

AMARTYA SEN'S 'CAPABILITY APPROACH' AND DEMOCRACY IN THE PHILIPPINES

Christopher Ryan Maboloc
Ateneo de Davao University, Philippines

Abstract

This essay applies Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to the way democracy is practiced in the Philippines by Filipinos. The author has reached the conclusion that negative freedom does not secure for people their well-being. Thus, even after the removal of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, the Philippines still remains poor. In this essay, the author argues that Filipinos should empower themselves morally in terms of their positive freedoms or capability, and the Church can be at the frontlines of this initiative, in order to achieve national development.

Re-examining the Case of Philippine Democracy

The rice crisis in the Philippines in 2008, which reached a point where it was necessary for the Church to distribute rice in order to reach out to the poorest of the population, is reflective of how the country has failed in delivering meaningful change to the lives of Filipinos. Daily, people line up to buy subsidized rice from the government. The government has argued that the spiraling cost of rice is a global problem and is beyond its control. This should not be the case for Filipinos, I believe. I think it was a result of wrong economic policies. Food security is essential to any developing nation. Agriculture, however, has been neglected by the administration of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Many poor Filipinos, which constitute 30% or 28 million people of the country's total population, even until today, experience starvation.

Can civil society do something to change this phenomenon? Is there a way to enhance the lives of people beyond the notion of protest? It is necessary, I believe, to study the economics of welfare and its political implications. I will begin with the problem of starvation. Starvation, says 1998 Nobel Laureate for Economics Amartya Sen, “is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat”, not the fact of “there being not enough food to eat”¹. People go hungry because their entitlement to food is not secured. It is possible that a country’s food supply problem is a result of wrong political decisions, for instance, the inadequacy of mechanisms to rid a country’s food security program from corruption. But this brings us to a bigger issue – poverty. Sen says that poverty is not the case of people’s “lack of income”, but rather, is “a matter of capabilities deprivation”². Income and other social primary goods are only suggestive of what people have or do not have – not of who they really are or of what they are capable of doing. Income for Sen, therefore, should not be suggestive of the kind of life a person is to live. The Philippine government has been using the money from its Overseas Contract Workers to keep the economy afloat. But in terms of human costs and the cruel choices people have to make, the government remains inutile and morally guilty of making Filipinos abroad as “mere means to an end”. Economic justice, in this sense, entails a new challenge for the Church.

It is without doubt that social justice, which is the battle-cry of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, unarguably, should favor the poor, women, and the vulnerable, or to use John Rawls, the “worst off”, for whom, Rawls writes in *A Theory of Justice*, the mechanisms of the basic structure must respond to. This requires, undoubtedly, an understanding of the causes of social inequality. Democracy, in theory, is meant for the realization of the good life, not only in terms

of a higher “standard of living”, but also in terms of the quality of that life, however scarce economic resources may be. The Church has been training lay people and has mobilized communities to empower them. But such has not been enough because poverty still thrives in the Philippines, especially in Mindanao. I therefore propose Sen’s approach to take a further step in enabling the Church to play a bigger role in human development. In this regard, the Capability Approach, a framework developed by Sen, is a good theoretical starting point in understanding the Filipino experience of democracy and how the Church can be a meaningful factor in changing the Philippine economic landscape.

A New Tool: Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach

Let me describe Sen’s theory. Sen says that primary social goods, which he explains are “general purpose means that help anyone to promote his or her ends”³, cannot be an adequate informational basis for evaluating well-being. He asserts that human capability or the extent of people’s freedom has a direct role, the most important indeed, in the achievement of well-being. His basic argument is anchored on the idea that freedom has a foundational importance⁴ and he proposes the paradigm-shifting distinction between equality in terms of “primary social goods” and equality in terms of “capabilities”. For Sen, evaluations regarding equality “should not solely be based on people’s command of resources, sense of happiness or desire fulfillment, but should include features of the way people actually live”⁵, because “equal benefits to people with unequal needs will not produce equal well-being”⁶.

