Humanity in the Capabilities Approach to Development
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Abstract:
The Capabilities Approach has been the subject of increasingly enthusiastic enquiry in development studies over the last two decades. Before it becomes the dominant paradigm of development practice, it is helpful to consider the probable consequences of its use. It claims to reposition the human at the centre of development, so its understanding of what it is to be human and eudaimonia, human flourishing, is the subject of my critical analysis. I draw out the paradox of power in the CA. This alongside associated issues perceived in the CA worldview provides the lens for my examination of information and communication technology for development as a case study. My theoretical study and preliminary examination of capabilities in practice indicate that it is imperfect and its usefulness depends on reflective, wise practitioners. It must either be transformed or more comprehensive, internally-consistent foundations for development sought.

Keywords:
Capabilities, Human Development, ICT4D, Individualism, Empowerment.
Introduction

The Capabilities Approach (CA) has been hailed as a suitable theory of development (Deneulin and Shahani 2009) in place of previous approaches. With freedom as a central principle, it aims to improve upon simplistic frameworks such as economic growth as the rationale of development (Alkire and Deneulin 2009: 25). Amartya Sen posits that “humankind should be able to face a bit more reality” (Sen 2010: 40) and therefore “development can be seen as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” (Sen 1999: 3). These substantive freedoms are referred to as “capabilities”, that is, what people are able to be and to do; the range of which make up the “functionings” available to them (Clark 2005). Functionings should consist of that which an individual “has reason to value” (Sen 1999: 74). The “functioning n-tuple” or “vector” refers to the combination of the functionings which make up a person’s state (Gasper 2002). A person’s capability set is the range of lifestyles or “set of functioning vectors within his or her reach” (Sen 1985: 201). By acknowledging human diversity, the CA recognises that different “conversion factors” govern the transformation of each human’s resources into capabilities (Robeyns 2005: 99). The core tenet of the approach to development is to augment the individual’s capability set (Martins 2007).

As the idea of capability was developing in the 1980s and early 1990s, Sen did not refer to an ‘approach’. Yet his 1999 work “Development as Freedom” explicitly mentions “the capability approach” (Sen 1999: 86), while Nussbaum opts for the plural “capabilities approach” in the first textbook dedicated to the subject, “Creating Capabilities” (2011: 18). Meanwhile some have been boldly promulgating “the CA” for decades (Beitz 1986: 287). This terminological consolidation reflects a trend in development research and practice, with capabilities-based interventions and studies now being undertaken in areas as diverse as childcare (Babic et al. 2010), public health (Ruger 2011), education (Underhaller 2009), and tourism (Warner 2003). The network of scholars and practitioners working with the CA collaborate through the Human Development and Capability Association and the associated “Journal of Human Development and Capabilities” (Nussbaum 2011: 17). The influence of the CA has now exceeded Sen’s and Nussbaum’s own work and become a somewhat autonomous force in development studies.
As opposed to neoliberal approaches in which humans are seen as strategic capital, Sen repositions human freedom as the end as well as the means of development (Sen 1999: 53). This arguably inspired the prevailing notion of beneficiary participation and the rhetoric of self-determination in current development practice (Neefjes 2000). To date much research has concentrated on whether the CA can be operationalised (Robeyns 2006). But as Walker (2012) has argued with respect to education, the framework used for development will influence which policies are made, which in turn alter the experience of the world that people have. The logic of this line of argument is that theoretical norms have corresponding impacts as they are operationalised. This paper will therefore compare the theoretical concept of the human being in the world that is implied by the CA to that which emerges from the thus far tentative employment of the CA in practice, with a focus on information and communication technology for development (ICT4D). This particular field is apposite for the discussion since it brings to light the question of aspirations (Appadurai 2004) and because its relevance is not restricted to capability expansion in the Global South but carries implications for the Global North too. In this way, the extent to which conceptual problems of the CA may translate into practice if it is mainstreamed will be indicated.

The paper will therefore assess Kippler’s suggestion that capabilities can connect post-development theory to an approach which facilitates empowerment, without undermining other values or becoming politically naive (2010: 33). It begins to respond to Clark’s call for more work on the policy implications of the capabilities approach (2005: 11), as well as Gasper’s insistence on a third phase of evaluation of the CA (2002: 437). As Sen himself commented (1999: 209), “a mis-conceived theory can kill” (cited in Alkire 2008).

In order to discover the potential consequences of employing the CA to development, the research takes a two-pronged format. Chapter one reveals the CA’s idea of what it is to be human by examining the capabilities literature. As Robeyns does, I “take Sen’s capability approach as my starting point, and discuss Nussbaum’s work when it...diverges” (2006: 95). Evidence from further capabilities scholars will be drawn upon. A critique of this worldview will form the basis of chapter two so as to highlight the paradoxes of power in the CA. As such the contradictory CA view of the human as both a rational agent in charge of her own development, and an instrument for the development of others, will be revealed. This combined with the emphasis on individual empowerment make the CA conceptually incongruous as it does not address other forms of power than power to be and do. These
issues will be highlighted together with practical consequences anticipated to emanate from them. Chapter three then applies them as an analytical lens to the development practice case study ICT4D. The different ways in which the CA has been implemented so far will be distinguished to show how its normative core influences these manifestations. Thus the concern that the CA would not be fully workable and would change the nature of human relationships will be supported by evidence from ICT4D practice. Although attempts are being made to strengthen the CA, by demanding a value change they question its very tenets, casting doubt on the relevance of the CA as a foundation for development.

1. The CA concept of the human in the world

Introduction

Awareness of the concept of the human in the world which the CA implies and aims for is required to anticipate the effects of ‘development as capability expansion’. This chapter is not therefore intended as a description of the CA, but an analysis of the worldview which underpins it. The picture emerges from a focus on Sen’s works as the founder of the CA, while incorporating other scholars, notably Nussbaum. The CA’s origins will be explored to introduce the CA human and her attributes of choice and reasoning. The discussion will then address the purpose of this human, and corresponding humanist, quasi-utilitarian CA concept of ‘the good life’. Finally, the human in context will be analysed, indicating contradictions in the CA worldview.

Assumptions

When considering whether the CA is an appropriate approach to development it is important to begin by considering what Sen and the CA conceive the human to be. Development should alleviate and eventually eliminate poverty, but each definition of poverty is “a construction of reality, involving numerous judgements, which are not always transparent” (Laderchi et al. 2003: 1). Sen defines poverty as “capability deprivation” and places the human at the centre of development (1999: 87). Examining the CA’s account of the human thus provides a way in to uncovering the otherwise elusive bias and worldview of the CA. Deneulin affirms that “no development policy can be neutral with respect to a conception of the good” (2002: 516). Sen himself acknowledges that the “evaluation of economic [and] social policies” depends on the “priorities in deciding on what should be at the core of our normative concern” (1999: 85).
The perspective offered in this paper shares a concern with Sen and Nussbaum for human flourishing (Nussbaum 2011: 197), but stands hesitant with Laderchi and Deneuvin because of a conviction that true flourishing should be rooted in a coherent, realistic worldview: one that corresponds as closely as possible to reality. The question of whether reality is understood as monolithic or plural, and by whom, is outside the bounds of this paper. As such, the paper will go on to assess the CA’s conceptual coherence by suggesting elements of human life which it cannot account for, and examining whether it can satisfy its own criteria for the good life – rather than holding it to some other, doctrinal standard of ‘reality’. In this way the analysis should remain useful to those of different worldviews.

