A POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF AMARTYA SEN’S CAPABILITY FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a postcolonial critique of Amartya Sen’s capability framework. This is done through first, a consideration of the positive contributions of the capability framework and then, an examination of its inadequacy. The authors argue that while Sen recognizes the importance of building the capability of the poor and promoting participatory freedom, the kind of development he aspires for cannot be fully reached as long as his approach remains within an individualistic capitalist neoliberal framework. Seminal ideas for a re-conception of postcolonial capability building are then offered.

KEYWORDS: capability approach; capitalism; economics; development; indigenous knowledge; neoliberalism; postcolonialism; poverty

Amartya Sen’s capability framework emphasizes capabilities as the key to analyzing poverty, pursuing development, and envisioning justice. As such, it affirms that the people themselves play an important role in their own empowerment. He encourages the use of participatory capabilities by the public in influencing policies and development initiatives that aim to build capabilities.1 Although Sen himself does not prescribe a list of basic capability bundles, he stresses that people who do

1Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 18, 53.
so must take into consideration particular contexts. Contextual and particular diversities affect capability and well-being.

Sen understands poverty to be more than just an economic issue. Poverty is not only about having less or no income but also about having no choice. Sen recounts the story of Kader Mia, a Muslim daily-wage earner. He was killed in a Hindu area. Sen points out that “Kader Mia need not have come to a hostile area in search of a little income in those terrible times had his family been able to survive without it.” It was economic poverty that pushed him to find work in a hostile environment and made him a helpless prey, in violation of his other freedoms. Economic poverty, in other words, breeds different dimensions of capability deprivations.

Poverty in Asia remains to be a disheartening problem. The vast majority of Asia’s peoples remain economically poor, and inequality continues to be a challenge in development. United Nations economic indicators show that rates of economic poverty have fallen down, although the actual number of poor people is still high.

Thus, it must be asked: Does Amartya Sen’s capability framework really give voice to the poor, and to what extent? This paper uses a postcolonial critical perspective to assess the degree of agency that the poor is given in Sen’s capability framework, given the dominance of neoliberal development today. Postcolonialism is a much debated and contested area. For the purposes of this paper, “postcolonial critique” refers to the practice of viewing and assessing the world, including social, political, cultural, and economic aspects of human relations, from a perspective that takes the history of colonization, including ongoing neo-colonization, and its

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4 Sen, Development as Freedom, 8.


6 There are constant efforts by many economists, philosophers, and agents of social development to redefine the meaning and concept of poverty beyond its traditional income-based measurement. On this matter, see Peter Saunders, “Towards a Framework: From Income Poverty to Deprivation,” SPRC Discussion Paper No. 131 (Sydney: The Social Policy Research Center, University of New South Wales, 2003).


effects on both the colonizers and colonized into account. The idea of postcolonial criticism is to compel “a radical rethinking of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and Western domination.” Such an analysis aims to consider the perspectives of the underside, marginalized or “subalterns” or “orient” and put into question the universalization of particularly Western views and solutions.

We will argue that while Sen’s capability framework has pro-poor characteristics, it remains entrenched in an individualistic neoliberal capitalist paradigm, which is detrimental to the poor. This system, which is presently dominant, “limits” the poor’s capabilities for development; thus, as long as the dominant neoliberal system is not resisted and as long as capability building is seen, understood, and implemented within this paradigm, the participation that Amartya Sen’s approach aims for will always be compromised. For Sen’s capability framework to be truly participatory and pro-poor, it has to be decolonized and liberated. We will conclude this paper with some ideas on how a postcolonial capability framework may be imagined as an alternative.

While many other economists and philosophers have already used and improved on Sen’s approach, the basis of this appraisal is Sen’s own exposition of the capability approach found in Development as Freedom in relation to some of his other works.

**CONTEXTUALIZING POVERTY**

As mentioned above, Sen understands poverty as “capability deprivation,” and he explains that low incomes are generally factors that decrease an individual’s

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As Alan Thomas puts it, Sen conceives of poverty as a “failure to be able to take a full part in human society... as a matter of lack of choice or capability.”14 The poor are those who are deprived of their full human potentials and capabilities. While we agree with this definition, the present context of globalization and the history of colonization in many Asian countries demand another layer of understanding poverty.

