

# AMARTYA SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT AND *GAUDIUM ET SPES*: ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND STRUCTURAL SOLIDARITY

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## 1. Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and *Gaudium et Spes*

Current development thinking has been dominated by what can be called the 'human development school', widely popularised by the annual Human Development Reports of the United Nations Human Development Programme, and whose conceptual roots are to be found in the works of the economist and Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen.

"Development can be seen, it is argued here, as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy."<sup>1</sup> So opens *Development as Freedom*. Sen identifies two reasons for viewing freedom as central to the process of development. First, there is an evaluative reason, for "assessment of progress has to be done primarily in terms of whether the freedoms that people have are enhanced." And second, there is the instrumental reason, for "achievement of development is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of people."<sup>2</sup>

The first reason to see development as freedom is linked to the evaluation of human well-being. Sen's pioneering works in welfare economics have emphasised that the quality of life does not lie in the amount of commodities that people possess, or the utility levels that they reach, but lies their "capabilities" or freedoms, that is, in their "abilities to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being."<sup>3</sup> There are components of human well-being that the income measure cannot capture, such as a greater access to knowledge, better nutrition and health services, more secure livelihoods, security against crime and physical violence, political and cultural freedoms, or participation in community activities. This is why the end of development cannot be reduced to a single measure, but needs to be multidimensional and concerned with the nature of the lives that people are living. The end of development is to enhance people's freedoms in all areas of their life (economic, social and cultural). Development can then be regarded as a process of expansion of capabilities, as a process of "expansion of the real freedoms that the citizens enjoy to pursue the objectives they have reason to value."<sup>4</sup> Or alternatively, development can be regarded as "the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency."<sup>5</sup>

The most fundamental freedom inherent in Sen's approach to development is that of "individual agency," that is, "the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world."<sup>6</sup> Throughout his works, Sen has emphasised that people should not be seen as passive spoon-fed patients of social welfare institutions, but "have to be seen as being actively involved in shaping their own destiny."<sup>7</sup> Each person has to be seen as a "doer and a judge" instead of a "beneficiary,"<sup>8</sup> as subject and actor of her own life rather than an object of actions that are being made for her. By "agent", Sen understands "someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives."<sup>9</sup> Sen distinguishes agency achievement, which is "the realisation of goals and values a person

has reasons to pursue, whether or not they are connected with her own well-being,”<sup>10</sup> and agency freedom, which is “one’s freedom to bring about the achievements one values and which one attempts to produce.”<sup>11</sup> Although by ‘agency’, Sen means the ability to bring about the goals that a person values, whether these goals are connected to human well-being or not, as an approach to development, the exercise of individual agency has closely been associated to goals related to the enhancement of human well-being. For example, speaking of the deep afflictions that affect mankind in terms of hunger, malnutrition, preventable diseases, poverty, oppression, Sen underlines that, “we have to recognise the role of *individual freedoms* of different kinds in countering these afflictions. Indeed, *individual agency* is, ultimately, central to addressing these deprivations.”<sup>12</sup>

Exercising individual agency may take an infinite variety of forms and ranges of actions. The question of what kind of agency is central to addressing human deprivations is left open. Sen’s writings devote a lot of attention to the ability to participate in the life of community, as a form of exercise of agency to do something for oneself and for other members of the community.<sup>13</sup> Participation in the life of the community is one form of expressing individual agency, but other forms may be valuable too, like for example migration to another country in the search for a greater well-being.

In addition to the above freedoms, Sen’s capability approach identifies two crucial attitudes for ‘development as freedom’ to be effective: sympathy, where concern for others directly affects one’s own welfare, and commitment, where concern for others is independent of one’s own welfare, where one’s choice is not motivated by its effects on one’s own welfare.<sup>14</sup> For example, one can help a destitute person because one feels unhappy and uncomfortable at the sight of this destitution. Helping the poor as a way of alleviating one’s unhappiness and making oneself more comfortable, would then be a sympathy-based action. But one can also help a destitute person because one thinks that it is not fair for someone else to suffer from destitution while one is not. In that case one’s action would be based on commitment.<sup>15</sup>

The role that these other-regarding concerns play for making participation work for the greatest well-being of all has been especially underlined in Drèze and Sen’s analysis of participation in India. For example, they write that, a way for democratic decision-making not to be a game where the voices of the powerful trumps the voice of the underprivileged, is to create a sense of solidarity between the most privileged and the underprivileged (e.g. intellectuals and higher social classes speaking on behalf of the underprivileged and defending their interests).

The capability approach to development emerged in a totally secular environment in the early 1980s. Yet, the ideas inherent to the capability approach bear many striking similarities with the ideas about international development set up in *Gaudium et Spes* forty years before the capability approach acquired a fully-fledged conception of development.