Origins of the CA

Assumptions of the paper itself now made plain, the roots of “capabilities” must be outlined. In the seminal work “Development as Freedom” Sen argues for freedom as the “foundation of justice” (1999: 54) after surveying the alternatives offered by utilitarianism, John Rawls, and libertarianism. In capabilities he sees an approach to development which encapsulates the useful aspects of each of the latter, while avoiding their pitfalls and including information they are blind to. For example, utilitarians are concerned with maximising happiness, which Sen deems “too malleable to be a firm guide to deprivation” (1999: 63) in contrast with the freedoms people have “reason to value” (Sen 1999: 10). Sen claims Rawls ignores the fact that people have varying ability to use their resources (1999: 74). The CA answers this with the concept of “conversion factors” which influence whether a person is “capable” of benefiting from a good (1999: 74). Sen also integrates subjective values into the approach, which economics has traditionally avoided doing (Deneulin 2002: 501). In this way he moves beyond the ‘modernisation approach’ to development (Asiedu 2011) and economic indicators as the measure of improvement. The result is closer to Aristotle’s view of eudaimonia, human flourishing, which Sen alludes to (1999: 73) and Nussbaum draws on explicitly (2011: 23). By drawing on classical philosophy to critique the modern philosophical foundations of dominant approaches, capabilities theory has contributed to the shift towards self-determination in development discourse.
Attributes of the human

Sen’s human can be described as a “collection of evolving capabilities”, contrasting the utilitarian “collection of preferences” view (Davis 2009: 419; 414). Nussbaum constructs a list of ten “basic functional” capabilities which for her define what anyone should be able to be and do in order to merit the label ‘human’ (1995: 82-83). These consist of being able to: live a normal length of time, satisfy bodily needs, avoid pain and experience pleasure, use the senses, have attachments, develop one’s idea of the good, be social, engage with nature, enjoy recreation, live without interference in personal matters (Nussbaum 1995: 83-55). But even Nussbaum’s image of the “pre-cultural” human being (White and Deneulin 2009: 255) is open to debate and modification. She envisages the list as part of a global conversation regarding social values rather than a series of absolutes. Although Sen suggests five particular freedoms as instrumental to others, he refuses to prescribe a list (1999: 38). Nussbaum acknowledges that “functionings, not simply capabilities, are what render a life fully human”, yet recommends that policies target capabilities (Nussbaum 2000: 87, cited in Deneulin 2002: 512). This leads to a “thinnish” rather than a rich “conception of personhood” in the CA (Gasper 2002: 437).

Although underspecified the CA human does have a number of key, irreducible attributes. Foremost among these is each human’s intrinsic right to freedom (Mansell 2002: 420). According to the CA, humans can make free choices regarding how to be and act. There is an “irreducible component of free will” in the CA (Johnstone 2007: 86), implying that a person’s dignity is defined by their moral right to decide how to live. In order to access knowledge about the functionings they value and make such decisions, they rely upon their ability to reason. Indeed, Sen refers to “our humanity as reasoning creatures” (1999: 77) which corresponds to Nussbaum’s sixth basic human capability; “being able to form a conception of the good” (1995: 84). Gasper affirms that “central to Sen’s view is the choosing, reasoning individual” (2002: 451). Furthermore, each person is understood to be in the optimum position to decide which functionings to pursue. According to Sen, it would be “absurd” for ethical theorists to pretend to know better than an individual what is best for her (2006: 88).
Purpose of the human

The purpose of the human in the capabilities view must now be addressed more fully. While it may appear trite, it is interesting to note that the survival of the human body is tacitly understood as key to the main goal of human flourishing – as highlighted by Gasper (2002). This Aristotelian view in which development is conceived as ever-expanding freedom (Clark 2005: 2) implies that the more capabilities one has, the better. The important thing is to have choices which increase one’s potential, not realise one’s potential in a particular way by making choices. In this sense, freedom alone is of intrinsic value to the human (Clark 2005: 5); no particular functionings are considered basic needs. Nussbaum judges it unnecessary to differentiate human well-being from agency, since well-being is encompassed in whatever an individual values being able to be or do (2011: 200): the human’s “power to” act (Martins 2007: 48). Capabilities can thus be understood as substantive positive freedoms or the “power to...shape [one’s own] life” (Fernandez-Baldor et al. 2009: 8). Capability expansion therefore relates to augmenting one’s agency, or “empowerment” (Hill 2003: 117). In the CA, the human, whose bettering is synonymous with the expansion of her capability set, has no higher purpose than empowering herself.

Nature of the CA worldview

The CA is thus clearly distinguishable as humanist since it concerns itself solely with humanity and “[refocuses] on people as ends in themselves” (Clark 2005: 5). Significance is attributed to individuals’ potential (Gasper 2007: 350) – rather than prescribing how they ought to act or be. The concept of the human may be lacking in detail but it is strongly optimistic about the human: theoretically each human can create her own identity and be the propeller of her own flourishing. Dubois and Mahieu echo this view, arguing that the human of the CA is defined as an economic individual but has the possibility of becoming a ‘real’ human by choosing her functionings (2003: 11). Categorising the CA concept of what it is to be human as economic in character (Douglas and Ney 1998: 52) is significant, given that Sen’s aim was to move away from such an attitude. Essentially, Sen has amended the call to maximise happiness (Mill 1910) with a call to maximise one’s capability set. In human development theory, which draws heavily on capabilities, development interventions must “offer the highest impact in terms of people’s opportunities” (Alkire and Deneulin 2009: 30). In this way utilitarianism’s “excessive [dependence] on a person’s tastes and preferences”
(Beitz 1986: 284) is replaced by dependence on a person’s reasoned values (Peterson 2004: 297). The skeleton framework of utilitarianism is thus recycled by the CA by altering the unit of measurement to individual freedoms.

The human in context

The capabilities model of one human’s relationship to another and to the environment must now be explored. These can be considered together for together they form the context which determines the individual’s conversion factors; that which governs their ability to transform “goods and services” into functionings (Robeyns 2005: 99). The CA deeply recognises human diversity so no general analysis of how the factors affect commodity conversion is offered. Nevertheless, Davis (2002) argues that humans only have different identities because they belong to different social groups, not in spite of these or because they belong to none. In that sense the capability to have an identity would depend on the capability to be in relationship with others – or in Nussbaum’s words, “being able to live for and to others (1995: 84). Davis infers that the CA considers the individual inherently social, for what people are able to do and be is influenced by others in various ways (2009: 414). Yet by framing the relational aspect of being human as a capability, something which a human can choose to utilise or not, the CA actually supports the idea that relationships are not necessarily integral to what it is to be human. In the CA, an individual isolated from others would hypothetically still be able to flourish, to the extent that she did not value connection to others or require them in order to realise other functionings. While the human may exist among other humans, Gasper is justified in saying that for the purposes of the CA, “community membership is taken as instrumental, not central, to being” (2002: 452). By designating people conversion factors, and relationships capabilities, the CA conceives society as but instrumental or optional to the individual’s definition of human flourishing, rather than intrinsic. The human in focus may be the ‘end’ of development, but those around him may be no more than his ‘means’.

This is not to say that the CA ignores social or institutional aspects altogether. It does incorporate participatory decision making; reasoning together over which capabilities are to be valued. Sen (1999) envisages this ideally taking place within a democratic framework. But

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1 The same could be said of the non-human environment, see for example Sen’s article on the option of preserving the Spotted Owl (2004).
this too is designed to serve the individual primarily, according to Sen, for whom social preference should imitate personal preference as far as possible (Sen 2006: 90). It is debateable whether within this structure the CA human is responsible for the impact of the choices she makes on her social and physical environment. Alkire and Deneulin contend that the individual does have responsibility for her own agency (2009: 38). However this is perhaps only plausible because they are referring to capabilities within the wider Human Development approach. Sen contends that people “must take responsibility for doing things or not doing things” in accordance with their agency (1999: 190). Yet the content of this responsibility is not specified, and does not clarify how an individual’s choices impact those surrounding him. While concentrating on empowerment, the CA demonstrates little attention to “obligation” (Deneulin 2002, Johnstone 2007: 85). Soper asserts that the CA is no different from capitalist and postmodern worldviews in that it fails to see humans as “responsible agents assuming accountability to the world beyond their immediate personal concerns” (2004: 112). Indeed, that which enables freedoms, even the contested international liberal economy, is automatically hailed as good (Sen 1999: 26). It is fair to deduce that Sen relegates responsibility to second place at best, after liberty (Dubois and Mahieu 2003: 1). As such, none of the elements of the CA relating to relationships and the world outside of oneself have proved as fundamental to being human as one’s own capability expansion.

