

# **An Appraisal of Capability Approach of Dr. Amartya Sen: A Discourse Analysis**

**S. Srinivasan<sup>1</sup>, Venkatesh Andavar<sup>2</sup> and Ashok Jayaraman<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Head of Research & Quality Assurance, International Training Institute, POM, Papua New Guinea.*

*E-mail: srini.cud@gmail.com*

<sup>2</sup>*Dean, Faculty of Business and Management, International University of East Africa, Kampala, Uganda.*

<sup>3</sup>*Dean of Studies, International Training Institute, POM, Papua New Guinea.*

---

## **To Cite this Article**

S. Srinivasan, Venkatesh Andavar & Ashok Jayaraman (2024). An Appraisal of Capability Approach of Dr. Amartya Sen: A Discourse Analysis. *Journal of International Economics and Finance*, 4: 1, pp. 85-96.

---

**Abstract:** Background: The capacities approach chooses to focus on the moral significance of people's capacity to lead the kinds of lives they have intrinsic worth. This distinguishes it from other well-known theories of ethical analysis like utilitarianism or realism, which alternatively focus solely on the availability of resources for leading a good life and on one's subjective well-being. This research attempts to assess Dr. Amartya Sen's capability approach in light of the aforementioned fact.

**Methods:** In this paper, the Capability Approach of Dr. Amartya Sen is evaluated using the Discourse Analysis from the overarching framework of qualitative research technique.

**Results:** According to the most contemporary theoretical and empirical studies, the capability approach to advancement and evolution is still a developing paradigm, with several fundamental issues that must be addressed. The growing opposition to alternatives, both in real-world settings and at the grassroots level (such as neoliberalism and the Washington consensus) and in academia (which are referred as the evolving "engineering" aspect of mainstream economics), demonstrates that the capability approach is favoured with a sizable portion of the population.

**Keywords:** Capability Approach, Functionings, Freedom, and Development.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The moral relevance of people's ability to live the kinds of lives that they have reason to value is the focus on which the capabilities approach chooses to concentrate. This sets it apart from more well-known theories of ethical analysis like utilitarianism

or realism, which respectively place a sole emphasis on the availability of means to the good life and subjective well-being. The set of desirable “beings and doings” that a person may access, such as being in excellent health or having meaningful relationships with others, defines their capacity to lead a good life. The Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen is most closely credited with developing the Capability Approach in the 1980s. It has been used a great deal. The United Nations Development Programme, for instance, has used it widely in the context of human development as a broader, deeper substitute for strictly economic measurements like a rise in GDP per capita. Here, “poverty” is defined as a lack of the ability to lead a good life, and “development” is defined as the increase of capability. Many academic philosophers have been drawn to the Capability Approach’s unique perspective. It is seen to be pertinent for morally assessing social structures outside of the framework of growth, such as when examining gender justice. It is also viewed as providing the groundwork for normative theorizing, such as a capability theory of justice with a clear “metric” (that identifies the valuable capabilities) and “rule” (that specifies how the capabilities are to be distributed). The most influential form of this capability theory of justice was developed by philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who derived from the standards of human dignity a list of essential capacities that should be included in national constitutions and guaranteed to all individuals up to a certain point [1]. This article focuses on the intellectual underpinnings of the Capability Approach and how Amartya Sen’s work served as its foundation through discourse analysis which is discussed elaborately in the methodological part.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section reviews some of the most important work of Sen’s capability approach.

Development is defined by Amartya Sen’s capacities approach to development as an increase in the freedoms persons have to select their preferred development options. Sen’s work was initially rooted in social choice theory, which is a tradition in quantifying and evaluating collective preferences, or choices among preferences, even though his more recent writings are theoretical and philosophical. According to this article, research on communication for development can benefit from such aggregation techniques (C4D). They can be used in both small- and large-scale project contexts to assess the results of procedures designed to encourage decision-making participation [2].

