCOUNT ONLY “CAPABILITIES”?

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Abstract. In this article I focus on the implications of the capability approach to eradicate poverty and eliminate inequalities between human beings. Even if the existent social problems have been debated throughout time by numerous researchers, different analyses having been made, concerning poor, vulnerable groups, and marginalized communities, we must focus on the causes which lead to the occurrence of disadvantages. Beyond that, we must investigate a few strategies concerning social inclusion and reducing poverty that contains numerous methods through which we can emphasize the development of disadvantaged people’s capabilities. My claim is that an increase of income represents just one way of helping to improve the life of these persons, but we must also take into consideration objectives such as the individual capability for self-development and the ability to function. To this matter, I will examine what capabilities an individual has or needs, to develop properly.

Keywords: *poverty, capabilities, quality of life, Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen, Thomas Pogge.*

0. Introduction

Considering the large number of vulnerable people living in poverty, the main issue is this: what can we do to help them escape from the circle of poverty, in which many were born and from which they cannot rid themselves? These groups need certain services granted to them, in the interest of participating in social and economic life. For instance, the national strategy on poverty reduction (2015-2020) from Romania concerns the ensuring of the Minimum Income for Inclusion¹, a program through which financial support will be combined

¹ To be consulted *The national strategy on poverty reduction 2015-2020.*

with different measures of reinstatement in the labor market, but also with the encouraging of children to participate in school.

Poverty and the absence of well-being, as problems encountered in contemporary society, can be studied from several perspectives; for example, we can consider a theory based on complex equality or a capability approach. Regarding complex equality, Michael Walzer and David Miller argued that different principles of justice can be applied in certain circumstances for different types of well-being. On the other hand, Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen have developed the theory of capabilities, claiming that it is important to see what individuals can do, what they can become, and what their ability to function is, in such a manner that it can be established the degree to which a person's life is either good or bad.

When the aim is to find solutions to eradicate poverty, an important aspect is whether to increase the income of poor people, insuring the welfare of such individuals, or to focus on the capabilities that these people have? In the next sections, we will concentrate on how the capabilities are understood and defined. Therefore, we will argue about: "what is each person able to do and to be" (Nussbaum 2011, 18), what are the opportunities that person must choose, act and, not least, the importance of the capability approach. As we will see, Amartya Sen considers the superiority of these capabilities over the resources, beyond the conception that economic development is an indicator for the population's quality of life. Another perspective, the one of Nussbaum, focuses around a normative conception regarding social justice, which can be followed by considering a set of capabilities, meant to protect the individual.

I. The Central Capabilities

For a person to overcome the unfavorable situation in which he finds himself, one must go beyond the resources he has access to and focus on a way through which he can use them. This is an approach that considers one's capabilities, meaning, what he can

do or become, using the available resources and opportunities. There are two main definitions of capabilities advanced by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.

Martha Nussbaum base her main argument in her own theory of *social justice* on a list of ten central capabilities derived from the concept of dignity (Nussbaum 2011, 33). Amartya Sen considers identification of these capabilities, focusing on the quality of human life, without considering the identification and definition of social justice.

Capabilities are answers to the question "*what is this person able to do and to be*", argues Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2011, 20). Therefore, these are a set of opportunities to choose from and to act, or certain substantial freedoms of the individuals, which must be promoted by any society and which can be chosen by any person, for their use or not. The answer to Nussbaum's question considers welfare regarding the income of the people, as well as the capabilities and freedoms of which every person benefits:

"The Capabilities Approach can be provisionally defined as an approach to comparative quality-of-life assessment and to theorizing about basic social justice. It holds that the key question to ask, when comparing societies and assessing them for their basic decency or justice, is <What is each person able to do and to be?> In other words, the approach takes *each person as an end*, asking not just about the total cost or average well-being, but also about the opportunities available to each person. It is *focused on choice or freedom*, holding that the crucial good societies should be promoting for their people, is a set of opportunities, or substantial freedoms, which people then may or may not put into action: the action is theirs". (Nussbaum 2011, 18)

In other words, capability means the opportunity of doing certain things, considering each person's decision, whereas functioning, or what a person can be, is different. Nussbaum argues for a clear distinction between capabilities and functioning

(Nussbaum 2011, 25), and uses Sen's example to introduce it: let us imagine a person who is starving and a person who is fasting. Both persons have the same type of functioning; they function in a certain manner if they feed themselves (nutrition is in the foreground). However, the starving person does not have the capability of feeding, whereas the fasting person has this capability, but chooses not to use it.

