



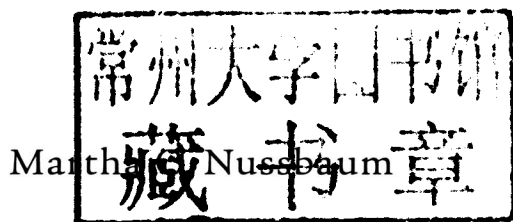
Creating Capabilities

THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

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CREATING CAPABILITIES

The Human Development Approach



THE BELKNAP PRESS OF
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

2011

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nussbaum, Martha Craven, 1947–

Creating capabilities: the human
development approach / Martha C. Nussbaum.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-0-674-05054-9 (alk. paper)

1. Social justice. 2. Economic development.

3. Women's rights. I. Title.

HM671.N868 2011

303.3'72—dc22

2010044834

CREATING CAPABILITIES

*To all the members of the
Human Development and Capability Association*

PREFACE

For a long time, economists, policy-makers, and bureaucrats who work on the problems of the world's poorer nations told people a story that distorted human experience. Their dominant models asserted that the quality of life in a nation was improving when, and only when, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita was increasing. This crude measure gave high marks to countries that contained alarming inequalities, countries in which a large proportion of people were not enjoying the fruits of a nation's overall economic improvement. Because countries respond to public rankings that affect their international reputation, the crude approach encouraged them to work for economic growth alone, without attending to the living standard of their poorer inhabitants, and without addressing issues such as health and education, which typically do not improve with economic growth.

This model persists. Although it is most firmly entrenched in standard analyses of the achievements of "developing countries"—as in the practice of development economics and in agencies associated with development, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank—it is also widely used to think about richer nations and what it means for them to "develop" or to im-

prove their quality of life. (All countries are “developing countries,” although that phrase is sometimes used to refer to poorer countries: every nation has a lot of room for improvement in delivering an adequate quality of life to all its people.) Since these nations also contain large inequalities, the approach generates similar distortions in them.

Today there is a new theoretical paradigm in the development and policy world. Known as the “Human Development” approach, and also as the “Capability Approach” or “Capabilities Approach,” it begins with a very simple question: What are people actually able to do and to be? What real opportunities are available to them? This question, though simple, is also complex, since the quality of a human life involves multiple elements whose relationship to one another needs close study. Indeed, one of the appealing features of the new approach is its complexity: it appears well equipped to respond to the complexities of human life and human striving. After all, the question it poses is one that people ask themselves often in their daily lives.

This new paradigm has had increasing impact on international agencies discussing welfare, from the World Bank to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Through the influence of the Human Development Reports published each year since 1990 by the United Nations Human Development Report Office, it also now affects most contemporary nations, which have been inspired to produce their own capability-based studies of the well-being of different regions and groups in their own societies. Few nations today do not regularly produce such a report. (Even the United States joined the group in 2008.) There are also regional reports, such as the *Arab Human Development Report*. In addition, the Human Development and Capability Association (HDCA), with membership of

approximately 700 drawn from 80 countries, promotes high-quality research across a broad range of topics where the human development and capability approaches have made and can make significant contributions. Most recently, the paradigm has had a major influence on the Sarkozy Commission Report on the measurement of economic performance and social progress.

The increasingly influential Capabilities Approach has been expounded primarily in dense articles and books for specialists. Repeatedly, general readers and instructors in undergraduate courses have lamented the lack of a more accessible book on the topic. This book aims to fill that gap, making the key elements of the approach clear and helping people assess it against its rivals. Above all, it attempts to situate the approach in the narrative context of human lives, showing how it makes a difference to what policy-makers notice in these lives and, hence, to the ability of policy to construct meaningful interventions that show respect for and empower real people, rather than simply reflecting the biases of intellectual elites.

Improving people's quality of life requires wise policy choices and dedicated action on the part of many individuals. It may seem unnecessary, then, to write a theoretical book on the topic, however immersed in narrative detail. Theories, however, are a large part of our world, framing the way issues are seen, shaping perceptions of salience, and thus slanting debate toward certain policies rather than others. Wise activists have all too little influence in the corridors of power. Because the dominant theories that have historically guided policy choice in this area are deeply mistaken, as I shall argue, they have steered development policy toward choices that are wrong from the point of view of widely shared human values (such as respect for equality and respect for dignity). We need a counter-theory to challenge these entrenched but misguided theories, if we

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want to move policy choice in the right direction. Such a counter-theory should articulate the world of development in new ways, showing us a different picture of what our priorities should be. The Capabilities Approach is the counter-theory we need, in an era of urgent human problems and unjustifiable human inequalities.