Some phrases of Dr. Amartya Sen that “the genuine chance we possess to realize our values” and “The ‘good life’ is partially a life of actual choice” and not one in which

the person is pushed into a specific existence - however rich it may be in other respects,” says Thomas Friedman. It is genuine self-direction, or the capacity to control one’s course both as an individual and as a member of multiple societies. Freedom must be genuine and practical; it cannot simply be a “paper” concept. Freedom does not mean having the most options possible, regardless of their value or quality. Indeed, having more options can occasionally confound people and make their lives even more miserable. Freedom is Groups, states, and other entities—instead of an individual—can increase liberties through investment and public action [3].

By examining the empowerment of men and women at the local level, this work [4] contributes to the empirical research on the factors that drive empowerment. Our econometric estimations confirm key predictions of Sen’s capability approach on potential factors of empowerment using microdata from four villages in rural Karnataka/India. The reported effects on community-level change are correlated with education, decent employment, other-regarding agency goals, political networks, trust, and justice. Gender-specific calculations show that the majority of the empirical empowerment-related determinants are, in many ways, similar for men and women. However, several factors—most notably higher education—correlate with the empowerment of men at the community level but not with that of women, emphasizing the divergent gender roles in rural Karnataka. These findings may support academics and practitioners in developing cause-related strategies to combat significant factors that contribute to disempowerment in institutional village decision situations generally as well as those that are gender-specific. [4]

The literature on development economics is increasingly influenced by Amartya Sen’s capability approach. By highlighting the value of putting an emphasis on agency and empowerment and strengthening the multidimensional approach to poverty analysis, it has improved the conversation about development. The Capability Approach hasn’t, however, been fully utilized outside of development economics. By contrasting the Capability Approach with the Rights-Based Approach (RBA) and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, this article evaluates the Capability Approach’s contribution to the field of development planning (SLF). The paper makes the case that the Capacity Approach has the potential to become a normative framework to radicalize development methods by concentrating on capability space, power relations, and participation.[5].

The capacity approach is a comprehensive normative framework for assessing social structures and personal well-being, as well as for designing policies and

making suggestions for societal change. The capabilities approach is prevalent in many disciplines, most notably in political philosophy, welfare economics, social policy, and development theory. It can be used to assess many different facets of a person's well-being, including personal well-being, inequality, and poverty. It can also be used to construct and assess policies, from welfare state plans in wealthy societies to development strategies by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in underdeveloped nations. It can also be used as an alternative evaluation technique for social cost-benefit analyses. It is debated in academics in rather abstract and philosophical terms, but it is also used for practical and empirical research. It has supplied the theoretical underpinnings for the human development paradigm in development policy circles [6] [7].

In another study by Drèze and Sen, the evaluation of India as stated previously is fairly comprehensive research that used the capability method as its theoretical backbone. They analyzed in depth many (missing) capacities, as well as the goods, institutions, and behaviors required to make them possible, including education, health, hunger, political involvement, reproductive health, violence, and the effects of nuclear threats on human well-being. Drèze and Sen's analysis went beyond simply gathering and presenting the statistics and data that were available; instead, they provided a critical analysis of the opportunities and well-being of groups and individuals in India, based on these quantitative data and a wide range of other resources, such as political and social data [8]. There is a wide range of works of literature on Sen's capability approach and these works of literature are analysis the approach as part rather than a few authors who have studied the entire capability approach. This paper tries to analyze the maximum components of the capability approach.

### **3. OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER**

The core objective of the study is to analyze the capability approach of Dr. Amartya Sen through discourse analysis.

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

Discourse analysis (DA), often known as discourse studies, is a method for examining spoken, written, or sign language usage, as well as any other major semiotic event. Different definitions of analysis (discourse, writing, conversation, communicative event) use coherent sentence sequences, propositions, speech, or turns-at-talk.

