

Second Edition

# Understanding Global Poverty

Causes, Solutions, and Capabilities

Serena Cosgrove and  
Benjamin Curtis



# Understanding Global Poverty

*Understanding Global Poverty* introduces students to the study and analysis of poverty, helping them to understand why it is pervasive across human societies, and how it can be reduced through proven policy solutions.

The book uses the capabilities and human development approach to foreground the human aspects of poverty, keeping the voices, experiences, and needs of the world's poor central to the analysis. Starting with definitions and measurement, the book goes on to explore the causes of poverty and how poverty reduction programs and policy have responded in practice. The book also reflects on the ethics of why we should work to reduce poverty and what actions readers themselves can take. This new edition has been revised and updated throughout, featuring:

- a new chapter on migration and refugees
- additional international examples, including material on Mexico, Covid-19 in global perspective, and South–South development initiatives
- information on careers in international development
- insights into how various forms of social difference, including race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexuality relate to poverty

Fully interdisciplinary in approach, the book is also supplemented with case studies, discussion questions, and further reading suggestions in order to support learning. Perfect as an introductory textbook for students across sociology, global development, political science, anthropology, public health, and economics, *Understanding Global Poverty* will also be a valuable resource to policy makers and development practitioners.

**Serena Cosgrove** is an Associate Professor in International Studies at Seattle University, USA.

**Benjamin Curtis** is a Director and Principal Consultant at Development Insights Partners, Czech Republic.

“This exceptional cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural work on one of the most pressing issues of humanity must be read not only by scholars and university students but also by policy makers. The authors show vividly and compassionately how poverty is a human problem and how it is related to capabilities. This book hands a mirror to its readers.”

**Gül İnanç**, *Co-Director, Centre for Asia Pacific Refugee Studies, University of Auckland*

“*Understanding Global Poverty* is an excellent resource that lives up to its name in offering readers a rich understanding of poverty as more than low income. The authors use clear language and compelling case studies as they untangle complex issues of global poverty in a manner that is sure to engage students.”

**Lori Keleher**, *PhD, Professor of Philosophy, New Mexico State University;  
President of the International Development Ethics Association*

“This smartly revised second edition of *Understanding Global Poverty* is an exemplary go-to resource. Each chapter’s clearly articulated learning goals and discussion questions are ideal for the student-centered classroom. While unapologetically grounded in ethical approaches to development, the authors nevertheless consider both the strengths and weaknesses of each using empirical evidence and vignettes to illustrate core concepts and debates. Its multi-disciplinarity will attract a wide variety of students eager to understand the challenges of global poverty and engage in solutions to meet them.”

**Daniel J. Whelan**, *Bill and Connie Bowen Odyssey Professor of Politics,  
Hendrix College, USA*

# **Understanding Global Poverty**

Causes, Solutions, and Capabilities

Second Edition

**Serena Cosgrove and Benjamin Curtis**

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# Preface

*Serena Cosgrove and Benjamin Curtis*

This book has three main objectives. First, it presents an interdisciplinary perspective on the problem of global poverty. Despite common rhetoric about the benefits of interdisciplinary approaches, research and teaching often remain firmly siloed within individual disciplines. The authors of this book are an anthropologist/sociologist and a political scientist, with one chapter written by a medical doctor who is a public health specialist, and another written by an academic researcher/practitioner who works at the intersection of human and national security. Some vignettes or text boxes were prepared by former students of ours whose majors were interdisciplinary as well: Humanities and International Studies. The primary authors have decades of experience in global health, international humanitarian assistance, sustainable development, and public policy. The endeavor to harmonize disciplinary perspectives within this book has not been easy, but we believe it was both necessary and rewarding. It was necessary because poverty's multidimensional nature requires an interdisciplinary approach; no single academic discipline can provide an adequate understanding of such a complex phenomenon. It was rewarding because it forced us to think outside our own narrow academic specializations, which should help readers think outside narrow bounds too. The book thereby presents a more holistic and insightful understanding of poverty than if it were written from the perspective of a single academic discipline.

The chapters that follow draw on academic literature from philosophy; economics; anthropology; sociology; women, gender, and sexuality studies; political science; and public health. We also draw on research written by international and national practitioners about what does and does not work for poverty reduction programs. And we draw on our own fieldwork. For this book, we have carried out research in Latin America (Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Brazil), Asia (Malaysia, Indonesia, India, and Kyrgyzstan), Africa (Zambia, Ghana, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and several post-socialist countries in Europe (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, and Slovakia).

The second main objective of the book is to introduce undergraduate and graduate students to the capabilities approach: what capabilities/opportunities do people need to lead a life that they value? Though there is a considerable literature on this approach to poverty and development, there are few introductory survey texts. Those that do exist we have found too specialized, or more philosophical than empirical, or otherwise not written in an accessible way to students new to the topic. We aimed to write a book that would present readers with some of the key concepts of the capabilities approach, then apply those concepts to a number of causes of and solutions to poverty. Because this book is a survey, we emphasize breadth rather than depth in our coverage; there are certainly

subtleties and specificities that we neglect. We do not pretend to be exhaustive, but do suggest additional readings at the end of each chapter for those who want to deepen their knowledge about a particular theme or topic. That same caveat applies to our coverage of the causes and solutions. We do not pretend to be comprehensive. We chose to cover causes and solutions where we had expertise, and which we thought would be interesting to analyze through the lens of capabilities.

The third main objective is pedagogical in nature. We wanted the book to be *teachable*, much more so than most of what academics write, including other textbooks. This book emerged from a course on global poverty that we developed to complement an existing course at our academic institution called Poverty in America. Given all the research and teaching that had been synthesized for the Poverty in America course, we decided it was important to examine many of the same questions from a global perspective, preferencing voices from the global south but also recognizing that some of the same causes contribute to poverty in the global north. We believe – given that we live in an interconnected, globalized world where economic, political, cultural, and environmental issues affect us all – it is just as important to understand poverty and inequality at home as well as abroad. And though the primary focus of this book is poverty in low- and middle-income countries (where most of the world’s poor live), the reader should understand that poverty and inequality pervade many societies. Inequality in high-income countries can mean that certain groups have levels of deprivation in life expectancy, hunger, or illiteracy comparable to low-income countries.

In contrast to many textbooks, this one has (unapologetically) an ethical perspective. In Chapter 1 we state our fundamental ethical assumptions for studying poverty, which depend above all on conceiving poverty as a human problem. This means that for all the diverse definitions and methods we utilize, the focus must always be on how poverty affects human beings as individuals and not just on abstract, aggregate statistics. For this reason, the book includes vignettes about real individuals affected by the topics we discuss. Ethnographic description helps us visualize and understand how it might feel to be that particular person. Compassion is an essential quality when considering the causes of and solutions to poverty because it helps us appreciate the urgency of the topic. Focusing on poverty as a human problem, too, connects to our collective responsibility to achieve the book’s goals of understanding what causes poverty and how it can be reduced.

Just as the book does not aim to be exhaustive and comprehensive, nor does it aim to be definitive. We try to avoid authoritatively pronouncing on what students and readers should conclude. Instead, we encourage debate and discussion. On one issue we do presume a bedrock definitiveness, namely on the need to address the injustice of poverty. Besides our own ethics and beliefs on what constitutes good pedagogy, in this aspect of the book’s approach we rely on some influential inspiration. This inspiration comes from Amartya Sen – the founder of the capabilities approach – who wrote that “the greatest relevance of ideas of justice lies in the identification of patent injustice, on which reasoned agreement is possible” (Sen 1999: 287). We hope this book promotes both reasoning and agreement on at least this bedrock issue. Beyond that, the book is very much aligned with Paulo Freire’s pedagogy that those who have been invisibilized and marginalized by poverty and exclusion can be the authors of the solutions to the challenges they confront. In this, our book’s objectives, approach, and inspiration are wonderfully summed up by Melanie Walker: “The key question is: what do I as a human being become as a consequence of what I experience in learning about human development?” For us as teachers of human development, “the essential question is therefore: what kinds of human beings

do I hope my students might one day become?” (Walker 2009: 335). We hope that this book provides some useful answers to both of these questions.