In addressing the problem of poverty, Philippine economic managers look at how economic growth alleviates the lowness of income of the poor, and thus, statistics based on

aggregate national income are utilized to measure the “trickle down” effect of economic expansion. This cascading effect to the poor assumes that such will improve the poor’s “standard of living”. Des Gasper explains that this process, known as the “economics of welfare”, follows from the fact that “economic production creates wealth which is distributed as income. Income is used for consumption which results to personal utility on the part of the earner. In economic terms, utility is judged as economic well-being”⁷. This means that economic well-being is construed as the product of income generated from higher production inputs in the economy. Higher input to the process means more labor is needed, thus resulting to employment. People earn their income from this, enabling them to consume commodities, thereby satisfying personal utility. Tragically, the Arroyo administration does this by giving the poor billions of cash subsidies – to no effect. Recently, in the City of Davao, its mayor and a local priest argued as to the moral propriety of using the local parishes as distribution centers of food for the poor. The mayor argued that it is not political. Rather, by using the parishes, his food for the poor program is insulated from politics. A local priest thinks it is not the case. People are in a dilemma. But a basic point could be lost – people are starving.

Let me return to Sen’s discussion. Welfare economics views poverty in a narrow way. This concept of poverty, proceeding from what is theoretically called economism, is ill-equipped as basis for knowing “why people are deprived of their well-being”. It does not tell the extent or the kind of deprivation that people suffer, whether it is so grave or unimaginable, say for instance in the case of children who scavenge in the city of Manila or Davao, a result of the informal garbage economy one usually finds in the Third World. Sen argues that the real extent of deprivation, as a matter of fact, may be underestimated if we concentrate only on the size of

incomes⁸. There are many factors to consider, including one's social and political freedoms, and civil society, notably the Church, has been at the frontlines battling poverty through mechanisms which help the realization of social justice in the Philippines.

But more needs to be understood if the Church and civil society as a whole are to become real contributors to human development. Sen argues that equality in the amount of income people earn or the social primary goods they possess is not a real guarantee to well-being achievement since there are difficulties that a person (i.e., a pregnant woman, a child, or a person with a physical handicap), may have to hurdle owing to his or her specific condition. A person with a physical handicap may have to overcome disadvantages in living comfortably that another at the same age need not have, even when both of them exactly are allocated the same amount of primary goods.

The reason for the above is the correlation between functionings and capabilities. The former refers to "what a person actually does", whereas the latter means "the ability to achieve certain things"⁹. Functionings correspond to "an individual's physical state of being", for instance, whether he or she has enough food to eat; "a mental state of being", say whether she enjoys herself doing creative work which she finds fulfilling, or "a social state of being", like whether for instance he or she is free to do certain things like taking part in social gatherings¹⁰. Functionings, therefore, are "the various things a person may choose to attain in his or her life and thereby value doing"¹¹. Functionings imply the different aspects of living conditions of people and thus, in a huge way, these tell us about the kind of life people live. The concept of capability intends to "reflect the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another"¹², thus it

implies the capacity to achieve real opportunities for well-being. Simply put, it means one's "freedom to be". In other words, capability concerns what makes a person realize what he can do or to put it basically, the freedom to achieve the kind of life one wants to live and impliedly, the freedom to avoid the kind of life one does not want to be in.

To illustrate the above, Sen gives the example of "a destitute who is starving due to famine and an affluent person who chooses to fast"¹³. Although both individuals are deprived of the "the functioning of being well-nourished, the freedom they possess is crucially distinct"¹⁴. The destitute clearly lacks the capability or positive freedom to achieve nourishment whereas the affluent has that option; he has the resources to buy food but refuses to do so in order to dramatize his protest. The basic idea here is for civil society to consider the role of positive freedom in enhancing the lives of the poor. Protests are important in securing the common good, but they are no guarantee to well-being achievement.

An explanation is needed. The idea of negative freedom, as opposed to the notion of capability, corresponds to what can be considered as non-intrusion rights or the freedom from abuse or coercion. For instance, a fisherman in any coastal town of the Philippine archipelago can feel secure and contented in his simple home, with no threat of violence from anyone. It can be said that in this case, his negative freedom may not have been violated. Yet, it can also be argued that his negative freedom has no value to him. Why? Poor, and sick, it can be said that he has a life that he does not really want. Given his condition, he is not really free. He needs more, i.e. education, a decent home, job security and others. These are things which one's positive freedom can only provide. From the point of view of the poor, the Church has played an

important role in realizing certain aspects of their negative freedoms, i.e. freedom from human rights abuse and coercion. But, it is equally important right now for the Church to take on new frontiers. It is now time for Church leaders to see how human well-being is advanced not merely through negative rights. In the Archdiocese of Davao, the Ignatian Institute of Religious Education has been serving the local Church by educating lay persons. Its donors, through the effort of its director Fr. William Malley, S.J., provide lay persons who work in basic ecclesiastical communities in Davao City scholarships in the study of theology and pastoral ministry. Such is a kind of positive empowerment, an empowerment that is absent from the perspective of some expensive elitist religious schools.

