

SOCIAL CHOICE THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION IN A HUMAN RIGHTS BASED APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

How to cite this paper: Mohan, D. (2017). Social choice theory and its application in a human rights based approach to development. *Journal of Governance & Regulation*, 6(3), 7-13. doi: 10.22495/jgr_v6_i3_p1

How to access this paper online:
http://dx.doi.org/10.22495/jgr_v6_i3_p1

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ISSN Print: 2220-9352
ISSN Online: 2306-6784

Received: 27.05.2017
Accepted: 13.07.2017

JEL Classification: A12, D71, I30, O1
DOI: 10.22495/jgr_v6_i3_p1

A discourse on human rights, is built on including such rights as part of a broader, universal framework (accommodating for moral, ethical claims) that go beyond any constitutionally derived claims and rights or any given set of legitimate laws that are defined by the sovereign of a country. In recent decades, invoking a discussion on safeguarding human rights has become a major way of challenging the level of inequities and oppression within and across countries today that are circumscribing the possibilities of realizing any form of developmental growth. This paper makes an attempt to study the basic formulation of rights, particularly in context of a human rights based approach to development (through a right to development) and exploring its analytical affiliation with the discipline of social choice theory. The social choice approach, as discussed in the paper, has something substantial to offer within the moral, ethical considerations involved in human right(s) formulation by offering a more systematic, non-arbitrary, analytical reasoning basis to the subject. Without getting into the mathematical details of the axioms involved in the theoretical construction of social choice, I draw a general linkage between the formal reasoning behind social choice theory (i.e. involving a diverse set of individual values and preferences in its social welfare function) and its operational connection with human rights, using freedoms as an integral part of the human rights based approach to development.

Keywords: Social Choice Theory, Economic Development, Human Rights

1. INTRODUCTION

Human rights, as Charles Beitz (2001) argues, “play the role of a moral touchstone as a standard of assessment and criticism for domestic institutions, a standard of aspiration for their reform, and increasingly a standard of evaluation for the policies and practices of international economic and political institutions”. Amartya Sen’s contribution to the subject of human rights and its application in development studies within larger economic reasoning has been remarkable; especially considering the fact how fewer mainstream economists in recent times have invoked a wider discussion on the subject of human rights and its link with the pursuit of development.

In the conceptualization of human rights, (Sen 2004) recognizes them as ethical demands that inspire legislation (to recognize them as legal rights) but that will be, “a further fact, rather than a constitutive characteristic of human rights”. This

paper attempts to revisit the contribution made in the field of human rights by Amartya Sen through the application of his *Capability Approach*, extracted from the axiomatic, formal reasoning provided in his work on extending Social Choice Theory into welfare economics and further, take it into a wider discourse on human right formulation.

While Sen himself does not specifically argue for the case of a Right to Development; however in his Nobel Symposium volume, he does define the necessity of such a Right to draw a close connect between the relationship shared by human rights in the process of overall development of beings (or sovereigns of a country). This paper discusses the contextual relevance of a Right to Development (as discussed by Sen and other developmentalists in recent times) and highlight the need of its realization for a developing state by focusing on development policies (categorized as a meta-right to safeguarding Right to Development) that expand and

safeguard basic freedoms embedded in a human rights based approach to development.

A right to development, in Sen's developmental framework is seen as a "conglomeration of a collection of claims, varying from basic education, health care, and nutrition to political liberties, religious freedoms and civil rights for all" (Sengupta, 2009). Such a Right somehow works as a "vector of all the different human rights" in some kind of a *pareto optimal* space where as "the value of such a Right improves, if at least one right improves and no right deteriorates".

A discourse on human rights is built on including such rights as part of a broader, universal framework (accommodating for moral, ethical claims) that go beyond any constitutionally derived claims and rights or any given set of legitimate laws that are defined by the sovereign of a country. For example, the right not to be tortured is accepted as a universal moral, ethical claim as part of human rights that remains independent of any constitutional recognition needed by a given country (Sen, 2000).

