



Methodological and Ideological Options

Is Amartya Sen's sustainable freedom a broader vision of sustainability? ☆

Thierry Demals¹, Alexandra Hyard^{*}

University Lille 1, Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, Cité scientifique, 59655 Villeneuve d'Ascq cedex, France

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ABSTRACT

For several years now, the theme of sustainable development (thereafter “SD”) has been approached through the capability approach (CA). Recently this notion has been used by Sen to propose a redefinition of SD in terms of “sustainable freedom” (SF), meaning: enjoying the actual freedom to choose a standard of living rather than another without affecting negatively the freedom of generations to come. For Sen, this concept is aimed at broadening current understanding of SD. This article seeks to show that Sen's broader concept of sustainability whilst it generates many questions has not actually expanded the concept itself.

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“To prevent catastrophes caused by human negligence or callous obduracy, we need critical scrutiny, not just goodwill toward others”.

[Sen, 2009, p.48]

1. Introduction

The capability approach (CA), a theoretical framework by which people's freedom to achieve well-being is equated with the real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2011), is now commonly used to deal with environmental issues. Over the past decade, it has been used in connection with sustainable development (SD) themes (Ballet et al., 2003; Lehtonen, 2004; Leßmann, 2011), with those of sustainability economics (Ballet et al., 2011; Binder and Witt, 2012; Birkin and Polesie, 2013; Martins, 2011; Martins, 2013; Rauschmayer and Leßmann, 2011), ecological economics (Scerri, 2012; Scheidel, 2013) and ecosystem services (Polishchuk and Rauschmayer, 2012). We shall return here to the link between CA and SD.

SD has a social dimension that raises the issue of transmitting social assets and potentialities from one generation to the other (Ballet et al., 2003). However, this transmission is problematic and depends on the

distribution of capabilities within the present generation, it being influenced by public policies. For Lehtonen (2004, p. 204), the CA allows, in theory, a better grasp of the social side of SD since it “would focus on evaluating the impacts of public policies on the distribution of capabilities across the society both at the level of the individual and of the society as a whole, taking into account the structures within which they are embedded”. That works in theory, but Lehtonen (2004) acknowledges that the CA remains too abstract and is not “directly applicable as [a] suitable analytical framework ... for examining the social preconditions for institutional change needed for environmentally sustainable development”. Leßmann (2011) hints at some problems for conceptualizing sustainability within the CA as inherent to some aspects of sustainability. First, in the context of sustainability, well-being is related to needs; whilst the CA is not opposed to a focus on needs, it provides a more comprehensive framework by defining and justifying an evaluative space for well-being, taking freedom of choice explicitly into account and modeling it (Leßmann and Rauschmayer, 2013). Next, the CA focuses on intragenerational justice and requires to be “augmented with a longer time horizon in order to analyse intergenerational justice”. Finally, it has yet to address the discussion on ecosystem services, and to outline the process of how functionalities are produced in detail. A paper by Ballet et al. (2011) points out other pluses and minuses inherent to the CA in three aspects of sustainable economy: the normative dimension of sustainability economics, the need to elucidate human–environment dynamics, and the discussion of institutions, policy instruments and governance. In their commentary of that paper, Rauschmayer and Leßmann (2011) stress that there are many more things to consider when using the CA towards sustainability economics than those considered by Ballet et al. (2011). In particular, Gutwald et al. (2011) aim to develop a CA-based notion of intergenerational justice. Following on the evaluative aspect, Ballet et al. (2013) revisit the CA as a comparative

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33 3 20 43 69 92; fax: +33 3 20 43 66 55.

E-mail addresses: Thierry.demals@univ-lille1.fr (T. Demals), alexandra.hyard@univ-lille1.fr (A. Hyard).

¹ Tel.: +33 3 20 43 69 92; fax: +33 3 20 43 66 55.

theory of justice in such environmental fields as access to ecosystemic services in space and in time.

Recently, the CA has been reframed by its famous exponent, Sen, in order to redefine SD as sustainable freedom (SF) understood as, on the one hand, being authentically free to meet one's needs for food, shelter and movement whilst, on the other, not preventing future generations from enjoying at least the same freedoms. Curiously, SF has received little attention in the literature linking CA and SD. However, SF deserves consideration for at least two reasons. Firstly, Sen's thinking on SF denotes an evolution of his framing of sustainability that is based on Brundtland as well as Solow's conceptions before departing from them (Section 2). Secondly, the aim of the Senian conception of SF is to provide a vision of sustainability broader than the two previous ones. But, this vision raises many problems besides those already outlined in a range of studies addressing the link between SD and the CA, and does not observably broaden the concept of sustainability (Section 3). One possible reason is that Sen (1999b, p.11) holds an anthropocentric position placing at the centre of his analysis concepts of rationality and freedom, that are, according to him, specific to human beings:

"In terms of the medieval distinction between 'the patient' and 'the agent', this freedom-centred understanding (...) is very much an agent-oriented view".

