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***Sen's capability approach in designing and implementing poverty reduction programmes: Promoting successful local application through focus groups***

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At a theoretical level there has been wide acceptance of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (CA) in development. However, questions remain regarding operationalization of the approach within the constraints participants and practitioners and other stakeholders face in designing and implementing poverty reduction programmes.

***How is the use of Sen's CA in designing and implementing poverty reduction programmes relevant to the human development approach?***

Human development has been defined as a broad approach that is about enlarging the range of people's freedoms and choices. In giving primacy to CA-based participatory appraisal techniques during the design and implementation of poverty reduction programmes, far reaching impacts on development thinking can be enabled where the emphasis is continually placed on enhancing capabilities, freedoms, and the agency aspect of individuals.

***Whose views are represented through the use of Sen's CA in designing and implementing poverty reduction programmes?***

In developing poverty reduction programmes within the CA perspective the individual participants in the programmes are consistently placed at the centre with an emphasis on the "agency aspect" of the individual. This is in the sense of someone who not only acts and brings about change, but whose accomplishments can be appraised in terms of his or her own standards and aims. These achievements can certainly be evaluated by external criteria, such as the quantitative indicators often utilised by stakeholders such as the donors, governments, field workers and NGOs. While these external criteria are recognized as important, the framework of CA-based participatory evaluation requires qualitative techniques which enable participants to identify *for themselves* the choices and opportunities they have learned or discovered through their participation, and therefore to recognize the active expansion of their own capability sets.

Furthermore, by viewing poverty alleviation programmes within the parameters of the CA there is the opportunity for the perspectives of participants to have greater influence over other stakeholders in their appraisal, design and implementation of poverty alleviation programmes. Schischka, Dalziel and Saunders (2008) report on a capabilities based participatory evaluation of community enterprises in rural regions of the Pacific Island nation of Samoa. This case study revealed that the all participants taking part in the village based enterprises valued the

opportunity to outline the opportunities that they had reason to value. This is in contrast to solely examining opportunities that might be valued and imposed by outsiders. While most participants reported that the *initial* impetus for their involvement was to find a source of income for their family, many also reported that what kept their involvement going (and strengthened the commitment of the wider community to the village projects) were a number of non-income opportunities that arose from taking part in the community enterprises. These included the ability of old people to revive and pass on traditional craft skills, the ability to contribute more resources to the local church and community and the ability to offer employment opportunities to young people in the village and thereby increase the likelihood that they might remain there rather than leave for better job prospects in the capital city or overseas.

The realisation by the NGO which organises the community enterprise programmes that there are a number of motivations for long term involvement of participants beyond income generation has implications for their content and implementation. For example in implementing new developments in these programmes the NGO now needs to incorporate potential for inclusion of the skills of old people and the potential job prospects for younger people as well as likely income generation. By including these outcomes in their analysis it is considered that there will be significantly increased long term commitment to the programmes by the local community than if income potential alone were considered.

### ***Why is the CA important for poverty reduction programmes?***

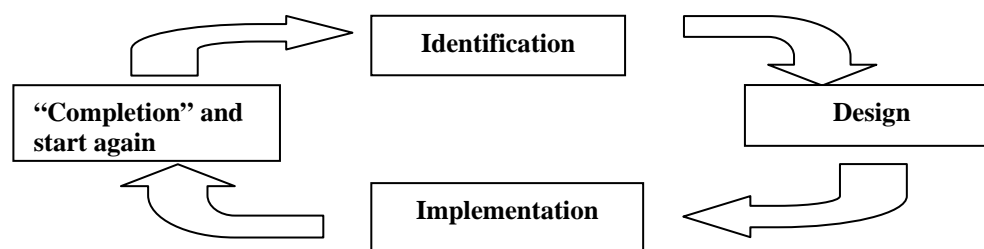
Sen's CA is part of a more general recognition that a failure to design and evaluate poverty alleviation programmes from the participants' point of view can result in failure of the overall programmes. Recently development academics and practitioners have noted that the formulation of development programmes is often carried out by outside 'experts' who use numerical and standardised criteria they are familiar with. Whilst their criteria are worthy of consideration, Sen's CA provides the opportunity to put the needs, aspirations, and standards of the local participants in the programmes at the centre and therefore increase the chances of successful local applications of a poverty reduction programme. The CA can also change the kind of questions that are asked and the substance of the discussion about poverty reduction, placing people at the centre of poverty reduction programmes rather than processes such as economic growth or debt repayment.

