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A Review of Amartya Sen's Re-examination of Inequality

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to critically evaluate Amartya Sen's articulation of inequality. Sen argues that inequality is a central notion in social theory. His basic question is: inequality of what? He answers this basic question by advocating his preferred notion of equality which is based on the capability to function. The extreme inequalities in incomes and assets we see in much of the world today harm our economies, our societies, and undermine our politics. Whilst we should all worry about this it is of course the poorest who suffer most, experiencing not just vastly unequal outcomes in their lives, but vastly unequal opportunities too.

Keywords: *Inequality, Equality, Capability Approach, Capabilities, Functioning and Amartya Sen*

INTRODUCTION

The question of inequality is a widely discussed matter these days. Many researches are being conducted to explore its causes, effects and role in hindering reduction of extreme poverty. On the point of inequality, Oxfam International Report (2014) articulates:

> *Crucially, the rapid rise of extreme economic inequality is standing in the way of eliminating global poverty. Today, hundreds of millions of people are living without access to clean drinking water and without enough food to feed their families; many are working themselves into the ground just to get by. We can only improve life for the majority if we tackle the extreme concentration of wealth and power in the hands of elites* (pp 2-3).

The response to global inequality is stronger today. The tenth goal of the new

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Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) to replace Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) in 2015 is to reduce inequality within and among countries. This shows the increasing concern towards the recognition of inflating inequality and poverty. According to Facundo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez and Zucman (2018), on the current World Inequality Report (2018), the income of 10 per cent of the richest people in the world represents an unhealthy chunk of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) in both advanced and developing economies with 55.5 per cent in India, 47 per cent in US/Canada, 45.5 per cent in Russia, 41.4 per cent in China and 37 per cent in Europe. Also, UNDP's (United Nation Development Programme) publication on *Income Inequality Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa* (December 2017) shows that Africa remains the global epicenter of income inequality as the continent hosts "10 of the 19 most unequal countries" in the world. Thus inequality decelerates economic growth, impedes poverty reduction efforts, and thwarts the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Against this background, the question of inequality being highly pervasive as an impediment to eradication of poverty is said to be recognized. The working hypothesis of this work is to make a critical evaluation of inequality within the framework of Amartya Sen's (1995) proposals in "*Inequality Reexamined.*" Within Sen's framework, it offers a broader and more comprehensive informational basis compared with Utilitarian, Libertarian or Rawlsian theories of justice and Dworkian equality of resources. Sen's (1995) argument is that inequalities depend on personal heterogeneities, social and cultural factors, among others, thus, freedom should act as means and principle.

The Problem of Equality and the Salient Questions

While addressing the problem of equality Sen (1995) is basically concerned with two fundamental questions, which are: (1) Why equality? and (2) Equality of what? The former question views the idea of equality from two dimensions namely: (1) The heterogeneity of human beings and (2) the multiplicity of variables in terms of which equality can be judged. Specifically, these components lead to divergences in the assessment of equality in terms of different variables. For the second question, Sen (1995) critically evaluates theories projected by other thinkers and theorists such as John Rawls, Thomas Nagel, Ronald Dworkin and Robert Nozick in an attempt to understand equality. In making a re-examination of inequality in our times, Sen (1995) makes a paradigm shift beyond what others consider income equality and equality in distribution of resources. Sen

incorporates the heterogeneity of human beings as an evaluative space for inequality. His perspective is about equality within a pluralistic society, with human, cultural, and religious diversities. Sen sees the multi-faceted dimensions which hinder the realization of equality. According to him, human diversities are the results of variations in human needs, capacities, capabilities and interests due to external characteristics and circumstances. Sen argues that:

> *We begin life with different endowments of inherited wealth and liabilities. We live in different natural environments – some more hostile than others. The societies and the communities to which we belong offer very different opportunities as to what we can or cannot do. The epidemiological factors in the region in which we live can profoundly affect our health and well-being* (1995:20).