Conclusion

The CA entails normative claims (Goerne 2010) concerning what it is to be human. The human is conceived as a rational, decision-making individual who pursues her own flourishing by endeavours to expand her real freedoms to choose between different valued lifestyles. The CA worldview is thus quasi-utilitarian, humanist, and optimistic about each human as the driver of her own development. The CA human exists in social structures, but relationships with other humans are conceived primarily as instrumental rather than as intrinsic to being human. That which is other to the individual, whether people or otherwise, is viewed as secondary to her own freedom such that her capability set is attributed more significance than any other obligation. This stems from Sen’s view of human freedom as the highest good, hence the space in which all evaluations of life take place (1999: 54-86). Although Sen states that “the capabilities perspective is inescapably pluralist” (1999: 76), human freedom comprises the objective framework within which diverse subjective views of
wellbeing must fit (Gasper 2007: 357). In this approach, to be human is to be an increasingly empowered rational agent. Interestingly, it has also been possible to discuss humans as conversion factors or capabilities within the CA when they form the context of another’s flourishing. Whether or not the CA is “incomplete” (Zheng 2009: 72), such normative, mutually-exclusive conceptions of the human are concrete enough to be critiqued, and must be for they form the foundation of the CA’s application in development.

2. A critique of the human according to the CA

Introduction

If interventions are oriented around a false or partial understanding of the human or what it is for a human to flourish, they will fail in their attempt to promote development (Walker 2012). A critique of the CA conception of the human is therefore required in order to provide an indication of the consequences the CA to development may have. The discussion will address questions of individualism, choice and purpose in that order such as to draw out the problematic nature of the CA’s understanding of power. As the critique unfolds, various practical consequences of these issues will be highlighted for exploration in the following chapter. Importantly, the discussion will indicate that there are worldviews which logically cannot be compatible with development as freedom. The CA therefore relegates certain values which are widely considered fundamental to humanity, to second place. This weakens the conceptual and practical plausibility of capability expansion as a normative approach to development and so should not be applied in practice without demur.

Individualism

The accusation that the CA is individualistic is a prominent critique and one with which it is appropriate to begin (Beitz 1986; Soper 2004; Gasper 2007). Sen argues that the CA incorporates participation, but he maintains that the individual is primordial (Sen 2009). Robeyns (2005) provides useful clarification of the issue. She distinguishes three types of individualism, arguing that the CA corresponds to just the first of these: ethical individualism. In a development context this means that the stakeholder or actor undertaking evaluation of social states does so according to their impacts on individuals to ensure that differences between beneficiaries are not missed. In contrast, methodological individualism would describe the world in terms of “individuals and their properties only”. Finally, ontological
individualism equates reality to no more than the sum of the latter. It is Robeyns’ claim that
the CA is not necessarily ontologically individualistic, since it recognises the importance of
She cites Sen’s 1990 analysis of “households as sites of cooperative conflict” in evidence
(Robeyns 2005: 108). Awareness of societal structures and relationships in Senian thought
(1987; 1997, cited in Martins 2007) should be distinguished from his and others’ treatment of
the CA to development itself. The fact remains that the CA has been interpreted ontologically
by other theorists (Giri 2000; Johnstone 2005) and inherently makes normative claims about
humans (see chapter one). This gives good reason to question whether the CA’s focus on
individual human freedoms could be employed without propagating ontological
individualism.

What is more, the existence of “group capabilities” (Ibrahim 2006: 397) weakens the
relevance of an approach which sees only individuals, even if this were but an ethical stance.
Where group capabilities are included in the CA this shows recognition that “capabilities of
collective entities are not simply the sum of the individual capabilities of members of the
group” (Stewart 2005: 200). To evaluate them as such is therefore to fail to perceive a
substantive freedom that can only be held collectively. One example of this is the intrinsic
worth and distinct quality of an orchestral performance, irrespective of whether members
participate voluntarily (Alkire and Deneulin 2009: 36). Equally, the capability to live in a
political system or to communicate in a language could be seen as collective freedoms which
correspond to Taylor’s “irreducibly social goods” (1995: 136) and as such are attributes of
groups rather than individuals. The CA ought to account for the existence of group
capabilities if it is to be useful.

Even as groups are considered in addition to individuals, the focus of the CA remains on the
capability expansion or the empowerment of that particular entity. It concentrates on the
capability expansion of each ‘person’ (individual or group) according to their values and in
doing so treats surrounding persons as objects of freedom – capabilities – or as conversion
factors. As such it can only ‘see’ one person at any particular time; other humans become
means to that person’s empowerment. This translates to an inward focus on the self, whether
that self is an individual or a group. Even if development interventions were organised
according to this introspective stance without theorists intending ontological claims by it, it is
likely to emerge in practice because the manner in which people are discussed determines the
way in which we can think about them and behave (Walker 2012: 391). The CA thus provides fertile conditions for what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim have called a “self-culture” (2001: 42) to thrive. They define this as the quest of “the many for a ‘life of their own’” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001: 42), although to the extent that people valued social functionings it would not necessarily be egotistical. The CA could also engender individualism in the sense of atomisation. By treating individuals (and groups) separately to account for their diversity, commonalities may be overlooked. As de Gruchy has noted, “if every human being were entirely different, sharing no basic characteristics, it would be impossible to live together in society” (2006: 46): it could be associated with societal fragmentation. Development practitioners must anticipate a culture of fragmented selves as a possible unintended consequence of the CA.

Choice

By looking at the role of choice in the CA, the impact of this inward focus can be explored further, beginning with the impact at the level of the individual. The previous chapter argued that the CA has an optimistic view of the human, who chooses which capabilities she values obtaining, and subsequently decides which of those capabilities to fulfil as functionings. Critical thinking and access to pertinent information are arguably prerequisites for making good, reasoned choices. To use Nussbaum’s terms, an individual’s ability to use “opportunity capabilities” depends on her “internal capabilities” (2011: 21). Humans may not always be aware of what is best for them when making choices. The fact that they could choose to ignore this and use their agency for ends other than well-being is incidental here. Furthermore, individuals may misunderstand the link between their commodity bundle and a given function which they have reason to value. For instance, one might base choices on the common assumption that increased consumption will bring increased happiness, hence the capability to be satisfied. Yet this is not necessarily the case, as the Easterlin paradox indicates: Northern happiness levels decreased or stagnated in the latter half of the 20th century, while corresponding incomes and consumption levels rose (Clark 2011: 12). Humans’ own fallibility when choosing how to convert their resources to capabilities, and indeed which functionings to value and pursue, is not recognised in the CA. Furthermore, the CA depends on humans actively employing their powers of reason in this regard. This is not self-evident: many people feel anxiety when they have to choose from a wide range of
options, as it inherently involves a sense of loss. Salecl has found that in this panic people have recourse to societal values rather than using their own reason to make decisions (2009). The CA cannot perceive this properly because of its thin view of the human which lacks “a psychic and social grounding” (Gasper 2002: 451). This weakens the CA assumption that an individual is the person best placed to determine his or her own flourishing.

Similar complications arise at the level of aspiration, which “relates to how people want to be in the future, for which reason people use their existing capabilities differently from a situation where they do not have this aspiration” (Nathan 2005: 36). Using language similar to the CA, Appadurai equates the “capacity to aspire” to a “cultural capacity” (2004: 27), but it could also be seen as an internal capability. It is a person’s aspirations which engender her motivation and thus affect the reasoning process towards her values. Aspirations themselves are heavily influenced by the surrounding socio-cultural context, as Sen has indicated:

Deprived people tend to come to terms with their deprivation...and they may, as a result, lack the courage to demand any radical change, [adjusting] their desires and expectations to what they unambitiously see as feasible (Sen 1999: 63).

Here he does demonstrate familiarity with the way in which an individual’s ability to imagine a ‘freer’ life is shaped by her surrounding socio-cultural context. The CA questions whether people are really free to “[judge] the kind of lives they would like to live” (Sen 1999: 63).

