

PROCEEDINGS OF THE FSN FORUM DISCUSSION No. 38
**FOOD SECURITY AND THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH: FROM THEORY TO
PRACTICE**
FROM 25 JUNE TO 24 JULY 2009

Summary available at:
http://km.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fsn/docs/SUMMARY_Capability_approach_FS.doc

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Duration:	from 25.06.2009 to 24.07.2009
Number of participants:	12
Number of Contributions:	13

II. INTRODUCTION OF THE TOPIC

Dear colleagues,

I'm Thais Bassinello, from Brazil. I'm currently undertaking a Master's course in Human Development and Food Security, offered by Università degli Studi Roma Tre. Before coming to Rome, I worked for the Brazilian Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger.

My dissertation for the Master will be a study of one of the social protection programmes being undertaken in Kenya, and its impacts on the well-being of the beneficiaries (especially food security). The conceptual framework will be the Capabilities Approach, formulated by Amartya Sen. The Capabilities Approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies and proposals about social change in society. "Capabilities" are defined as the substantive freedoms that one enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value, or the real actual possibilities open to a person. From this capability "set", a person chooses his or her "functionings", the particular beings (like being well-nourished) and doings he or she enjoys at a particular point of time.

The approach gave birth to the Human Development paradigm. Hence, Human Development can be seen as the process of expansion of people's capabilities. In opposition to the traditional welfare economics, this paradigm doesn't use income as the informational basis to assess well-being. Whether or not this will become the leading development paradigm is yet to be seen. For the time being, some attempts have been made to focus on the expansion of freedoms when assessing projects and policies.

Of particular importance is the on-going debate on how to operationalize the capabilities approach in the design of interventions. International Organizations (like FAO) and NGOs (like Oxfam) currently use the Livelihoods Approach as the conceptual framework for the design and assessment of food security interventions. It seems that, despite of its strengths, the Livelihoods Approach also focus primarily on (income) poverty reduction, since people's access to social, human, physical, financial and natural capital (or assets), and their ability to put these to productive use, is in the core of the approach.

In the view that I'm especially concerned with the application of the Capabilities Approach in the design and evaluation of food security interventions, I'd like to request the Forum's members to share:

- Information about organizations or individuals that use / have used the Capabilities Approach when designing, implementing or assessing food security interventions;
- Documents about the operationalization of the Capabilities Approach in food security projects or programmes;
- Any thoughts on the debate Capabilities x Livelihoods Approach, especially on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each approach when dealing with food security issues.
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Many thanks in advance for your attention.

Sincerely,

Thais Bassinello

Master in Human Development and Food Security (in progress)

Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Italy.

III. LIST OF CONTRIBUTIONS

Contribution by Amlan Majumder from Dinhaata College, India

Dear Thais,

I have not worked so far on food security issues within the framework of Capability Approach. However, while doing multidimensional assessment of well-being conditions of Indian women (within the framework of Capability approach), I have considered their access to food. Indian National Family Health Survey gathers information on how often one respondent (woman) consumes different foodstuff. I have utilized that data in my research (papers).

Hope this information will help you.

Best.

Amlan Majumder.

Lecturer-in-Economics
Dinhata College
West Bengal, India

Contribution by Ramzi Mabsout from the Nijmegen Center for Economics, The Netherlands

This an interesting query.

You may find my paper titled "Capability and health functioning in Ethiopian households" (http://km.fao.org/fsn/resources/fsn-viewresdet/en/?no_cache=1&r=816&nocache=1) helpful.

Comments, questions and feedback on the paper are very welcome.

All the best,

Ramzi

Contribution by Emma Samman from the University of Oxford, United Kingdom

Dear Colleagues,

I can't help with work that investigates the capability approach as it applies to food security directly. In case it is of use, OPHI has developed a research program grounded in the capability approach that focuses on 'Missing Dimensions' of poverty - namely employment quality, physical safety, empowerment, dignity, psychological and subjective well-being. For each of these areas, we have developed short modules to collect relevant data.

