The Circumstances of agency: a relational view on poverty

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The human development paradigm that inspires the growing international consensus on poverty and development conceptually bounds our thinking of the problem of poverty and its solutions in particular and inappropriate ways. We question, among others, the almost exclusive focus on individualistic well- and ill-being and the neglect of people's agency –in practice if not in theory. We propose to re-conceptualise freedom –and poverty- in relational terms. It is argued that by (re-) emphasising the relational character of un-freedom, we also put local political processes around the reproduction and reduction of poverty at the center stage. We conclude with a brief overview of implications for policy and research on poverty.

Introduction

"Ultimately", wrote Sen in the early eighties,

> "the process of economic development has to be concerned with what people can or cannot do, e.g. whether they can enjoy a long life, escape avoidable morbidity, be well nourished, be able to read, write and communicate, take part in literary and scientific pursuits, and so forth. It has to do, in Marx's words, with 'replacing the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances'". (1983: 754)

Since then, Sen's work, among other's work on human development, has contributed to the foundation of an unprecedented international consensus on the meaning of poverty and development. By the end of the 20th century, this consensus has been operationalised inter alia in the Millennium Development Goals. We now have an internationally agreed-on yardstick to judge countries' performance in terms of sometimes quite specific indicators and targets, many of them already being cited in Sen's above definition. The Millennium Development Goals have in turn been cast as part of a much broader international agenda build around the general objective to realize the conditions for people to live "In Larger Freedom" (Annan 2005, United Nations 2005). To live 'In larger freedom' means, inter alia, to bee 'free from want', which is then operationalised in terms of the 'wants' specified in the Millennium Declaration.

In this paper we would like to point to some specific traits of the paradigm behind this international consensus, the way in which it conceptually bounds our thinking of the problem of poverty and its possible solutions. We propose to re-locate these boundaries by taking another look at freedom, and another look at Sen's Capability Approach.

We proceed as follows. In a first step we see whether and to what extent the MDGs can be seen as an operationalisation of the Capability Approach (CA). We argue that, whereas indeed the MDGs could be seen as representing 'real freedoms' as opposed to merely formal freedoms, the current view on development has fixed a list of objectives to be reached at the cost of de-politicizing development. More particularly, Sen's emphasis on agency and on the crucial importance of political processes in determining 'what people have reason to value' is pre-empted by fixing an ex ante list of objectives and targets. Thus, the MDGs reflect a rather truncated reading of the capability approach.

In a second step, we take issue with the idea of freedom propounded by the Capability Approach. Though there is much in Sen's argument about the primacy of politics in defining development, it may be asked to what extent this translates into a sufficiently rich conceptualization of how political processes evolve 'in real time' and 'in real space'. Precisely at this point, the analysis may be considerably enriched by taking an alternative, relational perspective on freedom.

In a concluding part, we explore the implications of this largely theoretical exercise for research and policy.

1. Well-being and agency.

The MDGs and the Capability Approach concur on defining poverty and well-being in much broader terms than in terms of income only. True, the target to halve the percentage of people living below the 1$-frontier is perhaps the most well-known target of the MDGs, the whole picture reflects a conceptualization of poverty as a multidimensional and non-monetary reality. The basic argument for going beyond income or consumption is that this measure is too rough as a measure of what people's can effectively do and be. Capabilities can be defined here as "specific, effectively resourced capacities which [people] can deploy in actual circumstances" (O'Neil 2003: 189). Sen argues that, for a set of different reasons, people with the same income do *not* necessarily share the same level of well-being. Formally, similar incomes enjoy the same level of 'freedoms', they have the same purchasing power. But this formal freedom is not to be confused with *real* freedom, because different factors intervene in the 'conversion' of income into capabilities:

Table I.
Sources of parametric variation between earnings and capabilities to function

Personal heterogeneities:	People have disparate physical characteristics connected with disability, illness, age or gender, which make their needs diverse
Environmental diversities:	Variations in climate can influence what a person gets out of a given level of income
Variations in social climate:	Variations in the presence of public goods, variations in 'social capital'
Differences in relational perspective:	Being *relatively* poor in a rich community can prevent a person from achieving some elementary "functionings" (such as taking part in the life of the community)
Distribution within the family:	Distributional rules followed within the family can make a major difference to the attainment and predicaments of individual members

Source: Sen, 1999, pp. 70-71.

Sen argues that "different sources of variation in the relation between income and well-being make opulence –in the sense of high real income– a limited guide to welfare and the quality of life" (Sen, 1999, p. 71). Sen refers here not only to additional 'means' like public or social goods[1] which are at people's disposal without being reflected in their income, he also refers to different *needs* people have, as particular persons, as inhabitants of particular regions or as members of particular communities and households. What counts is not what you have or what you have access to, it is what you can do and be, given your abilities and needs. The CA can, in this sense, be read as an operationalisation of Marx' utopian "from each according to his ability to each according to his needs" (Sen 1992: 120-1).

