

In Pursuit of Equity: The Capability Approach and Education

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Abstract

In a rapidly changing world, generating new approaches for public policies to respond to expectations of the people are crucial. Therefore, this paper aims to illustrate the significance and applicability of the Capability approach in education projects. According to the Capability approach, social reforms should coexist with economic reforms in order to achieve sustainable economic growth and good governance. Drawing on a case study from Turkey, the paper concludes that the approach may offer a robust perspective for education projects.

Keywords: The Capability Approach, Social Development, Equity, Governance

1. Introduction

In general, the issue of maximizing the Social Programs' benefits poses two major questions for national governments. First, the direction and the substance of the programs may not be well-articulated. Second, social programs may have a narrow base of beneficiaries as the leadership of related institutions may be highly politicized (Sta. Ana, 2002). On the other hand, Amartya Sen, an Indian economist and 1998 Nobel Prize awardee, argues that governments should be measured with the concrete capabilities of their citizens. This is because top-down development will always trump human rights as long as the definition of terms remains in doubt. Thus, he tactfully underscores the significance of efficient social programs. For him, in order for citizens to have a capacity to vote, they first must have "functionings". These "functionings" can range from the very broad (e.g. the level of education) to the very specific (transportation to the polls). His revolutionary contribution to development economics and social indicators is the concept of 'capability' developed in his article entitled "Equality of What". Since 1990, UNDP has annually published the Human Development Report, which is partly based on the Capability Approach (CA hereafter). Furthermore, there are more than 500 country-level Human Development Reports about national, regional and local development strategies using the same theoretical tools and frameworks (Robeyns, 2006: 351).

In recent years, robust economic development in Gaziantep city in the south-eastern Turkey caused large-scale immigration to the city from nearby rural areas. Most of the families living in rapidly emerging poor districts neglect their children's education because of the financial difficulties they suffer, or due to their beliefs and traditions (i.e., negative attitude among some families-mainly in rural areas-regarding the education of females). Therefore, some social projects to overcome this impasse were launched in the city. From Street to the School from School to the Life project of *Cinar-Der*, which is a Civil Society Organization (CSO) is one of them.

This paper, first, discusses Sen's capability approach. Then, it briefly analyzes the aforementioned project with regard to the CA. The paper applies secondary analysis. Secondary analysis reproduces studies from a different perspective and within a different framework. The massive variety of topics makes it suitable to deal with debates concerning political, social and economic change. If the context issue is successfully addressed, it may pave the way for broader sociological and theoretical debates (Gillies&Edwards, 2005; Burton, 2000).

2. Sen's Approach: A Revolutionary Promise?

The CA is a normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being, and proposals about social change in the society. It underlines the difference between means and ends; substantive freedoms–capabilities–and outcomes–achieved functionings (Robeyns, 2005). In recent years, people working in diverse sectors of education have become more fascinated in the potential of the capability approach to contribute policies and practices; hence, it is also possible to consider what it has to offer to evaluations of specific areas like education (Vaughan, 2007).

In general, economic growth facilitates the expansion of basic capabilities through higher employment; it generally improves prosperity and provision of better social services as well. The latter works primarily through proficient welfare programs that support health, education and social security. The CA, too, suggests that economic growth is necessary for the development. However, it claims that it is not always sufficient since the expansion in human capabilities is also a necessity. The CA is mostly applied to investigate poverty, inequality, well-being, social justice, gender, social exclusion, health, disability, child poverty and identity. It has also been related to human needs, human rights and human security as well as development. Empirical studies about the CA may be categorized in to three sections: First, there are many attempts to apply the approach to the measurement of poverty and well-being (e.g. Human development index is the most well-known of this kind, which covers income, life expectancy, and education). Second, several studies have investigated the links between income and capabilities. Many of these studies provide empirical support for the CA by suggesting that income and capabilities do not always go together. Finally, some studies highlight the group disparities by pointing to gross inequalities in terms of life expectancy, nutrition and literacy etc., along the lines of gender, race, class, caste and age (Clark, 2006).

At micro level, policy action might focus on selecting beneficiaries for public work programs, welfare payments or microfinance projects. The problem here is the difficulty to identify people with relatively efficient conversion functions in advance (e.g. even if some people need less money than others to avoid capability failure, they may conceal their advantage in order to maximize their personal income and well-being). This signifies that development projects based on adequate income will alleviate poverty, but at a higher cost than necessary and with undesirable distributive consequences. Nonetheless, the CA provides a strong justification for the promotion of interpersonal equity in the space of basic capabilities (Clark, 2006: 10).

The core characteristic of the CA is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be, that is, on their capabilities. This approach differs from others concentrating on income, expenditures, consumption or basic need fulfillment. A focus on people's capabilities in the choice of development policies signifies a deep theoretical difference, and leads to different policies compared to utilitarian policy prescriptions. Nonetheless, as the CA is an opportunity based theory, there are ongoing debates regarding how to measure it. Thus, it has been improved by other scholars such as philosopher Martha Nussbaum aftermath of its introduction by Amartya Sen. Nussbaum aims at a partial theory of justice by arguing for the political principles that should underline a constitution. She maintains that all governments should endorse certain capabilities; nevertheless, Sen did not have such a clear aim when he started to work on the capability approach. Instead, his applied work was on poverty, in which he found some empirical support for a focus on what people can do (Robeyns, 2003).

