

The Application of Sen's Capability Approach to the Study of Social and Economic Phenomena

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Abstract

The Capability Approach is much discussed in the literature, making Sen one of the most influential philosophers and economists of our time. In this paper, starting from Sen's question "Equality of what?", we analyse how the economist offers new insights into the vision of equality, poverty and freedom. We hypothesise that he maintains that people who are identical in terms of physical characteristics and potentialities might achieve different levels of well-being depending on the family environment in which they grew up, the institutional context in which they live, the opportunities that the economic system reserves them or the cultural norms or social rules they have. Through a qualitative approach to the existing literature, our research will explain how, in addition to Sen's thought, poverty is contingent on people's different characteristics and the environment in which they live. As a result, this paper will demonstrate how in economics, poverty should thus be considered a vicious circle characterised by the lack of freedom (represented by fundamental capabilities).

Keywords: Welfare, Equality, Amartya Sen, Capability Approach, Economic Thought.

1. Introduction

Sen's capability approach is presented as a multidimensional approach. It focuses on the plurality of personal factors and the diversity of social, environmental, economic, institutional and cultural contexts. It becomes a central element in explaining different rates of conversion of resources into well-being (Sen, 1999).

This paper, starting from the supra mentioned assumption, aims to demonstrate how people are hypothetically identical in terms of their physical characteristics and potentialities according to Sen's thought. They can indeed achieve different levels of well-being depending on the family environment in which they grew up, the institutional context in which they live, the opportunities that the economic system reserves them or the cultural norms or social rules they have.

According to our hypothesis, Sen states it is very important to distinguish between income inequality and income distribution. Ensuring a greater share of income to a needy person can be considered a violation of the principle of equal income, but not of the principle of economic equality (Sen, 1979 a). The latter, in fact, must take into account the different needs connected to individual situations to aspire to an equality of results achievable through economic means (Deneulin, 2005).

On this basis, this paper will study the heterogeneity of individuals and their respective conditions to go beyond the economic approach.

Our research, starting from Sen's question "Equality of what?" offers new insights into the vision of equality, poverty and freedom. Amartya Sen, in fact, highlights the following sources of difference that influence and determines the process of converting resources into lives that people can actually lead (Sen, 1999). These are individual heterogeneity, environmental diversity, social climate variations, relational perspectives, and distribution within the family.

The differences in the relational perspectives are substantially related to the variations between different societies. This calls into question the conventions and customs of the society to which the individual belongs (Comim et al., 2008). Therefore, for Sen, human diversity is the basis according to which the analysis of society should be carried out (Alberti Corseri, 2020).

This research analyses how the capability approach has evolved and matured significantly over time as a distinctive normative framework for evaluating well-being,

We recall the thesis that was first advanced in Sen's lecture entitled "Equality of What?" at Stanford University in 1979 (Sen, 1979 a), exploring a theory that has subsequently been refined over three decades until reaching its final maturity in his later works, "Development as Freedom" published in 1999 and "The Idea of Justice", which followed some years later (Sen, 2011; Sen, 1999).

In addition, to strengthen our thesis, we evaluate how some aspects of Sen's approach can be traced back to Karl Marx (Alberti Corseri, 2020).

Considering the supra mentioned assumptions, our work focuses on the essential characteristic of the capability approach, stressing its focal point on what people are effectively able to be and to do in the economic and social scenario, according to Sen's thought. This focus distinguishes it from other more established procedures to evaluating well-being, such as resourcism or utilitarianism, which concentrate respectively on the availability of means for a good life or subjective welfare.

2. Theoretical framework

According to Sen, all approaches to the ethics of social phenomena have tried to achieve equality of "something", such as income, well-being, utilities, rights and freedoms. All these perspectives are somehow essentially egalitarian (Sen, 1979 b).

Considering two of the most well-known approaches, utilitarianism and the theory of primary goods, Sen concludes that both theories fail to consider capabilities. The utilitarian formula claims to maximise the sum of the total utilities enjoyed by individuals (Sen, 1993).

Starting from this outlook, we analyse how the utilitarian analysis can be employed in the study of the inequality phenomenon.

According to Sen, in some contexts, we could be interested in the relative positions of the various individuals in terms of income, such as highlighting the effects that income inequality can have on criminality or social hardship (Sen, 1979 b). Although such a distribution gives us little information on inequality relating to well-being, it does not follow that this space must be completely disregarded (Alberti Corseri, 2020). However, the limitation of utilitarian, or more generally economical theories, remains that of neglecting the component of human diversity in the study of individual and social well-being (Anderson, 1999).