From the perspective of many postcolonial thinkers, poverty is also regional and geographical. This idea is clearly articulated by Franz Fanon who speaks of a “geography of hunger.”15 It is generally found in the areas of the world that have experienced colonization and neo-colonization. These are the “underdeveloped” societies whose resources have been exploited and whose governments suffer from dependency—“a world of underdevelopment, a world of poverty and inhumanity.”16 It is these societies that have made “developed” societies possible. The geographical quality of such poverty is affirmed by Childs who states that “there is an ‘obvious’ geography of post-colonialism—those areas formerly under the control of the European colonialist powers.”17 However, Childs further nuances this idea to clarify that postcolonial poverty includes diaspora or internal colonization.18 In this paper, the “poor” are those who are experiencing multiple oppression, which at the very least includes economic poverty in a poor country.

**SEN’S CAPABILITY APPROACH**

Sen’s capability approach has three related and noteworthy implications for the poor that make it theoretically more inclusive in comparison to other economic frameworks such as (1) utilitarianism, within which priority is given to equal marginal utility, (2) welfarism, within which equal welfare is sought for, and other specific approaches, such as (3) John Rawl’s emphasis on basic goods, (4) Robert Nozick’s entitlement theory, and (5) Ronald Dworkin’s focus on equality of resources.

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 11–13.
all of which may be employed toward the attainment of a more just society and of solutions to poverty.\textsuperscript{19}

First, Sen’s approach presents a nuanced and multidimensional perspective on poverty as capability-deprivation instead of just as lack of income or material possession. Many poor people find themselves caught in a cycle: a lack of economic capability breeds other forms of incapability such as social and political unfreedoms, and these in turn promote economic unfreedom.\textsuperscript{20} With its emphasis on freedom and capabilities, Sen’s approach exposes the inadequacy of using macroeconomic measures, such as GNP (Gross National Product) and GDP (Gross Domestic Product), as indicators of economic growth and of narrowly aiming for growth in those areas only. For Sen, such broad and national measures of wealth fail to describe the quality of life of individuals in a society. Instead, Sen encourages a higher objective, which is integral development through building capabilities.\textsuperscript{21}

Second, because of Sen’s more nuanced view of poverty, the poor can have a greater role. No longer are they defined as mere recipients of aid, goods, or dole-outs, a scenario resulting from a narrow view of poverty as the lack of basic necessities. Dambisa Moyo, an economist from Africa, has criticized such an approach as being detrimental to poor nations.\textsuperscript{22} Sen’s approach avoids that outcome. It encourages the poor to participate in determining which capabilities are most important to them. It encourages “public participation in these valuational debates” in the identification of public priorities, and “public discussion and social participation” in policy-making.\textsuperscript{23}

Third, by giving the poor greater avenue for participation, it sees their situation not just in terms of human capital but also in terms of human capability.\textsuperscript{24} In this sense, poverty is understood as “capability deprivation.”\textsuperscript{25} Furthermore, eliminating different unfreedoms “that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency” is “constitutive” of development.\textsuperscript{26} Within

\textsuperscript{20}Sen, Development as Freedom, 8.
\textsuperscript{21}Ibid.; Sen, “The Concept of Development,” 162–64.
\textsuperscript{23}Sen, Development as Freedom, 110.
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., 293.
\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., xii.
Sen’s framework, the poor person’s entitlement to freedom, responsibility, and self-determination is given more recognition.\textsuperscript{27}

Sen’s conclusion is a very apt and admirable synthesis of the importance he gives to participatory freedom from the public:

The ends and means of development call for placing the perspective of freedom at the center of the stage. The people have to be seen, in this perspective, as being actively involved—given the opportunity—in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs. The state and the society have extensive roles in strengthening and safeguarding human capabilities. This is a supporting role, rather than one of ready-made delivery. The freedom-centered perspective on the ends and the means of development has some claim to our attention.\textsuperscript{28}

With his capability approach, Sen seems to provide more flexibility and space for communities to determine themselves using a perspective that relates agency to the person. Sen’s capability framework appears to be a great contribution to social development, if we understand it separately from the more encompassing neoliberal development framework.

CAPABILITY-BUILDING WITHIN NEOLIBERALISM?

However, Sen frames his approach within a neoliberal system, which has an inherently anti-capability character. This section offers an exposition on neoliberalism and its negative effects on the poor. After this, the neoliberal characteristics of Sen’s capability approach will be discussed.

