

Freedom of Choice and Poverty Alleviation

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Abstract

The Capability Approach (henceforth CA) views poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon that is not only characterised by low levels of achievement in the various dimensions but also by a restricted opportunity to choose among different ways of life. The CA thus puts a lot of emphasis on (limited) freedom of choice as a crucial aspect of poverty. If poverty is seen in this way there are two ways to improve the situation of the poor: by broadening the set of opportunities open to them or by strengthening their ability to choose. The paper concentrates on the latter.

Although the CA discusses several possibilities for strengthening the ability to choose in persons it does not explicitly consider the role of enhancing the capability of choice as a means of poverty alleviation. The paper summarizes which circumstances are seen in the CA as suitable for strengthening freedom of choice. Namely the paper discusses the market, democracy and participatory projects. Two shortcomings in the CA are identified in the course of discussion: first, the social embedding and second the process aspect of agency. Elaborating on these shortcomings shows that they are intertwined. Further a model for social work is presented that may serve as a point of reference how to think about social interaction and the process aspect of value formation. The model is based on the conditions of life approach which bears some similarities to the CA. The conceptual discussion is especially urgent in the case of poverty and the design of poverty alleviation because of the relevance of value formation in the context of such a normative concept.

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Although the CA discusses several possibilities for strengthening the ability to choose in persons it does not explicitly consider the role of enhancing the capability of choice as a means of poverty alleviation. The paper summarizes which circumstances are seen in the CA as suitable for strengthening freedom of choice. Namely the paper discusses the market as an institution that trains the ability to choose, democracy as a political institution that is based on freedom of choice and participatory methods as an attempt to build explicitly on freedom of choice of the participants. Two shortcomings in the theoretical conceptualization of freedom of choice in the CA are identified by discussing these institutions and circumstances: First, the interplay between social groups or social stratification and individual agency is not modelled in much detail within the CA. Second, the CA does not provide an explicitly temporal model of agency. The paper introduces a concept that models the situation of an individual both as an outcome (or effect) of the interplay with the social environment and as a cause for changes, thus taking the temporal aspect into account. This concept serves as a conceptual basis for social work and has been developed in the context of other approaches to well-being. The paper suggests that this concept presents a basis for remedying the afore-mentioned shortcomings. However, this is merely a first sketch. Much has still to be done for making the concepts work in practice.

The paper proceeds as follows: First the view of poverty as capability deprivation is presented. The second section gives an overview of the areas in which the CA discusses the strengthening of individual choice: the market, democracy and participatory projects. The third section elaborates on the shortcomings of the CA identified in the preceding section and introduces a concept of social work developed in a different theoretical context. Finally the paper concludes that conceiving both aspects at once may make the CA too complex, but that the demand for highlighting these aspects is justified. Especially the CA should not restrict itself to the opportunity aspect of freedom of choice.

1. Poverty as Capability Deprivation

The CA takes a multidimensional view on the standard of living in general and poverty in particular. The core idea is that functionings are constitutive of a person's life or being where functionings are understood as "the various 'doings' and 'beings' a person achieves" (Sen 1987: 29). The functionings that are considered vary from elementary ones such as "being adequately nourished, being in good health, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality" (Sen 1992: 39) "to very complex activities or personal states such as being able to take part in the life of the community and having self-respect" (Sen 1999a: 75). The combination of functionings actually achieved thus describes how a person lives.

There are two aspects that determine the feasibility of certain combinations of functionings for an individual: on the one hand the person's resources and on the other hand her personal features concerning her ability to use the resources for achieving functionings. The command over resources is a prerequisite for exercising functionings. For instance, without a

bike one cannot exercise the functioning “riding a bike” (see Sen 1985a: 10). Yet having a bike is not sufficient for exercising this functioning: There are people who cannot ride a bicycle, even if they have one, either because of physical handicaps (like being too small for the bicycle in question) or because they simply have not learned how to ride a bike. Thus, functionings result from combining resources and individual features. The latter are called “utilization functions” (Sen 1985a: 11) or “conversion factors” (Robeyns 2005: 99).