Regrettably, this awareness (Robeyns 2005: 108) of structurally “constrained” choices (Burchardt 2009: 13) is not matched by a strategy to deal with the phenomenon. This is arguably a result of the CA’s inward focus on the individual’s chosen capabilities. It would be impossible for the individual to address this alone, so implies that development practitioners or agencies should incorporate education into interventions (Burchardt 2009: 13) to promote thoroughly free choice. The need for external support to make wise, well-reasoned choices similarly provokes scholars to advocate education (Gasper 2002: 456) and “external guidance as a complement for local demand” (Hollow 2010: 350). This is not a straightforward task, since development workers would need to be committed to reflection in the first place. As Gasper remarks, this is not always so: Alkire (2005) and Robeyns (2005) have already abbreviated “reason to value” to “value” in their presentations of the CA (Gasper 2007: 343). Development agencies as “midwives entrusted...with assisting in the birthing of needy persons’ ‘agency capability’” (Carmen 2000: 1024) would place them in a position of great power over beneficiaries. As Carmen asks, “by whom? and why? and by
virtue of what prerogative?” would this responsibility for ensuring the internal capabilities of the human do not constrain her capability to choose be attributed? (2000: 1024). Development would be contingent on their fair and sensitive conduct. Equally, if no one takes responsibility for expanding the internal capabilities of the poor, they could be blamed for the extent of their own development, or become vulnerable to the influence of hegemonic ideologies such as consumerism (Gasper 2002). The confident expectation that a human can bring about her own flourishing, even with the support of others, is therefore ultimately dubious.

The process of choice at the interpersonal level must now be investigated. The CA relies on public discussion to ensure that collectively chosen values are well reasoned (Sen 2005b: 110-111). As the CA increases people’s agency, it ought to facilitate their power to choose to interact with one another and cooperate. Sen states that people are free to choose to focus on each other’s well-being and supposes that even egotistical people have a moral code (2010: 19). But the individual apparently remains free not to concern herself with others. Public discussion in the CA thus carries the risk of “tyranny of the majority” (Robeyns 2006: 373), in which voices of the marginalised are stifled by people in the group with power over them. Indeed, the focus of participatory development has been called into question for this very reason (Cooke and Kothari 2001). The problematic extends into the domain of aspirations again, as we remember that groups shape people’s choices “whether for valuable or undesirable capabilities” (Stewart 2005: 199). At this point optimism about decision-making in the public sphere weakens the CA, for as Chambers has commented, politicians rarely want to pass on their power (2006: 105). To the extent that the CA depends on people valuing “affiliation” (Nussbaum 1995: 75), it reveals ignorance of human fallibility and fails to address structures put in place expressly to limit other people’s freedoms. Even where humans are properly-equipped to plot their own course, the CA’s optimism with respect to group-level decision-making could jeopardise individual humans’ real agency and itself limit their empowerment.

Furthermore, the nature of reason is not specified in the CA. It would not necessarily follow a particular path but could lead to many legitimate conclusions (Gasper 2007: 343). The CA’s imprecise notion of reason makes it impossible to condemn or endorse a person’s chosen lifestyle by argument, however thorough the public debate. As such contentious issues such as “female genital mutilation, domestic violence, censorship, discrimination, air travel”
(Alkire and Deneulin 2009: 32) would be decided upon according to people’s values. The CA does not entail the moral authority to take a stance on them.

**The human purpose as empowerment**

The question of what is to be valued leads into the discussion of the human’s purpose according to the CA. The CA has been hailed for successfully reintegrating values and beliefs into development (Devine and Deneulin 2011) so that people can define their own flourishing. But several other worldviews are incompatible with the CA view that human freedom is to be pursued above all else. The classic example of the fasting person illustrates this effectively (Sen 2005a: 155). Fasting actually reflects belief in a higher principle than that of personal freedom, often rooted in the transcendental. Besides, the language of individual freedom cannot communicate values such as “friendship, respect and care” (Gasper and Van Stavaren 2003). The CA worldview more widely is hard to square with, for example, the Buddhist worldview of monism, which sees individuals as part of the one whole of reality rather than atomised or separate (Comblin 1985: 190). It is likewise impossible to fuse optimism and denial of human fallibility previously discussed with the Judaeo-Christian idea of the glorious, yet fallen, human nature (Corbett and Fikkert 2009). These cursory examples indicate that the CA forces other worldviews into submission, to the extent that they challenge its central tenets. Therefore the capabilities worldview does not cater for diversity as it intends to. In this respect the discourse fails on its own count, regardless of whether one sees reality as plural or not. This is a problem in itself for development practice as it could lead to the marginalisation or alternatively coercion of illiberal groups.

Therefore the CA potentially “risks ignoring the full range of the components of the good life, among which freedom is one” (Deneulin 2002: 506). Not only are goods only considered valuable to the extent that people find them so, but ultimately nothing can be seen to have objectively higher value than freedom. Here an internal contradiction of the CA emerges: it sees empowerment as the ultimate good, but empowerment itself requires disempowerment in some cases. As previously argued, capabilities or “substantive freedoms” could equally be defined as the “powers” to be and to do which people value. But if the CA, by extension, says that one’s capability set ought to grow infinitely, it requires that one person’s gain in power does not affect other people. However, three broad cases arise in which it is impossible for all
parties to be empowered at once. Firstly, people who are in close contact and have a similar level of capability deprivation can limit each other’s flourishing: Stavaren and Gasper illustrate this with the case of childcare, which amounts to a “burden” or capability deprivation for the adult caregiver, but is essential to the expansion of the child’s capabilities (2003: 154). Secondly, in vertical power relationships relatively developed “uppers” (Chambers 2006: 108) must sometimes yield their power over relatively deprived “lowers” (2006: 108) for the latter to be empowered. For example:

Any improvement in the substantive freedoms of a group through increased democracy is likely to reduce some of the attainable capabilities of many of those losing power (Hill 2003: 129).

Thirdly, one person’s capability expansion may inherently create deprivation for others. Societal norms, for instance mobile phone usage, which result from the capability expansion of the majority may make the minority who do not have those capabilities relatively deprived (Smith et al. 2011: 78). Therefore on both an intra- and inter-group level, it can be necessary for power to be “yielded” (Villarreal 1994: 8) in order for it to be gained. Thus far the CA perceives power-related constraints but fails to offer guidelines for decision-making in cases of conflicting capabilities. Nussbaum’s CA for constitutional law which incorporates a minimum capability threshold might be able to address power relations (Drydyk 2012), but the CA for development does not as yet. Therefore individual freedom as a norm not only excludes some people but paradoxically jeopardises the realisation of human empowerment.

It has been shown that encouraging capabilities expansion is at odds with the cession of power. To reconcile the two within the bounds of the CA would require a value change – for people to freely and reasonably value their own disempowerment in favour of another’s empowerment. In this way yielding power could be framed as a capability itself; in broad terms the capability to use one’s power to empower others. In Hill’s example of democratisation “those in positions of authority...will likely believe that gains have failed to offset their loss of power unless their values change considerably during the process” (2003: 129). Her conclusion that value change is therefore a necessary aspect of empowerment complements Deneulin’s concern that other reasoned values be joined to that of freedom (2009). However, this relates back to the aspiration question: how could this attitude be inspired, and by whom? Tellingly, these theorists presume that a change will be needed at all:
people are not necessarily predisposed to value others over themselves as the CA seems to expect (Johnstone 2005: 315). It is said that without a preset list:

Any capability could be argued to be valuable, including...the capability to abuse one’s power or consume so much that it harms others (Robeyns 2005: 106).

But whether such a list were determined by capability theorists, by citizens of a state, or by participants in a development programme, its content would depend on what people reasonably valued – and people do not always value each other. If implementation of the CA were to cultivate cultural individualism as suggested above, changing values would be even harder. The thrust of the CA is towards autonomy rather than dependency (Sen 1999: 283, cited in Grunfeld et al. 2011). The CA’s commitment to freedom maximisation prevents it from prescribing disempowerment. Peterson’s ethical theory (2004) acts as evidence of this: he combines the CA with the Pareto principle to make a weak ethical theory in which the rich are obliged to facilitate the empowerment of the poor – but only as long as it does not reduce their own freedoms. Altogether, the CA’s success rests shakily on humans’ self-sacrificial attitudes.