First, there is the primacy of freedom and personal dignity over all economic and social ends:

“Only in freedom can man direct himself towards goodness. Our contemporaries make much of this freedom and pursue it eagerly; and rightly to be sure. [...] For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man remains ‘under the control of his own decisions’.” (GS §17)

“For the beginning, the subject and the goal of all institutions is and must be the human person.” (GS, §25)

“In the economic and social realms, the dignity and complete vocation of the human person and the welfare of society as a whole are to be respected and promoted. For man is the source, centre, and purpose of all economic and social life.” (GS §63)

These words echo the capability approach’s emphasis that human well-being is to be assessed in terms of the actual living that the human person is living, and not in terms of the possession of commodities. In *Gaudium et Spes*, as in the capability approach, it is the human person who is the end of all social institutions. A liberalisation of markets would do no good, if the end result is that farmers in developing countries get a lower price for their crops, and have a lower ability to be adequately nourished, or a lower ability to be educated (if they cannot afford sending their children to schools as a consequence of their loss of income).

The recurrent idea of the capability approach is that human freedom is curtailed by poverty. Poverty makes people unable to lead a life they have reason to choose and value. For example, a clever female teenager in a rural village in Zambia dreams of going to go to university and be a doctor, but her freedom to choose such a life is crippled by the poverty of her family who cannot pay for her going to school and by the inability of the government to offer free education for all. Such a conceptualisation of the link between freedom and poverty is already found explicitly in *Gaudium et Spes*:

“Human freedom is often crippled when a man encounters extreme poverty, just as it withers when he indulges in too many of life’s comforts and imprisons himself in a kind of splendid isolation. Freedom acquires new strength, by contrast, when a man consents to the unavoidable requirements of social life, takes on the manifold demands of human partnership, and commits himself to the service of the human community.” (GS §31.1)

The centre building stone of the capability approach, human agency, and the ability of people to shape their own destiny, is implicitly underpinning *Gaudium et Spes*, although it has been made more explicit in the later encyclical *Populorum Progressio*:

“Man is truly human only if he is the master of his own actions and the judge of their worth, only if he is the architect of his own progress. He must act according to his God-given nature, freely accepting its potentials and its claims upon him.” (PP §34)

This emphasis on making people actors of their own lives has been particularly exemplified in what has been called the principle of subsidiarity:

“Neither the State nor any society must ever substitute itself for the initiative and responsibility of individuals and of intermediate communities at the level on which they can function, nor must they take away the room necessary for their freedom.” (*Mater et Magistra* §138)

While the capability approach talks about the importance of the moral sentiments of ‘sympathy’ and commitment’, or in other words of ‘other-regarding concerns’ for reducing poverty and increasing the freedoms of people to live a life they have reason to value, *Gaudium et Spes* uses the word ‘solidarity’, and underlines that an emphasis on freedom has

to go hand in hand with an equal emphasis on solidarity, which it calls commitment to the ‘common good’. The encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* defines solidarity as “this firm and constant determination to work for the common good; that is, for the good of all and each because we are all responsible for all.” (§38). *Gaudium et Spes* had earlier defined the common good as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment.”(GS §26).

And this where the striking similarities between the capability approach to development and *Gaudium et Spes* stop, and where, as we shall see in this paper, the encyclical will forcefully reveal its prophetic stance. In contrast to *Gaudium et Spes*, the capability approach conceives human well-being in terms of the freedoms that individuals have reason to choose and value. These freedoms are properties of individuals. Although the capability approach does consider freedoms, such as democratic freedom, as valuable freedoms which cannot be reduced to individual characteristics. Sen stresses that democratic freedom is “a significant *ingredient* – a critically important *component*—of individual capabilities.”<sup>16</sup> The importance and value of democratic freedom are only relevant to the extent that they enter as a component of individual human well-being, to the extent that it makes the lives of individuals better.

Social arrangements remain to be “investigated in terms of their contribution to enhancing and guaranteeing the substantive freedoms *of individuals*.”<sup>17</sup> As Sen insists, all actions finally bear upon their effects on the lives that human beings live, lives which are only lived by individuals and not by some supra-individual subjects. Individual lives are deeply dependent and inter-connected, but they are not in fusion: “the intrinsic satisfactions that occur in a life must occur in an individual’s life, but in terms of causal connections, they *depend* on social interactions with others.”<sup>18</sup> For the capability approach, other-regarding concerns are important because they increase ‘my’ quality of life, and ‘your’ quality of life’. While for Catholic Social Thinking, other-regarding concerns are important because they increase ‘our quality of life’, because ‘my’ life can only be full improved if ‘our’ lives are improved.

By using the example of migration remittances in El Salvador, I will argue that contemporary development theory *requires* to be anchored into common good approach to development. If individual freedom and individual agency fail to be understood within the wider framework of the common good, then a freedom-centred approach to development, such as is Amartya Sen’s capability approach and the human development paradigm, can hope to do very little to address human deprivations, and remove the unfreedoms that leave so many people with little choice about their lives.