By broadening the evaluative space of measuring inequality within society, Sen recognizes personal heterogeneities and physical characteristics such as: sex, age, physical and mental abilities as focal variables for measuring inequality. Here, Sen confronts John Rawls equality of incomes by giving an example of a situation where a disabled man and an able-bodied man are given equal incomes. However, the disabled person cannot function in the way the able-bodied person can. The able-bodied man has more functioning ability and well-being than the disabled man.

In fact, our global society has a lot of diversities caused by cultural, religious, social, and natural environment. A human being is nurtured by these elements. So, these diversities, according to Sen (1995), answer the question of 'why equality?' To understand Sen's (1995) claim here, we can think of any society where female children are denied formal education as a necessary tool for their empowerment. Thus, female children in such a society have fewer capabilities than female children in other societies where education is a priority for both male and female children. Sen's approach to inequality has a wider evaluative space as it looks at the impediments to a person's achieving well-being and individual capabilities.

Critical Evaluation of Equality Theories

According to Sen (1992), the question of equality corresponds to views regarding the equality of something as a choice of space and an evaluative space to determine equality. This is defined in the spaces of liberties, rights, incomes, opportunities, resources, political treatment, and utilities. Protagonists of equality of something,

according to Sen (1995), include Rawls (1971), who argues for equality of liberty, equality in distribution of primary goods such as wealth, income and opportunities; and Dworkin (1981), who argues for equality of resources such as civil and political liberties, education, and healthcare. Dworkin's resourcist metric in addressing equality is guided by some conception of the standard needs and endowments of human beings. In addition, Nagel (1991) advocates economic equality. Nozick (1974) with entitlement theory calls for equality of libertarian rights, while Buchanan (1975) builds on equal legal and political treatment. Sen (1995) makes a detailed critique on utilitarian and John Rawls approaches on equality.

Criticism of Utilitarian Approach on Equality

The utilitarian approach was proposed by a British moral and legal philosopher, Jeremy Bentham and developed by another British philosopher Stuart John Mill (Nussbaum, 2011). In addressing equality, the utilitarian approach has the merit of caring about people: it measures quality of life according to people's reported feelings about their lives. The utilitarian approach envisages that welfare could be realized as the achievement of a happy state of mind, or could be understood as utility in terms of satisfaction of desire (Sen, 1995). Bentham's (1789) principle of utility – the basis of his utilitarian model – advocates that in dealing with equality, policies should focus on promoting the greatest amount of happiness for the individuals in the society. Bentham's (1789) main concern is that the principle of utility would be useful in making judgments pertaining to the public policies directed toward reducing inequalities. In Bentham's (1789) view of the utility principle, before formulating any policy, policy makers must determine the sum total of pain or pleasure that the proposed policies suggest. Bentham (1789) suggests that pleasures, and the avoidance of pain, are the ends which the policy maker has in view.

Sen (1995) advances that utilitarian approach to promoting equality has some limitations. Its account fails to capture other aspects that are beyond the satisfaction of individual desires, for instance, participating in the life of the community. The utility account fails to capture dimensions of well-being whenever deprived people adapt their desires to their diminished circumstances and knowledge. For instance, a nation can get a very high average or total utility so long as a lot of people are doing quite well, even if a few people at the bottom of the social ladder are suffering greatly (Nussbaum, 2011). Indeed, the approach

justifies the infliction of a very miserable life on an underclass, so long as this strategy raises the average satisfaction level. Another criticism put forward on utilitarianism with regard to promoting equality is a narrow consideration of satisfaction as a goal. Satisfaction is usually understood as a state or condition of the person that follows an activity; it is not itself a form of activity; and it can even be achieved without the associated activity (Nussbaum, 2011). For example, a person can feel satisfied about an activity well done even though he/she has done nothing to realize that activity.

Thus, Sen (1995) argues that utilitarianism tends to ignore what he calls agency freedom of individuals. It is one's freedom to bring about the achievements one values and which one attempts to produce (Sen, 1995). Sen (2000) uses the term 'agent' in the sense of someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of his/her own values and objectives. Agency freedom views the removal of inequalities, injustices and un-freedoms so as to let people be free in contributing towards their well-being. Agency freedom is attributable to the role of the person as a 'doer' and is 'active' towards achieved functioning (Sen, 1995). In short, the utilitarian approach to equality undervalues freedom of individuals in realizing their satisfaction (Sen, 1995). Yet for Sen (1995), freedom to choose and act is an end as well as a means for the satisfaction of desires.

