The influence of Sen's applied economics on his non-welfarist approach to justice

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The influence of Sen's applied economics on his non-welfarist approach to justice: agency at the core of public action for removing injustices

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> *"there is a close relationship between public understanding and awareness, on the one hand, and the nature, forms and vigour of state action in pursuit of public goals, on the other. […] public enlightenment may, thus, have the role of both drawing attention to problems that may otherwise be neglected, and of precipitating remedial action on the part of governments faced with critical pressure.[…] It is important to see the public as an agent and not merely as a passive patient."*
>
> Jean Drèze and Amartya K. Sen, 1989: 19

Amartya Sen is well known for highlighting the failures of the standard framework of welfare economics, in particular what he has called "welfarism" (Sen 1977, 1979) which can be broadly interpreted as the focus on one kind of pre-defined information (Baujard and Gilardone 2020). His work has greatly contributed to making normative economics and political philosophy evolve in a direction which takes seriously persons' agency (see for instance Peter 2003, Burchardt 2009, Robeyns and Crocker 2010, Alkire 2010, Davis 2012). In contrast to most of these articles, we will neither study Sen's interest in agency strictly in relation to his capability approach[2] nor argue that personal agency shall be understood as a notion of individual advantage. Our view is rather that Sen's increasing focus on agency is a means to acknowledge theoretically: 1) people's "ability to reason, appraise, choose, participate and act" rather than viewing them only in terms of their needs (Sen 2009: 250); and 2) the basic human abilities "to understand, to sympathize, to argue" rather than viewing them as "doomed to isolated lives without communication and collaboration" (Sen 2009: 415). The scope is thus different from a mere widening of the informational base for appreciating personal situations within a social

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[2] See chapter 12 for an analysis of the way the capability approach deals with agency requirements. In line with Baujard and Gilardone (2017, 2020), we consider here that the capability approach is not the essential point in Sen's approach to justice.

state[3] because it takes us on the territory of the procedural aspects of injustice removal[4]. If we were to consider the views of critics, such as Ben Fine (2004: 101) who has argued that "the social, the contextual and the empirical" clashes absolutely with "the individual, the formal and the a priori" that characterizes the reasoning within social choice theory, such a perspective would be surprising. However, Sen still claims that the "analytical–rather mathematical–discipline" of social choice theory has helped him to investigate the demands of justice, along with "general–and largely non-mathematical–political and moral philosophy" (Sen 2012: 102). Looking beyond such formal and philosophical reasonings, we believe that some of Sen's other works—which may be called empirical, applied or directly engaged with the diagnosis of concrete injustices—have also played a non-negligible role in the definition of his approach to justice, with personal agency at its heart. This is that kind of influence that we want to present here.

Before making these points, it is important to recall that Sen's non-welfarist perspective has gradually been clarified within a debate between welfare economists and political philosophers that started in the late 1960's. Arrow's (1950) pessimistic result regarding the possibility of a democratic social choice from a set of individual ordinal preferences had a profound impact. For instance, it led some authors to propose a return to utilitarianism (Harsanyi 1955), others to develop an ideal but anti-utilitarian theory of justice (Rawls 1971) and others to oppose a libertarian and process-oriented approach to justice instead of a consequentialist construction of welfare (Nozick 1974). Under the influence of all these contributions, Sen (1970, 1977, 1979) began to question the standard assumptions of social choice theory, *i.e.* the search for Pareto optimality and completeness, the avoidance of interpersonal comparisons and value judgments, the exclusive focus on utility information however that is defined, and the absence of considerations of justice. His long-running attempt to reformulate the latest embodiment of welfare economics ultimately resulted in the proposal of a novel theory of justice.

Although it was not Sen's purpose from the outset, his mature writings on justice (Sen 2009, 2012) clearly assume, and indeed claim, a "social choice" approach to justice against a "social contract" approach that characterizes mainstream theories of justice, including in the first place that of Rawls[5]. Sen above all opposes the idea that the principal task of a theory of justice is the characterization of "just institutions" (2012: 103). He defines his own alternative approach through three main departures from the social contract theories (*Ibid.*): 1) "the identification of clear cases of injustice on which agreement could emerge on the basis of reasoning" (e.g., slavery, famines, chronic undernourishment, preventable epidemics, etc.); 2) the examination of "the nature of lives that people are actually able to lead", with a special attention to their "quality of lives and freedom" viewed as "social realizations"; and 3) including in the search of "reasoned agreement" the views of "people from anywhere in the world", making reasoning on "global justice" possible (e.g., addressing problems such as global

[3] We do not deny though that Sen has also advocated a wider informational base for the evaluation of social states than strict personal's utility or well-being: "[t]aking note of agency achievements or agency freedom shifts the focus away from seeing a person as just a vehicle of well-being, ignoring the importance of the person's own judgements and priorities, with which the agency concerns are linked." (Sen 2009: 288)

[4] Note that Davis (2002: 171) remarks that Sen's "strong concept of freedom"—agency—"places considerable demands on how a just society can function", emphasizing the concept of responsibility and the central role of public reasoning. He nevertheless suggests that it may take us on an entire new continent, "but perhaps […] too far!"