## 2. Migration remittances in El Salvador

El Salvador is one of the poorest countries of Latin America. Table 1 shows that El Salvador has much higher levels of monetary poverty than the Latin American average. While 35% of the Latin American population live with less than \$2 a day, 44% of the Salvadorian population does so. The figure is especially high in rural areas, where nearly 60% of the population is labelled as ‘poor’. One has also to note that (monetary) poverty in Latin America has not decreased since the 1980s. While 35% of the Latin American population was counted as ‘poor’ in 1980, still 35% live in poverty 1999. The signature of the Peace Agreements in 1992 which marked the end of the Salvadorian civil war does not seem to have brought along a better social context. Poverty in rural areas is even higher in 1999 than in 1994, and poverty in urban areas only decreased by 6 percentage points.

**Table 1: Percentage of families below the poverty line (percentage of families whose income is double the costs of a basket of basic food, or below \$2 a day)**

	1980	1990	1994			1999		
	Total	Total	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural
El Salvador	-	-	48*	40	58	44	34	59
LAC average	35	41	38	32	56	35	30	54

Source: CEPAL, Statistical Yearbook, 2002.

\*Data for 1995

When assessed in terms of the capability approach, the well-being of the Salvadorian population does not fare much better than when assessed in monetary terms. The tables below compare with data from Costa Rica, which is well-known for its exceptional achievements in human development.<sup>19</sup> In 2000, illiteracy rates were still about twice the Latin American average, and the decrease in illiteracy rates has been even during the two last decades. This suggests that the end of the civil war in 1992 did not bring significant improvements in tackling illiteracy (table 2). In terms of the functioning of being healthy, as measured for example by infant mortality rates, and access to basic services, table 3 shows that El Salvador lies in the Latin American average (one has however to take these data with caution as infant mortality is much higher in rural areas where the statistical surveys do not really reach). Only half of the population has access to piped water, and only 40% have access to a sewage system.

**Table 2: Illiteracy rates (population above 15 which cannot read and write)**

	Total			Male			Female		
	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000
El Salvador	33.8	27.4	21.3	29.1	23.7	18.4	38.4	30.7	23.9
Costa Rica	8.3	6.1	4.4	8.1	6.1	4.5	8.4	6.1	4.3
LAC average	-	-	11.7	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: CEPAL, Statistical Yearbook, 2002.

**Table 3: Infant mortality rates (per thousand live births)**

	1980-85	1985-90	1990-95	1995-2000
El Salvador	77.0	54.0	40.2	32
Costa Rica	19	16	13.7	12.1
LAC average	57.8	48.3	40.5	35.8

Source: CEPAL, Statistical Yearbook, 2002.

**Table 4: Access to basic services**

	Access to piped water			Sewage system			Electricity		
	1980	1990	1999	1980	1990	1999	1980	1990	1999
El Salvador	-	-	54.4	-	-	40.1	-	-	81.6
Costa Rica	86.9	94.7	-	-	-	-	83.1	98.8	-

Source: CEPAL, Statistical Yearbook, 2002.

These figures critically reflect the lack of public action in promoting people's well-being. Tables 5 and 6 indicate that El Salvador is lagging quite behind the Latin American average

when it comes to public spending on health and education. Interestingly, the country spends more than 12% of its GNP on dealing with violence and its consequences.<sup>20</sup>

Table 5: Public spending on education (as a percentage of GDP)

	1980	1985	1990	1995	1998	2000
El Salvador	3.4	2.7	1.9	2.1	-	3.0
Costa Rica	6.5	5.1	4.2	4.4	5.3	-
LAC average	-	-	-	-	4.5	-

Source: CEPAL, Statistical Yearbook, 2002.

Table 6: Public spending on health

	1980	1985	1990	1995	1998
El Salvador	1.5	1.3	1	1.3	-
Costa Rica	7.2	5	7.2	7.1	7.4
LAC average	-	-	-	-	3.1

Source: CEPAL, Statistical Yearbook, 2002.

There has been a large history of migration to the United States prompted by the civil war during the 1970s and 1980s. After the signature of the Peace Agreements in 1992, few migrants did return to El Salvador, and migration to the United States has continued at an even higher pace. Only the reasons behind the migration changed. What was once the search for a safe haven from the violence of the civil war has become the search for a better economic and social life given the government's inability to tackle poverty. It is estimated that in 2000, 1.2 million Salvadorians lived in the US. Some figures speak even of 2 millions (out of a total population of 6.3 millions). An estimated 50% of Salvadorians in the US are undocumented without proper visa, working mainly as domestic workers, cleaners, construction workers. In 2000, remittances amounted to about 13.6% of the country's GDP, a figure that is growing higher as years go on, as table 7 indicates. The share of remittances in the country's GDP has more than doubled during the last decade.