McChesney explains that neoliberalism “refers to the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit.”\textsuperscript{29} With its foundation in the traditions of the liberal political doctrine of John Locke and the economic theory of Adam Smith, neoliberalism as an interlocking component of liberal politics and market economy primarily justifies free market and capitalism

\textsuperscript{28}Sen, \textit{Development as Freedom}, 53.
\textsuperscript{29}Robert McChesney, introduction to \textit{Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order}, by Noam Chomsky (Woodgreen, London: Turnaround Publisher Services, 1999), 7.
with efficiency arguments.³⁰ Neoliberalism became the international economic policy in the late 1980s where the term “Washington Consensus” was used to refer to the policy reforms imposed by the US government to the debtor counties in Latin American and Third World countries through the international financial institutions (World Bank and IMF).³¹ As the essence of neoliberal development packages, the Washington Consensus involves a set of policies that include fiscal discipline, reduction of public expenditures, tax reform, interest rates, competitive exchange rates, trade liberalization, encouragement of foreign direct investment, privatization, deregulation, and security of property rights.³²

As a global system, neoliberalism has had widespread negative effects upon many poor nations in general and poor people within those nations in particular. These detriments revolve around three related themes: (1) global injustice, (2) individualism and privatization, and (3) imperialism.

First, its free market–based and profit-driven capitalistic policies have resulted in instances of injustice. Chomsky explains that after the Second World War, the interests of US investors prevailed over the preference of Latin Americans for a broader wealth distribution and higher standard of living for the general populace. The US became the primary beneficiary of the resources of Latin America. Because of the priority given to high profits by the people behind the Washington Consensus and the rise in oil prices and the revolution in telecommunications, a low-growth and low-wage economy was not avoided despite predictions made by economists. Many states formerly known as “communist” such as China, the Soviet Union, and other Third World nations began to integrate into the neoliberal global economic system, and with this development, the quality of life of the ordinary populace decreased as the stature of the local elite rose according to the “pattern of Western dependencies.” Much large-scale violence has also occurred in the promotion of the global capitalist system.³³

Moreover, neoliberalism is grounded on individualist and privatized enterprise that breaks down communitarian dimensions and seeks only individual interests over the common good. Himes and Himes explain that the individualist neoliberal market economy is based on the assumption that self-interest is always behind

³⁰Lars Syll, Amartya Sen on Neoliberalism (Jönköping: School of Education and Communication [HLK], 2004), 29, 1–2.
³¹Peet and Hartwick, Theories of Development, 84–91.
³²Ibid., 86–87.
³³Noam Chomsky, Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order (Woodgreen, London: Turnaround Publisher Services, 1999), 21–24.
peoples’ behaviors and that the individual is always at odds with the community.\textsuperscript{34} Taken from the individualist political doctrine of Thomas Hobbes, neoliberalism is founded on the belief that because of different self-interests, human beings are always in competition with one another and that therefore there can be no common good. Neoliberalism is also rooted in the individualist economic theory of Adam Smith who proclaimed the teleological value of self-interest: we seek a sense of well-being and worth that we can gain when people agree with us, and this serves the common good. This is the start of Smith’s theory of the invisible hand: when people pursue their own interests, things naturally fall into place. But Krishna refutes this individualist doctrine:

This premise, that the only “real” entity in social analysis is the individual, is often referred to as methodological individualism and is a key tenet of the modernization approach. To this view, the state should, by and large, stay out of direct production or interference in the workings of the economy. It should moreover not engage in wasteful expenditures that weaken the nation’s currency by increasing deficits or debts (something that complements the emphasis on individual thrift and self-discipline) and should ensure that its laws and taxes do not contravene the essentially competitive and individualistic character of society, as that is the source of its dynamism and progress.\textsuperscript{35}

The individualist character of neoliberalism finds its concrete expression in the instrumentalization of state and privatization.\textsuperscript{36} The neoliberal free market policies encourage “private enterprise and consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative, and undermine the dead hand of the incompetent, bureaucratic and parasitic government, that can never do good even if well intended, which it rarely is.”\textsuperscript{37} In reality, neoliberalism has proven that the invisible hand of the market is bogus, given the active role of the state in promoting and implementing neoliberal policies by imposing privatization of social enterprises.

Finally, as a global economic system, neoliberalism takes the form of imperialism. Imperialism is “not simply a deliberate and active ideology, but a combination of conscious ideological programs and unconscious ‘rhizomic’ structures of unplanned connections and engagements.”\textsuperscript{38} It seeks to subordinate all


\textsuperscript{35}Krishna, \textit{Globalization and Postcolonialism}, 10.


\textsuperscript{37}Chomsky, \textit{Profit over People}, 7.

