

The Capability Approach's Contribution to the Debate on Environmental Sustainability: A Discussion of Theoretical and Empirical Issues

Chiara Rambaldi

Arts & Humanities Department, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

Email address:

chiarafutura@gmail.com

To cite this article:

Chiara Rambaldi. The Capability Approach's Contribution to the Debate on Environmental Sustainability: A Discussion of Theoretical and Empirical Issues. *International Journal of Sustainable and Green Energy*. Vol. 11, No. 2, 2022, pp. 47-51. doi: 10.11648/j.ijrse.20221102.12

Received: June 15, 2022; **Accepted:** June 30, 2022; **Published:** July 12, 2022

Abstract: While the industrial revolution signaled the start of the Anthropocene epoch in which humans have become the dominant driver of geosphere alterations, a slew of environmental challenges impacting human existence have emerged, both globally and locally. Global warming, desertification, water scarcity, species extinction, water pollution, and other issues necessitate a debate about sustainable development as a means of meeting the needs of human development while also protecting the Earth's biocapacity. While international evaluations on sustainability, environmentalists, and worldwide academic specialists argue that human growth and environmental preservation are inexorably intertwined, the question of whether a successful relationship of environmental, and biodiversity justice is feasible while also aiming towards human socio-economic development arises. With these considerations in mind, this study presents a literature review discussion starting from Amartya Sen, the Capability Approach's founding father, to analyse the major CA philosophers who have contributed to the environmental debate on whether the theoretical framework requires structural reform or if it provides appropriate principles to face sustainability challenges. While M. Nussbaum initiates a theoretical debate about environmental justice for nonhumans by establishing a minimum degree of capacity for everyone, D. Schlosberg expands CA by addressing environmental issues on a more practical and less ethical basis advocating for a more natural relationship between humans and animals. As a result, this paper suggests, via a discussion of practical instances to analyse the capability approach's validation on environmental sustainability, that CA's principles are currently not fulfilling the green challenges the status quo must solve. The paper finishes by stating that a theoretical redesign would allow us to move beyond the contradiction between anthropocentric and nature-centric perspectives, eventually contributing to a productive conversation between capability theory and sustainability challenges.

Keywords: Freedom, Capability Approach, Environment, Sustainability, Theory

1. Introduction

Such a link between human growth and sustainable development has been at the centre of several theoretical disputes, particularly around the capability approach (CA), which has a significant influence on development. CA, which assumes the ability to fulfil freedoms of choice, has had little to say in the literature regarding sustainable development as a process of extending legitimate rights when compared to other theoretical perspectives on human growth [7]. As a result, the purpose of this article is to look at the CA's position in terms of remaining true to its theoretical

principles while also bridging environmental disputes.

Specifically, to understand the vision of progress as freedom while simultaneously recognising environmental sustainability concerns, the purpose of this research is to answer the following question: does the capability approach have anything to contribute to the environmental sustainability debate? This research attempts to address this issue by first offering the theoretical perspective of the capabilities approach, then exploring some of its key thinkers who have worked to build on one another in such an environmental dialogue. Different scholars, primarily Nussbaum and Schlosberg, have examined environmental

concerns based on sentient nonhuman creatures based on Sen's basic perspective. While animals should be granted the liberties already described by Sen, Nussbaum is primarily concerned with morality and ethics, which Schlosberg builds on by concentrating on the realities of animal and ecological life cycles rather than ethical justice. As a result, this study will follow with a body of empirical case studies that will be used to explain how the capabilities viewpoint and the perspectives of different philosophers make judging the relevance of human well-being and environmental conservation possible or not. Finally, a critical evaluation will be conducted to determine whether the capability approach and environmental sustainability synergy can coexist, which will be validated by the idea that a balance must be found between ecosystems and humans due to humans' abilities to dominate nature, thereby halting nature's abilities to flourish. However, this study eventually returns to the original research topic, emphasising how CA retains the necessity for theoretical framework reconsideration. When nonhuman species may simply request that humankind does not interfere with their ability to live freely, CA would eventually have to explain the synergy needed for people to freely utilise existential tools while also allowing ecosystems to thrive in their inherent freedom to subsist.