Thus, in order to obtain a clearer idea of the quality of life, to get closer to the 'capability set' or the set of functionings people have reason to value, information on income must at least be supplemented by other information, e.g. on these functionings themselves. This is precisely what is represented by the MDGs. To be sure, Sen makes an important distinction between what people are able to do and be, their capability set, on the one hand, and the functionings they have effectively realized on the other. Achieved functionings already reflect *achieved* well-being, whereas capabilities reflect well-being *freedom* (Sen 1985, 1992). Though in some cases it may be logical to consider achievement as a proxy for freedom (Sen 1998),

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[1] Or, for that matter, a number of public bads, like street violence or environmental pollution, that affect people's capabilities negatively.

theoretically they must be distinguished. Figure 1, which is taken from Robeyns (2003), allows clarifying the connection between income, the means to achieve, the real freedom to achieve and, finally, achievements themselves. Though arguably, the capability set is not directly observable (Stewart & Ranis 2006), the framework at least allows to connect the unobservable to a whole range of possible measures of well-being.

Figure 1.
Connecting means, freedoms and achievements
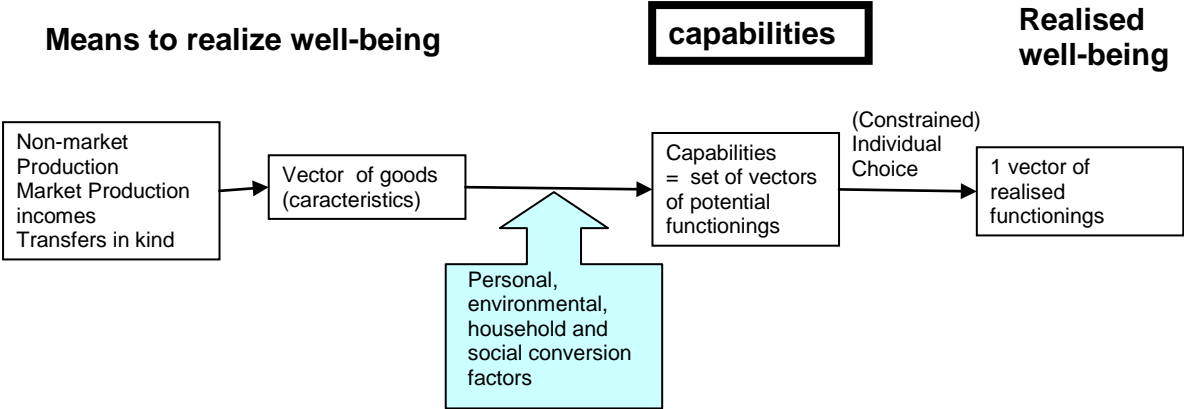
Source: based on Robeyns, 2003, p. 12.

At the same time, however, the Capability Approach can be used also in order to point to a crucial weakness in the MDG-related discourse on development. The Capability Approach redefines the terms of the development debate precisely to point to some crucial instances where important *political* choices must be made. There is no scientific ground, for instance, to give particular weights to certain capabilities, or to exclude other capabilities as irrelevant from the capability set. There is no scientific ground either to specify the weight of formal and substantial freedoms in our definition of well-being: these things cannot be decided at a desk or in a statistical office, or for that matter, at OECD headquarters. And there is no ultimate scientific ground, finally, to compare the well-being of different individuals and the way in which individual freedoms could be aggregated. Even the weight of future generations in any welfare function must, in Sen's mind, be assessed through political process. There is no shortcut to 'open public discussion and critical scrutiny' (Sen 1999: 81) in making social choice, is Sen's argument. Whereas mainstream economics, teaches us to make those choices in a purportedly positivist and scientific way, Sen has won the Nobel Prize by arguing that, ultimately, social choice is politically based, not scientific. "Post Sen", argues Peter Evans, "it is hard to resurrect either the anonymous aggregation of individual exchanges via the market or top-down technocratic analysis of needs as sufficient summaries of society's economic goals" (2005: 96).

True, it could be argued that the DAC-office, the World Bank and the IMF have simply prepared the MDG debate in the UN-plenary, where all countries have subscribed to them. Also, couldn't it be argued that, given the state of the world as it is, a UN-assembly is the best proxy for a global process of open public discussion and critical scrutiny? And the UN-

representatives have a convincing case when they argue that the level of 'ownership' of the Millenium Declaration is higher than the level of ownership of an average poverty reduction strategy paper, the latter being discussed by much smaller political circles than the former[2] and being extruded out of a process of debt cancellation. But none of these arguments are sufficient to give due account to Sen's emphasis on the importance of democratic political processes in operationalising the objective of development. Sen is so insistent on this because development has not only to do with moving from point A to B, so to speak, it has also to do with *who* is making this move. Sen's endorsement of Marx' utopian idea to replace "the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances" does already reflect that concern. Two decades later, it is formulated in terms of agency:

> "Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development. The concern here relates to what we may call the "agency aspect" of the individual… This work is particularly concerned with the agency role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions (varying from taking part in the market to being involved, directly or indirectly, in individual or joint activities in political and other spheres" (Sen 1999: 19).

Sen's concern with agency is arguably a cornerstone of the way in which he thinks about making social choice (Crocker 2005), but if so, it is clear also that development cannot be fixed once and for all and at a dubiously global level, allowing donors to align themselves and to realize more… *agency*! In this sense, the MDGs clearly fit within what Norman Long describes as the 'cargo' image of development intervention (2001: 33-34). They represent the common agenda of those agencies specialized in 'bringing' development to the poor.

