

## **Amartya Sen's capability approach as theoretical foundation of human development**

Shija Kuhumba\*

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the theoretical scheme of human development as proposed in the 1990s by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) by exploring the theoretical foundations of Amartya Sen's capability approach. Sen critiques traditional development thinking that considers Gross Domestic Product growth as a principal vehicle for progress and economic development. Human Development, grounded on the capability approach, focuses on the enhancement of people's real freedom to choose the kinds of lives they have reasons to value. This essay explores the strengths and weaknesses of the capability approach toward realizing holistic human development, an approach that focuses on human development as enhancement of individual freedom. For the capability approach to be an effective tool for evaluating human development, however, it is argued here that *Ubuntu* philosophy should be incorporated. *Ubuntu* philosophy envisions the human being as a communal being driven by the virtues of cooperation and solidarity.

**Key words:** Human development, capability approach, freedom, Amartya Sen, *Ubuntu* philosophy

### **Introduction**

This article illustrates Amartya Sen's capability approach as the theoretical foundation of human development. It makes a subsequent application of Sen's ideas in enhancing human development. Sen, a 1998 noble-prize winner in economics, is one of the greatest multidisciplinary minds of our time and his thoughts are becoming useful in various fields. In spite of its ambiguity, the capability approach is much discussed in academia and this makes Sen one of the most influential philosophers and economists of our time. His capability approach is integrated in various fields from economics, political science, philosophy to theology, medicine, public healthcare, developmental studies, studies on poverty and famine, and others.

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\* Department of Philosophy, St. Augustine University of Tanzania  
E-mail: [shijakuhumba@gmail.com](mailto:shijakuhumba@gmail.com)

Sen's approach has influenced the World Bank to change its direction from reliance on economic indicators alone to be more concerned with the way actual life is actually lived by human beings, and his contribution is visible in the United Nations's Development Programme (UNDP) reports. His approach also has continued to influence many significant Non-Governmental Organizations such as Oxfam International. The interdisciplinary appeal of the capability approach has also led to the creation of the Human Development and Capability Association (HDCA).

This article tries to analyze, evaluate, and critique the capability approach and integrate its insistence on the expansion of individual freedom in relation to expansion of freedom of collectivities and groups. This integration leads the article to propose *Ubuntu* philosophy as a paradigm to advance the theoretical scheme of capability approach on human development. This paradigm advocates for human development that fosters the collective wellbeing of the community.

The first part of the article deals with a review of the capability approach and human development. Also, it unravels Sen's emphasis on freedom as the essential element of enhancing human development. The second part proposes a new paradigm for human development by going beyond Sen's capability approach. In this part, the essay argues that, in spite of its global appeal and impact, Sen's capability approach portrays an individualist nature of human beings. This raises questions especially regarding the conception of the person, the nature of a person's values, and his/her relationship with others. Hence, the article proposes that Sen leave us with a weak conception of the human person in the discourse of human development for Sen's understanding of a person remains a disintegrated conception of the person where an individual is not an integral part of the community.

In response to this problem, an integration of the capability approach with *Ubuntu* philosophy is made, that focuses on solidarity and cooperation. This alternative is not an outright rejection of Sen's approach on human development but offers a significant revision to it, especially in the domain of empowering collective groups and the community. Therefore, this direction builds on what Sen (2000) describes as the most crucial freedoms of social existence, that is, "freedom to participate in critical evaluation and process of value formation" (p. 287). In fusing the capability approach with *Ubuntu* philosophy, the article argues that the community should be taken into account in the discourse of human development. By doing so, developmental policies in areas such as education, healthcare, social freedom, economic freedom and political freedom can aim at fostering the wellbeing of the entire community.

## Capability approach and human development

The expression ‘human development’ first appeared in the World Report on Human Development (1990), became influential for including a statistical appendix introducing the Human Development Index. It shifted the focus of economic growth to a people-oriented development model. The traditional focus on standards of living, economic variables and goods was replaced by human welfare in terms of life expectancy, education, and health. The United Nations Development Programme (1990) report defines human development as “the enlargement of the range of people’s choices” (p. 10).