\textsuperscript{38}Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, \textit{The Empire Writes Back}, 216–17.
institutions, norms and ideals to the restructuring demands of private capital.\textsuperscript{39} Influencing not just the economy but all aspects of life, it subsumes other cultures and ways of thinking (such as indigenous knowledge) into its own system. According to Colin Hay, Gramsci’s notion of hegemony entails that the “moral, political and cultural values as societal norms” of the dominating power be accepted as “\textit{common sense} [italics in the original].”\textsuperscript{40} In neoliberal globalization Western values and ways of thinking are spread: some even refer to globalization as “Americanization.”\textsuperscript{41} The dominance of neoliberal capitalism which has pervaded the world through globalization has also given people the impression that it is “normal,” and therefore, “natural” and “universal.” Postcolonial criticism puts this naturality and universality into question by revealing the political reasons behind them.\textsuperscript{42}

What Sen does is propose a way for the poor to achieve their well-being in a neoliberal capitalist world,\textsuperscript{43} and his method has been used by many (possibly) well-meaning institutions around the globe.\textsuperscript{44} However, as Paul Samuelson declares, Sen still belongs “solidly in the mainstream of economics.”\textsuperscript{45} Sen’s capability framework renders some constructive critique of free market neoliberal system, but it essentially offers no alternative system; it endorses working within and making the best out of a “most exploitative and repressive system.”\textsuperscript{46} The influence of this neoliberal system can be seen in three characteristics of Sen’s capability approach that hinder its pro-poor objectives. Each characteristic corresponds to a negative quality of neoliberalism mentioned above: (1) Sen does not sufficiently critique the very system of neoliberal capitalism that breeds global injustice, (2) his conception of capabilities primarily in terms of individual agency coincides with individualism and privatization, and (3) in the context of imperialism, there is an ambivalence in Sen with regard to supporting local cultures and indigenous knowledge.

\textsuperscript{41}Elliott and Lemert, \textit{The New Individualism}, 85.
\textsuperscript{42}Krishna, \textit{Globalization and Postcolonialism}, 2.
\textsuperscript{43}Sen, \textit{Development as Freedom}, 116.
\textsuperscript{46}McChesney, introduction to \textit{Profit over People}, 8.
First, Sen does not critique the system of neoliberal capitalism that breeds global injustice. Peet and Hartwick have the following comment on Sen’s *Development as Freedom*:

Amartya Sen’s *Development as Freedom* (2000), concerned with how society grants to individuals the capacity for taking part in creating their own livelihoods, governing their own affairs, and participating in self-government—although we do not find him following this through with a political economics of societal transformation.47

Sen’s notion of uplifting the poor or empowerment is building the capabilities of the poor so that they can function or participate in the market.48 However, this market economy has transformed itself into a hegemonic and oppressive system. While this system impresses upon people the semblance of freedom and flexibility, it is not really open and respectful of other possible ways of relating. By enabling the poor to become absorbed in this dominant system, Sen’s capability approach becomes another instrument of hegemony. Richard Robison and Kevin Hewison point out that as long as the neoliberal capitalist system is implicitly assumed or explicitly accepted, “any hopes of neo-liberal reformers have been frustrated.”49 Douglas Hicks overestimates Sen, saying that his treatment of agency provides basis for a preferential option for the poor that not only redistributes wealth but also asserts that “public policies are needed that equalize the structures in which women and men may seek to achieve well-being within a context of justice.”50 While Sen’s approach does necessitate more than a mere redistribution of goods, structural change is not a necessary conclusion of Sen’s approach. This is because Sen does not explain or critique how the free market maintains power holders and main decision makers. In saying that the poor should have a central role “in shaping their own destiny” instead of being “passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs,”51 Sen implicitly recognizes that there is something wrong with the status quo. However, his solution of distributing capabilities is inadequate if the hegemonic neoliberal capitalist system that breeds the prevailing kind of power relations and capability deprivation remains radically unchallenged.

In his foreword to a book entitled *From Poverty to Power* by Duncan Green, Sen attributes poverty to powerlessness and unfreedoms, and praises the book for

47Peet and Hartwick, *Theories of Development*, 3.
exploring how “poverty is being fought through the empowerment of the people.” However, despite “empowerment” initiatives or “distribution” of capabilities, when the basic power relation remains unequal, authentic empowerment is impossible. Forst argues that what the poor individually and collectively experience is not just a lack but a deprivation brought about by multiple domination of certain power holders who can wield societal influence in order to gain most of the profit in a system that is conducive to domination. One may cite the fact that in the Third World, developments in communication technology and media, which potentially enhance some capabilities, have failed to improve people’s well-being and were even detrimental to the social fabric when these implant First World or private interests that dominate over local, indigenous, or grassroots community values. This condition is due to “the concentration of power,” which determines “who owns and controls the distribution of communication” and communication’s “purpose and intent.”

