Needs and Capabilities

SABINA ALKIRE

1. Abstract

How should actions to redress absolute human deprivation be framed?[1] Current international coordinated actions on absolute poverty are framed by human rights or by goals such as the Millennium Development Goals. But appropriate, effective and sustained responses to needs require localized participation in the definition of those rights/goals/needs and in measures taken to redress them. Human rights or the MDGs do not seem necessarily to require such processes. For this reason some argue that no universal framework can describe economic, social, or cultural rights. Yet to address absolute poverty purely from the local perspective still requires the identification and prioritization of capabilities or needs, and often requires actions by greater-than-local institutions, so in practical terms a framework is not rejected without cost. This paper argues that the identification and prioritisation of rights or MDGs can and should be done at an international level, but that they might be framed as capabilities, and that far greater attention need be given to the iterative specification of these rights, and to the ongoing protection of certain agency freedoms. The paper explores how Wiggins' account of need can fruitfully inform the specification of needs claims. It also draws significantly on Sen's work to identify the intrinsic importance of process and opportunity freedoms, and to identify how these can relate to universal priorities.

[1] I am grateful to David Wiggins, Soran Reader, Melissa Lane, Ian Gough, Ingrid Robeyns, and participants at the Needs conference in Durham for their comments. Errors remain my own.

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2. Introduction

'We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women, and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected.'[2]

That sentence, taken from the 2000 Millennium Declaration of the United Nations, is an oft-cited introduction to the eight 'Millennium Development Goals' (MDGs) that the United Nations together with 189 countries pledged to achieve by 2015.[3] Rhetorical fashions shift, and words such as 'need' or 'right' do not appear in the favourite caption of this initiative. Unsurprisingly, though, the word 'need' threads through the Millennium Declaration and subsequent documents. For example the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan reported in 2002 that more progress was required. 'Otherwise the ringing words of the Declaration will serve only as grim reminders of the human needs neglected and promises unmet'.[4]

However, the MDGs and related accounts of human needs such as the second generation human rights (economic, social, and cultural rights), have been criticised by those who firmly support the commitments the MDGs seek to embody and advance. One salient criticism is that the MDGs are not conceptually framed so as to ensure that the *process* by which the MDGs are met is empowering, and that the MDGs are appropriately adapted in different settings. For example David Wiggins writes that proposals such as the MDGs are 'insufficiently rich or robust to withstand

[2] *United Nations Millennium Declaration* (8 September 2000), General Assembly Resolution 55/2.

[3] The goals are to:

i. eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
ii. achieve universal primary education
iii. promote gender equality and empower women
iv. reduce child mortality
v. improve maternal health
vi. combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
vii. ensure environmental sustainability
viii. develop a global partnership for development

[4] Kofi Annan, 'Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration' A/57/270 (31 July, 2002). David Wiggins, 'Claims of Need' in *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,1998) 1–57. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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commercial or political exploitation and abuse and insufficiently informed by the local realities of a myriad [of] very diverse supposed beneficiaries – an understanding insufficiently rich or robust, certainly, to sustain argument worthy of the high aspirations that underlay the [Millennium] Declaration itself'.[5]

But could there be an adequate way of framing goals for concerted action to redress absolute human deprivation? This paper will argue that such goals can and, for pragmatic reasons, should be framed universally, but as capabilities or freedoms. It will further argue that to identify and locally adapt a set of freedoms of vital importance requires an iterative approach that does indeed address the 'process' considerations mentioned above.

The paper will engage the writings of David Wiggins and Amartya Sen, both of whom work, in different ways, towards rights conceived as 'ethical affirmations' – Wiggins using vital needs, and Sen using freedoms.[6] The identification of particularly crucial needs, or especially important capabilities is a central component of rights, particularly when these rights are normative for individuals and groups (whether or not they are also to some extent legally protected).[7] What I propose is that we might interrupt the full determination of needs in Wiggins' account in two ways. First, we might frame goals at a sufficiently general level to guide international action by focusing on capabilities rather than needs or their satisfiers. Second, we might frame vital needs not necessarily as needs for commodities (to have or use $\boldsymbol{x}$), but in ways that can create ongoing space for individual and group agency, choice, and other processes of the kind that Sen and, it would seem, Wiggins, envisions contributing to a fully specified determination of vital needs. Finally, I propose an iterative sequence so that any account of needs can be revisited and revised.

This is a narrow and limited treatment, which compares needs and capabilities as the central space in which to articulate international goals. The paper will not enumerate needs thresholds, discuss institutional obligations, or scientific reasoning, or consider

[5] Hart Lecture (17th June 2004), 32, fn 23. Len Doyal and Ian Gough, *A Theory of Human Need* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1991). Ross Fitzgerald (ed.), *Human Needs and Politics* (Sydney: Pergamon, 1977). Patricia Springborg, *The Problem of Human Needs and the Critique of Civilisation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981).

[6] Sen Forthcoming Mimeo p. 6.

[7] Wiggins and Sen both follow H.L.A. Hart in viewing a purely legal account of human rights as too narrow. This paper will not, however, explore further the similarities and dissimilarities in their accounts.

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in anything more than a passing glance the normative 'frames' such as human rights. A further narrowing: the paper restricts its consideration of needs to Wiggins' account in 'Claims of Need' and its consideration of capabilities to Amartya Sen's writings.[8] Of particular note in Wiggins' account of needs are various conditions for the identification of certain needs as 'vital,' and the relativities that shape how an essentially contestable need can nonetheless be specified. Sen's writings identify indelible roles for human freedom in the identification and pursuit of needs.

