

# Freedom and the Common Good: Which Individual Agency for Development?

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(Draft, July 2004)

## Abstract

*Sen's capability approach to development sees individual agency as central for promoting human freedoms. However, not all kinds of individual agency are equally valuable. By looking at the role of migration remittances in El Salvador, the paper argues that migration is a form of individual agency which promotes individual freedoms, but which may undermine the structural conditions in which these freedoms can be enhanced. Hence, what needs to be fostered is the kinds of individual agency which help construct these structural conditions. The paper begins by scrutinizing the linkages between individual agency, freedom and well-being in Sen's capability approach, and discusses how these are empirically borne out in El Salvador. The empirical study particularly emphasises the relevance for what can be called a common good approach to development. This approach puts as much emphasis on the well-being of the society as a whole as on the well-being of its individual members. A common good approach also emphasises that otherness is constitutive of individual freedom, and that therefore structural solidarity is central to development. Participation in the life of the community is a privileged way through which structural solidarity can be expressed. Sen's capability approach does indeed stress the crucial importance of political participation. However, such a position implies the need to bring the capability approach beyond an individual freedom-based approach to development to incorporate a common good approach.*

## 1. Agency, freedom and well-being in the capability approach

The capability approach to development, which has also been referred to as a “freedom-centred view of development,”<sup>2</sup> evolves around these four fundamental concepts and distinctions: agency achievement, agency freedom, well-being achievement and well-being freedom. Agency achievement 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>3</sup> Agency freedom is “one's freedom to bring about the achievements one values and which one attempts to produce.”<sup>4</sup> Well-being achievement is the set of valuable beings and doings that a person actually achieves, and well-being freedom is “one's freedom to achieve those things that are constitutive of one's well-being.”<sup>5</sup>

Freedom, agency and well-being are recurrent concepts in Sen's writings, but these risk to get quickly confused with each other. The risk of confusion becomes even greater when ‘capabilities’, the constitutive elements of the evaluative space in which human well-being is to be assessed, are referred to as ‘freedoms’. Sen himself seems to reduce his careful distinctions into the single encompassing term of freedom. He identifies ‘development as freedom’ because he sees freedom as central to the process of development, and this for two reasons. 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>6</sup>

So, the link between freedom and development is two-fold. First, freedom is the end of development since what matters is the expansion of the freedoms that people have reason to choose and value (such as the freedom to read and write, freedom to be healthy, freedom to walk in public areas without fear or freedom to participate in the life of the community). Second, freedom is the means through which these individual freedoms are to be promoted. This type of freedom is then

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<sup>2</sup> Drèze and Sen (2002:20).

<sup>3</sup> Sen (1992:56).

<sup>4</sup> Sen (1992:57).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> All quotes from Sen (1999a:4).

closely associated with what Sen has called ‘agency’. 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>7</sup>

The aspect of freedom that this paper will mainly be concerned with is that of freedom as agency, that is, “the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world.”<sup>8</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>9</sup> Each person has to be seen as a “doer and a judge” instead of a “beneficiary.”<sup>10</sup> 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>11</sup> The freedom that is thus so central is the freedom as agency, the freedom as power to act and achieve the goals that one values. In that sense, an Al-Qaida terrorist would be an agent, someone who acts and brings about changes in the world, and someone whose achievements can be linked to his own values and objectives, e.g. the achievement of destroying the Twin Towers is judged in terms of his value of serving Allah and fighting the Empire of Evil. Or the U.S. and British armies in Iraq are agents by bringing changes into the world, and whose achievements of dethroning Saddam Hussein are to be judged according to their own values and objectives of bringing the Good News of democracy and freedom to the world.

Obviously, as the two above examples demonstrate, the value of “being an agent” needs some more qualifying elements. Not all forms of exercise of agency, not all forms of acting and bringing change into the world, are valuable. Sen makes here an implicit normative assumption, namely that the goals that one aims at bringing about through acting are normatively good. Acting is a valuable ability, and indeed central ability to the development process, because it can bring about changes in terms of one’s own well-being and the well-being of others.

Exercising individual agency, i.e. acting in view of improvement one’s human well-being and the well-being of others, 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 in Sen’s capability approach to development. 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>12</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 search for a greater well-being.

Like his great caution in determining the valuable ends that development processes should promote, Sen shows a similar caution in determining what kinds of agency should be fostered to promote development. While the development process ought to be oriented towards the “freedoms that people have reasons to choose and value”, without specifying what these freedoms are to be beyond the underlying values within people’s societies, the development process ought to occur through the free agency of individuals and “their ability to bring about achievements which are judged in terms of their own values and objectives.” Basically, individual agency, or the ability of individuals to act and take decisions for themselves and shape their lives, is what matters, full stop.

Sen’s reluctance to specify the kinds of agency that are valuable for development beyond the agency to bring about achievements in accordance to people’s values and objectives thus fully parallels his reluctance to specify the ends of development beyond the freedoms that people have reason to choose and value. The parallel deliberate incompleteness leads obviously to the same

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<sup>7</sup> Sen (1999a:xi). Italics are mine.