[5] For an exploration of the theoretical debate between the two philosophers and the progressive modification of Sen's theoretical ambition, see Gilardone 2015.

economic crises, global warming, global pandemics, etc.). According to us, the meaning of these three departures may be examined in the light of Sen's experience in applied or development economics dealing with pressing problems in the world, often within international institutions. More precisely, we want to show that Sen's alternative theory of justice is greatly influenced by 1) his work on famines for the International Labor Office (ILO); 2) his empirical work on gender inequalities, specifically within the Indian society, that helped him to refine his approach to hunger developed under the auspice of the World Institute of Development Economics Research (WIDER); and 3) his implication in the creation of the human development approach within the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). All these engagements—seemingly completely very separate from his contribution to theories of justice—have in fact fostered the formulation of a novel non-welfarist approach in which agency and public reasoning are the core elements.

Sen stated very early that welfare economics is concerned with policy recommendations (1970: 56). Although he has been particularly shy about being involved in governments, he did not remain confined to Universities and accepted to work for international organisations—principally for the ILO[6] and later for the UNDP[7]. In those organizations, his recommendations were directly concerned not so much with state policy as with some changes of focus to better understand extreme poverty and persistent inequalities, and thus with new types of reasoning to address these problems and provide fuel for public discussion regarding appropriate action. Sen strongly believes that "public action is neither just a matter of state activity, nor an issue of acting from some 'privileged ground'" (Drèze and Sen 1989: 61). In this sense, policy recommendations against deprivation cannot take the state "as the great promoter and a heroic protector"; they should rather involve "the agency of the public as well as its role as a beneficiary" (Drèze and Sen 1989: 60-61). Sen's experience of concrete and urgent problems such as famines and malnutrition made him formulate quite early the idea that "public action will be determined by what the public is ready to do, what sacrifices it is ready to make, what things it is determined to demand, and what it refuses to tolerate" (Drèze and Sen 1989: 61). And he insists on the fact that it would be a mistake to impoverish the richness of the set of possibilities for public action by focusing on one part of the picture only—e.g., state activity. The challenge was also to develop a theoretical approach adequate to reflect such a broad conception of public action, since its role is crucial in underpinning policy recommendations as well as in enlightening public reasoning. While it is fair to say that Sen's entitlement approach to famines, and then his capability approach to inequalities and development, lay the foundations of a new theory of justice, we should not forget the "action" part of his empirical works, which is certainly the most important for removing injustice. Indeed, Sen's focus on personal agency and public reasoning reappears forcefully in his recent elaboration of a procedural social choice approach to justice (Sen 2009)[8].

[6]The invitation came from Louis Emmerij whose first contact with Sen goes back to 1962, when they were both working on the econometric model that Tinbergen had prepared linking educational change to economic development. Emmerij reminds: "When I took on the ILO's WEP, one of my first thoughts was to get him involved, together with others like Tinbergen and Leontieff"(Fetherolf Loutfi 1998: 1).

[7]This time the invitation came from Mahbub ul Haq, who had been Sen's fellow student at Cambridge. Ul Haq was put in charge by the UNDP of the newly planned "Human Development Reports", and he insisted on Sen's collaboration in order to broaden the informational bases of development evaluations. (Sen 1999a: 13)

[8]For a presentation of Sen's (2009) procedural social choice approach to justice inspired by Adam Smith's device of the impartial spectator, see Bréban and Gilardone 2020.

Analysing famines for the International Labour Organization: linking the removal of injustice to democracy as public agency

Sen's (1981) seminal work on famines was prepared for the ILO within the framework of the World Employment Programme (WEP). The WEP was launched by the ILO in 1969, as the ILO's main contribution to the International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade. It was committed to help national decision-makers to reshape their policies and plans with the aim of eradicating mass poverty and unemployment. Sen actually began his work on the causation of famines in 1973[9], at a period when Ethiopia and the Sahelian countries were experiencing important famines, and Bangladesh was nearly to suffer this way as well—chapter 7 to 9 of Sen's (1981) book are devoted to these respective famines. However, Sen wanted to give a larger scope to his study of famine, by formulating a new approach to poverty and destitution—which may be seen as an embryo of his capability approach (Gilardone 2010: 15). Above all, it seems that his idea was to change the focus from strict *food availability* to that of *direct entitlement to food* since "something more than availability is involved" (Sen 1981: 165). In this regard, we may pay some attention to Sen's dedication of the book "to Amiya Dasgupta who introduced me to economics and taught me what it is about", as well as to his later confession of being deeply shaken in his childhood by the agony and outrage caused by the Great Bengal famine of 1943—to which chapter 6 is devoted.

Firstly, in a later interview with Richard Swedberg (1990: 251), Sen outlined the influence of Amiya Dasgupta, a friend of his father, in his choice to study economic theory while he was quite sceptical of its impact. At a time when he was much more concerned with things that looked immediately applicable and perspicuous in their relevance to the real world[10], Dasgupta[11] made him aware that "one could make a terrible mistake, even in terms of any relevance for practical concerns, by going *too directly* at it". Sen was very concerned with politics, but he learnt from Dasgupta the crucial role that theorizing inevitably has in setting the problem right and in confronting practical problems. More precisely, there are two reasons for his gratitude to appear precisely in that book (Swedberg 1990: 251-252). First, there is a concentration on the kind of problem that really affect people in Asia or Africa, and that is neglected by standard economic theory. Second, Sen presents and uses there a theoretical approach that is different from the prevalent approach of hunger and famine and, according to him, more relevant. The setting of a new theory certainly explains why it eventually took him almost ten years to publish *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*[12], but

[9] Sen had already made important contributions for the WEP about the choice of techniques in connection with his PhD thesis; he had also studied employment in the non-wage sector. See Sen (1972, 1975)

[10]Indeed, Sen had began his college education in the fields of mathematics and physics.