Sen, as a supporter of the free market, attributes cases of injustice and poverty to societies’ not yet having completely developed into capitalism. This is as far as Sen goes with regard to his critique of capitalism: attributing flaws to pre-capitalist, feudal arrangements, while maintaining the importance of individual freedoms. Analyzing a system, on the other hand, entails not only looking at elements within the system but also critically considering the interconnections and purposes of the system. While Sen’s capability approach offers improvements in prevailing development schemas, this same approach can still be—and has been—used contrary to the attainment of the well-being of the poor. As Eade notes:

Amartya K. Sen’s work on entitlements and capabilities provides insights into the dynamic nature of the exclusion that capacity building seeks to address. . . . Institutions—most notably the World Bank (now re-cast as the Global Knowledge

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52Amartya Sen, foreword to From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World, by Duncan Green (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2008), xiv. In this foreword, Sen gives some recognition of the poor’s capacity to organize (which can indicate the beginning of a further development in Sen’s thought), but this notion of the organization of the poor is expounded on in the book not by Sen but by Green. An evaluation of the adequacy of Green’s notion of the poor communities’ organization and participation may be a subject for another paper.


55Sen, Development as Freedom, 120–21.

56Ibid., 122.

Bank)—have also adopted the language of capacity building and participation, relating this to the neo-liberal agenda of rolling back the state, privatising public services (the “marketisation” of social welfare), good governance, and democratisation.58

Real changes in people’s lives, therefore, cannot be actualized as long as power and the system remain unchanged.59 Who controls the market? According to Donella Meadows, more attention must be paid to the rules and to who has power over these rules, because rules, in turn, control behavior.60

Second, Sen’s conception of capabilities in terms of individual agency suits individualism and privatization. Sen focuses on “exploring capabilities as the basis of judging individual advantage.”61 Since he accepts the neoliberal system as the overall context of his capability framework, he tends to retain an individualistic perspective of human persons as well. In turn, structural, social, and class concerns are reduced to being private affairs.62

Even when Sen acknowledges that there is a relationship between “individual agency and social arrangements,” he gives centrality to individual freedom and acknowledges social arrangements only as influences that can affect individual freedom.63 On the contrary, Deneulin argues that Sen’s framework does not account for the value of the overall condition of communities or of society as a whole, or of “common good” on its own accord, more than just the well-being of its members.64 Structural, social, and institutional realities shape, affect, and interact with individuals and so are constitutive of individuals. It is therefore insufficient to speak of the well-being of individuals without talking about the well-being of institutions and communities themselves.65

Even Sen’s book entitled Collective Choice and Social Welfare presents collective choice as a similar preference among members of society and remains preoccupied with individual liberties and values.66 This goes to show that Sen does not give due

58Eade, “Capacity Building,” 632.
60Meadows, Thinking in Systems, 158.
63Sen, Development as Freedom, xii.
65Ibid., 372.
recognition to how freedom is pursued or exercised by the poor in community and as a community.  

Hence, while Sen speaks of development where the poor are participants, it is unrealistic to expect the poor to be capable of participating when their collective mode of living, means of support, and common experience of deprivation are not duly recognized and their self-organization is not encouraged. The kind of freedom that Sen aspires for requires a need for one to articulate and expound on the political capability of the poor and their organization. Sen’s individualistic approach hardly explores the power people can have by coming together and so falls short of practical empowerment. The poor, who lack many economic and material resources, can make use of their social capital by coming together.

Third, there is an ambivalence in Sen with regard to supporting local cultures and indigenous knowledge. Despite the fact that Sen does not prescribe specific capability bundles and instead recommends that communities themselves participate in the valuation of capabilities (as seen earlier), he still uses a Western lens rather than respect and encourage the plurality that various communities need as they exercise their own agency (as will be shown below). This limits capability building in two related ways.

First, Sen leans toward universalizing particular cultural elements from dominant cultures or identifying “similarities” among Asian cultures from his particular Western interpretation. For instance, Sen asserts that the value of freedom is present among different Asian cultures. Filipino theologian Agnes Brazal has pointed out the limitation of this claim: “The Indian economist Amartya Sen also argues that in antiquity, one finds anticipatory components of human rights (such as freedom and


69 Sen, Development as Freedom, 231–240.

70 Ibid.
tolerance as individual entitlement) not only in Western but also in Asian religions."\textsuperscript{71} Despite this, what freedom means varies from culture to culture. Brazal explains that freedom and human rights are generally viewed more individualistically in the West, and Asians tend to have more communitarian values.\textsuperscript{72} Capability building, however, is set in a framework where neoliberal values and interests are promoted and opportunities to explore and cultivate the plurality of Asian values and ways are not maximized.

