

# Frustrated Freedom: The Effects of Agency and Wealth on Wellbeing in Rural Mozambique

BART VICTOR, EDWARD F. FISCHER and BRUCE COOIL  
*Vanderbilt University, Nashville, USA*

and

ALFREDO VERGARA, ABRAHAM MUKOLO and MERIDITH BLEVINS\*  
*Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, USA*

**Summary.** — In the capability approach to poverty, wellbeing is threatened by both deficits of wealth and deficits of agency. Sen describes that “unfreedom,” or low levels of agency, will suppress the wellbeing effects of higher levels of wealth. We introduce another condition, “frustrated freedom,” in which higher levels of agency belief can heighten the poverty effects of low levels of wealth. Presenting data from a study of female heads of household in rural Mozambique, we find that agency belief moderates the relationship between wealth and wellbeing, uncovering evidence of frustrated freedom.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Various measures of wealth, including household income and absolute poverty lines, have long served to measure development, and, by extension, overall wellbeing and quality of life. Yet, studies have also shown that wealth has a complicated relationship with wellbeing. Researchers have found that “links between material resources and subjective wellbeing are weak” in developing country contexts (Camfield, Choudhury, & Devine, 2007; Easterlin, 2001; Gough & McGregor, 2007; McGregor, 2007; Müller, 2010, p. 255). This is true not just for people who are poor. The economic and psychological literature on this dynamic in the developed world has also found non-linear relationships between differences in wealth and differences in wellbeing (see Deaton, 2007; Kahneman, 2011; Krueger, 2009; Layard, 2010).

Amartya Sen posits an independence of the variation between income poverty and agency to explain why two otherwise similar and comparably resource-poor individuals (e.g., one from a US inner city, the other from rural India) could experience dramatically different levels of wellbeing (Sen, 1999). The greater observed poverty of one in contrast to the other is explained as the consequence of a relative insufficiency of the agency required to convert available resources into wellbeing. Sen hypothesizes that one of the most insidious deficits of poverty is this insufficiency of the agency, which he labels “unfreedom.” Building on this observation, the capabilities approach views the ends of development as substantive freedom—the ability of people to live the lives that they themselves value. Such human development not only depends on opportunities such as those created by wealth, but also on the agency people who are poor need to mobilize those opportunities to achieve the life that they desire (see Alkire, 2005; Clark, 2009; Crocker & Robeyns, 2010; Foster, 2011; Sen, 2002).

While this suggests that wellbeing is correlated with the agency that actors are able to employ, agentive pursuits may

not necessarily enhance welfare or personal advantage (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). Persons may well choose to pursue ends that they have reason to value but that entail costs to personal welfare or material utility (e.g., other regarding aims) (Alkire, 2010). For example, giving one’s life for a cause would diminish personal welfare and yet could still be a valued exercise of agency toward one’s values. There are additional theoretical reasons to question a simple relationship between higher levels of agency and wellbeing. Graham (2011) suggests that diminished wellbeing may result from a kind of surfeit or excess agency: “The process of acquiring agency may in and of itself produce short-term unhappiness. And, if prospects of a more fulfilling life are raised but the opportunity to live that life does not materialize, one can surely imagine lasting unhappiness as a result” (p. 47).

In this article, we employ the concept of “agency belief” to refer to the ability to envision and pursue goals that people value; it is this deliberative sense of self-determination that underlies ones’ ability to choose to live the life they value. In isolating this component of agency, we build on a focus within the empirical literature under the capability approach (Alkire, 2008; Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland, 2006; Kotan, 2010; Narayan, 2005).

Based on a large random sample of female heads of household from the Zambézia province of Mozambique, this paper

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explores the condition where similarly resourced poor individuals, at least subjectively, report different levels of agency. In particular, we examine the consequences for persons whose reported agency is significantly greater than comparably resourced others. In the context of this study, the objective, absolute level of resources is severely limited, which tightly bounds levels of health, wealth, education, and safety. In this context, we propose that high levels of agency belief may be associated with decreases in subjective wellbeing. That is, that subjective wellbeing improves with increasing agency belief up to a point, after which increases in agency belief will be associated with a decrease in subjective wellbeing, a condition we label “frustrated freedom.”

## 2. WEALTH AND WELLBEING

Conventional welfare economics holds that more wealth gives people more choice, which they will then use to pursue their preferences and utilities. While there was, and still is, considerable debate on what levels of absolute or relative income are considered deficient enough to be labeled “poor,” income has served as both the measure of poverty and the focus of development interventions. In recent years, this basic understanding has been the subject of significant critique. Sen (1999) and others demonstrate that differences in wealth among people who are poor have a limited relationship with differences in the lived conditions of poverty. Lived poverty is not merely an absence of wealth nor is its alleviation merely a question of the increase in wealth.