2. Capability Approach: A Theoretical Overview

CA was initially developed to enhance understanding of basic economic theory and development (to better understand the principles of CA see: [19, 21, 22, 1, 2, 4]). It is a comprehensive normative framework for evaluating human well-being and social structures, as well as the formulation of policies and recommendations concerning social transformation, as a response to the utilitarian and commodity paradigm of neoliberalism that had focused solely on economic growth [16]. CA, which is employed in a variety of domains, most notably development thinking, micro-macroeconomics, social policy, and political theory, regards freedom as both constitutive of and quintessential for progress [22]. In other words, CA views liberty to be both the most important aim of development and the most important approach for achieving it [6].

2.1. Sen's CA Position for Sustainable Development

For Amartya Sen, CA's founding father, capabilities are actual freedoms that individuals have reason to value; namely, the ability to achieve specific functions (doings and beings) [20]. Although such an approach has the potential to be highly revolutionary – albeit more conservative in practice –, it has acquired significant impact in the development field, not least due to Sen's popularity on the Human Development Reports promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (albeit now amended by the Millennium Development Goals) [7]. But also, because CA's principles are entwined with the concept of sustainable development, as

environmental sustainability necessitates a discussion of freedoms of choice in order to support growth.

While CA is a significant theoretical framework for considering sustainable development because it explicitly includes individuals' habits that are quintessentially affecting and related to environmental challenges, Sen's focus on people with diverse talents and resources who have the same opportunities to achieve different levels of functioning – the so-called conversion dilemma – [7] has not been at the forefront of Sen's writings on sustainability and environmental issues. Sen's lone peer-reviewed publication on environmental sustainability co-authored with Sudhir [3], constitutes only a subsection of *The Idea of Justice* [23] on development. The latter opposes a society in which basic capacity deprivations exist but does so without taking into account the impediments that an anthropocentric worldview in which Man dominates Nature provides to capability development, freedom, and progress.

2.2. Nussbaum's CA Perspective on Sustainable Development

While Sen's perspective on sustainability may be restricted, several intellectuals, like Martha Nussbaum, have highlighted reservations about environmental challenges. For example, while citizens' freedom to enjoy an unpolluted environment is hampered by businesses' right to destroy the environment, land reform attempts, which are claimed to be vital to many freedoms for the poor, are hampered by landowners' entitlement to preserve their land. Obviously, these rights are not among those Sen addresses, as he makes no claim to limit or rule out such conflicts in his theory of freedom.

Because environmental challenges are crucial to long-term growth as their current condition is unsustainable and has a negative influence on individual lives, Nussbaum tries to narrow the CA gap by broadening CA's methodology to account for the demands of those who are not fully active members of society; namely, sentient nonhuman animals [15]. While Nussbaum's presentation of capabilities [12] may be manifestly Rawlsian, it is the subject of an overlapping consensus among persons with rather diverse comprehensive views of the good (equality and moral fairness above all), she advances CA by arguing that justice for nonhumans implies the construction of a minimum level of capabilities for everyone. In other words, she expands CA by introducing the implications of environmental sustainability; for example, she considers it unethical to kill sentient nonhuman animals for sport or luxury items, as well as “cruel practises and painful killings in the process of raising animals for food” are prohibited in her view [13] – even though she does not advocate for meat consumption to be eliminated.

The abuse of nonhuman animals in medical research, which Nussbaum characterises as a dreadful predicament, is another concern mentioned by Nussbaum in her criticism of Sen CA's design [13]. It needs to be discussed that, although Nussbaum introduces CA to sustainability concerns, she may miss the fact that even if the multiple unjustifiable harms are

removed, research to treat human medical needs will still be necessary, which would unavoidably jeopardise the interests of individual sentient nonhuman animals. She also overlooks a more fundamental question concerning human sustainability and the status quo: do we have the resources to do justice to all humans, nonhuman animals, species, and ecosystems in terms of satisfying their claims to threshold-level functionalities? Such consequences, it may be argued, are particularly troublesome for any CA theorist wanting to develop the model while staying true to Nussbaum's Rawlsian commitment. One method to answer this question would be to consider the extent to which danger to critical capacities may be reconciled with justice because it is required for thriving.