Beyond that, someone can assume that there are people who have certain capabilities but cannot use them. For example, let us imagine a man who developed his intellectual capabilities but who is incapable to make smart economic decisions. Moreover, there are individuals who possess internal capability to participate in politics, but they are unable to participate in the meaning of combined capabilities; they could be immigrants without any legal right or they can be excluded from participation (like black people were excluded in at the beginning of last century). Giving someone the chance to exercise their own capabilities is essential here. It is also possible to live in a social and political environment in which one can accomplish their internal capabilities (judging the government), but they lack the ability to think critically or speak in public (Nussbaum 2011, 22).

Regarding these examples, Nussbaum distinguishes between the internal and the combined capabilities. *Internal capabilities* represent the intellectual and emotional capabilities, personal features, health, body skills, also the internal learning of perception and movement of a human being (Nussbaum 2011, 21). These can be developed by education, using resources and improving physical and mental health by the society. *Combined capabilities* represent internal capabilities, as well as social, political and economic conditions.

The above distinction highlights the fact that, although some people have internal capabilities, they might lack combined capabilities. We must take into consideration the fact that each individual has some basic capabilities, which are fundamental ones because of their innateness and make possible the future development. But without the involvement of the state regarding the development of these capabilities through a proper education,

these individuals cannot integrate in the community, or worse, they will not be a part of it.

On the other hand, capabilities are not just abilities which are found inside each of us, they are also liberties and opportunities (created from the interaction of political, social and economic environments), argues Sen. Therefore, capabilities represent *what they can have or what they can be*, not only *what a person is able to do or to be*, as Nussbaum argues. Capabilities represent the way through which people can reach to some important activities. Therefore, it is about the goods that people can have or use, not about what they are able to have or are able to consume. This idea is considered from the perspective of access and liberty of which people benefit, but also of a person's ability to accomplish certain activities.

Sen's theory of capabilities is based on the advantages and disadvantages which someone has (or not), according to *what a person is able to do or to be*. Therefore, it is not about the resources which are available, but about the fact that "people should have access to whatever they (have good reason to) want to be or to do, but also that they should have the freedom to choose among these options." (Wolff, De-Shalit 2007, 37)

Another perspective regarding the capability approach belongs to Thomas Pogge. He claims that this approach does not help the individuals to properly evaluate their own needs, which can undermine, in certain ways, person's own dignity (2010, 44).

Pogge says that, "by shaping institutional arrangements in such a way that resource distribution in society compensates for the natural inequalities endowments, capability theorists are committed to make interpersonal comparisons and judging human beings as being better or worse than others" (2002, 204-205).

The disadvantages some people face does not occur merely because of the social institutions which have no account for the special needs of these people, argues Pogge, but due to the institutional schemes and cultural practices which are too sensitive to biological differences. For instance, if these differences should be removed, the disadvantaged people (for example, women)

would benefit from the equality of opportunity, political rights or the equality for getting paid for the work and effort they have invested. Pogge's argument is based on the idea that social institutions are the ones that apply different treatments to people, which leads disadvantages. (Pogge 2010, 25).

We can ask ourselves why Pogge believes that we should seek for a public criterion of public justice. In his view, the public criterion should tell us how institutional order should be so that resource distribution could compensate, in certain situations, for natural inequalities (Pogge 2010, 44).

The global institutional structure plays an essential role within producing and maintaining poverty, whereas the global institutional order prejudice the poor people, claims Pogge.

"Global order is made of rules and reglementations established by global institutions such as World Trade Organization – WTO, The World Bank, The International Monetary Fund – IMF, and by the United Nations System" (Gauri, Sonderholm 2012, 22). The main task of these institution is to create a system focused on the national interest of the developed countries, and, as an additional secondary task, the underdeveloped countries interest (Pogge 2008, 122). The system is unjust because it does not pay enough attention to the interests of the poor citizens from underdeveloped countries and can be criticized from a morally point of view for representing the interest of the rich and powerful nations which, in some cases, might be exactly to exploit the poor, considers Pogge.

II. Multiple meanings of the term

Capabilities have been explained and defined using multiple terms, by Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen and other researchers. The term can be understood as functionality, liberty or opportunity. Starting from Nussbaum's definitions, Christopher Riddle defines capabilities as being a set of different functionalities from which a person can choose, these functionalities representing things or activities from which some can be chosen. Therefore,

"one's capability set represents her freedom to choose alternative lives to lead. These capabilities should be pursued by each and every person and the goal of such an approach is to treat each person as an end, and never as a mere means to the ends of another" (Riddle 2014, 32)

Sen's capabilities (*to be and to do something*) are called **functionalities**. When talking about wellbeing, it is important to fulfil some functionalities, only this fulfilment ensure capabilities' development. Therefore, we can assume that the liberty of that person is the most important, if we discuss about liberty in the sense of focusing on the real opportunities of a person to do what they want. There is a debate regarding the sense of the term *capability*, because it is often used in different ways: sometimes capabilities can be interpreted as *liberties* for functionalities, other times they can refer to possible combinations of functionalities which have not been yet achieved (Wolff, De-Shalit 2007, 37).