Discourse analysts, in contrast to much of traditional linguistics, not only explore language use “beyond the sentence boundary,” but they also favor analyzing “naturally occurring” language usage rather than made-up instances. [9] The study of text is strongly tied to linguistics. Discourse analysis tries to disclose socio-psychological aspects of an individual or individuals rather than text structure, which is the key distinction between discourse analysis and text linguistics. [10]. Language studies, education, sociology, anthropology, social work, cognitive psychology, social psychology, area studies, cultural studies, international relations, human geography, environmental science, communication studies, biblical studies, public relations, argumentation studies, and translation studies are just a few of the humanities and social sciences that have embraced discourse analysis. Each of these fields is governed by its presumptions, dimensions, and methods. However, there is an ongoing debate over whether Austrian-born Leo Spitzer’s *Stilstudien* (Style Studies) of 1928 is the oldest instance of discourse analysis. The ancient Greeks, among others, had much to say on speech (DA). It was translated into French by Michel Foucault [11]. But it wasn’t until Zellig Harris’s series of articles [12] reflecting on the work from which he created transformational grammar in the late 1930s that the phrase was first used widely. Over the following four decades, this effort developed into a science of sublanguage analysis [13], culminating in a demonstration of the informational structures in texts of a sublanguage of science, that of immunology a thoroughly developed theory of language informative content, and [14]. However, most linguists at the time chose to overlook these advancements in favor of a series of complex theories of sentence-level syntax and semantics.

## 5. PRINCIPLES AND ORGANIZATION OF SEN’S CAPABILITY APPROACH

In this section, Functionings, capacities, agency, and freedom are important notions of Sen’s Capability Approach that are discussed that follow.

### 5.1. Functionings

The most basic idea is that of functionings. Sen wants to go beyond the issue of wealth, which can be defined as the percentage of a person’s income that is below the poverty line, the gross national product, or any other single indicator of economic well-being. His motivation for doing this is varied. Such measures, to start with, ignore how money is distributed in a society. For another, money does not capture

all of the characteristics of development that may be properly expected. For instance, Jews in eighteenth-century Russia may have been better affluent than some others, but discrimination prevented them from having access to many necessities for a happy life. The same is true for LGBT people in America in the 20th century. And finally, there are a lot of things that people may appreciate but that wealth alone cannot offer, like a pristine natural setting. Sen contends that progress must be centered on a variety of beings and actions that go far beyond material well-being. Thus, according to Sen, the capacities approach treats functionings that citizens may value as well-being.

The idea of “functioning,” which is rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, illustrates the numerous things a person may value doing or being. The valued functionings can range from extremely basic ones, such as being able to participate in communal life and having self-respect, to more sophisticated activities or personal states, like being able to eat enough food and being free from preventable sickness.[15]. Functionings are viewed as the embodiment of what a prosperous life might look like. This is not because income and wealth are desirable for their own sake, but rather because typically they are admirable general-purpose means for having more freedom to lead the kinds of lives we have reason to value. Wealth should, of course, be included in development thinking, but primarily as a means rather than an end in itself.[15]. Therefore, a comprehension of what makes up functionings and a comprehension of capacities, as described by this method, are inextricably linked.

## 5.2. Capabilities

The various functional combinations that a person is capable of achieving are referred to as their capabilities. Functionings and opportunity freedom, or the substantive flexibility to pursue various functioning combinations, are the two components that makeup formulations of capability. [16] In the end, capabilities refer to a person’s potential and capacity to produce worthwhile results, taking into consideration pertinent internal and external variables. The key phrase in this definition is “freedom to achieve,” because if freedom only had instrumental value to a person’s well-being (valuable as a means to an end) and no intrinsic value (valuable in and of itself), then the worth of the capability set as a whole would be determined solely by the worth of a person’s actual combination of functionings. Due to the nature of the alternatives open to them, such a definition would not take into account all that a person is capable of accomplishing and their consequent current state. As a result, the

