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A conceptual and theoretical framework for progressive political candidates in Colombia

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, the electoral triumph of June 19 represents the change that the majority of the Colombian people longed for. However, this brings with it some duties that must be assumed by any person who today has the progressive initiative to opt for a popularly elected executive position. Specifically, helping to build the political project of Gustavo Petro and Francia Márquez implies having conceptual and theoretical clarity around the following question: What is that perspective or approach to social and economic policy that is in tune with the postulates of a Colombia World Power of Life? In order to contribute to this purpose, this document aims to demonstrate that the capabilities approach elaborated by Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen contributes conceptually to the elaboration of projects, programs and development plans with a progressive approach.

Key words: Colombia, capabilities approach, progressivism, Historical Pact, Amartya Sen.

JEL: I31, I32, D63

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Introduction

In correspondence and coherence with the principles of political progressivism that allowed the electoral triumph of the Historical Pact last June 19, any development project, program or plan must be built from an approach focused on guaranteeing real freedoms that allow well-being, good living or, as the peoples of Latin America used to say in the past, the *suma kawsay*. Therefore, it is plausible to choose a theoretical construct that in tune with the principles of political progressivism validates and gives legitimacy to the structural reforms to be implemented by the government of Gustavo Petro and Francia Márquez.

Without going into the exhaustiveness of describing Colombia's major social problems, and assuming that the government proposal (not the Development Plan) of the president-elect is clear in relation to the structural reforms that are proposed as a solution to these problems, the question that arises and that we try to answer is: Why should those who have political aspirations to opt for an executive position of popular election at the territorial level (departmental or municipal) have an understanding of the capabilities approach? In what follows and in order to answer this question succinctly, but in a language close to any reader not specialized in development economics, I will point out through concepts some arguments that demonstrate the convergence and epistemological coherence between the capabilities approach and the philosophical principles or axioms of political progressivism gathered around the historical pact. We will divide the paper into three sections. The first section will introduce the reader to the concepts of human development, well-being, functionings and capabilities. The second section will answer the question: Why does the capabilities approach have links with the philosophical postulates of political progressivism around the Historical Covenant? Finally, conclusions and final recommendations will be presented.

First concept: human development

In the field of economics, it is common to hear that there are developed and developing countries. The average non-economist usually interprets a developed country as one in which monetary poverty levels are minimal. Surprisingly, this same idea that associates income with development was also considered by mid-20th century economists, for whom the development stage was reached once high rates of economic growth were achieved. In other words, economists of the time wrongly assumed that higher levels of

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would bring about (through the trickle-down effect) development. It was not until the 1990s that international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations adopted a new definition of development in which people's quality of life transcends the monetary sphere (GDP per capita) and includes other dimensions of human well-being. These include, for example, education, health, decent housing, decent work, etc.

The intellectual architect of this new definition of development was Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen. According to Sen (1999), the main problem with having economic growth synthesized in GDP as a metric of development is that this indicator of the economy is insensitive to how economic growth is distributed among the population. In other words, Sen argues that a country can be doing very well in terms of economic growth and yet the quality of life of the population remains the same or even worse. With this argument, Sen indicates that a public policy maker should make use of other more sensitive and informative metrics on how people live.

This realization led the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to commission the construction of a development indicator that would report more broadly on people's quality of life. The final result was the Human Development Index (HDI). Furthermore, in this context, the UNDP in its 1990 report circumscribes Amartya Sen's theoretical postulates around his concept of well-being.

Second concept: well-being

The concept of well-being has been widely discussed by economists. Some equate well-being with the feeling of pleasure or, linking the term (in the subjective dimension) with happiness. Thus, while some adhere to what is known as the subjective well-being theory, others, such as Amartya Sen, opt for an objective perspective of well-being that does not exclude the importance of subjective perception. As it is beyond the scope of this text to go into the details of the contrast between subjective and objective welfare theory, we will say that the former invokes individual satisfaction and the latter, without downplaying the importance of subjective perception, is concerned with the actual conditions of welfare. The main argument presented by Sen for opting for an objective approach is that a person or persons, after a long period of time living in precarious conditions, can adjust or adapt to such conditions (Teschl and Comim, 2005). Thus, Sen argues that, although it is important to perceive that well-being is enjoyed, it is more

important that it is actually enjoyed. For example, a person living in what are known as human settlements might report in a quality of life survey that he or she has well-being because, unlike other people living on the street, he or she has at least a place to sleep. Similarly, those who live in areas of intense armed conflict could feel that they have well-being.

In this line, it should be mentioned that Sen's most important contribution is the distinction he makes between two terms, the attainment of well-being and the freedom of well-being (Sen, 1985). To refer to the former he uses the concept of functioning, while when he speaks of freedom from well-being he usually uses the concept of capability. Thus, his approach is known as the capability approach.

Third. The capabilities approach.

The capabilities approach, also known as the human development approach, is a theoretical-conceptual, normative, multidimensional and proactive framework for thinking about injustice and inequality. It provides conceptual bases for building public policies with a territorial approach that contribute to efficient, effective and efficient solutions to social, economic and political problems. Its application has made it possible to construct different indexes, among which the Human Development Index and the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) stand out.

