

**Development as Freedom**, Amartya Sen. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, ISBN: 0 19 829758 0, 366pp

“Development as freedom” – savour those words! This seminal work from Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize Winner in Economics, constitutes a comprehensive challenge to the dogmas of the New Right that have dominated economics and economic theory during the last 20 years.

According to what has become the ‘conventional wisdom’ of economics, the most important function of economic policy is to safeguard the ‘right’ of a minority to accumulate profits at the highest rate possible (euphemistically referred to as ‘growth’). Development, we are told, is possible only if there is such growth. Only when this freedom is unrestricted will others in society benefit from any associated spin-offs (the trickle-down effect). All other freedoms are only achievable if such growth occurs. The purpose of ‘development’ is, therefore, to guarantee ‘growth’ so that ultimately other freedoms can, at some indeterminate time in the future, be enjoyed. State expenditure, according to this dogma, should be directed towards creating an enabling environment for ‘growth’, and not be ‘wasted’ on the provision of public services that, in any case, can ultimately be provided ‘more efficiently’ by private enterprise. These are the mantras that you will find woven through almost every report on economic development over the last 20 years – whether from the World Bank, IMF, WTO, or from bilateral development agencies in the North. This is the madness that, as Amartya Sen points out, makes socially useful members of society such as school-teachers and health workers feel more threatened by conservative economic policies than do army generals. It is the madness that led, as I have argued elsewhere, to social calamities such as the genocide in Rwanda.

In this important book, Sen brings sense (and sanity) to bear on economics and development theory. The well being of humans is placed at centre stage. It is seen as both the goal and the means for development, not simply a spurious side effect. “Freedoms,” he argues, “are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means.” Development should be seen as a process of expanding freedoms. “If freedom is what development advances, then there is a major argument for concentrating on that overarching objective, rather than on some particular means, or some chosen list of instruments”. To achieve development, he argues, requires the removal of poverty, tyranny, lack of economic opportunities, social deprivation, neglect of public services, and the machinery of repression.

His challenge to the shibboleths of conventional economics is performed with gentleness and reason. There is both breadth in the scope of subjects considered and depth in the treatment of empirical data that he amasses as evidence for his conclusions. He shows, for example, how high per capita income does not necessarily correlate with greater life expectancy – poor Afro-Americans have a lower life expectancy than the poor in the Indian state of Kerala where public services have long been accessible to the poor. And further, the “solution of the problem of population growth (like the solution of so many other social and economic problems) can lie in expanding the freedom of the people whose interest are most directly affected by over frequent child-bearing and child-rearing. The solution of the

population problem calls for more freedom, not less.” Famines, he argues, are not a product of absolute shortages of food; rather, “Inequality has an important role in the development of famines and other severe crises ... [the latter] thrive on the basis of severe and sometimes suddenly increased inequality.”

Nothing, he believes, is “as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women. This is indeed a crucial aspect of ‘development as freedom’.” His concern is about human potential, and how it can be liberated both as a means for improved economic performance and as the very purpose of economic and social activities.

Sen presents a treatise that integrates ethics, values and economic theory. “The formation of values and the emergence and evolution of social ethics are also part of the process of development.” He argues that a variety of social institutions including those involved in the operation of markets, administrations, legislatures, political parties, NGOs, the judiciary, the media and the ‘community’, all contribute to the process of development, and therefore an integrated analysis is needed of their respective roles

This book is vital reading for all those concerned with human development, freedom and respect for human dignity. It has the potential for influencing social and economic policy in the North and in the South— a potential that will be realised so long as we have the freedom to challenge prevailing dogmas, and so long as those in power have the capacity to listen. Not everyone will necessarily agree with all that Sen has to offer (I, for one, have less faith in the virtues of the market or the theories of Adam Smith, than he). Complete agreement is not, however, necessary. The strength of this book lies in the reflections it provokes and the debates it will stimulate about issues that should concern us all. That debate is vital for: “It is the customary fate of new truths to begin as heresies and to end as superstitions.” It is important that Sen’s contribution does not share the same fate.

Although some may find one or two sections hard reading, the book belongs – dog-eared from multiple readings and reflections – on the shelves of all development workers, academics, policy makers, activists and – dare I say it – economists alike.

Firoze Manji  
Department of Continuing Education, Oxford University  
(Contact address: 38 Western Road, Oxford, OX1 4LG, England.  
[firoze@fahamu.org.uk](mailto:firoze@fahamu.org.uk))

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