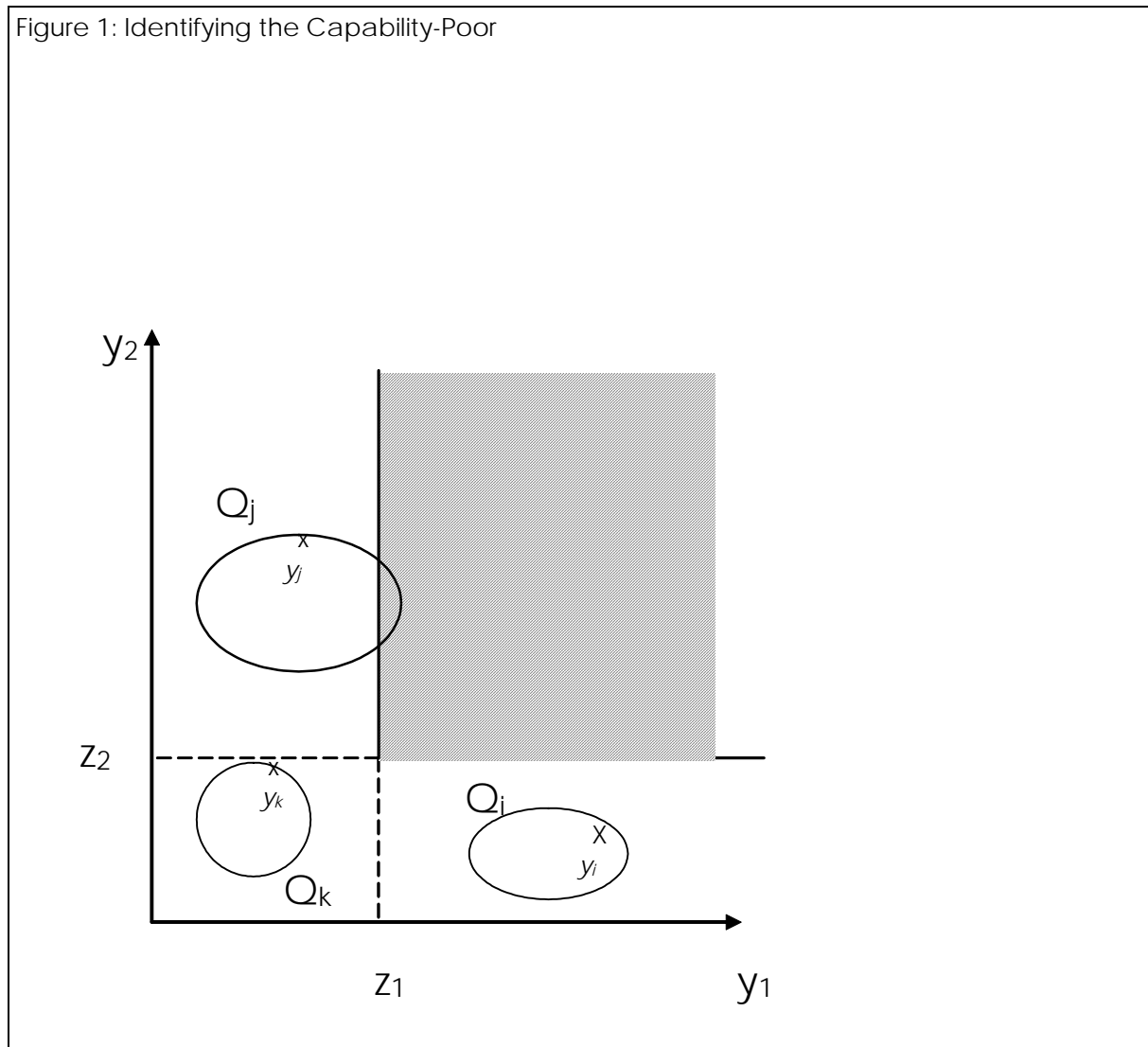
However, the CA supposes that there are always various combinations of functionings or ways of life open to an individual because various bundles of resources are in her reach and she can use these resources in various ways. All options that are feasible for a person in terms of both – resources and conversion factors – can be represented as bundles or vectors in the functionings space. Thus the individual enjoys some freedom of choice over different ways of live that can be represented by the capability set comprising all feasible combinations of functionings (Sen 1985b: 201; 1992: 40). Capability thus reflects the freedom of choice a person has to choose a life she “has reason to value” (Sen 1999a: 74).

When assessing the well-being of people, one may either look at the functionings achieved or at all combinations of functionings feasible for a person, since the CA holds that freedom of choice matters for evaluating a person’s standard of living apart from the functionings achieved. Freedom of choice requires that the capability set comprises more than one feasible option. Apart from the quantity of options open to the individual Sen (1990: 470) claims that the extent of freedom a capability set offers also depends on the quality of the available options:

“A set of three alternatives we see as ‘bad’, ‘awful’ and ‘dismal’ cannot, we think, give us as much real freedom as a set of three others we prefer a great deal more and see as ‘great’, ‘terrific’ and ‘wonderful’. The idea of effective freedom cannot be dissociated from our preferences. Freedom is not just a matter of having a larger number of alternatives, it depends on what kind of alternatives they are.”

Hence, the evaluation of a capability set involves both: determining the number of options available and the quality of these options. However, the capability set is not directly observable but “has to be constructed on the basis of presumptions” as Sen (1992: 52) points out. The natural starting point for doing so is the bundle of achieved functionings, because it’s the one that can be observed. In the case of poverty measurement the quality of options can be assessed by using poverty lines z_1 and z_2 for each dimension. In the two-dimensional case we arrive at the following scenario:

Figure 1: Identifying the Capability-Poor



Source: Leßmann 2007: 172.

People who achieve a functioning bundle in the shaded area are deemed non-poor and don't enter our consideration. The individuals i , j and k however achieve functioning bundles fall below at least one (y_i and y_j) or both poverty lines (y_k). In this case they are considered as potentially poor and their capability sets (Q_i , Q_j and Q_k) have to be determined in order to analyse their situation. If their capability set contains at least one bundle of functionings above the poverty lines they are not considered as poor (like person j). Only those who achieved a bundle of functionings below the threshold *and* miss the capability of achieving one above the threshold should be considered and counted as poor (like persons k and i in figure 1). This two-step procedure of identifying the poor (Leßmann 2004) follows the idea that poor functioning achievements are not sufficient as indicators of poverty because what matters is the feasibility – and not the actual achievement – of decent levels of functionings. This is in line with the example Sen gives once and again:¹

¹ See as well: Sen 1999a: 76; 19

“The example ... of the person who *fasts* out of choice as opposed to another who *has to starve* because of lack of means, is relevant here. Both may end up starving and fail to be adequately nourished, but the person without the means – and thus without the capability to be adequately nourished – is poor in a way that the fasting person is not.” (Sen 1992: 111)

Implicitly he refers to a minimal standard or poverty line when he talks of “being adequately nourished”.