[11]Dasgupta was teacher of Economics at Dhaka University for twenty years, from 1926 to 1946. Except brief periods at the London School of Economics, during 1934-1936, to earn a PhD, working with Lionel Robbins, and on Visiting Fellowship at the University of Cambridge in 1963-64, Dasgupta was based in India. This prevented him from receiving any real recognition abroad. Nevertheless, he was considered in his country as "the economists' economist" (Sen 1994: 1149). Dasgupta was one of the pioneers of development economics and Sen reminds him as combining rigour and humanity: "While the reason for being interested in economics was what he called 'the presence of economically remediable misery in the world', the reasoning it demanded had to be strict and exacting" (Sen 1994: 1147).

[12] In the preface, Sen (1981: vii) thanks the ILO's members "for, among other things, their extraordinary patience; the work took a good deal longer than they – and for that matter I – imagined it would".

it was critically important since he certainly already had the conviction that "a misconceived theory can kill" (Sen 1999c: 209).

Secondly, although there is no reference in his book to his own experience when he discusses, among others, the Bengal famine he had witnessed, one can guess that his motivation for that research came from his childhood trauma—to which he first confessed in 1990 (Sen 1990a) and then recurrently presented as a decisive experience in his choice of subject study as well as on the methodological setting (e.g., Sen 1999a, Barsamian 2001). Born on a university campus[13], the son and grandson of academics, Sen's childhood was quite protected and privileged. But this condition didn't prevent him from being deeply shaken by the Great Bengal famine of 1943. Although he was a witness, and not a victim, of this event, it left a deep impression on him. When the Bengal famine occurred, Sen was a nine-year-old boy. He remembers he was allowed by his grandfather to give a cigarette tin of rice to anyone that came for help. But the main memory he has and on which he prefers to focus is, on the contrary, his feeling of helplessness and "bewilderment" (Barsamian 2001: 5). He then realized that no one in his family, nor any of his friends' families, were affected by the famine. This quite transparent and brutal class-division profoundly sensitized him to the issue of inequality[14]. Secondly, he knew from his parents that "the crop hadn't been bad in any sense so it was surprising that there would be a famine" (*Ibid.*: 6), which maybe oriented him to postulate that the problem was not just about the availability of food. Those thoughts of his childhood returned in the work on famines he started some 30 years after the Bengal famine and without doubt influenced the opening lines of his study:

> *Starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat.* (Sen 1981: 1)

For example, the general understanding that the famine he witnessed was taking place at a time when food supply was not insufficient—which was confirmed by empirical research on other famines as well—certainly helped him work out another hypothesis. Indeed, he found that overall food output during the Bengal famine of 1943, in which about 3 million people died according to his evaluation, was no lower than in 1941. Thus he questioned the view that famines are caused by food availability decline and showed that it "gives little clue to the causal mechanism of starvation, since it does not go into the relationship of people to food" (Op. Cit.: 151). Finally, he tackled the problem keeping in mind what he had wondered as a child:

> *If some people had to starve, then clearly, they didn't have enough food, but the question is: why didn't they have food? What allows one group rather than another to get hold of the food that is there? These questions lead to the entitlement approach, which has been*

[13] Sen was born in Santiniketan—which means 'the home of peace'— on the campus founded by the poet and social thinker Rabindranath Tagore in the forest, while his parents lived in Dhaka. Indeed, in the Indian tradition, the birth of the first child has to take place in the mother's parental home, in that case where his maternal grand-father worked and lived. Not only Tagore had christened Sen as 'Amartya', which means "immortal" in Sanskrit, but he is one of the strongest influences on Sen's worldview, at least for two reasons: 1) the bounds that linked the poet with Sen's family and 2) Sen's education at the school Tagore founded (see Gilardone 2008). Especially in Sen (2001), appears the proximity between the engagements of the poet and the economist. The main themes are the importance of science and education in people's life, the reasoning in freedom, the critique of patriotism, nationalism and cultural separation.

[14] It is what one can deduce from Sen's autobiographical reconstruction and it is indeed quite plausible. However, as we said previously, there is inevitably a part of interpretation, imagination and commitment in this reconstructed reality from present questions and reflections.

> *explored in this monograph, going from economic phenomena into social, political, and legal issues.* (Sen 1981: 151)

According to Sen, the entitlement approach[15] provides a general framework for analysing famines rather than one particular hypothesis about their causation. However, that view allows explaining why the market mechanism takes food away from the famine-stricken areas to elsewhere: "Market demands are not reflections of biological needs or psychological desires, but choices based on exchange entitlement relations" (*Op. Cit*.: 161). Just as Keynes had shown that a market economy could be in equilibrium with many people unemployed, so Sen showed that a functioning market economy could leave millions dead (Desai 2001: 220).