2.3. Schlosberg's CA Standpoint on Sustainable Development

In the demand for responding to Nussbaum's reservations about CA and sustainability, yet beyond Sen's dismissal of such discussion, are Schlosberg's [17] arguments that try to broaden and address CA's environmental sustainability challenges on a more practical and less ethical basis. He suggests that the capabilities approach may be expanded to encompass not only specific animal demands of justice, but also entire species and habitats. CA, he suggests, "could enrich ecological justice by bringing recognition to the flourishing of systems as well as the individual animals Nussbaum includes" [17]. He rejects Nussbaum's human-centred ethical starting point in favour of appealing to the patterns of life of animals and ecosystems [8]. He recalls that part of animal thriving is supplying nutrition to other organisms, and that being food for others is the cornerstone of certain species' functioning. In practice, acorns can develop into oak trees or squirrel food, and gazelles can procreate socially or become tiger victims [8].

In keeping with his larger approach, Schlosberg [18] contradicts Nussbaum's [13] position that humans should be at the centre of the animal world, safeguarding defenceless species from predators. It could be claimed that in Schlosberg's perspective, even within zoos, sanitization of nonhuman animal skills, such as passing the ball to the killer whale, is the result of human frustration, and it is ultimately what prevents us from properly appreciating species-based capabilities. According to Schlosberg, Nussbaum is not only incorrect about what it needs to survive as a killer whale or a tiger, but she also has a limited understanding of what it takes to live as a gazelle. If such changes could be achieved without causing more harm than good to particular nonhuman species, then intervening to protect the gazelle from the tiger rather than the cruller natural form may be justified; but is it the case?

Although, unlike Nussbaum, Schlosberg's broader perspective and ambiguous definition of "environment" pose a dilemma, embracing Schlosberg's broader approach to capabilities might give not only a theoretical understanding of social and human justice, but also a larger model of environmental sustainability. While most of humankind's

treatment of animals and ecosystems has benefitted populations, providing enough assistance for all species on the edge of extinction, as well as a continuous supply of capacity for all ecosystems, would be prohibitively expensive and risk restricting human welfare and social space. Thus, even in Schlosberg's arguments, the question of how to preserve both human potential for flourishing and the promise of sustainability remains unaddressed.

Let us look at some real-world instances to better appreciate the issues CA has when it comes to environmental sustainability.

3. CA Merging with Practical Examples of Environmental Concerns

3.1. Protected Areas

Governments in the post-colonial decades started to sustain a protectionist stance, with organisations acquiring ownership of wildlife, both within and outside protected areas, resulting in indigenous people being evicted or highly curtailed in what they may enjoy, with no recompense [27]. The logic of natural resource protection that can result in the destruction of local communities, as in the case of the communities living through a comparable tragedy around Lake Chad, is an illustration of this. Due to overfishing, the government has agreed to safeguard the Lake's fisheries supplies [26].

Instead of promoting public awareness about the problem of overfishing and working with them to solve it, the government is oppressing fishing-dependent people, and their quality of life has deteriorated dramatically since the conservation strategy was established [5]. The government in Lake Chad has robbed some individuals of their potential to thrive under the premise of environmental protection. Local communities have therefore been dispossessed of their own freedom and capacity to enjoy life, as well as the ownership of land and resources, which has been taken over by governments or private corporations under the premise of providing the ecosystem with complete independence and possibilities [26].