This paper reviews Sen's own contribution to the subject of Human Rights along with the contributions of other contemporary developmentalists, drawing a connection between the application of social choice theory in conceptually designing a freedom based-human rights discourse in the expression of a Right to Development. The social choice approach has something substantial to offer within the moral, ethical considerations involved in human right(s) formulation by offering a more systematic, non-arbitrary, analytical reasoning basis to the subject.

Without getting into the mathematical details of the axioms involved in the theoretical construction of social choice, the paper draws a general linkage between the formal reasoning behind social choice theory (i.e. involving a diverse set of individual values and preferences in its social welfare function) and its operational connection with human rights. This is a connection that Sen (2000, 2011) draws upon in detail, while arguing for a more inclusive, analytical process in the formulation, recognition of human rights.

2. METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

The paper, written as a literature review to Sen's own contribution to the field of human rights and social choice theory, reviews the existing literature on this discourse which is further structured in the paper into *three* parts: *first part*, provides a brief description of what one means by a *human rights based approach to development* (HRBA) or a *Right to Development*; *second part*, introduces Social Choice Theory as an approach with the axiomatic reasoning involved in its concept and the *third part* (under the *Discussion section*), revisits some of Sen's own propositions on the application of Social Choice Theory using the relevance of basic freedoms in a human rights based approach to development. The paper, in its attempt to do an intensive literature review covers not only Amartya Sen's own work in areas of human rights, social choice theory but includes some of the other classical works from scholars like J. Buchanan, Feinberg, Dworkin, Scanlon et al.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 A Human Rights Based Development Approach: a Right to Development?

The subject of developing a Human Rights based approach to development, is one of the key concepts in addition to other conceptual frameworks accounting for individual capabilities, *functionings*, entitlements that Sen (2000, 2011) discusses in his broader conceptualization of economic development as an end goal in itself i.e. an end goal which is realized through the expansion of both human capabilities and freedoms. In recent decades, invoking a discussion on safeguarding human rights has become a major way of challenging the level of inequities and oppression within and across countries today that are circumscribing the possibilities of realizing any form of developmental growth.

A positive relationship between the fulfilment of a given set of rights and freedoms with the level of economic growth can ideally exist if that level of growth is "(a) specially designed to ensure that inequality does not increase; and is (b) participatory and accountable" (Sengupta, 2009). A right based process to economic growth allows consistency in the pursuit of developmental growth for most states and a Right to Development can act as a useful catalyst in promoting such growth.

Article I, Paragraph I of the Declaration on the Right to Development states, "the right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized". The Right principally is recognized as a human right that integrates various processes linked with economic, political, social, cultural development; attaching special importance to fundamental freedoms that may help an individual being to realize an optimal state of "well-being" as part of her/his development.

"Well-being", here can functionally be expressed in following terms:

$$W_i = (R_1, R_2, \dots, R_n; F_1, F_2, \dots, F_k) \quad (1)$$

where W_i represents Well-being of any "i" number of individuals, "R" represents rights and "F" represents Freedoms.

Similarly, Development, in a functional expression can mathematically be functioned as:

$$D = (dR_1, dR_2, dR_3, \dots, dR_n; dF_1, dF_2, \dots, dF_k) \quad (2)$$

The functional expression of Development hints at a complex exercise of constructing quantifiable metrics for "R" and "F" in order to reflect the weight and the level of enjoyment of these rights and freedoms by a given population (see Sen, 2000). The preferential ranking order of "R"s and "F"s therefore need a more formal, axiomatic (assumption based) methodological framework. This is where the incorporation of the use of social choice theory becomes helpful (discussed later).

In terms of the different set of “perfect and imperfect obligations” that emerge as part of any right based process of development, such obligations are more than just the obligations of realizing the individual component rights (reference drawn to the discussion on role of freedom and interests in the formulation of rights later).

If a society recognizes RTD (Right to Development), which is a right to a process of development consistent with the human rights standards; the corresponding obligations include those involved in coordinating them into a development program, for a “clear value addition to that process”. This “value addition” involves coordination between different stakeholders of the state and agencies that recognize the interdependence of various rights and also the constraints within institutional resources and achieve higher level of outcomes.