When Routledge approached us to do this second edition, it seemed a confirmation that the book had been successful in many of its goals. Besides being used at many different universities around the world, the first edition was also translated into Spanish. The first edition also served as part of the inspiration for the documentary *Hunger and Hope: Lessons from Ethiopia and Guatemala* (available for viewing at [www.ricksteves.com/watch-read-listen/video/tv-show/hunger-and-hope](http://www.ricksteves.com/watch-read-listen/video/tv-show/hunger-and-hope)). For this second edition, all of the chapters have received a thorough revision, which included updating with the latest statistics and most recent scholarship. Some chapters were significantly restructured, such as Chapter 3 (“Multidimensional measurements of poverty and wellbeing”) and Chapter 6 (formerly focused on gender, now titled “Race, class, gender, and poverty”). Our colleague Audrey Hudgins also contributed an all-new chapter on migration and poverty (Chapter 9) to provide a much-needed analysis of one of the highest profile and most controversial phenomena in global development in recent years. Finally, it bears mentioning that this second edition was prepared primarily during the pandemic year of 2020. While the chapter on health and poverty (Chapter 4) was updated with an addendum on the pandemic, at the time of writing, the impacts of the SARS-CoV-2 virus on a range of development outcomes remain to be seen. The coming years will reveal just how much this massive global challenge will require a new analysis of relationships between poverty, capabilities, and human wellbeing.

## Works cited

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*In gratitude,*

*Serena Cosgrove and Benjamin Curtis*



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# 1 Building a framework for understanding poverty

*Benjamin Curtis and Serena Cosgrove*

## Learning objectives

- Explain how poverty is multidimensional and depends on deprivation and thresholds.
- Describe income and monetary definitions of poverty, and analyze their strengths and weaknesses.
- Describe the capabilities definition of poverty, and analyze its strengths and weaknesses.
- Understand the distinction between capabilities and functionings, and how entitlements can be enshrined in laws but not actualized in reality.
- Summarize how human rights, structural violence, wellbeing, absolute and relative poverty relate to capabilities.
- Explain what it means to conceive of poverty as a human problem.

## Introduction

It may have been the most troubling place we have ever visited. It was an informal settlement (often called a “slum”) in a major city in the developing world; for the moment, it does not matter exactly where. An estimated one million people were living in an area of about 500 acres, creating one of the highest population densities in the world. Sometimes families of eight people would be living in houses of maybe 100 square feet, roughly the same size as a bedroom in an average home in a high-income country. If they were fortunate, people would have running water in their house for about three hours a day. Otherwise, they had to get water from a communal spigot. In either case, the water was not safe to drink. Very few people in this community had bathrooms in their homes. Instead, they had to use the public toilets. Because of the scarcity of services and the very high population density, one public toilet would serve around 1500 people. The stench was horrifying. There were few paved streets in this settlement. Rather, it was mostly pathways through dilapidated structures, and many of those pathways had open sewage running along them. There was garbage everywhere. One children’s playground was on top of a giant mound of trash.

Though people might own the precarious structure where they lived, very few owned the land beneath it, which means that their housing options remain insecure. If people did earn an income, they might be lucky to make the equivalent of USD 2 a day. Oftentimes, the working conditions were appalling. Some people worked in a small plastics recycling industry. All day long they would sort by hand through giant piles of plastic – including things like discarded syringes – then melt the plastic down into other things. They had little to no protection from the melting plastic’s hazardous fumes, and yet this is what they

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did every day just to earn two dollars. There was actually a whole range of jobs in this community. Some people made pottery, some made food, some made clothing. As hard as life here may sound, many people came because they could make more money than trying to farm land in the rural areas. Why, then, was this place so troubling? It was not just the sewage, the cramped living conditions, the fumes, or the paltry wages. It was that human beings should not have to live with their opportunities so drastically restricted. And yet for most people in the community, they had no better option. They were poor.

Poverty can be found virtually everywhere. It is a universal human problem. However, poverty may not be the same everywhere. The very definition of “poor” can change from place to place – and yet it can also remain the same. There are some traps that will make you poor no matter where you are. This chapter is concerned with definitions because a study of global poverty must start with trying to understand what “poverty” means. We will first consider how poverty is multidimensional and predicated on deprivation. We will then review several ways of defining poverty, though we will ultimately suggest that a lack of opportunities is a basic, underlying definition. We examine monetary/income understandings of poverty before turning to the theory of capabilities and functionings. We will also discuss the idea of wellbeing, and a basic set of rights to which all humans are entitled. This is a necessary foundation for understanding what poverty is, what causes it, how it affects people, and how it can be reduced. Subsequent chapters will build on this foundation to expand upon the chapter’s themes. One idea will remain consistent, however: poverty is a human problem, so just as with the example of the informal settlement above, we must never lose sight of the experiences, hopes, aspirations, and opportunities human beings have to live a life that they value.

### **What is poverty?**

How can we define poverty? This is one of those words that people use conversationally, with a meaning they think they understand, but often without thinking deeply about possible definitions. Stop right now and take a minute to think about how you would define poverty. What does it mean to be poor?

On the one hand, the definition could seem simple – but it is not nearly as simple as it initially seems. The most common way of defining poverty is “not having enough money.” But why use money (or the lack thereof) to define poverty? What is money good for? The idea is that money (or income more broadly) is really a proxy to indicate a person’s or family’s ability to acquire goods necessary to survive. Money can be used to buy food, for example. Therefore, another potential definition of poverty is “not having enough food.” If a person is starving not by his own choice, then he is almost certainly poor; he is lacking the means necessary to survive. This food definition of poverty is most applicable in low income countries, since in high income countries it is very rare that people do not get enough calories (though the calories they get may not be optimally nutritious). When we add the idea of food poverty to monetary poverty, the definition of poverty becomes more complex, since we recognize that poverty is a *multidimensional* phenomenon. There is more than one way that a person can be poor, and thus there is more than one way of defining poverty.

As this chapter progresses, we will be exploring how poverty is multidimensional. There is nonetheless a core idea to all definitions of poverty, namely a shortfall or deprivation of something, whether something tangible such as money or food, or intangible such as rights or respect. The specific meaning of *deprivation* is key here: it assumes that

a person is deprived of something to which he or she is entitled. Does this presume that every person is somehow entitled to a certain amount of money? Not necessarily. What it does presume is that every person is entitled to a basic material standard of living (such as having enough food) that a certain amount of money can buy. Therefore, a shortfall of money below the threshold necessary to acquire the basic necessities (such as food) deprives a person of a minimally adequate standard of living. In addition to deprivation, then, also essential to the idea of poverty is some conception of a *threshold*: above this threshold, whether it relates to money, food, rights, respect, etc., a person is not poor, but below it, he or she is. The question of what constitutes the threshold for an adequate minimum in the areas of income, food, rights, and respect is a debatable one that we will return to repeatedly.

### ***Income definitions of poverty***

Combining the ideas of deprivation and a threshold, we need to examine the definition of income poverty in greater detail. Income is certainly a vital component of meeting one's needs. At the individual level, one's income is the sum of all income-generating activities. Those activities can be in formal sector jobs, that is, those jobs that are regulated and taxed by the government, and/or in the informal sector, which is commonly thought of as "under the table" work that is not reported to the government. Informal sector jobs can include domestic service work, construction, farm work, food preparation, sales in the marketplace, etc., and they are very common in lower income countries. At the national level, the gross domestic product (GDP) – or the total market value of all goods and services produced in the country – is a way of measuring a country's economic prosperity. When this figure is divided by the number of people in a country, you have the GDP per capita, often used as an indicator of a country's standard of living. According to International Monetary Fund data from 2020, GDP per capita in the United States was USD 67,426, compared to USD 873 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). While much more will be said in Chapter 3 about such measurements, a quick glance at these figures suggests that there is much more poverty in the DRC than in the United States.

