



Africa Development, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, 2004, pp. 185–190

© Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2004
(ISSN 0850-3907)

Book Review

Amartya K. Sen, 2000, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, Paperback, 366 + xvi pages).

Lansana Keita

Department of Philosophy, Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, University of Arizona, USA.

Given that the problem of development is generally seen as one concerned with alleviating poverty and increasing wealth, it is generally viewed as falling within the research purview of economists. The intellectual and ideological debate over the years have been between those who embrace neoliberal economics on the one hand and those who embrace some version of Marxian political economy on the other. From the latter paradigm has developed the well known ‘dependency school’ which examines more holistically the problem of development as it relates to industrialized and non-industrialized nations in the world. Neoliberal economics as it applies to economic development has traditionally limited itself to what is referred to as neoclassical economics growth and development theory. The main questions have been how to accommodate substitutions for labour and capital within the context of Cobb-Douglas production functions and Harrod-Domar growth models. The solution to the problem of development in this context was one of merely increasing gross domestic product and per capita income. And this has been the perennial prescriptive programme of highly influential agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank. Sociological considerations were hardly ever considered and issues such as income inequalities, justice, rights and so on were just not factored into prescriptive models for growth and development.

Amartya Sen has proposed to modify this narrow paradigm in his text *Development as Freedom*. Sen has written extensively not only on theoretical economics but also on the relationship between ethics and economics. In this regard he has developed a more comprehensive vision of what economic decision making actually entails. Sen begins by making the important point that we live in a world of contrasts and paradoxes. As Sen puts it: ‘We live in a world of unprecedented opulence, of a kind

that would have been hard even to imagine a century or two ago....And yet we also live in a world with remarkable deprivation, destitution and oppression (Sen:xi). This condition is something welfare economists, who recognize that efficiency and equity need not be at logical odds, are concerned to grapple with. And Sen has done much research in this area. But he goes on to argue for bringing 'individual agency and social arrangements' into the picture for the ultimate purpose of convincing us that we must 'see individual freedom as a social commitment' (Sen: xii). Thus Sen wants to argue that the 'expansion of freedom is viewed, in this approach, both as the primary end and principal means of development' (Sen:xii). Sen is thus convinced that the path to economic development is optimally achieved under conditions of freedom.

Of course, neoliberal economists speak of market freedoms meaning by this that the entrepreneur with capital should be free as much as possible to invest and reap maximal profits without much restriction. But this is not what Sen has in mind. For Sen, what leads to development are the freedoms of the individual both economic and political to exercise other freedoms that in turn produce other kinds of freedom which are all causally and empirically linked to each other. In short, Sen believes that what allows freedom to develop instrumentally is 'the removal of substantial unfreedoms' as being '*constitutive* of development' (Sen:xii). But the dynamic of removing unfreedoms requires the 'instrumental effectiveness of freedoms of particular kinds to promote freedoms of other kinds' (Sen:xii). And the instrumental freedoms Sen has in mind are 'economic opportunities, political freedoms, social facilities, transparency guarantees, and protective security' (Sen:xii).

Sen's programme is to examine social institutions such as the state, the market, the legal system, political parties, the media, public interest groups, public discussion groups 'in terms of their contribution to enhancing and guaranteeing the substantive freedoms of individuals, seen as active agents of change, rather than as passive recipients of dispensed benefits' (Sen: xiii).

Throughout his text and in twelve chapters Sen sets out to establish the basic point that development is best aided and does not really take place unless certain instrumental freedoms are set in place. He also points out that in societies where there are established freedoms phenomena such as famines are less likely to occur. Sen offers the examples of China and India. The claim is made that China lost thirty million people in its 'Great Leap Forward' in 1958–1961 while 'India has not had a famine since independence' (Sen:187). Two points are made in this regard. First,

increased opportunities—hence potential choices—constitute an important item in Sen’s stock of freedoms. As he puts it: ‘protection against starvation, epidemics, and severe and sudden deprivation is itself an enhancement of the opportunity to live securely and well’ (Sen:188). In the second instance ‘the process of preventing famines and other crises is significantly helped by the use of instrumental freedoms, such as the opportunity of open discussion, public scrutiny, electoral politics, and uncensored media’ (Sen:188).

Another crucial aspect of ‘development as freedom’ for Sen is the increased agency and opportunities for a better life that accrue to women and society as a whole as societal freedoms increase. According to Sen the increased agency of women is a causal element in the improving of certain criteria that theorists of development sometimes employ in their ‘quality of life’ discourse. Direct developmental benefits accrue in the areas of child survival and planned fertility rates which, Sen argues, are important for development.

Having made the case for the necessity of freedoms in the form of individual and group agency for the development enterprise Sen then turns to the important question of how to implement the mechanisms that would guarantee those needed freedoms. His answer turns necessarily to the issue of rights. Sen argues quite correctly that rights must first be legitimated (he argues that we are not naturally born with them) but then questions necessarily arise as to their actual significances. Are rights to be implemented according to ‘perfect obligations’ or should they be seen merely as ‘imperfect obligations’? The first he labels *the legitimacy critique*, the latter he calls *coherence critique* (Sen:228). The considerations here may both entail legal and institutional content unlike the view that regards rights as being contingent mainly on particular social ethics. The critique here is that human rights are not as universal as some theorists would claim. Sen refers to this approach as *cultural critique*. The instantiation of the question here is whether one can legitimately support parochial values that contravene supposedly universal values involving human rights. Thus are there Western, Asian, and African values pertaining to freedoms that could be militated against in the development discussion? Sen argues that the evidence does not support the claim: there are no set of Asian values (reference here is to Singapore prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew’s thesis that there are distinct Western and East Asian concepts of government and rights) that are totally at odds with such from the West. Sen argues that there are precolonial Asian scholars who argued in favour of individual freedoms and human agencies. Sen refers to the writings of