In contrast to the utilitarians, Sen's (1995, 2000) capability approach is concerned primarily with the identification of value-objects, and sees the evaluative space in terms of functionings and capabilities to function. While utilitarians answer the question of what the greatest good is, Sen's (1995) capability approach answers the questions: What are the objects of value? and 'How valuable are the respective objects to the people? Sen (1992) recognizes such attempts as spaces chosen to address equality in particular demands. According to Sen (1992), this approach provides different ways of seeing the respective lives of different people; each of the perspectives leading to a corresponding view of equality.

Critical Evaluation of Resource Based Approach to Promoting Equality

A popular alternative to the utilitarian approach is a group of approaches that urges the equal allocation of basic resources such as wealth and income. Amartya Sen in *Inequality Reexamined* criticizes such approaches focusing on John Rawls' theory of the 'primary good' (such as liberties, opportunities, income, wealth,

and self respect etc) in *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls argues that justice should be a social virtue in any political community. Rawls advances two principles of justice: First is the 'liberty principle' which says: "Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all" (Rawls, 1971). Second is the 'principle of equal liberty' which says: "Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality (distribution) of opportunity" (Rawls, 1971). Rawls' principles of justice have the merit of caring greatly about distribution since resources ought to be distributed equally among all citizens. In Rawls' understanding, if those aforementioned principles of justice are followed through formulated policies, any society might reduce inequalities.

However, according to Sen (1995), this approach too encounters formidable objections. First of all, income and wealth are not good alternatives for what people are actually 'able to do and to be.' People have different needs for resources, and they also have different abilities to convert resources into proper functions. Some pertinent differences are physical; a child needs more protein than an adult for healthy physical functioning, and a pregnant woman needs more nutrients than a non-pregnant woman (Nussbaum, 2011). Thus, a sensible public policy would not give equal nutrition-related resources to all, but would for example, spend more on the protein needs of children, since the sensible policy goal is not just spreading some money around but giving people the ability to function. Money and resources are just instruments to enable people attain their reasonable functioning or to function effectively as human beings.

Moreover, another objection to the resource based approach to equality is that some of the pertinent differences are created by persistent social inequalities. For instance, in order to put women and men in equal position with respect to educational opportunity in a society that strongly devalues female education, we will have to spend more on female education than on male education. If we want people with physical disabilities to be able to move around in society as well as able-bodied people, we will need to spend extra resources on them. Sen (1995) then proposes that in order to reduce inequalities, it is not simply to distribute equal resources but to examine critically personal heterogeneities in people. For Sen (1995) people have disparate physical characteristics connected with disability, illness, age, or gender, making their needs diverse. For example, an ill person may need more income to fight his/her illness than a person without such

an illness would need. While the compensation needed for disadvantages will vary, some disadvantages may not be correctable even with more expenditure on treatment or care (Sen 1995). Thus, a nation in its battle to reduce inequalities should take into account personal heterogeneities among its citizens.

For Sen, resource based approach is insufficient to reduce cases of inequality and to promote equality. He argues that the particular informational focus on which Rawls concentrates neglects some considerations that can be of great importance to the substantive assessment of equality – and also of efficiency. Thus, Rawls views only means and nothing more, while Sen (1995) also looks at freedom. More so, Rawls (1971) speaks only on what a person *does* or gets, but Sen (1995) discusses what a person can get and what a person can do.