3. Need Claims: Inherently Particular

Wiggins argues that while it is valid to proscribe universal evils such as torture, genocide, or slavery, one cannot validly propagate universal goals to meet human needs.[9] He argues this while holding that needs should command political and ethical attention. Indeed Wiggins argues (in ways this paper will not explore) that appropriately defined vital needs should in principle have priority over other desires, and over non-vital needs. He speculates that '*it is pro tanto unjust* if, among vital interests actually affected by such interventions, the greater strictly vital need of anyone is sacrificed in the name of the lesser needs of however many others'.[10] This section traces Wiggins' account of needs claims.

To begin with a common observation, consider how the phrase 'this group is deprived of basic capabilities' strikes the ear versus the phrase, 'this group has unmet basic needs'. The word 'capability' or 'freedom' or even 'basic capability' does not prima facie carry a comparable normative force. Wiggins argues that the difference between the impact of stark claims of 'need' on the listener, and the impact of claims of 'want' or 'desire' or 'preference', [or, we might add, capability / freedom] explains the 'constant recourse to the idea of need' in western political

[8] Wiggins op. cit., paragraphs 1–11, and postscript 2, 319–328. It would perhaps be a more obvious comparison to use Nussbaum's account of the capabilities approach as she also argues that the state should support a 'threshold' of central human capabilities (Nussbaum 2000). But as this paper turns on the role of freedom and agency, I use Sen's writings as they consider the role of freedom rather carefully.

[9] Hart Lecture (17th June 2004), 32, fn 23.

[10] Wiggins op. cit.: 45

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discourse.[11] He makes the case that although the concept and conceptualization of need is difficult, it is nonetheless crucial: 'given the special force carried by "need", we ought to try to grasp some special content that the word possesses in virtue of which that force accrues to it. It would be a sort of word-magic if so striking a difference as that between "want" and "need" could arise except from a difference of substance'.[12] But a great deal of confusion is evident in how to define needs in a sufficiently flexible manner as to avoid producing an imposition, and a sufficiently robust manner as to command political attention.

Need turns on the observation that some things are required *despite* what one chooses, and however hard one struggles against the need. Marta keenly desired to subsist on the oranges she was picking and send her entire earnings home, but she began to fall ill. The other pickers told her to buy protein-rich food from the canteen with some of her wages or she would become too weak to work at all. She *needed* other food besides oranges (and her need, as we shall see, was basic). Thus Wiggins describes needs as '*states of dependency (in respect of not being harmed)*, which have as their proper objects things needed (or, more strictly, *having* or *using* ... *x*)'.[13] In contrast to needs, 'capability' – in seeming contradiction – represents precisely a potential for [often intentional] choice and action.

Wiggins works towards defining the most fundamental or 'vital' needs by first defining *absolute* needs and then identifying five other possible qualities of needs – which are 'overlapping but independent categorizations' – all of which vital needs satisfy.[14]

Absolute, or categorical needs refer to needs which, if unmet during a relevant time period, *blight one's life* or cause serious harm. Consider *x* to be something that is needed – something that one cannot get on without – such as food or emergency health care when one has been in a serious accident. Wiggins defines absolute needs in the following way:

(i) I need [absolutely] to have x
if and only if

[11] Op. cit., 4. This argument is common in basic needs literature: see also Doyal and Gough, op. cit., Fitzgerald, op. cit., and Springborg, op. cit.

[12] Op. cit., 6

[13] Op. cit., 16

[14] Op. cit., 16

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(ii) I need [instrumentally] to have x if I am to avoid being harmed
if and only if
(iii) It is necessary, things being what they actually are, that if I avoid being harmed
then I have x.[15]

So a person needs *x absolutely* 'if and only if, whatever morally and socially acceptable variation it is (economically, technologically, politically, historically ... etc.) possible to envisage occurring within the relevant time-span, she will be harmed if she goes without'.[16] Consider the example of a person needing one pound to buy a kilo of rice. To test this claim one would first need to ascertain that one pound is the price of a kilo of rice (it could not be bought more cheaply or borrowed); second, one would need to ascertain whether the person would be harmed if she did not have a rice by time *t* (say, Sunday at five). The first set of investigations consider the scientific connection between the satisfier and the need, as well as the feasibility of meeting *that* need with *that* satisfier (in this case, the fact that one pound will indeed buy a kilo of rice). The second set of investigations examine harm, which plays a pivotal role in the determination of need (a fuller account of harm is required for basic needs as we shall see).

Another feature of needs that Wiggins identifies is that they are expressed in a general way.[17] This is because 'we must start to see any statement of the form "*y* needs *x* [absolutely]" as tantamount to a challenge to imagine an alternative future in which *y* escapes harm or damage without having *x*...'.[18] As Wiggins put it, often we might recognize that we can slightly weaken the statement because 'he will get by if he has *x* or *y* or *z*. Overspecificity in a "needs statement" makes it false'.[19]

Wiggins then canvases additional distinguishing characteristics of needs. (1) *badness or gravity* refers to 'how much harm or suffering would be occasioned by going without'. (2) *urgency* refers to 'how soon must this thing be supplied?'[20] (3) *substitutable* needs are those

[15] Op. cit., 10.
[16] Op. cit., 14.
[17] Wiggins follows Hare's distinction between universality and generality – see R. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 38–50.
[18] Op. cit., 22.
[19] Op. cit., 23.
[20] Op. cit., 14 both quotes.