The example of the fisherman above, however, should not be taken as something that undermines the value of negative freedom. We can say that negative freedom is also very important in securing and protecting our democratic rights which may be violated in the absence of such freedom. Our negative freedom is also of great value if seen from the context of society as a whole since without it, regimes can become abusive. While positive freedom enhances the individual's ability to be the person she desires herself to be, our negative rights protect us from the excesses and manipulative tendencies of other people. It is in this area where the Church in the Philippines has been active in promoting and protecting its infant democracy. The toppling of Ferdinand Marcos, of course, remains its prime example.

It is without argument that ensuring the elementary capabilities of people as a matter of public policy is to secure the very basis for their well-being. If the government commits itself to each child born in Basilan, the poorest province in the Philippines, seeing to it that each child is well-

nourished, gets provisions for health care, enjoys good education and is also given the chance to participate in the affairs of governance later in life, then there is no reason for these children to become bandits or rebels someday. But in the absence of the above, it can be said, human life is hopelessly diminished. In places where insurgency thrives, the Philippines as a country do not lack heroes. Priests and lay workers and members of civil society have sacrificed their lives. However, it is equally important to empower people themselves to change the course of their destiny. This will entail a huge effort for people to value, for instance, their right of suffrage in order to change their kind of leaders. Basilan remains poor not only because it is impoverished economically but more so because people lack the freedom to be real contributors to social change.

Thus, the power of democracy to effect change in the well-being of Filipinos depends on what they do to their lives. If democracy is to become a key to national development, then people should be an integral part to its vital existence. From a global perspective, as a counter-argument to this, one can cite the benevolent dictatorship of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew or China's rise. In response, Jeffrey Sachs notes that China's economy awoke after it opened its markets to the world¹⁵. Sen also points out that there is little evidence that it is the authoritarian style of Lee Kuan Yew that has made Singapore a prosperous state¹⁶. If any, Sen points to "helpful policies" which includes "open competition, provision for education and high literacy rates, the use of capital markets, and incentives for investments"¹⁷, factors which can make a country globally competitive. These things should be studied seriously and must be taken advantage of by civil society if it is to adapt itself to the demands of the 21st century.

Positive and Negative Democracy in the Philippines

From the foregoing, democracy can be theoretically construed and empirically practiced as “positive” or “negative”. The emphasis on people’s positive capabilities, for instance, “the role of freedom concerning the way different kinds of rights, opportunities, and entitlements”¹⁸, can be seen as instrumental to national development. The above includes economic opportunities, education, health, transparency in government, and protective security in terms of safety nets (i.e., farm subsidies during food or economic crises), as the things that are necessary to make democracy work. These rights can be considered as “positive entitlements” which empower people, and as such, they contribute to human well-being in the same manner as one’s positive freedom does to one’s life.

In arguing for people’s democratic rights, Sen emphasizes the argument that no famine has ever occurred under a democratic regime. The reason for this is that any famine is unthinkable if the government provides enough provisions to farmers in terms of farm inputs. A government that is in solidarity with its people can immediately address any need for food basically because transparency in the disbursement of funds and the participation of farmers in the planning process will help ensure food stability. The case of the 700 million Peso fertilizer scam is a classic case on how Arroyo has ruined Philippine democracy. Here, the crucial point is that Filipinos owe to each other the moral and political duty to articulate our concerns and press the government for immediate, effective and efficient action. This requires, however, the “capability” to “speak out”, and the “positive empowerment” to argue for one’s rights in public. Sen notes that, “the people have to be seen, in this perspective, as being actively involved –

given the opportunity – in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs”¹⁹. Positive democracy means people are real contributors to human well-being and not “passive recipients” of dole-outs and grants. For example, famines, Sen argues, are not natural calamities but human disasters, and he theorizes that “famines are policy failures”²⁰, and not a real shortage of food. The same holds true for the country’s rice crisis. Neglect of agriculture is simply a failure of governance. Where government fails in a poor country, the people have no where to go but the Church. Where the political apparatus of governance is non-functioning, the Church has to lead, not only in terms of giving people a voice, but more importantly, by teaching people become “fishermen” – active in the pursuit of their well-being and not mere by-standers waiting for their government to do something.