Considering the theory of capabilities, the following question arises: it matters only the level at which a person can function, at a certain time, or it is also important to consider the perspective of those persons to sustain that level of functionality? Jonathan Wolff and Avner De-Shalit's suggest that people's perspectives maintain certain functionalities (Wolff & De-Shalit 2007, 9).

Functionalities, understood as things a person can achieve, but also as the perspectives that person has towards achieving those things, are considered as "that various things which that person is able to do (or to be) in leading a life. The capability of a person reflects the alternative combinations of the functionalities the person can obtain, from which he can choose a collection" (Sen 2008, 24). Sen argues, through the capability approach, that we can evaluate someone's welfare or liberty considering the capabilities they already have, but also the capability of acquiring these functionalities. Thus, to eradicate poverty, it is important to take into consideration the capabilities and functionalities people have.

To distinguish between the notion of *capability* and that of *opportunity*, understood in its traditional sense, Sen introduces in discussion the concept of **liberty**. This refers to the liberty of

choosing the life one wants to live, or the real opportunity to choose the functionalities of life one values.

One attempt to define liberty, based on the capability approach, concerns the distinction between *control freedom* and *effective freedom* (Vallentyne 2006, 83-84). To control the freedom to function, one must attain certain possible functionalities, through manifestation someone's will. The effective freedom to function includes all other possible functionalities, independent of one's will, and opposite to others choice.

Another type of liberty is the *favour independent liberty* (Pettit 2001, 13). According to Pettit it is an intermediate liberty which lays somewhere between the previously mentioned liberties. To understand the term, Pettit gives the following example: let's assume that a disabled person asks for help to outdoors. That person is dependent on asking the members of the society a favour, and they will accept in, so that a disabled person could live a better life. For the assurance of welfare for that person, it is important, first, that a life independent of favours is assured, as much as possible.

If we view poor people as less advantaged people, we can look at these disadvantages in relation to a lack of **opportunity**, which can follow in the uncertainty to function in different situations. In these situations, people less advantaged do not dispose from real opportunities. Wolff and De-Shalit consider that the idea of capability is too vague, suggesting that it should be replaced with the idea of *real opportunities* (2007, 9). These disadvantages are interpreted as the results of low functionalities. Every individual must be responsible for his actions, and to do this, it is important to approach the problem of real opportunities, to achieve sure functionalities (Riddle 2014, 32).

Sen and Nussbaum have argued that capabilities are the relevant benefits, seen as opportunities to function in life. This perspective seems to be different from the approach on the welfare opportunity. Peter Vallentyne (2006, 79) argues that, although certain versions of the capability approach are incompatible with certain versions regarding the opportunity of welfare, the most

plausible version of capability is identical to an easy generalization of the perspective based on the opportunity of welfare. Capabilities represent, thus, the opportunities which every person has in order to be able to function. These functionalities include facts and states of facts. Opportunities need to be understood, therefore, as effective freedoms not as control freedoms. Effective freedoms include opportunities based on pure luck without letting the past choices to affect one's chances (Vallentyne 2006, 82).

III. Reconsidering the importance of resources

If we analyse the problem of poverty considering resources (that people have or have not), we can compare the advantages and disadvantages which the poor are facing, based on monetary value. For example, we have evidence that low income prevents people to benefit from some facilities. From this perspective, poor people seem to be the ones who do not benefit from certain resources, opportunities or abilities (Wolff, De-Shalit 2007, 4).

Initially, economic development represented a good way to measure the progress of many countries. One of the advantages of using this method was that the gross domestic product; this was easily measurable, "since the monetary value of goods and services makes it possible to compare quantities of different types" (Nussbaum 2011, 47); moreover, this type of measurement was considered transparent (and the data could not be easily modified).