Today, resource based approach is still the most common method to measure the quality of life (i.e. monetary indicators of income or consumption). However, although monetary resources are significant for the quality of life, they do not suffice to measure it. Because, they are not intrinsically valuable; they are instrumental to other objectives. Therefore, Sen maintains that the value of the living standard lies in the living, not in the possessing of commodities, which has derivative and varying relevance. This would not be problematic if resources were a perfect agent for intrinsically valuable activities or states, but people's ability to convert resources into a valuable functioning varies in important ways (e.g. buying a laptop may be delightful source of recreation, pleasure and status for a teenager. But if the person is blind or unable to read, its presence in the household does not increase the quality of life at the same degree). That's why, it may be argued that the quality of life is not value-free. So, non-

monetary resources, which include a range of assets as well as access to certain services such as health, education, water, electricity and roads, become significant (Alkire, 2008: 2-3). Certainly, level of income is very important in many contexts but one should look beyond the income poverty. What about a person with an income above the poverty line, who suffers from an expensive illness? Therefore, Sen determines four different sources of variation: 1) Personal heterogeneities (proneness to the illnesses etc.) 2) Environmental diversities (living in a flood-prone area etc.) 3) Variations in social climate (the prevalence of crime etc.) 4) Differences in relative deprivation connected with customary patterns of consumption in particular societies. (being relatively impoverished in a rich society, which can lead to deprivation of the absolute capability to take part in the life of the community) (Sen, 1998: 194-195).

Main constituents of Sen's approach are functionings and capabilities. Intriguingly, even though they are related to each other, their relation has idiosyncracies (e.g. a person on a hunger strike and a victim of famine in Africa both lack the functioning of being well-nourished. However, the former has the capability to achieve the functioning of being well-nourished while the latter does not.). Another distinction of the CA is between commodities and functionings. As seen in the laptop example, the same commodity may have different functioning for various people. Hence, we need to know much more about the person and circumstances in which she or he is living (e.g. a man and a woman may have the same educational degree and both want to use this degree for some functionings like functioning to secure financial freedom, but if women are discriminated in the society, it is more difficult for the woman to use her degree) (Robeyns, 2003: 11-18).

In recent decades, adaptation of the people to deprivation by learning to suppress their demand and aspirations has become one of the main issues in development ethics and this phenomenon is often cited as a reason for veering away from utilitarian-inspired concepts of well-being (Clark, 2009). The strength of the CA in this issue is its simplicity about the objective (i.e. the objective of poverty reduction should be to expand the capabilities of deprived people) (Alkire, 2005). According to Sen (1998), new efforts in utilitarian welfare economics such as Pareto comparison take no interest whatever in distributional issues, which cannot be addressed without considering the conflict of interests and preferences. Sen argues that the use of interpersonal comparisons may allow public decisions to be more sensitive for inequities in well-being and opportunities. For him, interpersonal comparisons of personal welfare are mainly based on comparisons of mental states—whether of pleasures or of desires—but sometimes this maybe delusive as well. Because, utilities may be very flexible in response to persistent deprivation (e.g. a destitute person or a tyrannized citizen under brutal authoritarianism may come to terms with his deprivation by taking pleasure from small achievements, but his success in such adjustment would not make his substantive deprivation go away).

3. An Education Project in Turkish Context and Its Evaluation with Regard to the Capability Approach

SODES (Social Support Program), which was planned as an effort to convert macro economic success into social development and launched by the national government to support social projects of Local Government Units (LGUs) as well as Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) for achieving the social development in the South-East Turkey after a robust economic development period within the last decade. The program started in nine provinces including Gaziantep city (Devlet Planlama Teskilati, 2011a).

The project named as *Sokaktan Okula Okuldan Hayata* (From street to the school from school to the life) was among social development projects funded by *SODES*. The target group of the project was the school-aged children working in streets. In particular, the aim was assisting poor students in their lessons to increase their success in the school and preparing them for the *SBS* (national level evaluation exam). However, main objectives were to identify poor children, to persuade and encourage their families to let them continue with their education, and to increase their chance to have better education for a better future, hence creating capable citizens of the future. The length of the project

was nine months. It was accepted in 2009 and completed in 2010. Three centers in poor districts were established and 914 students, nearly half of whom were female, benefited from the project. Aside from the female students, children working in the streets were identified with the help of the local authorities, and their families were encouraged to let them continue their education. Necessary school materials were distributed to the children. 133 out of 284 eighth grade students (last grade before SBS-national evaluation exam) participating to the project were very successful and they are likely to go on their education in good schools thanks to their success in the exam, although most of them were supposed to leave their education for working or as they are female. Eighteen voluntary teachers took part in the project. Not only supplementary courses were given to the children, but also the life of the students was put on focus by family visits. In addition, seminars for parents were arranged as well as other social events for the children. Hence, some events outside the school were arranged to help their social development as well. (e.g. a trip for successful students to Istanbul, Ankara and Canakkale cities was arranged to give them a chance to visit the places they never saw before due to their families' financial hardships). In general, teachers are satisfied with the outcome of the project. They underlined the importance of the project, and suggested these projects should be multiplied as they improve both educational success and social capacity of the children (Devlet Planlama Teskilati, 2011b).