From the middle of the 1980s, Sen carried on his work on famines and chronic hunger under the auspices of the World Institute of Development Economics Research (WIDER) in Helsinki[16]. In collaboration with Jean Drèze, he tried to focus on the appropriate public actions in facing hunger, rather than on its measurement. Their book *Hunger and Public Action* (1989) represents one the first fruits of a programme of "research for action"[17], and which primary focus is indeed on action. While they highlight the major role the state might play in eradicating famines and in eliminating persistent deprivation, they also insist from the very beginning on the decisive part of "agency" in such action—although the term agency is not always used:

> *the reach of public action goes well beyond the doings of the state, and involves what is done* by *the public—not merely* for *the public. We also argue that the nature and the effectiveness of the activities of the state can deteriorate very easily in the absence of public vigilance and activism.* (Drèze and Sen 1989: vii)

On the one hand, Sen argued that theoreticians have a role to play in proposing a better approach to famines[18] that would help to anticipate and prevent them. On the other hand, alerts given by media, non-governmental organisations, pressure groups or opposition parties are also of crucial importance—which takes us to the notion of "agency", as Sen (1987: 14) notes. "[A]ctive journalism can fruitfully supplement the work of economic analysis, by reporting early signs of distress", and "how soon, how urgently and how actively the government will act will also depend on the nature of the politics of the country and the forces that operate on the government to act without delay" (*Ibid.*).

[15]We will not enter here in the details of Sen's entitlement approach. Let us simply recall that "[a]n entitlement relation applied to ownership connects one set of ownerships to another through certain rules of legitimacy" (Sen 1981: 1). And in a market economy, "[a] person will be exposed to starvation if, for the ownership that he actually has, the exchange entitlement set does not contain any feasible bundle including enough food." (*Op. Cit.*: 2)

[16]WIDER was established by the United Nations University as its first research and training Centre in 1984 and started work in 1985. The principal purpose of the Institute was to help identify and meet the need for policy oriented socio-economic research on pressing global and development problems, as well as common domestic problems and their inter-relationships (see Sen 1987: 1).

[17] Lal Jayawardena—the Director of the WIDER and an old friend of Sen who had also studied at Cambridge in the 1950s—explains in the preface that Drèze and Sen's book is one of the first results of the WIDER's programme of « Research for action ». He also insists on the fact that, since its creation in 1985, "WIDER has consistently search to promote research on contemporary development problems with a practical orientation" (Drèze and Sen 1989: v).

[18] To him, it means "making better use of economic analysis that focuses on entitlement failures of particular occupation groups rather than on output fluctuations in the economy as a whole" (Sen 1987: 14).

Agency here is related to two crucial elements: 1) "public knowledge", in which economists as well as journalists have a role to play and 2) "involvement in social issues", or political commitment of the population (*Ibid*.: 15). It is now well known that one of Sen's points in his analysis of famines was that democracy—implying adversarial politics and social criticism, in addition to elections—can influence state action in the direction of greater sensitivity to extreme poverty, and indeed plays a major role in the eradication of hunger and deprivation (see Sen 1999b). For example, he and Drèze came to the conclusion that the Bengal famine of 1943 would not have occurred if India had not been under the British domination (e.g., Drèze and Sen 1989: 126). More generally, in democratic countries, even very poor ones, the survival of the ruling government would be threatened by famine, since it is not easy to withstand the criticism of opposition parties and media[19].

It appears that Sen's contribution to the study of famines has been an important step in theorizing agency and integrating practical ideas of democracy in tackling the removal of injustice. As Alkire (2010: 212) has noted, Sen's writings on famines politicized the problem in a new way: while there is "no law against dying of hunger" (Sen 1981), Sen's analysis, later pursued with Jean Drèze, made it clear that people's actions and protests of injustice can effectively prevent famines. His insistent focus on "social actions taken by members of the public—both 'collaborative' (through civil cooperation) and 'adversarial' (through social criticism and political opposition)" (Drèze and sen 1989: vii) not only had "the effect of shifting the borders of development out from a narrowly economic space" (Alkire 2010: 214), but offered some insights on the way actions toward more justice can be implemented. There is no doubt it influenced his formulation of a new approach to justice, alternative both to the social contract approach and the welfarist perspective.

Analysing gender inequality: a further step toward agency considerations

We have seen that, in order to better alert people on the risks of famines, Sen thought that it was important to present "the food problem as a relation between people and food in terms of a network of entitlement relations" (Sen 1981). He knew that such an approach needed to get into issues which were not "so clearly economic and legal, especially the notion of legitimacy" (Swedberg, 1990: 255). In the original version of *Poverty and Famines*, there were chapters in which he tackled the problem of "perceived notions of rights", but he finally decided to leave them out, in order to go straight to his important point. However, the notion of legitimacy eventually reappeared when he developed a gendered perspective on the problem of hunger (e.g., Kynch and Sen 1982; Sen 1987: 13; Drèze and Sen 1989: chap 4). Sen sometimes used the term 'extended entitlements' to broaden the focus of entitlement analysis "from legal rights to a framework in which accepted social notions of 'legitimacy' can be influential" (Sen 1987: 13; Drèze and Sen 1989: 50). But he also developed the problem of "the perception bias" in terms of basic capabilities[20] within the family distribution (Sen 1983a, Kynch and Sen 1983). The idea of a "perception bias" refers to a situation where the systematic disadvantage of a particular group is not perceived, while documented analysis shows that the different family

[19] "Even the poorest democratic countries that have faced terrible droughts or floods or other natural disasters (such as India in 1973, or Zimbabwe and Botswana in the early 1980s) have been able to feed their people without experiencing a famine." (Sen 1999b: 8)

[20] In particular: the ability to survive, to be well nourished, to be free from disease and to receive medical attention.

members do not enjoy the same basic capabilities. For Kynch and Sen (1983: 364), it may be "closely related to a sense of *priorities*, e. g. there may be magnification of the needs of the males in general and the head of the household in particular". It may also be related to a perception bias of the respective contribution to joint prosperity, which in turn influences the respective legitimacy to benefit of it (Drèze and Sen 1989: 57). It may even be related to a bias in the perception of one's own self-interest[21], which "is in fact a "socially determined" perception" (Sen 1989: 65).

