

# The Capability Approach: Comparing Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum

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## Abstract

Capability approach pioneered by Amartya Sen has been a new milestone for analyzing poverty through gender perspective. Since the introduction of the approach, numerous scholars from various fields have applied this approach in their studies. One of the prominent scholars who has contributed and expanded the approach is Martha Nussbaum. Though there have been some agreements but the arguments between the two scholars have shed new insights about the poor and their situation. Therefore, this paper attempts to compare Sen's and Nussbaum's capability approach by focusing on their core concepts, main arguments and rationality of the criticism of the approach. The methodology of this paper is based on document research.

Keywords: Amartya Sen; Martha Nussbaum; Capability approach; Cultural relativism;

## 1. Introduction

The capability approach developed by Nussbaum and Sen has received enormous attention in recent years in-term of philosophical exchanges and applied discussions related to policymaking. Although Sen pioneered the approach, but Nussbaum expanded it to a more advanced level and more applicable in various fields other than the economic studies. Correspondingly, both scholars agreed that capability approach is a realistic framework for the study of human life from a different perspective. Despite their agreement with the fundamental aspects of capability approach, there are some differences in the way they explain capability approach. This paper will outline three main differences in Sen and Nussbaum's version of capability approach in terms of a definite list of capabilities, groundness of the theory and the argument regarding cultural relativism.

## 1.2 Difference in Sen and Nussbaum's Capability Approach

Sen and Nussbaum's arguments regarding capability approach explain that human development should not be focused based on income poverty only. They both argue that humans themselves have the strength to improve their impoverished life. Therefore, Sen's approach basically explains poverty using two core concepts that are referred to as capability and functioning. On the other hand, Nussbaum's version goes into the core concepts by identifying variations and setting limitations to the concepts especially in terms of capabilities. Both versions of capability approach are explained in the next section.

### 1.2.1 Sen's Capability Approach

Amartya Sen is one of the most prominent philosophers and welfare economists who pioneered capability approach during the 1980s. He created a new dimension or new perspective on poverty studies at a time when most studies focused on lack of income as the main reason for poverty. Sen, (1999) first introduced the concept of capability in his *Tanner*

*Lectures on Equality*. In Sen's capability approach, capability and functioning are two core ideas that have been discussed. Functionings are states of being and doing, and they should be distinguished from the commodities that are being used to achieve them. For example, driving is very different from possessing a car. Here, driving is the functioning while car is the commodity that is used to drive. Robeyns, (2003) clarifies that the core aspect of capability is its focus on what people are effectively 'able to do' and 'able to be', basically referred to as their capabilities. Capabilities refer to the set of valuable functionings that a person has to possess which represents the effective freedom of an individual to choose between different functionings and combinations. Robeyns, (2003) stated that a person's functionings and capability are closely related but distinct. This can be seen in Sen's view as below:

*"A functioning is an achievement whereas a capability is ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense more directly related to living conditions, since they are different aspects of living condition. Capabilities in contrast, are notions of freedom."* (Sen, 1994, p. 273)

Compared to other monetary related approaches, Sen's capability approach truly takes initiative in researching what is happening in a poor household. This effort underscores a new perspective on how we should understand that unequal distribution of resources is the main reason of destruction of capability and functionings of the members of the household. Similarly, Bastos et al (2009) explains that Sen's version of capability approach exposes how commands over commodities determine rights and entitlements of each person in the household. He further clarifies that, social and cultural settings, for instance, gender structure, and determines the possession of resources of the household, the capabilities and their conversion into the functioning of a person. Occurrence of inequality distribution of resources will affect capabilities and functionings of each person of the household. In fact, Anderson (2003) clarifies that what really matters for Sen's capability approach is to what extent owned commodities allow a person to have a freedom of functioning in the society for their own well-being as they do not directly assure a state of being. As mentioned by Robeyns (2003), Sen's approach focuses on real freedom, that is on what people are able to do and not on what people should do to alleviate their impoverished situation.

### **1.2.2 Nussbaum's Capability Approach**

Nussbaum is one of the notable scholars responsible in expanding the capability approach into a new dimension. Nussbaum, (1993) endorsed her own version of capabilities approach based on the Aristotelian and Marxian ideas of human flourishing and good life. Her version of capability approach claims that living well as a human being is about leading the life activities with human choice and their rationality. Unlike Sen, Nussbaum's capability framework identifies a well-detailed list of human capabilities that is supposed to be served by every human being in the world.