Human development, according to Sen, cannot be limited to the growth of the gross national product (GNP), the rise in income, or the increased levels of industrialization and technological advancements. He maintains that income, utilities, resources and wealth act as means towards an end for human development, and not as ends in themselves. Sen (2000) attests that “the usefulness of wealth lies in the things that it allows us to do” (p. 14). This brings us to Sen’s understanding of human development as enhancement of the lives we lead and the freedoms we enjoy, thus, human development is defined as the removal of major hindrances to our freedom. Some of these hindrances are poverty, tyranny, poor economic opportunities and others. In this context, the expansion of freedom is viewed both as a primary end and the principal means for development.

Human development is achieved when people have greater freedoms (capabilities). These substantive freedoms, according to Sen (2000), are “seen in the form of individual capabilities to do things that a person has reason to value” (p. 56). The freedom that we enjoy is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political, and economic opportunities that are valuable to us. Institutions and societal arrangements are of much importance for promoting the freedoms of individuals. Thus, human development as an expansion of individual substantive freedoms occurs with the improving of institutional frameworks such as markets, public services, the judiciary systems, political parties, mass media, and public discussions.

Additionally, human development would really mean making the person more capable through investing in social sectors and public infrastructures and in the long term these goals will improve the health, education and social capabilities of people (Alexander, 2007, p. 10). This draws attention to what makes life worthwhile: people’s ‘centredness’. This departure sees human development in terms of expansion of individual freedoms in the bundle of opportunities that one has reasons to value.

## **The capability approach as a theoretical framework**

The capability approach is a widely influential theory in contemporary political philosophy, social justice, development studies, studies on poverty and inequality, and in public policy. It was formulated by Sen and further developed by Martha Nussbaum. Sen (1993) defines the capability of a person as that which “reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person achieves and from which he/she can choose one collection” (p. 31). The distinguishing characteristic of the capability approach is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be, that is, their ‘capabilities.’ This leads to two important themes for human development as developed by Sen, namely, capabilities and functionings.

### **Capabilities**

What Sen calls “capability” is determined by the different lifestyles that an individual can choose. A capability is “a person’s ability to do valuable acts or to reach valuable states of being”; it “represents the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be” (Sen, 1993, p. 28). Thus, capabilities represent various “combinations of functionings” (Sen, 1999, p. 14). Capability is also a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting a person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another (Sen, 1995, p. 40). These basic capabilities refer to the freedom to do some of the basic things necessary for one’s survival or to keep one out of poverty.

Sen considers capabilities as a person’s abilities to do certain basic things, like meeting one’s nutritional requirements, and the ability to move and appear in public without shame. Palatty (2009, p. 27) suggested that the relevance of a person’s capability, according to Sen, arises from two distinct but interrelated considerations. First, if the achieved functionings constitute a person’s well-being, then the capability to achieve functionings will constitute the person’s freedom, that is, the real opportunities (to achieve well-being). Capabilities refer to the notions of freedom and reflect the real opportunities people have to lead or achieve a certain type of life. Capabilities to be effective must take into consideration the socio-cultural aspects that curtail the flourishing of humanity within society.

The second connection between well-being and capability considers the direct form of producing achieved well-being depending on the capability to function. In this, the act of choosing may itself be a valuable part of living and a life of genuine choice with serious options may seem to be, for that reason, richer (Palatty, 2009, p. 28). Here, capabilities should enhance functioning within the society. Sen (2004) does not list out capabilities required in the society to realize human development:

Pure theory cannot “freeze” a list of capabilities for all societies for all time to come, irrespective of what citizens come to understand and value. That would be not only a denial of the reach of democracy, but also a misunderstanding of what pure theory can do, completely divorced from particular social reality that any particular society faces (p. 77).

To be specific, capabilities reflect individual freedom to achieve valuable functionings. Capabilities of a person, according to Sen (1993) depend on a variety of factors, namely, personal characteristics and social arrangements. That is to say, capabilities as real opportunities engulf personal abilities as well as societal opportunities such as safety nets, social facilities, and economic opportunities. This combination produces a capability set which refers to the various available functionings from which the person can freely choose. A set of capabilities depicts one’s freedom to choose from possible livings (Sen, 1995, p. 52). A set of capabilities presents a larger menu of real opportunities unlike functionings which present one of the available choices in the capacity set.