From this perspective, we read the emerging practices under what is called the New Development Paradigm as an attempt to articulate a set of *more effective and efficient* strategies to bring development to the poor. If the paradigm would indeed work, it could perhaps bring a specific type of well-being, but at the same time the agency role of the presumed poor *themselves* would have been denied and undermined rather than stimulated. The complete absence of any reference to indicators of political rights and democratic decision-making in the MDG-list is not quite innocent in this respect. Thereby, the MDGs risk to become the new bible for development technocrats and practitioners. As the list of targets is clearly defined, beyond any doubt and endorsed by all, there seems no need left to revive local public debates on priorities between capabilities, freedoms or individuals. At least, this is the way in which the MDGs have been incorporated into development practice: as a list of indisputable, universal targets against which any particular development project or programme are to be assessed[3]. The same goes for the PRSP-process; the fundamental underlying calendar for the establishment of a PRSP is determined by international financial commitments, nothing implies that the calendar set by processes of democratization coincides with it. A blatant example of this is the case of Congo, where the PRSP has been prepared during the end-phase of a long-term political transition: nothing guarantees that the newly elected government feels bounded by the commitments made by an interim-government whose character is almost per definition undemocratic.

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[2] This argument was put forward by UN-representative Eveline Herfkens, during a debate about the MDGs at Antwerp University, 15 October 2005.
[3] See our own evaluation of the Belgian Social Fund, for account of the Belgian Technical Co-operation (Tshimanga, De Herdt & Kamavu 2006).

2. Agency and freedom

Thus, Sen defines development as "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. In this approach, expansion of freedom is viewed as both *the primary end* and *the principal means* of development" (1999: 36). This rehearses an earlier claim that

> "Freedom is central to the process of development for two distinct reasons; (1) *the evaluative reason*: assessment of progress has to be done primarily in terms of whether freedoms that people have are enhanced; (2) *the effectiveness reason*: achievement of development is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of people" (1999: 4).

We agree with this dual conception of freedom as both well-being and agency, but we also think that whereas the 'end' aspect of freedom can be usefully understood at the level of the individual, the agency-aspect is to be understood primarily at a supra-individual level. Sen (*and* Marx) tend to conceptualise the 'end' aspect of freedom from an individual perspective – ultimately it is the well-being of each human being that counts. Sen *also* insists on "the agency role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions" (1999: 19), but if we take serious the importance of collective action in social change, individual agency can only become part of the 'means' of development if we explicitly take into account the way in which this individual agency is interconnected with others.

Though Sen does not follow this route, his careful distinction between freedom and achievement on one hand, and between well-being and agency on the other, is not inconsistent with an understanding of the 'end' of development in terms of *well-being* freedom (and achievement) as an individual-level characteristic, and *agency* freedom (and achievement) as a supra-individual phenomenon. We develop this argument in the form of three propositions.

Proposition #1. Agency freedom is an attribute of relationships, not of individuals

If we pursue Sen's critique of income as an incomplete and insufficiently specific measure of (or in fact constraint to their) freedom given people's differential needs, we must acknowledge that the *individual* capability set risks to remain incomplete and deficient when it comes to judging agency freedom. In almost all relevant contexts, the actual circumstances in which people are functioning are primarily determined *by and together with other* human beings. Indeed, human agency depends crucially upon the capacity to enroll other human beings in one's 'projects'. (Long, 2002:17) In the interdependent world, freedom is not 'given', and people must actively engage in social practices to realize it. In the words of the German sociologist Georg Simmel,

> "Freedom is not a solipsist being but a sociological doing, not a state in which an individual finds himself in but a relatedness, however freely engaged in from the perspective of the individual… Within our relationships, freedom shows itself as a continuous process of liberation" (Simmel 1907: 57).

To be sure, Sen himself does anything but deny the importance of social arrangements in enabling people to do and be what they have reason to value. He does emphasize the "quintessentially social" character of people (Sen, 2002, p. 81). Ultimately, however, he fails to step out of the economists' way of thinking which neatly conceptualizes individuals as separate from the environment which impacts on them (Townsend 1983: 668; Zimmerman

2005). Although the capability approach refreshingly complicates the concept of the 'set of constraints' in an attempt to allow for a more accurate understanding of the different circumstances each individual is facing, it continues to frame the 'individual' and the 'circumstances' as stabilized and analytically separable entities. However, once we understand and accept the quintessentially *interactive* nature of the relationship between people and the others, who are part of her environment, this way of thinking cannot but run into difficulties. Individuals in part change in response to 'circumstances' of their own creation, they adapt to them *while at the same time continuously re-creating them*, and it is precisely in the way in which these two-way interactions occur that one can identify freedom.

Even kinship is both a 'circumstance' which an individual just happens to be born in and a set of obligations which one must be actively engaged in, in order to activate it. Sara Berry notes that "Consanguinity and common heritage were points of entry into potentially productive relationships, rather than guarantees of entitlement… People may be born into certain relationships, but unless they nurture and maintain them, they will lose their vitality, becoming "kinship" only in name" (Berry 2005: 6). At the same time, each particular kinship relationship will be shaped as the result of the reinterpretation and reenactment of the bonds and interactions between concrete individuals of kin. These ideas are *not* consistent with the assumption that agency freedom, or its converse, poverty, is an individual attribute. The capability approach seriously criticizes –or rather: enriches- income-based approaches to freedom, but basically it concurs with neo-classical approaches in their definition of freedom, as something like (but more complicated than) disposable income that you can assign to an individual. If, in contrast, we focus on the quintessentially interactive nature of people's agency, freedom cannot but be a characteristic of a *social relationship* rather than something which can be attributed to isolated *individuals*.