But measuring the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and the economic growth did not lead by default to an improvement of the quality of life. If the purpose is to eradicate poverty and to improve the quality of life, this method is not sufficient, at least not regarding to health and education. Cultural, ethnic, institutional or geographical factors should be considered when we analyze how welfare can be promoted through education. If an educational system has bad institutions it does not matter how much a well-developed country allocate to it because it would not function properly, or at least not as good as a country which

allocates a similar amount but in a more effective matter thanks to its better institutions. This contrafactual example gives a specific example on how focusing on economic growth can deceive us.

I am not arguing that economic factors are irrelevant, all that I am trying to say is that by focusing merely them we lose from our sight other relevant factors, in some cases factors that can be way more important. According to the national strategy regarding social integration and the poverty reduction 2015-2020, the relative monetary poverty can be reduced only by increasing of poor people's capabilities to generate, on their own, an increased income. This can be done through "(i) improvement of the technical skills, of education and experience on the labour market of the people affected by monetary poverty, (ii) increasing the employment rate of this part of the population and (iii) integration of measures which will increase the income of the targeted group (like measures to reduce discrimination)" (Teşliuc, Grigoraş, Stănculescu 2015, 56).

IV. Is the capability approach superior to the resource approach?

Pogge suggests that we should ask ourselves which of these approaches can offer more plausible public criteria for a social justice. By doing this he rejects the arguments referring to the capability approach, arguing that the theorists of capabilities have exaggerated the systematic difference between two similar approaches. The capabilities theorists assume, whereas the resource theorists deny, that a public criterion of social justice should take into account the measure in which these people, with a certain physical and mental constitution, may change resources in valuable activities. What we must take into consideration is an evaluation of feasible institutional schemes, in terms of access of the participants to valuable resources, or in terms of capabilities, argue Pogge (2010, 18).

If we support the view that the capability approach is more plausible than the resource approach, it does not mean that the former is inferior to the last one. Pogge claims that both Sen and Nussbaum make the same mistake: they compare an implausible way of thinking (according to which feasible institutional schemes

are based on the average income or GDP per inhabitant) with a more plausible way of thinking based on capabilities, and then suggest that the capability approach is more plausible than the resource approach (Pogge 2010, 19).

The capability approach has been seen by Amartya Sen as an ideal, the important thing being that citizens must be equal in terms of capabilities and not of the resources of which they dispose. But what is the relation between the equality based on resources and that based on capabilities? Whereas Dworkin considers that the two types of equality are identical, Sen rejects this perspective. Therefore, Sen argues that those who wish to measure equality in terms of resources are focused on the personal freedom of the individuals. The problem relating to these liberties is not treated correctly.

Still, Sen does not consider that we can speak of equality of liberties, because people have reached different levels when it comes to their abilities and can reach different levels of functioning. People do not have the same abilities to do as they will. They have the same material resources, but the capability to use them is different, and thus, we can no longer speak of freedom exercised equally. An equal freedom can be reached only when we compare people's capabilities, but not also the resources which they possess, argues Amartya Sen.

V. Welfare beyond capabilities and resources

The lack of opportunities, of income and the limited access to constant employment are just a few of the issues recurring mainly from the inequalities present in society and have negative effects especially on vulnerable groups. We must take into consideration the *equality concerning the resources* of individuals, separately, (such as: health, talent, ambition and other opportunities), *equality concerning the welfare* which everyone can achieve (based on the resources they have had) and *equality concerning the opportunities or capabilities* that a individual has (Dworkin 2002, 285).

Furthermore, we must ask ourselves if an equal distribution of capabilities and opportunities is necessary to ensure welfare of an individual. From Sen's and Nussbaum's perspective, a society is just if the capabilities seen as opportunities to function are distributed equally, and these arguments are based on the capability distribution. Considering the context where the society members are facing problems caused by poverty, we must ask ourselves if it is necessary to focus on equal distribution of capabilities or opportunity distribution towards welfare achievement.

If we accept the assumption that welfare is our aim, we depend on the following question: How can we measure the welfare of the individuals? Sen and Nussbaum argue that we must consider all the opportunities which every individual has, so that he can function and live a decent life, argument that follows from the previous sections. The wellbeing of the citizens is not an objective that can be fulfilled considering a certain person's preferences, because they are way too flexible.

If we want to find an answer, we must distinguish between two perspectives: (i) an objective way of measuring poverty (following the objective economic indicators of somebody's welfare, like the expenses or the income of that person) and (ii) a subjective way of measuring poverty² (subjective opinions of the poor ones regarding their situation are all being considered). It is well known that this subjective measurement has certain advantages, because certain long-term economic measurements are highlighted, therefore some future opportunities or possible disadvantages are anticipated³.

