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## **A Constructive Intervention in Martha Nussbaum and Ingrid Robeyns' Capabiltarianism and its Implications for Sustainable Development in Nigeria (2012-2022)**

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### **Abstract**

Capability Approach is one of the topics examined in development studies; it emphasises the understanding that human welfare and access to unlimited opportunities is important to economic success and this can in turn help to create sustainable development. Creating sustainable development is of significance to addressing the social, economic, and environmental challenges faced in Nigeria. However, there has been a major problem in Nigeria militating against the achievement of sustainable development goals in line with the Vision 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study seeks to carry out a constructive intervention in Martha Nussbaum's and Ingrid Robeyns' Capabiltarianism to solve the problem of sustainable development in Nigeria. It employs a qualitative research design using the method of secondary data collection to analyse the data. To achieve sustainable development in Nigeria, especially the SDGs, there is a need for constructive intervention using the capability frameworks of Martha Nussbaum and Ingrid Robeyns to advance social justice, equity, improve quality of lives and guarantee a more sustainable future.

**Keywords:** **Capability Approach, Sustainable Development, Development Ethics, Capabiltarianism, Nigeria, Sustainable Development Goals**

### **Introduction**

In the International Political Philosophy discourse, the problem of development is one of the central issues of concern, either at the state, national, or international levels. On this problem, International Political Philosophy critically interrogates the ends and means of public policies formulated and implemented for development objectives. Significant areas of International Political Philosophy are issues that focus on development ethics. Development ethics borrows freely from the works of economists, political scientists, planners, agronomists and other specialists of other disciplines (Goulet, 2006). For development ethicists, such as Amartya Sen, Denis Goutlet, Martha Nussbaum, and Ingrid Robeyns, development is perceived as both the ethical reflections on the means and ends of local, national, and international economic development (Culebro and Gasper, 2021). In reality, scholars have moved away from the unilateral western outlook on development since the unanimous adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 (Öhlmann et al, 2021). Therefore, the call for ethical reflection gives room for analysis, evaluation, and action-plan of societies, with special reference to suffering, climate change, conflicts, inequality, and injustice within different societies at a global scale (Goulet, 1971; Öhlmann et al, 2021).

The field of Development Ethics typically takes a normative stance, asking questions about the nature of ethically desirable development and what ethical means for achieving development. The discourse also revolves around various ethical dilemmas that have bedevilled the practice of development (Fryer, 2011). Ethics places each disciplines' concept of development in a broad evaluative framework; therein development ultimately means the quality of life and the progress of societies towards values expressed



in various cultures. Despite that development can be wholly studied as an economic, political or social phenomenon, its ultimate goals are those of existence itself – which is to provide for all humans (Ul Haq, 1995).

Development ethics is a moral assessment of the theory and practices of development which has different sources. A valuable source of development ethics is found in the work of Amartya Sen, an Indian American economist and political philosopher, who addressed the causes of global economic inequality, hunger and underdevelopment. In his works, Sen addresses these problems with a conception of development based on ethical principles. Amartya Sen describes development as freedom, but development (internal and external) of capabilities are goals and means of achieving freedom (Tungodden, 2001).

It is important to note that development ethics deploys philosophical tools of research, combined with ethical thinking and practice to issues (relating to the ends and means) of development policy making and policy implementation in the modern state. Merely concentrating on the means or resources that people have, the capability approach focuses on identifying and developing the substantive freedoms and opportunities for people to value their lives.

The capability approach emphasises access to the significance of elements like education, healthcare, political engagement, resources, social relationships, and individual agency in development processes by taking people's capabilities into consideration (Eade, 1997). The capability approach on development argues that the focus on an individual's material circumstances should be measured in relation to the opportunities and options accessible to them. Furthermore, the capability approach shows that development is multifaceted, highlighting economic, social, political, and cultural elements. To ensure equal opportunity and access for everyone through capability, development must be inclusive, egalitarian, and sustainable. Policymakers and stakeholders can extend economic indicators and prioritise initiatives that empower people, improve their capabilities, and advance social justice by incorporating the capability approach into development frameworks and policies. It offers a more comprehensive knowledge of development, enabling more inclusive and thorough solutions to social, economic, and environmental problems.

