



Capability Approach in Public Policy: A Theoretical Appraisal

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The capability approach with its focus upon individual freedom and choices has come to grab the attention of policymakers in the arena of policy making and policy evaluation. The present study investigates the discourse on the capability approach that endorses its ascendancy over the standard approaches to wellbeing. In the paper, the researcher has made a critical analysis of the standard approaches to wellbeing and observed that these approaches certainly lack the concern towards human freedom and choice which renders towards their inadequacy in the assessment of wellbeing. The paper unveils the essence of the capability approach in public policy making and argues that there is a strong case for taking the approach into considerations in the judgement of human wellbeing. Finally, the paper concludes that the capability approach, though stands in variance with these approaches, actually reinforces them and creates necessary conditions for significant policy implications.

Keywords: Capability approach, policy evaluation, freedom, choice, wellbeing

Introduction

Public policies in commensuration with the notion of wellbeing holds importance for a nation in terms of empowering each of its citizens. Empowerment of each citizen by sustaining his/her capabilities and enabling him/her to enjoy optimum freedom is in congruence with the realization of border goals of equity and justice in the society. In this regard, Public policies, embracing the basic principles of capability approach i.e., 'expansion of human freedom and capability to function', have received wide acknowledgement both in academic literature and in the policy making processes of the developed nations such as the United Kingdom (UK), Germany and Canada as well as international development agents like United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). At the same time, developing countries like India, which are characterised by millennia of institutionalised inequalities in terms of caste, class and gender and reeling from the men-

ace of poverty and impoverishment, have also started looking beyond the standard welfare economic approaches and embarked on the capability approach as a model in public policy making and evaluation. In this context, it is pertinent to understand what the capability approach is, what features it bears and what implications it has in the policy evaluation of wellbeing.

Structure of the Paper

The present paper is organized into four sections. First section deals with the conceptualisation of the capability approach defining the terms capability and functioning. Second section gives the details of the classical approaches to the wellbeing and presents the arguments of the capability approach thinkers against these approaches. Third section discusses the significance and limitation of the capability approach in public policy realm. Fourth and final section concludes by asserting the implication of capability approach and other approaches in public policy making.

Understanding the Capability Approach

In the international development arena, the capability approach as came into forefront as a promising theoretical framework for public policy over the traditional approaches like the Gross National Product (GNP) based, utilitarian and the recent resource-based approaches during the last decades of the Twentieth century. It marked a breakaway from the conventional approaches of development that concentrate on possession of commodity, income and utility as the exclusive indicators of human wellbeing. In contrast, the Capability approach, in its specificity, concentrates on the actual freedoms and capabilities that people essentially have to choose between different kinds of valuable lives as in their vision (Sen, 2009, p. 18). Though the capability approach became the core of the debate on human development only in the twentieth century, it has a long tradition probably beginning with the Greek Political thinker Aristotle. The notion of human capability and functioning was taken into consideration by Aristotle for setting some of the goals of good political organization as he perceived the good of human beings in terms of the functions and activities in their life (Nussbaum, 1997, p.275). later, the classical political economists like Adam Smith and Karl Marx viewed the success of human life in terms of accomplishing the necessary human activities and established that it is the 'functionings' and the 'capability to function' which essentially decides well-being of individuals (Sen, 2003 p. 43). However, the capability approach as an approach to the actual assessment of the quality of life was first pioneered in the field of economics by Nobel Laurate Amartya Sen in the 1970s and 1980s. In his