According to Sen (1995), Rawls' notions of justice are means to freedom, means to justice, and means to equality. Sen (1995) argues for capabilities as embedding actualized freedom based on functionings where people choose activities which are valued and are useful for them. Sen's (1995) doubt on Rawls' inequality theory is that 'a person's capability may be reduced in exactly two cases, which are: (1) through a violation of his liberty by someone violating his/her freedom over a personal domain and (2) through some internal debilitation that he/she suffers (Sen, 1992). Here Sen's argument is that equality of freedom to pursue our ends cannot be generated by equality in the distribution of primary goods. We have to examine interpersonal variations in the transformation of primary goods and resources more generally into respective capabilities to pursue our ends and objectives (Sen 1992). At this point, Sen takes a direction which goes beyond equality of something to freedom and capability that has substantive elements for measuring equality.

Proposal to Equality: Sen's Background to the Question of Equality

Sen (1995) stresses that before John Rawls' book entitled *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, political philosophy was dominated by utilitarianism, the theory that holds that social policy ought to aim at maximizing our welfare. Rawls (1971) discovers two features of utilitarianism repugnant. First, its aggregative character, its unconcern about the pattern of distribution of welfare, which means that inequality in its distribution, calls for no justification. Secondly, he objected to the utilitarian assumption that welfare is the aspect of a person's condition which commands normative attention. Rawls (1971) replaces aggregation with equality and welfare with primary goods. He recommends normative evaluation with primary goods

instead of welfare quanta, and new function namely equality instead of aggregation. Rawls's (1971) criticisms of equality of welfare, and arguments against the welfare metric were later advanced by Sen (1995), who proposes two large changes to Rawls' view: from actual state to opportunity, and from goods (and welfare) to what he calls functionings. Sen's argument against Rawls' primary goods metric was simple but powerful. It was that differently constructed and situated people require different amounts of primary goods to satisfy the same needs, so that judging advantage in terms of primary goods leads to partially blind morality (Sen 1992). Sen (1995) brings paradigm shift expressed by 'what people get out of goods depends on a variety of factors, and he advances that judging personal advantage just by the size of personal ownership of goods and services can be misleading. It seems reasonable to move away from a focus on goods as such to what goods do for human beings.

Sen's (1995) approach to equality is based on substantive freedom and capability approach. He argues that utilitarian and Rawls' perspectives on promotion of equality offer the movement from achievement to the means of achievement. It is through this analysis that Sen brings into limelight the drawbacks of the various traditional theories which give importance to the achievements, for-example Income-based theory and Utilitarianism; he criticizes them for their drawbacks. Sen argues that:

> *The extent of real inequality of opportunities that people face cannot be readily deduced from the magnitude of incomes, since what we can or cannot do, can or cannot achieve, do not depend just on incomes but also on the variety of physical and social characteristics that affect our lives and make us what we are* (Sen 1992, pp. 28).

He also argues that there is still a complexity in converting one's primary goods or resources to the way of life desired, because the achievement in question is influenced by various other factors too. The shortcomings of these theories made Sen (1995) to change the viewpoint, proposing his capability approach. Sen develops the idea that society should promote equality in the space of capabilities. The capabilities approach is based on real questions one must ask while dealing with the problem of inequality: What are people actually '-able to do-' and '-to be-'? What real opportunities for activity and choice has society given them? What are the social, cultural, and religious impediments toward realization of equality in any society? What are the environmental factors hindering people from attaining what they value most in their lives? How do political policies and

institutions endanger attainment of equality in a given society? And finally, what are the economic factors hindering the reduction of inequalities in any given society? These questions prompted Amartya Sen to make a paradigm shift in the way society looks at inequality. Thus, he introduced capability theory as another alternative way of looking at inequality.