With the notion of legitimacy, Sen tried to raise concern about some rules in the distribution of food generally unquestioned by economic theories: the rules governed by mores, conventions and other social practices. And in this respect, he wanted to show that the class conflict was not the only conflict of interest that was deserving attention in the food battle; intra-family distribution was also an important issue:

> *Inter-household divisions, ownership rights and the rights of transaction and bequeathing are, obviously, relevant to the determination of entitlements of families. The perceived legitimacy of these legal or semi-legal rights has a powerful influence on the nature of personal and public action related to the distributional problem. While the lines are not so sharply drawn in the case of intra-household divisions, there are important issues of perceived legitimacy in that context as well.* (Sen 1987: 13)

The relative deprivation of women became a central issue in Sen's writings in the early 1980s (Kynch and Sen 1983, Sen 1983a, 1984, Sen and Sengupta 1983). This work on gender inequality was initially confined to analyzing available statistics on the male-female differential in India[22]. He started looking at the pattern of the allocation of resources within a family, on the basis of some available data, but also of some "freshly collected in India in the spring of 1983, in collaboration with Sunil Sengupta, comparing boys and girls from birth to age 5" (Sen 1999a). Sen's primary objective—and challenge given the difficulty of observation in that matter—concerned the diagnosis of sex-bias or not in the distribution of food within the family. He soon came to the conclusions that "there is some straightforward evidence of serious comparative neglect of female children, especially in distress situation", or that the over-all decline in Indian mortality rates has gone "hand in hand with a decline in the female-male ratio […] *since* 1921" (Kynch and Sen 1983: 370, 378). In other words:

> *There is no escape from the grave tragedy of the undernourishment of children (or sharper undernourishment of female children in distress situations […]), or the unusual morbidity of women […].* (Sen 1984: 346).

From empirical and local analysis, he gradually moved to a general theory of gender inequality (Sen 1989, 1990b). He remarked that there were misconceived theories regarding the economics of the family, or the distribution of resources within households[23]. Before thinking about public action to remedy what Sen considered as one the biggest injustice in the world, he proposed a novel approach

[21] For instance, Sen (1989) mentions some studies which demonstrate that the notion of "personal well-being" is unintelligible to typical rural Indian women, and that if they were able to reply to the question of their own well-being or interest, they might answer the question in terms of their "understanding of the welfare of the family as a whole" (Sen 1989: 69).

[22] Notice that in *Commodities and Capabilities* (1985), he also proposed some international comparisons.

[23] For a summary of Sen's arguments against standard theory of the family and some interpretations in terms of social choice theory and capability approach, see respectively Peter 2003 or Gilardone 2009.

to the economics of the family in terms of "cooperative conflict". Basically the idea is that there are strong elements of conflict embedded in a situation in which there are mutual gains to be made by cooperation (Sen 1989, 1990b, Drèze and Sen 1989). Sen identifies four determinants of the outcomes of such cooperative conflicts: 1) the breakdown position, e.g. the separation of spouses or their cohabitation in a state of permanent strife; 2) perceptions of contributions to joint prosperity—often devalued when unpaid work is involved; 3) threats that the parties can respectively employ; and 4) the understanding of conflicts faced by the different parties—women sometimes value more the well-being of their family members than their own and contribute to perpetuating gender inequality. While education and politics can have a far-reaching impact on the deal women receive, Sen and Drèze above all—and very pragmatically—highlighted the undeniable importance of female participation in 'gainful' economic activities as a material factor in combating the special deprivation of women (Drèze and Sen 1989: 59).

Once again, the choice of the policy should not confine to what the government can do. Sen demonstrates that issues of perceived legitimacy and entitlement can be deeply influenced by a re-examination of the social and political aspects of intra-family inequality and disparity. In analyzing gender relations as complex cases of cooperative conflicts with female deprivation as a consequence, Sen's point is to provide "a basis for informed and enlightened public action in the broadest sense" (Sen 1987: 13). While famines are extremely easy to politicise—"all you have to do is to print a picture of an emaciated mother and a dying child on the front page and that in itself is a stinging editorial"—in order to bring quiet but widespread undernourishment, or the debilitating effects of lack of schooling, to public attention, "you need a great deal more engagement and use of imagination" (Shaikh 2004).