In summary, poverty as capability deprivation means that a person’s achievement level is lower than a minimal standard and that this person’s opportunity to escape poverty is very limited in the sense that a bundle of functionings above all poverty lines is not in that person’s reach.

2. Strengthening individual agency for alleviating poverty

If poverty is seen as capability deprivation in the above defined sense the alleviation of poverty has two aspects because freedom of choice has two aspects (Sen 1999a: 17): the opportunity and the process aspect. Hence, public policy can either aim to improve the opportunities people face or strive at strengthening and improving the processes involved. The CA concentrates in general on the former (Sen 2004a: 336) and presupposes that people are able to choose and to choose wisely. This supposition has a normative aspect: “seeing people as agents rather than as patients” (Sen 1999a: 137) means to respect them as human beings. The CA embraces the idea of choosing a life one values as a very fundamental minimal characteristic of the personhood of human beings. Apart from this normative aspect agency has also a positive aspect that is of particular importance for policy design and targeting: Since “[t]he objects of ‘targeting’ are active themselves, ... their activities can make the targeting achievements quite different from targeting-attempts” (Sen 1999a: 137). For instance, if poverty alleviation policy concentrates on low income and mainly consists in raising the income of the poor this will lead to strategic behaviour on the part of the poor. They have an incentive to remain income-poor by e.g. prolonging their unemployment status in order to benefit from the alleviation policy. Or they might fear the stigma of being a recipient of welfare payments and refrain from revealing their poverty. Both reactions reflect incentive distortions and the policy will fail in its main aim to alleviate poverty.

Though the CA mainly focuses on the opportunity aspect and how the capability set can be broadened both quantitatively and qualitatively there are some hints how the ability to choose can be strengthened within the CA. These concern the role of the market, democratic deliberation and the application via participative projects.

2.1 Agency and the market

The market is very often associated with freedom as in “free market”. Freedom in this case means above all freedom from interference or what Berlin (1958: 122) called “negative

freedom": "I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity." However, freedom is not regarded as an outcome of the market but rather as a precondition for its efficiency (Dasgupta 1986, Helm 1986). According to the first fundamental theorem of welfare economics the market leads to a Pareto efficient outcome, i.e. if the allocation of goods traded on a market is changed such that the reallocation improves the position of some, there will be others who are worse off afterwards as well. One precondition for the market to generate a Pareto-efficient outcome is that goods can be traded without interference on it.

However, negative freedom is but one ingredient of freedom of choice. Freedom from interference concerns the process aspect of freedom of choice whereas the opportunity aspects is touched upon by the quantity and the quality of options available. The latter can be said to characterize what Berlin (1958: 131) calls "positive freedom": "... to be somebody, not nobody; a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave, incapable of playing a human role, that is of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them."

Freedom of choice as offered by the market is modeled in economics as the budget set: "The 'budget set' represents the extent of the person's freedom in this space, i.e. the freedom to achieve the consumption of various alternative commodity bundles." (Sen 1992: 36) Free exchange of goods and the budget as the sole criterion of access to goods is assumed. It is important, however, to keep in mind that the market isn't immune against discrimination especially on the labour market and other violations of freedom.

Sen conceives the capability set in analogy to the budget set in standard microeconomics: "Just as the so-called 'budget set' in the commodity space represents a person's freedom to buy commodity bundles, the 'capability set' in the functionings space reflects the person's freedom to choose from possible livings." (Sen 1992: 40) He carries this analogy so far that he proves the Pareto-efficiency of the market with respect to capabilities just as the first fundamental theorem of welfare economics proves the Pareto-efficiency with respect to utility (Sen 1993). However, Sen makes two major adjustments of the argument: First, he uses preference satisfaction instead of utility as the evaluative criterion. Secondly, he broadens the domain of preferences to include freedom of choice and thus transfers the argument to the evaluative space of functionings and capabilities (Sen 1993: 533–535). In the end he arrives at the result that the market equilibrium is efficient in the sense that no other state can be achieved that offers at least one person more capabilities without reducing the capability set of someone else.

The two adjustments deserve a bit more of attention. Firstly, the move towards a broader evaluative criterion than utility follows from Sen's critique of utility theory. Namely he criticizes that utility is taken to equal well-being (Sen 1985b, 1987b); the focus on outcomes paying no regards to processes (this is called consequentialism, Sen 1987b: 39); the disregard of the

phenomenon of adaptive preferences or of taking pleasure in small mercies respectively (Sen 1985a: 21); the exclusive focus on self-interest (Sen 1983). By looking at the satisfaction of preferences these shortcomings are reduced. Well-being then depends on preferences which can also include preferences concerning process aspects and altruistic motives. Yet, the criterion is still quite consequentialist in contrast to proceduralistic theories such as Nozick's.

