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Abstract

The capability approach developed by Sen represents a proposal for the evaluation of individual well-being and social development centered on people and away - but not exclusive- of materiality. In the present article describes the capability approach developed by Sen and examines the importance for the evaluation of human development.

Keywords: capability approach, functioning, Amartya Sen

JEL Codes: I31, I32, D63

1. Introduction

At present the capability approach (Henceforth CA) is attracting plenty of attention from scientists and researchers of the human and social sciences.

The reason for this ‘attraction’ lies on the importance of this approach, not only as an assessment framework¹, but as an ‘easily’ operable and flexible tool, where the design and construction of the Human Development Index (HDI) and Multidimensional Poverty (MPI) stand out, which offer greater objectivity in the measurement of people’s life quality; better yet, both indexes allow countries to track the reality of their development. Therefore, the per capita gross domestic product is useful in the assessment of the economic growth, but very inefficient as a measure of human development². This affirmation does not suggest discarding the importance of income in people’s quality of life, but rather, to confirm that this is just a mean and not the end *per se*³.

Although the purpose of this document is not to make an exhaustive analysis at the philosophical, economical and anthropological level of the CA, it should be noted that, this approach is a purpose which without being parallel to the utilitarianism, it is the one which takes the most distance from the concept. In essence, and from the economical point of view, this approach recognizes and warns the importance of the ethic.

The motto of this approach translates in that the wellbeing is better assessed in terms of “capabilities”, in other words, that which people want to be or do to function and that includes whatever these reasons must value. In this sense, “capability” means freedom or more consequently, real opportunity to be and to do that which is valued for each one⁴, and in

¹ Which can be used for a variety of assessment exercises, among which there are: (1) the assessment of wellbeing; (2) the assessment and evaluation of the social agreement: assessments of the social and distributive justice; and (3) the design of politics and purposes about the social change in society, that is in the core of social ethics.

² This translates in that the potential and in the human achievements are not in function of uniquely financial resources.

³ The CA is presented under the perspective that just the extremes have an intrinsic importance, while the means are just instrumentals to reach the goal of greater development and welfare. In consequence, we always must ask and be aware of what type of value things have, whatever is being considered is intrinsically or instrumentally important.

⁴ Everyone has the freedom to pursue its conception of good how it sees it and examines and critically reviews.

consequence, is what allows to function. Based on the above, the CA purposed by Sen⁵ does not make a list of capacities.

On the other hand, the CA having as center the real and effective opportunity of people, applies a differential approach, in other words, Heterogeneous, where it is not the same the pregnant woman than that which is not, or a person who fasts than that which is obligated to endure hunger or that which the context favors of the one that this restrings. For these reasons the capabilities approach provides a wider informational base than that which is centered around *primary goods*⁶ or around the resources.

For some authors like Ingrid Robeyns this approach does not explain social phenomena like poverty, the inequality and the exclusion; but rather, it is purposed to conceptualized these phenomena.

In summary, the approach allows the individual assessment and the social advantage analysis. In this sense, Sen (2009) sustains that the CA can make a meaningful contribution to the justice theories, that is why, justice fosters when people enjoys of more freedoms to live a life which has reasons to value.

2. Background of the capability approach

Some aspects of the capability approach are dated back, among others, to Aristoteles, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx. However, the present form how it has been presented has been given by Amartya Sen. This approach has been enlarged thanks to the contributions of various authors, where Martha Nussbaum is highlighted, not just for offering a purpose centered around justice, but also around feelings. Unlike Sen who purposes an approach with greater interests and applications in issues of poverty and inequality. Therefore, Nussbaum affirms that the *telos* of Sen's CA is the life quality, while Nussbaum's is the search for the social justice and democracy in a liberal framework.

⁵ Amartya Sen was pioneer in the capability approach in the decade of 1980, subsequently Martha Nussbaum and others joined.

⁶ Rawls (1971)

3. Capability approach applications.

The contributions of the CA have been of considerable importance, mainly when it is present that they have contributed to define the principles on which the present reports of human development are drawn up. These reports culminate with a *human development index* (HDI), a compound metric based on three key factors: the life expectancy, educational achievement and control over the necessary resources for a dignified life. In addition to the reports of the human development of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) other researchers have tried to operationalize the capability approach, among these is Fukuda-Parr (1999; 2003) who observes the gender equality and visualizes women's poverty from the perspective of the lack of education, health and the channels for participating in the economic life and decision making instead of basing uniquely on the household income.

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