At the theoretical level, it is also critical to be a little more imaginative and less reductive. Firstly, if we want to address adequately issues of injustice, Sen's empirical work on Indian economy and society shows that a relevant framework requires integrating the role of norms, rules and social perceptions of interests and legitimacy on behaviors. Secondly, he puts to the fore the presence of both congruent and conflicting elements in the diverse social arrangements between which we might choose:

> *Given the multiplicity of collusive solutions that exist, an important issue is the relation between alternative norms, rules, and perceptions and alternative cooperative solutions that may exist—some more favorable to one and others more favorable to another.* (Sen 1989: 66)

While the impasse identified by narrow models of "individual rationality" is invalidated by Sen (1989)[24] in case of cooperative conflicts, he nevertheless highlights another kind of problem related to "isolation". Values and perceptions need social examination and discussion, especially when it is shown that one group systematically receives a lower share of the benefits of cooperation than another. Since the inequalities between men and women observed by Sen are not seen as "real inequalities" by most Indians, it leads Sen to conclude that the value system underlying the sense of obligation and legitimacy in a society may obliterate the sense of inequality and of exploitation. In other words, the nature of the perceptions that prevail in a cohesive and well-integrated family "may go hand to hand with great inequalities emerging from perception biases" (Sen 1989: 68). Referring to Marx's notion of

[24] Sen particularly refers to the famous prisoner's dilemma, a two-person game, in which "the pursuit of each party's own goal leads to substantial frustration for both, since each inflicts more harm on the other through this pursuit than the gain that each receives from selfishness" (Sen 1989: 63).

"false consciousness", Sen considers thus that the examination of different cooperative solutions shall be done in terms of some objective criteria like functional achievements. Simultaneously, notions of who is "contributing" how much call for closer scrutiny since the "deal" that women get vis-à-vis men is clearly not independent of the perception problem regarding contributions made by different people. Let us remark that the perception biases or false consciousness that Sen wants to undermine are important barriers to personal agency—barriers that "the traditional economic model which relates individual welfare to a clear introspective perception, or a choice-based concept, of advantage" (Kynch and Sen 1983: 364) cannot identify, and a fortiori remove. In contrast, Sen's study of within-family distribution tends to show that:

> *the perception of reality—including illusions about it—must be seen to be an important part of reality. Non-perception of disadvantages of a deprived group helps to perpetuate those disadvantages.* (*Ibid.*: 365)

In a nutshell, we may say that Sen has drawn three important lessons from his analysis of gender inequality in India: 1) it is crucial to take *actual behaviors as a basis for reasoning* on cooperative conflicts, rather than some ideal or hypothetical behavior (e. g., rational behavior); 2) in order to assess the merits of different cooperative outcomes, *the informational basis shall be as objective as possible* to escape perception biases; 3) *if the social results*—according to some objective criteria—*are systematically unfavorable toward a specific group* within the society, it may be relevant to *examine the value system* that influences the behaviors that produce an unequal solution. In these matters, public reasoning is much more relevant than direct state intervention.

The human development approach within the UNDP: a focus on agency through the capability approach and public reasoning

Just after the publication of his seminal work on famines (Sen 1981) and while he was engaging in the analysis of gender inequality in India (Kynch and Sen 1982, Sen 1983, 1984), Sen was invited to give the Presidential Address of the Development Studies Association in 1982. It gave him the opportunity to propose a rethinking of the idea of development inspired by the methodological turns and results of his empirical studies. In "Development: which way now?"[25], Sen clarified the relationship between his concepts of entitlements—elaborated in the context of famine analysis—and capabilities—worked out in the context of moral philosophy as more relevant than utility to address issues of inequality (Sen 1980), and he further explored within the specific issue of gender inequality[26]. On this occasion, he also brought persons' agency to the fore:

> *Perhaps the most important thematic deficiency of traditional development economics is its concentration on national product, aggregate income and total supply of particular goods rather than on 'entitlements' of people and the 'capabilities' these entitlements generate. Ultimately, the process of economic development has to be concerned with what people can or cannot do, e.g. whether they can live long, escape avoidable morbidity, be well nourished, be able to read and write and communicate, take part in literary and scientific pursuits, and so forth. It has to do, in Marx's words, with 'replacing the*

[25]The paper is the final version of Sen's 1982 Presidential Address of the Development Studies Association.
[26]For an analysis of the relationship between Sen's empirical studies of gender inequalities and the working out of the capability approach, see Gilardone 2009.

> *domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances.* (Sen 1983b: 754)

This paper may be considered as the launching of a novel approach to development since it is the first time Sen defines development as the "expansion of people's capabilities" (Sen 1983b: 760). It may also be noticed that Sen's quotation of Marx is a good definition of what Sen calls "agency": "the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances". Not only did Sen carry on his research on hunger and deprivation within WIDER through developing a capability approach (e.g., Drèze and Sen 1989), but he was a major influence on work led within the United Nations Development Programme.

It is now well known that Mahbub ul Haq, a close friend of Sen, thought that his capability approach could be very relevant to ground the new development perspective of the United Nations[27]. Sen reported that, while Haq was working on the launching of a Human Development Report (HDR) for the UNDP, he called Sen who was in Finland to include him in the project: "he told me that I was too much into pure theory and I should drop all that now ("enough is enough"), and that he and I should work together on something with actual measurement, actual numbers, and try to make an impact on the world" (Shaikh 2004). Haq's ambition was to create a simple measure of social welfare, or human development, inspired by Sen's theoretical insights[28]. Despite his skepticism about reducing his capability approach to a single number that would go beyond Gross National Product, Sen helped to develop the Human Development Index (HDI). Haq eventually convinced Sen that such an index would certainly be "just as vulgar as GDP, except it will stand for better things" (UNDP 2010b: 2). Above all, Sen understood that "in order to communicate, you have to have the simplicity that GDP had" (*Ibid.*: 3). Indeed, for the 20th anniversary HDR edition, Helen Clark—the administrator of the UNDP—recalls that "[t]he premise of the HDI, considered radical at the time, was elegantly simple: national development should be measured not simply by national income, as had long been the practice, but also by life expectancy and literacy" (UNDP 2010a: iv).