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which could be met by a different satisfier if the standard of harm is slightly lowered (hence the value of generality mentioned above). (4) *entrenched* needs are those which cannot be changed, even if gradually or over time.

If a need is *entrenched*, other routes of action would not avert the harm. If Murial is lacking an *entrenched* need, say food, then no matter whether the political leaders assume that Murial's only possibility is to beg, or whether they assume that in fact there are many alternatives Murial could take to avoid being hungry (she could migrate and work, or live with relatives, or frequent charity kitchens in another area), they will have to recognize that within the next five days (for example – any time period could be specified) *in all cases Murial will be harmed* if she does not get food. Wiggins writes, '*y's* need for *x* is *entrenched* if the question of whether *y* can remain unharmed without having *x* is rather insensitive to the placing of the ... threshold of realistic envisage-ability-cum-political and moral acceptability of alternative futures'.[21] This would not be the case, for example, if Murial had a need to work in McDonalds because she was a teenager and found meaningful employment by the image of, and income from, McDonalds. Because if Murial matured, changed professions and found an alternative future in which she was fulfilled by managing a furniture workshop, the need to work at McDonald's could disappear (note that the need might still be absolute in the short term).

(5) *Basic* needs are a subset of entrenched needs. An entrenched need is further defined as *basic* 'if what excludes futures in which *y* [the person, i.e. Murial] remains unharmed despite her not having *x* [the basic need-satisfier, i.e. food] are *laws of nature*, unalterable and invariable *environmental facts*, or facts about *human constitution*'.[22] If Murial's need were basic it could not 'disappear' by a change in her job preferences. Basic needs are rather unavoidable, as Marta the orange-picker learned.

Thus in these stages Wiggins identifies ***vital needs*** as those basic (hence entrenched and absolute) needs which are grave and scarcely substitutable. Vital needs thus lie at the intersection of the different considerations.

[21] Op. cit., 15.

[22] Op. cit., 15; A. K. Sen, 'Capability and Well-Being', *The Quality of Life,* A. Sen and M. Nussbaum (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 30–53.

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Vital needs may have a claim to political attention because even if a person twists and turns to avoid them, the person cannot disrupt laws of nature, unalterable and invariable environmental facts, or facts about the human constitution. This might *seem* to explain part of the appeal of the Millennium Development Goals. Three of the MDGs clearly aim to reduce mortality. If claims of need, as Wiggins has them, 'may be pressed from a simple passion to subsist'[23] then premature preventable death seems to constitute a grave blight (related to a fact about human constitution). Chronic hunger and undernourishment – the halving of which is contained in the first goal – are also usually recognised as harmful: persistent child malnutrition stunts physical growth and development thus affecting the child for life. The widespread support for MDGs may

[23] Op. cit., 29. Amartya K. Sen, 'Equality of What?' *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, S. McMurrin (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980a). Amartya K. Sen, 'Plural Utility,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **81** (1980/81), 193–215. Amartya K. Sen, 'Well-Being Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984', *Journal of Philosophy* **82**, 4 (1985a), 169–221. Amartya K. Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1985b). Amartya K. Sen, 'The Standard of Living', *The Standard of Living: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, A. Sen, J. Muellbauer, R. Kanbur, K. Hart, and B. Williams (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Amartya K. Sen, 'The Concept of Development', *The Handbook of Development Economics*, Volume I, H. Chenery and T.N. Srinivasen (eds.) (Amsterdam: Elsevier Publishers, 1988a). Amartya K. Sen, 'Development as Capability Expansion', *Human Development and the International Development Strategy for the 1990s*, K. Griffin and J. Knight (eds.) (London: MacMillan, 1990). Amartya K. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). Amartya K. Sen, 'Capability and Well-Being', *The Quality of Life*, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 30–53. Amartya K. Sen, 'Well-Being, Capability and Public Policy', *Giornale degli economisti et Annali di economia* **53** (1994), 334–347. Amartya K. Sen, 'On the Foundations of Welfare Economics: Utility, Capability and Practical Reason', *Ethics, Rationality and Economic Behaviour*, F. Farina, F. Hahn, and S. Vannucci (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996a), 50–65. Amartya K. Sen, 'Freedom, Capabilities and Public Action: A Response', *Politeia* 12, 43/44 (1996b), 107–125. Amartya K. Sen, *On Economic Inequality*: with a substantial annexe 'after a Quarter Century' by J. Foster and A. Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd Edition, 1997a). Amartya K. Sen, *Development As Freedom* (New York: Knopf Press, 1999).

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suggest the plausibility of these interpretations of blight although they were 'arrived at without consultation of the opinions of [all] other[s]'.[24]

Yet, in contradistinction to the MDGs and any other needs of ostensibly universal applicability, Wiggins identifies three ways in which needs are also relative. They are:

1. *Relative to an account of well-being:* as the words 'harm' and 'blighted' suggest, the particularization of what needs actually are, is not 'innocent of the metaphysics of personhood'[25] but requires some account(s) of human well-being or flourishing.
2. *Relative to culture and individual understanding:* Harm (or suffering, or wretchedness) 'is an essentially contestable matter, and is to some extent relative to a culture, even to some extent relative to people's conceptions of suffering, wretchedness and harm'.[26]
3. *Relative to feasible possibilities at the time:* Needs are necessarily temporally indexed – need at time *t*. This limits consideration of alternatives to futures 'that (i) are economically or technologically realistically conceivable, given the actual state of things at *t*, [presumably in a particular place] and (ii) do not involve us in morally (or

[24] Op. cit., 60 where Wiggins discusses the epistemological role consensus can play.