As an example of how an active and knowledgeable populace would transform society, it can be said that transparency laws, from the point of view of positive democracy, are useless if people are not knowledgeable of the mechanisms which ensure transparent government transactions. Any government can easily abuse its people if people are bereft of the tools or knowledge which will secure for them their welfare. The only way forward for the Philippines, right now, is a moral revolution that proceeds from well-meaning men and women. There is no other way except through the kind effort of good religious people whom most Filipinos respect. It is no secret that a hungry man, for example, will simply say that he has no time to think about corruption in government. It can also be said that “anti-corruption drives” and the “right of suffrage” are only seen by the poor in a negative way as means of protecting one’s negative freedom, and not as positive opportunities to really empower oneself in public. This has to

change. Positive democracy, it should be noted, entails the active participation of people, of “people power” in a very positive way because it results to real change in the way people act in the public sphere. For Sen, “the achievement of democracy depends not only on the rules and procedures of democratic processes but also on the way certain opportunities are used by citizens”²¹. It is now time for the Church to lead this new revolution for positive democracy.

Basically, it can also be argued that the importance of democracy lies in the fact that it secures and protects the political freedoms of people. Negative freedom implies freedom from oppression. Simply put, it is the “right to protest”. We can explain this by pointing out that democracy makes, or at least puts “pressure” on government leaders, to be responsive to the needs of the people because the people hold them accountable. The Church has been at the forefront of an anti-corruption drive. However, much needs to be done, most especially from the grassroots level. For instance, the weakness of Philippine democracy is something that I see in the inconsistent image of a corrupt politician who endorses an anti-corruption book. Protests can effect some change in the public lives of people, but unless people become real contributors to their well-being, change is but a dream, “difficult” and “impossible”. For example, libraries are almost non-existent in many public schools. This should not mean that a student mustn’t read books. For a student to really learn, he or she has to find these books somewhere. It will not be enough to wait for the results of mass actions denouncing the government’s neglect of education. A student needs to realize that the life he or she has to live is something that is “fully” and “truly” his or her own responsibility. Opportunities don’t just come. These are things that we create.

In conclusion, my analysis is that responsible citizens, guided by their “duty of civility”, will work to ensure that development becomes the priority of their national and local leaders. The streets can be the battle ground for such. But beyond such and in a very positive way, the academe, research institutions, basic ecclesiastical communities, and private corporations can contribute to advance the welfare of people more than the parliamentary of the streets. The Catholic Church-led EDSA People Power of 1986 is a classic case for negative democracy. After two decades, it has become apparent that the event has not translated to a “highly industrialized” Philippines, President Corazon Aquino’s goal while in office. Of course, negative democracy makes people vigilant even in intense economic situations. People value their political freedoms. But people can also resign to the fact that their kind of government is perpetually corrupt. Negative democracy does not necessarily empower them to seek real well-being, and thus, negative democracy may not place a country on the map to human development. The Church has to take on new frontiers. People should realize, as Mahbub Ul Haq suggested, that they are the “real wealth of the nation”. This means that development is not the mere “by-product” but is in itself the reflection of the “kind of people” a country has. Of course, we deserve a better government. But on the other hand, to demand such from our leaders, right now, may not be enough.

Notes

- ¹ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981: 1.
- ² Ibid., 22
- ³ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999: 72.
- ⁴ Sabina Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002: 6.
- ⁵ Charles Gore, *Irreducibly Social Goods and the Informational Basis of Sen's Capability Approach*, *Journal of International Development* 9 (2)1997: 236.
- ⁶ Des Gasper, *The Ethics of Development*, Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2004: 107.
- ⁷ Gasper, *Development as Freedom: Moving Economics beyond Commodities*, *Journal of International Development* 12 (7) 2000: 283.
- ⁸ Sen, *Inequality Re-examined*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992: 113.
- ⁹ Gasper, *Is Sen's Approach an Adequate Basis for Considering Human Development?*, *Review of Political Economy*, 14 (4) 2002: 454.
- ¹⁰ Gore, *Irreducibly Social Goods*, 237.
- ¹¹ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 75.
- ¹² Ibid., 74.
- ¹³ Ibid., 75.
- ¹⁴ Ingrid Robeyns, *Sen's Capability Approach Re-examined*, Discussion Paper, Center for Economic Studies, University of Louvain, 2000: 6
- ¹⁵ Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty*, London: Penguin, 2005.
- ¹⁶ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 148
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 150
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 37
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 53
- ²⁰ Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, 78
- ²¹ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 155