Table 7: Participation of remittances in GDP (in %)

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
5.9	9.8	11.5	11.8	12.0	11.2	10.3	10.5	11.3	11.2	13.2	13.6

Source: UNDP (2002).

The presence of remittances makes a significant difference in the life of poor families. A survey conducted with 200 families in 2002 in a district of El Salvador (with a total number of 326 families of which only 4 families were "non-poor"), obtained the following results:<sup>21</sup> 35.5% of families had migrants, more than two thirds of migrants were men below 25, half of migrants had only primary education, and 85% of them had gone illegally. Table 8 compares the income and consumption patterns of families with and without migrants.

Table 8: Migrant consumption patterns

(US\$)	Families with migrant	Families without migrants
Average annual income	665	398
Investment in education (per child)	87	44
Expenditures on health	448	190

Expenditures on mobile phones	35	16
Expenditures on land lines	34	5

Source: Benavides et al. (2003).

The money from remittances is essentially spent on consumption goods, mainly food, medication, education, and telecommunications. Remittances seem to play a non-negligible role in the decision of parents to send their children to school. A study showed that remittances had a significant impact on school retention, as family budget is the primary factor for school drop-outs.<sup>22</sup> In urban areas, remittances of US\$100 lowers the hazard of leaving primary school by more than 50%, and by more than 25% in rural areas (in rural areas, the family budget is not the main constraint for school enrolment, distance from school is another important factor).

Not only do individual migrants put their own individual efforts for improving their well-being and that of their family members, they are also putting together collective efforts. This phenomenon of collective remittances is also known in the literature of migration as 'hometown associations', which are organizations of immigrants which channel the money earned by immigrants in order to improve their communities of origin.<sup>23</sup> Hometown associations usually finance central public goods of a community, such as road infrastructures, school maintenance, water and sanitation facilities, or community recreation facilities. Examining the case of hometown associations in Mexico, Orozco notes that in some communities, the donations of immigrants through these hometown associations represent as much as the amount the municipality allocates to public works. He cites for example the case of a school improvement project in a Mexican municipality which was three times the budget that the municipality allocated to public works in education.<sup>24</sup>

El Salvador does not escape this growing phenomenon of collective remittances that occur all over Latin America. For example, the government's social investment fund, the *Fondo de Inversión Social para el Desarrollo Local* (FISDL) is using collective remittances to finance social investment in municipalities. Unfortunately, no studies exist so far regarding the extent and impact of collective remittances on El Salvador's social development.

Despite the dearth of data, what can be said is that migration risks taking over the role of what was once the responsibility of governments: the provision of public goods. Migration may well be a form of exercising 'one's individual agency' and one way to shape one's own destiny and improve one's well-being, that of family members (as table 8 showed, it helped improve the health and educational achievements of the family members), and that of members of their community of origin (in the case of collective remittances), it is a form of agency that takes away the social responsibilities of the government, and shuns away the need for a structural solution to poverty. As long as families and communities get their needs met by migration, there are little incentives to address structurally the root causes of poverty.

Moreover, migration is not only a short-term poverty reduction strategy which does not address the structural roots of poverty, it may also undermine efforts at tackling structurally poverty in the long term (and hence providing the fuel for further migration and further individualised short-term poverty reduction strategies). While being a temporary means to meet family and community needs, without a structural solution to poverty, poor people would need to rely endlessly on migration to pay for health care and education, and communities would need to rely endlessly on migration to finance public infrastructures and utilities.

This erosion of seeing the importance of structural solutions to structural problems is especially reflected in the lack of political participation. Most Salvadorians do not consider the government, through its elected representatives, as the major agent of change in the Salvadorian society. A political survey concluded that,<sup>25</sup> in 1999, only 5% of the population trusted political parties. In 2000, less people trusted electoral processes than in 1994. In 2000, while 54% believe that democracy is the best political system, 10.3% would like a return to an authoritarian government, and 21.2% are indifferent to a democratic or authoritarian regime. It is also very worrying to observe that the Salvadorian government strongly encourages migration as a poverty exit mechanism, and sees migration as a positive aspect of globalisation (I shall return more extensively to that point in the last section).

When assessed in terms of well-being of individuals, migration is a positive way of exercising agency for the sake of promoting one's own well-being and that of the members of the same community. The shift from the public to private provisioning of health and education for example equally promote people's freedoms to be healthy and educated, and perhaps even better if private provisioning of public goods is linked to greater efficiency in delivery.