Nussbaum, (2011) typically uses the plural term "capabilities" in order to emphasize that the most important aspects or capabilities of people's quality of life are plural and are quantitatively distinct. She felt that health, bodily integrity, education, and other aspects of individual lives cannot be classified into a single term. Therefore, Nussbaum (2011) prefers to define her 'capability approach' as the "human development approach", because she is concerned with the capabilities of non-human animals as well as human beings. Due to that, Nussbaum is being praised for providing a richer, more applicable and realistic framework that can be used to evaluate every individual's well-being. Nussbaum's idea of well-being

arises from the essence of reading Aristotle who argued about “good life” of every human (Gasper, 1997; Deneulin, 2013). They further explained that like Aristotle, Nussbaum expands the approach to reinforce the environment where human beings can lead good life with their owned capabilities. Besides, it can be understood that Nussbaum’s version of capability approach focuses not only on the household but each individual in the household. Here, each individual in the household is the unit of analysis of poverty.

## **2.1 Sen and Nussbaum: A Polemic**

Although Sen and Nussbaum have similarities in terms of their core ideas of capability approach, contradictions occurred in terms of argument regarding capabilities, groundness of the theory and the concept of cultural relativism (see figure 1 and figure 2). These three major aspects in the Sen and Nussbaum’s capability approach differentiate their views in implementing the approach.

### **2.1.1 Arguments Regarding Capabilities**

One of the most prominent differences between Sen and Nussbaum’s capability approach is the notion of capability used in their arguments. Gasper, (1997) explains that Sen’s version of capability approach did not specify any particular capabilities that need to be owned by a person. Compared to Sen, Nussbaum developed a definite list of capabilities that she referred as “central human capabilities” (see figure 2). The list constitutes ten central human capabilities which are, (1) life, (2) bodily health, (3) bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; (5) emotions; (6) practical reason; (7) affiliation; (8) other species; (9) play; and (10) political and material control over one’s environment. She believed these capabilities are needed by every human being to live in a truly human way in order to achieve human flourishing and human dignity. Although Sen pioneered capability approach, but he did not give a list of central human capabilities unlike Nussbaum (see figure 1 and figure 2).

Besides, Nussbaum does not only endorse a list of important capabilities but she also explains the variations and specifications of these capabilities. The variations of capabilities are categorized as basic, internal and combined capabilities. Nussbaum, (2000) further explains that basic capabilities are referred to human natural capabilities such as ability to hear, see or walk. These types of capabilities are needed for developing more advanced capabilities. Meanwhile internal capabilities are based on basic capabilities by certain processes such as exercise and training. A supportive environment is needed to develop these kinds of capabilities. For example, one learns to interact after practicing speaking with family, friends and relatives. Nussbaum, (2000) defines combined capabilities as internal capabilities together with external conditions that make the exercise of a function as a mandatory option. An example given by Nussbaum is a widowed young woman who though was not mutilated but was not allowed to practice her sexuality due to the forbiddance of her culture for a second marriage. Nussbaum, (2000) explains that in this example, the young woman has the internal capability as she is not mutilated, but she does not possess the combined capability that is the freedom to practice her sexuality. In continuation, Nussbaum (2011) also stressed that every human does not only need to have the capabilities on their own but they also need to utilize the ten central human capabilities to live in a truly human way and be fully functional. Compared to Sen, Nussbaum insists that the capabilities that have been listed should be legalized to make sure that every human being is able to practice these capabilities. Nussbaum coined the term, threshold of capabilities, insisted that every citizen should be guaranteed or promised a social minimum security whereby these capabilities are available to

them as other human life infrastructures. She further agrees that institutions, for example, religious, labor and government have a role to ensure that these threshold levels of capabilities are achieved. Subsequently, Maboloc (2008) supported Nussbaum's version of capability approach because it proved to be a more realistic version than Sen's version of capability approach. He felt that Nussbaum's argument on capabilities should be beneficial and essential to everyone regardless of their gender, social status or any other variables.