Second, when the multi-cultural Asian perspectives are not given due support and recognition, people’s participatory freedoms become an instrument for absorption into the market economy rather than a vehicle for decolonization and self-determination. Consideration must be given to the politics behind culture in an empire that does not appreciate all cultures equally. For example, Sen traces the concept of “sine,” attributed to Western mathematics, to Sanskrit to argue for cross-cultural appreciation.\textsuperscript{73} While cultural purism and conservatism are to be avoided, care must be taken not uncritically to accept all cultures as equal. While the “sine” may have come from India, now that it is a symbol used in modern mathematics, it globally denotes a trigonometric concept more than anything else (even more than what it might have signified in Sanskrit).\textsuperscript{74} This example shows how indigenous knowledge is usually understood to be “informal” compared to the dominant ways of thinking.\textsuperscript{75}

Paying attention to this “informal” kind of knowledge, however, could enrich discussions on global poverty. Lal points out that while Sen is lauded as an Indian economist, Sen’s thought remains Western and modern. Even though Hindus have very long Bhakti traditions that take up the problem of poverty, none of these is included in Sen’s thought.\textsuperscript{76}

Sen’s cultural ambivalence manifests in various ways. He attempts to advocate agency, empowerment, and self-determination, but he constantly goes back to

\textsuperscript{71}Agnes Brazal, “Globalization and Catholic Theological Ethics,” in Catholic Theological Ethics in the World-Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross-cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics, ed. James Keenan (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008), 79.

\textsuperscript{72}Ibid., 80. We have cited Brazal’s general description as an example of a difference between cultural appreciations and understandings of freedom. This is not to simply dichotomize between Asia and the West. Multiple differences also exist within each region which elude generalizations.

\textsuperscript{73}Sen, Development as Freedom, 244.


particular neoliberal conceptions of human rights and freedom.\textsuperscript{77} He endorses multicultural appreciation but continues to see the world through a Western lens.\textsuperscript{78} The universals Sen articulates and the perspective from which he seeks to make recommendations for various societies are also produced and expressed by a particular entity, the West, which has been universalized because of its dominant characteristic. All the above constitute a form of imperialism. Local communities, including decolonizing Asian countries, need more space to be able to determine what is right and good for them, to determine the valuation and direction of their own capabilities, or to decide how to appropriate other cultures, without the norms being dictated from above or from the hegemonic center.

**CONCEIVING A POSTCOLONIAL CAPABILITY FRAMEWORK**

We have argued at length that the shortcomings of Sen’s capability approach lie in the fact that it remains within the inherently flawed neoliberal system. Considering all the issues presented, the basic question of this paper has to be asked again: Does Amartya Sen’s capability framework really give voice to the poor, and to what extent? We maintain that Sen’s capability framework can authentically give voice to the poor only if it is rescued from neoliberal control. This can be done by a reconceptualization of the capability approach from a postcolonial perspective. We propose an alternative capability approach that has the following attributes: (1) it is one that contributes to the building of a human economy (instead of acceptance of an unjust system); (2) it is founded on solidarity and economy (rather than on market economy and individualism and privatization); and (3) it is operated and constantly reformulated with inclusivity, multi-polarity, and hybridity, founded on localized and indigenous knowledge (rather than its being an instrument of Western-US imperial hegemony).

First, Sen’s capability approach can only achieve its full potential when it contributes to building and nurturing a human economy rather than participating in market economy. The collapse of the financial giants in the world (Lehman Brothers and General Motors) in 2008, which has had a lasting and far-reaching impact, has exposed the inherent weakness of market economy.\textsuperscript{79} The significant

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\textsuperscript{78}Ibid., 244.

\textsuperscript{79}Edward Estrada, “The Immediate and Lasting Impacts of the 2008 Economic Collapse—Lehman Brothers, General Motors, and the Secured Credit Markets,” *University of Richmond Law Review* 45
event has validated the ever-pressing questions on the viability and sustainability of the neoliberal market-driven and profit-oriented economy. Indeed, “it’s already time for the people to have their say in the economic matters.”

This situation calls for the cooperative establishment of a human economy. Human economy as an emerging postcolonial, broad, socio-economic, and political project seeks to reconsider the centrality of humanity in all aspects of life. It is an umbrella concept that emphasizes both “what people do for themselves” and “the need to find ways forward that must involve all of humanity.”

Human economy as a people-centered economy directly critiques and resists the neoliberal policies that David Hill describes as leading to “human degradation, inhumanity, and increased social class inequalities within states and globally.” It questions and decentralizes the power of the neoliberal capitalists who seek to legitimize “competition, privatization, poorer standards of public services, greater inequalities between rich and poor . . . and the economic system of private monopoly ownership.”