Linking human rights interdependently with the pursuit of economic development, Sen (2004, 2006) provides the notion of a “meta-right” which constitutes a development policy for identifying agency considerations in a developing state to realizing a Human Rights Based Approach to Development (i.e. a Right to Development). The formulation of a development policy attaches significant importance on the role of agency or institutional instruments of the state to feasibly enforce a right (in this case A Right to Development).

As illustrated in Feiberg’s (1970) words: “the characteristic use of rights is to be claimed, demanded, affirmed and insisted upon” and “having rights, of course.. makes claiming possible, but it is claiming that gives rights their special moral significance...”; so, “while ‘claiming to’ may be guided by moral considerations, ‘claiming against’ calls for identification of the duty bearers and a mechanism for enforcement..” which emphasizes on the need for agency to be involved in the realization and enforcement of such rights.

The practical identification of a state’s development policy ensures that, “all agents in society would have either ‘perfect’ or ‘imperfect’ obligations converted into direct and indirect duties, and would be obliged to perform them” (see Sengupta, 2009).

What becomes important to observe then is a methodological process that can help in formulating such rights, accommodating for universally realized moral, ethical considerations (as in human rights) through formal reasoning methods. In the following section, I discuss the concept of Social Choice Theory and its framework to further explore its application in human rights through an agency based approach.

3.2 Social Choice Theory: as a Normative Approach

In a Nobel lecture delivered on December 8th, 1998, Amartya Sen spoke on “*The Possibility of Social Choice*” in terms of its content, relevance and reach. Eighteen years down the line, while most modern economists discount the practical significance of Social Choice Theory in the governing dynamics of policy formulation within a democratic, pluralistic society; it would be worthwhile to revisit some basic foundations of Social Choice Theory. The exercise, I

believe will help us in broadening the framework of discussion attached with human rights.

3.3 Foundations of Social Choice Theory

Almost two and a half centuries ago, at the time of the French Revolution (late 18th century), two French Mathematicians, J.C. Borda (1781) and Marquis de Condorcet (1785); who were also amongst the intellectual leaders of the French Revolution, made a systematic attempt to formally study the challenges that lie within social decision making (involved both at a political and policy level) and in trying to accommodate divergent interests and preferences of people in a given society.

The attempt ultimately led to the original formalization of Social Choice Theory as a new currency of scholarship within political science that later saw its application in welfare economics. Condorcet and Bordo’s own mathematical investigations, less elegantly, lead to some rather pessimistic results where they noted that majority rule (which democratic voting process is dependent upon), can be “thoroughly inconsistent” (famously known as Condorcet’s paradox).

To explain the paradox, in simple terms, take the case of a drinking preference: if you prefer wine to whiskey, but whiskey to beer and beer to wine, one may conclude that you have intransitive preferences (i.e. preferring A to B and B to C does not mean that you prefer A to C). While this may not be a problem in making preferential choices on what to drink; the intransitive, paradoxical nature of preferential behavior may be more of an issue with political decision-making and policymaking exercise.

Similarly, in case of the recent US Presidential election, in most poll analysis (combining most pre/post-election polls), people believe that Bernie Sanders stood a much better chance to win against Donald Trump as against Hillary Clinton. In applying the paradox, while one may prefer Donald Trump as President to Hillary Clinton, and Hillary Clinton to Bernie Sanders, but could ultimately prefer Bernie Sanders to Donald Trump. This simply brings out the inconsistency that majority voting (between two contesting candidates) may bring out.

Coming back to the empirics of Social Choice Theory, it was only around 1951 when economist Kenneth Arrow brought the field of Social Choice Theory in the wider public scrutiny among political scientists, economists by doing a closer study of Condorcet’s own results. However, Arrow (1950) deepened the preexisting gloom by establishing “an astonishing, pessimistic result of ubiquitous reach” through his “Impossibility Theorem” (formally defined as the “General Possibility Theorem”).