Migration is also a powerful sympathy and commitment-based action. Often migrants undergo a loss in their own well-being (such as the risk entailed by the illegal travel to the US) for the sake of other members of the family. Fathers go abroad to secure a better living for their children. Sons go abroad for the sake of securing health care to their parents. Assessed in terms of the capability approach, migration can thus be seen as a good way of promoting individual freedoms. However, there is a strong argument that migration may be undermining incentives to undertake structural reforms towards the promotion of human well-being. This in turn may be increasing the likelihood that poor people will look for better living options abroad, further undermining the country's capacity to promote human well-being. In other words, migration is a form of exercising individual agency for the sake of enhancing human well-being which may erode other forms of individual agency such as participation in the kinds of political activity that build up stable democratic and socially responsible public institutions. The individual agency that Sen's capability approaches stresses as being so important promoting human well-being may fail to do so in the long run if expanding human well-being goes on being considered in terms of expanding the freedoms of individuals. When well-being is considered in terms of the common good, there is hope for individual agency to effectively address human deprivations.

### 3. A common good approach to development

The concept of the common good has a long history, which can be traced back to Aristotle. Although not talking of the 'common good' as such, Aristotle affirms that the political community exists for the sake of the good of the community which embraces all other goods:

“Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest good of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.” (*Politics* 1252<sup>a</sup>1-6)

*Gaudium et Spes* directly paraphrases the above passage:

“The political community exists for the sake of the common good, in which it finds its full justification and significance, and the source of its inherent legitimacy. Indeed, the common good embraces the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection.” (GS §74)

In a seminal contribution to the political debate in the United Kingdom, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference for England and Wales issued in 1996 a report entitled ‘The Common Good.’ The common good was defined therein as “the whole network of social conditions which enable human individuals and groups to flourish and live a fully, genuinely human life, otherwise described as ‘integral human development’. All are responsible for all, collectively, at the level of society or nation, not only as individuals.” (§48)

The central idea of the common good is that it is a good shared in by all those who are forming a certain community. The common good “is immanent within the relationships that bring this community or society into being.”<sup>26</sup> The common good is a good that goes beyond individual human well-being. It is “a good proper to, and attainable only by, the community, yet individually shared by its members.”<sup>27</sup> The good of each community member cannot be separated from the good of the community as a whole. The common good of the community and the good of the members are mutually implicating.<sup>28</sup> Lisa Cahill writes that, “The common good defines a solidaristic association of persons that is more than the good of individuals in the aggregate. ‘Common good’ says something about social communication and cooperation as essential to the fulfilment of our very personhood.”<sup>29</sup>

The idea of the common good has tended to be received with quite some scepticism in secular writings. As emphasised earlier, the capability approach for example insists that social arrangements are to be assessed in terms of the freedoms of individuals, and not the freedom of some collective body, which would be more than the aggregation of the freedoms of individuals. Secular writings might accommodate the idea that a good would be common to all (for example, democratic freedom would be such a good common to all), but it does not accommodate very well the idea that such a common good has an existence in its own right. The capability approach fully embraces the fact that “the welfare of individual persons is contingent upon the interdependent social relations that constitute the common good”<sup>30</sup> But it would not accommodate the statement that, “yet, the common good is a value in its own right, as more than the aggregate of the individuals participating in it.”<sup>31</sup>

I have summarised five objections that secular writings may formulate to the idea of the common good. First, the idea of the common good, as attractive as it might appeal, is another form of talking about the need for the adequate institutional arrangements to promote individual human well-being, The common good is in that sense instrumental to individual flourishing. Second, if the common good is not instrumental, then it might trump individualities and subsume them into a totalitarian system. Third, the idea of the common good is not much different from the idea of public good in economics. Fourth, the common good is a disguised way of talking about a good which is common to human life, and therefore can amount to the human rights or lists of human well-being as the ‘thick vague theory of the good’ put forward by Martha Nussbaum.<sup>32</sup> Finally, is the idea of ‘a’ common good or ‘the’ common good which matters? If there is such an idea of ‘the’ common good, then one might have serious doubts as to who is to know what ‘the’ good of the community is. Given the diversity of opinions, how could one agree on what constitutes ‘the’ human good.

The first objection is that there is actually no need for an explicit idea of the common good. It is just another way of talking about the need for institutional arrangements that are shared by the members of a same community and which contribute to promoting the good of each of its members. This instrumental vision of the common good has especially been portrayed by the natural law developed by John Finnis. For Finnis, the common good is “the whole ensemble of material and other conditions, including forms of collaboration, that tend to favour, facilitate and foster the realization by each individual of his or her personal development.”<sup>33</sup> The common good is hence a question of creating the conditions in which people can pursue their own objectives, namely basic goods in Finnis’ natural law theory.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Sen’s capability approach, a common good vision of development would only insist on the importance of the institutional conditions in which people can pursue the freedoms they have reason to choose and value. Nothing else thus than what Sen’s capability approach already says and insists upon.