Figure 2.
From the means to the achievements and back again
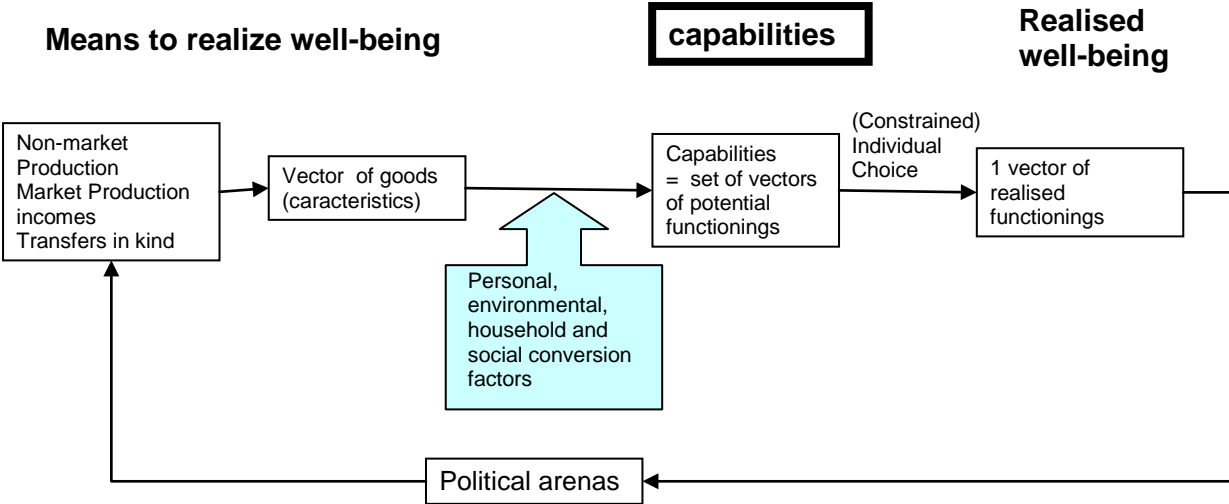
In terms of Robeyns' figure (figure 2), this means that the connection between the 'means' and the 'ends' must not only be seen as a one-way connection from left to right: in reality, we have to look at this connection as an ongoing cycle where 'means' are transformed into 'ends' (i.e. doings and beings) which in turn generate particular 'means', and so on. 'Ends' and

'means' become two inseparable moments of an on-going spiral. By concentrating just on the conversion of means into achievements, one does not do justice to the converse impact of doings and beings on means and resources, i.e. *that* part of the picture that visualizes the "sociological doing" involved in one's liberation.

Proposition #2: Agency freedom as voice

This crucial theme of 'sociological doing' can be linked to the literature on institutions. Again, Sen provides for a starting point here. Though Sen never clarifies what he means by 'social arrangements', his use of the concept is consistent with the concept of 'institutional arrangement' coined in the New Institutional Economics literature: it denotes a specific arrangement between individuals from which they may derive particular (unequal) rights and entitlements. In turn, specific arrangements fit within the 'rules of the game' as given by the broader institutional environment. He then conceptualizes public political organizations as clearly separated from private social arrangements and as the realm where the private rules of the game are purportedly fixed, enforced, and eventually altered. This distinction between private social arrangements on the one hand and political institutions on the other also reappears in the distinction, made by Onora O'Neil between primary and secondary agents of justice: the former become the guarantors of the rights of the latter. But as lamented by O'Neil (2001), there is no place in such a model to identify injustices committed by primary agents of justice –either willfully, because they are incapable to play their role as primary agents of justice, or both. In such a case states become part of the problem instead as part of the solution. This is the case for many third world countries.

In contrast to such an old-style dualistic view of public and private institutions, we propose to think of any social arrangement in terms of three intertwined but analytically distinct layers.
To begin with, social arrangements do not form in a social void, people do not meet in a random fashion. To the extent different factors, varying from physical distance to the way in which space and time is socially organized, already pattern social interaction in particular ways, social encounters are on the contrary already to a certain extent 'arranged' even before they materialize. Thus, a particular social arrangement should be analysed *also* as a particular node in a wider network or set of networks. People's entitlements do not only depend on the rules of the games they play, they also depend on the networks they are involved in. It may be interesting, in this regard, to make use of Charles Tilly's distinction between "exploitation" and "opportunity hoarding" as two mechanisms generating inequality (Tilly 1998, 2005). Exploitation refers to a situation where powerful people are, somehow, able to realize a cooperative arrangement by appropriating themselves a disproportionate part of the surplus. Opportunity hoarding on the other hand has to do with closing off access to a valuable resource to 'others', however defined, in whatever way (Tilly 2005:74).