Moreover, in order for it to truly subvert the unjust neoliberal system, human economy needs to have the four fundamental attributes identified by Hart, Laville, and Cattani:

1. It is made and remade by people; economics should be of practical use to us all in our daily lives.
2. It should address a great variety of particular situations in all their institutional complexity.
3. It must be based on a more holistic conception of everyone’s needs and interests.
4. It has to address humanity as a whole and the world society we are making.

Given the holistic, diversified, and inclusive features of human economy, the more nuanced, multidimensional capability framework of Sen would allow the poor people, particularly in Asia, to have a greater role in re-shaping and re-building their own lives and destiny and to contribute to the humanization of global economy.


Ibid.


Ibid., 40.

This requires the promotion and building of people’s capabilities not only in their individual capacity, but more importantly in their community capacity. Thus, in order for Sen’s capability framework to contribute effectively in the building and nurturing of human economy, the poor should consciously contribute to the building of community towards empowered community participation “as a corrective to the excess of the market and the individualism fostered by the neoliberal agenda.”

The above brings us to the second point: Sen’s capability framework can only work effectively if it is grounded not on a market economy where an individualized and privatized way of living is the norm, but on a solidarity economy encouraged and fostered by community participation and community empowerment. While a solidarity economy varies in terms of degree and foci depending on the loci, Jean-Louis Laville defines solidarity economy as one that is based on the mix of three core principles: (1) a “market principle,” which seeks an equilibrium for supply and demand; (2) a “principle of redistribution,” in which a governing body re-allocates output; and (3) a “principle of reciprocity,” which refers to the relational aspect among the members of a community. Contrary to neoliberal goals, solidarity economy aims at, among other things, strengthening communities and reducing individualism. It can entail community building for grassroot communities, having channels for these communities to be heard, and leadership training and alliances among these communities themselves.

Eric Dacheux and Daniel Goujon assert that solidarity economy offers a potential constructive alternative model to a neoliberal economy, which has caused “worldwide increase in inequality.” They highlight the three fruitful approaches of a solidarity economy model: (1) “develop the collective (i.e. non-individual) subsistence economy,” (2) “strengthen the state’s capacity for action,” and (3) “contest the vision offered by international financial institutions.” If these three approaches were to be translated into the language of capabilities and freedom, they would mean the cultivation of people’s collective agency, the strengthening of government agency,

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86Ibid., 328.
91Ibid.
and the development of capabilities required by societies for self-determination. Capability building has much to contribute toward meeting these ends.

Clearly, Sen’s capability framework, if stripped of its neoliberal clothing, can serve as a torch to light the way to an alternative solidarity economy that should correct the plight of the poor, the disadvantaged, and the excluded through the alternative solidarity economy.

Lastly, in order for Sen’s capability framework to offer a more credible option for the poor in developing nations, it should be exercised and be constantly reformulated with inclusivity and multipolarity in view. Multipolarity refers to international relations with the following political and economic dimensions: politically, it describes an environment where no single center dominates in the numerous national concentrations of power; economically, it means “more than two growth poles” play a key role in the global economic system. The manifold ways by which this can take place have to be based on localized and indigenous knowledge. Sen expresses his openness to taking a many-sided approach to development and encourages the balancing role of the government, but not outside the dominant neoliberal market economy. As discussed above, neoliberal market economy has an inherent tendency to control, impose, and colonize the social, economic, and cultural aspects of the people in the developing world. Chomsky describes alternative counter-hegemonic approaches:

It makes little sense to ask what is “right” for particular countries as if these are entities with common interests and values. And what may be right for people in the United States with their unparalleled advantages could well be wrong for others who have a much narrower scope of choices. We can, however, reasonably anticipate that what is right for the people of the world will only by the remotest accident conform to the plans of the “principal architects” of policy. And there is no more reason now than there ever has been to permit them to shape the future in their own interests.

Within this postcolonial perspective, capability building can yield two things: (1) recognizing and cultivating indigenous cultures and (2) allowing these “peripheral” perspectives to address and decentralize the “center.” At this point, we cite two studies that illustrate each outcome.