Such view of the common good as instrumental for pursuing one’s personal fulfilment or individual well-being is however incompatible with the essence of the common good. Personal fulfilment or the pursuit of one’s own well-being requires participating in goods that transcend individuals. Although the social conditions are necessary for individual freedoms to be met, and in some sense the common good is instrumental to the good of each individual, the common good is part of individual flourishing itself. As Hollenbach noted in what is the major contemporary academic study to date on the issue, the shared life of interaction with others is a good in itself, and this is why it cannot be disaggregated into the good of each individual, “for such disaggregation dissolves the bonds of relationship that constitute an important part of good lives”.<sup>35</sup> This leads Hollenbach to conclude that the common good can best be described as the good of being a community, as “the good realized in the mutual relationships in and through which human beings achieve their well-being.”<sup>36</sup> These words echo the words of one of the main revivers of the idea of the common good in the modern world, the Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain:

“We must not say that the aim of society is the individual good (or the mere collection of individual goods) of each person who constitutes it. This formula would dissolve society *as such* for the benefit of its parts, and would lead to the ‘anarchy of atoms’. The end of society is the common good. But if one fails to grasp the fact that the good of the body politic is a common good of *human persons*, this formula may lead in its turn to other errors of the collectivist or totalitarian type. [...] The common good of society is neither a simple collection of private goods, a good belonging to a whole which draws the parts to itself [...]. The common good is the *good human* life of the multitude, of a multitude of persons; it is their communion in the good life; it is therefore common to the whole and to the parts, on which it flows back and who must all benefit from it.”<sup>37</sup>

The above quotation answers by the same token the second objection that one might have to the idea of the common good, that of the danger of totalitarianism. The idea of the common good does not trump individualities, it actually enhances these individualities. By participating in the common good, i.e., by participating in the whole network of social conditions which enable human individuals and groups to flourish, individuals are becoming more themselves. For example, by paying one’s taxes and not resorting to fiscal evasion in order to increase one’s incomes, one participates in these conditions that will allow oneself, and other members of the community to better flourish (if for example the tax money is used

to finance the improvement of the National Health Service). Or to cite another example, by participating in the life of the community through establishing trade unions and being a member of them, one is able to enhance the establishment of labour conditions (such as minimum legal wage, legal holiday, sickness leave) for the sake of one's own good and the good of others. Participating in the common good, in a good shared by all, does not hence sacrifice individual flourishing for the sake of the flourishing of the group. Enhancing the flourishing of the group does enhance in the long run the flourishing of each individual. One has to acknowledge, however, that in some extreme cases, individual flourishing might be sacrificed, with great harms, for the sake of the group in the short run. For example, a trade unionist in a dictatorship might be put into prison and be tortured, but his or her commitment-based action will pave the way for a greater good for his or her fellow workers and future generations. The cases where individual flourishing might be severely trumped for the sake of the collective are exceptional, and in all cases, such sacrifice is not demanded but rests entirely upon the freedom of the individual.

This example offers a response to the third objection that I have identified, that of the similarity with the already existing idea of public good in economics. One of the key characteristics of a public good is its non-exclusive character. Participation in the good does not exclude other people's participation in it. For example, by using the public good of public transport, I do not exclude others using that public transport (provided one has not reached the saturation point of use). Participation in the common good is different from participation in a public good in the sense that participation in it does not only not exclude another person's participation, but it actually promotes it. For example, by working towards establishing the structural conditions for decent labour, one does not exclude others from decent labour but one facilitates other people's contribution in establishing these structural conditions, and furthering the possibilities of decent labour. Workers might militate for the right of setting up trade unions for the sake of guaranteeing minimum living wages. Once the trade union is legally established and politically recognised, it might facilitate the claim of further labour guarantees such as maternity cover or sickness leave.

Fourth, if the common good is a good shared in by all, then one could say that Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities exemplifies in some sense the common good, as these central human capabilities represent a good shared by all humans – all human beings, by virtue of being human, would need to have these capabilities in order to have a good human life.<sup>38</sup> This is however a precipitated conclusion. The concept of the common good goes actually beyond what is 'the good human life'. The common good is the common life of the community and the structural conditions for the good human life. While the *human* good is a good that only dwells in individual lives (for example health is a good that only individuals have), the *common* good is a good that dwells beyond individual lives. In that sense, the idea of the common good is very close to the idea of 'structures of living together' put forward by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. He defined them as structures which belong to a particular historical community, which provide the conditions for individual lives to flourish, and which are irreducible to interpersonal relations and yet bound up with these.<sup>39</sup> The common good could be seen as the sum of these structures of living together. It is irreducible to interpersonal relations. It is something that emerges from life in common, from the 'living together' in human communities.