Our theoretical approach to this study recalls the theory of Rawls, who proposed to focus on the means for acquisitions (Rawls, 1999).

Instead of subjective utility or preferences, Rawls proposes a new approach to tackle redistribution and justice problems: the so-called "primary social goods". These kinds of goods have a general character, so they are necessary regardless of each individual's life plans and specific preferences. In particular, these are basic goods such as fundamental freedoms, power, income, and the social bases of self-respect (Forst, 2005). Primary goods constitute "keys of access" to other interests. Payment, for example, allows an individual to buy the things that someone needs; the right to vote will enable them to choose their own representatives (Sen, 1999; Brighouse & Robeyns, 2010).

Therefore, equality based on this principle does not imply ensuring that all citizens' preferences are met but ensuring that basic needs are appropriately distributed. In this regard, Rawls proposes applying a different principle. Social and economic differences must be combined to offer the greatest benefit to those who are the most disadvantaged (Alberti Corseri, 2020).

According to Sen, the Rawlsian theory moves in the right direction: evaluating the inequality in this space means taking into account the multidimensionality of the phenomenon. Rawlsian concepts of social justice seek to combine meritocratic notions of equal opportunity and positive rights to primary goods with negative principles of liberty (Dean, 2009). Rawlsian primary goods or, more generally, resources give us a more objective metric than the utility. Being means to many alternative ends, they seem to guarantee their owners a certain degree of freedom for the construction of any particular good life (Wells, 2013; Carter, 2014).

In our opinion, when the relevant metric of distributive justice or inequality assessment is Rawlsian primary goods, there is indeed a strong commitment to neutrality about what constitutes the good life (i.e. what resources may be used for).

On this basis, in this paper, we study how Sen has often recognised his debt to the philosopher John Rawls. Still, he also criticises Rawls's failure to consider, more directly, those factors that affect the quality of a person's life, that is, the valuable functionings that resources help us achieve (Sen, 1985). Sen claims that even the choice of the primary goods variable is not completely valid because it remains insensitive to the differences that play a major role in transforming primary social goods into the freedom of choice and realisation of people's life plans (Sen, 1979 a). Having or enjoying the same primary goods does not exactly mean enjoying the same substantive freedoms due to individual variations in converting resources and goods (Sen, 1999). While resources are necessary to achieve certain functionings, in this study, we want to stress that the exclusive focus on resources dismisses considerations about substantial heterogeneity in people's ability to convert them into valuable functionings. Sen highlights that functionings are converted at different rates in different people (Maffettone, 2011; Anderson, 1999), given interpersonal differences in terms of internal and environmental factors, including an individual's characteristics, the society may belong to, as well as the environment happens to be in (Brighouse & Robeyns, 2010).

In other words, two people with the same conception of the good life and the same bundle of resources might well have quite different real opportunities to achieve that life (Wells, 2013).

As long as there is heterogeneity in individuals' actual abilities to convert resources into functionings, Rawls's neutrality cannot be presumed to enhance fairness in the sense of giving everyone an equal opportunity to live a life according to their conception of the good. Resources should not be the exclusive focus of a fairness-based theory of justice, even if, like Rawls's primary goods, they are deliberately chosen for their general usefulness to lead a good life (Maffettone, 2011). Sen's criticism of John Rawls's influential account of the fair distribution of primary goods stands in for criticism of resources approaches in general (Alberti Corseri, 2020). As Sen argues, we should focus on the relationship between resources and people, rather than "fetishising" resources as the only means for achieving the goal of living a flourishing life. Sen, therefore, appears to be more eligible than Rawls to accommodate the diversity of human beings and the complexity of their circumstances (Sen, 1985).

In any case, Sen's perspective has some resemblances to Rawls's. When endorsing a democratic approach to questions of social justice in general and of which capabilities matter in particular, Sen makes many references to John Rawls's idea of "public reasoning" (Sen, 2004).