Nussbaum did not only create a definite list of capabilities but went further to introduce the concept of threshold of capabilities. This aspect uplifts Nussbaum's framework as a more sensible and applicable approach compared to Sen's framework. Threshold of capabilities explains the importance to provide minimum benchmark of capabilities to each and every individual around the world. DeMartino, (2011) agreed that Nussbaum's elaboration of capabilities based on neo-Aristotelian perspective has the ability to provide an intensive framework of what is a true human life and enabling citizens to receive a minimum secured life with important capabilities. In contrast, Gasper (1997) posits that in terms of capabilities, Sen's research on capabilities shows that his intent was to provide an optional framework of utility or commodity-focused welfare economics and moral philosophy. Sen specifically discussed the two core ideas, which are functioning, and capability to assess the well-being and the standard of living throughout his presentation of the capability approach. On the other hand, Deneulin (2013) asserted that the focus of Nussbaum's capabilities approach is not the group (e.g. church or self-help groups) or life structures<sup>1</sup> (e.g. caste system or patriarchy), which are usually blamed for the inability of a person to escape from poverty. She insisted that the focus should be the individual him/herself. Therefore, life structures and groups are important in determining capability outcomes, but they should be left out from the evaluation space of poverty. In Nussbaum's capability approach, what matters most is not what the structure or group is doing, but what each individual is doing. Robeyns, (2003) argue that Nussbaum's well-defined "central human capabilities" and the list implemented through constitutions reflect that her approach is universalistic<sup>2</sup>. Through this argument, it can be understood that Nussbaum is very much focused on defining, classifying and implementing her capabilities till it reaches the common people through their government. Meanwhile, Sen's capabilities section is too general because there is no specification about the kind of functioning and capabilities that are need to be considered when applying his version of capability approach.

### **2.1.2 Groundness of the theory**

Another major difference in Sen and Nussbaum's capability approach is in the groundness of their theory (see figure 1 and figure 2). Both have the contradiction due to their fields of expertise and backgrounds. Nussbaum, (2000) developed her version of capability approach from a philosophical perspective and she strongly grounds her theory on Marxian and Aristotelian idea of true human functioning (see figure 2). Following Aristotle, she emphasizes that the two notions of human flourishing and human dignity are compulsory to make sure a person lives his or her life in a truly human and dignified way with the capabilities that have been listed in Nussbaum's central human capabilities. Nussbaum starts her argument from an Aristotelian perspective of human development and does not only depend on Sen's theory of capability. In contrast, Sen does not use the idea of true human

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to structures (caste, patriarchy, religion or culture) that exist in human life upon creation by human themselves.

<sup>2</sup>The term refers to the effort of Nussbaum to generalize the capabilities and its constitutionalization, together with the entitlement of those aspects to every human being in this world.

functioning and he insisted that the capabilities owned by a person will lead to the functioning of a human and lead to human freedom. As a scholar that belongs to a different tradition Sen has his own justification on why he did not give the accreditation to Marx and Aristotelianism. On the other hand, Nussbaum also gives accreditation to Marx for being the ground on which she starts her discussion on capability approach. In a similar way, DeMartino (2011) explains that Nussbaum's version of capability approach clearly reflects Aristotelian heritage, with emphasis on human flourishing, but she also draws on Marx and assumes an affinity between two philosophers. He further added that, Nussbaum draws Aristotelian basic by emphasizing on function and capability and she also outlines the similarities with the views on truly complete human functioning by Marx in the economic and philosophical manuscripts at the end of her article which was originally presented in 1986. Compared to Sen who argued capabilities in a general perspective, Nussbaum (2000) argued that capability approach which includes Marxian and Aristotelian perspective require truly human functioning of every human being. Truly human functioning refers to wide range of human life activities that derived from their capabilities. Nussbaum also take Marx's stand when she argues that humans must have "pluralism"<sup>3</sup> in their life activities because that is the only logical way that differentiates them from being animalistic (see figure 2).

### 2.1.3 Cultural relativism

Another important difference between Sen and Nussbaum's capability approach is cultural relativism (see figure 2). The concept refers to the idea that cultural context is critical to an understanding of people's values, beliefs and practices and strongly bounded with general tolerance and respect for the difference. Basically the concept of cultural relativism requires others to understand an individual's life aspects in terms of the individuals' own cultural settings. Meanwhile, Donnelly (1984) states that cultural relativism is a doctrine that holds that (at least once) an individual life aspects are exempt from legitimate criticisms by outsiders and is strongly supported by the notions of communal autonomy and determinations. But Nussbaum takes a brave decision to ignore the concept to make sure that each human being is treated as a human despite all the differences they have in their life. Nussbaum, (2000), states that most feminists choose to ignore cultural relativism because it offers a tool for criticizing rationality and rejecting objectivity. Nussbaum stated that objectivity is based on the presumption that subject and object can be separated from each other; where a subject refers to a male observer and an object refers to nature. She further explains that objectivity is problematic for a woman because it denies the subjective and emotional experiences of women and contributes to male dominance. As a result, Nussbaum (2000) criticizes Sen for not straightforwardly rejecting cultural relativism for the purpose of gender equality. Although, she agreed with his care for universal norms, she questioned his stand for not completely rejecting cultural relativism in his version of capability deprivation. This difference can be discerned in the quotation below:

*"First of all, although Sen and I are in strong agreement about the poverty of cultural relativism and the need for universal norms in the development policy arena, he has never produced explicit arguments against relativism apart from historical arguments about non-western cultures that show descriptive inadequacy of many anti-universalist approaches"*

*(Nussbaum, 2000, p.67)*

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<sup>3</sup> It refers to variation of human activities such as reading, thinking, analyzing, fighting for the rights apart from the basic activities (eating and sleeping). Those aspects will portray the differences that occurred between the human and animal.



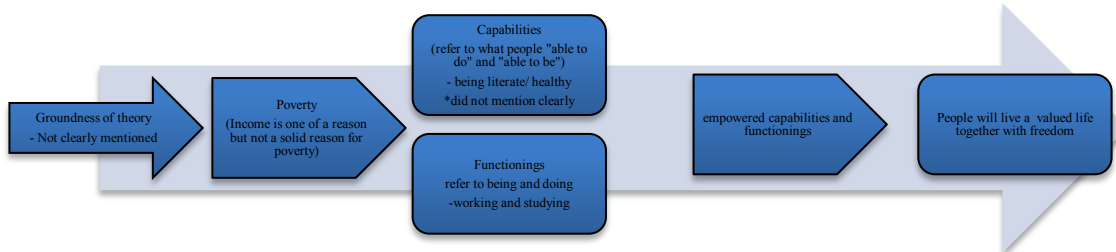
In line with Nussbaum's view, Zechenter (1997) identifies cultural relativism, which requires us to respect traditional cultures and its rules and regulations. In reality it tends to cover up the fact that even in the most egalitarian and non-stratified of societies, there is no such thing as one culture. Further, he argued that logically all cultures consist of groups and individuals with agendas, and their customs have reflected the interest of the dominant classes. As a result, Nussbaum (2011) posits that the perspective of respect is required in cultural relativism by saying that respect and relativism are very different because real respect for differences requires unwavering and non-relativistic protection for the freedom of speech, association and conscience, and the material factors. She further asserted that since many world traditions do not recognize these norms, hence relativism does not entail them. In larger philosophical sense, Nussbaum clear rejection of relativism has naturally connected to her definite list of capabilities that was suggested by her. Against the rules of cultural relativism, which requires us to recognize pluralism of societies, Nussbaum insisted that she is very definite about the content as international human rights movement does. She urges that a particular list of capabilities ought to be used to provide a minimum level of security and the need to be recognized and given something like legal protection in all nations. Furthermore, dismissal of cultural relativism is needed to make sure all the nations and their citizens benefit from this capability approach and its practice without any cultural or moral justification (Brown, 2008).

Nussbaum's initiative in providing definite list of capabilities and legalizing it as a minimum security for every human being clearly shows that her effort in universalization of capabilities is specific (see figure 2). Nussbaum, (2000) explains that cultural relativism has the potential of interfering in this universalization of capabilities by marginalizing or underrating non-dominant voices such as women from receiving their basic capabilities from law enforcement of government. Therefore, rejection of the concept is compulsory to make sure each individual is equally entitled to the capabilities in the definite list without any interruption of culture. Furthermore, since culture itself is relative, the meaning of morality may be different from one culture to another (Rachael, 1986). What is considered moral in one culture might not be considered moral in another culture. Therefore, Nussbaum's argument that the well-being of a person and their capabilities should not be debated as right or wrong but it should be implemented as a basic necessity of every human. As a result, human flourishing and human dignity will be achieved (see figure 1 and figure 2). Zechenter, (1997) criticizes that cultural relativism is about the rights of a group instead of rights of individuals. Basically cultural ideas, customs, restrictions and regulations, prioritize the well-being of a group of people rather than individual's well-being. In contrast, Nussbaum's capability approach and her definite list of capabilities suggest that an individual's well-being is more important than the group and each individual is entitled to be treated equally regardless of which culture he/she belong.