Secondly, the move towards the functioning space as the evaluative space preserves a crucial role for income and the budget set. Raising income will at least not reduce capabilities (Sen 1993: 535), but it might not enlarge the capability set either because of the manifold dependencies between resources and conversion factors. As Sen (1999a: 88–89, 1993) points out disadvantages in converting income into functionings are often “coupled” with disadvantages in income generation: “Handicaps, such as age or disability or illness, reduce one's ability to earn income. But they also make it harder to convert income into capability, since an older, or more disabled or more seriously ill person may need more income (for assistance, for prosthesis, for treatment) to achieve the same functionings (even when that achievement is at all possible).” (Sen 1999a: 88) Because of these multifaceted interdependencies it is difficult to compare capability sets inter- as well as intrapersonally (Pattanaik/Xu 1990, 1998, Sen 2002). All the more we have to keep in mind that efficiency tells us nothing on the equity of outcomes. Efficiency is compatible with very unequal and inequitable distributions.

2.2 Conditions of deliberation

One of the core ideas of the CA is that people are heterogeneous in their features and opinions. This includes the diversity of people in their ability to convert resources into functionings as well as differences in the ideas of what constitutes a “good life”. The latter induces Sen to argue against fixing a list of dimensions relevant for the analysis of well-being: “To have ... a fixed list, emanating entirely from pure theory, is to deny the possibility of fruitful public participation on what should be included and why” (Sen 2004b: 77). Hence, participation in poverty alleviation for instance should start with defining poverty and postpone the question of the best way to fight poverty.

Though Sen always emphasizes the need of public discussions he is not too explicit about which conditions have to hold in order to ensure an open and fair public debate. However, his concern is not restricted to formal conditions of participation: “Democracy has complex demands, which certainly include voting and respect for election results, but it also requires 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. Democracy is a

demanding system, and not just a mechanical condition (like majority rule) taken in isolation.” (Sen 1999b: 9–10) In the book on “India: Development and Participation” co-authored by Jean Drèze, he states that apart from “free and fair elections” democracy demands “protection of human rights and political liberties, respect for legal entitlements, the guaranteeing of free discussions and uncensored distribution of news and fair comment, and ... widespread actual participation of people including the most disadvantaged.” (Drèze/Sen 2002: 24) However, these conditions are not to be understood as preconditions for establishing a democracy. In opposition to the long retained trend in development policy to withhold democracy from developing countries for the sake of promoting their economic growth first, Sen argues for a rather pragmatic and less constraining view: “A country does not have to be deemed fit for democracy; rather, it has to become fit through democracy” (Sen 1999b: 4). David Crocker (2006: 180) elaborates: “In spite of political and economic injustices, with the help of ... [measures] such as training in public speaking and reason giving, people *in and through* the deliberative process itself may reduce their differences and promote justice as they together forge answers to practical problems.”

There is a strong theoretical argument in favour of taking this view that is discussed in the literature on deliberative democracy and the CA: If a minimum level of political functioning is seen as a precondition of democracy, the scope of political deliberation is unduly restricted because the content of this precondition cannot be questioned in the process of deliberation (Peter 2007, Srinivasan 2007: 474). The same is true for thinking about economic equality as a precondition of democracy. Undeniably there are interconnections between economic well-being and political functioning, but to require an equal distribution of economic means as a prerequisite of democracy amounts to overstate some interconnections while leaving others aside. A prominent example of this line of thinking can be seen in Rawls who tackles the question of distribution in terms of primary goods neglecting the personal diversity in converting resources into functionings.

Even if political capability is not regarded as a precondition of democracy thinking about which individual functionings support the democratic functioning of society and describing what can count as political capability is a worthwhile undertaking (Bohman 1997, Bonvin/Thelen 2003, Crocker 2006, Srinivasan 2007, Bonvin 2008). One of the outcomes of this undertaking reveals a theoretical shortcoming of the CA: While pointing out once and again that freedom has both an opportunity and a process aspect, the CA concentrates on the former. Deliberation is, however, a process. Therefore it comes as no surprise that procedural capabilities play a major role in this literature. As Sabina Alkire (2006: 135) puts it: “[W]hen judgements as to which capabilities are valuable must be made, and when these judgements affect wider groups of people, procedural considerations enter.” A good example is the “capability for voice” that includes the aspect of opportunity for voice but emphasizes the need for taking a procedural view on voice (Bonvin/Thelen 2003).

In summary, Sen mentions three reasons for attaching value to democracy: Firstly, democracy has an intrinsic value in that it furthers agency of all people. As already mentioned the opportunity for choosing a life one values can be seen as the minimalist concept of personhood held by the CA. Democracy offers the chance to enjoy both negative and positive freedom. Democracy works towards equality by presupposing the equality of all citizens (Deneulin/Crocker 2006: 2).

Secondly, there is the instrumental value of democracy as a means to achieve goals beyond political deliberation. For instance, there has never occurred a famine in a democracy (Sen 1999a: 152). Thirdly, democracy has a constructive value in that it helps finding a joint basis of beliefs and values in a society. In particular, the relevance of certain functionings for a "good life" is determined by public debate and will lead to a kind of consensus with respect to giving priority to the avoidance and combat of certain deprivations (Sen 1999a: 154).