This leads us to our final point, what is 'the common good'? Is it possible to identify the set of all these structures of living together which provide the conditions for individual lives to flourish? Or better speak about 'a common good' that is relative to different communities? A

common good would hence be a good that a particular historical community shares in common and that sustains its life in common. A common good approach to development which would consider ‘a’ instead of ‘the’ common good as objective to pursue would quickly fall in a certain relativism that Sen and Nussbaum’s capability approaches have tried to combat. If one endorses that there’s such an idea of ‘the human good’, a good common to all humans in their quality of being human, such as Nussbaum’s ‘thick vague theory of the good’, it follows that one can endorse the idea of the common good that makes the good human life in common possible. The idea of the human good does not pretend having an objective and exhaustive definition of what the human good consisted of, it can, and has to, be left ‘thick vague’. Similarly, the idea of the common good can, and has to, be left thick vague as one will never be able to exhaust all the structures that sustain the good human life in common.

To sum up, a common good approach to development focuses not as much on the freedoms that individuals may have as on the structural conditions supporting these freedoms. Within such an approach, individual agency is seen as the ability to promote the conditions in which the well-being of oneself *as* a member of a certain political community can be enhanced. While Sen’s capability approach focuses on individuals, and then looks at institutional arrangements to promote the well-being of individuals, a common good approach to development focuses on the institutions themselves, as well as on individuals, because it is precisely within these institutions that individuals are formed and nurtured.<sup>40</sup> Because the institutional fact is constitutive of a person’s individuality, it is not only the well-being of individuals which is to be secured but also the well-being of these institutions. This view will have non-negligible consequences for the way one understands individual freedom and agency and its role in addressing human deprivations.

#### 4. Political participation and structural solidarity

Seeing membership to a community as constitutive of the self implies seeing solidarity and responsibility at the heart of human freedom. Indeed, the very idea of the common good “implies that every individual, no matter how high or low, has a duty to share in promoting the welfare of the community as well as a right to benefit from that welfare.”<sup>41</sup> One could even affirm that commitment to the common good is synonymous to solidarity. The social encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* defines solidarity as “this firm and constant determination to work for the common good; that is, for the good of all and each because we are all responsible for all.” (§38) The encyclical goes on stating that freedom and solidarity are intrinsically linked and that none of both can be sacrificed for each other: “In order to be genuine, development must be achieved within the framework of solidarity and freedom, without ever sacrificing either of them under whatever pretext.” (§33.8) The human being is fully free and human to the extent that he or she is responsible for others. This idea was already present in an embryonic form in *Gaudium et Spes*, when it asserted that, “freedom acquires new strength when a man consents to the unavoidable requirements of social life, takes on the manifold demands of human partnership, and commits himself to the service of the human community.” (§31.1)

Thus, individual freedom is strengthened by participation in the common good. For freedom and solidarity to be mutually self-reinforcing, one would need an adequate institutional framework that promotes people’s participation in the common good for the greatest advantage of all. Hollenbach insists that such an institutional framework is a requirement of social justice: “Social justice requires an overall institutional framework that will enable

people both to participate actively in building up the common good and to share in the benefits of the common good.”<sup>42</sup> Of such adequate institutional frameworks, he singles out participation in the political life as a constitutive part of the pursuit of the common good. When political participation is low, the common good is low as well, and people have less freedom to determine the conditions of the life they share together. A low political participation confines people to pursue the good they can in their private lives.<sup>43</sup>

The example of the migration in El Salvador well illustrates this point. The lack of active citizen participation in political life (as exemplified for example by the low political involvement of people), and the lack of active support for such participation on behalf of the government, entails that people are reduced to pursue what good they can in their private life, namely through migration. Instead of strengthening the political empowerment of people, the Salvadorian government is on the contrary actively undermining active citizen participation in the political life, and actively undermining people’s participation in the common good. The government’s attitude in the last presidential elections in March 2004 particularly reflects this determined effort to prevent collective and structural solutions to poverty. Two main parties disputed the elections: ARENA (*Allianza Republica Nacional*), the party of the right behind the privatisation and liberalisation policies (the founder of that party is also the one that committed the intellectual murder of Monseñor Romero) and the FMLN (*Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberación Nacional*), the party of the left which gathered among its ranks the guerrilla of the civil war. The FMLN came with a structuralist reformist agenda, and was committed to promote human development. It also advocated a return to the national money (the Salvadorian economy has been totally dollarised). Before the elections, the Salvadorian newspapers (all owned by wealthy economic elites) reported the news that the US government had threatened to freeze all migration remittances if the FMLN were to win the elections. Furthermore, the US announced that it would not recognise the FMLN government and would break all economic and political links with El Salvador. It is only after the elections, once ARENA won, that the latter information was denied. What ARENA promised to do during its campaign was to lower the costs of money transfers for migrants, giving hence greater incentives for people to look for private rather than collective solutions to poverty reduction.