[25] Op. cit., 11. Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Nature, Function and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* **6**, Supplementary Volume (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 145–184. Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Aristotelian Social Democracy', *Liberalism and the Good,* Bruce Douglass, Gerald Mara and Henry Richard (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1990), 203–252. Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism', *Political Theory* **20**, 2 (1992), 202–246. Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach', *The Quality of Life,* Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 242–269. Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics', *World Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams,* J. Altham and R. Harrison (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 86–131. David A. Crocker, 'Functioning and Capability: The Foundations of Sen's and Nussbaum's Development Ethic, Part 2', *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 153–199.

[26] Op. cit., 11.

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> otherwise) unacceptable acts or interventions in the arrangements of particular human lives or society or whatever, and (iii) can be envisaged without our envisaging ourselves tolerating what we do not have to tolerate'.[27]

This relativity means that although overspecificity is to be avoided, Wiggins' needs can only be specified locally, with reference to a particular time, and with a deep understanding of, or in partnership with, the concerned individual(s) or group(s). Wiggins thus objects to the MDGs and, similarly, to second generation rights such as the right to development, or to education, or to food, because they cannot incorporate these relativities, thus are liable to be (and have a history of being) interpreted and implemented in inappropriate ways.

4. Practicality, Process, and Open-endedness

Wiggins' sophisticated account of needs introduces a number of careful distinctions, some of which were set out above, and articulates the kinds of sensitivities, flexibilities, and considerations that would characterize a full determination of important needs. It also lays a possible foundation for a needs-based approach to rights. But the distance between Wiggins' account of needs and a universal or global description of deprivation-related goals or rights that could guide public action is considerable. I will briefly mention a set of practical difficulties, and certain conceptual concerns.

Clearly the need for local specification of needs is durable and inescapable. But if we can only specify needs locally, then would the staff of every institution that is designed to meet terrible human deprivation at the national or international level have to hold their breath in suspense until the mystery of what vital needs are in a particular situation at a particular time was revealed? Or might these needs – in a sufficiently general way – be predicted and anticipated? Another problem is data collection and analysis. If we have no hypothesis regarding what needs might be, then we would not gather data on them (on nutritional status, on causes of mortality and morbidity, on ability to drink clean water, etc) nor compare how they are fulfilled in different situations. Yet perhaps

[27] Op. cit. 1998, 12. Amartya K. Sen, 'Rights and Agency', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, **11**, 1 (1982a), 5–29; Sen, 'Liberty as Control: An Appraisal', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, **7** (1982b), 207–221; Sen, 'Freedom of Choice', *European Economic Review* 32 (1988b), 269–294.

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some of our understanding of human need is further deepened by such information and analysis (which could be used for descriptive purposes to inform, rather than dictate, responses). Further, if not all needs can be met locally nor by the relevant state but require global or non-state interventions, then how do we craft more efficient processes by which those with unmet vital needs, and those potentially responsive to them, can interact? These clearly practical problems would be encountered if responses to need were confined to deeply sensitive local accounts.

Certain conceptual issues may bear consideration. Does Wiggins' own account adequately address the problems that many have detected in the MDGs – namely, (first) their lack of mechanisms by which to tailor the goals to local values and circumstances, and (second) their inability to distinguish whether or not the *process* by which the goals were realized was itself humane at the very least? Third, how does this account address ongoing human diversity among those with unmet vital needs?

As regards the first issue, Wiggins clearly identifies the considerations that should guide the local specification of needs (urgency, gravity, substitutability, etc). He also clarifies that the identification of needs is time-sensitive. This account is, indeed, strong and flexible, and although he does not specify who is to undertake these considerations, or how value conflicts are to be managed, these questions are often enough addressed, and vary by context anyway. Because for Wiggins needs are *only* identifiable locally, he does not spell out how to take a general need (for nourishment), and further specify it. Yet a clear strength of this account is that it identifies the concerns that would arise in such a specification.

While recognizing that unmet needs may cause multiple harms, Wiggins defines needs with reference to the objects of need '*x*'.[28] The second key question is how *x* can be interpreted.

Wiggins describes needs as '*states of dependency (in respect of not being harmed)*, which have as their proper objects things needed (or, more strictly, *having* or *using* things)'.[29] He gives no examples of his own; as examples of what people have claimed to be needs (whether or not they are) Wiggins cites 'more roads, more fast reactors, more

[28] 'Needs are *states of dependency* (*in respect of not being harmed*), which have as their proper objects things needed (or, more strictly, *having* or *using* ...x)'. Op. cit., 16.

[29] Op. cit., 16.

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animal experiments'.[30] This goes back to Wiggins' definition of absolute needs: 'It is necessary, things being what they actually are, that if I avoid being harmed then **I have *x***.'[31] For Wiggins, *x* was a satisfier, a thing that someone needs to *have* or to *use*.