Nic Marks, the founder of the Welfare Center, achieved such a subjective way of measuring poverty. He considers that the most important thing is that all human beings in the world are happy. Therefore, when we ask one what *he wants*, he replies that he wants to be happy, healthy, loved and to have possessions⁴. For

² To be consulted Posel and Rogan (2016)

³ To be consulted Singh-Manoux, Marmot and Adler (2005)

⁴ To be consulted Nic Marks (2010)

the happiness of the people to be measured, Nic Marks proposed an index, considered by himself to be the main method to measure sustainable welfare. This index, The Happy Planet Index (HPI)⁵, is considering data measurements regarding: life expectancy, the lived welfare and the ecological footprint (resource consumption and the human impact on the environment, regarding preserving or deterioration of the environment).

Despite the subjective and objective way of measuring poverty, the violation of human rights and liberties represents a problem which worsens the situation of the disadvantaged people and this still affects people all over the world. Nussbaum argues that unequal treatment, which prevents the development of equal capabilities, should be forbidden because it is incompatible with equal human dignity, and a theory of justice must ensure equal human dignity (Kelly 2010, 72).

It might be argued the subjective way of measuring poverty based on happiness does not help to eradicate poverty. Here we can identify several reasons why. First, poor people can be happy if they have alcohol, tobacco and sugar. For example, people don't have access to different resources or foods with a lot of nutrients (such as dairy products, meat or vegetables), but they can be happy if they have enough money to spend on alcohol, tobacco and sugar, if we focus on different traditions and ways on spending time and socialise. Secondly, people can be unhappy even if they have plenty of resources, but they lack the ability to spend or don't know what is in their interest. Furthermore, it is difficult, if not

⁵ The HPI can be calculated in the following way: $\frac{\text{Lived welfare} \times \text{Life expectancy}}{\text{Ecological footprint}}$.

Through the lived welfare a certain index taken from Gallup World Poll⁵ is aimed, by asking a question called *the life scale*. This question asks for the participants to imagine a scale, where 0 is the worst life possible and 10 is the best life possible, then to pinpoint on the scale where they think they actually are. The ecological footprint is considered a measure regarding resource consumption. By the mean of this index, we have to aim the fact that the purpose of poverty eradication is that to produce happiness, healthy lives and welfare of the being.

impossible, to eradicate poverty focusing on the subjective way, because people's lives can be improved if they have money and a lot of other resources (such as capabilities, as we have argued earlier, a proper education or the other people's assistance).

If we accept the assumption that poor and vulnerable people need help, we can rely on society based on social cooperation. Rawls social cooperation rely on the idea of reciprocity between individuals, without an explicit focus on extreme dependency relationships.

We can consider three situations: (i) one based on „care for children, elderly people, and mentally or physically handicapped people are a major part of the work that needs to be done in any society, and in most societies, it is a source of great injustice. Any theory of justice needs to think about the problem from the beginning, in the design of the most basic level of institutions, and particularly in its theory of the primary goods". (Nussbaum 2006, 64), or another one (ii) based on the bad luck (chance): If an individual finds itself in an unfortunate situation because of bad luck (for example, was born blind or without any talent which others have), then that individual should be relieved from that responsibility (Dworkin 2002, 287) or another one (iii) based on choice – for example, after deliberate decisions (they have now, less resources than other people because they have spent it on luxury items or because they choose to not work anymore for underpaid jobs), that individual finds himself in an unfavourable situation, than that individual must assume the responsibility of their own choices. In the last case, the situation of the disadvantaged individuals is the result of their own choices, not of fortune, and those individuals should not have the right to any compensation, argues Dworkin.

Dworkin argues that we must take into consideration the problem of personal and collective responsibilities by making the distinction between *chance* and *choice* and we must consider the way in which fortune, choices and our judgement shape our own perception regarding responsibility (Dworkin 2002, 298).

VI. Conclusion

The strategies regarding poverty eradication and social inclusion, approached from different perspectives, seem to help improve the situation of the poor citizens. In this paper, I showed a few perspectives on how poverty can be eradicated. I started from explaining what capabilities are and how important they are. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum argue this way. I presented three types of equality (regarding resources, welfare and opportunities or capabilities of an individual) and I examined what implications they have on the capability perspective. The arguments regarding poverty eradication and improving the quality of life, simultaneously with the proper development of an individual capabilities, were followed by counterarguments supported by Thomas Pogge, by means of which he demonstrates that the poverty issue cannot be resolved through this new perspective. Pogge's argument considers a public criterion of social justice, which should tell us how the institutional order should be, such that resource distribution should compensate, in certain cases, for the natural existent inequalities.

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