The capability approach has rightly emphasised the crucial role of participation in the life of the community as an important form of expression of individual agency. The case for participation in the life of the community is even more compelling when human well-being is considered in terms of a common good. What matters is not as much the expansion of individual freedoms, by whatever human actions, but the expansion of the common good which cannot be reduced to the freedoms of individual agents, through participation. In other words, not any type of individual agency is central in addressing human deprivations, but the type of individual agency which leads to the promotion of the common good. If Sen’s capability approach attributes a crucial importance to political participation as a way of promoting development and the freedoms that people have reason to choose and value, it is perhaps because, tacitly, it recognises that beyond these freedoms, there is something more important that sustain them, namely the structures of life in community.

One could argue that, while not talking explicitly about “commitment to the common good”, the central importance of participatory decision-making in Sen’s capability approach is implicitly synonymous to it. While Catholic Social Thinking stresses that individual freedom is strengthened by participation in the common good (by participating in the building of the common good, all have a share in its benefits), the capability approach to development

stresses that freedom is strengthened by participation in the life of the community. One has to be, however, very cautious in drawing the hasty conclusion that the idea of participating in the common good is similar to the idea of participating in the life of the community in Sen's capability approach.

From the above discussion, one can highlight two crucial differences. One is the recognition of the intrinsic value of the common good, which is beyond the aggregated value of the life of each single individual. The second is that solidarity is built in as an intrinsic part of human freedom. Otherness, or the relation to the other, is constitutive of individual freedom. Otherness does not follow the exercise of free choice. While in Sen's capability approach, autonomy and individual freedom tend to have a normative priority over affiliation.

In today's increasingly more connected world, the prophetic words of *Gaudium et Spes* expressed forty years ago still have a forceful actuality. Unless one realises that the human being is free only to the extent that he or she participates in the good that is common to all, not only the good of their families, or communities of origin, but the good of all humans and the natural environment, a good that surpasses all individual good, very little can indeed be achieved to address human deprivations.

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<sup>1</sup> Sen (1999:3).

<sup>2</sup> All quotes from Sen (1999:4).

<sup>3</sup> Sen (1993:30).

<sup>4</sup> Drèze and Sen (1995:10).

<sup>5</sup> Sen (1999:xii).

<sup>6</sup> Sen (1999:18).

<sup>7</sup> Sen (1999:53).

<sup>8</sup> Sen (1985:208).

<sup>9</sup> Sen (1999:19).

<sup>10</sup> Sen (1992:56).

<sup>11</sup> Sen (1992:57).

<sup>12</sup> Sen (1999:xi). Italics are mine.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Drèze and Sen (2002).

<sup>14</sup> Sen (1982).

<sup>15</sup> This example is taken from Sen (1999:270).

<sup>16</sup> Sen (2002:79).

<sup>17</sup> Sen (1999:xiii). Emphasis is mine.

<sup>18</sup> Sen (2002:85).

<sup>19</sup> See for example Jolly and Mehrotra (1997).

<sup>20</sup> El Salvador is known as one of the most violent countries in Latin America, together with Colombia, with homicide rates higher than 100 per 100,000 inhabitants. More people are reported to die of unnatural causes of deaths now than during the civil war. See for example Cruz et al. (2003).

<sup>21</sup> Benavides et al. (2003).

<sup>22</sup> Cox and Ureta (2003).

<sup>23</sup> See for example Orozco (2004).

<sup>24</sup> Orozco (2005).

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- <sup>25</sup> UNDP (2002: chapter 5).
- <sup>26</sup> Hollenbach (2002:9).
- <sup>27</sup> Dupré (1994:172).
- <sup>28</sup> Hollenbach (2002:189).
- <sup>29</sup> Cahill (2004:9).
- <sup>30</sup> Cahill (2004:42). See also Sen (2002:85) quoted earlier.
- <sup>31</sup> Cahill (2004:42).
- <sup>32</sup> See for example Nussbaum (1992).
- <sup>33</sup> Finnis (1980:153).
- <sup>34</sup> See for example Dupré (1995), Keys (1995) and Pakaluk (2001) for a critique of such view.
- <sup>35</sup> Hollenbach (2002:81). This is reminiscent of Charles Taylor's idea of irreducible social goods discussed in Taylor (1995).
- <sup>36</sup> Hollenbach (2002:81).
- <sup>37</sup> Maritain (1937:55). See also Maritain (1946).
- <sup>38</sup> See for example Nussbaum (2000).
- <sup>39</sup> Ricoeur's (1992:194) original definition refers to institution: "By institution, we understand the structure of *living together* as this belongs to a historical community, a structure irreducible to interpersonal relations and yet bound up with these."
- <sup>40</sup> Hollenbach (2002).
- <sup>41</sup> Catholic Bishops' Conference (1996: §70).
- <sup>42</sup> Hollenbach (2002:201).
- <sup>43</sup> Hollenbach (2002:100).