Further, there is some value in the view that politics is not so much located in 'separate' institutions as in a separate layer surrounding any institutional arrangement. That is to say, all social arrangements can be described both as nodes of social networks, a 'rules of the game' and as 'political arenas' where these rules are permanently questioned, doubted, contested, imposed, deflected and accepted (Bastiaensen et al. 2005). Politics is present anywhere where social actors interact on common issues (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1997: 240). We borrowed the concept of political arenas from development sociology (Long 2001, Olivier de Sardan 2004): the 'continuous process of liberation' as denoted by Simmel finds its reflection

precisely in the diverse ways in which the 'rules of the game' are put into practice, contested, renegotiated and altered *in the process.*

Given that human agency at least partially depends upon the capacity to mobilize cooperation and approval by others, it is our contention that freedom has to do with the differential possibility people have in their ability to exert *voice* in a particular relationship. More precisely, individuals will be dominated by 'chance and circumstance' to the degree they have a limited "ability to question, challenge, propose and ultimately usher in new ways of doing things" (Bebbington 1999: 2034). Voice is of particular importance in ushering in a change in the unequal ways in which individuals connect, resulting in various processes of opportunity hoarding, and a change in the unequal ways in which they divide the surplus among them – resulting in processes of exploitation.

It has sometimes been argued that a move away from identifying freedom or poverty in terms of individual attributes would be contrary to ethical individualism, that is, the postulate that "individuals, and only individuals, are the units of moral concern" (Robeyns, 2005: 107). The position defended here does, however, not contradict ethical individualism at all. Indeed, the attractiveness of the idea of freedom as non-domination is precisely grounded in the importance of every individual's voice and ability to be a co-creater of the environment that shapes perspectives and opportunities[4]. But 'exerting voice' is evidently a characteristic of a relationship; it cannot be attributed to an individual.

Voice is to be understood here as a necessary complement to *exit* and *loyalty*, two other ways of characterizing an interaction between different subjects, as developed by Hirschman (1970). In a symmetrical relationship, A as well as B are as free to conform to (loyalty) or contest (voice) the other's expectations. They can also withdraw from the relationship (exit). Conversely, people in marginalized positions lack "voice to express their views and get results skewed to their own welfare in the political debates that surround wealth and welfare" (Appadurai 2003: 63). Appadurai interprets the relations entertained by the 'poor' as oscillating between either loyalty or exit:

> "…poor people have a deeply ambivalent relationship to the dominant norms of the societies I n which they live. Even when they are not obviously hostile to these norms, they often show forms of irony, distance, and cynicism about these norms. This sense of irony, which allows the poor to maintain some dignity in the worst conditions of oppression and inequality, is one side of their involvement in the dominant cultural norms. The other side is compliance, not mere surface compliance but fairly deep moral attachment to norms and beliefs that directly support their own degradation. Thus, many untouchables in India comply with the degrading exclusionary rules and practices of caste because they subscribe in some way to the larger order of norms and metaphysical propositions which dictate their compliance: these include ideas about fate, rebirth, caste duty, and sacred social hierarchies." (Appadurai 2003: 65).

To be sure, Sen himself does emphasize the importance of *voice* as an important constituent of well-being, but there, he does at least implicitly connect voice to the presence of a democratic system and public (state) decision-making. Such a view truncates voice both by

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[4] Our position does not so much contest ethical individualism, but rather the separation many ethically individualistic accounts implicitly introduce between ethical and political analysis. If it is true that, in the end, local practices determine the way in which resources are produced, distributed and consumed, and that these practices are in turn evolving in response to local voices, the value of ethical discourses will ultimately be determined by the effect they have on those voices.

reducing the relevant realm of voice to the state, and by reducing the ability to use voice to classic political freedoms and civic liberties. As already noted above, the claim that politics is present anywhere that social actors interact on common issues allows to recognize the state as an important political site and democracy a set of important incentives, but also to go beyond such a truncated view of politics. Further, we reiterate that in our conception the ability to exert *voice* is not, as liberal political thought would have it, an individual attribute, but profoundly relational. We concur with Appadurai who treats

> "voice as a cultural capacity, not just as a generalized and universal democratic virtue because for voice to take effect, it must engage social, political, and economic issues in terms of ideologies, doctrines, and norms which are widely shared and credible, even by the rich and powerful. Furthermore, voice must be expressed in terms of actions and performances which have local cultural force. There is no shortcut to empowerment. It has to take some local cultural form to have resonance, mobilize adherents, and capture the public space of debate" (Appadurai 2003: 66-7)

A bit ironically, voice implies a degree of *loyalty* to "widely shared and credible ideologies, doctrines and norms". Logically so: the ability to exert voice is crucially determined by others' listening and taking it serious. The value of a particular narrative depends on having an interested and ultimately convinced audience. There is a presumption here that "the stock of ideologies, doctrines and norms" present in society is sufficiently heterogeneous, ambiguous and pluriform to allow for several narratives about the same practices, and consequently there is some leeway in re-interpreting the justification for such particular practices. Every public transcript which legitimizes a particular social arrangement as just and reasonable is always accompanied by a set of hidden transcripts which cultivate alternative ideas about justice and order and which legitimize particular ways to contest domination and, eventually, redress experienced injustices (Scott 1990) . In her analysis of property rights to land in Kumawu, Ghana, Sara Berry, for example, notices how land rights are closely connected to particular narratives –and, consequently, how conflicts over land are crucially determined by the particular version of 'hearsay' which is permitted by the Court. Berry concludes that

> "Where property rights are defined through on-going processes of negotiation, people are more likely to gain reasonably secure access to land by participating in the negotiations, and the accompanying proliferation of historical precedents, than by settling on a single story which secures some people's rights at the expense of others… Policy makers might be better employed in discussing ways to enhance the efficiency and accessibility of facilities to mediate contested claims, than pursuing the chimera of definitive rules and maps" (Berry 1997: 1237)

If we define development as agency freedom, agency freedom as voice and voice as a relational aspect, development has to do less with defining the "right" institutions for growth or, for that matter, pro-poor growth, than with giving the floor to alternative conceptions of "right" and "wrong"[5], and to procedural rules at all levels that allow such alternative views to surge and to be put into relation through socio-constructive political processes.