skill sets suggested by this method go beyond simply focusing on accomplishments, as freedom of choice is crucial to a person's quality of life on its own. [17]. For instance, whether a person is choosing not to eat makes a difference in their well-being between fasting and starving. [18] In this illustration, starvation is the state, but the ability to get enough food is what matters most when comparing the well-being of people in the two states. In conclusion, living a certain way of life is not the same as selecting it; your level of well-being relies on how you came to adopt it. [17] Formally speaking, a person's capability set represents their opportunity freedom, or the ability to choose between different combinations of functionings, whereas the combination of their functionings represents their actual achievements. [18]. Some functionings play the dual role of functioning as both an end and an instrument, in addition to being the outcome of capacities and serving as a requirement for capabilities. Good nutrition, physical and mental health, and education are a few examples of functionings that directly contribute to capabilities. [19]. Additionally, Nussbaum makes a distinction between internal capabilities, which are personal skills, and combined capabilities, which is "defined as internal skills plus the social, political, and economic contexts in which functioning can be chosen." [20]. Since the idea of (combined) capability "combines internal preparedness with external opportunity in a convoluted way, measurement is likely to be no easy undertaking," she points out that it is not simple to do [21]. Freedom, responsibility, and economy of the person offered an expansion of the capabilities approach. His book examines how the ideas of personhood, accountability, and freedom relate to politics, moral philosophy, and economics. It makes an effort to balance people's morals and reason. It offers a methodological analysis (phenomenology versus Kantian philosophy) with the goal of re-humanizing the individual through deeds and the values and standards that result in commensurate rights and obligations that must be ordered. The capabilities approach is crucially expanded throughout the book. It specifically takes into account the relationship between freedom and responsibility, or people's ability to impose moral restraints on themselves. Sen's capacity approach, in contrast, views freedom as a choice based solely on functional rationality [18].

### 5.3. Agency

According to Amartya Sen, an agent is a person who takes action and affects change, and whose success may be measured in terms of his or her values and objectives. This is distinct from the conventional usage of the word "agent" in economics and

game theory, which refers to a person acting on behalf of another person [18]. The ability to independently select the behaviors that are important to one depends on agency; however, this selection may not always be in line with one's well-being. For instance, a person exercising their power to pursue a goal they value by choosing to fast may not have a positive impact on their physical well-being. Sen argues that to achieve agency success, a person's pursuit of their overall goals must be taken into account rather than only their well-being [17]. Agency largely refers to a person's position as a member of society with the capacity to engage in economic, social, and political activities for the capability approach. Therefore, the agency is essential in determining one's capacities and any political, social, or economic obstacles to obtaining meaningful freedoms. Concern for agency emphasizes that empowerment, engagement, and public discourse should be encouraged together with well-being [22].

Alkire and Deneulin made the point that the extension of important liberties goes hand in hand with the agency. In other words, individuals need to have the freedom to be educated, talk in public without fear, express themselves, associate, etc. to be agents of their lives; on the other hand, people can create such an environment by acting as agents [16]. In conclusion, the agency component is significant for determining what a person can accomplish by their understanding of the good. [23]

#### **5.4. Freedom and Development**

The concepts of functionings, capabilities, and agency collectively form the conceptual framework for Sen's perspective on development as freedom [15]. Sen's claim is straightforward. Both the primary goal and the major means of development are freedom. We should be grateful that such a renowned economist is reportedly singing our praises insofar as many of us have been critical of approaches to development that emphasize growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), rising personal incomes, industrialization, technological advancement, or social modernization. Sen's fundamental beliefs about human nature and his absence of a workable plan for achieving his stated objectives, however, contain many highly problematic features that render Development as Freedom not only erroneous but also downright hazardous. Sen argues that freedom should be the main driver of development for two reasons: first, since the only legitimate measure of human progress is the expansion of freedom, and second, because development depends on people's freedom of choice. As long as the notion of freedom is broad enough to



include freedom from material or spiritual want, as it does for Sen, many people will agree with the first claim. The second claim is more contentious within mainstream economics and popular discourse: Economists typically justify cutting back on public spending by arguing that poor economies cannot manage such expenditures and that development (in terms of economic growth) should indeed occur first and only then can societies afford to care for the social welfare of their citizens (for a traditional version of this “stage-gate” theory) [24]. He rightfully maintains that we should view political liberties and civil rights as direct benefits in and of themselves rather than as a means to an end (GDP growth). Freedom fosters the development, which is another benefit.