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I

A WOMAN SEEKING JUSTICE

All over the world people are struggling for lives that are worthy of their human dignity. Leaders of countries often focus on national economic growth alone, but their people, meanwhile, are striving for something different: meaningful lives for themselves. Increased GDP has not always made a difference to the quality of people's lives, and reports of national prosperity are not likely to console those whose existence is marked by inequality and deprivation. Such people need theoretical approaches that can aid their struggles, or at least provoke public debate by drawing attention to them; they do not need approaches that keep these struggles hidden or muffle discussion and criticism. As the late Mahbub ul Haq, the Pakistani economist who inaugurated the Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Programme, wrote in the first of those reports, in 1990: "The real wealth of a nation is its people. And the purpose of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy, and creative lives. This simple but powerful truth is too often forgotten in the pursuit of material and financial wealth." According to Haq, development economics needs a new theoretical approach if it is to respond to people's most urgent problems.

Consider Vasanti, a small woman in her early thirties who lives in Ahmedabad, a large city in the state of Gujarat, in northwestern India. Vasanti's husband was a gambler and an alcoholic. He used the household money to get drunk. When that money was gone, he got a vasectomy to take advantage of the cash incentive that Gujarat's government offered to encourage sterilization. So Vasanti had no children to help her, a huge liability, given the fact that a childless woman is more vulnerable to domestic violence. Eventually, as her husband became more abusive, she left him and returned to her own family.

Poor parents (or siblings, if the parents have died) are often unwilling to take back a child who has been married, especially a female child who took a dowry with her. Accepting the child back into the home means another mouth to feed and a new set of anxieties. In Vasanti's case, a divorce would prove costly because her husband was unwilling to grant one. It was her good fortune, then, that her family was willing to help her. Many women in her position end up on the street, with no alternative but sex work. Vasanti's father, who used to make Singer sewing machine parts, had died, but her brothers were running an auto parts business in what was once his shop. Using one of his old machines, and living in the shop itself, Vasanti earned a small income making eyeholes for the hooks on sari tops. Meanwhile, her brothers gave her a loan to get another machine, one that rolls the edges of the sari. She took the money, but she didn't like being dependent on her siblings—they were married and had children, and their support could end at any time.

Vasanti then discovered the Self-Employed Women's Organization (SEWA), a pathbreaking nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Ahmedabad that works with poor women. Founded by

the internationally acclaimed activist Ela Bhatt, SEWA had by that time helped more than 50,000 members, with programs including microcredit, education, health care, and a labor union. Unlike some other Indian states, Gujarat has followed a growth-oriented agenda without devoting many resources to the needs of its poorest inhabitants. Government programs that might have helped Vasanti—legal aid, health care, credit, education—were not to be found. It was her good luck that one of the best NGOs in India happened to be in her own backyard.

With the help of SEWA, Vasanti got a bank loan of her own and paid back her brothers. (SEWA, which began as a humble credit union, now operates a bank in an impressive office building in downtown Ahmedabad. All the officers and employees of the bank are women, many of them former beneficiaries of SEWA's programs.) By the time I met her, several years later, she had paid back almost all the SEWA loan itself. She was also eligible to enroll in SEWA's educational programs, where she was planning to learn to read and write and to acquire the skills necessary to promote greater social and economic independence and political participation. With the help of her friend Kokila, she was actively involved in combating domestic violence in her community. This friendship would have been very unlikely but for SEWA; Vasanti, though poor, is from the high Brahmin caste, and Kokila is from one of the lower castes. Though still all too evident in society in general, divisions along lines of caste and religion are anathema in the Indian women's movement.

What theoretical approach could direct attention to the most significant features of Vasanti's situation, promote an adequate analysis of it, and make pertinent recommendations for action? Suppose

for a moment that we were interested not in economic or political theory but just in people: what would we notice and consider salient about Vasanti's story?