Confucius, often appealed to by those who seek justification for state authoritarianism, with the following: 'Confucius is not averse to practical caution and tact, but does not forgo the recommendation to oppose bad government...Confucius's ideas were altogether more complex and sophisticated than the maxims that are frequently championed in his name' (Sen:235). Sen also makes the same argument with reference to the precolonial Indian writers Ashoka and Kautilya (Sen:235-238). And the same applies to Africa with the precolonial writings specifically of Ahmed Baba the precolonial Timbukto jurist and scholar. The truth is that those who argue most for restrictions on the freedoms of others usually seek to increase and enhance their own individual and group freedoms at the expense of others.

Sen emphasizes his thesis on the intrinsic value of freedom for development in the chapter titled 'The Importance of Democracy' by unpacking its intrinsic meaning of affording individual agencies the mechanisms whereby they could profit from the 'process aspect' of freedom which in turn would yield its 'opportunity aspects' (Sen:291). He further compounds his position by appeal to the well known 'Arrow Impossibility Theorem' in the chapter 'Social Choice and Individual Behaviour' which demonstrates the difficulty of forging a single will out of a multiplicity of individual wills. The solution to the natural anarchy of society is to increase the amounts of freedom especially for tasks involving development and social transformations.

The originality of Sen's approach is that he has extended the idea of development to include the subjective role of its intended beneficiaries which too often are given short shrift by those who argue for market freedoms and the rule of law as they seek to create the optimal conditions for the implementation of their neo-liberal theories. Exhortations are constantly made to African governments to 'practice democracy' and 'free up markets' so that Africa's economies can grow and develop but full and subjective agencies of the citizens of those targeted countries are never fully encouraged. For example, the government of some country may negotiate with the World Bank to build a dam to rationalize that nation's water supply, but the individuals affected by dam construction are rarely consulted and asked for their individual opinions. Even when they are, the compensations offered for the disruption of livelihoods are never adequate. This takes place in a context where African governments are quietly encouraged by their Western patrons to abrogate maximal freedoms for themselves while denying a modicum of such to their citizens. Lost in all this is the notion that economic growth and development are not just

issues of the increase in gross domestic product but also increases in freedoms themselves. Such freedoms would include various forms of freedom of expression including the press and the right to speak openly about the performance of the servants of the people, the government and its elected officials. It is in this regard that one must take a cue from Sen and view freedom as an economic good in itself.

Thus democracy and the freedoms it brings constitute intrinsic elements of the process of development. But how actually viable is Sen's thesis? It was pointed out above that there is no basic mutual exclusivity between development and freedoms but it should be borne in mind that those who argue most for free markets and globalization restrict their concept of freedom just to the freedom for private international capital to invest anywhere without unnecessary hindrances such as taxes and governmental regulations. The point here is that 'free markets' do not imply the free agency of workers to bargain fairly for the same rights and comparable wages enjoyed by workers in the countries regarded as developed.

Sen admits that he has 'never counseled any government, preferring to place my suggestions and critiques—for what they are worth—in the public domain' (Sen:xiv). In this regard the following paradox should be noted: the post-colonial governments of Africa all claim to desire development but claim that externally imposed economic forces militate maximally against the required conditions for economic growth and development. But if one extends Sen's definition of development to include freedom as a necessary condition for development then it becomes apparent that postcolonial governments themselves hinder development. The postcolonial restrictive tariffs and restrictions placed on intra-continental trade, travel, and business activity in terms of work permits, worker mobility, access to banks, and so on, make development extremely difficult to achieve. Ironically, during colonial times intra-regional and intra-continental trade and travel were, for the most part, much more efficient.

The implementation of freedom as a crucial aspect of development must therefore require debate and civil society participation. Sen is correct in pointing out the role that investment in human capital would play in this regard (Sen:143-45, 292-97). Investment in human capital is recommended by economists because of its decisive role in economic growth and accumulation of capital. But for Sen development is not only about economic growth in the quantitative sense but also about the increase in human capabilities. As Sen put it: 'At the risk of some oversimplification, it can be said that the literature on human capital tends to concentrate on the agency of human beings in augmenting production possibilities. The

perspective of human capability focuses, on the other hand, on the ability—the substantive freedom—of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the real choices they have. The two perspectives cannot but be related, since both are concerned with the role of human beings, and in particular with the actual abilities they achieve and acquire' (Sen:293). No doubt, freedom as an intrinsic aspect of development would require an expanded version of human capital investment to include not only the acquiring of new skills that would boost productivity and growth but also new intellectual skills that would enhance the individual's quality of life and subjective agency.

Sen's text is useful for the following reasons: it extends the theoretical discussions of development economics beyond the narrowness and unrealisms of neoclassical economics to include issues normally dealt within political philosophy. In this regard development for Sen is not just restricted to issues of increasing output so as to boost GDP numbers, it now becomes an issue of increasing human freedoms, agencies, and opportunities. Such considerations become, in Sen's model, necessary conditions for genuine development. In short, instead of economic development theory and practice putatively concerned with material well-being according to the principles of utilitarianism Sen's paradigm includes the considerations crucial for genuine individual liberties and freedoms as debated within the theoretical confines of libertarianism and liberalism. It is the proper mix of these three considerations that create the basis for optimal human well-being anywhere in the world.