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[5] Notice that the idea that conceptions of 'right' and 'wrong' ultimately determine the way in which social arrangements allocate rights and duties to different actors, suggests that there is 'something more' than mere self-interest when it comes to explaining human behaviour. The ultimate characteristic of voice is that it activates this 'something more', and that it does so to the extent it can make the terms of the arrangement public (Hirschman 1976: 387; Douglas 1987: 50; Tilly, 1998).

Proposition #3: Differential agency and voice

As noted above, the capability approach forcefully argues that persons with different objective needs and situated in different social contexts face different 'conversion factors', as Sen calls them, to convert 'income' into well-being. By analogy, it may be interesting to explore how these "sources of parametric variability" impact on people's differential agency. The example below focuses on differential ability to participate in the labour market.

Table II.
Sources of parametric variance when turning doings into earnings

Personal heterogeneities:	The disabled have comparatively more difficulty with earning an income
Environmental diversities:	Cultivating cash crops may be much less rewarding in more remote areas
Variations in social climate:	Regions may differ markedly in the availability of income-earning opportunities
Differences in relational perspectives:	Ability to appear in public without shame can critically determine people's differential access to the labour market
Distribution within the family:	Some household members rather than others engage in income-earning activities, other things remaining equal

All of these sources of parametric variance in converting income into capabilities do also arguably play a role in converting doings into earnings. It is also logical to suppose that participation in the labour market is not dissimilar from participation in or access to other kinds of private or public resources.

Figure 3.
From the means to the achievements and back again
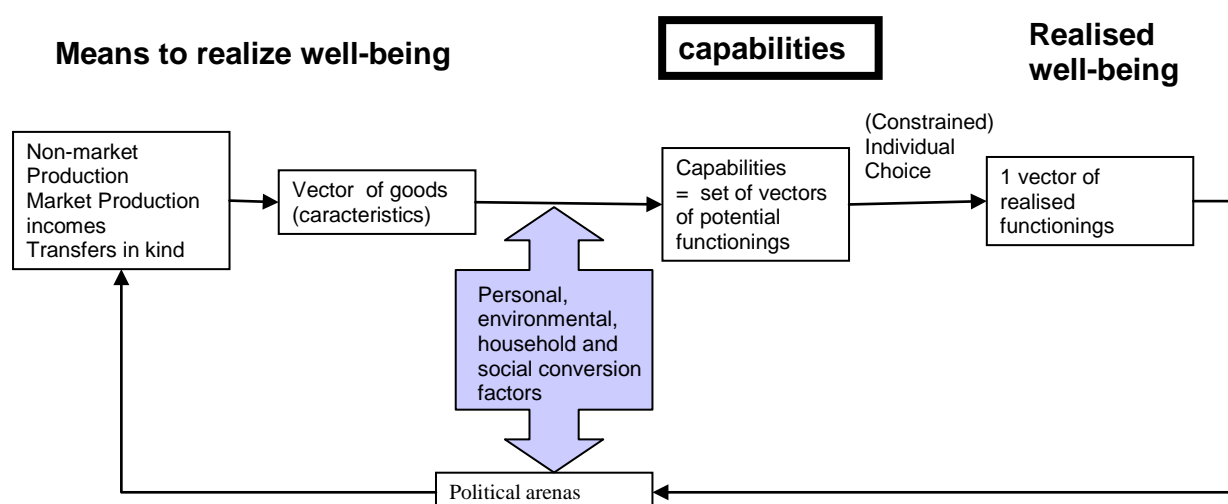
Because the same sources of parametric variance may play a role both in the conversion of income into capabilities and in the conversion of doings into earnings, they provide for a framework to identify *inequality traps*. For example, in the case of old-age there is a 'coupling'

of weak income-*earning* ability and weak income-*using* ability, causing the disadvantaged position of this group to be reinforced (Sen 1999: 119). We also acknowledge Martin Ravallion's definition of pro-poor growth, in this context, as growth realised by policies which try to eliminate the causes behind inequality traps (Ravallion 2003, World Bank 2005). More in particular, Jalan and Ravallion's work on spatial inequality traps in China (1997), which suggests that remoteness impacts in several mutually reinforcing ways on well-being, can readily be cited as a source of parametric variance, together with other work on remote areas (Duncan and Lamborghini 1994, Bird et. al. 2002). But the above framework also allows to integrate an impressive amount of work on the connection between agency and perhaps more common parameters like disability, old age, social capital and intra-household inequalities.

Yet, we also think that the scope of this framework can be considerably enriched by taking a closer view on the conversion factor Sen denoted as 'differences in relational perspectives'. In describing this factor, Sen systematically refers to the intrinsic as well as the instrumental importance of what Adam Smith called 'ability to appear in public without shame'. Though we agree about the importance of this dimension of well-being and about the fact that the absolute level of income is by itself an insufficient measure of well-being for this very reason, we also think that Sen's account of 'differences in relational perspective' deserves to be extended. We think that especially the all-or-nothing-character of this parameter needs to be rethought.