3.2. Climate Change

Another example is that of climate change. The economic debate about climate change (among others rising temperature levels, drastic climate actions resulting in fires and glaciers to melt) has been limited to evaluating the costs and benefits of climate change in the short and long term via its impact on consumption [11, 24, 25]. However, from a perspective such as that of the capabilities approach, the real question is in fact to evaluate the capabilities space of current and future generations. In this case, if climate change is having permanent effects on some capabilities, it is becoming urgent to act to avoid exceeding the tolerance limit of the environment that would lead to irreversible disruption - 2% according to scientists working in the field [10].

Since we cannot foresee what future generations will do, and because the present generations cannot force its wants on future ones without restricting the other's freewill, the dilemma described by CA theorists endures, because future generations have the same right to celebrate capacities as today's generations. Pelenc [14] defines "environmental justice" as the preservation of an equitable balance of interpersonal and inter-degree capability based on human socio-ecological aspects in order to settle such environmental-human conflict. Perhaps, the question is not so much about what new descendants will choose as it is about how the current generation can ensure that future ones have at least as much choice as they previously had. This contrasts with Nussbaum's [13] suggestion that a minimalist definition of justice should be assessed from a capacity's threshold. However, there is no reason why new generations should enjoy less liberty than the current ones in terms of equitable fairness. And if it is not feasible to prove improvement *a priori*, as it is in the instance of global warming, we must guarantee that future leaders are not penalized in terms of their capability set.

4. Where Does CA Fit into This Scenario Now

It is reasonable to wonder if there is a choice to be made between human and environmental justice. Perhaps, not hardly. The foregoing disputes are more than just pragmatic obstacles in achieving capacities fairness for sentient creatures, species, and environments, which is defined as endorsing threshold-level capacities. They may be the outcome of an interplay between this conception of justice and the settings in which environmental sustainability and CA's concepts of human liberties collide, and they reflect a more fundamental problem that CA must address *a priori* [28]. Observe how Nussbaum's and Schlosberg's situations diverge from those whereby CA was initially created. Collaboration for the common good first, then individual development, might be the ambition of a just contemporary human society for all people and non-sentient animals [8].

If a solution between people and the environment can be reached, it is crucial to remember that ecosystem operation depends on the commitment of humans who have the potential to dominate the ecosystem - which is where such environmental challenges began. This is, however, troublesome for the purpose of boosting CA: Given the believability of Schlosberg's contention that hunting is a critical component of a tiger's existence, as well as the improbability of being horribly slain being compatible with the survival of a single antelope, any attempt to build threshold skills for all sentient creatures looks bound to fail, because both the tiger and the gazelle will perceive their potential to live a flourishing life limited by such chances.

One possibility for CA, according to Cripps [8], is to stick to Schlosberg's notion of sustaining essential capabilities for the common good but figure a way to show that this is

consistent with general inability to defend victims from predators. Returning to Schlosberg's effort to align hunting with individual gazelle thriving is instructive. Thus, any conclusion, nevertheless, would necessitate a rethinking of the theoretical framework. When nonhuman creatures can only urge that humanity does not intervene with their ability to exist, CA would ultimately have to produce an explanation of what it is for all people that demands them to be provided the means and mechanisms required to resolve natural hurdles to thriving.

5. Conclusions

Most scientists agree that anthropogenic global warming is taking place and rapid action is needed if we are to avoid dangerous climate change (above two degrees Centigrade) by 2050, now less than thirty years away [9]. Meanwhile, Sen and CA seem to have more generally failed to take on board one of the most important issues facing humanity. This article has suggested a way in which to develop CA in relation to sustainability, namely a legitimate freedom approach which develops from the work of Nussbaum to be better framed by Schlosberg's suggestions which propose the idea of capabilities justice as upholding core capabilities for all but finding a better way to demonstrate that this is compatible with widespread failure to protect prey from predator. If the human population continues to expand, a point will be reached where just feeding and housing all humans would demand habitat loss, which will result in the extinction of ecosystems, species, and individual nonhuman beings. Neither can the problems caused by ecosystems be rectified simply by proclaiming that people should respect biodiversity. Mankind is a part of nature and depends on it for existence.

