

The Capability Approach: A Reassessment of the Orthodox Approach to Development

Polina Encheva, University of Westminster

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the debates surrounding the capabilities approach and its far-flung reach across various disciplines. The essence of its scholarship aims to frame the evaluation space of development using people's reasoning and capabilities to achieve freedom and as a form of powerful critique to mainstream economics. The first part will look into the debate between the two most prominent capabilities scholars – Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and discuss what has been set as the base of the approach. The second part will look into the utilitarian (universal) nature of the capabilities approach and compare Nussbaum's orthodox view and the classical utilitarian John S. Mill views on happiness. The later part will try to clarify the debate on the use of the approach and whether it does import Western values that can lead to new imperial practices, by looking into the use and implementation of foreign aid today. This conceptualization of the capabilities approach will be applied in practical settings and be used for the creation of policy recommendations towards the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. US withdrawal from UNRWA funding is seen in the context of the collapse of multilateralism in international development, thus requiring reassessment of mainstream policy practices.

Because of its abstract nature, there is clear disagreement among scholars on how this theoretical approach should be understood at its most general level. However, Martin Peterson have brought this ethical debate on a more practical level arguing against the ethical premises of the utilitarian Peter Singer on issues of foreign aid. Looking into Sen's capabilities approach, his argument was based upon a weak ethical premise and an egalitarian version of the Pareto Principle' morality. To fully unfold this, it is worth deepening into foreign aid. Conceptualising on aid as a tool of power maintenance abroad can bring the much-needed clarity on whether or not can utilitarianism be used in development through the capabilities approach.

The following paper has attempted to map out the gaps within the work done both from heterodox and orthodox perspectives on the capabilities approach so far and critically assess the research conducted in recent years. It is worth stressing that despite the popularity of the approach as a powerful critique to mainstream development economics and its wide application in practical settings, more conceptual work is required to establish what would belong to the core of the approach.