### **Functionings**

The concept of functioning is derived from the verb ‘to function’ which generally means to be involved in an activity. According to Sen (1999), “functioning is an achievement of people, that is, what they manage or succeed to be or to do” (p. 39). The definition explicates very clearly that functionings, in fact, refer to a person’s achievement in the effort to do something or to be somebody. Thus, functionings are physical or mental states (*beings*) and activities (*doings*) that allow people to participate in the life of their society. Functionings range from elementary physical states like being well-nourished, being in good health, being clothed and sheltered, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, being literate, to the most complex social achievements such as being happy, taking part in the life of the community, having self-respect or being able to appear in the public without shame, participation in social and political life (Sen 1995, p. 110). These ‘beings’ and ‘doings,’ which Sen (2000) calls ‘achieved functionings’ (p. 75-76) together constitute what makes life valuable.

Capabilities and functionings are closely related to each other, but they are distinct:

A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they are different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead (Sen 1987, p. 36).

Additionally, capabilities are real notions of freedom and the real opportunities people have to lead or achieve a certain type of life; whereas functionings are aspects of living conditions or different achievements in living a certain type of life. To differentiate functionings from capabilities, Sen (2000, p. 75) gives the example of the fasting person and the starving person. While both encounter similar level of functionings (i.e. nutritional deficiency), the fasting person has the capability to be adequately nourished, that is to say, he/she could eat if he/she chooses to do so, while the starving one does not have that capability.

Sen's model reminds us of the key issues in which individuals are excluded from enjoying economic entitlements and benefits simply because of socio-economic, market and political conditions. We can imagine recent illegal migrations of Africans to Europe through Lampedusa: the death of hundreds of African and Asian immigrants seeking fortunes in Europe hurts us. Why? It is precisely because people are forced to leave their countries because of poverty, insufficient economic entitlements and inadequate possibilities of job creation. It is critical to ask whether these people have capabilities in the form of economic opportunities such as jobs and economic empowerments. If they lack capabilities in the form of freedoms and opportunities to function as human beings, then we have to question developmental policies undertaken by the countries of their origin. We have to ask whether these policies are pro-people or else pro-market operations to quench greedy leaders and multinational companies.

### **Aspects of freedom in human development**

Freedom entails two valuable aspects, the 'opportunity' aspect and the 'process' aspect. The opportunity aspect of freedom is concerned primarily with our ability to achieve what we value rather than the process through which achievement comes about. Sen (2002) claims: "whether a person has the opportunity of choosing one option rather than another from a given 'opportunity set' 'menu' according to her preference, but also the extent to which she has the opportunity of choosing – or 'developing' – the preferences that she may prefer to have" (p. 12). Here, the

opportunity aspect represents higher values which make available capabilities and functionings that enable people to achieve and live the kind of life they value. An example of the opportunity aspect of freedom is the actual participation of a person in democratic processes and economic decisions affecting his/her life. In assessing opportunities, attention has to be paid to the actual ability of a person to achieve those things that he/she has a reason to value because the opportunity aspect of freedom is concerned with our actual capability to achieve our goals and values. This means that opportunity aspect of freedom relates to the real opportunities which we have for achieving what we can and what we value. Sen views the opportunity aspect of freedom as a central notion for any social evaluation whereby the social evaluation is understood as values and preferences set by a free individual.

The second aspect of freedom is the 'process' aspect. The process aspect is concerned with the procedure and process of free decisions. It takes into account even the considerations that are not figured out in the accounting of the opportunity aspect. The process aspect of freedom includes participation in political decision-making, involvement in social choices and immunity from interferences. Sen argues that the process aspect of freedom not only seeks for opportunities, but also seeks to participate in the process of the achievement of freedom. The process aspect focuses on "the extent to which people have the opportunity to achieve outcomes that they value and have reason to value" (Sen, 2000, p. 191). Examples of this aspect of freedom are democratic participation, free press, free and fair conditions the government can put in place for respecting civil and political rights, and inclusive debates.