To begin with, it is of course important to identify that specific group of people which is *absolutely* unable to appear in whatever kind of public, but there are reasons to make room for a more differentiated picture[6]. As mentioned by Adam Smith,

> 'Custom… has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them. In Scotland, custom has rendered [leather shoes] a necessary of life to the lowest order of men; but not to the same order of women, who may, without any discredit, walk about barefooted' (Smith, 1791, p. 471).

Thus, depending on their gender category, men and women faced different 'conversion factors' to translate their income into particular capabilities in 18th Century Scotland. Ironically, in Smith's example women seem to be *advantaged* vis-à-vis men in the sense that the *same* level of income would in fact allow them to attain a *higher* level of well-being if we would apply Sen's argument. But in fact, it is more reasonable to assume that lower expectations of 'custom' vis-à-vis women's footwear suggest that by analogy, women are expected to lower *their* expectations vis-à-vis what 'custom' finds reasonable to offer to *them*. Conversely, on the basis of Smith's description of it, we may expect there was in general more gender equity in England than in Scotland at the end of the 18th Century. Note anyhow that there is no social exclusion of women in an *absolute* sense; women are fully allowed to appear in public without any shame –and it will even cost them less. But they can do this, however, only at the social price of visibly marking their inferiority vis-à-vis men. As Appadurai would have it, women and men face different *terms of recognition*, a different "framework within which they negotiate their interactions with other social groups" (World Bank 2006: 21)[7]. Facing different terms of recognition, we can expect them to be relatively

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[6] What follows has been developed in much more detail elsewhere (see De Herdt, forthcoming).
[7] As Smith already remarked, probably supposing his readers to be male, "To talk to a woman as we would to a man is improper: it is expected that their company should inspire us with more gaiety, more pleasantry, and more

more exploited as well as to suffer relatively more from opportunity hoarding. According to Charles Tilly, this is precisely why gender distinctions are sometimes overlapping with processes generating inequality: they give this inequality a durable character. Both anthropologist Mary Douglas (1987) and sociologist Charles Tilly (1998, 2005) argue that hierarchically related categories are precisely made more resistant to change *because* they are applied in a variety of social contexts. Thus, gender distinctions can rather easily be emulated to structure unequal arrangements because they are already applied in a very large and diverse set of contexts. Douglas adds that the strongest structuring devices are those which establish an analogy with the non-human world:

> "There needs to be an analogy by which the formal structure of a crucial set of social relations is found in the physical world, or in the supernatural world, or in eternity, anywhere, so long as it is not seen as a socially contrived arrangement. When the analogy is applied back and forth from one set of social relations to another and from these back to nature, its recurring formal structure becomes easily recognized and endowed with self-validating truth" (1987: 49)

Note that the criterion of 'gender' is used here *not* to refer to differences in *physical* characteristics between women and men; in as far as these physical characteristics play a role in converting resources into capabilities and back again, they are captured under the heading of 'personal heterogeneities'. Most differences, inequalities indeed, in the ability of women and men to convert resources into capabilities into resources have nothing to do with physical characteristics: gender is predominantly just a social marker. The fact that there is an analogy with physical differences strengthens the social importance of the marker, it does not causally explain it. Distinctions on the basis of gender do not differ here from other distinctions mentioned under the heading of personal heterogeneities as well, like 'age', 'disability' or 'illness': each of these social categories have clear physical markers which also point to objectified differences in need. But there are others physical markers as well, like race, place of birth, autochthony, family background, or ability to speak Oxford English. Depending on the social context, these markers categorize people, they connect role expectations to each category and cause people to appear in public in ways specific to the category to which they are supposed to belong[8].

Further, it may be valuable not only to conceive 'differences in relational perspectives' in a much more differentiated way, it is important also to stress that there may be a lot of variability in the ways in which different social sites 'activate' certain identities and make abstraction of others. Some markers, like gender, may be strong, but none of them is absolute[9]. It is a useful hypothesis that there is much local variability in the way in which the precise marker(s) are used in a particular organization or social site, or at a particular point in time. This depends in part on the ease with which such markers can be borrowed, to the extent

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attention; and an entire insensibility to the fair sex, renders a man contemptible in some measure even to the men" (Smith, 1759 I.II.4)

[8] Interestingly, Sen does mention the phenomenon, e.g. where he discusses differences in life expectancy between black and white Americans (Sen, 1999, pp. 22-23). He notes that life expectancy of female black Americans is comparable to life expectancy of women in Kerala. But precisely the comparison makes clear that the mere individual-level difference in opportunities is only part of the information contained in these data: Black American women are living in the *same* society as their white-coloured counterparts, the difference in life expectancy is in part the result of a *different* treatment by the *same* institutions. The comparison between black and white American women is therefore adding information about another dimension of deprivation than the comparison between American and Indian women.