### **Theory of Capabilitarianism**

Capabilitarianism otherwise called Capability Approach is a normative approach to human welfare that concentrates on the actual capability of persons to achieve their well-being rather than on their mere right or freedom to do so (Robeyns, 2016). It was conceived in the 1980s as an alternative approach to welfare economics (Sen, 1985). Capabilitarianism is a theoretical approach to quality-of-life assessment and to issues about basic social justice, which emerged as an alternative, in the global development context, to theories that focus on economic growth as the main indication of a nation or region's quality of life (Nussbaum, 2000). The main focus of capability approach is freedom. This means that societies must promote opportunities for people who may or may not choose to put it into action. For Amartya Sen, policies should focus on what people can be or are able to do to improve their work. This can be done by removing obstacles from their lives to function better with freedom to live their desired lifestyle. Sen mentions functioning; for him, individuals can differ greatly in their abilities to convert the same resources into valuable functioning (Sen, 1999).

A philosophical and ethical framework known as capabilitarianism places the advancement of human potential at the forefront of social and political advancement (Oosterlaken, 2015). The understanding of each person's inherent worth and dignity is the theoretical cornerstone of capabilitarianism. It states that people possess a variety of capabilities or modes of operation that allows the fulfilment of valuable and worthy lives. These capabilities or talents cover a wide range of areas, such as education, possibilities for social and economic mobility, political engagement, and individual liberties. Capabilitarianism opposes limiting measurements of well-being such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or money, but otherwise emphasises the real freedoms and chances that people have to pursue the lives they value (Bourban, 2022: 292). It acknowledges that everyone has different goals and priorities, and that determining one's level of well-being should be based on how effectively one can pursue his or her own objectives to live happy lives.



Capabiltarianism has four major tenets, which are: Multidimensional Approach, Agency and Freedom, Social Fairness and Equity, and Human Dignity. The Multidimensional Approach shows the different capacities (variety of needs and interests) for humans to function. At the same time, individual Agency and Freedom are highly valued by capabiltarianism by increasing people's capabilities and liberties to make independent decisions. On Social Fairness and Equity, capabiltarianism emphasises the significance of social fairness and equity in advancing human potential. The tenets of Social Fairness and Equity aim to address the disparities and structural impediments that restrict people's potential and chances. On Human Dignity, it emphasises the value of upholding each person's dignity, acknowledging their strengths, and creating the environment necessary for their growth and well-being.

The theoretical and practical aspects of capabiltarianism have witnessed tremendous advancement through the works of Martha Nussbaum and Ingrid Robeyns. The prominent writings of Martha Nussbaum, especially her book, "Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach", provides a thorough foundation for Capabiltarianism. She defines ten necessary central talents for humans to flourish and these include: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination, thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, and control over one's surroundings (DeHaan et al, 2016: 2037).

Nussbaum also emphasises the significance of human agency and functioning in obtaining well-being (Motilal, 2021). She argues that enabling conditions, such as access to political freedoms, healthcare, and education, allow people to use their capabilities and operate effectively in a variety of spheres of life. Martha Nussbaum also emphasises how personal agency shapes one's abilities and way of living (Nussbaum, 2007). It is important to state that Martha Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities, which offers a blueprint for social interventions and policies for gauging freedom has been adopted globally (Fukuda-Parr, 2019).

The 'cart wheel' method of capabiltarianism, which builds on Nussbaum's list of essential capabilities, was developed by Ingrid Robeyns. She stated that the capability approach should be represented as a cart wheel, with the functioning achievements serving as the rim and the central capabilities serving as the spokes. This method enables the consideration of additional abilities that might differ between situations and societies. Robeyns also established the idea of "sufficiency thresholds" in the context of the capability approach. She stated that it is not sufficient to only concentrate on enhancing capabilities, rather, care must also be taken for people to have enough capability to live honourably. Robeyns proposed the idea of setting minimum thresholds for each capability to guarantee a life of basic dignity. She argued that the significance of relational capabilities shows how social and relational aspects affect each individual's capabilities. In her argument, she stated that social networks, personal connections, and the effectiveness of interactions all have huge impact on the capacity of happiness.