2.3 Problems in participative projects

So far the ideas on democracy and participation therein have been rather abstract and general. Respecting the individual, its wishes and thoughts about what constitutes a "good life" is a core characteristic of the CA. This is why the CA is apt for combining it with participative methods as Alex Frediani (2007) argues. However, participation on the micro-level demands a more detailed and engaging definition of poverty, of the relevance of the various dimensions and of the right way to combat poverty. What role does freedom of choice play in this endeavor? Do participatory projects always respect a person's freedom of choice? Otherwise: how are we to ensure this?

There are several examples for using participatory methods based on the CA and the overall lesson is that participation is no panacea. For example, in her study of women in the suburbs of Istanbul Pinar Uyan Semerci (2004, 2007) finds that the women view themselves mainly as a part of the community – either of their family in a narrow sense or of their family and relatives in a broader sense or of the community in their village of origin. Asking these women what they wish for, what they expect from life and what kind of life they value causes problems of understanding because they wish for their family and their children, but not directly or merely for themselves. They gain strength and self-confidence from their power to change things for their family and their children. In consequence Uyan Semerci (2004) questions the possibility of researchers to understand the "voices of the poor" and argues for an extension of the notion of capabilities to cover relations among individuals (Uyan Semerci 2007).

The question of communication between participants of a project and researchers as well as facilitators shows up frequently in studies of participatory projects. Sony Pellissery and Sylvia Bergh (2007) point out that existing power relations distort the exercise of deliberation. Rather than being irrelevant they found power relations to have a major influence on outcomes and often are reinforced by participatory projects. Hence, they propose to complement participatory methods with power analysis. They distinguish "visible", "hidden" and "invisible

power". While visible power displays in decision procedures like elections, the manipulation of these procedures is a form of hidden power. The most problematic form of power, however, is the invisible power that comes close to what Sen (1992: 149) calls "social conditioning": "Invisible power" describes a subtle influence on how people conceive themselves. Pellissery and Bergh (2007) show in three case studies how hidden and invisible power undermine the aims of participation.

Sabina Alkire (2006: 148–150) shows that this problem is widely known in the literature on participatory methods for development policy. Several techniques have been proposed to tackle this problem and to diminish the power influence of facilitators. However, the issue of power imbalances inescapably comes up in any such project and thus it is most important to consciously attend to the issue.

The main interest of Sabina Alkire (2002) lies on the question whether participatory projects actually enhanced the capabilities of the participants both quantitatively and qualitatively. Thus, first of all, she states the changes in their way of life or functioning achievements respectively. Then she asks the participants for their evaluation of the changed situation. Finally, she takes up the question whether the changes have been brought about in an efficient way and if there has also been worsening effects of the project on participants' capabilities. In this context problems of communication come up again concerning the desire for freedom of choice. Drawing on the case of a project on literacy for women, Alkire (2002: 294–296) discusses whether the participating women had actually desired more freedom of choice. There is no simple answer to this. The effects of such projects are difficult to foresee. In particular the women couldn't picture the changes literacy would bring about them. Being untrained in planning and projecting something that aims mainly and directly at improving their lives and not those of their family, it was difficult to talk with the women at the beginning of the project on its aims (just as Uyan Semerci found as well). Further, there is always the influence not only of the facilitator but also of persons playing a key role in the village (the point on the power imbalances that Pellissery/Bergh 2007 made).

Let me mention as a last example the study of Solava Ibrahim (2007) on self-help projects. Self-help projects are characterized by a participation that goes beyond the one we looked at so far. Self-help projects are the outcome of a collective effort to overcome poverty. The participation starts earlier than in the other projects and covers already the planning of the project and not merely its conduction. Because of its emphasis on freedom of choice and agency Ibrahim considers the CA as suitable for analyzing self-help projects, but she argues for introducing a concept of collective capabilities.

In summary we find two problems in the application of the CA in participatory projects (for poverty alleviation): Firstly, communication between the researcher, the facilitators and the participants might be difficult due to strategic behavior in the light of power imbalances (Alkire 2006, Pellissery/Bergh 2007) or due to differences in language and ideas of poor people like the "voices of the poor" approach suggests (Uyan Semerci 2004, 2007).

Secondly, the CA is focused on the individual and individual aims, preferences and agency. Uyan Semerci (2007) thus demands a “relational account” of capabilities and Ibrahim (2007) introduces the idea of collective capabilities. This critique – the individualism criticism – is a recurrent issue in the CA (Robeyns 2005, Alkire 2008). However, the claim that the individual is the ultimate unit of moral concern has widespread support among capability researchers: Robeyns (2005: 107) calls this claim ethical individualism; Nussbaum (2000: 5) speaks of the principle of each person as an end and the principle of each person’s capability. Several routes are taken in order to recognize the importance of collectives, personal relations and groups in the CA. They range from conceiving collective or group capabilities (Stewart 2005), the idea of structures of living together (Deneulin/Stewart 2002), the demand of a more explicitly relational conception of capabilities, the introduction of a relational ontology (Longshore Smith/Seward 2009) to the embeddings of individual capabilities in social conversion factors (Kuklys/Robeyns 2004, Volkert 2005, Robeyns 2005) and links to theories on social stratification (Roche 2006, Leßmann 2009a). Apart from conceptual and theoretical questions it is important to note that the social embedding is a forceful factor in shaping individual agency or the exercise of freedom of choice. Any attempt to strengthen individual agency has to take this into account.