Sen explores the interconnections between opportunity and process aspects of freedom. For him, these aspects are mutually dependent in that freedom involves "the *process* that allows freedom of action and decisions, and the actual *opportunities* that people have, given their personal and social circumstances" (Sen, 2000, p. 17).

### **Well-being and agency freedom**

In assessing the extent of a person's real freedom, Sen pays closer attention to both the 'well-being' and 'agency' aspects. To him, well-being refers to an individual's own advantage. In this case, one's advantage can be assessed in terms of valuable states of being, such as being well-nourished, healthy, educated and so forth. According to Sen (2000), well-being freedom concentrates on "a person's capability to have various functioning vectors and to enjoy the corresponding well-being achievement" (p. 189). Agency refers to the various ways in which persons themselves act and exercise their choice to achieve valuable states of being; this includes the achievement of goals and fulfillment of commitments and obligations, the outcomes of which need not be

advantageous to the agents themselves. Agency freedom concentrates on what the person is *free to do* and *achieve* in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important.

Sen's capability approach advances the importance of an agency-based approach to freedom. The person is seen primarily as an agent and doer, pursuing various goals and accomplishing various objectives and obligations. Agency aspect is situated in relation to self-determination, authentic self-direction and personal autonomy. On the contrary, in the well-being aspect of one's freedom the person is seen as a 'patient' or 'beneficiary.' In this context, one may be forced into states of being passive, without considering that a human agent is entitled to act and bring about change. Sen (2000) suggests that the achievement can be judged in terms of one's own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria. Therefore, a responsible agent can decide what he/she should achieve. This implies that agency is a person's ability to act on behalf of what he/she values and has reason to value.

A recent study on Sen's capability (Palatty, 2009) points that well-being freedom and agency freedom in human development are very important in our day to day life. The well-being is important in the context of social arrangements and for making public provisions for security and so on, and the agency aspect of freedom is more concerned with responsibility towards others. Thus, agency aspect relates to what people can undertake to achieve public provisions through individual, collective political and social action. This requires inclusion of institutions in the development arena other than the state and market.

### **Criticism of the capability approach**

The criticism that Sen's capability approach does not pay sufficient attention to groups is valid. Its validity can be drawn from contemporary mainstream economics which is structurally unable to account for group membership, and does not acknowledge the limits of individual rational agency. This weakness is prevalent in Sen's capability approach, as it does not believe in people's abilities to be rational and to resist social and moral pressure stemming from groups (Robeyns, 2007, p. 109). Also, Daka (2008, p. 235) shows that Sen's insistence on individual's freedom is important only in a community framework together with others. Instead of expanding only an individual's capabilities (freedoms), we can also expand the community's freedoms in such a way that both the individual and community can flourish together.

Another critics of the capability approach, Gore (1997, p. 113-114), directly challenges the approach for its over individualistic position. Gore critiques Sen for arguing that the capability approach's evaluation of well-being is exclusively based on



individual properties. Therefore, Gore argues that Sen does not take into consideration the fact that an individual has properties that belong to society or institutions. Gore (1997) adds that Sen's version of the capability approach is weak in its assessment of social justice, inequalities, and human well-being, especially in multicultural societies.

To integrate the expansion of community capabilities it is very important to acknowledge the notion of community underlined in some of contemporary philosophers. These communitarians see each human being as "thickly situated", embedded in a social environment, reacting to and shaping his or her life from strands already present in the community (Bell, 2002, p. 65). For example, Sandel (1998, p. 183) reminds us that a person must not be isolated from society because "we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone." Sandel (1990) adds:

We cannot regard ourselves as independent [from society] ... [we must understand] ourselves as the particular persons we are – as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons and daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic. Though my life is subjective to revision, it does have "contours" – a defining shape arising from my 'projects and commitments' as well as from my wants and desires (p. 354).

In a related discussion, Hollenbach (2002) points out that a good community or society is "a place where people are genuinely interdependent on each other through participation in discussions concerning the decision making about their common purposes" (p. 42). Hollenbach (2002) emphasizes that "to be a person is to be-in-relation-to-other persons" (p. 131). Here, it is realized that the individual finds a meaning in the community in which he/she lives and is able to develop his/her capabilities in mutual cooperation with other members constituting the society.