Several recommendations have been forwarded to create the value change needed for the CA to work. According to Johnstone, what is missing from the CA is an “account of how oppressors are to become enlightened” (2005: 315). Chambers’ “pedagogy for the powerful” does this by attempting to reframe power-yielding functionings as desirable to the powerful (2006: 107). For example, sharing control is re-imagined as more efficient for the development manager (2006: 104). This is a form of ‘power with’ (Fernandez-Baldor et al. 2009: 9), a utopian situation in which all parties are empowered and disempowerment occurs willingly – although not purely altruistically. But it does not go far enough: there may be cases in which yielding power is undesirable, yet essential for the flourishing of the other. The development manager may reasonably prefer control to efficiency. Besides, for Chambers’ proposal to work, it would require what Giri calls “ontological striving”: a posture of the heart which understands that in seeking the good of the other, one’s self expands and flourishes (2000: 1015). Giri therefore calls for “development as freedom” to be supplemented by “development as responsibility” (2000: 1003). Staveren and Gasper agree that development would be better understood as “involving also the growth and maintenance
of the value of caring for others” (2003: 157). In order to envisage equality of capability expansion, Drydyk also has recourse to the attitude of care, emphasising “caring for persons as human beings” (2012: 37). To care for people not only as valued functionings, as capabilities, or as conversion factors upon which one’s flourishing inconveniently depends; but as full human beings in the same measure as oneself. It is imperative that humans are able to conceive of one another as subjects, not solely as objects of instrumental value. Here we can evoke Buber’s philosophical distinction between the “I-thou” relationship and the “I-it” relationship, respectively (1958: 62). Only by virtue of this caring, “dialogical” I-thou relationship (Giri 2000: 1016) could one be empowered through the other’s empowerment – despite one’s own apparent disempowerment.

Conceptualising this deep value change cannot be accommodated within the CA language of individual freedoms. Though I have argued value change would be necessary in order to solve the CA’s impasse when ‘power to’ meets ‘power over’, in the attempt to make the CA theoretically sound it would actually stretch and exceed the bounds of the CA itself, transforming its definition of the human. This indicates that the CA is not a wholly satisfying approach to development. In particular we can deduce that the CA may be unworkable: to the extent that people do not care for one another, the empowerment of all is not possible. For example, as some individuals or groups are empowered, others must be deprived of capabilities. Capability expansion of those involved in a development intervention may be thwarted by socio-economic power structures made up of people who do not care for them. More profoundly, if the CA were to be the standard in development, one would expect to see caring relationships of self-sacrifice undermined and people treating each other as instrumental to the achievement of their preferred lifestyle.

**Conclusion**

Examination of individualism, choice and human purpose in the CA uncovers the paradox of empowerment. Human empowerment sometimes depends on human disempowerment, but the CA cannot account for this on its own terms without changing people’s values. The type of value required would transcend the language of individual freedom and redefine all humans as subjects rather than designating some as instruments (see chapter one). Because the CA makes freedom the highest good, it cannot force this change upon people. That implies a powerfully influential role for development agencies, which could facilitate a caring
community and offer guidance to reduce humans’ vulnerability to the limitations of their own internal capabilities. Indeed it has been demonstrated that the optimism of the CA may attribute too great a role to the individual in determining what is good, as well as being dangerously reliant on systems of public discussion. Morally-controversial or unjust capabilities may be among those pursued legitimately and people whose worldviews conflict with that of freedom may be marginalised. The CA itself offers no strategy to deal with this or the dependency on all uppers, whether fellow-citizens, development agencies, neighbouring groups or global institutions, which will shape the empowerment of those targeted by development interventions. The CA promotes self-determination which may result in the value of freedom prevailing over fellow-humans, to the detriment of dialogical human relationships. One must be able to consider more than one individual entity at a time as a human in order to make development work for humanity.

3. The human in capabilities-based development practice: ICT4D case-study

Introduction

Rather than extrapolating the ramifications of the CA to development practice from the theory alone, early uses of the CA in development practice should be examined to explore the validity of the hypotheses made in chapter two. Taking ICT4D as case study, this chapter will attempt to determine whether there is a correlation between the CA worldview and associated critique, and development practice. This follows the logic of Dubois and Mahieu who claim that once a theory is integrated into development strategy, it becomes clear to see the positive or negative consequences of its use (2003: 13). ICT4D and the use of CA in the sector will be introduced at the outset. Then examples of ICT4D practice using the CA for evaluation frameworks, interventions, and action-research projects will be subject to scrutiny. Although it would be interesting to investigate cases where the CA is utilised nominally but does not really shape the rationale, the scope of the paper means only cases which are fully based on the CA can be treated. Where interventions were designed according to the CA as well as evaluated by it, this is specified. The research will not be ordered according to the different elements of my critique of the CA, as this would prejudice the findings. Rather, the analysis will distinguish and examine in turn the different ways in which the CA has been interpreted: conversion factor focus, choice, and empowerment. This will permit fair conclusions about how distinct “capability approaches” (Gasper 2007: 346) to development could entail
particular impacts for humanity. At each stage the portrayal of the human and any associated implications will be enunciated and compared to that of my theoretical critique, with explanations given for any divergences. The overall hypothesis has been that what is normative about the human in theory will affect humanity in reality. By showing whether and how the CA worldview, with its biases and problems, emerges in this practice case study it should thus be possible to draw conclusions about the conditions under which the CA might have the expected ramifications for humanity on a wider scale, if taken as the standard approach to development practice.

**ICT4D background**

Firstly ICT4D must be introduced. ICTs are those technologies “associated with three main sets of interconnected processes: the capture of information, its storage, and the ways in which people access and share it” (Unwin 2009: 79). According to Hamel, ICT4D equates to using information and communication technologies (ICTs) “to reach development objectives” (2010: 5). In 2001 the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Report took ICTs as its focus, and the United Nations ICT Task Force was created to address the growing “Digital Divide” (DD) (Kivunike et al. 2011: 62). Concern that the poor are not excluded from technological progress in the building of a global “Information Society” (World Summit on the Information Society 2012) has since motivated multiple scholars to refocus the debate on what kind of development is being targeted (Heeks 2010, Unwin 2009). Zheng calls for the re-examination of the “unquestioned belief that investing in ICT is the path toward social and economic development” (2009: 66). She proposes capabilities as the new “space” for the study of e-development (Zheng 2009: 68). This shift reflects diminishing trust in the “mainstream neoliberal development discourse...the debate having been even more fuelled by the present USA–Europe economic uncertainty” (Andersson et al. 2012: 1).


**Case study rationale**

ICT4D is therefore a useful case study in the current research task to ascertain the probable consequences of using the CA for development. ICTs can have an instrumental role in
facilitating other capabilities, as well as being the object of a desired functioning. As Kleine has argued, the fact that ICTs could contribute to many other sectors makes them an especially appropriate “test case” for the CA to development (2011: 128). Even within ICT4D the CA could be exponentially influential in future for ICTs’ use is not limited to interventions, as highlighted by Grunfeld (2007) concerning mobile phone usage. Constrained choice is particularly relevant in ICT4D: the present DD means that many people are not familiar with ICTs and so must use imagination to reasonably value them (Kleine et al. 2012: 44), while aspirations may be influenced by the pervasiveness of ICTs and their association with western culture (Hollow 2010). Interestingly, the information society and its technologies, such as the internet, have embedded values such as “personal liberty” which are similar to those of the CA. Using the CA, researchers and practitioners are beginning to offer an answer as to what kind of development ICTs ought to be facilitating, and where ICTs ought to be situated in the process of development. The nascent capabilities-based ICT4D literature combines the CA to development with ICT in a variety of ways to research, design and evaluate interventions. As it is an “emerging” (Heeks 2010: 623) discipline, the research contributes to ICT4D at an optimal moment, before its modes of practice are fixed upon.