3. Social work for strengthening agency

The preceding section identified two major shortcomings of the CA with respect to modelling individual agency and freedom of choice: First, the process aspect of freedom has not received enough attention so far. Secondly, the interplay between social groups or social stratification and individual agency is not modelled in much detail within the CA.

This section elaborates first on these two shortcomings and then introduces a model for social work based on the conditions of life approach that constitutes a basis for remedying these shortcomings.

3.1 Social Stratification and Processes

As stated above, on the one hand side the social embedding of the individual is widely acknowledged within the CA. On the other hand side various approaches how to integrate this idea into the CA coexist. In particular, there is ambiguity as to whether the affiliation to a group is freely chosen or due to some innate characteristics of the person. Frances Stewart (2008) focuses on groups that are defined externally in the context of what she calls horizontal inequality, i.e. she takes an external perspective and groups people together irrespective of whether they think of themselves as members of this group. She convincingly shows that this perspective has some cogency because often those sharing certain characteristics (black people, women, ...) are deprived as members of this group. At the same time she points to the fact that groups also have an influence on the values and preferences of people (Stewart 2005: 190). In particular, a person’s evaluation of her own

situation will be influenced by her reference group. If she's deprived relatively to her reference group she will consider herself poor even if her level of achievement would not be considered poor from an external point of view. The converse might happen as well: There are people we consider as poor on an objective basis, but who don't think of themselves as poor because they evaluate their situation relative to a poor reference group.²

Hence, there is also a freedom of choice concerning the reference group involved. As Sen (1999c, 2006) points out we have a plurality of affiliations (or identities as he puts it) and "[a]long with the recognition of the plurality of our identities and their diverse implications, there is a critically important need to see the role of *choice* in determining the cogency and relevance of particular identities which are inescapably diverse." (italics in the original, Sen 2006: 4) One way of making one's affiliations visible is to share a life-style and to show some characteristics (like e.g. wearing a scarf in the case of Muslim women).

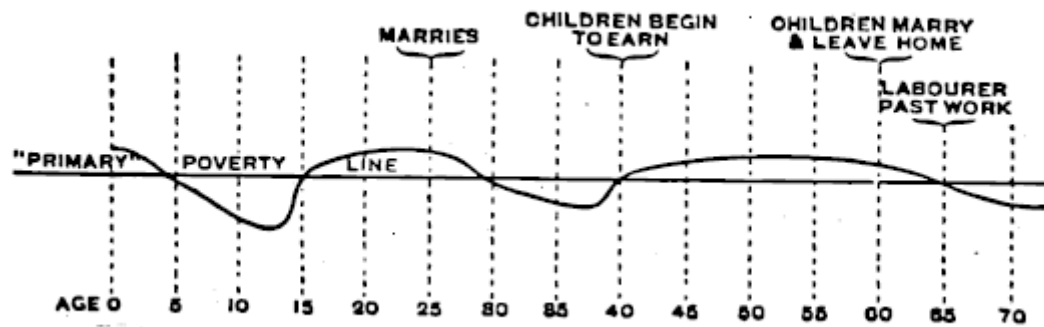
In sociology we find a large literature on such issues in the context of social stratification theory. The role of life-styles, for example, is interpreted as indicating objectively the membership to social layers on the one hand side and as an expression of free choice or free affiliation on the other hand side (Müller 1992). If a group of people share a life-style that is characterized by a certain homogeneity, persons can show that they belong to this group by adopting this life-style. However, when many people do this the life-style loses its exclusiveness and stops functioning as a means of identification to the original group.

Very similar ideas are also present in the sociological research on life-courses and life-course analysis. The idea of a typical life-course, a prefixed pattern of events at specific ages is a modern idea (Kohli 1985, 1986). On the one hand side such a pattern exists objectively. For some time there was a very homogeneous pattern of the course of life of people in Germany. The "typical" course of life serves as a reference point for the evaluation of one's own life. It is also the background for consciously choosing a different pattern. (The movement of 1968 did exactly this: they chose to live in other ways than their parents.) Thus, on the other hand side people choose their course of life, they shape their life-courses.

Life-course analysis has a long tradition in poverty analysis: Seebohm Rowntree drew this figure of the life-course of a laborer:

Figure 2: The risk of poverty during the life-course of a laborer according to Rowntree

² In German being unhappy despite an objectively good standard of living is called „Unzufriedenheitsdilemma“ (dissatisfaction dilemma) and being happy despite an objectively low standard of living is called „Zufriedenheitsparadox“ (satisfaction paradox), Voges 2000a.



Source: Rowntree 1980

Rowntree identified three events that threw a laborer into poverty: first his own childhood, when his parents have too many children to care well for all of them, secondly the period of time when his own children are young and can't contribute to the family income and thirdly his old age. In the same way contemporary life-course analysis seeks to identify events that bear an increased risk of poverty (Leisering 1995, Leisering/Müller/Schumann 2001, Bartelheimer et al. 2009).