2. The Evolution of Senian SD

Sen has reflected upon SD for about 20 years. From the beginning, he developed a conception of SD characterised by a dynamic idea of nature that cannot be dissociated from social and economic aspects. If in his previous works Sen quotes the Brundtland Report and Solow's papers, he thereafter seeks to go beyond them in order to provide his own conception of a SD intrinsically linked with CA.

2.1. From "Human sustainable development..."

It was, in a paper drafted with Anand in 1994 for the Human Development Report Office, that Sen used apparently for the first time the expression "SD". Before undertaking this work, Sen does not seem to have used this expression, his long-standing analysis of development notwithstanding (see Sen, 1960).

In this paper, the notion of SD is composed of two elements. The first is what Anand and Sen (1994, p.7) call "the environmental challenge". This challenge, which is still connected with what they consider the old idea that SD arises "essentially from concerns relating to the over-exploitation of natural and environmental resources" (Anand and Sen, 1994), was, for them, at the core of early international reports on the planet, such as that of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN, 1980). However, Anand and Sen do not approve of this idea of conservation since according to them "resources are basically fungible and can be substituted for one another" (Anand and Sen, 1994). Rejecting the idea of conservation, the authors show support for a dynamic conception of the environment. In their view, the Brundtland report does not only differ from earlier international reports in that it "helpfully shifts attention away from conserving specific resources and 'leaving the world as we found it' in every particular" (Anand and Sen, 1994, p.8). But it does not really take into account natural resources as such either in so far as it "invites examination, even independently of environmental concerns" (Anand and Sen, 1994).² If it is true that the 1987 report claims to approach environmental issues considering ecological problems no longer *per se* but in connection

² Be that as it may, it is worth noting that this definition met with criticism as early as 1990. See Hueting (1990) and Graf (1992a,b).

with economical problems (WCED, World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.37), it is equally true that it reflects broad concerns for the environment. As indicated in the report: "We all depend on one biosphere for sustaining our lives ... Some consume the Earth's resources at a rate that would leave little for future generations" (WCED, World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). So, the Brundtland report considers environmental and development issues together (Vivien, 2005, p.20). The second element Anand and Sen (1994, p.8) retain as constitutive of the definition of SD is "intergenerational equity" that they understand as a distributional equity. According to them, this equity concerns both the interpersonal and intrapersonal distribution of the benefits, that is to say the fair distribution of benefits among contemporaries and between present and future generations. Because it takes into account the *distribution* of the total amount of utility and not just the total amount, this analysis diverges from the Utilitarian analysis that overlooks distributional matters (see Sen, 1974).

For them, intergenerational equity must not diminish the importance of current generations in the definition of SD: "There would, however, be something distinctly odd if we were deeply concerned for the well-being of the future – and as yet unborn – generations whilst ignoring the plight of the poor today" (Anand and Sen, 1994, p.11). Accordingly, they recommend taking into account not just the intergenerational dimension of equity but also its intragenerational one, *viz.* taking into account "human development".³ Working towards current generations' human development contributes to efforts towards SD: "A general increase in educational levels, for example, will raise productivity and the ability to generate higher incomes, now and in the future" (Anand and Sen, 1994). So that they confidently assert: "Thus human development should be seen as a major contribution to the achievement of sustainability" (Anand and Sen, 1994).

Over and above Brundtland's definition of SD, Anand and Sen also refer to the definition of sustainability proposed by Solow (1991): "For Solow, sustainability would appear to be an obligation to preserve the present-day economic opportunities (such as productive capacity) for the future, not necessarily to increase them" (Solow, 1991). The reference to Solow may come here as a surprise since not only does it revert to the idea of preservation/conservation, but it also stresses the idea of obligation, which seems to be in contradiction with Anand and Sen's dynamic conception of the environment. Thus, if Anand and Sen refer to Solow's definition of sustainability, it is because it offers the advantage of presenting the issue of sustainability in economical terms and of imposing minimal constraints on current generations: he envisages a transfer of opportunities towards future generations, up to an amount of future opportunities not to exceed the current amount. In so far as sustainability only compels current generations, in Solow's words (1991, p.181), to bequeath to future generations "the option or the capacity to be as well off as we are", it keeps their opportunities at the same level. But, Solow's vision of sustainability raises a lot of problems. First, this vision, expressed in economical terms, preserves only material resources, that is to say, the resources subject to evaluation. Second, because it is consistent with the Utilitarian method, Solow's vision of sustainability concentrates on the total utility and neglects the distribution of that total. For example, a rare species, that has a low sum-total of utilities for a community at the moment, is not guaranteed to be preserved; whereas a common species, that has a high sum-total of utilities for a current community, is more assured of preservation.

2.2. ...to SD

In 1995, his examination of environmental evaluation caused Sen to take a greater interest in the environment. The prevalent answer given

³ The term "human development" appears in Sen's papers in the late seventies (Sen, 1977, 1984, 1985a,b, 1987a,b).

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