<sup>8</sup> Sen (1999a:18).

<sup>9</sup> Sen (1999a:53).

<sup>10</sup> Sen (1985:208).

<sup>11</sup> Sen (1999a:19).

<sup>12</sup> See for example Drèze and Sen (2002).

problems when the capability approach to development is brought to bring insights for actions. Are all the types of agency that bring about the objectives that people value to be fostered? What kinds of individual agency should be promoted?

Digging into Sen's writings and trying to put some pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together, one can observe that a certain kind of exercise of agency is actually privileged so far as development is concerned. Not whatever objective that one may value can be brought about through action, but objectives that are linked to other-regarding concerns. Sen identifies two crucial determinations of human action that are very important for linking individual agency and the enhancement of human well-being: 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. Commitment is a counter-preferential choice that "destroys the crucial assumption that a chosen alternative must be better than (or at least as good as) the others for the person choosing it".<sup>13</sup> These other-regarding concerns act as powerful and necessary instruments of development. It is precisely these concerns which make individual actions conducive to promoting the ends of development. For example, one can help a destitute person because one feels unhappy and uncomfortable at the sight of his or her 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 actions would be based on commitment.<sup>14</sup> These sympathy- and commitment-based actions are seen as a necessary form of agency to promote human well-being. And this leads me to a second understanding of freedom, in addition to freedom as agency, freedom as human well-being.

In the capability approach, human well-being is conceived in terms of the freedoms that individuals have reason to choose and value. I will not discuss here the problems left with the indeterminacy of the 'freedoms that people have reason to choose and value' as end of development. Rather, I would like to underline that these freedoms are properties of individuals. In Sen's capability approach to development, social arrangements are to be "investigated in terms of their contribution to enhancing and guaranteeing the substantive freedoms of individuals."<sup>15</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 interconnected, 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>16</sup>

By using the example of migration remittances in El Salvador, I will illustrate that individual agency, as an ability to act motivated by other-regarding concerns, for the sake of promoting human well-being may fail to do so in the long run if expanding human well-being is considered in terms of expanding the freedoms of individuals. This example will lead me to argue that, what the capability approach is lacking is a common good approach to development. Such an approach considers individual agency and other-regarded concerns motivated actions in a more structural perspective than what Sen's capability approach currently does.

## 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 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

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<sup>13</sup> Sen (1982:92).

<sup>14</sup> This example is taken from Sen (1999a:270).

<sup>15</sup> Sen (1999a:xiii).

<sup>16</sup> Sen (2002:85).

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 functionings, 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>17</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, suggesting 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 government 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>18</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.

<sup>17</sup> See for example Jolly and Mehrotra (1997).

<sup>18</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).

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.

These ratios are very low, and there does not seem any greater tendency on behalf of the Salvadorian government to get more involved in the delivery of public services and public goods. For example, in the field of education, the government is promoting community management schools (known as 'Educación con Participación de la Comunidad' program). In this program, communities take the initiatives to organise their own schools, to administer and support them financially through family-based associations. Although the programme might be seen as a successful participatory initiative, which creates greater monitoring of teachers' performances and school functioning, this programme might create adverse effects. There is a danger that this successful participatory initiative is a first step of the government's disengagement from its role as the provider of the public good of education. While the government still puts a share of its budget in these community-based schools, the door is open for progressively running the schools on the basis of private financing. This disengagement is actually becoming quite obvious in the government's attitude towards migration as the major motor of social development in El Salvador.

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).

In 1997, 14% of rural, and 15% of urban households said to receive remittances. 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>19</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).

<sup>19</sup> Benavides et al. (2003).

The money from remittances is essentially spent on consumption goods, mainly on consumption of food, medication and 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>20</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. El Salvador has experienced a growing phenomenon of collective remittances where migrants from the same region gather some funds together through social investment funds. For example, the *Fondo de Inversión Social para el Desarrollo Local* (FISDL) is using collective remittances to finance social investment in municipalities.

The Salvadorian government strongly encourages migration as a poverty exit mechanism, and sees migration as a positive aspect of globalisation. There is however another side of the coin. Although migration seems to help improve the well-being of individuals and their family members (as table 8 showed, it helped improve the health and educational achievements of the family members), or members of their community of origin (when remittances are used to fill in municipal budgets for building roads and schools for example), migration does not promote incentives for the government to secure basic public goods. By favouring migration and remittances in the financing of its development process, the government is getting little by little rid of its social obligations towards the people. Individuals are gradually taking over what has traditionally been held as the proper role of the government in the provision of public goods, in the provision of health care and education for example.

Migration does not only erode the government's responsibilities in securing human well-being, it may also erode individual responsibility for securing human well-being through participation in the life of the community. 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>21</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. Another worrying data is that very few Salvadorians belong to associations of social change. For example, in 1998, only 3.5 % of the population belonged to co-operatives, 0 % to political organisations, and 0 % to credit cooperatives.

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 space, migration can 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. 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 to serve human well-being. When assessed in

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<sup>20</sup> Cox and Ureta (2003).

<sup>21</sup> UNDP (2002: chapter 5).

terms of, not individual human well-being, but of what can be called the common good, migration can be seen as a detrimental form of individual agency.