All of these theories share the ambiguity between a prefixed pattern and choosing a pattern on the background of a prefixed one. Further, this thought describes a process and, thus, hints at the importance of time. Patterns evolve in the course of time and change in the course of time. The link to processes and time might seem most obvious in the case of life-course analysis where it is at the core of the theory, but it is also present in the case of life-styles as an indicator of social layers and Stewart's papers on groups and horizontal inequality. Stewart (2005: 187) holds that groups can "enhance" capabilities. "Enhancing" describes the process of broadening and improving a person's capability – in the course of time. Life-styles evolve, then serve as a reference and are adopted by those who want to belong to a group or social layer. This process of adopting a life-style, however, affects the life-style and its symbolic importance as a point of reference. Thus, the life-style itself change and its meaning for those who share it. All these processes take place in the course of time.

The CA is, however, an essentially static theory. For example, in order to combine the CA and life-course analysis, Bartelheimer et al. (2009) introduce the idea that capability sets are accumulated in the course of life.

It is all the more remarkable that the CA has not yet established an explicit way of how to deal with time as Sen always points out that freedom has both aspects: the opportunity and the process aspect. He himself introduces a process in a very rudimentary way when he assumes people to choose a life they value from their capability sets. He also hints at the situatedness of people and their capabilities (Bonvin/Thelen 2003) and prepares the ground for a relational account of capability (Uyan Semerci 2007). Yet, the CA so far falls short to

cover either the idea of social embedding and collectivity or processes and time in a unique and convincing way. These two ideas are – as this section has shown – intertwined. Collectives and groups are formed in the course of time. The process of group-formation in itself has already a huge impact on people’s self-perception and self-confidence as the examples of participatory projects substantiate (e.g. Stewart 2005: 187).

3.2 A model for social work (based on the conditions of life approach)

Similar to the CA the conditions of life approach is a multidimensional approach to well-being and poverty. The similarity between the approaches goes so far that the conditions of life approach has also modeled freedom of choice as the freedom to choose from a menu of options (Leßmann 2007, 2009a). In contrast to the CA the conditions of life approach is mainly used by sociologists and provides therefore a direct link to sociological theories of stratification (Leßmann 2009a: 290–92). Further, the role of time was discussed in the context of this approach right from the beginning (Leßmann 2009a: 288–90).

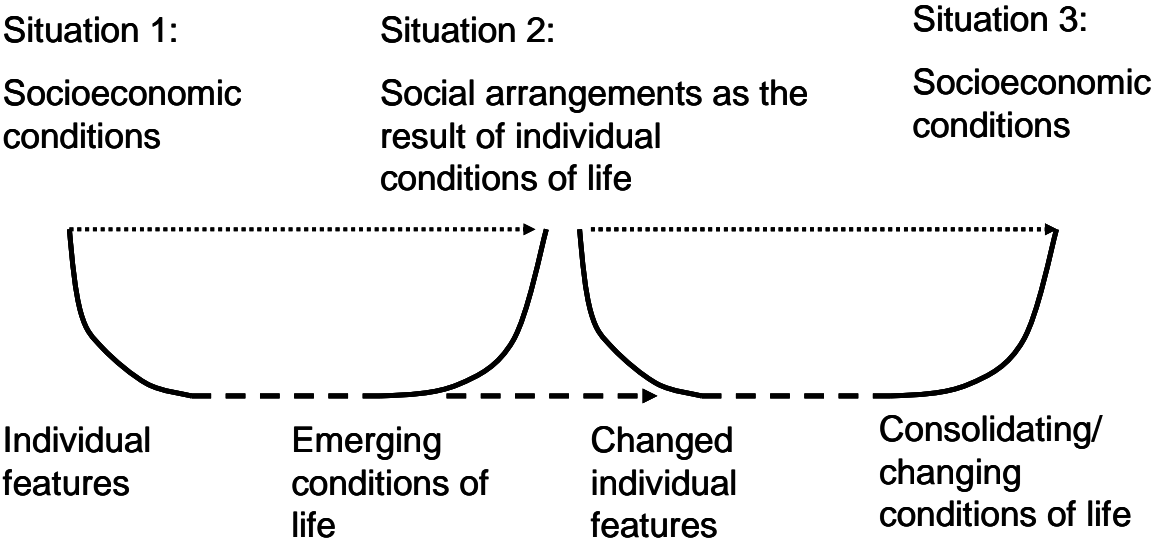
The conditions of life approach has been promoted for social policy in general and has been adopted for social work with the poor in particular. In the following a somewhat abstract model for conducting social work is presented that was developed within the conditions of life approach. The starting point of the model is the recognition of the ambiguity between taking a pattern as given and using the pattern as well as changing it by adopting it discussed in the last section. As Anton Amann (1983: 147–48) puts it the conditions of life constitute for the single individual constraints but at the same time the conditions of life define the agency space³ and thus allows for freedom and choice. Wolf Rainer Wendt (1984: 108) uses the term “way of life” which “is applicable to individuals and social groups alike, in particular to the patterns of how people individually and collectively cope with structural conditions of life by making use of their own capabilities as well as socioecological and sociocultural resources. A way of life is thus how people actively organize what options the conditions of life provide.” (translation by the author) The task of the social worker consists first of all in analyzing how the individual conditions of life came about as a result of an interaction of social conditions (macro-level) with individual ways of life (micro-level). Wendt (1988: 83) speaks of raising the clients awareness of the general as well as specific features of his situation. This analysis offers at the same time insights on the freedom for changing one’s way of life, the freedom of choice provided by the conditions of life. The social worker will offer a menu of options how to react to her client. Thus, the second task of the social worker is to point out the agency space of her client. Hence the social worker hints at her client’s responsibility for his own life by emphasizing that his behavior matters and that he has an impact on his conditions of life even if he is poor. Yet, social policy has to provide

³ In German this is called “Spielraum”. This term is hard to translate. It has many connotations of freedom, playfulness, space or menu to choose and so on.

opportunities and to offer structural conditions for individual agency that enable especially poor people to improve their situation.