If we return to Sen's approach, it does not exactly define the basic capabilities list. Instead, it keeps it open to be defined on a local context and people's priorities. Thus, Sen underscores the role of agency and the freedom of the people to make their own choices. He also highlights the need for 'democratic processes' to find the valuable capabilities within the context of a local situation (Gigler, 2005). As Vaughan *et al.* (2007: 13-14) put it,

"Some of the reasons why the concept of capability is useful in general assessments of equality between individuals relate to the very broad scope of what is meant by education. Firstly, the capability approach was a response to the limitations of assessments that measure only desire satisfaction, resources, or outcomes. In education, most standard evaluation tools are based on what people say they want from their schooling; resources, for example spending per child; or outcomes in the form of examination results. There are, however, problems relating to each of these. In terms of desire satisfaction, imagine a situation in which children from low income groups receive only primary education, and children from high earning families attend primary and secondary school. If both groups say they are satisfied, because this is what each has come to expect, then there is no problem in terms of utility or desire satisfaction, as both groups are apparently equally content. Yet there is something uncomfortable about this kind of conclusion, however widespread the practice that supports it."

Within the light of this explanation, a situational analysis of students in Target Group of the project can be found in table 1. Conversion factors in the table points to the reason behind the inequality in education in the city. Table 2 illustrates the variables and gives a relevant evaluation of the project. Finally, other issue to be taken into consideration is to keep the educational projects outside of any ideological or political stake of organizations, and to be intended merely for alleviating the inequality in education.

4. Concluding Remarks

It is obvious that the requirements of the people differ according to time and location; therefore, the search for new perspectives and approaches is endless. As the CA regulates the distribution of the resources, it may be applicable in many fields for more effective use of the resources. Undoubtedly, good Governance requires capable citizens and that's exactly what Sen's Capability Approach tries to achieve. It offers a new perspective for educational projects as well.

To sum up, education of the children is one the most important issues of social development at national and local level. It is also clear that children of disadvantaged families do not equally benefit from the educational opportunities, which, in turn, harms equity in society. Even though the macro economic development is partially or fully achieved, this problem remains unresolved as long as it is not addressed by social projects. That's why, education projects such as From Street to the School from

School to the Life are crucial, and their success may pave the way for broader application of the CA in different contexts.

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Table 1. Description of student behaviour in Target Group of the Project

<u>Perceived problem</u>	<u>Required Goods and services</u>	<u>Conversion Factors</u> (Reasons why 'the problem' exists)	<u>Capability</u>	<u>Choice</u>	<u>Functioning (or lack thereof)</u>
Poor performance on tests	Content from lesson and textbooks	PCF (Personal Conversion Factor): Absenteeism, lack of time to study due to financial hardships for males, or lack of the parental motivation for the success for the females ECF(Environmental Conversion Factor): Lack of textbooks, other materials SCF (Social Conversion Factor): Only a handful of students are classified as 'smart' and expected to do better.	Freedom or opportunity to strive to do well on exams	Most do not choose to study due to chores and lack of encouragement by parents	Good performance on exams
Low completion rates (dropping out)	Financial resources, and persuasion of families	PCF: Opportunity cost of child staying home to work ECF: Lack of resources for books, and other charges SCF: Value of education is not high in rural areas. Besides, female students are not sent to the school due to traditions.	Freedom or opportunity to stay in school	Most students do not have a choice if the family cannot afford necessary expenditures	Finishing primary school

Source: Developed and modified from Robeyns 2005a cited in Tao 2010.

Table 2. Determining Variables of the Project within the framework of the Capability Approach and Basic Evaluation of the Project

Variables	Definition in Sen's Approach	Application to the Education	The Project
Capability	The presence of real opportunity to overcome the impasse.	Children should have real opportunity to continue their education. (They should not work in heavy works or get married at an early age, but absence of child labor is not enough).	Students are chosen among the ones working in the street, or females.
Functioning	the valuable activities that make up people's well-being	Education is universal and all the children should have the equal chance to further themselves for a bright future.	The project increases both performance and completion rate among poor students.
Individual Agency	The Freedom to pursue objectives that a person has the reason to value, even though that objective does not develop his or her personal well-being. (Regarding the children, A.Sen argues that promoting certain functionings on behalf of children in the present could be justified if it ensures children's freedoms in the future.)	The parents should not forced but persuaded. (Regarding the children's freedom, having good education expands their future freedoms)	Parents are invited to the related institutions and they are informed regarding the project.