Since the end of the Second World War, lack of income has been the principal definition economists have used to describe poverty. However, given what we have already said about multidimensionality, do income/monetary definitions of poverty tell the whole story? In this book, we argue that monetary or income definitions of poverty are useful, but do not include many critical dimensions of what it means to be poor. Income has an instrumental value, which means it can be used for certain other ends, such as acquiring things that enable a person to live a life that she values. The instrumental value of income is a prime reason why economists use it as a proxy for wellbeing or poverty. Having enough money alone, however, does not guarantee that a person will be able to live a life that she values. For example, those who are rich but sick will probably not rate themselves high on wellbeing, even if money may help them get treatment. Similarly, it is conceivable that someone who is rich but still subject to legal or cultural discrimination of various kinds, or denied basic civil rights, cannot be said to have escaped forms of poverty.

Part of the problem is that income (or other resources, including money) are not always easily converted into things a person values. Personal, environmental, and institutional factors can all limit the instrumental or proxy value of income. This is an example of how institutional factors can complicate using income as a proxy: imagine two sets of

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parents, each with the same income, but they live in two different countries. In country A, there is a good public education system, but in country B the public system is shoddy, so parents who want a good education for their children will pay for private schools (Sen 1999: 70). Who is better off, the parents in country A or country B? They have the same level of income, but in this example the parents in country A are better off because they are not spending additional money to send their children to school. The point of this example is that income cannot fully capture wellbeing. As another example, imagine a family whose income is somewhat above the poverty line, but where the parents squander the money on alcohol, presents for themselves, or unwise investments rather than spending the money to ensure that their children are adequately fed, educated, and otherwise cared for. In this example, because the family's income is above the poverty line, it may seem that they have a basically adequate standard of living. However, the way that income is distributed within the family disadvantages the children. Such unequal distribution of income is all too common in many societies, with women and children most often getting less than a fair share.

It is also important to remember that income is not the same as employment. In the case of someone who has lost their job, income may be state welfare disbursements, but their self-esteem may be affected by not generating their own income. In this case again, income cannot equate to wellbeing. The problems with using income as the sole indicator of poverty magnify at the aggregate level. Imagine a country, such as the United States, with a high GDP per capita but also substantial levels of income inequality. In such a case where income is so unevenly distributed, there will be a small group of people with high incomes while the majority of the people have lower incomes. However, because of the way the numbers have been averaged, it appears that people are richer than they actually are: the few rich people have skewed the average. Poverty may be much more widespread, and much more severe, than the numbers indicate. Furthermore, economic growth – particularly in countries with high income inequality – is not the same as increased income for everyone. Because of income inequality and other structures of discrimination and marginalization, the theory that economic growth automatically benefits the poor – that is, that “a rising tide lifts all boats” – is not necessarily correct. When a country's economy is growing, many people might not get to share in the wealth.

Few theorists argue against the utility of income at the individual or aggregate level as one potential indicator of poverty, but it is important to recognize that income as an indicator has its limitations. The simplest definition of poverty as “not having enough money” is therefore inadequate. To reiterate, poverty is multidimensional: it cannot be truly understood via a single perspective, whether money, food, or some other dimension. We should also return to the idea of deprivation. What does it really mean? Deprivation of what? Deprivation can take many forms, not just of the income needed to sustain oneself. In fact, a lack of money does not serve as an adequate proxy for lack of political rights, lack of safety or control over one's body, or a lack of adequate health and education. If deprivations of income and economic growth are insufficient for understanding poverty, then what other deprivations should we consider?

#### ***The capabilities approach***

The capabilities approach calls attention to deprivation of opportunities, choices, and freedoms. This is a powerful, provocative, and multidimensional way of understanding what constitutes a good human life. It is most associated with the Nobel Prize-winning

economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, but its ideas have been elaborated by a number of others as well, including the philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Ingrid Robeyns, and the development ethicist David Crocker, to name but a few. Sen developed this approach in part from a series of lectures at the World Bank in which he encouraged the Bank to expand its thinking about what poverty is. He agreed that income is an important asset in helping people get out of poverty, but he argued for a more comprehensive approach in which the goal of public policy should be securing the basic abilities necessary for a human to lead a fulfilled life. The capabilities approach thus provides a means of evaluating minimum requirements for quality of life, which then constitute demands of social justice for government policy to guarantee those minimum requirements.

Rather than focusing on a country's economy, the capabilities approach focuses on individual humans. It prioritizes "the actual freedom of choice a person has over alternative lives that he or she can live" (Sen 1990: 114). The words "freedom" and "choice" are key: this approach emphasizes that every human being must have the opportunity to choose aspects of a life that he or she will value. As Nussbaum has written, the capabilities approach holds "that the crucial good societies should be promoting for their people is a set of opportunities, or substantial freedoms, which people then may or may not exercise in action: the choice is theirs" (Nussbaum 2011: 18). People may value different things, both because of their individual desires and how those desires are (at least partially) socially constructed. What matters is that people have the freedom to choose what they want their lives to be.

What are capabilities? Capabilities are the processes that allow freedom of action and decisions. They are best thought of as opportunities for life choices. Can you choose your profession? Can you participate in your society? Can you choose where to live? Can you live to a ripe old age? Essentially, capabilities are the freedom to do things that are important to you. A capability is not the choice or the opportunity itself; rather, it is the *potential* to choose, the freedom to choose. Writers in this tradition describe capabilities as the answer to the question, "What is this person able to do and to be?" (Nussbaum 2011: 20), and as the freedom to enjoy functionings (Comin 2008: 4). The term "functionings" is another fundamental concept in this approach. Think of it as the other side of the coin to "capabilities." It is not enough to be able to do something, to have the capability. Do you actually do it? If capabilities are what you can possibly do, then functionings are what you *actually* do, the outcomes or realizations of your choices. Functionings are people putting their capabilities into action (Sen 1999: 17). A functioning, Sen explains, "is an achievement of a person, what she or he manages to do or be" (Sen 1985: 10).

The distinction between capabilities and functionings is not merely philosophical quibbling – it is a very important consideration in evaluating wellbeing. For example, a woman may have the education and vocational skill to carry out a particular job, but she is unable to use those skills in the marketplace because women are not allowed to work outside the home in her society. In this case, she is denied the capability to hold a job; she does not have the freedom to choose to work outside the home. Nussbaum gives an example of how an important capability is often not actualized as a functioning: "Many societies educate people so that they are capable of free speech on political matters – internally – but then deny them free expression in practice through repression of speech" (2011: 21). You could have the capability to engage in political participation, but you might not choose to do so. In such a case, you have chosen not to actualize your capability as a functioning, which is justifiable because it is your own personal choice. But it is also possible that the actualization of your capability is thwarted not through your

own volition, as for example, when a government prevents your political participation, or you are unable to achieve the functioning of reading because you have been denied an adequate education.