For that reason, therefore, we need to have an expansion of community capabilities in which individuals would find meaningful life as an indicator of the integral human development. This can be achieved by having a strong anthropological foundation of human persons. This article subscribes to the *Ubuntu* philosophy as relevant in restructuring Sen's capability approach especially on the position of human person in the community as a key dimension of human development.

### **Integrating capability approach with *ubuntu* philosophy**

Human development requires appropriating cultural values embedded in various societies so as to give meaning to the people as real agents and ends of any development theory. Departing from this claim, the individualistic position which is

maintained in Sen's development theory can be integrated with *Ubuntu* philosophy whereby individual freedom is seen in the well-being of the community and group. This enables a widening of the capability approach in order to accommodate the dimensions of community. Daka (2008) argues that community becomes a platform where persons are empowered and dignified as human beings because it is only in a community of persons that an individual can claim and exercise his/her obligations and duties while at the same time aiming at the collective well-being. Therefore, for the capability approach to be operational in the human development discourse, it should engage more intensively in a dialogue with disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, gender studies, and cultural studies. This practice is evident in most Sub-Saharan African countries where cooperatives such as farmers' cooperative societies are established to enable farmers to work together. Empowering these cooperatives might be a tool to improve the well-being of an association and then individual members could share benefits accordingly.

Many African societies have subscribed to this dimension where there is a strong conviction that a person *becomes* because of the community. John Mbiti (1999) asserts in Kiswahili that: *mtu ni watu* which literally means "a single human being is human beings". This implies that an individual exists in the community of other human beings. From this conception, therefore, *Ubuntu* carries the recognition of human qualities that foster respectful and harmonious relationships where individuals exhibit solidarity towards one another.

John Mbiti (1999) argues that there is a symbiotic connection between the individual and the community. This connection is reflected in the philosophical awareness that: "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am" (p. 110). Mbiti (1999) further explains this connection by asserting that: "Nature brings the child into the world, but society creates the child into a social being, a corporate person. For it is the community which must protect the child, feed it, bring it up, educate it and many other ways incorporate it into the wider community" (p. 107).

From above we see that Mbiti underscores the continuity of this philosophical awareness beyond physical existence. He (1999) writes: "the existence of the individual is the existence of the corporate; and where the individual may physically die, this does not relinquish his social-legal existence since the 'we' continues to exist for the 'I'" (p. 141). Mbiti's thoughts and *Ubuntu* philosophical propositions affirm that a functioning community can be a model of humanity framework where everyone can experience the value of being human. Consequently, this might be a positive aspect of the human development whereby collective capabilities are taken into account.

This preoccupation for community breaks out of Sen's insistence on individual capabilities in which a person is considered to be free floating in the society.

Broodryk (2006) describes *Ubuntu* as an African traditional philosophy, which is based on the values of humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values. The principle of caring for each other's well-being and a spirit of mutual support of each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his/her relationship with others in the community. Therefore, *Ubuntu* philosophy, if fused with the capability approach, can bring about holistic human development in which a human being as an agent of development is embedded within a community. The theory of *Ubuntu* as an embodiment of ethical living in contemporary African philosophy should maintain communal relations in which persons are able to express themselves with the greatest possible freedom. Chasi (2014) comments that it is reasonable to say that *Ubuntu* should prize the freedom of expression by which individuals with the social capital have the capabilities with which to build and sustain strong communities.

To realize the aforementioned position, *Ubuntu* offers two essential characteristics of human being which might strengthen Sen's capability approach on human development. First, individual capabilities with integrity and sense of equity, and second, individual being with-in community guided by virtues of cooperation and solidarity.

### **Individual capabilities versus *umuntu w'ubuntu* (individual capabilities with integrity and equity)**

*Umuntu w'ubuntu* specifies the main characteristics of a human being as an individual with integrity, sense of equity, fairness and harmony. Ramose (2002, p. 41) purports that intelligence is the faculty by which the *muntu* (human person) acts and interacts with other human beings. So, it is the faculty that enables *muntu* to appreciate, relate and live harmoniously with others.