### 5.5. Critics of Sen’s Capability Approach

The subjective nature of well-being and the notion that a person’s subjective assessment of their well-being is all that matters are both rejected by Sen’s definition. Sen (1985a; 1985c; 1987a) responds by saying that people could be deluded about their well-being. For instance, a person in need might place a high priority on their subjective well-being or favor activities like smoking that are harmful to their health. Sen uses the idea of reasonableness as an objective standard to avoid such illogical conclusions. Only those valued capabilities that can withstand this approach can be deemed to be reasonable, therefore we must subject our values to a process of scrutiny and (public) argumentation [25] [26] 27].

Many scholars have concluded that there are only two strands of selecting capabilities, namely the philosophical approach favored by Nussbaum or the procedural approach advanced by Sen, as a result of the disagreement between Nussbaum and Sen on how to select relevant capabilities. However, as Byskov (2018a; 2018b) argues, this is overly simplistic and ignores many possible and currently employed methods for the selection of capabilities and functionings. At least 14 different methods for choosing capabilities are identified in the literature, according to Byskov, who divides them into four categories: ad hoc methods, which choose capabilities based on pragmatic factors; foundational methods, which choose capabilities based on some overarching normative value or principle; procedural methods, which use open-ended empirical or deliberative exercises to choose relevant capabilities; and mixed (or multi-stage) methods [28] 29].

A theory of justice must first clarify how its tenets or assertions of justice are supported. For instance, the later Nussbaum (2011a) maintains that her list of

capabilities is justified because they uphold human dignity, in contrast to the early Nussbaum, who justified it by examining what might be regarded as important human attributes [30]. According to Anderson (1999, 316), everyone has the right to the “capacities necessary for functioning as an equal citizen in a democratic state” as well as “whatever capabilities are necessary to enable them to avoid or escape entrapment in repressive social connections.”[31]. According to Claassen (2017, 2018), society’s overarching concern with a navigational agency can be used to infer the skills pertinent to social justice [32] [33].

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The capability approach to glowing and development is a paradigm that is still being developed, and some fundamental issues need to be solved, according to the most recent theoretical and empirical research. However, the increasing opposition to the alternatives around the world, including both in the actual world and at the grassroots level (such as neoliberalism and the Washington consensus) as well as in academic work (such as the growing “engineering” nature of mainstream economics), demonstrate that the capability approach resonates with a large number of people. The capacity approach will either stay essentially a philosophical framework or develop into a well-developed paradigm for freedom, development, and societal values during the coming decades. To determine the boundaries and potential of the capabilities approach, academics from various disciplines as well as societal actors and policymakers will need to put in a lot of effort.

## References

<https://iep.utm.edu/sen-cap/>

Tom Jacobson and Leanne Chang. (2019). Sen’s Capabilities Approach and the Measurement of Communication Outcomes. *Journal of Information Policy*, Vol. 9 (2019), pp. 111-131.

Sabina Alkire. (2022). *The Capability Approach and Human Development* (OPHI)

Melinda Schmidt and Harald Strotmann. (2022). Female and Male Community-Level Empowerment: Capability Approach-Based Findings for Rural India. *The European Journal of Development Research* Vol: 34. PP: 754–784.