Both Sen's and Rawls's approaches undeniably stress the importance of going from the space of utility to the space of people's freedoms to choose their own conception of the good life through a democratic process of public reason. Therefore, both approaches seem to situate themselves within a liberal individualistic framework. Such a framework claims for a liberal and pluralist notion of the state (i.e. non-commitment to a conception of the good in the name of universalism). This framework conceives the person as a rational bearer of rights and freedoms (and capabilities, in Sen's case). Also, it views regulated capitalism as a system in which opportunities are generated and human agency thrives (Brooks, 2014). Specifically, Robeyns suggests that Sen's approach is a form of liberal egalitarianism, for it is concerned with equality, and inequality is to be assessed in the space of the substantive freedom of the individual to do or to be that which someone values (Robeyns, 2009).

Sen lays the foundations for an alternative proposal, starting from the assumption that a person's position within a social structure can be judged from two different perspectives: actual functionings and freedoms to function in a certain way (that is, capabilities). The former concerns what an individual manages to do or to be; the latter considers the concrete opportunities someone has to practice what they want to do (Alkire, 2002).

The two perspectives are not always connected: a person can have inequality of functionings and inequality of freedoms without the two necessarily coinciding (Alberti Corseri, 2020). The adequate distribution of goods does not always lead to social equality because the use that can be made of these goods varies from individual to individual. Therefore, it could be said that adequate distribution of goods would be valued only when it can be transformed into effective functionings enjoyed by individuals.

3. A new concept of equality and well-being in Sen's thought

According to Sen's thought, our purpose is to study how relevant functionings can be related to relatively simple needs, such as being well-fed or in good health, or more complex needs, like being happy or having good self-esteem. One of the basic thesis of our paper is that functionings are constitutive of a person's being. Capability is a set of vectors of functionings and reflects a person's freedom to choose. Unlike the theory of primary goods, functionings directly reveal what individuals enjoy at different levels (i.e. health and longevity). This means that the focus is not on goods or resources but on what individuals manage to do or to be through these goods (Deneulin & Stewart, 2000).

Furthermore, if compared to utilitarianism variables, functionings have greater objectivity: they reveal what is actually enjoyed by individuals while utility might depend on subjective mental conditions (Anderson, 1999).

For this reason, Sen's approach allows us to make inter-personal comparisons using his framework. The two categories of equality and that of freedom are not on the same logical plane. In economics and politics, it is not possible to consider equality as an alternative to freedom and vice versa (Dean, 2009). Freedom is one of the possible fields of application of equality, and equality is one of the possible ways to distribute freedom. Thus, on the one hand, there is a need for equal rights to freedom. On the other hand, there are many other instances of equality about the same number of aspects concerning individual lives (Alberti Corseri, 2020).

Sen tries to find ways to think afresh about the issue of inequality to build a new definition of equality. Starting from the question "Equality of what?" he rethinks the issue of inequality within a defined space because the defence of equality, whether of income or opportunity, is always against the expense of another space (Alberti Corseri, 2020). Opposing Rawls' conception of equality, Sen argues that equality must focus on the difficulties faced by individuals to achieve primary goods. These difficulties are both external and personal (Sen, 1979 a). External characteristics might be represented by geographic location and social classes, while personal criteria refer to gender, age, or individual mental and physical abilities. This dual characterisation of human diversity determines the capacity of individuals to realise their life plans. It is clear that an individual with a congenital disability who enjoys the same income as another will have fewer opportunities to act on his desires because of his handicap (Cornelius & Wallace, 2017). By showing the limit of the traditional criterion used to determine the level of equality, Sen tries to "reformulate" the notions of Rawlsian "primary goods" (i.e. resources) and that of utility (i.e. outcomes). Sen attempts to find a tool that can overcome the limitations of traditional equality assessments, which only measure resources and outcomes (Alberti Corseri, 2020). He reviews the different areas of equality such as income or welfare using the concept of "capability". According to Sen, the distribution of fundamental capabilities is the best and most extensive area in which to assess inequality (Dean, 2009). It is a morally relevant dimension that goes beyond utility and primary goods. This concept has renewed the inequality approach, including poverty, in rich countries and developing countries. Within this approach, freedoms are extended in order to allow everyone to determine the proper sovereign life project. The capability approach focused on ensuring equality and developing human potential can thus offer new insights into the vision of equality (Alberti Corseri, 2020).

Analysis of inequality is very often focused on groups of people and not on a single individual. Addressing the issue of inequality concerning human diversity leads us to assume that there are various kinds of differences.