Arrow’s formalization of a ‘social welfare function’ through his work in the 1950s went on to establish a set of axiomatic conditions including a) *Pareto efficiency* (which asserts that “an alternative situation would be better if the change would increase the utility of everyone or at least did not diminish the utility of anyone”); b) *non-dictatorship*; c) *independence* (“demanding that social choice over any set of alternatives must depends on preferences only over those alternatives”) and d) *unrestricted domain* (“requiring that social preference must be a complete ordering, with full transitivity and this

must work for every conceivable set of individual preferences”).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Amartya Sen's Work on Social Choice Theory and its Link with Human Rights

Social choice theory has been seen at some disadvantage by many of its commentators because of the formal, mathematical nature adopted by it. This causes a degree of farther remoteness between social choice theory in terms of its practical applications with other widely studied philosophical analysis of social justice. Sen (2011) in *The Idea of Justice*, acknowledges how the practical importance of mainstream philosophies in social justice (extended under the influence of leading philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant or John Rawls) are based on a more simplified, informal reasoning but makes a stronger case for the use and application of social choice theory, from which a theory of social justice can be significantly draw upon.

A deeper study on the application of social choice theory by Sen (2000, 2011) and Basu, Pattanaik and Suzumura (1995) brings out how the normative approach behind social choice theory can help in formally structuring a rational basis of social judgments and public decisions while choosing from and between different social alternatives. As Sen (2011) points out, “the outcomes of the social choice procedure take the form of ranking different states of affairs from a ‘social point of view’, in light of the assessments of the people involved”. There is no discourse needed for some grand theory of social justice, which is more transcendently imaginative to work in some form of a “perfect world”.

The pragmatic methods of social choice accommodates a diverse set of values, belief system and preferences than enable institutional arrangements or different agencies to design, implement better policies for a given set of people (See Anand, Pattanaik, 2009). More importantly, such an approach helps significantly in framing policies that seek to optimally maximize the overall well-being of a targeted group for which the social policy is designed.

4.2 Human Rights and Social Choice

In the theoretical construction of a social welfare function, Arrow articulates the possibility of a more robust, formal relationship between individual values (representing diverse set of preferences) in a composite social function that allows for consistency in decision making; while using democratic instruments of public reasoning, impartial scrutiny, open discussion and communication as practice.

Arrow's work emphasizes a lot on the role of reasoning within any formulation of social choice (something that Adam Smith too focused upon in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*). Thus, the connection between individual values, public reasoning and open discussion as practice lie central to the art of social choice, having an important basis for connection with any discourse on rights, particularly

human rights which need a wider framework for accommodating public reasoning, impartial scrutiny etc. at a universal level (see Wicksell, 1896).

Further, common values are ideally realized or even legally validated (in context of legal rights) through a socially inclusive process of deliberation (Smith, 1790). And even though the common values to be considered in the narrowly defined analytical framework of social choice theory, applies more to the members of a given society or polity, there is no bar that regulates the application of such framework to be extended over to members from different societies or polities that is relevant in case of a “universally” managed discussion on human rights.

Any analysis on rights, particularly human rights, demands a more objective view that is shaped by a process of “impartial scrutiny”, taking note of different points of view (including those that are traditionally motivated) and ultimately reflecting the incorporation of such views in the process of final realization of rights (see Rawls, 1971).

Role of Freedom and Interests Embedded in Conceptualization of Human Rights

While rivers of ink has been spilled over in discussing the meta-ethics and moral implications for a wider discourse of human rights, let me here briefly touch upon the basis for the formulation of a given right by discussing the role of freedom and interests as part of the “obligations” that come in the process of formulating any universally recognized human right(s).

Borrowing from Sen's own framework of using some “threshold condition” of freedoms that are attached with the recognition of a right, one can normatively bring out a case for the application of Social choice conditions in the broader conceptualization of human rights. Moreover, the contesting claims of freedoms and interests as the basis of human rights (which scholars like Joseph Raz, Charles Beitz discuss in their works) need adequate attention in any human right(s) discourse.

