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# Capability approach

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The **Capability Approach** is a conceptual framework developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum for evaluating social states in terms of human well-being (welfare). It emphasizes functional capabilities ("substantial freedoms", such as the ability to live to old age, engage in economic transactions, or participate in political activities); these are construed in terms of the substantive freedoms people have reason to value, instead of utility (happiness, desire-fulfilment or choice) or access to resources (income, commodities, assets). Poverty is understood as capability-deprivation. It is noteworthy that the emphasis is not only on how human beings actually function but on their having the capability, which is a practical choice, to function in important ways if they so wish. Someone could be deprived of such capabilities in many ways, e.g. by ignorance, government oppression, lack of financial resources, or false consciousness.

This approach to human well-being emphasises the importance of freedom of choice, individual heterogeneity and the multi-dimensional nature of welfare. In significant respects, the approach is consistent with the handling of choice within conventional micro-economics consumer theory although its conceptual foundations enable it to acknowledge the existence of claims, like rights, which lexicographically dominate utility based claims (see Sen (1979)).

The approach is first fully articulated in Sen (1985) and discussed in Sen and Nussbaum (1993). Applications to development are discussed in Sen (1999), Nussbaum (2000), Alkire (2002) and Clark (2002, 2005), to health in a special issue of *Social Science and Medicine* edited by Anand P and Dolan P (2005) and to the econometrics of social indicators/policy by Anand P Hunter G and Smith R (2005) and Kuklys (2005).

She frames these basic principles in terms of ten capabilities, i.e. real opportunities based on personal and social circumstance. This approach contrasts with a common view that sees development purely in terms of GNP growth, and poverty purely as income-deprivation. It has been highly influential in

development policy where it has shaped the evolution of the human development index HDI has been much discussed in philosophy and is increasingly influential in a range of social sciences.

The ten capabilities are:

1. *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.
2. *Bodily Health*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. *Bodily Integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
4. *Senses, Imagination, and Thought*. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason--and to do these things in a "truly human" way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain.
5. *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.)
6. *Practical Reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)
7. *Affiliation*.
  1. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.)
  2. Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.
8. *Other Species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9. *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
10. *Control over one's Environment*.

1. *Political*. Being able to participated effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.
2. *Material*. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

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- Human Development and Capability Association
- Journal of Human Development
- "Justice Across Boundaries" Radio interview with Martha Nussbaum on Philosophy Talk



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