Consequently, the need for practicality requires neglecting some of these differences to focus our attention on the most relevant ones (Sen, 1979 b). In the literature on inequality, the most widely used classification has been that focused on economic classes, defined in the Marxian sense (Maffettone, 2011). According to Marx, we analyse that classes are defined essentially in relation to the ownership of the means of production, which means that there are always two fundamental classes (free and slaves, barons and serfs, capitalists and wage earners) in every historical period (Marx, 2006). This conception of class certainly has ideological and political connotations, but Marx proposed in his studies a fundamental distinction between class "in itself" and class "for itself". On the one hand, a group of individuals find themselves in very similar economic and social situations; on the other hand, this "class" is understood as a self-conscious unit that fights in solidarity for the same purposes (Marx, 2006). This is the Marxist revolutionary subject. According to this approach, the kind of inequality that can be analysed refers to the variables of wealth and income. Although this classification has produced numerous and substantial results in political, social, and economic analysis, it has not always proved to be suitable for analysing particular relationships, such as what Sen considers the most important: the relationship between economic opportunities and freedom. Even if inequalities deriving from private property were eliminated, there would remain a series of inequalities relating to personal variables, such as abilities and needs (Deneulin, 2005).

In our opinion, Sen also criticises the classical economy that considers the individual as independent and autonomous in choices, overlooking the family system's constraints.

According to Sen, the most realistic way of thinking about family relationships is to consider them as "cooperative conflicts". That is, within the family, there would be a relation of both cooperation and conflict (Sen, 1985).

In addition to the outcomes that benefit all parties, we must also consider that the parties often have opposing interests. To be able to grasp these differences, it is appropriate to refer to the positions of power that usually characterise the family context. Some members enjoy a better position in terms of well-being (Alberti Corseri, 2020).

For example, the members that receive the salary will have greater power in spending choices (Koggel, 2003). Sen has spent many years analysing, through empirical studies, the great discrimination existing within the family. In this context, according to our research's aim, we underline that disparities are spread in various sectors: from food distribution to different levels of education and incidence of diseases.

Most of the author's studies have been carried out in developing countries. In that case, it does not mean that the phenomenon does not exist in the industrialised West, where family inequality mainly affects women (Nussbaum, 1992). Family, or household, has always been one of the most important elements of the social fabric. Families tend to reproduce certain patterns of inequality and redistribution. Some data can help us to outline the situation.

Historically, a study concerning the state of malnutrition of the inhabitants of rural areas of West Bengal following the flooding of 1978 and 1979 shows that among children, the female sex presented a greater degree of malnutrition calculated based on weight concerning age (Sen & Sengupta, 1983; Yadav et al., 2016). West Bengal typifies many south-eastern countries where female children experience lower health care levels and uncertain survival, especially after the neonatal period. A further investigation into the distribution of diseases in Calcutta between 1976 and 1978 still shows a situation clearly to the detriment of women, with an index of diseases, in most areas and in all age groups (except in that of young up to 14 years), superior in the female sex (Sen & Sengupta, 1983). This figure is undoubtedly linked to the degree of malnutrition and to the lesser health care given to women.

Despite such worrying data, various types of economic analysis persist in considering the family, in terms of work and consumption, as a decision-making unit, without examining the internal differences and the peculiarity of distributional outcomes within the family (Brooks, 2014). In order to assess the standard of living of socially disadvantaged people, it is important to be able to take individual differences into account. Sociology has always highlighted the power of ideas in maintaining social inequalities, in whatever context they occur (Clark, 2007).

Unfortunately, members of the "dominant" group and those of the "subordinate" group tend to uncritically accept ideologies, such as those sets of ideas that justify inequalities making them appear "natural" and even just (Deneulin, 2005). In this perspective, we can consider the phenomenon of "adaptive preferences", deriving from the fatalistic acceptance of living conditions by the most disadvantaged individuals of society.

This phenomenon typically manifests itself in women from traditionally relegated countries to tasks and secondary roles. These women do not have the desire to rebel against well-established conventions, and they are not able to express dissatisfaction and suffering. But the real change must go through the action of women themselves (Koggel, 2003).

Within this perspective, women should not be considered as passive beneficiaries of aid but as active protagonists of their change.