*Umuntu w'ubuntu* also refers to a human person who realizes oneself as an individual person in one's universe which includes one's guiding principles, cherished values, innovating and constructive choices, self-determination and self-realization in harmony with others. The main aim of the community is to safeguard humanity in individuality; on the other hand, the permanent concern of the individual is how humanity can be safeguarded in the community. Ramose (2002) aptly interprets this view as follows: "to be a human being is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others" (p. 42) This view can strengthen Sen's capability approach in evaluating human development whereby the well-being can be evaluated by the extent to which a person recognizes the well-being of others in the society. Also this can enable developmental policies to take into account people's participation and

collective role in overcoming socio-economic problems so as to attain good standards of living.

### **Individual Capabilities versus *Umntu mu'abantu* (Individual Being - with/in – Community)**

*Umntu mu'abantu* refers to being-with or in-community (in-communion-with). *Umntu mu'abantu* considers the human being as a communal and social being. In this regard, people realize themselves in the universe of other people, including their guiding principles, their values and dynamics of the world. This category of *Ubuntu* philosophy indicates that the conception of the human person includes the plenitude of humanness which cannot be achieved outside the community.

Contemporary debates on African philosophy present two interpretations of *umuntu mu'abantu* (human person-with or in-community). The first interpretation argues for radical communitarianism whereby a human person is defined in terms of community and not in terms of an isolated and static human entity. Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984), while defending a radical communitarian position, suggests that the notion of “personhood” or “being a person” is understood in many African languages and societies as an acquired status that is dependent upon people’s relationship to their community (p. 31). Menkiti (1984) characterized personhood in African languages as follows:

The various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one’s stations. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the ‘it-status’ of early child-hood, marked by an absence of moral function, into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense – an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as an eluding one (p. 31).

Menkiti (1984) concludes that an individual’s identity is simply part of a thoroughly fused collective ‘we’. According to this tradition, the belongingness of people to a community is not optional as we do not choose voluntarily to enter a human community, but born into a community.

A more moderate position on communitarianism is taken by Kwame Gyekye (1997). Gyekye’s view is that personhood can only be partly, never fully, defined by one’s membership in the cultural community. “Moderate communitarianism,” implies that each person has the capacity for their own individual judgments – has some

autonomy – in spite of the degree to which they may be socializing beings in their community. Gyekye (1998) notes:

The re-evaluation may result in the individual's affirming or striving to amend or refine existing communal goals, values and practices; but it may or could also result in the individual's total rejection of all or some of them. The possibility of reevaluation means, surely, that the individual is not absorbed by the communal or cultural apparatus but can to some extent wriggle out of it, distance herself from it, and thus be in a position to take a critical look at it; it means, also, that the communal structure cannot foreclose the reality and meaningfulness of the quality of self-assertiveness that the individual can demonstrate in her actions (p. 327).

The capacity for self-assertion enables an individual to exercise his/her freedom to determine one's own goal, to pursue them, and to control one's destiny in the community. Gyekye's suggestion tends to be in agreement with Sen's understanding of human development whereby individuals are given freedom to choose the kinds of life reasonable and valuable for them. So, individuals should be in a position to question and make critical evaluation of the community development policies.

The communal aspect in human development discourse can be seen in the associations and groups coming together to work collectively. General examples can be drawn from some parts of the world especially in villages and among tribal people where they maintain a cooperative model of development in which they act collectively in establishing village communal projects like water facilities, community schools and health facilities. People work collectively for the communal well-being by virtue of solidarity. Solidarity in the development discourse is becoming crucial toward enhancing people's well-being. For instance, Symhorien Ntibagirirwa (2016) suggests that solidarity is a main component for members of any community to participate fully in the development activities. Thus, members realize themselves when they participate fully in production as they partake in the community. Ntibagirirwa (2016) adds that solidarity among individuals in the community should be accompanied by friendship. As members of the community journey together in the projects, they grow to relate in terms of what each one can be for others.

### **The human being as an agent in human development**

The human being as an agent in human development process has an agency freedom which encompasses critical perspective of autonomy whereby people are obliged to do with ability to form, not just adopt, one's own conception of the good. In this

perspective, autonomy has to do with the individual decision-making on various matters of one's society including the policies of economic development (Ntibagirirwa, 2014, p. 290). The critical aspect of agency helps people make sure that nothing is imposed on them. This means that people must understand the state of affairs that is presented to them and discuss it on the basis of the beliefs and values that they hold (Ntibagirirwa, 2014, p. 292).