Alexandre Apsan Frediani (2010) Sen’s Capability Approach as a framework to the practice of development, *Development in Practice*, Vol:20(2), PP:173-187. DOI: 10.1080/09614520903564181

- Fukuda-Parr, Sakiko (2003) The human development paradigm: operationalizing Sen's ideas on capabilities. *Feminist Economics* 9 (2/3): 301-317.
- Fukuda-Parr, Sakiko, and A.K.Shiva Kumar (2003) *Readings in Human Development*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Drèze, Jean, and Amartya Sen (2002) *India: Development and Participation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- "Discourse Analysis—What Speakers Do in Conversation". Linguistic Society of America. Retrieved 2019-11-25.
- "Yatsko's Computational Linguistics Laboratory". yatsko.zohosites.com. Retrieved 2019-11-25.
- Elden, Stuart (2016). "When did Foucault translate Leo Spitzer?". *Progressive Geographies*. Retrieved 2016-11-10.
- Zellig S. Harris (1992). Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society. Vol. 138, No. 4 (Dec., 1994), pp. 518-527. Published By: American Philosophical Society
- Richard Kittredge and John Lehrberger (eds.). (1982) *Sublanguage Studies of Language in Restricted Semantic Domains*. Published by De Gruyter.
- Hardy, Donald E., (1991). "The foundations of linguistic theory: Selected writings of Roy Harris Ed. by Nigel Love (review)". *Language*. 67 (3). ISSN 1535-0665.
- Sen, Amartya. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York: Knopf.
- Alkire, Sabina (2009), "The human development and capability approach", in Deneulin, Séverine; Shahani, Lila (eds.), *An introduction to the human development and capability approach freedom and agency*, Sterling, Virginia Ottawa, Ontario: Earthscan International Development Research Centre, pp. 22–48, ISBN 9781844078066.
- Sen, Amartya (1992). *Inequality reexamined*. New York Oxford New York: Russell Sage Foundation Clarendon Press Oxford Univ. Press. ISBN 9780198289289.
- Sen, Amartya (2001). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780192893307.
- Gandjour, Afschin (2007). "Mutual dependency between capabilities and functionings in Amartya Sen's capability approach". *Social Choice and Welfare*. 31 (2): 345–350. doi:10.1007/s00355-007-0283-7. S2CID 15031335.
- Martha C. Nussbaum (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard University Press: Harvard. pp. 21–22. ISBN 978-0-674-05054-9.
- Martha C. Nussbaum (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard University Press: Harvard. p. 61. ISBN 978-0-674-05054-9.
- Alkire, Sabina (2005). "Capability and Functionings: Definition & Justification". HDCA Introductory Briefing Note.

- Crocker, David A (1995), "Functioning and capability: the foundations of Sen's and Nussbaum's development ethic", in Nussbaum, Martha; Glover, Jonathan (eds.), *Women, culture, and development: a study of human capabilities*, Oxford New York: Clarendon Press Oxford University Press, pp. 153–199, ISBN 9780198289647
- Rostow, W. (1960). *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sen, A., (1985a), *Commodities and Capabilities*, Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Sen, A., (1985c), *Women, Technology and Sexual Divisions in Trade and Development*, New York: United Nations, pp. 218–223.
- Sen, A., (1987a), *Gender and Cooperative Conflicts*. WIDER Working Papers, 18.
- Byskov, M.F., (2018a), "Selecting Capabilities for Development", in Comim, Fennell, and Anand (eds.), *New Frontiers of the Capability Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 198–231.
- Byskov, M.F., (2018b), *The Capability Approach in Practice: A New Ethics for Setting Development Agendas*, London: Routledge.
- Nussbaum, Martha (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Belknap Press. pp. 30–31. ISBN 9780674050549
- Anderson, E., (1999), "What is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics*, 109(2): 287–337.
- Claassen R. (2017), "An Agency-Based Capability Theory of Justice", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 25(4): 1279–1304.
- Claassen R. (2018), *Capabilities in a Just Society: A Theory of Navigational Agency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.