The CA as conversion factors

The first category of CA use in ICT4D practice to be examined concerns those who have focussed on the concept of “conversion factors” as a tool to evaluate ICT access. Gudmundsdottir (2009), Olatokun (2009), and Kivunike et al. (2011) turn to the CA to try to understand why existing ICTs are underused in South Africa, Nigeria, and Uganda respectively. In each case their analysis reflects the CA’s principle of human diversity by noting the different characteristics which affect people’s capability to use the ICTs in question. Gudmundsdottir finds that South African students’ mother tongue determines whether they are capable of learning through ICT at school. Because the computer software available is in English, those who speak isiXhosa are deprived of this capability (2009: 185). Yet isiXhosa-speaking children express reluctance to use their first language with alternative ICT software, implying that isiXhosa “has less value in the minds of many isiXhosa-speaking learners” (2009: 183). Here the aspirations of the individuals potentially limit their own development. Olatokun also found that people’s ambitions affected their capability to use ICTs in rural Nigeria, for if they had not been educated they would see the computer, for
example, as too complex and not useful to them. He notes age, gender and income as further conversion factors here (2009: 493). Kivunike’s research in rural Uganda also harks of constrained choice, for people “were not aware of what more they could do with ICT in exercising their political freedom” (2009: 72) and so valued ICT capabilities less than they might otherwise have done. Overall, these ICT4D studies mirror the CA idea of each human as a unique, reasoning individual. But the human’s ability, or lack thereof, to reason and aspire to their own development is shown to influence their capabilities to the extent that the human’s own psychological state could be viewed as a conversion factor in the CA terminology (Burchardt 2009). This substantiates chapter two’s theoretical link between the optimism of the CA regarding humans as the drivers of their own development and the risk that aspirations jeopardise human flourishing.

Significantly, these studies have overarching concerns which may not reflect those of the people whose lives they are researching. Gudmundsdottir’s enquiry is rooted in a desire to combat the DD to “[prepare] the Western Cape for participation in the knowledge economy” (2009: 176). It is the perceived ubiquity of ICTs which motivates Olatokun’s investigation too: “it has therefore become imperative to access and use ICTs everywhere especially in a developing country such as Nigeria”. Key opportunities which he argues access to ICTs can engender are “e-commerce”, “work productivity”, and “accessing markets” (2009: 493-4). Scholarly and multi-lateral recommendations to deploy the CA in ICT4D also reveal such presuppositions in action (Hamel 2010 and Alampay 2003 respectively). Hamel makes a value judgement of his own as to the advantage of being included in information networks, which he associates with the global economy (2010). Similarly, Alampay reasons that: “In our globalized world, ICTs are needed for people and communities to remain competitive. As such, universal access to ICT policies can be seen as policies that expand people’s freedoms” (2003: 2). Here Alampay equates competitive advantage with freedom without recourse to individuals’ own values, bypassing the logic of the CA. In contrast, Kivunike shows a commitment to defining quality of life improvements according to people’s own values as “agents” with “personal goals and values” (2011: 62). When the CA is used to evaluate and make recommendations, focussing on conversion factors, the outcome is indeed contingent upon the researchers’ preconceptions. The majority of their reasoning also seems greatly influenced by global structures, here the international capitalist economy.
Nonetheless, evidence suggests the CA is predisposed towards this market-oriented rationale. Wresch and Fraser present a study of small businesses in the Caribbean and their “ICT-enabled market freedoms” (2012: 76) by incorporating capabilities reasoning that increased freedom for each individual to trade depends on open markets. In this case multiple problems have accompanied economic liberalisation: increased competition as consumers gain in capability to choose from a range of goods, while returns decrease due to falling prices according to the demand. They intimate that global economic power-structures are repeated, limiting the advantage of Caribbean ICT capabilities. Yet this CA commitment to individual freedom prevents them from advocating trade protection measures, instead they concur with the business owners of whom “none...mentioned a desire to put up barriers to international exchange” (Wresh and Fraser 2012: 84). One might question whether this is wise, given that it limits other capabilities. This highlights the issues raised earlier concerning conflicting capabilities and both internal powers and wider structures as constraints on choice. Not only can the CA be manipulated according to the presuppositions that a researcher or practitioner has about the good life, but also by global capitalism.

The CA as choice

The second main way in which the CA has been interpreted as it has been translated into ICT4D practice is expanding choice. Wresh takes choice to be “inherent” to the CA to development (2009: 262) and as such uses the concept in his evaluation of “progress on the global DD” (2009: 255). He observes that, paradoxically, the more people have the capability to use ICTs, the more compliance with the new “community communication standard” becomes obligatory, and the more the capability is endangered as it is less of a free choice (2009: 260). This illuminates the previous point concerning constrained choice, yet Wresh is either unable to or chooses not to propose a solution to this situation using the CA. Nevertheless developing countries’ ICT capabilities have increased; they now host innumerable websites themselves (2009: 262). He notes that the internet has thus made people in the global North aware of the difficult reality people face in developing countries. His conclusion is that “if information resources are available about developing countries, but citizens elsewhere in the world ignore them, then that is a matter of choice” (2009: 262). The “ethical perspective” (2009: 255) he offers through the CA as choice is that people have no
obligation to one another regarding matters of global inequality, reflecting related concerns in chapter two.

A second use of the CA for development evaluation which focuses on choice is found in Hatakka and Lagsten’s study of higher education students from developing countries use of the internet (2012). They are careful to distinguish between expanded range of choice, and increasing the “valued choices” of individuals – the latter revealing a deep understanding of the CA. In a similar way to Wresch (2009), their evaluation framework suggests that standard morals are subject to an ethics of freedom: plagiarism appears as a potential functioning, while censorship and copyright are treated as inconveniently restrictive conversion factors (Hatakka and Lagsten 2012: 30-33). Their research takes each person as a separate individual, including an interview with one as an appendix. Their rhetoric echoes this individualism: “we have to stay open to individual differences. People may value different lives and we cannot pretend to know the wills of each individual” (2012: 37). They find that it is “hard to generalize the findings due to the individualistic nature of Sen’s CA” (2012: 37). The CA thus prevents them from drawing out commonalities for constructive conclusions, remaining individualistic at the very least on an ethical level. Furthermore, they exhibit the problematically influential task of the practitioner in the CA: “it is...up to the evaluator to choose what information to include in the analysis and what information to exclude from an evaluative role” (2012: 37). Finally, they themselves highlight the issue of mutually exclusive capability sets: they find “a trade-off between agency freedoms and well-being freedoms” where students must choose between “[questioning] the teachers’ interpreted knowledge” and success in class, respectively (Hatakka and Lagsten 2012: 36). Overall this deployment of the CA as choice leads to many of the anticipated problems, including being morally non-prescriptive, atomistic individualism, and conflicting capabilities.

The most explicit demonstration of the CA as choice is Kleine’s “Choice Framework” (CF) for the design of ICT4D projects (2010). The CF mirrors the CA’s worldview very closely but positions choice as the “primary outcome” of development and frames empowerment in terms of choice (2010: 680). The paradox of simultaneously prioritising each individual’s freedom of choice forces her to disaggregate humanity in the sense that she says “unidirectional” interventions designed for groups would contradict the CA (2010: 689). Therefore each human is treated separately, as in the CF action-research project of a
telecentre programme in Chile. Bizarrely, Kleine outlines its importance by describing the choices of just one woman to use the telecentre to take a virtual tour of a German town (2010). The CF does not account for collective capabilities, but “sees individuals as using their agency to navigate social structures” (Kleine et al. 2012: 46).

Reflecting this individualism, in Kleine’s work things are only as valuable as they are to the individual. For example, the language of the CA represents relationships as resources: “her social resources (contacts with friends) had helped her gain the information that there was free access to the Internet available at the telecentre” (2010: 686). This is not new in development practice, for example the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, also inspired by Senian thought, uses the term “social capital” (Scoones 1998). But rather than relationships being valued in terms of their importance to the human’s valued livelihood outcomes, they are valued to the extent that they empower the individual. Similarly, in the Fair Trade action-research project based on the CF, reasons why western consumers buy Fairtrade products are explored, but the simple motivation of caring for the other – the producer in a distant country – is overlooked (Kleine et al. 2012). The CF models this attitude, categorising “more/better relationships” and “more voice” as “secondary” to the principal development outcome of choice (2010: 160), therefore as optional rather than central to the human being. There is a subtle suggestion that a person’s beliefs are valuable only to the extent that they empower people to make choices: “Spirituality or religious beliefs...can strengthen or weaken an individual’s psychological resources” (Kleine et al. 2012: 47). Altogether the CF indicates that the CA’s commitment to individual freedom is detrimental to other values that people may have.