Based on a list of basic skills, according to the supra-mentioned cases described, the capability approach would be able to guarantee weak groups particular attention to substantive justice rather than formal justice and rely on the need to carry out positive actions to enjoy it (Nussbaum, 1992). For these reasons, we believe that the capability approach cannot be considered a Western approach because it is not tied to a particular culture or a certain historical tradition. In fact, if we talk about what people are actually able to do, we do not give any privileges to a Western idea because ideas of freedoms and capabilities are found in any culture.

4. Economic and empirical evidence from the analysis of famines

In this paper, we draw attention to how Sen refuses to adopt a traditional economic approach that relates the phenomenon of famine to a lack of available food. However, according to Sen, the phenomenon of famines is much more complex (Sen, 1982). Economic policy choices, institutional relations, and market structures can provide an adequate reading key to the study of the plague.

Hunger is not merely related to food production and agriculture, but especially to the functioning of the entire economic system and, in an even wider sense, to those political and social arrangements that can act directly or indirectly on the population's ability to get food and to stay healthy and well-fed (Alberti Corseri, 2020).

Political actions must be complemented by the efficient functioning of other economic and social institutions, such as trade and market exchanges, political parties, non-governmental organisations, and institutions (including well-functioning media) that promote public discussion (Alkire, 2002; Cornelius & Wallace, 2017).

Classical economic theories still tend to refer to the Malthusian perspective of the simplistic relationship between food resources and population. From this perspective, hunger is seen as a problem of overcrowding and famines as a direct effect of population growth: production fails to meet demand (Mulrooney, 2003; Rubin, 2015).

Therefore, most studies on famine focus on the national production of food since the triggering cause of the phenomenon are to be found in the prolonged lack of food. Consequently, famines are considered a direct consequence of the decline in food availability (Comim et al., 2008).

On the contrary, Sen argues that food is not distributed for charity or based on automatic distribution mechanisms in an economic system (Sen, 1999). Therefore, the core of the phenomenon is not the total supply of food but the possibility that people may or may not have to use such assets. Sen focuses his attention on individuals' rights over a certain basket of goods, including food (Sen, 1982).

In such a context, death by starvation has a different connotation: it is the result of the lack of the possibility to consume a basket with a sufficient amount of food. This possibility generally depends on juridical, political, economic and social structures. Sen, in fact, specifically refers to three determining factors: endowment, productive possibilities and exchange conditions (Sen & Sengupta, 1983).

Endowment refers to the possession of productive resources that have a price on the market. In general, the basket of means available to individuals includes work, land and other resources. But many people only have their own workforce (Alberti Corseri, 2020).

They, therefore, do not directly produce foodstuffs that are necessary for their own needs. Their purchasing capacity depends on the salary obtained through work, thus indirectly from producing other goods or services (Sen, 1982).

Production possibilities are instead related to technological innovations and the individual ability to use them. Finally, exchange conditions refer to the opportunity to sell and buy goods and determine their relative prices (Sen, 1993).

In particular, in the study of famines, it is fundamental to analyse the network of interdependencies created between different productive sectors (Campbell Bartoletti, 2014). During economic emergencies, the terms of trade can change substantially, causing very rapid and disastrous results. Some famines have been accompanied by abrupt changes in the relative prices of products or wages due to different causes, usually climatic phenomena (Rubin, 2015). From these observations, it is clear that famine and starvation are much more complex phenomena than simple local food shortages or food-population relationships.

In particular, Sen analyses four major famines: that of Bengal (1943-1944); that of Ethiopia (1972-1974); that of the Sahel (1968-1973); that of Bangladesh in 1974 (Sen, 1982).

The Bengali famine, first, has had its fair share of famines in the past, including 1770, 1783 and 1897, but the most recent one, often British Raj, was in 1943. The famine led to the death of around 3 to 4 million Indians, either due to starvation or due to famine-related diseases (Rubin, 2012). The Bengal famine of 1943 was characterised by a critical period between May and October, during which there was a high number of deaths from starvation. Mortality rates remained high for some years due to epidemics caused by famine.