A common example that may help clarify these concepts is the bicycle. The bicycle is a resource that allows its rider to convert a capability into a functioning. The capability is the opportunity to move around faster than walking, something a person might choose because she values it. A person could have this capability – for example, if she knows how to ride, owns a bike, and social norms permit women to ride – but she may choose not to convert it to a functioning for whatever reason. The functioning itself is mobility: it is the realization of the capability to move around faster than walking. When a person is able to convert her capability to a functioning – actualizing her opportunity to move around by becoming mobile on the bike – then she derives (hopefully) some utility, some satisfaction, from doing so (Alkire and Deneulin 2009: 42). This example helps demonstrate why the twinned concepts of capabilities and functionings are important. A person could have many capabilities but might not realize any of them. This means that a person could have a great deal of freedom in theory – she could have the freedom to choose a variety of things that she could value – but that freedom may be insufficient if her choices cannot be converted to actions. Both capabilities (freedoms, opportunities) and functionings (actualizations, realizations) matter for a person's life.

### *Defining the central capabilities*

We have already given some examples of capabilities, such as political participation or mobility. An important (but contentious) topic within the capabilities approach concerns the central capabilities, that is, the basic capabilities to which every human being is entitled. There is considerable room for disagreement in identifying the basic capabilities, in that the capabilities approach recognizes that different societies will value different things, and hence there will be some acceptable difference among cultures and individuals as to what constitutes a valuable human life. The imperative nonetheless is that communities decide democratically on the central capabilities for their society. The hope is that through a participatory, deliberative process, a society can arrive at some prioritization of what every person should be free to be and to do. However, such a process must be truly democratic, inclusive of all voices in a society, so that people or groups in power are not able to dominate and impose their values.

Where the discussion truly gets contentious, however, is with identifying what the basic, *universal* capabilities should be, those that have a value regardless of cultural or societal specificities. Interestingly, Sen, the father of the capabilities approach, has refused to specify a list of basic, central capabilities, insisting on the need for the democratic process mentioned above to determine them in culturally specific contexts. Other writers, though, have proposed such a list, chief among them Nussbaum (see also Gough 2003, Qizilbash 2002). Nussbaum claims that it is possible to identify a consensus about what constitutes a valuable human life – what basic capabilities every human is entitled to – that transcends cultures. Part of her rationale is to establish a kind of moral authority with such a list, so that students, researchers, policy makers and indeed anyone can identify when a person falls below the minimum thresholds of capabilities and is thereby deprived of some basic rights. The list of all potential human capabilities could be very long, but the objective of a list of “basic” capabilities is to set out the aspects of a life essential to wellbeing.



What are the basic capabilities? Despite the disputes, there is some consensus, in that most writers on the subject do find areas of common ground. Many writers mention having adequate health, enough food and nutrition, and at least enough education to ensure basic knowledge and the capability of independent thought and expression (see Saith 2001, Desai 1995). Sen himself, despite his avoidance of an explicit list, tends to mention these same features, and adds the ideas of political participation and freedom from discrimination on the basis of race, religion, and gender. These common areas have not been arrived at purely theoretically; empirical research has made some similar findings as to what people consistently value. From their massive ethnographic research project, *Voices of the Poor*, Narayan and Petesch point to these as basic capabilities that people value: bodily health; bodily integrity; respect and dignity; social belonging; cultural identity; imagination, information, and education; organizational capacity; and political representation (Narayan and Petesch 2002). In David Clark's research in South Africa, people mentioned jobs, housing, education, income, family and friends, religion, health, food, good clothes, recreation and relaxation, and safety and economic security as the major aspects of a valuable life (Clark 2005a). While the specific meanings people may assign to each of those (admittedly somewhat vague) labels may vary, it is nonetheless apparent that some consonance holds for the fundamental *categories*, such as with health, education/information, sociability, and safety.

Nussbaum's own list embraces many of these same categories and adds a few idiosyncratic particulars. Box 1.1 enumerates and briefly explains Nussbaum's list. Her list is by no means canonical or exhaustive; it has definitely sparked debate, and we include it here not as a complete endorsement on her view of the central capabilities but rather because it is one of the most influential lists and, as such, a useful springboard for discussions of what the central human capabilities are or should be. Note how the list is phrased: "being able" expresses the idea that these are capabilities that people must be free to choose to realize if they want to, but they do not have to choose to realize them. That is why this is a list of basic capabilities and not basic functionings.

### Box 1.1 Martha Nussbaum's list of the central capabilities

- 1 **Life.** "Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length, not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living." The principle here relates to life expectancy, asserting that no one should have to accept a life of seriously foreshortened mortality.
- 2 **Bodily health.** "Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter." These capabilities relate to food security and shelter security, but also to the fact that no one should have to accept a life with especially high morbidity (i.e. susceptibility to disease).
- 3 **Bodily integrity.** This capability is about an individual's right to have control over and security for his or her own body. It includes freedom from violence of all kinds, including sexual assault, as well as mobility, and choice over one's sex life and reproduction.
- 4 **Senses, imagination, and thought.** This range of capabilities upholds the principles of freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and the right to education; it is about being able to use one's mind freely and imaginatively.



The idea is that everyone should be able to think creatively and individually. Education up to minimum standards of literacy, mathematics, and science is necessary to support that ability, but also to support the capability for practical reason, listed below.

- 5 **Emotions.** “Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves,” to those who love us, to feel longing, gratitude, anger, and the full complement of emotions. This item connects to the freedom that everyone must have to form intimate relationships, but it is also part of freedom of association.
- 6 **Practical reason.** This is intellectual freedom broadly construed, including freedom of religion. It stipulates that every human should be able to think for him or herself, and to make reasoned choices about the life one leads.
- 7 **Affiliation.** This refers to a bundle of ideas on being able to live beneficially in society. It again relates to freedom of association, but it is conceived not just in political terms as the freedom to form or join political parties or other societal organizations. It is also about sociability, the capability to have a variety of social relations, and to do so without being discriminated against because of one’s race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion or any other ascriptive category.
- 8 **Other species.** “Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.”
- 9 **Play.** “Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.”
- 10 **Control over one’s environment.** This is another bundle of political and civil rights that relate to being able to shape the conditions in which a person lives. This includes political participation and freedom of speech, freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, and the equal right to hold property. It also relates to work, including freedom from employment discrimination and other unfair working conditions.

Source: adapted from Nussbaum (2011).

There is a degree of overlap or repetition in Nussbaum’s list, such as with the multiple mentions of freedom of association and expression. Part of the reason for the overlap is Nussbaum’s insistence that affiliation and practical reason play an “architectonic role” for the other capabilities (Nussbaum 2011: 39). This means that affiliation and reason are essential to a person’s deciding what sort of life she values. They are also essential, in Nussbaum’s view, to human dignity. She envisions a situation whereby someone might be well nourished and well educated, enjoying many of the basic capabilities, and yet without the freedom to express herself politically because of government restrictions. In such a case, that person is denied her dignity, since she is being treated like an infant. She is not truly free to make choices for herself, nor is she free to participate adequately in the life of her community, which must necessarily include helping make decisions about how her community is governed. Nussbaum’s list also leaves some room for societally contextualized variation. While the list attempts to establish levels below which no one should fall, different societies may establish minimum thresholds above the levels that Nussbaum suggests. In other words, there is the potential that different societies could adapt Nussbaum’s central capabilities to their own cultural context, as long as they do not violate the minimum guarantees.

Because these are basic capabilities, considerations of equality and equity are important. While everyone is equally entitled to these capabilities, sometimes equality is not a sufficient standard. Nussbaum alludes to the possibility that women could have an “equal” right to vote as men, but that their votes would only be counted as one-quarter of a man’s. Similarly, everyone might have an equal right to the minimum threshold of a primary education, but that threshold is almost meaningless unless one also considers the *quality* of the primary education. Some schools may be well equipped and provide an excellent education, while others may lack resources and teach children relatively little (Nussbaum 2011: 41). Thus, though Nussbaum regards these capabilities as the “bare minimum” that any government must secure for its people at a minimum threshold level, sometimes getting everyone to that threshold is not enough to satisfy justice concerns. The reason is that the threshold level may be inequitable, disproportionately disadvantaging some people.