Unfortunately that formulation seems a mis-step in the argument, because it appears to emphasize the possession and use of commodities to the exclusion of other concerns.[32] Commodities themselves can be quite an insensitive metric across persons. As Sen notes in his criticism of Rawls' primary goods, having (eating) equivalent grams of rice would not generate the same nutritional functionings or meet nutritional needs if consumed by a child, a day labourer, a pregnant or lactating woman, or an elderly invalid. Additionally, the possession of a needs satisfier does not convey any information about the surrounding circumstances. In the same way that one might not desire the oyster that consigned one to oblivion, one might not truly need the emergency food delivery that was delivered with such pomposity as to ruin self-esteem (while making available needed nutrition), or the family planning intervention that

[30] Op. cit., 9. Ruut Veenhoven, Carla DenBuitlaar and Henk de Heer, *World Database of Happiness: Correlates of Happiness* (Rotterdam, Netherlands: RISBO, 1994). Peter B. Smith and Michael Harriss Bond, *Social Psychology Across Cultures: Analysis and Perspectives*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993). G. Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Press, 1980). Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). Ronald Inglehart and Wayne Baker, 'Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values', *American Sociological Review*, **65** (2000), 19–51. Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener and Norbert Schwarz (eds.), *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999). R. M. Ryan, and E. L. Deci, 'Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and well-being', *American Psychologist*, **55** (2000), 68–78. V. Chirkov, R. Ryan, Y. Kim and U. Kaplan, 'Differentiating Autonomy From Individualism and Independence: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective on Internalization of Cultural Orientations and Well-Being', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **84**, 1 (2003), 97–110.

[31] Op. cit., 10.

[32] I am grateful for David Wiggins' advice on this point in particular. Amartya K. Sen, 'Welfare, Preference and Freedom', *Journal of Econometrics*, **50** (1991), 15–29. Amartya K. Sen, 'Maximization and the Act of Choice', *Econometrica* 65, 4 (1997b), 745–779. Amartya K. Sen, *Rationality and Freedom* (Cambridge MA: Belnap Press, 2002).

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was violently imposed. One of the concerns regarding the MDGs is that they do not safeguard against such distortions in their delivery – but nor, inherently, do Wiggins' needs.

Could *x* include not only the object of need but also pertinent circumstances such as the *process* by which ***x*** was specified – for example, in a way that was gentle and dignifying versus imposed versus empowering? It would seem that, if the process fits the same qualifications for being vital as the object, the process could be part of *x*. If we changed the description of *x* away from *have x* and *use x* to *have/ use/ try/ seek/ generate/ act/ etc. x*, the identification of needs could indeed include an account of interpersonal variations or of the process by which the needs were met. Thus we would replace the term *have x* by a number of possible verbal clauses.

Third and finally, if needs are essentially contestable, as Wiggins argues, then how does his account address the ongoing plurality of views once a decision is made as to the set of vital needs and thresholds for a *group* rather than an individual? One might assume that no disagreement persists after a decision is made among the population whose vital needs risk being unmet – that they would graciously welcome all interventions on their behalf. Obviously the much-discussed 'adaptive preferences' raise some barriers here. But setting these aside, even after a group decision is made, the very people whose needs go unmet may continue to hold disparate reasoned views. Indeed this behavior occurs among the absolutely poor as is documented elsewhere.[33] For instance disagreement may arise from diversity in respect to plans of life. So persons, whether deprived or flourishing, might choose deliberately to refrain from meeting certain vital needs (although they have the capability to do so) in order to enjoy some other need or functioning, and this deprivation may be occasional or systematic and long-term.[34] As Sen regularly observes, a Brahmin or hunger striker may regularly refrain from eating, because they personally value the religious discipline or the exercise of justice-seeking agency. The side effect of pursuing these other (perhaps non-basic) needs or functionings is that they will not be well-nourished (in the short or long term, depending on the frequency and severity of their fasting).

[33] Sabina Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002b), Chapters 5 and 7.

[34] Wiggins discusses this briefly (op. cit., 21); see footnote on Paul Streeten's work. C. R. Beitz, 'Amartya Sen's *Resources, Values and Development*', *Economics and Philosophy*, **2** (1986).

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It is important to know whether people had the real freedom to meet a vital need – as the Brahmin and hunger striker do to meet their nutritional needs – and instead are choosing to exercise a different freedom instead. To gain this information we would need to consider freedom not only as a process, but also in regards to each of the 'vital needs'. This train of thought leads us to consider human functionings and their associated capabilities.

5. Capabilities

Amartya Sen's capability approach provides an alternative framework in which to frame priorities for public action.[35] In the monograph *Inequality Reexamined* Sen argues that social arrangements should be evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve valuable functionings. The approach employs three central terms.

Functionings are 'the various things a person may value doing or being'[36] such as being nourished, being confident, or taking part in group decisions. These are the general 'aspects of life' referred to above. The word is of Aristotelian origin and, like Aristotle, Sen claims that 'functionings are *constitutive* of a person's being'.[37]

[35] For the main texts developing the capability approach see Sen 1980, 1980/81, 1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1988a, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1999. Amartya K. Sen, *Resources, Values and Development* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

[36] Sen 1999: 75.

[37] Sen traces the roots of this approach to human flourishing to Aristotle's writings in both *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* (Sen 1992:39, Sen 1999:73). Nussbaum's work investigates this heritage: see especially 1988, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1995. For an inspection of both authors' conceptions of functionings see Crocker 1995. Frances Stewart, *Basic Needs in Developing Countries* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). Paul Streeten, Shaid Javed Burki, Mahbub ul Haq, Norman Hicks, and Frances Stewart, *First Things First: Meeting Basic Human Needs in Developing Countries* (London: Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 1981). Karin Lederer (ed.), *Human Needs: A Contribution to the Current Debate* (Cambridge, MA: Oelgeschlager, Gunn and Hain, 1980). International Labour Organization, *Employment, Growth, and Basic Needs* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 1976). Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995). Jean Drèze and

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But in assessing social arrangements, Sen argues, a focus on what functionings people have managed to achieve would be incomplete, because it would be blind to people's 'agency'[38] and to their opportunity freedom.[39] In order to attend to the foundational importance of freedom Sen introduces the concept of capability. Capability refers to a person's *freedom to* promote or achieve what they value. 'It represents the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another ... to choose from possible livings'.[40] Sen attributes to freedom ('the *real opportunity* that we have to accomplish what we value'[41]) intrinsic value.

