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BRIEFING NOTE

**CAPABILITY AND
DEMOCRACY**

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

Democracy is much more than free and fair elections or majority rule. In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen defines ‘democracy’ in these terms:

Democracy has complex demands, which certainly include voting and respect for human rights, but also ... the protection of liberties and freedoms, respect for legal entitlements, and the guaranteeing of free discussion and uncensored distribution of news and fair comment. Even elections can be deeply defective if they occur without the different sides getting an adequate opportunity to present their respective cases, or without the electorate enjoying the freedom to obtain news and to consider the views of the competing protagonists.

This definition sets a norm, rather than simply offering a description. It outlines the *ideals* of democracy, in contrast to its *institutions* and *practice* (“making democracy work”), and goes on to portray democracy as a “demanding system” of governance, not just a “mechanical condition”.¹

Democracy is “rule by the people” in contrast by rule by experts or guardians. Democracies and democratic theories come in degrees and can be graded along four dimensions: *breadth*, how many people govern; *depth*, how the people rule; *range*, what issues the

people decide and in what institutions; and *control* or *influence*, the extent of impact that popular decisions have in the world.

For Sen and Drèze democracy is robust on all three dimensions. It is demanding with respect to *breadth*, for in democracy there is “widespread actual participation, including the most disadvantaged”² and an “equitable distribution of power”.³ Democracy is also demanding with respect to *depth*, because it requires more robust modes of participation than just voting or majority rule, for example, free discussion and the give and take of opposing arguments. Furthermore, democracy is demanding with respect to *range* in terms of both of the questions that citizens or their representatives should democratically deliberate and decide and the institutions in which they should do so. Finally, for Sen and Drèze, popular decisions should enable people to exercise their agency and make a difference in the world.

***WHY MIGHT WE VALUE
DEMOCRACY?***

INTRINSIC VALUE

Democracy can be of intrinsic value – value in and of itself - insofar as it enables citizens to shape their own lives and communities. This freedom is part of human dignity. Democracy and political and civil rights can, thus, have

¹ Sen 1999: 9-10

² Drèze and Sen 2002: 24

³ Drèze and Sen 2002: 347

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condition”*

“direct importance in human living associated with basic capabilities (including that of political and social participation).”⁴

Democracy enables people to exercise *agency*. If one is prevented from political involvement, one does not have control over the decisions which affect one’s life. The freedom to determine one’s own destiny is “one of the elementary freedoms that people have reason to value, [...] even among people who lead very deprived lives in material terms.”⁵ Democratic processes can be intrinsically valuable because they provide each citizen with opportunities to select their leaders and debate policies, and hence to have a say in the important decisions which affect them. People are free to exercise their agency, and shape their own well-being and destiny rather than have it determined by others or by impersonal forces.

Democracy also supports *equality*. We have reason to value democracy because it assumes that all adult members of the group are equal in worth or dignity. Apart from whatever constructive consequences it may have, democracy is intrinsically important because it treats members of the group as *equals*.

INSTRUMENTAL VALUE

Democracy can also be instrumentally valuable. Democracies tend not to war against each other, and they tend to be

more responsive than alternatives to the importance of protecting human agency (voice) and well-being.⁶

Although a benevolent dictator may listen to “his” people and respond compassionately to their needs, he is likely to insulate himself from popular demands. Narrow or shallow democracies may also exclude the voices of the poor and relegate them to voting, distributive justice is more likely to occur in even these conditions than in an undemocratic state.

Democracy is especially valuable in times of crisis. A free press, for example, may identify a pressing human problem such as an imminent famine and, before it becomes a reality, demand appropriate public action. A citizen’s freedom not to starve, frequently benefits from the “protective power of democracy”.⁷ In a democratic country, government officials have an incentive—if they want to be reelected—to pay attention to what people want and demand.

CONSTRUCTIVE VALUE

Finally, Sen argues that democratic governance is “constructively” good insofar it provides information, institutions and processes in which people can learn from each other and “construct” or decide on the values and priorities of the society in a way that is influenced by the diverse values

⁴ Sen 1999b: 148

⁵ Drèze and Sen 2002.

⁶ Drèze and Sen 2002: 24

⁷ Sen 1999b: 43

and needs of different groups and people.⁸ Value formation is as much a democratic activity as is the use of social values in the determination of public policy and social response.⁹ This point leads us to the question of the processes groups employ to make policy choices and form their values.