The importance of this approach lies in the recognition that well-being is inherently multidimensional and that the constituent elements of a "good life" vary among people, cultures and societies. Therefore, its focus is not on resources, income or what some political philosophers such as Rawls have called primary goods, but rather, on the ability or freedom that people have to convert these into well-being (Sen, 1979). Therefore, the key concepts in the capabilities approach are functionings and capabilities.

Functionings are states (elementary or complex) that reflect the different things a person can value doing or being. Arguably, they are achievements or accomplishments that a person chooses to do or be because he or she values and has reason to value. An example of functioning is to be well nourished or to be free from preventable diseases, that is, a basic functioning could be: to be in good health or to be nourished, another a little more complex would be to be socially integrated.

Two things to say in reference to the above is that, first, people have reasons to weight differently the same functioning and the reasons for this are due to the differences in needs and capabilities of people. Second, functionings are distinguished from the resources used to achieve them. The importance of this distinction lies in the fact that due to personal differences (age, disability, etc.) and the variability of the environment (geographical, social or cultural) the resources can be the same for two people and yet each achieve different states of well-being. For these reasons, the focus should not be on the means but on what people can do with them (Sen, 1987).

In order to make this concept more understandable, Sen proposes considering the case in which a person owns a bicycle; there, according to him, there is no relationship of freedom between the resource and the person if the latter is in a wheelchair and consequently cannot move by means of this means. At the same time, Sen adds that well-being does not depend on whether the person is able to buy a bicycle (or in fact owns one), or whether being able to buy one or having it at home generates happiness. Rather, it is about the fact that the person can actually move around on it.

The difference between functioning and capacity lies in the fact that functionings are choices while capacities represent the whole set from which choices can be made. A person who fasts achieves the same functional results (being malnourished) as a person who is forced to endure hunger, however, each possesses a different set of capacities that are demonstrated in the fact that, whoever fasts has the option to eat, and it is precisely having this freedom to choose that gives meaning to fasting. In this sense, what Sen proposes through his approach centered on capabilities is to understand that the issue of distributive justice implies equality in capabilities rather than in functionings, income or resources. In other words, it is about guaranteeing people the freedom to choose the life they value and have reason to value.

Why does the capabilities approach have links to the philosophical tenets of political progressivism around the Historic Covenant?

The simplest way to demonstrate that there is a strong link between the political progressivism of the Historical Pact and the capabilities approach is to note the importance that both give to opportunities. For political progressivism, achieving the development of a country like Colombia implies that higher education should be a universal right that allows all people the real option of achieving an educational life

project. Here, in line with the capabilities approach, we see that it is not a matter of forcing everyone to go to university, but rather, that those who value and have reasons to value education should be able to do so. The same can be argued when the importance of building child welfare centers for the sons and daughters of single mothers with the initiative to enter university or technical or technological institutes is raised. Once again, it is clear that the principle of these policies is to enable people to achieve what they really want to be or do.

In addition to the above, political progressivism understands very well that the degree to which a person reaches a certain level of well-being is closely correlated with what some scholars of the capabilities approach such as Ingrid Robeyns call conversion factors (Robeyns, 2003), and which are classified into three groups: (i) personal conversion factors which are internal to the person -such as metabolism, physical condition, sex, reading skills, or intelligence-; (ii) social and cultural conversion factors, these are factors of the society in which one lives, such as public policies, social norms, practices that discriminate unfairly, etc. and iii) environmental conversion factors arise from the physical environment in which the person lives: climate, pollution, propensity to earthquakes, and the presence or absence of the seas and oceans. Thus, for example, consider a bicycle as a resource that might allow a person to train for a competition, commute to work or college, and so on. However, this depends on whether the person knows how to drive, is not forbidden to drive, or has the appropriate terrain that allows him or her to be transported on it.

Another point is that it should not be overlooked that the postulates of political progressivism, as well as the capabilities-based approach, take into account the importance of distinguishing between providing and facilitating. In the first case, the aim is to attend to or assist extreme cases, such as that of older adults living in economically disadvantaged conditions, without a support network and most probably in a vulnerable state of health. What is being defended here is the importance of them receiving a subsidy or pension slightly above the monetary poverty line to guarantee basic functions.

Finally, political progressivism is in line with the capabilities approach when it argues that a free citizenry is one that is guaranteed security as well as real possibilities for realizing its life projects. Consequently, a citizen's real freedom is viewed in its entirety when it is interpreted as a coin that has a face and a seal. On the one hand, freedom understood as security or negative freedom implies non-coercion by a third party (be it a

person or the State itself) and, on the other hand, positive freedom understood as opportunities to live in conditions of dignity. Thus, the coherence in both theses lies in guaranteeing human security. That is, living in a country without armed conflict, but which offers everyone real possibilities to achieve their life projects.

Conclusions and final recommendations

Among the different reasons to say that the capabilities approach is in tune with the postulates of a Colombia World Power of Life we find that such approach allows:

- Assess avoidable disadvantages such as precariousness, exclusion, vulnerability, discrimination, poverty and inequality.
- Focus on people's freedom to choose between different lifestyles and ways of life.
- A social evaluation based on the ends, i.e., on the capacities to function, and away from (not excluding) the means (resources or income).
- Identifying that the value of a resource (e.g., a bicycle) depends on whether it enables the person to function (to get around) and not simply on whether its possession generates happiness (Sen, 2008).
- To understand that development or social policies are not limited to the achievement of well-being, but rather, to the freedom to achieve well-being.

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