Faithfully reproducing the CA view of the human as a rational chooser, the CF as a basis for development practice carries with it further associated limitations discussed in chapter two. Firstly, the discussion of the Fair Trading project does acknowledge that the increased choice it gave customers actually overwhelmed them (Kleine et al. 2012: 52). This supports the concern that more choice is not necessarily advantageous for humans but depends on their internal make-up. Indeed, Spence contends that people require “wisdom” to choose whether increased information capability is actually beneficial to them (2011: 261). Secondly, Kleine alludes to structures in naming the challenge of operationalising the CF: it “requires risk taking on the part of funders, but ultimately means trusting people to be empowered agents of their own development” (2011: 129). In this sense those uppers with financial power must be
willing to hand it over to deprived people, thus empowering them. Without the compliance of
the funder or practitioner, these CA interventions would be impossible. Disempowerment is
also necessary between project beneficiaries. For example, in the Fair Tracing project one of
the producer aspirations was to “express their views of their product” (Kleine et al. 2012: 52).
This was facilitated by the technologies put in place, but crucially what the producers may
have really wanted – to be listened to by people in consumer countries in a dialogical
relationship – cannot be guaranteed by the CF. It remains the choice of powerful individuals,
as it was the ‘choice’ of Northern internet-users to respond to or ignore the plight of the poor
in Wresch’ study (2009). The applications of the CA which translate it as choice perceive the
need to change structural power imbalances in this sense, but have no grounds on which to
oblige people to do something about it. The realisation of development as expanding people’s
real freedoms emerges as dependent on this being something that those with power value.

The CA as empowerment: from individual to collective capabilities

The third way in which the CA is interpreted in practice, and which comes much closer to
addressing the question of power, is capabilities expansion as empowerment. Zheng’s
recommendation paper preserves the theme of empowerment, calling for ICT4D to be
oriented according to the CA which “accommodates and critically evaluates the design of
social arrangements and cultural values in relation to individual capabilities” (2009: 74). This
tendency to evaluate everything in terms of individual freedoms leads to a dilemma for
Madon, who uses the CA empowerment lens to evaluate e-governance initiatives in Kerala,
India (2004). The dearth of resources with which to invest in the programme meant that
policy-makers had to choose which limiting factors of which citizens’ e-governance
capabilities to target (2004: 10). Furthermore, success was contingent upon support from
other governmental departments as uppers (2004: 9). Similarly, Busch proposes that powerful
ICT corporations act as ‘good citizens’ to “[foster] the capabilities of their fellow citizens to
lead self-sufficient lives” (2011: 351). In each case the empowerment of the capability-
deprived depends on the will and choices of the development actor or upper.

The findings of Vaughan’s evaluation of ICT capabilities in indigenous Australia force him
to examine collective capabilities, not just individual ones, which he concludes means policy
using the CA may be problematic in practice (2011: 138). The CA certainly misses
something important if it does not incorporate collective capabilities. But even where
empowerment is undertaken on a group level, the same structural questions of power are encountered. The iREACH action-research project in Cambodia considers the capabilities of communities as well as individuals. A key idea underpinning the project is the “virtuous spiral” of empowerment, which harks of the CA’s presupposition that power can infinitely expand (Grunfeld et al. 2011: 152). In this case ICT capabilities did stimulate the creation of other capabilities, for example villagers obtained the capability of having health information, and in turn this augmented their collective “capability...to improve their health conditions” (2011: 162). Villagers also expected that the improved “capability to be educated was intertwined with employment” (2011: 162). However, a young person’s improved employability is not the guarantee of a job but depends on a country’s job market. The discussion of the project does begin to register the importance of the macro-level, seeing district councils and national policies as impacting its effectiveness (2011: 167). The report of another ICT intervention designed to create collective capabilities, the “Nepal Wireless Networking Project” also states that success depended dangerously on the support of donors worldwide and the founder of the programme (Thapa et al. 2012: 7). This leads the researchers to ask “what motivates or drives the actors to act the way they do?” (2012: 20). The CA must answer this question if the benefits of such ICT programmes are to be rolled out on scale. Once again, empowerment depends on the persuasion of the already powerful groups not just people themselves as agents.

Gigler’s Alternative Evaluation Framework based on the CA, and implemented in Venezuela and Peru, also targets empowerment (2004, 2011). The framework is composed of separate indicators for individuals’ and communities’ empowerment based on the capabilities they value (Gigler 2011). Wider structures again thwarted the communities’ plans. The lack of demand for e-commerce on a national level prevented those in Satipo, Peru, from using ICT capabilities to sell their produce online – which was the reason the capabilities had been valued (Gigler 2004: 29). In Venezuela the Unuma project to increase indigenous teachers’ instrumental ICT capabilities was dependent on the engagement of the director and effectiveness was inhibited due to political turbulence (2004: 27). Furthermore:

By executing the project directly at the community-level, without any coordination with the traditional organizational structure of the indigenous movement in Peru, the project created important tensions and frictions between different indigenous communities (Gigler 2004: 30-31).
The excluded groups would arguably have been relatively disempowered by the investment made in select neighbouring communities. Even where the focus was widened from an individual’s to a group’s empowerment, the capabilities of peer groups were overlooked. The CA has predisposed practitioners and people to look inwards rather than outwards. As such when they eventually encounter others and wider structures and institutions, they do not have a strategy to deal with them. Just as empowerment is contingent upon power-yielding by uppers, it is also short-sighted to focus on the freedoms of just one unit, whether individual or group, as units’ flourishing may be interdependent in horizontal as well as vertical power relationships.

The CA as empowerment: adding to the CA

The fact that ICT4D experts are adding to the CA as empowerment strengthens the case that an essential dimension of power has been omitted by the CA. Puri and Sahay use a framework which includes capabilities to evaluate the Gyandoot intranet programme of Madhya Pradesh, India (2007). Their results show that capabilities increasing for some correspond to capabilities decreasing for others: “traces of citizen empowerment (and middlemen disempowerment) could be discerned” (2007: 151). By asking the question “who defines the participation agenda?” they discover that the “strong administrative will” of the district council was crucial to the success of the decentralisation project and thus to the empowerment of villagers (2007: 150). It is only because this question is included alongside capabilities in the evaluation framework as another of the four questions that this power dynamic can be appreciated. Notably, this represented a historic shift in the relationship between citizens and governance structures (2007: 150), signalling that a value change was required for capabilities to be expanded.

Similarly it has been argued that critical theory can contribute “to enrich and strengthen” Sen’s CA to ICT4D (Zheng and Stahl 2011: 69). They note that the CA lacks a theory of “how individual agency is restricted and what this means for operationalising the CA” (2011: 70). In order to make sure that embedded ideologies are addressed they propose that those in charge of operationalising it ought to be “reflexive” about their own presuppositions, and
undertake their own “critical questioning of the CA”. As chapter two anticipated, this puts the onus on practitioners to recognise power imbalances and find concrete ways to avoid the CA propagating them. This is not only complex, but is also contingent on the will of the development worker. An optimistic, CA view of the human might expect this to be plausible. Equally, if practitioners themselves echo the CA focus on self-determination of the human means that they might not be committed to listening to stakeholders and handing over the power to them. Here the inconsistencies of CA theory emerge in the ICT4D literature. Furthermore, even if this were a dependable method of strengthening the CA, one might question whether critical theory could perceive the approach’s weaknesses without moving away from its fundamental priority of individual freedom. This might help find a constructive approach to problems of power in development practice, but it would look a lot less like the CA. As concluded in chapter two, in the attempt to solve problems in the CA one must go beyond its conceptual boundaries.