These surveys could be used for impact evaluation, possibly pertaining to food security. Please find a brochure describing this work at http://km.fao.org/fsn/resources/fsn-viewresdet/en/?no_cache=1&r=818&nocache=1. For further information, please consult our website - www.ophi.org.uk - and let us know if you have questions.

Kind regards,

Emma Samman

Contribution by Tesfaye Haile Dargie from SNV, Sudan

Dear All

I am Tesfaye Haile Dargie. I am from SNV Sudan. SNV is the Netherlands Development Organization (<http://www.snvworld.org/en/>) . We are working on building the capacity of public and private organizations and CBS so that they are capable to decide on their own development. We have two programs. One is building the capacity of organizations providing basic services so that the communities are able to access basic services. The other is an economic development program through pro poor value chain development that can enable small producers to get equitable share of the gross margins so that they can ensure their food security and beyond. SNV had presentations on the annual HDCA conference held at Groningen (Netherland in 2006).

I know SNV Ethiopia started documenting its achievements. I was part of it before I came to Sudan. Here in Sudan we are operating in Southern Sudan with the same approach. South Sudan is a newly emerging state with the peace agreement held on 2004 with Sudan Government. It is a region with untapped potentials however with limited capacity and capabilities to tap them.

Regards,

Tesfaye Haile Dargie
SNV Sudan Economic Development Advisor
Livestock and Pastoralism

Contribution by Cristina Devecchi from St Edmund's College, UK

Dear Thais,

Food capabilities and livelihood are not my field of expertise. I have nonetheless attempted some lay thinking. A first distinction we should make is between sustainability and way in Italian would be *sostenimento* (can't think of the word in English) in which the first is about a cycle, programme or process of food production and distribution which aims to give independence to people. So, giving people the tools to grow their crops, or changing the law about land ownership (to cite an extreme case) would be part of sustainability. The second refers to ad hoc measures to relieve hunger, malnutrition or the like. These should be short term measure.

In both cases we develop, or at least we hope to do so, both functionings and capabilities. While in both cases the functioning and capability of being 'well-nourished' should be achieved, there are a host of other functionings and capabilities that come into play. For example, in the case of sustainability we might envisage people working together in some kind of community practice. These can lead us to think both in terms of the individual and social capabilities that this new process of food production can yield.

But there might be more than that. For example, the new process of sustainable food production might give people a choice on what they want to grow. In this case the capability to choose is essential. So it might be that instead of setting all their fields to grow coffee because this is what the multinational want, farmers may decide that what they and their family need is wheat, potatoes, or whatever else.

Another way of thinking about it, but keeping firm my initial distinction, is to look at food for consumption and analyze not the process of production, but rather the process of end user consumption. So, when it comes to having a fair share of the food, what capabilities people have?

For example, there are cultures where the man gets a bigger share of the food available and while this might be right from the physical needs point of view, pregnant or lactating women require an even greater share of the food available. The same can be said of young children or even older people who might need less food, but food that they can eat. for example, it will be of no help whatsoever to provide steaks to an old person with no teeth. Even more interesting would be the case of disabled people.

With regard to the question of livelihood, I suppose while it is important to evaluate how much family groups, or individuals have in terms of general food resources, in reality it is the way in which individuals can get a benefit from the resources that matter most. So, it is of little importance the fact that a family has X resources, if individual Y gets less than what he needs or want.

I am sure that these reflections of mine have been of little help. I would nonetheless be interested in knowing more about your work essentially because I am interested in how the distribution of available resources can be evaluated in a more just and fair way.

Thanks,

Dr Cristina Devecchi
Von Hugel Institute
St Edmund's College
Cambridge, UK

Contribution by Jim Chalmers from Flinders University , Australia

Dear Colleagues,

I offer some thoughts on my work which alternates between research and teaching and consultancy as a Human Development and Capabilities practitioner. Hopefully this will help to add further light on the differences between the approach I follow and the Sustainable Livelihoods approach in the context of food security.