The fact that CA is approaching a stagnant state is problematic because the concerns associated with environmental issues are essentially dynamic. This might imply that the current approach of deciding on distributive fairness is ineffective. This is not to mean that CA is not an excellent option for a comprehensive approach to environmental justice, on the contrary, as demonstrated in this paper. While the aim of this paper is to not find an answer to such conflict but only to contribute to a productive conversation to this debate, a theoretical re-design would allow to move further than the disagreement between the anthropocentric and nature-centric viewpoints. While such endeavours are not exhaustive in this paper and the recommended paths ahead for CA are only proposals, it is worth noting that environmental problems may be examined utilising the domains of freedom in time and spatial dimensions, because human-to-human connections are inextricably related to nature.

References

- [1] Alexander, J. M., 2008. *Capabilities and Social Justice*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

- [2] Alkire, S., 2005. *Valuing Freedoms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Anand, S., and Sen, A., 2000. Human Development and Economic Sustainability. *World Development*, 28 (2), pp. 2029-2049.
- [4] Anderson, E., 1999. What Is the Point of Equality? *Ethics*, 109 (2), pp. 287-337.
- [5] Ballet, J., et al., 2011. The social sustainability of sustainable development: from omission to emergence. *Developing Worlds*, (4), pp. 89-110.
- [6] Ballet, J., et al., 2013. Environment, justice and the capability approach. *Ecological Economics*, 85, pp. 28-34.
- [7] Crabtree, A., 2012. A Legitimate Freedom Approach to Sustainability: Sen, Scanlon and the Inadequacy of the Human Development Index. *The International Journal of Social Quality*, 2 (1), pp. 24-40.
- [8] Cripps, E., 2010. Saving the polar bear, saving the world: Can the capabilities approach do justice to humans, animals and ecosystems? *Res Publica*, 16 (1), pp. 1-22.
- [9] Ki-Moon, B., 2013. The millennium development goals report. *United Nations Pubns*, 365, p. 366.
- [10] MEA (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment), 2003. *Ecosystem and Human Well-being: A Framework for Assessment*. Island Press.
- [11] Nordhaus, W. D., 2007. A review of the Stern review on the economics of climate change. *Journal of economic literature*, 45 (3), pp. 686-702.
- [12] Nussbaum, M. C., 2000. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [13] Nussbaum, M. C., 2006. *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species membership*. Cambridge Mass: Belknap Press.
- [14] Pelenc, J., 2010. Crossing Sen's capability approach with Critical Natural Capital theory: toward a new perspective to reconcile human development and Nature conservation goals. *Bienal conference of the International society of ecological economics advancing sustainability in time of crisis*.
- [15] Rawls, J., 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- [16] Robeyns, I., 2006. The Capability Approach in Practice. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 14 (3), pp. 351-376.
- [17] Schlosberg, D., 2007. *Defining environmental justice: Theories, movements and nature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [18] Schlosberg, D., 2012. Justice, ecological integrity, and climate change. *Ethical adaptation to climate change: human virtues of the future*, pp. 165-183.
- [19] Sen, A., 1980. Equality of What? In: McMurrin Saint Tanner Lectures on Human Values, 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [20] Sen, A., 1984. The Living Standard. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 36, pp. 74-90.
- [21] Sen, A., 1985. *Commodities and Capabilities*. Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- [22] Sen, A., 1999. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [23] Sen, A., 2009. *The Idea of justice*. London: Allen Lan.
- [24] Stern, N., 2006. What is economics of climate change. *World Economics*, 7 (2), pp. 1-10.
- [25] Stern, N., 2007. The economics of climate change. *American Economic Review*, 98 (2), pp. 1-37.
- [26] Swiderska, K., et al., 2008. *The Governance of Nature and the Nature of Governance: Policy that Works for Biodiversity and Livelihoods*. London: IIED.
- [27] Turnbull, C., 1987. *The Forest People*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- [28] Wolff, J., and De-Shalit, A., 2007. *Disadvantage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.