Imagine for instance that everyone gets one anti-malaria pill. For people who live in high or dry areas, where malaria is not endemic, one pill may be adequate. But for people who live in malaria endemic areas, the equal standard of one pill will not do enough to help them. They may need more than one pill – an unequal distribution if the people in the high, dry areas get only one – in order to enjoy the same health as the people who do not live in malaria endemic areas. In this case, because systemic or other contextual factors create disproportionate disadvantage, an equitable (rather than equal) distribution of resources is required. Equity means ensuring that people who are disadvantaged receive proportionately more resources based on what they need to overcome the disadvantage.

The idea of basic entitlements that all people must be guaranteed should bring to mind the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see Box 1.2), and indeed there are many affinities between human rights and the capabilities approach (see i.a. Vizard *et al.* 2011, Sen 2005 and 2004, Nussbaum 1997). Both paradigms insist that human beings be treated as ends and not as means, which implies protections for certain fundamental things such as freedom of conscience, political participation, and personal security. Both depend upon principles of universality, equality, and interdependence necessary to safeguard our own specific rights plus each other’s rights (Deneulin 2009: 60). There are, however, meaningful differences between human rights and capabilities, such that these two approaches are not identical. For instance, human rights primarily depend upon state and legal institutions, while the fulfilment of capabilities depends upon a more diverse network of formal and informal institutions, including government, cultural norms, civil society organizations, and businesses. The capabilities approach also adds the idea of functionings, paying more attention to the dynamics of the *realization* of fundamental guarantees than does the human rights approach.

### **Box 1.2 Selected rights from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

#### **Article 3:**

Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.

**Article 7:**

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

**Article 13:**

- 1 Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
- 2 Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

**Article 18:**

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.

**Article 19:**

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

**Article 20:**

- 1 Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
- 2 No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

**Article 21:**

- 1 Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
- 2 Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
- 3 The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

**Article 23:**

- 1 Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
- 2 Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
- 3 Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
- 4 Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

**Article 25:**

- 1 Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
- 2 Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

**Article 26:**

- 1 Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- 2 Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
- 3 Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Source: [www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/](http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/).

Ultimately, though, these two approaches complement each other. The capabilities approach benefits from the moral legitimacy that human rights grant to the fundamental guarantees, and the accountability of institutions for respecting them. As the 2000 United Nations Human Development Report declared:

Human rights express the bold idea that all people have claims to social arrangements that protect them from the worst abuses and deprivations – and that secure the freedom for a life of dignity. Human development, in turn, is a process of enhancing human capabilities – to expand choices and opportunities so that each person can lead a life of respect and value. When human development and human rights advance together, they reinforce one another – expanding people’s capabilities and protecting their rights and fundamental freedoms.

(UNDP 2000: 2)

Much more could be said about the relationship between rights and capabilities, and in subsequent chapters this theme will return. Throughout the book we will sometimes speak of “rights to capabilities,” since that is an area where these two approaches intersect: as human beings, we all have inalienable rights to certain opportunities that are encapsulated by the notion of capabilities. For example, we all have the right to realize our capability of political participation. Thus, legal rights can be a way of guaranteeing capabilities. Box 1.2 gives a partial list of some rights from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that could be considered congruent with basic capabilities; we encourage readers to read the Declaration’s complete list for themselves.

*Other important concepts in the capabilities approach*

The capabilities approach moves quickly from asking whether or not someone can do something (has the capability) to whether or not they are actually doing it (realizing the capability, i.e. the functioning). The reason is that there is so much variability and heterogeneity of people's choices and differences of distribution of opportunities, not to mention the unreliability of preferences (Nussbaum 2011: 59). For this reason, in using the capabilities approach to understand poverty, we have to be careful with what "choice" really means. Take for example the problem of "adaptive preference," which means that our preferences (and hence our choices) adapt to our circumstances. "When society has put some things out of reach for some people," Nussbaum writes, "they typically learn not to want those things" (2011: 54). If a person has no conception that she could potentially choose *not* to get married at age 14 and become a mother by 15, then she has no knowledge of how her choices are unfairly limited. Her preferences have adapted to her circumstances. One of the normative assumptions of the capabilities approach, though, is that people deserve to be aware of a full range of life choices – they must have the freedom to choose from that range.

The freedom-limiting dynamic of adaptive preference may be especially severe for oppressed groups, in which members adjust their expectations to the restrictions (social, cultural, political, economic) in which they are embedded. This is why the capabilities approach also stresses the idea of *agency*; it is defined as "one's freedom to bring about achievements one values and which one attempts to produce" (Sen 1992: 57). In other words, it is the ability to actualize functionings, but most generally to pursue one's own goals, to effect change in one's life. A person's agency is important to consider because it is a way of thinking about the control that person exerts over his or her own destiny. We have to keep our attention on what people actually do because capabilities are only half of the story. As an example, a woman raised in a society that discourages her from working outside of the home may, because of adaptive preference, never seek a profession. Or she might have the capability of getting a job, but if her functioning is limited by discrimination, she is not free to choose. In this latter case, her agency is constricted.

Freedom to choose which capabilities to actualize into functionings is also a fundamental normative assumption for the capabilities approach. The choices a person makes here are rarely simple, however, nor is the principle of freedom of choice. Sen insists that evaluating a person's freedom to choose must incorporate some perspective on the quality, quantity, and diversity of available opportunities (Sen 1985, 1983). If a person is forced to choose between two evils – such as whether to stay in the village that the government has burned down, or flee to a refugee camp – then is it really accurate to say that he has adequate freedom of choice? And sometimes capabilities do not involve a meaningful choice. Does a person choose to live long, or choose whether or not to have good health? People typically have no choice about contracting such things as malaria and cholera, for example (Clark 2005a). The point of these questions about choice is this: while freedom to choose is a principle worth adhering to, in practice it is often easier to evaluate achieved functionings rather than possible choices when trying to determine a person's quality of life or poverty status. How to evaluate achieved functionings – in other words, to use the capabilities approach to measure human wellbeing and poverty – is a topic we will return to in Chapter 3.

Choice and agency can work differently for different people when it comes to achieving a life that one values. Many factors will impact the choices a person makes, including her

evaluation of the possibility of attaining the functioning she desires. Another essential consideration are *conversion factors*, which are the factors that influence whether a person is able to convert a capability into a functioning. Sen cites three broad categories of conversion factors (Sen 2005: 153; see also Robeyns 2005):

- 1 Physical or mental heterogeneities among persons (including such things as disability, metabolism, sex, intelligence, and being prone to illness)
- 2 Variations in non-personal resources (including such social factors as norms, gender roles, societal hierarchies, societal cohesion, and public policies, such as on public health care or anti-discrimination laws and their enforcement)
- 3 Environmental diversities (such as climatic conditions, infrastructure such as roads, buildings, and bridges, geographical factors such as isolation, or varying threats from diseases or local crime).

Returning to the bicycle example, this is a resource that enables a person to convert a capability to a functioning, but several factors can limit the conversion possibilities. If someone has a physical disability, she might not be able to ride the bike. Or, as Robeyns explains, “if there are no paved roads or if a government or the dominant societal culture imposes a social or legal norm that women are not allowed to cycle without being accompanied by a male family member, then it becomes much more difficult or even impossible to use the good [i.e. the bicycle] to enable the functioning” (Robeyns 2005: 99). This example reminds us of two important things. First, that it is not just the goods, services, and resources a person has access to that will influence how she is able to convert capabilities to functionings. Various social institutions such as cultural norms are also influential, and for this reason it is necessary to study the situation and circumstances of people’s actual lives in order to evaluate what they can choose and achieve.