In studying how mathematics can be taught to the Blackfoot tribe, Sterberg remarks how using indigenous knowledge can be a form of tokenism, such as simply using a hypothetical scenario involving tipis as an example but framing mathematical

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94Chomsky, *Profit over People*, 40.
problems the modern way. But truly integrating indigenous knowledge can produce profound results.⁹⁵

An example of capacity building that is not only sensitive to culture but is founded on culture is how a teacher named Bryony used mathematics at the service of tribal values. Despite being a teacher, Bryony made an effort to learn and listen first. She considered the cultural context of the people, listened to an elder’s story and learned to appreciate the significance of the people’s relationship to the land. In her attempt to integrate indigenous knowledges and Western mathematics, she invited a geologist to explain the scientific geometry of land excavation, and an elder to pray and tell the story of the place. The design and implementation of her mathematical curriculum involved relating geometry to the people’s medicine wheel, mathematically assessing the land, and a field trip that led to a search for sacred stones. Instead of transposing a packaged way of teaching that was already familiar to her, Bryony adapted and even changed the curriculum in order to enrich the capabilities of the tribe so that it may respond to its own recognized needs and achieve things that it deems important.⁹⁶

Sterenberg assesses the result of this method of teaching positively:

What was unique about this experience was her approach to planning and implementing. Rather than starting from Western mathematics, she started from a consideration of Indigenous knowledges. We visited the land and she provided students with the opportunity to respond to the teachings of the land. . . . Reflecting on her observations of the students, Bryony noted that integrating Indigenous and Western mathematics through place made students feel more connected to their land and community. The students were proud and expressed concern for the care and treatment of traditional sites. Students became more willing to express themselves mathematically and were more confident in their mathematical knowledge and skills.⁹⁷

When unique indigenous knowledge is taken more seriously, we realize that these have much to contribute to the world. For instance, modern societies or even the globalized world, in spite of a plethora of “historical developments,” “theories,” and “solutions,” admittedly still continue to grapple with the question of environmental sustainability.⁹⁸ Researchers are beginning to discover other possible worldviews,

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⁹⁶Ibid., 27–28.

⁹⁷Ibid., 28–29.

and some indigenous societies that “have developed ways to deal with complexity” have “resource-practices that suggest a sophisticated understanding of ecological relationships and dynamics” and offer “huge potential interest” in the area of the sustainable management of ecosystems.99 While indigenous knowledge is often judged as superstitious and primitive according to prevalent norms, these wisdoms and systems of relations enshrined in stories and rituals realize other profound possibilities for relating with nature, valuing it and protecting it.100

Berkes and Berkes find that while modern Western science tends to be precise and analytical, many indigenous perspectives tend to operate from a holistic paradigm, which sees everything as interconnected. Though this way of thinking may seem vague to modern scientists, a study conducted on the contamination at the Hudson Bay shows that the “logic” and “sensing” of the Inuit regarding the fish and the environment proved to be more effective compared to the usual methods of the scientists. Berkes and Berkes therefore recommends that “fuzzy logic,” a logic that uses generalizations rather than calculated precision, enables scientists to also more effectively understand the environment.101 Nevertheless, they still admit that the Inuit have an advantage:

For Westerners, holistic Western sciences such as fuzzy logic help comprehend the concept. Indigenous knowledge holders do not need fuzzy logic to understand holism; they already practice it.102

Thus, wisdoms from “below” or from “the margins” can present new light for the enlightened world, when these are given the opportunity to dialogue with Western culture in the context of human solidarity. According to Felix Wilfred, globalization in its present form is unjust because what is being globalized is the unity and norms of the better-off members of the globe. Ultimately, this practice intensifies the gap between the have and the have-nots, a situation which causes even more disunity than unity.103 Sustainability then, both social and environmental, cannot be achieved in this way. For Wilfred, the formation of a global community toward a just world

99Jackson, Prosperity without Growth, 1–16; Berkes and Berkes, “Indigenous Knowledge,” 6–12.
102Ibid., 12.
must come from the poor and subalterns participating and helping one another.\textsuperscript{104} Here, building capabilities is key.

CONCLUSION

We agree with Eade: “If capacity building means anything, it is surely about enabling those out on the margins to represent and defend their interests more effectively, not only within their own immediate contexts but also globally.”\textsuperscript{105} What we have done is to show what a capability approach based on Sen’s work can truly accomplish if it is taken out of a neoliberal paradigm and re-conceived in a more inclusive and postcolonial perspective.

Working to increase the capabilities of the poor within the dominant system is indeed not enough. Sen’s economic breakthrough will just be used for the political ends of those who are already in power. The system which quashes capabilities itself needs to be changed. What is needed is a paradigmatic shift. Modernity has made us believe that development comes from above, from the “center” or from the Western hegemony and that today this development takes the form of neoliberal capitalism. Real empowerment, however, which requires that poor communities be able to own projects, determine their own directions, pursue their own ideals, and make their contribution to society, necessitates changing the existing paradigm.\textsuperscript{106}

With its emphasis on participatory freedoms, the capabilities approach, when used to promote a human economy and solidarity economy towards an inclusive and multi-polar growth, has transformative counter-hegemonic potentials, indeed.

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\textsuperscript{104}Ibid.


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