The human being as an agent in human development is not at the receiving end of any development initiative. There is a paradigm shift from autonomous model to agency model in development. The autonomous model in the process of development is earmarked by a tendency among policymakers and planners to conceive of economic development as a project which targets the people as ends-in-themselves (Ake, 1996, p. 12). In other words, development becomes an end result that has been achieved for the people, but without the people. Consequently, this autonomous process is often used to justify the powers and liberties of leaders and those who advise them to design strategies of economic development without the involvement of the people.

A shift from the autonomous model to agency aspect of freedom enables people to be key figures in their development process. Thus, the link between economic development and agency concerns the relationship between people and the economic development they desire to achieve. It entails changing the conception of economic development as autonomous and an end product offered to people without their participation to people being the starting point of their economic development. Here, the term agency is drawn from Sen's (2000, p. 19) conception of an agent as "someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives." Alkile (2003) defines agency as the ability to act; this means that "people are seen as being actively involved in shaping their destiny and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of ready-made development programs" (p. 15). Therefore, a lack of agency means 'not acting' or being passive and just mere recipients. So, a lack of agency may arise whenever one is naturally not disposed to act or is not given the opportunity to act. These aspects lead to capability deprivation conceived as an indicator of poverty in the language of Sen.

Agency is the ability to act, and autonomy provides the ground for building participatory development, requiring participatory justice as fair and appropriate participation in decision-making at all levels. Agency leads people to be aware of themselves and of the beliefs and values which they hold. These factors make people to become both ends and agents of development. Ake (1996) comments: "If the people are the agents of development that is to those with responsibility to decide what development is? What value it is to maximize? Then the methods for realizing it, they must have the prerogative of making public policy at all levels" (p. 126). Kabede (2004) also argues: "when human agency is involved and given priority, development

becomes an issue of human capabilities ... and shifts from development economics to issues of entitlements and empowerment” (p. 110).

In connection with the above, the relevance of agency-based development is its application for poverty eradication. However, it rejects the pursuit of the eradication of poverty through over-dependency on the donations and aids providing quick and short-term solutions to the problems of underdevelopment. Therefore, it envisions participation of people in the society as active agents of development for themselves and the entire society. This follows under agency freedom in Sen in which people actively engage in development initiatives that foster well-being of others and the entire society.

In addition, agency is to be exercised to advance the well-being of the agent, her family and community. Agency makes it possible for someone to go beyond self-regarding goals and thereby to consider the targets that others have reasons to value. Thus, agency aspect of human freedom is related to individuals’ responsibility towards others. Symphorien Ntibagirirwa (2014) suggests that “agency freedom becomes an answer to the question of how individuals participate in the life of their community while at the same time presenting their individual autonomy” (p. 282). Also, Sen considers human being as agent in human development by suggesting as follows:

A person as an agent need not be guided only by her own well-being. [...] If a person aims at, say, the independence of her country, or the prosperity of her community, or some such general goal, her agency achievement would involve evaluation of states of affairs in the light of those objects, and not merely in the light of the extent to which those achievements would contribute to her own well-being (Sen, 1992, p. 56).

This understanding of agency shows that people can go as far as sacrificing their personal well-being in the search of the prosperity of the community. Here, Sen concentrates on individual capabilities along with the fact that the individuals are embedded in the society. He makes it clear when he said that “individuals are socially embedded agents who interact with their societies and flourish fully only by participating in political and social affairs of their societies” (Sen, 2002, pp. 79-80).

Sen is aware of the tension that exists between the individual and the community. Although Sen tries to justify the necessity of social and political institutions in the human development process, in his framework there is much insistence of development as enlargement of individual freedom without taking into account the social nature of human being as reflected in the virtues of solidarity and cooperation.

Palatty (2014) suggests that agency necessitates going beyond the dualistic opposition between self-regarding activity (egoism) and other-regarding activity

(altruism) and instead develops an integrated conception of human well-being. In the same vein, Jürgen Habermas (1987, p. 94) comments that “I think all of us feel that one must be ready to recognize the interests of others even when they run counter to our own, but the person who does that does not really sacrifice himself but becomes a large self” (p. 52).