Statistics show that the rice harvest (which constitutes the basic food of the Bengali population) of 1943 had to some extent fallen concerning the previous year's crop, but it was much more than the 1941 harvest, which had not been a year of famine. This study shows that relatively small changes in food availability can be accompanied by dramatic growth in the number of starvation deaths (Schwartz, 2017). If we analyse the social groups affected by the tragedy, the picture confirms that famine is often a problem of loss of purchasing power in certain sectors. In the Bengali famine, the areas affected by hunger were almost exclusively rural ones. The triggering cause of the phenomenon can be traced to the economic crisis following the war against Japan (Maharatna, 1996). This war caused the government's military spending to increase, producing an improvement in the economic situation of the urban population that worked in the war industries. When rice prices began to grow, the panic and manipulations of speculators caused them to skyrocket, so, although there was no significant drop in the overall supply, the rural population could not survive. It was precisely the increased prosperity of a group that caused a disadvantage for another group (Sen, 1982). Even when a famine is actually related to a decline in food production, some groups are not affected by it.

The Ethiopian famine particularly affected the province of Wollo and was apparently caused by a drop in food production due to a violent drought (Sen, 1982). Consequently, local agricultural workers did not have the means to buy what they needed, as they had nothing to sell. On the contrary, food was not scarce at the national level, and there was no increase in food prices.

Historically, the Ethiopian famine undoubtedly appears, unlike the Bengali one, as a recession famine. Yet even in this case, the FAD (food availability decline) approach is not a good approach to analyse the phenomenon (Rubin, 2015). The province of Wollo was the most affected by famine because there was no possibility of obtaining food because the means to do so were not available.

Sen points out that, on the contrary, there were even exports of foodstuffs from the province of Wollo to certain richer areas of Ethiopia where the demand was greater, and the population's purchasing power was greater (Sen, 1982). In our opinion, the market, in this case, far from favouring a solution or mitigation of the problem, contributes to aggravate it, as it tends food movements in a direction contrary to the real need, responding to the law of purchasing power and certainly not to that of actual need.

The famine was not simply a result of the drought. Haile Selassie's government ignored and suppressed information about starvation in Wollo and Tigre (Endale, 1993). International aid organisations, wanting to preserve good relations with a friendly government, ignored troubling details on starvation (Devereux, 2006).

The Irish famine of 1845 is another valid example of a case study for our research. The Great Famine was a disaster that hit Ireland between 1845 and about 1851, causing the deaths of about 1 million people and the flight or emigration of up to 2.5 million more over about six years (Thornton, 2004; Mulrooney, 2003).

The short-term cause of the Great Famine was the failure of the potato crop, especially in 1845 and 1846, as a result of the attack of the fungus known as the potato blight (Delaney, 2014). The potato was the staple food of the Irish rural poor in the mid-nineteenth century, and its failure left millions exposed to starvation and death from sickness and malnutrition (Campbell Bartoletti, 2014). Following the collapse of the economy caused by the "potato disease", most Irish populations were vulnerable and unable to provide for their livelihood (Delaney, 2014). The British government opted for an export policy. Instead of importing into the country affected by the crisis, the goods were exported from Ireland by the market rule by which the goods move towards paying more. The crisis was greatly compounded by the social and political structure in Ireland in the 1840s. Most poor farmers and agricultural labourers or "cottiers" lived at a subsistence level. They had little to no money to buy food, which was widely available for purchase in Ireland throughout the famine years (Campbell Bartoletti, 2014). This is another case of a close causal link between certain forms of government and food crises (Sen, 1982).

Regarding the case of Bangladesh, a lot of people in Bangladesh still vividly recall the 1974 famine with great sadness and often with despair. It brought untold miseries to millions and resulted in the deaths of many (Currey & Hugo, 1984). Although figures vary in terms of total mortality, some scholars estimate 1.5 million deaths as a reasonable estimate. This number includes post-famine mortality (Delaney, 2014). Starvation was not the only factor; a significant number of deaths were attributable to cholera, malaria and other diseases. As with most famines, weakened, disease-susceptible conditions resulted in high post-famine mortalities of over 450,000. The poor, labourers and non-landowners were especially susceptible. The famine that occurred in Bangladesh was also attributed to the lack of food availability following the flood of 1974 (Rubin, 2012).

However, Sen argues that the famine occurred well before the real effects of crop damage could be suffered by the population (Sen, 1982). In this specific case, we want to underline that the scarcity of the crops had an immediate impact on wage employment, which was reduced. Still, the forecast of a future shortage of rice crops also stimulated speculation on prices, which had already started an inflationary path. Alongside the floods, other forces of macroeconomic nature must therefore be taken into consideration. As with most famines, the causes of the Bangladesh famine were multiple. These included flooding, rapid population growth, government mismanagement of foodgrain stocks, legislation restricting the movement of foodgrains between districts, foodgrain smuggling to neighbouring countries and the so-called distributional failures (Ahmed, 2016).