My inquiries on food security are grounded by the notion that no human being should go hungry in a decent society. This is the guiding image behind my attempts to develop a "political economy approach to sustainable livelihoods". This approach contains unifying conceptual grounds of social justice and invokes the guarantee/protection of a whole range of rights associated with food security and substantive freedoms. The approach transfers clear recognition that freedoms depend on social and economic determinants such as education, health care facilities, and also on political and civil liberties. This evokes analytical attention to the role of power, inequality, scarcity, lack of access and other structural features of the society and economy in generating sustainable development and its impact on poverty and human capabilities.

In the case of women as a vulnerable group, the starting point for analysis is the recognition that within the household unit, women have less right and power over the utilization of assets and resources and narrow influence over household decision-making. Outside the house, women have restricted negotiating power in the job market and other exchange and distribution systems that could enhance their socioeconomic status. Similarly, with indigenous and other vulnerable rural peoples, these groupings have narrow access to collective resources; and they are under-represented in decision-making groups. In other words it is a challenging normative and policy environment. Moreover, there are inadequate resources allocated to gender, ethnic, and rural equity in the workplace, given that institutional features continue to impede equity.

An outcome of the analysis, accordingly, is that it becomes crucial to tap into the wealth of cultural capital that exists in all its diversity. Ultimately, the problem of food security is viewed as the problem of diverse experiences including disparities of access, in the context of power

relations. On the assessment of policy measures in these investigations, there is clear recognition that poverty targeting and food security priorities are frequently not aligned in a country's policy agenda. The key point in correcting this involves greater awareness that the availability of food is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for food security. Unless questions of assets, employment and income security are tackled upstream, interventions can do little for food insecurity downstream. A common feature of the recommendations for improving policy is an emphasis on the importance of policy-makers being guided by local interpretations. This involves poverty mapping and similar exercises that differentiate between what it feels like to live in a particular locale. For example, food insecurity feels very different depending on whether one lives in an especially drought-prone area, or in areas particularly prone to floods and soil erosion. Moreover, attempts to measure these experiences need to be attuned to seasonal cycles, since people are very food poor in one season and less poor in another season after harvest.

Turning to a theoretical explanation of my approach to livelihoods, it sets out from a critique concerning the decision-making idea that the Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) approach typically transmits, which can be traced to neo-classical economics. The SL approach, bereft of a theory of power, contains a blind-spot involving the multidimensional nature of decision-making. The cause of this can be traced to the neglect of power relations that underpin experiences of livelihood by impoverished persons. In particular, gender relations, and cultural imperatives associated with the role of knowledge relations in peoples' access to social goods, play primary roles in livelihood choices. However, these issues are typically neglected by SL practitioners. By way of contrast, the human development and capability approach brings clear understanding that in the dialectics of participation in small groups, the primacy of choice stands out, along with the reciprocities that this generates. This can be demonstrated in social contexts where power relations are less oppressive (for example in pre-state social groupings such as Iban communities which I studied): peoples' choices, dignity, food security, and general well-being are much better-integrated in these contexts; and these play a crucial role in renewing the equitable knowledge relations that sustainable livelihoods depend on.

The emphasis in my approach is much less-focused on the structural-functional placement of power than on the significance of the 'polyvalence' of knowledge relations. This term signifies the multi-faceted potential that human capabilities bestow on power relations; i.e. this engenders possibilities for both domination and freedom. Ultimately this is not a deterministic situation. Showing this requires adequate contextualization of power that is conveyed by different sets of social relations. If sufficient account is made of the local dimensions of experience, it becomes possible to observe what freedom looks like to different people. This method can uncover the values in the signification processes through which different people organise knowledge relations. However, an archaeological approach of this kind needs to be focused on sites where individuals produce knowledge relations. This challenges and contradicts conventional explanations of choice, which trace dominant social thinking to the exchange of ideas.