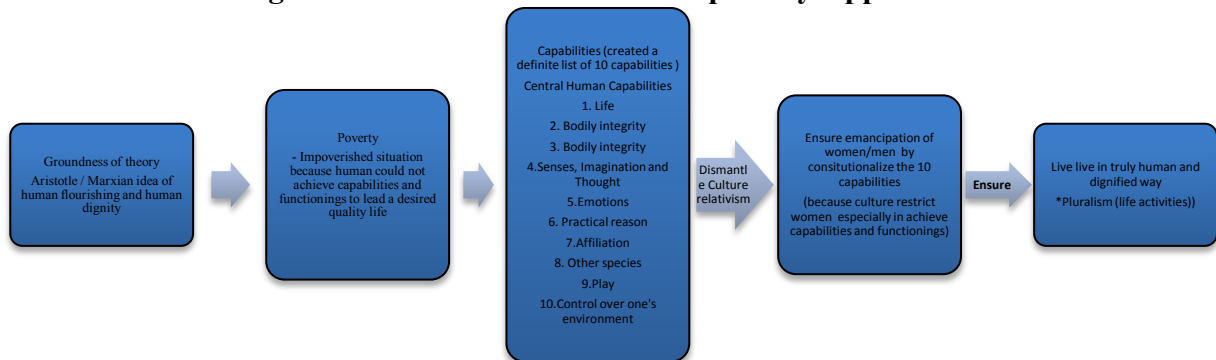
Consequently, if cultural relativism is taken into account, universalism of human rights will not be realistic because not all cultural groups would approve the suggestion that capabilities should be constitutionalized (see figure 2). For instance, bodily integrity (a capability that requires women to have the right to do decision regarding her body; freedom to move from one place to another, to be free from domestic violence) might be approved in a culture that practices matriarchy but neglected in a culture that practices patriarchy. In matriarchy, women's rights and protection are prioritized since mothers will be the head of family, but in male-headed households as in a patriarchy system, most probably women's life aspects such as their health and education might be neglected. Since every human being deserves to live well, Nussbaum urges that the involvement of cultural relativism will cause human well-

being and capabilities to be considered as an option rather than a compulsory aspect of human life. In relation, she also insists that the rejection of cultural relativism will ensure that each individual has the opportunity to perform his/her capabilities because the concept itself is bias towards functionalism and its nature of welcoming dysfunctional beliefs and customs of a culture (Gasper, 1997: 328).

**Figure 1 : Amartya Sen's Capability Approach**



**Figure 2 : Martha Nussbaum's Capability Approach**



### 3. Conclusion

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have made major contributions in exploring poverty related issues using capability approach. Sen's version of capability approach clarifies that individual well-being depends on their capabilities and functionings and strongly suggests that lack of income is not only the main reason of poverty. Throughout his version of capability approach, he suggested that each person should have the human freedom in order to live a life the individual has reason to value. Besides human freedom, he expounded poverty from a multidimensional perspective. In contrast, Nussbaum's capability approach portrays a systematic analysis of the capabilities of humans and how to bring it to common people. Grounded strongly by Aristotelian and Marxian's concepts of human flourishing and human dignity, Nussbaum developed a blue print of human development by creating a definite list of capabilities along with suggestions to be constitutionalized by the government. In fact, both Sen and Nussbaum's approach has the potential to analyze current issues such as social inequality, gender, education and health that exists in society today. Main difference lies on which approach able portray an issue with extensive and clarity framework that able to make the researches understand and apply on their research. We can take women and poverty issue as example. Sen's capability approach able to analyze women and poverty issue by arguing that deprivation of general capabilities and functionings of women led them to live impoverished life. Therefore, Sen's approach would insist that, in order to achieve valued life, poor women need to possess capabilities and functionings in fully empowered way. Meanwhile, Nussbaum's capability approach will take extended step by illustrating how a women's deprivation of ten specified capabilities would make them vulnerable to poverty and forbid them to live truly flourished and dignified life. Apart from that, Nussbaum's version of framework has the ability to show how complexity such as cultural relativism could forbid

women's escapism from the poverty. Therefore, as a result, Nussbaum's idea of capability approach seems to be more applicable in analyzing human capabilities than Sen's view that appears to be an initial guide to understanding human freedom. Conclusively, compared to Sen's, Nussbaum's capability approach resembles more effective and a holistic approach that can be applied in human development studies.

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