Exposition of Capability Approach on Question of Equality

Capability approach is a widely influential theory in contemporary political philosophy, social justice, development studies, studies on poverty and inequality, and in the public policy. It was formulated by Sen and further developed by Martha Nussbaum. In advancing, Nussbaum (1988, 2000a, 2000b, 2003 and 2006) develops capability theory in an Aristotelian context. The capability to function, she argues, involves two necessary conditions namely: internal conditions (I-capabilities) and external conditions (E-capabilities). Individuals have rational capabilities such as skills, emotional capabilities, internalised learning and character in order to make appropriate choices. Nussbaum views external conditions for functioning i.e. the E-capabilities as 'combined capabilities,' whereby internal capabilities are combined with suitable external conditions for the exercise of the function (Nussbaum 2000a). However, Sen (1995, 2000) sees Nussbaum's canonical list of capabilities denying a platform for public participation to discuss key elements to promote human development. Rather, Sen (1995, 2000) develops capabilities under Capability Approach framework by advocating public participation of individuals in the society to decide what they have, reason to value in their life. Sen, defines the capability of a person as that which "reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person achieves and from which he/she can choose one collection" (Sen 1993). The distinguishing characteristic of capability approach is its focus on 'what people are effectively able to do and to be,' that is, on their 'capabilities.'

Constitutive Elements of Capability and Functioning Approach

Capabilities represent various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that a person can achieve or could have achieved. Capability is a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting a person's freedom to lead one type of life or another (Sen 1995). These basic capabilities refer to the freedom to do some of the basic things necessary for one's survival or to keep one out of poverty. Sen (1995,

2000, and 2009) considers capabilities as a person's ability to do certain basic things, such as meeting one's nutritional requirements, the ability to move, and the ability to appear in public without shame. The relevance of a person's capability according to Sen (2000) arises from pertinent argument. He suggests that the achieved functionings constitute a person's well-being; then the capability to achieve functionings will constitute the person's freedom – the real opportunities – to have well-being. In this account he points down an example:

> *In forming a view of the goodness of the social state, importance may be attached to the freedoms that different people respectively enjoy to achieve wellbeing. Alternatively, without taking the route of incorporating wellbeing freedom in the 'goodness' of the social state, it may be simply taken to be 'right' that individuals should have substantial wellbeing freedom* (Sen, 1995, 1999).

Capabilities refer to the notions of freedom and reflect the real opportunities people have to lead or achieve a certain type of life. They are options for actions or choices which reflect real opportunities among persons within the society. Capabilities to be effective must take into consideration the socio-cultural aspects that curtail the flourishing of humanity within the society. Thus, in order to reduce inequalities, there is a need to evaluate our cultural practices, social affairs, and our religious ethos. Critical evaluation of these variables will enable us to formulate broader policies in dealing with inequality problems.

The concept of functioning is derived from the verb 'to function,' which generally means to be involved in an activity. According to Sen (1995, 1999), "functioning is an achievement of people, that is, what they manage or succeed to be or to do". The definition explicates very clearly that functionings, in fact, refer to the person's achievement in the effort to do something or to be somebody. Thus, functionings are physical or mental states (beings) and activities (doings) that allow people to participate in the life of their society. Functionings range from the elementary physical ones such as being well-nourished, being in good health, being clothed and sheltered, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, being literate, to the most complex social achievements such as being happy, taking part in the life of the community, having self-respect or being able to appear in public without shame, participation in social and political life (Sen 1995). These 'beings' and 'doings,' which he calls 'achieved functionings,' together constitute what makes a life valuable. Hence, while distributing wealth, opportunity and resources to people as a way of reducing inequality, the policy makers ought to ask a fundamental question: 'how are these resources,

opportunities and wealth going to help deprived people in the society to function fully?' Also, how are the distributed income and wealth going to help people to realize their elementary functioning such as being well-nourished, being in good health, being literate or being in position to escape morbidity and premature mortality? In addition, how are the distributed resources in position to enable people to attain more complex functioning such as taking part in community life?

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The question of inequality is a widely discussed matter these days. Many researches are being conducted to explore its causes, effects, and role in hindering the reduction of extreme poverty. For instance, the Oxfam briefing paper issued on 10th May 2016, entitled "The Time is Now: Building a Human Economy for Africa," contributes to this discourse. The report stresses that inequality is harming the ability of growth to reduce poverty and deliver shared prosperity in Africa. It adds that inequality prevents the emergence of a new middle class. The report also indicates that with growth slowing, the need to tackle inequality is vital. It is vital to providing the opportunities needed for the millions of young people across the continent. The report goes further to highlight some concrete examples of inequality facing African women based on social and economic exclusion. The report shows that there is no recognition of and support for reproductive and unpaid work that is mostly performed by women. This unpaid work further increases the inequality between men and women.