We should acknowledge though that the human development approach has also, and primarily, drawn a strong and direct influence from the basic needs approach, including non-material needs such as participatory process and freedom (Hirai 2017: 18)[29]. But the definitive form of the human development approach, as it was launched in 1990 with the first HDR (UNDP 1990), is strongly in line with Sen's capability approach[30] and his more general plea for people's agency: emphasizing the centrality of human initiative and creativity and the need to democratize the development process

[27] In his autobiography, Sen (1999a) reports: "Mahbub insisted that I work with him to help develop a broader informational approach to the assessment of development. This I did with great delight, partly because of the exciting nature of the work, but also because of the opportunity of working closely with such an old and wonderful friend."

[28] Sen reports that Haq kept quoting his 1984 book called *Commodities and Capabilities*: "It was kind of a formal lecture – a mathematical lecture. But Mahbub would comment on the fact that I made a big distinction between judging people and how their lives are going by looking at the commodity basket they own, as opposed to the freedoms and the capability they actually enjoyed. And Mahbub tried to tell me that this is the thing to do - and obviously you have done a few things, as he pointed out, but there are other things to do" (UNDP 2010b: 4).

[29] Hirai (2017: 11) notices that a clear change of perspective—from the basic needs approach to the capability approach—occurred during the 1988 Amman Roundtable.

[30] The chapter 1 of the first HDR is very explicit regarding the link between the idea of human development and the capability approach.

(Hirai 2017: 11). According to Desai, Sen's influence reappeared in 1995 when the HDR put to the fore the theme of gender:

> *Here the agency theme is crucial and the human rights that women can exercise are an essential part of daily existence. Women need rights indoors to cope with domestic violence and intra-household inequalities. […] Women's human development thus requires a broadening of the notion of freedom, and good nutrition or education presumed as given by the liberal notion of freedom become crucial* (Desai 2001: 221).

It also helped to undermine "the presumption—often implicitly made—that the issue of gender inequality does not apply to "Western" countries" (Sen 2009: 257). For instance, the 1995 HDR revealed that "Italy had one of the highest ratios of 'unrecognized' labour by women (mostly unglamorous family work) among all the countries of the world included in the standard national accounts in the mid-1990s" (*Ibid.*).

In a sense, the human development index (UNDP 1990), and then the gender-related development index and the gender empowerment measure (UNDP 1995) are the translation of Sen's theoretical work influenced by his empirical results over a dozen years in terms which were to influence the largest number of policy-makers and opinion-formers. However, it is important to keep in mind that for Sen, this was just one application of his capability approach—which has its contextual relevance, but in no case the only possible implementation (Gilardone 2010: 22-23). The philosophy at the roots of the human development approach is somehow in this line. Indeed, the approach is characterized by a perpetual evolution, "to the extent that it places importance on public discussion and participation in the process of development" (Hirai 2017: 1). More precisely, decision-making through public discussion is a core message in the human development approach, aiming to submit the values involved in development explicitly to the public (Hirai 2017: 68). Sen keeps insisting on the idea that using any particular index always needs explicit formulation to facilitate public scrutiny, criticism and correction (e.g. Sen 1997: 544, UNDP 2010a: vi). Even, at the beginning, Sen and Haq tried out different weighting systems to build the index—moving back and forth between theory and empirical results. They examined the results, keeping in mind their understanding and knowledge of the countries, "to try to see to what extent it tallied with the kind of implicit wisdom that [they] had" (UNDP 2010b: 2). Another persistent idea in Sen's work is the following: it is important not to see the use of any framework for evaluation as an "all or nothing exercise" (Sen 1992: 48). In other words, we need to leave room for ambiguities or incompleteness and we cannot expect a perfect evaluation of the development level, or the inequality level of a society. However, it can help to identify situations of patent injustice.

Last but not least, it is important to point out that, for Sen, providing indexes is not the only role of Human Development Reports. While he is conscious that "an avalanche of tables (and a large set of related analyses) […] lacks the handy usability of the crude GNP" (UNDP 2010a: vi), he nonetheless highlights the essential role of the prose that HDRs contain, along with all the information displayed by many tables. Sen also insists upon one point very strongly: setting out indicators for everything that matters is not always relevant. For instance, he has refused to help Haq to get a quantitative measure of human freedom, although freedom is the most important value in Sen's work (UNDP 2010b: 4). It seems that Sen is very clear on the fact that getting indexes of political democracy and political freedom is not the right way to think about it and to promote such values. It does not mean that those critical issues for any development process should not be addressed in the reports, but "rather than

trying to make nonsense out of numerical indicators and trying to put something which doesn't fit there", he considers more relevant to "write about it" (UNDP 2010b: 5). In other words, it would be a big mistake to reduce the human development approach to numbers like the HDI, and Sen reminds us that "[pe]ople have read prose for generations—they have read the epics, read poetry, read novels, read essays, to learn from each other" (*Ibid.*). If we agree with Sen that the goal of all scientific analysis is to provide some constructive basis for "broader public exchanges, deliberations and informed agitations" (Sen 2013: 7)[31], then we should not reduce the wealth of information about how human beings in each society live and what substantive freedoms they enjoy to pure numbers.