The dominant neo-classical paradigm on choice, which SL remains theoretically indebted to, is even more compromised by the issue of blind-spots. The importance of this for decision-making associated with power relationships that shape the possibility for food security is significant. Gramsci has drawn attention to how oppressive knowledge relations inform an ideology that infiltrates, diverts, and damages peoples' construction of reality. Barthes has pointed to the difficulty of seeing through the maze that ideology constructs by instilling a perception that particular ideas are natural and rational. An adequate social choice theory (missing in SL) needs to grasp that self-interest is derivative rather than causative; it is a by-product of the tension between authentic interests and blind-spots. There needs to be a specific accounting of how oppressive knowledge relations perpetuate blind-spots, preventing people from pursuing their true interests and creating the potential for retreat from freedom. Opposition to critical thinking can be fierce and contemptuous of human worth. We see this in current conversations on poverty, which promote the view that peoples' 'perverse choices' are to blame, rather than social place in the hierarchy, and vulnerability to the bent of power groups to side-track others' options. These are fundamental questions of food security which invoke the need for increased understanding that the availability of food is an essential condition but does not guarantee food

security. Unless analysis, as well as the attention of political leaders and policy-makers in a decent society, address critical issues of power that involve control of assets, employment and income security, the other recommendations and intervening improvements can do little for food insecurity at the level of impoverished communities.

I hope that your inquiries continue to be fruitful and look forward to seeing a compilation.

Best regards

Jim Chalmers
Flinders University
Adelaide, Australia

Contribution by Dave Crocker from University of Maryland, USA

Hi All

I treat the application of an agency-focused version of the capability approach to hunger and food security in ch. 8 of my book *Ethics of Global Development: Agency, Capability, and Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Please find an announcement of the book at http://km.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fsn/docs/Crocker%20-%20Ethics%20of%20Global%20Development%202.pdf and the "Concluding Remarks" of Ch. 8 below. I hope this proves helpful.

Concluding Remarks (Ch. 8)

Famine, food aid, and the ethics of famine relief remain—as they were in the early and mid-seventies—pressing personal, national, and global challenges. Philosophers and other ethicists can play a role in meeting these challenges and thereby reducing world hunger. This goal is best achieved, however, when the questions of world hunger and moral obligation are reframed and widened. I have argued that development ethicists, policy-makers, and citizens must emphasize (1) interpretative and strategic concepts instead of moral foundations, (2) persistent malnutrition instead of famine, (3) prevention rather than treatment of hunger, (4) food entitlements instead of food availability, (5) and human capability and agency rather than food and entitlements, and (6) local and national self-development rather than external food aid and development assistance. My intent is not to reject the second terms in each pair but to subordinate them to the first terms—concepts at once more fundamental and comprehensive.

Overall, the refocusing I advocate has conceived an ethics of food aid as a part of a more basic and inclusive ethics for development. Since the best long-term cure for hunger is good national and global development, we must put emergency and project food aid in a developmental perspective and incorporate an ethics of famine relief into an ethics of and for national and global development. With the capability approach to agency-oriented development, we can supplement a focus on food with an emphasis on agency and capability as the means and ends of development as freedom. To avoid the fallacy of misplaced concreteness is not to eschew abstractions but to place them in their proper relation to each other and to the concrete world of facts and values.

Best,

Dave Crocker

Dr. David A. Crocker
Senior Research Scholar
Institute for Philosophy & Public Policy
School of Public Policy

Interim Director, International Development
School of Public Policy
Director, Public Leadership Program
College Park Scholars
University of Maryland
USA

Contribution by George Kent from the University of Hawai'i, USA

Focusing on building capabilities as a way of ensuring food security has merits, but it also has weaknesses. The approach is based on the idea that the poor have deficits of some kind, and the task is to somehow fill in those deficiencies. Even if it is not intended, this may amount to a blame-the-victim approach, one that deflects attention away from the role of the larger social system in which the victim is embedded.

In many places, the most serious problem at the local level is the lack of opportunities to do meaningful, productive work. Too many people with high potential are working on unproductive farms, pulling carts, or doing mind-numbing physical work on assembly lines.