For a **freedom** to be incorporated as part of a given right, as Sen (2011) argues, it must pass some ‘threshold conditions’ that attach enough importance on the freedom itself to influence its realization in a gamut of human rights. The normative construction of social choice theory, allows one to utilize and incorporate the relative importance of individual preferences (in this case, freedoms) in a broader social context and the freedoms (or preferences) ranked and attached with greater weight tend to influence the final outcome of the social function (Sen 2006).

To illustrate the relative weighing of freedoms in a given case, let us take an example of the following three freedoms that a woman (hypothetically called Rai) may have:

1. Rai's freedom to not be assaulted.
2. Rai's freedom to get access to basic primary education.
3. Rai's freedom to go out in the evening to meet people without any restrictions imposed upon.

While all three freedoms remain important in their own light, for a broader discussion on which freedom can be given relatively more weight (in terms of importance- by a threshold); it would be plausible to perhaps consider Freedom A as “good subject matter for a human right”, similarly Freedom B too. However, Freedom C, in a wider discourse may

or may not qualify to cross the social relevance to qualify as a human right. It is also possible that Freedom C is interconnected with the safeguarding of Freedom A in this case (the fear of being assaulted may restrict Rai's freedom to go out in the evening to meet people).

The metric of assessing any "threshold condition" can be based largely on the substantial importance given by agencies or institutional instruments representing members of any given societies towards the realization of a freedom (either A, B or even C) in the incorporation of a human right.

While open discussion, public reasoning, impartial scrutiny is critical for any discussion on freedom in a consequential manner, such an exercise cannot remain agency neutral or excluded. The role of agency (through a given set of democratic institutions) here remains significant in ultimately determining "the threshold level" that allow a freedom to be realized as a higher order preference in the constitution of right(s) (Sen, 2006).

At the same time, the recognition of a right, particularly as human right(s) must seek to go beyond the relative importance given it to by some closed, endogenous set of institutions or agencies. There is a need for weighing of freedoms (i.e. attaching relative importance to basic freedoms) to happen in transcendence i.e. across borders in a wider manner where the process of doing so, requires extensive public deliberation and critical scrutiny.

The role of participatory debates from different sections of societies is critical in shaping the threshold level for particular freedoms to be incrementally incorporated in a discussion on rights. This discussion however needs to involve the role of both "perfect and imperfect obligations" attached in a Kantian discourse on rights and duties. Sen (2011) in *The Idea of Justice* offers a special space to both these set of obligations as duties that are vital on a discourse on human rights formation involving both, an agency-centric and an agency-independent approach to the enforcement, safeguarding of rights. Thus, the idea of "weighing" different kinds of freedoms requires a ranking of rights, which can further determine (through extensive public discussion, reasoning) which right can prevail in cases of conflict (Scanlon, 2009).

As Sen (2011) points out, the analytical importance attached in weighing "the seriousness and social relevance of particular freedoms, has a significant place in the assessment of human right". While the possibility of disagreement may always exist in the proclamation about human rights, a process of "impartial scrutiny" needs critical scrutiny of existing freedoms and interests (discussed below). However, are freedoms and interests-involved competing claims as a basis for a human rights based framework?

Joseph Raz, in his book *The Morality of Freedom* argues "Rights ground requirements for action in the *interest* of other beings". A focus on identifying certain *interests* as a foundational basis for rights and human rights in particular is definitely important but may result in a "conflict of rights". T.M. Scanlon (2009) in his essay, *Rights and Interests* further explains what one can mean by a "conflict of rights".

Scanlon (2009) through an example illustrates that, "the right to freedom of expression can sometimes be said to be in conflict with the right to a fair trial, or with the right to one's reputation and balancing of these rights is said to be called for." The conflict between a right and some interest implicitly involved in it are important but in the claim of a right, some limitations on certain institutional interests are considered *necessary* for protection in figuring a *feasible* alternative (Scanlon, 2009).

This claim of finding a *feasible* alternative weighs upon the cost these limitations impose on our interests and may be acceptable given the importance of the interests being protected (Scanlon, 2009). In other words, the right of freedom of expression in the actual realization of its normative claim may not be as broad as we think of it to be. However, there is a need for an agency to not overtly emphasize on the interest aspect of the right but rather focus more on the underlying freedoms attached with it.