To summarize, we may say that Sen's role in the human development approach was motivated by three important aspects of his development studies: 1) the necessity for a wider informational basis on personal situations that may reveal unfair living condition—relative to personal agency rather than purely material conditions or purely subjective conditions; 2) the necessity for an explicit formulation of the value judgements behind each evaluation done; and 3) the significance of public discussion in making evaluations evolve according to some shared values and defining policy strategy to improve the living conditions.

Conclusion

From the middle of the 1970s, Sen's exploration of the limits of the welfarist framework began to be fuelled by the results of his research in empirical studies, notably concerning famines but also gender inequalities or the evaluation of development. Such a statement is not meant to deny that most of his work was devoted to exploring theoretical problems, especially in the fields of social choice theory and moral philosophy, which eventually gave rise to a novel approach to justice. It is rather meant to contest a common view according to which Sen is *only* a theoretician, whose ideas are difficult to "work out" (e.g. Pressman and Summerfiled 2002)[32]. Indeed, we have shown that Sen's approach to justice is clearly political and impregnated with practical sense due to his research dedicated to public action.

Sen has been strongly driven by his awareness of his privileged condition in a world with much poverty and inequality as well as by the feeling that he owes something to others (Barsamian 2001: 13). His empirical research not only persuaded him that it would be irrelevant to tackle those crucial issues directly without paying sufficient attention to the role of theorisation but confirmed that public action against injustice cannot be decided from some 'privileged ground' (Drèze and Sen 1989: 61). It does

[31] In this 2013 paper, Sen elaborates on the complementarities between scientific scrutiny and public involvement within a reflection on "the ends and means of sustainability", that is quite similar to his view on the ends and means of human development: "we have to go beyond the role of human beings specifically as 'consumers' or as 'people with needs', and consider more broadly their role as agents of change who can—given the opportunity—think, assess, evaluate, resolve, inspire, agitate, and, through these means reshape the world." (Sen 2013: 7) This implies to have a definition of sustainability broad enough to be enliven by people seen as "the ultimate agents of change" (*Ibid.*: 9), in the same way that human development has been thought to influence public discussion with broad information on people's lives, and conversely been influenced by the priorities determined by public reasoning.

[32] For an overview of the commentators' expectations regarding what is frequently called "operationalization" and Sen's position on this issue, see Baujard and Gilardone 2017. Like in the present paper, but through another perspective, it is shown that Sen's contribution to the theory of justice should not be remembered for having provided a capability theory, but for something very different: a theory of human agency and public reasoning.

not entail that theorists have no role to play in the setting of public action. On the contrary, “a discriminating economic analysis [...] can have a significant informative and activist role” (Sen 1987: 16).

While he declined numerous invitations to advise the Indian government, he considers it a part of social scientists’ task to choose important subjects to work on and develop analysis that can serve public debate and put governments under pressure. It seems that for him, advising governments directly without public approbation would be counter-productive. Public understanding and appropriation of economists’ results is a necessary stage in social choices. Through this strategy, Sen’s work eventually had a major effect on politics. In particular, his work on the causes of famine changed public perception by showing that hunger is not caused by a failure in food supply, but by a decrease of people’s ability to buy food. His analysis of inequality and poverty translated into the United Nations’ Human Development Index and other similar gender-related indexes has also been very influential, providing an authoritative international source of welfare comparisons between countries, competing against the simple measure of GNP. Above all, Sen’s analysis of the male-female conflict coupled with the cooperative aspects of family life urges us to make room for the perceptions underlying ideas of obligation and legitimacy in the formulation of the gender inequality problem—and more generally in the formulation of any inequality problem. When it clearly appears that one group systematically receives a lower share of the benefits of cooperation than another, there is good reason to examine the value system that implicitly leads to such unequal cooperative outcome. And in this respect, defining the so-called right informational basis for welfare evaluation like the welfarist tradition proposes would not be very helpful.

Sen’s strong support for values such as personal freedom, democracy, and pluralism led him to challenge welfarism by introducing the concepts of agency, public reasoning and incompleteness. In Sen’s non welfarist approach to social justice, not only do economists need to broaden their informational basis and use multidimensional criteria, but they also need to give up their “expert” posture or paternalist views. Relevant consequential evaluations are important, but they must be preceded and followed by adequate democratic processes. Beyond mere participation, people need to be involved in identifying the problems that matter and defining public action for addressing them. All Sen’s contributions to applied economic problems support the view that the economist’s role is not to provide precise evaluations of how justice will be advanced or hindered. He sees the economist’s role as being to offer an objective – even if potentially incomplete – basis for public reasoning in defining policy strategy and different types of public action to improve living conditions. For each empirical problem he has tackled, Sen elaborated a specific theoretical framework in order to give the most objective picture of it given his observations of people’s experiences and understanding of the situation. He formulated the *entitlement* approach, and then the *capability* approach, to analyse problems of hunger and poverty. He formulated the *cooperative conflict* approach for distribution problems within the family, and a mixture of *indexes inspired by the capability approach and explicit discussion of the value judgements* for different evaluations in development studies. In this way, his work aims to inform and enlighten public action in a broad sense. Not only does Sen claim that state policy has to be supplemented by public involvement in a way that is both “collaborative” and “adversarial”, but he also defends the idea that public understanding of common perception biases is key for a removal of injustices that relies on changes of behaviours and social norms, as well as institutional arrangements.

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