Martha Nussbaum's version of capability approach (theory of justice) is a derivative work from the requirements of human dignity, a list of central capabilities to be incorporated into national constitutions, guaranteed to all (Nussbaum, 2011). Ingrid Robeyns' theory is a critique of Martha Nussbaum's capability approach in which she faults Nussbaum's capability approach and offers an alternative 'cartwheel' approach (Robeyns, 2016). The contributions of Nussbaum and Robeyns to the growth and improvement of Capabiltarianism have deepened and broadened its theoretical underpinnings. The understanding of the complexity of human well-being, agency, and the significance of social and relational elements in determining people's potential has been improved by their works.

With the aim of attaining sustainable development by 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a worldwide framework for addressing a variety of social, economic, and environmental concerns. Like many other nations, Nigeria has adopted the SDGs as the foundation of its development programme. Sustainable development is at work in Nigeria through a number of initiatives and activities. In order to achieve long-term success and well-being, sustainable development in Nigeria entails resolving the nation's particular social, economic, and environmental problems.

This paper argues that both theories and frameworks offer useful resources for policy analysis, the promotion of social justice, and real-world actions to improve human potentials with the aim to advance sustainable development. It further contends that sustainable development is of significant importance in Nigeria as it addresses the country's social, economic, and environmental challenges. The paper probes



the question: What beneficial interventions are applicable and appropriate for sustainable development in Nigeria drawing on the ideas of capabilities, well-being, and social justice? By promoting social equity, economic diversification, and environmental stewardship, sustainable development can enhance the well-being of Nigerians, reduce poverty and inequality, create economic opportunities, and preserve the country's natural resources for future generations. Capability Approach faces a problem of plurality. It presumes that the notion of a good life and purpose for every human is the same; such that it is assumed that good health, good life, and the need for sexual partners, and other indices are goals which every human chases and their capabilities to achieve them must be aided or enabled. However, every human is unique and so are their capabilities and their interests. Therefore, capability approach disregards that there is no uniformity in the term, 'good life' and its differing capability. The paper further argues that, in contrast, both capabilities and ideas of Martha Nussbaum and Ingrid Robeyns within the Nigerian context are indeterminate and diverse.

The discussion begins with a note on methodology. It further evaluates the relevance of Capability Approach to sustainable development before discussing sustainable development in Nigeria. The paper further situates the discussion of capability on Nigerian context between 2012 and 2022. The final analysis explores both capability theories in the Nigerian situation.

### **Methodology**

The methodology of this paper is theoretical and explorative in nature. This approach is chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relevance of Capability Approach for sustainable development in Nigeria, identify specific challenges, propose a constructive intervention, and analyse potential implications. For the purpose of the research work, secondary data is analysed. This includes texts, peer reviewed journals, government documents, chapters in scholarly edited books, and internet sources. The literature provides a theoretical foundation that facilitates a deep understanding of the specific challenges and opportunities in Nigeria's sustainable development context. Qualitative data analysis technique such as thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and key insights related to the research question.

### **Nigeria as a Contextual Analysis for Both Capability Theories**

Undoubtedly, Nigeria can provide an intriguing background for examining both Martha Nussbaum's and Ingrid Robeyns' capability theories. Nigeria is an excellent case study that shows how these capability frameworks may be applied in a complicated and real-world situation with dire socioeconomic issues. The core capabilities of Nussbaum offer a framework for assessing well-being in various spheres of life (Naz, 2021). The realisation of abilities connected to physical health, senses, creativity, and knowledge are hampered in Nigeria by issues with access to basic education, healthcare, and clean water. It is crucial to upgrade healthcare facilities and services nationwide. Having access to universal healthcare would improve people's capability to live healthy lives and contribute to development. Nussbaum's focus on the shared human condition is both 'a blessing and a curse' in the Nigerian setting.

While it emphasises on the value of particular skills for all people, it neglects the ways in which cultural and environmental factors affect the well-being of people. In applying Nussbaum's approach in Nigeria, one must evaluate both the outcomes of individuals and their opportunities and freedoms. For instance, difficulties in finding good jobs, gender discrimination, and political instability may restrict one's capability for practical judgement, identification, and political engagement. Nussbaum's methodology advocates looking at both internal and external factors that affect capabilities. In Nigeria, issues such as corruption, poor infrastructure, and unequal resource distribution have a big impact on the opportunity people have to use their skills (Prince, 2023).