Poor people are embedded in social systems that limit their possibilities, but international agencies emphasize the failures of the individual rather than of the social context.

The global marketplace is not an equal-opportunity marketplace. Many countries stay on the bottom no matter how much outsiders try to help them. To some extent that is due to internal forces such as armed conflicts, rapid population growth and corrupt leaders. To some extent it is the result of international political and economic forces that keep them down. For example, massive subsidies of agricultural products in richer countries result in their dumping large quantities of these products in poorer countries, undermining their agricultural sectors. Sometimes poor countries cannot get access to the markets of rich countries to sell their export products, and then they can do that only if they sell at rock-bottom prices. It is not only individuals but also entire countries that have, in effect, become unemployed, totally marginalized by the global economic system. Those who are employed work on unfavourable terms, giving them little prospect of ever catching up.

Of course poor countries ought to take responsibility and try to pull themselves up. However, with the playing field tilted so sharply against them, it becomes a Sisyphean struggle. They climb a bit and then some natural disaster or, more predictably, inflation, overtakes them and pushes them back. The global economic system favors the powerful.

In viewing hunger as primarily a matter of deficits among its victims, hunger is viewed as mainly a technical problem, not a political problem. This orientation supports the view that the problem belongs to those other people, not to all of us, together.

Methods for producing food are well known. The world is wealthy. There is no technical mystery about the cure for hunger in the way that there is a mystery about the cure for, say, AIDS or the Ebola virus. The dogged persistence of hunger and poverty should lead us to wonder whether these challenges actually are addressed in a serious way.

Aloha, George

Professor George Kent
Department of Political Science
University of Hawai'i
USA

Contribution by Rubayat Ahsan, from Bangladesh

Dear Thais,

I wrote a working paper which was about "Conceptualizing two Development Approaches & Applicability in the Context of Reality"

This paper talks about Sustainable Livelihood Approach, Human Rights Based Approach, Sen's Capability, Food Security, and Food Sovereignty.

Executive summary of the paper is:

This paper attempts to reflect the understanding of the concept of Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) in the changing development dynamics. Critical understanding of existing policies, principles, and models of different development agencies will be useful in understand the existing concepts. In addition, examining linkages between SL and right to food, food security, hunger, and food sovereignty could reveal missing elements of the existing concept of SLA. Nonetheless, the power relationship between powerholders and the powerless could be a potential area to look at loop holes for sustainability of livelihoods approach. In addition, the paper will find some common goodness and applicability from the Rights Based Approach (RBA) and SLA. Alike, SLA, RBA is growingly introduced and practiced by development institutions and agencies. Skeptics may argue RBA is a "jargon" or a "buzz" word and its conceptual area could be fuzzy and blur, and could be replaced by some other fashionable jargon in the next couple of years. Therefore, keeping cynical arguments in mind the paper could find some areas of application of RBA to livelihood.

The objectives of this paper are i) to understand the existing frameworks on SLA, ii) to develop a conceptual guideline for RBA, iii) to build understanding on essentials and components of RBA, iv) to examine food security and sovereignty issues in the context of neoliberal policies, and v) to consider new age challenges. The paper would find some missing elements of SLA that would need attention for an effective development intervention. On the other hand, critical analysis from rights perspective could truly address causes of deprivation and poverty.

Some highlights from the Capability section of this paper

A true development intervention should work for uplifting vulnerable labors from capability poverty, which means improved capability of a labor can improve his or her income. Therefore, development interventions need focus towards improving adequate standard of living of a person and eventually improving capability rather raising income only. RBA intends to ensure minimum standard of living, which includes right to food, health, education, adequate housing etc., which are fundamental needs for having capable persons. According to Rodrik, focusing on poverty is also warranted from the perspective of a broader, capabilities-oriented approach to development. He notes that an exclusive focus on consumption or income levels constitutes too narrow an approach to development. Sen (1999: 19) has explained the complex relationship between income and capabilities. Low income can cause illiteracy, ill health, hunger, and lack of well being. On the contrary, better health and education may help a person to earn well. In my opinion, Income poverty leads to potentiality poverty. Potentiality poverty leads to capability poverty. The cycle may occur in reverse way too, for example, capability deprivation – potentiality poverty- income poverty. According to Sen, if we shift our focus from "income poverty" to "capability deprivation", it would help us to understand freedom of human lives from poverty.