The famine did not occur among all areas and populations but was concentrated in specific areas, particularly those hit by flooding (Sen, 1982).

Also, the last case considered in this paper, the case of Sahel, illustrates the validity of Sen's approach (Sen, 1999). Starting in 1968, a series of droughts hit the Sahel region from West Africa to Ethiopia. Between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, approximately 100,000 people died due to food shortages and disease (Rubin, 2015). The droughts led to fears that the Sahel was turning into a permanent desert due to mismanagement of natural resources, overgrazing, and overpopulation (Currey & Hugo, 1984).

In this region, the survival of a rather large sector of the farmers is linked to a precarious balance based on the possibility of exchanging animal meats and leather products with poorer but indispensable foodstuffs for a living (Alberti Corseri, 2020). The drought that occurred in the years 1968 to 1973 brought down the prices of animal products because many farmers, in a state of need, replaced animal products with cheaper foodstuffs.

The collapse of prices made it impossible for pastors to buy what was necessary to survive (Rubin, 2015). The Sahel famine seems to be the most suitable to defend a FAD (food availability decline) approach since the continuing drought led to a decrease in food availability. However, Sen maintains that even in this case, the approach is incomplete.

It does not explain the differences in the distribution of hunger between groups (Sen, 1982). Not all areas were equally affected by drought, and the famine victims were almost exclusively nomadic shepherds and the sedentary population of the Sahel region. In order to analyse the famine, it is necessary to focus on the economic conditions of these groups and the collapse of their possibilities (Sen, 1982).

There is a need to analyse hunger as related to the relationship between people and food in terms of a network of relations sometimes complex and intertwined. This involves market mechanisms, public policy, macroeconomic developments, natural disasters, and speculative activities (Mulrooney, 2003).

Therefore, we drew attention to examples that demonstrate how famines are closely related to a country's economic conditions but even more to its political and social structures. In particular, another example is represented by the Chinese case (1958-61). One of the greatest famines in history occurred in the country precisely during an extraordinary economic development project (Rubin, 2012). The lack of free elections and a press without censorship prevented the Chinese population and the central power from becoming aware of the fact that some regions had remained without food. This means that political freedom, such as freedom to criticise and vote, is connected to other kinds of freedom, including that of escaping death by starvation and famine.

By placing the generic "ability to be and do" at the centre of the analysis, in our opinion, Sen examined the phenomena of poverty, inequality and famine from a new perspective in the field of economic analysis: the human being.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, Sen infers from the observed correlation that democracy prevents famine. In this paper, we demonstrate how Amartya Sen offers two reasons for this inference through the analysis of the existing literature and historical study cases. First, democratic governments are accountable to their citizens and subject to uncensored criticism from the media. Democratic governments have, therefore, a strong incentive to eradicate famines to maintain power. Sen indeed argues that the famine case is an instance of a broader phenomenon whereby democracy advances human security by giving political incentive to rulers to respond to vulnerable citizens.

Second, because of the informational role of the free press, democratic governments are likely to know about the plight of citizens and therefore about the need for amelioration.

A free press, as demonstrated, Sen tells us to contribute to human security by giving a voice to the vulnerable and disadvantaged and by subjecting the government to criticism. Sen thus views democracy as not merely the presence of elections and ballots but as government by discussion, which includes political participation, dialogue and public interaction (Sen, 1982). By contrast, authoritarian regimes, which suppress public debate, must be simply uninformed about the severity or extent of famine and fail to assist for that reason.

In our research, we found that Sen claims that a political system attentive to the needs of the most vulnerable individuals can be more decisive than purely economic growth to contrast famines. Effective public intervention and more equitable food distribution would have prevented people from suffering hunger in the past. Therefore, a strategy of protection, prevention and promotion is preferred to "emergency intervention", which is often reduced to humanitarian aid.

In Sen's perspective, the best way to implement a more equitable food supply distribution is to create jobs, encouraging trade and business. In this view, the victims are not treated as passive beneficiaries of governmental relief but as agents of a renewal process.

To conclude, as a result of our research, in this work, Sen emphasises two empirical issues relating to democracy: the connection between democracy (or public reasoning - Sen seems to use these terms interchangeably) and famine and the connection between democracy and economic development.

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