To indicate the range of types of valuable freedoms, Sen also has observed that individual advantage can be assessed in at least four different spaces: *well-being achievement*, *well-being freedom*, *agency achievement*, or *agency freedom*. Sen argues that we cannot simply choose to focus on one or another of these four possible spaces; there are good arguments for keeping all in mind. He argues this while accepting that these objectives may conflict. If Rodrigo tried to introduce ethics within his company, his manager might promote him to a 'safe' post with a good package (to keep him quiet) but scant opportunity to affect company policy in an ethical direction. Thus Roger's well-being achievement may increase, but his agency freedom to promote things he values may decrease.

Many immediately object that freedom appears to be given undue prominence in Sen's account. They argue that in fact individual freedom of choice is not necessarily valued equally in different cultures or by different people – and indeed some might value group harmony a great deal, and individual eccentricity

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Amartya Sen (eds.), *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *India: Development and Participation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[38] Agency refers to the freedom to bring about achievements one considers to be valuable, whether or not these achievements are connected to one's own well-being or not. See Sen 1992: 56–7, 1999: 191, and Sen's third Dewey lecture 1985: 203–221.

[39] See Sen 1982a, 1982b, 1988b, 1992, 1999, 2002. Sabina Alkire, 'Dimensions of Human Development', *World Development* (February, 2002a).

[40] Sen 1992: 40.

[41] Sen 1992: 31, see 1999: 74 and 2002: 596. Alkire *Valuing Freedoms*.

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slightly less.[42] But this criticism, as common as it is, merely misunderstands Sen's unusually expansive use of the term freedom. For example one commonly discussed manifestation of freedom is freedom of choice. Sen argues that increases in choices per se do not necessarily constitute an increase in freedom, in part because the options added may not be ones we value anyway, and in part because (however valuable or not options may be) we may lose the option to live 'a peaceful and unbothered life' – perhaps by being a good daughter or a good father and not re-making the social mould.[43] 'Indeed sometimes more freedom of choice can bemuse and befuddle, and make one's life more wretched'.[44] Thus rather than importing in concepts of freedom from other theories, readers might do well to observe how flexible the 'freedom to achieve what one values' and has reason to value actually is – and is intended to be.

As is at once apparent even from this brief summary of Sen's capability approach, a number of kinds of evaluation are inescapable in the specification of capabilities and freedoms that might be entrenched, basic, or vital. At minimum, an evaluation must consider: which achieved functionings people value rather than regard as trivial or evil or undesirable; how valuable alternative people's or future generations' functionings are; how valuable it is to have further (valuable) options as opposed to enjoying the tranquility of not having to choose, or the convenience of having another responsible agent act as one *would choose* without having to consider the matter oneself; and how to guide action according to diverse people's conflicting claims about what functionings are valuable.

Sen has not systematically identified either a set of basic capabilities/freedoms or the relevant facts of human nature. However in the case of human rights (which he, like Wiggins and also following HLA Hart argue, have normative force), Sen does articulate grounds for priority. 'To qualify as the basis of human rights, the freedoms to be defended or advanced must satisfy some

[42] Veenhoven *et al*. 1994, Smith and Bond 1993, Hofstede 1980, Inglehart 1997, Inglehart and Baker 2000, Kahneman *et al*. 1999. However see Ryan's empirical studies of autonomy (2000, 2002, 2004), that invoke concepts closely related to Sen. Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Flawed Foundations: The Philosophical Critique of (a Particular Type of) Economics', *University of Chicago Law Review* (1997), 1197–1214.

[43] Sen 1992: 63.

[44] Sen 1992: 59. See Sen 1985b, 1991, 1997d and the references therein.

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'threshold conditions' of (i) special importance, and (ii) social influenceability'. [45] Sen acknowledges that the discipline of rights will include ongoing discussions regarding what rights satisfy these threshold conditions. 'Insofar as the idea of human rights demands public discussion and engagement ... the agreement that would be sought is not only whether some specific freedom of a particular person has any ethical importance whatsoever (that condition can be easy to satisfy), but also whether its significance and its influenceability meet the threshold conditions for inclusion among the human rights on which the society should focus'. For example, a person's right not to be telephoned often by persons she detests may be important, but not of sufficient importance to be included as an urgent human right whereas her right to receive urgent medical attention for a serious health conditions, is. Similarly a persons' right to live a tranquil life, however important, cannot be guaranteed by external help through social agencies, thus cannot be a human right.

It is precisely at this juncture that the mesh to the previous discussion of MDGs and needs could prove fruitful if, at the international level, needs were framed not with respect to their satisfiers but rather with respect to general functionings.

6. General Functionings

I would argue that internationally valid goals, such as the MDGs, can and, for pragmatic reasons mentioned above should, be articulated and advanced. One approach for doing so would be to draw on Sen's defense of the second generation rights and articulate a set of economic and social aims that refer to freedoms considered in a very general way.

What would be lost if needs were framed not with reference to the direct satisfier(s), but rather with reference to that general aspect of human flourishing that is at risk of being blighted? And what is lost if they are framed in a very general way, with the explicit understanding that the relativities and circumstantial conditions are to be 'taken into account' during implementation? Quite a bit would be lost, such as the particular understandings of what, precisely, is required in order to meet a need (understandings of wretchedness, urgency, the feasible alternatives, the concrete

[45] Sen forthcoming 'Elements of a Theory of Human Rights', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (Expected Fall 2005).