*Ubuntu* philosophy considers human being as *umuntu w'ubuntu* (individual capabilities with integrity and equity). Here, a human being as an agent of human development is an active participant in the development process. He/she pursues development guided by sense of integrity, ethical standards, responsibility towards one-self and fulfillment of duties, which enhance his/ her well-being. Also, human agent is an active participant in decision making of developmental policies. On the other hand, *umuntu mu'bantu* (human being with-in community) defines humans as embedded in social relations. The communitarian view as enshrined in *ubuntu* ethos offers values such as cooperation, solidarity and social well-being to human development discourse. According to Gyekye (1997) communitarian views continue to shape Africans and are generally held to be of more importance than the values of individual rights. From such communitarian values should flow both a sense of responsibility of individuals to their community and obligations to society. Thus the enhancement of Sen's capability approach with *Ubuntu* philosophy could enable individuals as part of community to be responsible and accountable to the well-being of themselves as agents of development in the society.

## Conclusion

This article has dealt with Sen's conception of human development in terms of expanding one's freedom through capabilities and entitlements. Sen proposes capability approach theory, instead of economic growth indicators, to evaluate the development of nations. The capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation of individual well-being and social arrangements. It designs policies and proposals about social change in society. Palatty (2016) argues that Sen's approach can be used to evaluate several aspects of people's well-being, such as inequality or poverty. In the process of human development, the capability approach focuses on what people are effectively able to do and to be, that is, on their capabilities. This approach makes a distinction between the means and the ends of people's well-being. The ends are viewed in terms of people's capability to function, that is, their effective opportunities to undertake the activities that they want to engage in and to be whoever they want to be (Palatty, 2016).

This article has argued that human development should be evaluated in terms of reasonable opportunities offered to people in society. These opportunities should be



seen in the light of expanding people's freedom so as to become active participants and agents in the human development. To realize this, human agents in the process of human development should focus on the key aspects of freedom as developed in the Sen's capability approach. The first aspect is freedom as opportunity; this aspect can be valued for the substantive opportunity it gives to the pursuit of (our) objectives and goals. However, in assessing opportunities, attention has to be paid to the actual ability of a person to achieve those things that he/she has reason to value. The second aspect is freedom as a process that involves the exercise of political and civil rights. The absence of this aspect may cause rise of uneasiness in the society for these aspects of freedom point to economic freedoms in the form of socio-economic opportunities and political freedom in the form of political rights and freedom of expression.

Palatty (2016) illustrates that the capability approach is sensitive to structural and psychological injustices. Some kinds of injustices, such as group stigmas and stereotypes, oppressive discursive norms, and group segregation caused by shunning interfere with individual abilities to stand as equals in society. The capability approach focuses on the evaluation of social norms which affect the ability of individuals to convert their resources into functionings. It recognizes these injustices and suggests remedies. Thus, it is not enough to give resources or opportunities such as safety nets, free education and economic entitlements; they may not be able to convert them into functionings, more specifically to enhance their state of being and doing. It is here that the capability approach as an evaluative tool can be used to critique social and cultural traditions which act as blockade to the people facing injustice to realize their well-being. Public discussion may be introduced in the communities so as to bring awareness to people regarding dignity of human person.

However, Sen's capability approach remains wedded to an individualistic approach. Human development refers to the enlargement of individual well-being, while social well-being or enhancement of communal welfare is not given sufficient space. Thus, the Senian capability approach does not pay attention to the collective well-being of the society. This makes capability approach unfit to comprehend integral humanism.

This study has proposed *Ubuntu* philosophy of humanism as a potential complement to Sen's capability approach to advance human development. *Umuntu w'ubuntu* considers individuality of human being with cherished values, choices, self-determination, self-realisation and in harmony with others. *Umuntu mu'bantu* considers human being as a community being, a human being as socially constituted. To fuse these concepts of *Ubuntu* philosophy with Sen's capability approach is a starting point to provide a new horizon for African developmental models in which individuals interact with community for collective good.

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