You have chosen an interesting topic for your masters thesis. As I can see, there will be a theoretical frame work based on Sen's Capability and analysis of some food security projects on the ground with respect to that model.

Wish you a good work!

Rubayat

Contribution by Sabina Alkire from the Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative, UK

Hi there.

Here are some references.

Drèze and Sen 1989 is the place to start.

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FOOD, FAMINES AND HUNGER - writings by Amartya Sen

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Sabina Alkire

Contribution by Rubayat Ahsan, from Bangladesh

Dear All,

I added an updated version of my working paper "Conceptualizing two Development Approaches & Applicability in the Context of Reality" to the FSN resources list.

(Available at http://km.fao.org/fsn/resources/fsn-viewresdet/en/?no_cache=1&r=819&nocache=1)

It is an unpublished document I wrote as an independent assignment for Actionaid's internal research purposes.

You are welcome with comments or feedback. I shall incorporate those later on before publishing.

Readers may find me too critical at some sections and paragraphs, which is a reflection of being an activist from an unjust world perspective. I hope readers could consider the anger of an activist.

Enjoy reading this paper.

Regards.
Rubayat

Contribution by Mehrnaz Mostafavi, from OCHA, USA posted on HDR-NET

Dear Thais:

In response to your inquiry, you may want to refer to the chapter on Food Insecurity in the Handbook entitled "Human Security in Theory and Practice". Human security while broader than

human development is nevertheless very much informed by Amartya Sen's capabilities approach. As one of the Co-Chairs of the Commission on Human Security, the *Human Security Now Report* was published in May 2003 and since then the Human Security Unit at the United Nations has been working to operationalise the concept in different situations of insecurity. For your ease of reference, here is the link to the Handbook <http://ochaonline.un.org/humansecurity/Reports/tabid/2186/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

I hope the chapter will be of help.

With kind regards,
Mehrnaz

Mehrnaz Mostafavi (Ms)
United Nations
Human Security Unit
Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
<http://ochaonline.un.org/humansecurity>

Contribution by Krisna Kant Jha, from Mithila University, India

Dear all,

At present I will like to discuss on the Capability versus Livelihoods Approach, keeping in mind gender equality with particular reference of India. On the basis of an intensive survey I have found that Indian women do not exercise the freedom to earn livelihood at the cost of marriage. Marriage is compulsory for them and marriage gives them the status of half limbed person. They are socialized to lose their livelihood earning limbs and their genital organs are made strong. If a woman fails to give birth of a child preferably a male child just after the marriage she is tortured by the family and by the society. For the food security the father of a girl make an attempt to marry her to a prosperous boy because she will have to take food after feeding her husband, the bread winner, and the children. This is the practice of patriarchy prevalent in this society that male will earn and female will depend on him for the maintenance. She is not expected to earn her own livelihood. So freedom for livelihood earning in such a case is essential for the capability expansion in a woman. I have evidences that even if wife and husband are equally qualified to get livelihood the wife is forced to remain in house to retain male dominance in the family. Amartya Sen also pleads that the positive freedom, which we see comes from livelihood, is also essential for the capability development, beside a person also requires negative freedom and happiness to ensure capability development in her. On the other hand a person earning livelihood may not exercise many other freedoms missing the chances for capability development. There are sufficient evidences on this fact too. Food security is basic capability for every one which may be outcome of livelihood and in some cases as a social security measure. I am a member of both HDCA and IAFFE.

If you are interested in the discussion you may write back to me.

With best regards,

Krishna Kant Jha