The Oxfam International Report (2016) also indicates that many countries in Africa still have legal restrictions to gender equality that are inhibiting women's equality in the economy. The Report then suggests that in order to reduce inequality, policies should rectify gender inequalities in access to credit, equal inheritance, and land rights to make a huge change. Sen's (1995) proposals in *Inequality Reexamined* suggests that the problem of inequality should move beyond the distribution of equal wealth, opportunity, and income to include expanding individual capabilities in terms of their freedom to realize whatever they value and whatever people have reason to value. Sen (1995) suggests that our policies directed towards reduction of inequality should critically evaluate our social affairs, cultural and religious ethos. This critical evaluation should aim at eliminating cases of social exclusion tending to increase inequality in the society.

Sen (1995) also tends to suggest that giving equal opportunities, income, and wealth is not enough to reduce inequality. Rather, the policy makers ought to ask a very fundamental question: '-do these people have same capabilities to convert those resources into achieved functioning?' To give an example: most Sub-Saharan African countries have adopted education for all as the law that grants every citizen a right to free primary education and in some countries even free secondary education especially in public schools as a way forward to break the vicious cycle of poverty caused by illiteracy and ignorance. But there are other obstacles attached, such as cultural traditions where in some tribes, female children are denied right to education; also the quality of education in public schools is still poor. This is a kind of formal opportunity. On the other hand, the term 'valuable choices' designates that Sen's (1995, 1980, 2000 and 2009) capability approach as another alternative on the subject of inequality judges a person's extent of freedom based on what is immediately relevant and important in leading a meaningful life. In this case even if there are formal opportunities based on the law that every citizen should have a free primary education, still this is not a valuable choice due to the poor quality of education and some cultural ties in the society that block this formal law. To make education a valuable choice, Stalon (2018) articulates that African policy makers in education sector need to go beyond just sending people to school. There is a need to enhance and design educational programmes for enhancing people's skills and creativity so as to enable people engage in business innovations and entrepreneurial ventures.

Additionally, inequality is an economic and social liability that keeps poor people poorer and suffocates and stifles their potential; undermines poverty reduction, and drives enduring government crisis. Coupled with age-old forms of systematic exclusion and discrimination based on gender and race, it exacerbates social disorder such as youth unemployment, gender-based violence, migration, criminality, and displacement. It also denies people their dignity and their voice, which deepens social discontent, frustrations, radicalisation and the likelihood of more conflicts (Stalon, 2018).

Sen's (1995) proposals in *Inequality Reexamined* are very important especially for poor countries in formulating policies to curb inequality and its associated evils. Sen (1995) suggests that any effective policy directed towards reduction of inequality should aim at realizing what he technically calls 'elementary functioning' of individuals being literate, being in good health, and being well-nourished plus more complex functioning such as participation in community life, having self-respect, participating in public discussions. Thus,

Sen's (1995) framework on inequality provides the avenue for Sub-Saharan Africa to address rampant inequality through improving the creation of social safety nets, putting in place an education system that improves attitudes and behaviour; promoting basic social services like health facilities and providing atmosphere for people in society to appear in public with a sense of dignity.

Applying Sen's (1995) proposals to policy frameworks directed towards inequality reduction requires mutual collaboration and cooperation among various actors such as governments, and corporate and civil societies who need to urgently embark on a comprehensive plan to build a human economy or economy centred on human being. Also, addressing persistent inequality calls for an international coalition to push reforms that strengthen global governance institutions; to establish reforms which focus on shared prosperity, inclusive growth, social protection and enhancing opportunities for all people without discrimination based on gender, caste, religious affiliations, and tribal settings. These reforms indeed require a theoretical backup. This study suggests that capability approach as proposed by Sen (1995) could be relevant in this discourse. So, it is a call for policy makers to take seriously insights offered by Sen's capability approach theory as captured in *Inequality Reexamined* while dealing with the problem of inequality.

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