For example, examining economic development programmes within the perspective of the CA would allow a better understanding of how effective these programmes are in generating quality employment that is expanding choices and capabilities that participants themselves value. Evaluating a development programme, such as the one discussed above, using a capabilities based participatory appraisal methodology, allows for participant valued non financial factors to be promoted in the outcomes of the programme. Participants in the community development programmes reported that they valued the ability for traditional handicraft skills to be utilised by various members of their community as a means to engage with the outside market economy through sales to tourists. In the longer term this gave them and their families' choices to participate in the cash economy. They also gained skills such as budgeting and commercial abilities that could be in demand in the more formal labour market should they decide to try to join it. Another desirable feature reported by the participants was that the community development programme allowed them flexible working hours so that could fit their work obligations around other important village commitments such as child care and important cultural activities such as weddings, funerals and church attendance. This they saw in contrast to employment in a factory in an urban setting where they would not only be removed from the local environment they valued but also where they would lack the flexibility in working hours to take part in the community activities that are important to them. More standard appraisal methodology might highlight the income earned from a factory job in an urban location as a superior outcome to that of a community development programme based in villages remote from town. However capabilities based participatory evaluation allows for the highlighting of factors such as time flexibility and ability to contribute to local community that are valued by participants and that are likely to keep them involved long term in development programmes.

### **When can the CA be used to design and implement poverty reduction programmes?**

Capabilities-based participatory appraisal methodology such as focus groups can be integrated into *all* stages of the poverty alleviation programme's project cycle. Interviews with groups may be more instructive than those with individuals because group members have an overlapping spread of knowledge, covering a wider field than any single person (Chambers 1997). Furthermore, Keleman, Hellin and Bellon (2009) note that focus groups can be a rapid and resource-efficient way of gathering information about complex relationships. Figure one shows the circular nature of a typical project cycle of a development project.

**Figure One: Stages of the Project Cycle of a Poverty Alleviation Programme**



During the identification phase there is the opportunity to use preliminary focus groups to establish what are the aspirations and existing skills of the participants as well as foreseeing any possible difficulties. In the design phase, the focus groups can be used to develop aims and objectives and how to achieve them so as to ascertain an assessment of the expected impacts on the lives of the participants. Next in the implementation phase of a programme, regular focus groups can serve to evaluate the extent to which the hopes and expectations are eventuating at the same time as recording the expansion of capabilities that should be occurring (or not occurring). Adjustments to programmes may be made as appropriate when expectations are not being met or capabilities not expanding as expected. Focus groups in this phase of the project cycle also provide a valuable way of checking for the development of unexpected capabilities that may arise for the participants as the programme develops. As the process of development is ongoing the "completion" phase of the development cycle is actually the commencement phase of the next project. Focus group discussion at this stage allows the group to reflect on what they have achieved and the choices that have opened up for them. The field workers and the management of a development agency can aim to continually improve the design of future programmes for capability expansion with the ongoing input of their participants. In this way, there is greater opportunity for engaging participants in development programmes and of enhancing outcomes that they value.

#### **Some general sources:**

1. **Alkire, S. 2002** *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
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4. **Keleman, A., Hellin, J. and Bellon, M.R. 2009** *Maize Diversity, rural development and farmer's practices: lessons from Chiapas, Mexico*, *The Geographical Journal* Vol 175 no1 p52-70.
5. **Schischka, J., Dalziel, P. and Saunders, C. 2008.** *Applying Sen's Capabilities Approach to Poverty Alleviation Programs*. *Journal of Human Development* Vol. 9 p229-246.
6. **Sen, Amartya K. 1999** *Development as Freedom*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

**Note: HD Insights are network members' contributions and do not necessarily represent the views of UNDP.**