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satisfiers). Yet a kind of usefulness could be gained – if the process of specification was sufficiently safeguarded.

For example, in 'Capabilities and Well-being'[46] Sen mentions a capability to meet nutritional requirements, to be educated, to be sheltered, to be clothed. These refer transparently to *what is needed at a general level* (nutritional diet, education, shelter, clothes). In this way, we might identify a set of freedoms that pertain to vital needs (as Wiggins' defines it) or are of special importance and social influenceability. If they are conceived of in a sufficiently general fashion, and if the process of specifying them is likewise sufficiently robust – indeed intrinsic to the account – then this might allay the more considered fears of imposition that Wiggins and many others raise.

7. Freedom

A standing question is why, in addressing absolute and entrenched deprivation, it might be relevant to talk about capabilities rather than needs. Is our goal to have the capability to ..., or simply to ...? Is the capability term merely a way of creating flexibility and accounting for personal differences – or does the freedom itself make an independent contribution? This is the remaining outstanding issue between Sen's capability approach and needs approaches.

It might be mentioned at this point, as an aside, that Sen's capability approach arose out of the 'Basic Needs' approach in international development represented by writers such as Paul Streeten and Frances Stewart. A key reason Sen gave for differentiating the capability approach from the basic needs approach was precisely to introduce a more substantive role for freedom. Wiggins and others have answered, of course, to the familiar criticism that 'needs is a more passive concept than "capability" ' – the needs approach asks 'what can be *done for* the person?' whereas the capability approach also adds the question 'what can the person *do*?'[47] In Wiggins' approach, if we changed the description of *x* away from *have x* and *use x* to *have/use/try/seek/generate/act/etc. x*, the identification of needs could indeed include an account of the process by which the needs were met. Thus we would replace the term *have x* by a number of possible verbal

[46] Sen 1993a: 36.
[47] Sen 1984: 514.

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clauses so that they might encompass freedom and other desirable qualities. But that freedom could be introduced does not mean that it would be. Why might freedom be brought centrally into the discussion – especially, for example, in relation to the MDGs and similar practical endeavours to meet acute human needs?

First, Wiggins discusses needs 'within a non-authoritarian, critical society in which discussion was both free and effective'.[48] In such a context one is relieved of the obligation to guard against situations of active political repression. Unfortunately this framing condition does not uniformly pertain in either developed or developing countries at present. Thus presumably Wiggins' account would need modification in these circumstances.

Consider, even superficially, what would happen if governments bent on achieving the MDGs globally *only* evaluated progress in meeting needs relating to health, education, and nutrition (defined either as functionings or as particular satisfiers such as birth assistance[49]). If Country A had higher increases of health, education, and nutrition than Country B, then an international observer would say with utter certainty that the progress in meeting needs (the MDGs) in A was better than B. What if A had achieved these indicators by oppressive policies (outlawing fasting; forced displacement of populations, and imposed maternal health regimes)? If food (absence of hunger) and birth assistance (to reduce maternal mortality) were judged to be needs, we would *still* have to say that A was better at meeting needs than B (because A had come closer to our objective than B). This judgement would be accurate, but might not capture the full sense of what we consider important. In order to be able to distinguish country A, which achieved indicators through oppressive policies, from country C, which achieved the same gains without coercion, we would need to change our objective, for example by adding a series of 'process-related' conditions to *every* description of need. That is, rather than having this as a 'framing condition' outside the concept of need, we would need to bring this into the account of need itself. The adjustments to 'have x' could, of course, accomplish this (for example, 'have x in an uncoerced manner').

Now perhaps we could frame our goal as meeting vital needs if we *always* added in the need for decision-making, participation or

[48] Op. cit., 327.

[49] In addition to the eight goals of the MDGs, there are 18 targets and 48 indicators that do track changes in particular 'satisfiers'.

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autonomy among the corealizable set of vital needs.[50] As Wiggins writes, 'freedom, choice and autonomy are themselves vital human needs, and are candidates for precisely the kind of protection that is accorded qua needs to other real needs'.[51] Then our objective might be to increase some set of needs such as vital *health, education, nutrition and freedom*. Indeed this was one option explored by Basic Needs authors.[52] Sen has argued instead, that in addition to considering what he calls 'process' freedoms or agency, one also needs to consider 'opportunity' freedoms with respect to *each* functioning.[53] The reason is that freedom is 'an irreducibly plural'[54] concept and different kinds freedom may increase and decrease at the same time. Increases in democratic participation for a national population (process freedom) may occur during the same time period that indigenous groups are forcibly displaced in order for a dam to be built, and that women gain greater decision-making power within the family, and that maternal health regimes are imposed. If we considered freedom as a separate category (and the MDGs do not even do this) we might only recognize the increase in democratic participation, and not recognize, the other significant losses and gains.