The foundation for sustainable development in Nigeria may be found in Nussbaum's list of essential competencies, which also includes involvement in politics, health care, social interactions, and education. Regardless of their origin or region, policies should work to guarantee that all Nigerians have access to these capabilities. It is essential to fund high-quality education for all Nigerians. This entails not only expanding access to education but also making sure that the education curriculum delivered provides



students with the abilities and information required for a guaranteed involvement in the society and the economy. She also stresses the value of having a clean and healthy atmosphere. For long-term well-being, it is essential to implement sustainable practices in industries such as agriculture, energy, and waste management.

Contrarily, Robeyns' emphasis on the relational aspect of skills is relevant to Nigeria, where societal norms and gender roles can have a significant impact on well-being. Realising abilities like connection, physical integrity, and practical reason requires gender equality and women's empowerment. Robeyns' method, which emphasises plurality and human agency, is applicable to Nigeria's complex cultural milieu. It can accept differences in goals for well-being across racial, religious, and regional boundaries. The population of Nigeria, which is multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multilingual, supports Robeyns' emphasis on pluralism.

This variety emphasises the necessity for a flexible strategy that takes into account the priorities and values of various cultures when evaluating talents. The focus on sufficiency that Robeyns emphasises is in line with efforts to combat extreme poverty and hardship in Nigeria. To achieve a minimum level of well-being, policies should concentrate on meeting fundamental necessities including food, clean water, shelter, and healthcare. Policies should also encourage active participation in decision-making and offer people the chance to shape their own growth. To address environmental issues and ensure marginalised populations are not disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation, Robeyns' concern for justice must be taken into consideration.

## **Conclusion**

The capabilities approach centres development activities around the needs of the individual. It acknowledges that people have different needs, aspirations, and values, and that development should enable people to follow their own goals. Enhancing people's capabilities, that is, their actual chances to accomplish and become what they value, is the aim. Both Martha Nussbaum's and Ingrid Robeyns's capability theories contribute to the broader scope of capability approach but they have nuanced differences in their focus and application. Selecting the most suitable theory for sustainable development in Nigeria depends on the specific context, priorities, and challenges faced by the country.

Nussbaum's approach is grounded in the idea of "central human capabilities" that individuals should aim to achieve for a life of dignity. She outlines ten core capabilities that cover a range of dimensions, including life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, and control over one's environment as being necessary for human flourishing. This approach provides a comprehensive framework for assessing human well-being and ensuring that individuals have the foundational capabilities necessary for a flourishing life. This approach is especially valuable for addressing inequalities and ensuring a basic level of human dignity.

Robeyns's approach emphasises a more open-ended list of capabilities, allowing for context-specific additions based on societal preferences. She emphasises the importance of considering relational and environmental factors that affect people's well-being, such as social relationships and the natural environment. Robeyns's approach provides flexibility to tailor capability approach according to local contexts, which can be particularly beneficial for a diverse and culturally rich country like Nigeria. It also highlights the role of social and environmental factors in shaping individuals' capabilities. Robeyns's approach is contextually flexible as it gives value to the ability to adapt and expand the list of capabilities based on its cultural diversity and local priorities. It also emphasises the relationship between individuals, their communities, and the environment. Ultimately, both approaches offer valuable insights into enhancing well-being and human development which can both be harnessed on a careful assessment of Nigeria's unique context, goals, and values. The sufficiency philosophy of Robeyns is in line with meeting Nigeria's urgent requirements, such as expanding access to clean water, healthcare, reducing poverty and education, especially in rural and marginalised areas. Even though maximisation is the desired goal, Nigeria may need to balance short-term fixes with long-term development plans. Both strategies place a strong emphasis on reducing inequalities, although Robeyns' sufficiency strategy may have a more



immediate effect on disadvantaged groups, perhaps resulting in speedier improvements in their quality of life.

In Nigeria, a nuanced and context-specific strategy is required because of the trade-off between sufficiency and capability maximisation. While Robeyns' sufficiency method might offer those in desperate need more immediate aid, Nussbaum's approach offers a holistic picture of flourishing. A practical strategy can comprise meeting fundamental requirements while gradually enhancing capabilities to allow people to gradually live more fulfilling lives.

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