First we would probably notice how small Vasanti is, and we could initially take this as evidence of poor nutrition in childhood. Poor families are often forced to feed all their children poorly, but we would want to ask about how her brothers fared. Evidence abounds that girls are less well nourished than boys and less often taken to the doctor in childhood when ill. Why? Because girls have fewer employment opportunities than boys and thus seem less important to the well-being of the entire family. The work they do in the home does not bring in money, so it is easy to overlook its economic importance. Moreover, in northern and western India girls move away from the family when they marry, taking a dowry with them. They are thus more expensive than boys, and parents often wonder why they should spend their resources on girls who won't be around to support them in their old age. The mortality of second daughters in northern and western India is notoriously high. So Vasanti's nutritional deficiency is a result not just of poverty but also of gender discrimination.

Unequal laws of property and inheritance contribute to the predicament of India's daughters, and anyone thinking about Vasanti's life must consider the role they have played in her situation. The religion-based systems of personal law that have existed in India since Independence govern property and inheritance as well as family law. All the systems institutionalize large inequalities for women. Until 1986, for example, Christian women inherited only one-fourth of what sons inherited, a custom that surely contributes to defining the worth of a daughter's life as less than that of a son's. Hindu women, too, have suffered inequalities under the Hindu property

code; they attained equal shares in agricultural land only in 2005, seven years after I met Vasanti. Hers is not a land-owning family, but an analysis of her predicament would naturally lead us to notice that closely related inequity.

Thinking about such issues, we would be led to a study of the striking gender imbalance in India's population. Demographers estimate that where similar nutrition and health care are present, women live, on average, slightly longer than men—so we would expect a ratio of something like 102 women to 100 men. Instead, the most recent Indian census shows 92 women to 100 men. These numbers are averages. In the south, where property is transmitted through the maternal line, and where the husband moves into his bride's home rather than taking his bride away, women's basic life expectancy corresponds to the demographers' prediction: the state of Kerala has a sex ratio of 102 women to 100 men. In some northern states, by contrast, the ratio is alarmingly out of kilter: a house-to-house survey in one area of rural Bihar came up with the astounding figure of 75 women to 100 men. It's well known that these imbalances are augmented wherever information about the sex of the fetus is available. Amniocentesis clinics are ubiquitous throughout the nation. Because sex-selective abortion is such a widespread problem in India, it is illegal to seek information about the sex of the fetus, but these laws are rarely enforced.

Vasanti, then, has had a bit of good luck in being alive at all. Her family didn't nourish her very well, but they did better than many poor families. When I met her she seemed to be in reasonable health, and she is fortunate to have a strong constitution, since health care is not easily accessible to the poor in Gujarat. The Indian Constitution makes health a state rather than a federal issue, so there is great variation in the resources available to the poor state by state.

Some Indian states, for example, Kerala, have effective health care systems, but most do not.

Next, we are likely to notice the fact that a woman as intelligent and determined as Vasanti has had few employment options because she never learned to read and write. We can put this down to a failure in the Gujarati education system, since education, like health, is a state matter, and literacy rates vary greatly from state to state. In Kerala, adolescent literacy for both boys and girls is close to 100 percent, whereas nationally 75.3 percent of men are literate compared with only 53.7 percent of women. The factors that produce this discrepancy are related to those that produce the sex gap in basic life expectancy and health: women are thought to have fewer options in employment and politics, so from the family's perspective, it makes more sense to assign domestic labor to girls while sending boys to school. The prophecy is self-fulfilling, since illiteracy debars women from most employment and many political opportunities. Moreover, the fact that a girl will soon leave her birth family and join another family through marriage gives her parents a lesser stake in her future. Kerala has addressed these problems better than Gujarat, though Kerala has a poor record of creating employment opportunities for people once they are educated.

Because education is such a crucial avenue of opportunity, the Indian Constitution was amended in 2002 to give both primary and secondary education the status of an enforceable fundamental right. Recognizing that poor parents often keep children out of school because they need their labor to survive, the Supreme Court of India has ordered all schools to offer children a nutritious mid-day meal that contains at least 350 calories and 18 grams of protein, thus giving poor parents an economic incentive that often outweighs the lost wages from their child's labor during school hours.