THE RANGE OF SOCIAL CHOICES

What, more precisely, are the most fundamental choices that groups will have to make in a democratic society? Theorists using the capability approach have identified the following:

1. The choice of agents and participants. Who should be a member of the group and who or what is to make (further) choices? The capability approach assumes that people who are most affected by a decision should have a role in making the decision.

2. The choice of the process of decision-making. Groups have a choice from among several collective decision-making procedures, including some form of democratic decision-making. Sen has devoted much of the work over the course of his career to the rational scrutiny of various social choice processes.

3. The choice of agency versus well-being. When the community's choice to make its *own* decisions is likely to reduce the well-being of (some of) its

members, it faces a fundamental decision not only about agency but also of agency versus well-being.

This choice is the social version of an individual's choice between the "opportunity aspect" of freedom, which concerns outcomes, and its "process aspect" which concerns procedures. What matters here is that all people affected by the decision have been *included* in the process of deciding a certain outcome.

4. The choice between functionings. Within the "space" of well-being, a community sometimes must choose between two functionings - such as some members being made healthy now (functioning through curative medicine) or others being made free from ill health (through preventative medicine).

5. The choice between functionings (or capabilities) now and functionings (or capabilities) in the future. A community with scant food may have to decide between present and future ill functioning, such as being ill-nourished now and being ill-nourished in the future. A secondary education system may have to meet pressing educational needs for some group rather than invest in training new teachers who would be able to expand services in the future.

6. The choice and weighting of valuable capabilities and functionings. Once in the "space" of capabilities and functioning, individuals

⁸ Sen 1999b: 152-53

⁹ Drèze and Sen 2002: 25

and communities often must decide on those capabilities and functionings that - at a given time and place - are most valuable, those that are less valuable, those that are trivial, and also identify destructive freedoms. Nussbaum's version of the capability approach proposes an objective but incomplete and revisable list of valuable capabilities to be embodied in the nation's constitution.¹⁰ Sen prefers to leave the valuational exercise to public scrutiny.

7. The choice of capability thresholds. Not only does a society make value judgments about which capabilities to promote, it also makes value judgments about the threshold levels according to which these capabilities should be secured. Sen highlighted the "threshold conditions" of "special importance" and "social influenceability".¹¹ The community has to identify these threshold conditions or the basic levels to which valuable capabilities are to be promoted.

8. The choice between *basic capabilities* and expansion of *all valuable capabilities*. Alkire correctly identifies a further choice that communities sometimes face, namely between the promotion of basic capabilities and the expansion of all valuable capabilities or freedoms.¹²

9. The choice to specify general capabilities and functionings.

Supposing that a group selects certain capabilities and functionings as valuable and even basic, it is still free to *specify* its selections in certain ways. The capability to appear in public without shame can be specified differently in the Costa Rican rain forest than in the Norwegian tundra.

10. The choice of distributive and other values. Communities also can and should choose distributive and other values, how to interpret them, and how to prioritize them. Among the values open for a community to decide is that of just or fair distribution. But, while important, justice once decided is not everything, and a community has the freedom to decide to value and sometimes prioritize other values such as efficiency, social cohesion or social stability.

CHALLENGES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

How to move from these democratic norms to practical implementation?

Each of the choices listed above confront groups from the local to the global level. For Sen "public scrutiny and criticism"¹³ have a role to play in these valuational debates. Such debate "is a crucial part of the exercise of democracy and responsible social choice."¹⁴ Following John Rawls, Sen maintains that democracy should be understood, as "the exercise of public reason."¹⁵

¹⁰ Nussbaum 2000

¹¹ Sen 2004: 319

¹² Alkire 2002: 195

¹³ Sen 1999b: 30

¹⁴ Sen 1999b: 110

¹⁵ Sen 2003: 29

But what does Sen mean by public scrutiny and public reason? What, more precisely, are his views on democratic decision-making as a kind of “responsible social choice?” Although he gives us hints, it is precisely at this point that Sen needs to go further.

The literature on deliberative democracy may provide a resource for addressing these questions of democratic procedures and principles – for deriving practical policies from the norms which the capability approach has provided. The briefing on deliberative democracy, and the bibliography below, provides resources for taking this discussion forward.

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