One last example of adding to the CA when applying it for ICT4D is Johri and Pal’s (2012) proposal to combine the CA with Illich’s notion of conviviality (1973) to design technologies for development in a way that prioritises user empowerment. In this way they hope to “reconcile the individual-oriented nature of Sen’s work with institutional structures in a more pragmatic manner” (Johri and Pal 2012: 67). They imply Capable and Convivial Design (CCD) could engender “fulfilling relationships and engage people with their ability to allow them to reciprocate and contribute back to their environment” more effectively than the CA by itself. They too have perceived relationality as a weakness of the CA, whether it concerns the human in society or with regard to the natural environment. They discuss CCD in the context of classroom use of ICTs for education. Here they observe that the most privileged child will also be the “alpha” child and control the progress of the group. However, rather than questioning what might be fundamentally problematic with this ‘power over’ attitude, they redesign the software so that collaboration is obligatory for each child to complete his work (2012: 69). Interestingly, their approach still reflects a bias in the CA to overlook the impact egotistical attitudes may have on the development of people in contact with any given individual, even though it ought to aim for all individuals’ flourishing. This reflects the difficulty which was anticipated regarding the consideration of dialogical human relationships within the language of the CA.
Conclusion

The CA to ICT4D has been discussed in its various guises to ascertain the validity of chapter two’s hypotheses with regards to the potential consequences of the CA. The CA concept of the human has been absorbed and reproduced by ICT4D experts using the approach: chapter one’s human attributes of choosing, reasoning and empowerment-seeking, are reflected, especially where conversion factors are focused on. Therefore it is unsurprising that the conceptual issues of chapter two have corresponding impacts in this sector of development practice. Where the concept of conversion factors is used as a tool to evaluate development, it becomes clear that people’s own aspirations affect their capability expansion. Moreover, the reasoning and aspirations of development practitioners influence the perspective on successful development. Here, as in the focus on choice, the influence of hegemonic structures on which development outcomes are valued, such as the international economy and the internet, becomes apparent. But even interpreting the CA as choice expansion does not furnish practitioners with the authority or strategy to deal with such limitations to development. The choice-based examples also reflect the rhetoric of a culture which values the self overall, to the detriment of values other than freedom. They demonstrate the problem of operationalising the CA with regards to conflicting capabilities between atomised individuals. In contrast, where the CA is applied as empowerment there is a trend for development practice to be less individualistic. These scholars and practitioners tend to find the primacy Sen accords individual freedoms to be unworkable and unrealistic therefore also look at collective capabilities. Reflective practitioners recognise, however, the same issues of power that they face, automatically adding critical concepts to CA: empowerment of development beneficiaries depends on the will of uppers, as well as being influenced by and influencing the empowerment of peers. Some of the evidence examined involves capabilities-based evaluations of development progress or interventions that were not designed using the CA. However, the results are not weakened since the power issues also transpired in examples embedded in the CA (Grunfeld et al. 2011; Kleine et al. 2012; Thapa et al. 2012).

Thus formal suggestions to conceptually enrich the CA have been made, but these strategies represent such a thorough questioning of the highest and only objective value of the CA, individual freedom, that they move beyond it. The CA was effective as an evaluation tool for investigating the limitations of capabilities expansion, but possesses little prescriptive power to tackle them. This is concerning given that people working in the capabilities paradigm
consciously envisage these preliminary studies having an exponential impact to influence the course of ICT4D practice (Heeks 2010; Kleine 2011: 125). The anticipated results that unsurprisingly emerged to a lesser extent given the short time-scale of projects were: illiberal values being sidelined by freedom, and the emergence of a self-culture. Similarly there was little evidence of the poor – capability deprived – people being blamed for failures to achieve their own empowerment. This seems to reflect capabilities practitioners’ genuine concern for supporting people’s development and their recognition that powers to aspire and reason are influenced by externalities. In ICT4D, this could be significant given the growing hegemony of the information society, the DD and its links to the global economy.

General Conclusion

This paper has found that the CA’s pursuit of development as human flourishing is thwarted by its own conceptually contradictory worldview. In order to discover the potential consequences of employing the CA to development, the paper first addressed CA theory, discovering the optimistic view of each human as the rational propeller of her own development. This constitutes a point of weakness in the CA, for it means others can be conceived as instrumental to her purpose; her empowerment. In an extreme reading of the CA it actually simultaneously imposes contradictory views of the human: ‘conversion factor’ or ‘capability’ in contrast to ‘agent’. This is not problematic to the extent that the empowerment of individuals or single groups is the aim. But if the CA cannot perceive more than one person at a time, it is incapable of addressing humanity’s flourishing. This is because one’s empowerment may require or engender the disempowerment of others. For all to be empowered according to the CA, humans must have reason to value the functioning ‘yielding power to the other’.

The problem of power was what emerged most strongly from the case study of ICT4D practice, particularly when operationalised as choice. Here, individuals are treated separately and the focus is inward, so although structural limitations to their development are recognised the CA does not have the means to tackle them. In contrast, practitioners who understand the CA as empowerment tend to incorporate group capabilities and recognise that one’s empowerment may be contingent on others. Some even critique the centrality of uppers’ involvement and recommend ways to strengthen the CA. This indicates that development interventions’ success will be less restricted if empowerment is emphasised over choice. This
is promising, since empowerment reflects capability theory more closely and is therefore likely to be the key mode of implementation. However, recommendations which really strengthen the CA would have to change people’s values such that they recognise each other’s worth as humans too. Development would therefore be heavily dependent upon the practitioner’s wise, neutral mediation between different agents to make them inclined towards one another. Some practitioners have already demonstrated the will to use their powerful position to favour lowers which is a positive sign.

The ICT4D case study perceived further outcomes of capabilities theory in practice, such as how vulnerable it made individuals to any distortions in their own valued lifestyles. This can result from external structural constraints on their reasoning and valuing processes. It would be interesting to examine implementations of the CA by other development actors such as multilateral agencies to see if such outcomes were repeated. The influence of marketing on people’s aspirations through involvement in the information society, and therefore on their personal development goals, ought to be explored further. To fully substantiate the claim that choices may be constrained in the CA, it might be useful to conduct research concurrent to the capabilities-based action-research projects to see if there were alternative outcomes beneficiaries were prevented from pursuing. It would also be interesting to consider whether the CA to health and education has had corresponding outcomes so far. The fact that the ICT4D examples touched on the latter two and other sectors suggests that this is likely.

The paper indicates that in theory the CA encourages cultural individualism, which the European states already using the CA to welfare (Arndt and Volkert 2011) may consider noteworthy. If the CA is made the dominant development approach it will be interesting to see whether it does reproduce or reinforce individualism. Capabilities language describes the world in terms of human freedoms so inherently makes other values hard to uphold as equally or more important. This has implications for the potential of the CA, since it is only workable on its own terms if it can instigate value transformation. Creative ways of promoting the value of care without resorting to coercion, such as education, must be explored. A rights-based approach would make people regard one another’s flourishing, but would not be in keeping with the crucial role of free choice in the CA by making this an obligation. In an introduction to the Human Development and Capability Approach, Alkire and Deneulin cite the South African notion of “ubuntu” and South American liberation theology as similar to the CA’s “focus on people’s freedoms” (2009: 23). But this focus actually puts the CA in a
complicated position with respect to the ubuntu conviction that only by altruistic “participation and sharing of our ability to be and to know can we access flourishing” (Johnstone 2005). In fact in many implementations of the CA examined, Johnstone’s insight that it seems to “assume goodwill unproblematically on the part of the powerful” was the factor which affected the realisation of development as freedom (2007: 85).

The CA does facilitate a fuller description of development than economic approaches. Indeed an exploration of capabilities monitoring could be enlightening. But it is difficult to see how questioning the primacy of individual or even group freedom, as some have recommended in order to tackle power-related constraints on empowerment, could be said to stay within the bounds of the CA. The human ‘care’ required to address the theoretical and corresponding practical challenges to using the CA, which this paper reveals, transcends the CA’s normative concept of individual freedom as the highest good. Attempts have been made to marry the CA to a concept of justice (Sen 2010, Drydyk 2012). But rather than building on its foundations with a concept of value that seems to contradict it profoundly at the level of what it is to be human in relationship to others, it may be preferable to alter the foundations themselves. The challenge is to find an approach to development which mirrors the descriptive power of capabilities without subordinating humanity to the pursuit of individual freedoms. In this regard perhaps post-development theorists are wise to emphasise the role of new social movements (Kippler 2010). Otherwise, the conventional development industry must respond to Chambers: “can a will to power be transformed, in a spirit of love, in a will to empower?” (2006: 108). Sen may contend that humankind could cope with more reality than economic views admit (2010: 240), but the reality which many people face cannot be conceptualised as, or improved by, prioritising individual freedoms.

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