A final and not entirely residual point on the additional value of framing needs in terms of human capabilities is that it may help us to explain why it seems at once urgent to meet needs that are defined, strongly, as not intentionally required in order for lives not to be blighted, and yet deliberately to continue to hold out the possibility that people will choose (intentionally) to leave their own needs unmet. But to return to a poor Brahmin, it would seem too strong to suggest that *people's entire lives* will be blighted if they do not meet their vital need for nourishment because, while the Brahmin's 'functioning' of being nourished or healthy would indeed be blighted by intense fasting, it might also hold

[50] Stewart, referring to Streeten *et al*. 1981, Lederer 1980, ILO 1976 and others notes that BN *always* included 'certain standards of nutrition, and the universal provision of health and education services'. They sometimes included 'shelter and clothing and non-material needs such as employment, participation and political liberty' (1985:1). See Drèze and Sen 1989, 1995, 1997, 2002 and Sen 1999, all of which view political participation as a basic capability.

[51] Op. cit., 328.

[52] Particularly Streeten 1984 and Stewart 1985.

[53] This argument is developed in Sen's Arrow lectures, Sen 2002 Chapters 19–21.

[54] Sen 2002: 585.

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simultaneously that in other spheres her life might be regal and radiant. By enumerating vital needs with reference to distinct dimensions of flourishing – or 'spheres of concern'[55] – one is able to give a reasoned account for such trade offs.

8. An Iterative Approach

The discussions of this paper might be brought towards a constructive proposal by considering the three ways in which we might frame goals for concerted action to redress absolute human deprivation across the globe.

(1) to provide satisfiers of vital needs (in the absence of which life is blighted).
(2) to expand vital capabilities
(3) to increase people's capabilities to meet their vital needs, which requires some sequential and iterative set of activities such as the:

   a) articulation of general goals of special importance and social influencability
   b) identification of long term valued capability goals and strategies for the community of interest (i.e. using participation)
   c) establishment of vital needs instrumental to these goals in the short term for the community of interest
   d) implementation of a strategy such that negative freedoms are safeguarded and the goals and strategies can be influenced by public debate in an ongoing iterative manner
   e) mitigation of (especially vital) capability contraction that occurs either among the community of interest or among other groups, while meeting vital needs

The problem with the first alternative (1) – a pure needs approach specified locally only – is that it may overlook coercion, either overtly, as in the case of China's one child policy, or more subtly, in a top-down planning approach that does not allow specification of needs relative to that particular context. It ignores how discussions around 'essentially contestable' needs carry on even after a set of needs has been enumerated and a set of measures implemented. To

[55] I have tried to explore some of these ideas elsewhere in '*Valuing Freedoms* 2002 and 'Dimensions of Human Development' (2002).

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correct this difficulty it may be necessary for a needs approach to import a rigorous separate discussion as to the processes required to provide for each need, and also for an absence of coercion (although allowing commendation of a set of new practices). The residual problem in the final form is that thus specified, the needs would be so locally particular that they could not guide global initiatives.

The second approach (2) flounders on the absence of procedures by which basic capabilities could be specified. Further it is very hard to put all of the components of the capability approach into practice at the same time. Consider the building of a health clinic in a remote area where traditional medicine is used, and persons visit hospitals infrequently. If a district government wished to be very sensitive to local values, it might quietly arrange the building and staffing of a health clinic 'for those who wished to have access to modern medicine'. But one might doubt that an idle staffed health clinic necessarily constitutes an expansion of capabilities. If Thomás lived in the village, *could* he achieve basic health care, or would his suspicion of, or lack of clarity about the clinic, mean that this was not a real option? The development of functional health clinics, nutritional habits, primary schools, and the like seems more often to *require* field staff to motivate communities, to provide information about the benefits of the initiatives, to demonstrate results and win confidence. This interaction may itself knead and alter the values and of participants and/or decision-makers.[56]

This paper advances the third (3) option. In this option, the MDGs or similar rights would be framed in a general way, with reference to the freedoms they would protect. This general statement could be of technical and practical value. However, to address the concerns that have rightly arisen, a series of further steps would address the local specification of needs (3b), implementation (3c), the ongoing protection of certain freedoms and possibilities of ongoing adaptation (3d), and concern for wider external impacts (which have not been discussed in this paper). If one accepts this way of constructing a capability framework then articulating and meeting vital needs (3b) does indeed have a central

[56] With Nussbaum I also think it significant 'that the endogeneity of preferences has been recognized by almost all the major writers on emotion and desire in the history of Western philosophy, including Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans, the Stoics, Thomás Aquinas, Spinoza, and Adam Smith, not to mention countless contemporary writers in philosophy and in related fields (such as anthropology and cognitive psychology)'. Nussbaum (1997).

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role within a 'capability' approach. This interpretation differs from Wiggins' approach in *formalizing* the need for local specification of needs, participation and negative freedom, and in doing so in a general rather than localized level. But it does not introduce fundamentally new concerns.

Conclusion

Clearly, examination of the needs and capability approaches reveals that they are not at loggerheads. We have to go on using both. As regards the particular problem of framing goals for international action (which may be rights), both face the problem of identifying certain specially important needs or freedoms. Wiggins' account of vital needs introduces some of the considerations that might further delineate how rights of 'special importance' can be met in a particular context at a particular time. At the same time, Sen's approach is useful because it is able to articulate general priorities so that those working at an international level can have some vague common goals, while protecting the ability of those at the local or technical levels to have their say in the 'essentially contestable' specification of needs relative to their particular circumstances.

It may be that needs writers have implicitly assumed that people's participation will be invoked and their freedoms cultivated in the development of vital needs strategies. Yet Wiggins' description of the negative associations with 'need' in Britain suggests that the needs programs may have been executed in such a way that they offered the needy population scant incentive or opportunity to shape, actively, their own response. The danger of not making explicit the value of active engagement by the 'poor' is that it may be overlooked by implementing institutions that understand themselves to be bent on 'urgent' matters.

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