Second, the example reinforces the earlier point about equity because some people may require more resources to convert the same capabilities to functionings (Walker 2004, 2003). A blind person may have the capability for mobility but will need different resources compared to the sighted person. In Walker’s example, girls in South African schools may have difficulty converting the same capabilities as boys (they are equally able to read, do math etc.) to the same functionings because of certain factors such as cultural devaluing of girls’ education, or threats of sexual harassment or violence, or sexist employment practices after completing an education. Thus, one must be very careful in assumptions about equality of opportunity, since even if such initial equality truly exists, it still does not mean that there is an equal chance to achieve the life choices that a person values. Initial opportunities are at best half of the story; achieved functionings are again essential for evaluating wellbeing. And in order to assist deprived or disadvantaged people to achieve those functionings, they may need disproportionate attention or resources compared to those who are not deprived or disadvantaged.

It should be clear that an idea of freedom is absolutely central to the capabilities approach. However, this is not the shallow understanding of freedom that one might assume. Freedom is not only what are known as positive liberties, that is, the freedom to do certain things, such as criticize the government, practice your own religion, live where you want, or marry whom you want. The idea of freedom does include positive liberties, but it also includes negative liberties, that is, freedom *from* hunger, fear, and shame. The capabilities approach embraces both notions of freedom. It does so by emphasizing the imperative of a person’s freedom to choose to live a life that he values. That is a positive

liberty, but it can include the freedom to avoid other things, that is, the negative liberty to be free from things the person does not value, such as hunger or discrimination or ignorance. Why freedom is so central to the capabilities approach is because often people who are poor simply are not free to escape their destitution. They lack alternatives; they lack agency and choice. Hence, they are condemned to the unfreedom of poverty, where they do not have adequate power to change their lives.

Another way that the capability approach's emphasis on freedom avoids simplistic, jejune understandings is by recognizing that freedom is not purely individualistic. Someone who crassly insists that freedom amounts to his positive liberty to do whatever he wants fails to realize how any individual's freedom depends upon the broader society. As noted above, many social factors can impinge upon the choices we make, whether norms about gender behavior, public policies connected to education or health care, or economic arrangements, including the distribution of wealth and power. How other people exercise their freedoms impacts how you or I exercise our freedoms. The choices we can make depend upon broader social circumstances, and we must be attentive to those circumstances when making our choices. Sometimes certain people (because of their relative status in society) will have more choices – and hence more freedoms – than other people. Sometimes, too, the actual attainment of a person's choice is not so important. Imagine a girl in the global south who decides to pursue a PhD: what matters is that she has the reasonable freedom to make that choice and is not unfairly constrained in the actual achievement of the goal. For the purposes of the capabilities theory, though, not everyone who wants to do a PhD must complete it in order for that person to be “free.” As Sen explains, “the freedom to have any particular thing can be substantially distinguished from actually having that thing” (Sen 2005: 155).

### **Box 1.3 Freedom and human wellbeing**

On the roads around Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia, men and women sit by piles of stones. They sit right next to the asphalt, cars and trucks whizzing past them. They sit there all day long, in the intense heat or in the torrential downpours. All day long, day in and day out, they sit there with a hammer, breaking large stones into smaller stones. They breathe in the pollution from the vehicles and the dust from smashing rocks. They endure injuries to their hands and muscles from the grueling work. Every so often they will sell a pile of stones to someone who needs it for a construction project. They will earn the equivalent of a few dollars for a week's worth of work. Who would choose this work, if they had a choice? The stone breakers are often the poorest of the poor, lacking education, skills, or assets such as tools besides a hammer that might help them earn a less brutal living. What freedom do people in this situation have to choose a different life for themselves?

On an island in the southern Indian state of Kerala there is a village of Dalit people. The Dalit are the lowest in India's caste system, formerly known as “untouchables,” victims of systemic cultural discrimination. The island where they live often floods during the monsoon season, which means their dwellings are insecure. Most of the men from the village work as day laborers, which is also insecure: some days you get work and money, and others you do not. The women make money by harvesting coconuts. They earn three cents for every coconut they sell. When a girl gets married, according to custom her family has to pay a dowry. Dowries can cost



up to USD 1600, plus gold. How can you amass that kind of money if you earn three cents per coconut? Families often have to take on massive debt to be able to afford a dowry. Fortunately, Kerala has a decent system of public education, so many of the villagers go to school up to the tenth grade. Beyond that, however, tuition is no longer free, so they cannot continue. Why not leave the island and go live somewhere less flood-prone? Why not find some other means of generating an income besides harvesting coconuts? Why not refuse to pay the dowry if it is such a financial burden? These choices are not open to the villagers – they are not free to choose. In many ways, they live in unfreedom, and that is what it means to be poor.

### *Poverty and capabilities*

This book, in accordance with the capabilities approach, defines poverty as unfreedom, the deprivation of freedoms necessary to lead a fulfilled life. A person is poor when she lacks the capabilities to live the life she has reasonably chosen. Sen describes a number of unfreedoms that a person would surely not choose if she were free to choose something else: famine, malnutrition, excessive morbidity, lack of access to adequate health care and clean water, violations of political and civil rights (Sen 1999). These deprivations of inherent dignity, of basic capabilities – these unfreedoms to choose something better for oneself – qualify a person as poor. In this book we do presume that there are basic or central capabilities. Our bedrock definition of poverty is being deprived of the basic capabilities to which every human is entitled. Such deprivation places a person below the minimum threshold necessary for an adequate, dignified human life. Everyone by virtue of being human has dignity, but sometimes people live in situations where their dignity is compromised or unrealized. When such situations – whether social, political, familial, or economic – deny a person her dignity, then that person is deprived (Nussbaum 2011: 30). Such deprivation denies a person the freedom to choose a life that she has reason to value.

This conception of poverty links to two other important analytical perspectives. The first is again human rights: poverty is the denial of basic rights, which can be understood as rights to the basic capabilities (see Osmani 2005). People who are poor routinely suffer human rights violations because they are not able to access their basic capabilities. Hence for people to escape poverty, their human rights must be secure. The second analytical perspective – structural violence – expands on this link between rights and poverty. Structural violence is defined as “the avoidable disparity between the potential ability to fulfil basic needs and their actual fulfilment” (Ho 2007: 1). “Basic needs” refers to human rights and basic capabilities. “Structural” here relates to the unequal distribution of power in societies and around the globe. Such structures create inequalities of race, class, and gender which shape interactions in political and economic systems and via global institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. These systemic inequalities mean that people with power get much more than their fair share of resources, while those who have little or no power are exploited – they have much reduced chances to meet their basic needs.

“Violence” in this case is both direct (e.g. physical brutality) but also indirect such as human rights violations. It is indirect because it is built into the unequal power structures. The idea of “avoidable disparity” entails that all people should be free to realize their capabilities and functionings, but some are not because structures disproportionately

disadvantage them, creating fundamentally unequal life chances. So, the concept of structural violence holds that people are poor in part because they are systematically exploited, and one of the reasons they are systematically exploited is because they are poor. As Paul Farmer has written, “the poor are not only more likely to suffer; they are also more likely to have their suffering silenced” (Farmer 2009: 25). The poor not only disproportionately suffer human rights violations but find it harder to change their situation because of existing power structures. To use a term that we introduced earlier, we can say that such social structures unjustly limit some individuals’ opportunity to exercise their agency. In subsequent chapters we will examine specific domains that contribute to poverty (health, geography, conflict, etc.); what the idea of structural violence adds to such focused empirical analysis is an underlying conceptual frame for how systemic power imbalances contribute to poverty.