Easterlin (2001) famously observed the apparent paradox that while within countries wealthier people are on average happier than poorer ones, between countries there is little relationship between per capita income and average happiness (c.f. Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Numerous studies have demonstrated that differences in wealth have a limited and non-linear relationship with differences in individual happiness or life satisfaction. Gilbert (2006), Graham (2011) and Layard (2010) stress the importance of non-material aspects of wellbeing (stable marriage, employment, social networks, health are all associated with happiness; unhappiness is associated with divorce, unemployment, and economic instability). In a study of Latin America, Graham and Lora (2009) found that friends and family were most important to the happiness of people who are poor, but that work and health mattered most to the affluent.

This is true not just for the developing world. Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi (2010) make the case that policy in France and the developed world should focus on increasing quality of life, understood to include broad measures of both objective and subjective wellbeing. They write that “quantitative measures of these subjective aspects hold the promise of delivering not just a good measure of quality of life per se, but also a better understanding of its determinants, reaching beyond people’s income and material conditions” (2010, p. 18). They go on to note that “proponents of the capability approach also emphasize that subjective states are not the only things that matter, and that expanding people’s opportunities is important itself, even if this does not show up in greater subjective wellbeing” (p. 64).

Research in happiness psychology and economics has also examined the relationship between wealth and wellbeing, focusing particularly on developed country contexts. Layard (2010), Kahneman (2011), and others argue that there is a curvilinear relationship between wealth and happiness: more income produces proportionate advances in happiness up to a given point. Kahneman (2011, p. 397) reports that above

household incomes of \$75,000 in high-cost areas in the United States, there is no increase in experienced happiness with income increases. Kahneman and Deaton (2010) argue that while hedonic happiness is not tightly associated with income, broader measures of life-satisfaction do have an asymptotic relationship.

Sen is critical of utility models in traditional welfare economics (1992, 2009; see also Clark, 2009; Crocker & Robeyns, 2010). He observes that in terms of “the mental metric of utility” people tend to adapt their aspirations to the context of what is perceived as possible and realistic (see also Elster, 1983). This means that a “a person’s deprivation, then, may not at all show up in the metrics of pleasure, desire fulfillment, *etc.*, even though he or she may be quite unable to be adequately nourished, decently clothed, minimally educated and so on” (Sen, 1990, p. 45; see also Clark, 2009; Foster, 2011).

At the same time, Sen’s rejection of the welfare utility model compels that new weight be given to life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing (see Alkire, 2002). For the purposes of this paper, we employ a conception of wellbeing based on life evaluation and overall life satisfaction. The social psychology literature distinguishes between hedonic happiness and our focus, subjective wellbeing (Kahneman, 2011). From this perspective, the achievement of goals that appear counter-preferential in terms of immediate personal welfare (hedonic happiness) may nonetheless advance reported long term life satisfaction (subjective wellbeing). Often missed by revealed preference models (Clark, 2009; Foster, 2011), subjective wellbeing is fundamental to understanding what the “life that one values” means (Chambers, 1997; Graham, 2011; Narayan & Petesch, 2002).

## 3. AGENCY AND SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING

Sen’s perspective at once expands the realm of determinants of poverty out from wealth alone and, significantly, respects the aspirations and desires of people who live in poverty. The ability to act on what one values, or “what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good” (Sen, 1985, p. 206), contributes to wellbeing both through the effective conversion of opportunity into valued outcomes and through the value of agency itself. However, this “agency achievement” may not necessarily enhance wellbeing to the extent well-being is considered personal welfare or utility (Crocker & Robeyns, 2010; Sen, 1985).

In Sen’s approach, “capabilities” define the space of what is possible for individuals to do or to be. The goal of development is to increase capabilities, to ensure that people have “agency freedom” the freedom to choose their own life path and the power to effectively pursue their goals (Sen, 1993; Crocker & Robeyns, 2010; Foster, 2011). Freedom of speech, for example, requires the capabilities of literacy and technology, and the freedom of self-determination requires a whole range of capabilities that allow individuals to achieve those things and states of being that they themselves see as valuable (see Alkire, 2008).

The capability approach to development theory and practice emphasizes the importance of individual and collective capacity to convert objective levels of resources and opportunities into the lives people would choose for themselves. Sen (1999) understands this choosing as intrinsically motivated, stemming from agency or empowerment. That is, substantive freedom entails choosing consistent with one’s values and not simply self-interest or extrinsic reward seeking. Alkire (2008) shows that it is largely assumed that agency contributes

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