Wolfgang Voges (2002b) has drawn a model that captures the interaction between the individual and society, between the micro- and the macro-level. This model is based on the ideas of Coleman (1992) in his “Foundation of Social Theory” and thus draws a link to a general sociological theory.

Figure 3: Conditions of life resulting in and resulting from interaction between the macro- and the micro-level



Source: following Voges (2002b: 272)

According to this model conditions of life can always be interpreted in two ways: as the outcome of social conditions (in interaction with personal features) on the one hand side and as the cause for changing social conditions on the other hand side. The society is but an aggregate term for all people living at a certain place and time. Any change in individual patterns will change the social pattern as well if only in the margins. The individual, however, perceives social conditions as external and given and adjusts her behavior accordingly.

Although this model remains at an abstract level it provides a way of thinking about the interaction between the individual and the society that can serve as a point of reference. The model includes both the idea of social embeddings of the individual and the idea of time as an important factor for modeling freedom of choice.

4. Conclusion

The CA views poverty as capability deprivation. This paper interprets capability deprivation as deriving from two factors: the lack of opportunities to choose from and a poorly developed ability to choose. In contrast to most contributions of the CA so far, the paper focuses on the latter. The importance of opportunities to choose from notwithstanding, the paper looks for areas which strengthen the ability to choose of the poor. Three areas are identified where the CA discusses how to strengthen a person’s ability to choose: the market,

democracy and participatory projects. With respect to the market the CA clearly states that the market does not guarantee freedom itself, but that the freedom from interference of others (negative freedom) has to be ensured by the economic ordering for the market to function. The market can be shown to efficiently allocating capabilities if there are no market failures (externalities and interferences). When discussing democracy and deliberation a shortcoming of the CA becomes obvious: The CA concentrates on the opportunity aspect of freedom and has little to say on the process aspect. Deliberation, however, is a process and has to be modelled accordingly. Some ways how to integrate a process-oriented model into the CA have been proposed. The micro-level application of deliberative processes in participatory projects reveals another shortcoming of the CA. Many people, especially women and poor people perceive themselves mainly as a part of a group. This is a challenge for the CA that holds that the individual is the ultimate unit of moral concern. Different suggestions have been made how to account for the social embedding of individuals in the CA.

Taking a closer look to the two shortcomings we identified shows that they are linked. Group formation takes place in the course of time and groups change permanently. Time matters mainly because the process of deliberation over values, preferences and projects takes time. Groups as points of reference for the individual members affect this process heavily. Hence, introducing either the social embedding into the CA or the process of value formation is more a choice of emphasis than a choice between two different aspects. The social embedding is the outcome of a specific process that takes place in the course of time and obtains its importance from its impact on value formation. Similarly, the process aspect of freedom is related to the process of value formation, of learning how to choose (Leßmann 2009b) and is always influenced by the social environment of the person.

Introducing both – the process aspect and the social embedding – will make the CA much more complex and will renew the discussion on how to operationalize the approach (Robeyns 2000, Comim 2001, 2008). However, problems in operationalizing the approach for participatory projects and deliberative democracy have led to the desire to introduce the social embedding and processes into the approach. Therefore a pragmatic way of dealing with this desire is advisable. Depending on the research question new, complementary concepts are and should be introduced into the CA, but we may not find a unique best concept for either aspect. However, the model for social work presented in this paper may serve as a point of reference for this undertaking. It shows how the two aspects are intertwined and offers several perspectives that emphasize either the process aspect or the aspect of social embedding.⁴

For defining poverty and reflecting about how to alleviate poverty both aspects are crucial. Poverty is a normative concept. Sen (1983) has argued that poverty has an absolute core,

⁴ Just like the circular flow diagram in economics is used for measuring income in several ways.

but he does not deny its relative nature either. Human agency – a fundamental and core value of the CA – is inherently social (see Nussbaum 2000: 82 on the special importance of social affiliation for a person’s capability). It is, thus, impossible to define poverty without reference to the social environment and to overcome poverty without respecting the human agency of the poor. In consequence, strengthening their agency includes not only to provide more opportunities to choose for them but also to encourage them as well as all others to make use of their freedom of choice. Hence, developing concepts and models for this process is inescapable for the CA and Sen’s (2004a: 336) claim that the CA simply cannot deal with the process aspect of freedom is unacceptable.⁵

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⁵ It seems that this claim is linked to restricting the informational base to capabilities (Sen 2004a: 337). Right now, capabilities are perceived as static, but it stands to question whether a dynamic model of capability is out of reach (Leßmann 2009b).

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