A few other initial observations will help in applying the capabilities definition of poverty. First, one has to consider the extent of deprivation. A person might be denied a number of capabilities, but is it conceivable that he still might not be poor? Imagine, for example, that someone is denied (for whatever reason) the capability of enjoying nature, such as by taking a walk in the mountains. Number 8 on Nussbaum’s list involves being able to live in relation to nature. Is that person who is denied his hike “poor”? Probably not, though the reasons for the deprivation may help determine the answer. More powerfully, though, most people would presumably not regard taking a hike in the mountains as a basic capability to which everyone is inherently entitled, the deprivation of which would fundamentally harm his dignity or the life that he values. Again, there is a permissible vagueness or uncertainty here; the individual himself has to determine what sort of life he values. Nonetheless, a principle that Clark and Qizilbash (2005) have proposed is that poverty is best defined as a shortfall in any core or basic dimension. So if a person experienced deprivation of one single core capability – such as being able to get an education – he would be considered poor, even if he had ample freedom in non-core capabilities such as taking a hike. From Clark and Qizilbash’s research, the people who were “core poor” because of deprivations in the basic capabilities were the homeless, those with no access to water at all, those with no education, and the unemployed (2005: 21).

Also, be attentive to the difference between absolute and relative poverty. The idea of absolute poverty holds that there are some standards by which anyone is poor. Someone who is starving not by his own volition, someone who cannot read, someone who is so sick that he cannot work or lead the life that he wants – all of these people experience poverty according to an absolute standard. The list of basic capabilities sets out such an absolute standard for determining poverty: if someone falls below the minimum threshold of the basic capabilities then, by definition, he is poor. Absolute definitions of poverty have a binary aspect, that is, you either are or are not poor. A relative definition of poverty, in contrast, is contingent upon a particular society or culture. A famous example from Adam Smith illustrates this point. In Smith’s example, a person who could not afford a linen shirt and leather shoes would feel shame in public. A linen shirt and leather shoes were a standard relative to eighteenth-century Britain, and if you did not have them then you were poor. Shame, however, is an absolute standard. No one should be forced to feel shame because he lacks some basic material good, or has a disability, or is a member of a minority ethnic group, or has made a life choice that contravenes an oppressive social norm. Shame is a deprivation of dignity, another absolute standard to which we are all entitled (see Sen 1983).

In any practical application, both absolute and relative standards have to be applied to define poverty. Why this matters is that occasionally some uninformed people will claim something to the effect of “poor people in the United States don’t know how good they have it – they have cars, public schools, health care at the emergency room, plenty to eat, not like *real* poor people” in some developing country. The misguided assumption is that poor people in rich societies such as the United States are not really poor in comparison to poor people in lower income societies such as Haiti or Malawi. While there could seem to be a grain of truth in this thinking, it fails to recognize that the United States will have its own relative poverty thresholds that are completely irrelevant to Malawi. Every society will rightly require poverty measures specific and contextual to that society, while other aspects of poverty corresponding to the basic capabilities will be absolute and apply everywhere.

### *Wellbeing and happiness*

Though poverty conceived as capability deprivation is this book’s main focus, it is also worth considering what is perhaps the opposite of poverty, namely wellbeing. Within the capability approach, different writers take slightly divergent perspectives on what wellbeing means, but most agree that it depends on wellbeing freedom and wellbeing achievement (see i.a. Dalziel *et al.* 2018, Robeyns 2017, Clark 2005b). Wellbeing freedom refers to the choices a person can make, the potential “doings” and “beings” she might choose. It is not the choices themselves that necessarily grant wellbeing, but rather the freedom to make them. Sen (1999) insists that not just any capabilities are fundamental for wellbeing, rather, only the choices we make that are informed by reasoned judgements about the kind of life we value. This is why wellbeing is partially relative and predicated on an individual’s particular values. What matters is that we each have the freedom to select from a range of options that matter to us. Wellbeing achievement relates to functionings, that is, the realization of our choices for a valued life and whether we achieve them. Wellbeing would be only partial if we had the freedom to make valuable choices but were unable to convert those choices into achieved functionings.

To put this in the perspective of poverty, freedom is again key. A person who is poor is denied wellbeing freedom and wellbeing achievement. Poverty equates to *ill*being when people are not free to make choices about a life they have reason to value, or are systematically prevented from converting those choices into functionings. The basic capabilities establish a minimum, absolute threshold: without them, a person is in *ill*being. However, the basic capabilities amount to only a partial definition of wellbeing. Just because a person’s basic capabilities are secure, that does not mean she has achieved wellbeing. She may have reason to value certain possibilities that are not captured by the list of basic capabilities. These choices will be contextual to the individual and/or the society, but ultimately we must all determine what wellbeing means for ourselves. Helping people to escape poverty and achieve wellbeing means helping them to secure their capability freedoms, in other words to expand their opportunities (Smith and Reid 2018).

Though the choices that constitute wellbeing can be subjective to a person’s own values, in most cases the achieved functionings can be measured objectively. For example, assume that a person would choose good health, career advancement, and societal engagement as key to her wellbeing. These achievements can all be measured through externally observable indicators for health, salary, or social capital. There are other measures of wellbeing that are more subjective, such as happiness. In some ways, happiness as an aspect of

wellbeing would seem obvious. Ask someone about their overall life satisfaction, and/or their satisfaction in certain areas such as income, work, relationships, etc., and you can get a picture of what they want out of life and whether they feel they are achieving it. Mental states do matter for wellbeing, and Sen (2008) regards happiness as one relevant indicator, since the capability to be happy is an important freedom that most people will value.

However, from a capabilities perspective, subjective measures such as happiness have only a partial and problematic relationship to wellbeing. There are several reasons. The first relates back to adaptive preference: people whose freedoms are limited may not know they are limited, and so could report themselves “happy” even if their agency is seriously compromised. Imagine someone who is starving and bedridden but considers himself happy; is he truly in a state of wellbeing? Additionally, some achievements that are fundamental to a capabilities conception of wellbeing have a weak empirical relationship to happiness. Education, for example, does not consistently improve subjective reported wellbeing. Empirical evidence also shows that reported life satisfaction differs systematically between groups, with men consistently rating themselves less satisfied than women (Robeyns and van der Veen 2007). Furthermore, many of the factors that have been shown to affect happiness – such as genetics, age, or religion – are not realistic targets for development policy (Stewart 2014). Though religious people may report higher wellbeing, making people religious is not a reasonable development project. These and other problems mean that happiness is insufficient as an indicator of wellbeing and as a focus of programs to improve people’s lives. Nonetheless, happiness can be included as part of a “dashboard” of wellbeing measures, a topic we will discuss in Chapter 3.

### *Critiques of the capabilities approach*

Inevitably, the capabilities approach has attracted criticism from some scholars of development and poverty, who raise several objections. One objection is that the capabilities approach is too individualistic, since its emphasis is on the freedoms enjoyed by individuals and not groups. However, the approach’s proponents, such as Sen, have always emphasized that an analysis of capabilities is not incompatible with application to groups or social structures. In fact, the approach explicitly acknowledges that social and group factors can impinge upon the conversion of capabilities to functionings, for instance through norms or formal state institutions. It is certainly possible to consider the freedoms and rights of groups, or the possibilities of collective action, via the capabilities approach; Chapter 5 on geography and spatial poverty, and Chapter 11 on the environment both do so.

Nonetheless, Sen has given powerful reasons for why individuals need to be the primary focus for capabilities. The individual, in his account, is the main unit of moral concern. What we have to care about with social justice is individuals, because individuals are what constitute groups, whether the family, the ethnicity or whatever other collectivity. Also, prioritizing an analysis of the group or its rights can overlook deprivations or inequalities within the group. The classic example is with women or children, who may be disadvantaged with resource allocation within the family (Alkire and Deneulin 2009).