[9] This is also a basic message of Sen (2006), though identity is discussed there 'as such', the links between identity politics and unequal access to goods and resources linger somewhere in the background in Sen's account.

indeed that those local power holders can tap into broader epistemic communities. But in the end, the value of a marker is determined at the local level, all depends on the degree to which it is convincing as a local narrative of inequality and capable to make it more enduring. At least in part, this capacity also depends on the extent to which these markers also generate a useful discourse that allows the subalterns to organize themselves as a counterforce and put pressure on existing arrangements. It is useful to remind Norman Long's insistence, here, that actors are "hardly ever completely, enrolled in the 'project' of some other person, or persons" (Long 2001: 17). There is always some room for maneuver, and if we take agency and freedom serious, it is this room for maneuver (of the poor) that we have to start to identify and cultivate. In as much as voice has to do with the ability to question 'prevailing norms and customs' themselves and, ultimately, to 'usher in new ways of doing things', it suggests a different way of thinking about poverty reduction: the use of these social categories as devices to structure access and opportunities must be questioned.

To be sure, we do not want to deny the importance of individual-level beings and doings, nor of individual-level and regional-level conversion determinants of agency, but we think that an analysis of agency freedom must ultimately study the importance of these factors in terms of the way in which they shape the political arena around institutional arrangements and the way in which these are connected to wider networks of interaction and epistemic communities.

Implications for research and policy

The general argument to broaden poverty analysis, if not to shift focus, from different aspects of well-being freedom towards the relational aspects of agency freedom, has been made largely at a theoretical level. The Millennium Development Goals were a welcome excuse to engage in this discussion. By way of conclusion, we discuss some other connections between theory and development policy.

First, the focus on agency freedom in relationships directs attention away from 'the poor' as the major object of development policy. Unfreedom as domination by others is a relationship; it has at least two sides, the side of the dominated and the side of the dominant party. It may be, depending on the exact empirical circumstances, more effective to restrain the dominant party as to protect the vulnerable. And in any case it is less important to compensate the victim than to end the production of poverty. Sen aptly refers to poverty as capability deprivation, and indeed poverty becomes tractable in as far as some identifiable social arrangement actively *deprived* people of some capabilities. That's precisely where our kind of analysis is leading us: to a study of the institutional arrangements producing both well-being and poverty, and to the way in which the position of the marginalized in the political arena around these arrangements can be strengthened. More in particular, we referred to exploitation and opportunity hoarding as two major types of processes leading to inequality in doings and beings, and to the role of culturally specific discourses in entrenching these processes.

Second, there is bound to be a more important political constituency for anti-poverty policies if we define poverty as domination by others. Because of its relational character, freedom as non-domination by others is much more intimately connected to discourses of fairness and justice. Depicting poverty as an injustice transforms it from a problem of bad luck or odd circumstance into a social issue: Something can and should be done about it. The challenge here is one of articulating different local sources of resistance and discourses of justice so as

to give them more leverage. As we saw above, the degree of publicness of voice determines its power. There is an important role here for academics and intellectuals more broadly, in connecting different discourses and creating alliances among the underprivileged. In Mary Douglas' terms, the challenge is to find the right *analogy*.

Third, even if, above, we defined our focus on the relational aspects of agency as broadly consistent with Sen's Capability Approach, we think such a consistency exists perhaps only if we take a 'broad enough' perspective. Sen himself sees development as "essentially a 'friendly' process" (1999: 35) precisely as he sees the expansion of freedom as both the primary end and the principal means. Once we complicate matters by casting agency primarily in the interaction with others, however, this basic friendliness cannot be taken for granted. More particularly, it is well possible, and even probable, that we seriously truncate agency by focusing on well-being freedom only –supposing that agency freedom will ensue: people can also achieve well-being by trading their agency away. By loyalty rather than by voice. It may be well the case that I am just among the lucky slaves who work for a benevolent landlord, or that I may have succeeded, through cunning and treachery, in creating the right circumstances to get access to crucial resources, but the level of well-being thus realized cannot really be interpreted as an indication of development as non-domination. Thus, Geoff Wood concludes his description of the coping strategies of Afghan peasants as follows:

> "the dangers of not being a client, of not being protected, of losing ''membership'' of the local commander-led community are immense. Better to be with the devil you know—the Faustian bargain. Security at the price of graduation—individual or collective. Striking out on your own is just too risky." (2003: 468).

Fourth and finally, this results in an important admonition to review international aid efforts deployed in the wake of the MDGs. To the extent the indicators incorporated in the list of the MDGs are just realized 'by chance and circumstance' people are still dominated and unfree. To be sure, clientelism is perhaps the best option available to stay secure in contexts marked by fragmented markets and weak states. But even if such a system 'works' in terms of individual-level indicators of well-being, we undoubtedly stretch the concept of freedom way too much if we would see such indicators as measures of freedoms[10]. At most, they might be seen as indicators of a temporary settlement, the best to be achieved in the given circumstances but awaiting to be overruled once conditions change[11].

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[10] See our own discussion of the evolution of wealth and well-being in Kinshasa (De Herdt &Tshimanga 2005).
[11] This is inspired by Avishai Margalit's (2003) defense of Abraham Lincoln, who was accused of having made a Faustian bargain in the Missouri Compromise 1820, which determined the boundary between states which allowed slavery and those where it was prohibited. Margalit argues however that "His compromise in accepting the Constitution is akin to a prolonged truce with slavery and not to making peace with it" and therefore not really a Faustian bargain. Mutatis mutandis, Wood's word choice might be too hard as well.

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