In another hypothetical example, a person from Nepal who wishes to come down to New Delhi to join a peaceful demonstration against a policy that the Indian government has decided upon (say, the recent demonetization reform which seeks to affect the circulation of Indian currency in denominations of Rs. 500, Rs. 1000 In Nepal too is somehow excluded from being allowed to participate in the demonstration.

If such a restriction is imposed on the person from Nepal, it would violate his freedom (to peacefully demonstrate) and may correspondingly violate his rights too. Here we see a direct connection between the person's freedom and its inclusion in his right to peacefully protest. Scanlon (2009) argues that rights may be "defined or redefined in the light of the balance of interests and of empirical facts about how these interests can be protected".

However, if we exclusively focused on the *interest* factor, for a Nepali person to participate in the demonstration, we would be required to examine whether it is in the *interest* of the person himself to join such a demonstration against the demonetization reform. In the process of making such an assessment, even if the political priority of the Nepali person from his participation may be clearer, it may become evident that the person's own 'interest' may not be clear.

Therefore, in making such an assessment, we may end up limiting the weight of importance attached with the person's freedom to participate in the demonstration (whether it is in his interest or not). If freedoms are accepted as important because they give the person involved the liberty to choose and lead his life in terms of his own priorities, then an interest-based perspective on human rights must, ultimately, be inadequate.

5. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Social choice theory through its formal reasoning methods allows certain "threshold levels" to be established under an axiomatic relationship working under different set of variables (as in the case of incorporating diverse set of freedoms and rights in let's say a Right to Development). A claim that a

certain freedom is important enough to be seen as a human right is also a claim that “reasoned scrutiny” would sustain that judgment (Sen, 2011).

The formal process of any such “reasoned scrutiny” presents an important role of different agencies or institutional instruments to be involved in viably enforcing or formulation any set of rights, particularly human rights. In case of a discourse on human rights, it is not enough for ethical claims on such rights to pass the “threshold test” (for freedoms) within a closed, national setting only but rather pass a similar test of realization at a universal level.

Thus, from a policy perspective, what remains key is using the axiomatic reasoning offered by the principles of social choice theory in functionally expressing actionable development policies (as a meta-right to Right to Development) for states in differential stages of economic development. This can help developing states to further widen their own growth-based view to economic progress and accommodate for achievable developmental goals, embedded in the entitlement of basic freedoms for all its sovereigns.

6. CONCLUSION

Any discourse on a human rights based approach to development (or a right to development), is built on including such a right as part of a broader, universal framework (accommodating for moral, ethical claims) that goes beyond any constitutionally derived claims and rights or any given set of legitimate laws that need adequate attention from the sovereign of a country. A Right to Development (incorporating various facets of economic, political, social developmental processes) need recognition by states and institutional instruments of the state need to enforce policies, legislations in safeguarding the claims on such a right.

Borrowing from Sen’s own framework of using some “threshold condition” of freedoms that are attached with the recognition of a right, the paper normatively argues for a case to apply conditions of Social choice in the broader conceptualization of human rights based approach to development. Moreover, while contesting claims of *freedoms* and *interests* as the basis of human rights (which scholars like Joseph Raz, Charles Beitz discuss in their works) need adequate attention in any human right(s) discourse, *freedoms* in their own value hold both greater intrinsic and extrinsic importance in a right to development.

The foundations of social choice theory in its broader application within the subject of human rights also raises important questions for the role of public reasoning, open discussion, impartial scrutiny and the institutional instruments of the agency in identifying threshold conditions for *freedoms* embedded in the formulation, guarantee of a human rights based approach to development.

The paper, thus, in offering a detailed literature review (on the subject of social choice and a human rights based approach to development) makes an attempt to raise some of these pertinent points of deliberation for economists working in the area of human right(s) and development studies, to further expand the relationship between social choice and human rights (using a freedom based consequential

approach)- *via* an inter-twined process that can be applied in the interpretation and deconstruction of other, different set of economic, political, cultural rights that are constitutive in the broader human rights approach to development through a social choice perspective.

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