Two other objections are worth mentioning for their relevance to this book’s application of the capabilities approach. The difficulty of agreeing upon a set of basic capabilities has attracted much attention because, critics allege, it makes the approach very difficult to operationalize, that is, to use, to apply, to measure in the real world. We will turn to some of the issues with measuring capabilities in Chapter 3. But one of the alleged problems with operationalizing the approach is that consensus on the basic capabilities is

unattainable, certainly at the global level, and perhaps even within countries. Even if Sen's ideal of a democratic, deliberative approach to arrive at societally contextualized basic capabilities were tried, so the complaint goes, it will be distorted by power imbalances within the society. Critics claim that disputes about what counts as "basic" will be politically impossible to overcome. For the time being, we will leave the validity of this objection open for debate and return to the question in the book's conclusion.

Lastly, it has been alleged that the capabilities approach (particularly Nussbaum's list of the central capabilities) is a product of imperialistic, western thinking. The claim is that Nussbaum's philosophy, heavily inspired by Aristotle, ignores or excludes potential non-western views of "the good life" and valuable freedoms. In its extreme form, this argument accuses the capabilities approach of justifying further imposition of western values on non-western societies. Nussbaum not surprisingly rejects such accusations, pointing out that many of the capabilities approach's main theorists are from non-western societies (Nussbaum 2011: 104). She also says that the only imposition the approach justifies is to protect the weak from the strong. While Nussbaum mounts a cogent defense of the approach from this accusation, we will again leave this debate open for discussion as the book proceeds.

### **This book's method**

These open questions point to the book's method of studying poverty, which incorporates these three features: (1) a multidisciplinary approach, (2) a consistent emphasis on poverty as a *human* problem, and (3) debates and deliberation. First, our multidisciplinary approach grows out of the multidimensional nature of poverty. Poverty is not just a topic for economics and economists. It relates to health, education, civil rights, international politics, gender, cultural norms, and environmental concerns, among other things. Anthropology, psychology, political science, law, philosophy, history, cultural studies, biology, chemistry, and theology can add a great deal to the study of poverty. While a scholarly inquiry cannot fuse all of these different disciplines, we have tried to blend insights from a number of them into the chapters that follow.

Second, studying poverty from multiple disciplines has a deep connection to studying poverty as a human problem. The ultimate object of improving wellbeing is not states, economies, businesses, or cultures but human beings. Theory and analysis should not lose sight of the people who are suffering but could be thriving. This is why the book will continually emphasize the faces and voices of people in poverty: because they are a constant reminder of why, as fellow human beings, we should care about this problem, and why we should work to remedy it. Faces and voices give an immediacy that provides a more compelling entry point into studying poverty than some distant, high-altitude, purely analytical approach. Moreover, reading individual stories as they relate to poverty should help stimulate empathy by appealing to our common humanity. Emphasizing the human aspects of poverty also makes a direct connection to the ethical demands of poverty, namely what we (whether professors, students, those who have much, or those who have little) owe those who are suffering.

The method we use in this book is well attuned to the overall ethos of the capabilities approach. The capabilities approach avowedly puts human beings at the heart of its concerns. Remember that its fundamental question is: what are people able to be and to do? As Drèze and Sen have written, this "is essentially a 'people-centered' approach, which puts human agency (rather than organizations such as markets or governments) at

the center of the stage. The crucial role of social opportunities is to expand the realm of human agency and freedom, both as an end in itself and as a means of further expansion of freedom” (Drèze and Sen 2002: 6). The idea is again that the individual human is the fundamental unit of analysis, and the point of the analysis is to determine the opportunities (and the constraints on those opportunities) that a person has to live a life that she values. Nussbaum’s emphasis on dignity also connects here. When people are unjustly denied the development of their capabilities, the inherent dignity to which they are entitled is violated.

Third, this book will consistently include debates and encourage deliberation. The reasons are several. Intense debates rage around certain topics in development, and many of the book’s chapters consider these debates in some detail. Occasionally we will offer what we judge to be the most justifiable answers to a controversial question, but we generally avoid definitive pronouncements, as definitiveness is hard to attain in development. Rather, in our view the best approach is more provisional, and embraces competing perspectives. This approach is also partly motivated by capabilities theory. Sen says in *The Idea of Justice*, “When we try to determine how justice can be advanced, there is a basic need for public reasoning, involving arguments coming from different quarters and divergent perspectives” (2009: 92). This book therefore aims to inculcate and support the general belief (espoused by other writers in the capabilities tradition such as Crocker 2008) in deliberation. By presuming debate and competing viewpoints on many topics, rather than a single definitive answer, we want to encourage careful, open-minded, analytical reasoning about those viewpoints. Our hope is that the chapters stimulate readers to debate divergent analyses and perspectives for themselves.

## Conclusion

The multidimensional perspective, the human focus, and the emphasis on debate and deliberation are all essential for answering questions on what poverty is, what causes it, and how it can be reduced. They all aid in understanding the possibilities for human wellbeing. They are pedagogical strategies to shed some light on this book’s ultimate question: what does it mean to be a human living in poverty? This is an enormous question, with many different potential answers, and we do not intend to answer it at the outset. Instead, we hope that readers return to the question again and again, seeking new answers in every chapter. For now, and to launch this book into its subsequent chapters, we will return to the community we mentioned at the beginning of the chapter to pose a series of questions that all stem from the objective of treating poverty as a human problem.

The community itself was Dharavi, a neighborhood in Mumbai, India, known as one of the largest slums in the world. This is a place where, with its deprivations, so many people are struggling and sometimes succeeding to build a flourishing life. From the description we have given, how might poverty be multidimensional in Dharavi? What might it mean to be a human living in absolute poverty versus relative poverty in this community? What could be the basic entitlements, the central capabilities to which all people in Dharavi should have a right? How does lacking those basic entitlements affect the human being? How might living in Dharavi affect one’s physical health and learning? How might it affect one’s psychological health? How would you imagine that living in poverty might affect one’s sense of self-worth? How, in sum, might living in poverty affect one’s ability “to do and to be” in the capabilities sense?



This book is not an ethics manual, though ethical concerns will pervade its inquiry. Focusing on poverty as a human problem connects to our collective responsibility as human beings to achieve the goals of understanding what causes poverty and how suffering can be alleviated. Studying poverty is fundamentally about our *own* humanity. This is because we humanize ourselves by considering the basic rights and capabilities to which we are all entitled (Walker 2009). We humanize ourselves, and hopefully our societies and the world, when we take on the challenges of understanding the minimum requirements of human dignity, how people are unjustly deprived of their dignity, and how we can justly help them to recover it. In the final chapter of the book, we examine ethical questions in more detail, but throughout all the chapters that follow, we urge readers to think consistently and profoundly about their own ethical engagement with poverty, what it means to study it, and what you owe those who are living in unfreedom.

### Discussion questions

- 1 What does freedom have to do with poverty?
- 2 What are the problems with examining global poverty only in terms of the global south and not the global north?
- 3 What do you see as the relative advantages and disadvantages of the income and capabilities approaches? Is the capabilities approach relevant only for “developing countries,” or could it work for any country around the world?
- 4 What does it mean to treat human beings as ends and not as means?
- 5 What capabilities do you think are essential for a dignified life? Do you think the list should be left open like Sen advocates or do you think the global community needs to agree on a list like Nussbaum’s? What would you add to or subtract from Nussbaum’s list?
- 6 What would the deliberative process look like for a society to decide on its list of central capabilities?
  - Attempt to construct such a process in your class and conduct a debate to identify agreed-upon central capabilities.
  - Do you think it is possible to come to a truly democratic agreement on basic capabilities, whether globally, within countries, or even within your classroom?
- 7 What do you think of the critiques that the capabilities approach is guilty of imposing western values on the rest of the world?

### Online resources

- This interview with Amartya Sen from 1999 covers a number of ideas in the capabilities approach: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6A7k6peWRM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6A7k6peWRM)
- The short documentary *Dharavi Diary* is available at <https://vimeo.com/40813441>

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