### 3. A common good approach to development

The concept of the common good has had a long history, back to Aristotle through Aquinas. The Christian Social Tradition defines 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.”<sup>22</sup> The document, echoing Aristotle for whom the political community exists for the sake of the human good,<sup>23</sup> further states: “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.”<sup>24</sup>

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.”<sup>25</sup>

The central idea of the common good is that it is a good shared in by all. It is a shared good by all who are forming a certain community. It “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 idea of the common good has tended to be received with quite some scepticism in political theory. I have summarised five objections to the existence of such an idea. 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. Fifth and 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 (this objection parallels the conclusion that one cannot 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, as this is 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 member of that community. 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>28</sup> The common good is hence a

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<sup>22</sup> Gaudium et Spes §26.

<sup>23</sup> “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]

<sup>24</sup> Gaudium et Spes §74.

<sup>25</sup> Catholic Bishops’ Conference (1996:§48).

<sup>26</sup> Hollenbach (2002:9).

<sup>27</sup> Dupré (1994:172).

<sup>28</sup> Finnis (1980:153).

question of creating the conditions in which people can pursue their own objectives, namely basic goods in Finnis' natural law theory.<sup>29</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>30</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>31</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>32</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, but 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 individuals. In some extreme cases, individual flourishing might be sacrificed for the sake of the group in the short run. 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.

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

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<sup>29</sup> See for example Dupré (1995), Keys (1994) and Pakaluk (2001) for a critique of such view.

<sup>30</sup> Hollenbach (2002:81). This is reminiscent of Charles Taylor's idea of irreducible social goods discussed in Taylor (1995). The idea of irreducible social goods has been taken into the development debate in Gore (1996) who argued that the individualist ethical framework of Sen's capability approach could not incorporate these goods. Sen actually refuted these arguments by saying that irreducible social goods such as family life or democratic practice are full components of individual well-being, see Sen (2002). I have taken Gore's arguments further. What is inadequate in development is taking individual well-being as only final ethical evaluative framework. There is a strong case for taking irreducible social goods, what I have called 'structures of living together', as additional ethical evaluative framework for development, see Deneulin (2004).

<sup>31</sup> Hollenbach (2002:81).

<sup>32</sup> Maritain (1937:55). See also Maritain (1946).

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 in it, but it actually promotes it. 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 (e.g. one can begin by setting up trade unions for the sake of minimum living wage, once the trade union is legally established and politically recognised, it facilitates to claim 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 is in sort sense the common good, as it exemplifies a good shared by all. All human beings, by virtue of being human, need to have these capabilities in order to have a good human life.<sup>33</sup> 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>34</sup> The common good could be seen as the sum of these structures of living together. It is irreducible to interpersonal relations, and 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 the 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 could be left 'thick vague'. Similarly, the idea of the common good can be left thick vague as one will never be able to exhaust all the structures that sustain the good human life in common.

Thus, 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 to development 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>35</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.

In Sen's capability approach, autonomy and individual freedom have a normative priority over affiliation links. It is because I am a human being capable of reason that I go out of myself towards others and create affiliation links.<sup>36</sup> In that respect, sympathy and commitment are based on a free

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<sup>33</sup> See for example Nussbaum (2000).

<sup>34</sup> Paul Ricoeur's original definition refers to the notion of 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." [Ricoeur (1992:194)]

<sup>35</sup> Hollenbach (2002).

<sup>36</sup> See especially his little piece on '*Reason and Identity*' in Sen (1999b).

decision. I am a person who makes choices towards others, including counter-preferential ones. In a capability approach enriched by a common good vision, Sen's original capability approach is turned upside down. It is precisely these affiliation links which are constitutive of one's agency and freedom to act. Otherness, or the relation to the other, is constitutive of individual freedom. Otherness does not follow the exercise of free choice.

#### 4. Individual agency, participation and structural solidarity

Seeing otherness and the 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>37</sup> One could even affirm that commitment to the common good is synonymous to solidarity, because the good of each member of a community 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>38</sup> 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."<sup>39</sup>

A common good approach to development emphasizes 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."<sup>40</sup> The human being is fully free and human to the extent that he or she is responsible for others:

"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."<sup>41</sup>

Individual freedom is thus strengthened by participating 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.<sup>42</sup> Of such adequate institutional frameworks, participation in the political life is the most important. David Hollenbach notes that political participation "is itself a constitutive part of the pursuit of the common good."<sup>43</sup> When it 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.

The empirical 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

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<sup>37</sup> Catholic Bishops' Conference (1996: §70).

<sup>38</sup> Hollenbach (2002:189).

<sup>39</sup> *Sollicitudo Rei socialis*, §38.

<sup>40</sup> *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, paragraph 33.8.

<sup>41</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, paragraph 31.1.

<sup>42</sup> Hollenbach (2002) notes 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." (p. 201)

<sup>43</sup> Hollenbach (2002:100).

founder of that party is also the one that committed the intellectual murder of Monseñor Romero) and the FMLN (*Frente Farabundo Martí 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.

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