



Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach

By Martha C. Nussbaum

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If a country's Gross Domestic Product increases each year, but so does the percentage of its people deprived of basic education, health care, and other opportunities, is that country really making progress? If we rely on conventional economic indicators, can we ever grasp how the world's billions of individuals are really managing?

In this powerful critique, Martha Nussbaum argues that our dominant theories of development have given us policies that ignore our most basic human needs for dignity and self-respect. For the past twenty-five years, Nussbaum has been working on an alternate model to assess human development: the Capabilities Approach. She and her colleagues begin with the simplest of questions: What is each person actually able to do and to be? What real opportunities are available to them?

The Capabilities Approach to human progress has until now been expounded only in specialized works. *Creating Capabilities*, however, affords anyone interested in issues of human development a wonderfully lucid account of the structure and practical implications of an alternate model. It demonstrates a path to justice for both humans and nonhumans, weighs its relevance against other philosophical stances, and reveals the value of its universal guidelines even as it acknowledges cultural difference. In our era of unjustifiable inequity, Nussbaum shows how—by attending to the narratives of individuals and grasping the daily impact of policy—we can enable people everywhere to live full and creative lives.

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Editorial Review

Review

A remarkably lucid and scintillating account of the the human development approach seen from the perspective of one of its major architects. (Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics)

Nussbaum, who has done more than anyone to develop the authoritative and ground-breaking capabilities approach, offers a major restatement that will be required reading for all those interested in economic development that truly enhances how people live. (Henry Richardson, Georgetown University)

A marvelous achievement: beautifully written and accessible. With Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum is one of the founders of the 'capability approach' to justice; the most innovative and influential development in political philosophy since the work of John Rawls. This book, for the first time, puts in one place all the central elements of Nussbaum's systematic account of the approach, together with its sources and implications. (Jonathan Wolff, University College London)

The very best way to be introduced to the capability approach to international development. It is also a wonderfully lucid account of the origins, justification, structure, and practical implications of her version of this powerful approach to ethically-based change in poor and rich countries. (David Alan Crocker, The University of Maryland School of Public Policy)

Offering a forceful and persuasive account of the failings of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as an accurate reflection of human welfare, the distinguished philosopher Nussbaum provides a framework for a new account of global development based on the concept of capabilities...The author argues that human development is best measured in terms of specific opportunities available to individuals rather than economic growth figures...This small book provides a strong foundation for beginning to think about how economic growth and individual flourishing might coincide. (*Publishers Weekly* 2011-02-07)

Nussbaum looks at what it really means for a country to experience prosperity. Traditionally, a country's economic well-being was measured by its gross domestic product. Nussbaum takes a more personal approach by focusing on how economic prosperity plays out in ordinary citizens' lives. She analyzes the life of a woman in India by taking a close look at her situation to see what capabilities and opportunities she--and women like her--might have. The key is not to look simply at the hand they've been dealt, but whether their particular society affords them opportunities to win with it. Nussbaum calls this the "capabilities approach," and it offers a novel way to measure prosperity on a national level by seeing how well a country can provide life-changing prospects for all its citizens...By demonstrating the philosophical underpinnings of this approach and how the theory plays out in the real world, Nussbaum makes a compelling case. Not only is this a more realistic measure of wealth, but it is also a far more compassionate one. For readers who enjoy economics laced with humanity. (Carol J. Elsen *Library Journal* 2011-03-01)

In her new book, *Creating Capabilities*, the philosopher and legal scholar Martha Nussbaum argues that we need to refocus our ideas about development on the scale of individuals: on concrete human lives and the way they actually unfold. Quantitative measures like per capita GDP, she writes, are poor measures of development; they can't capture the shape and texture of individual lives, even though individual lives are what matter. Development isn't about how rich your nation is, on average--it's about whether people can live in a way "worthy of human dignity."...Nussbaum's book comes at an interesting time, just as growth in the

rich world is slowing. That slowdown makes her ideas relevant for rich people, too. Dignified life in the rich world isn't only about being "well-fed," either...Even amid a slowdown, there are other dimensions in which life can keep improving. (Josh Rothman *Boston Globe online* 2011-03-16)

Renowned philosopher Nussbaum concisely captures the essential ideas of a new paradigm of social and political thought, the "human development and capabilities" approach to global social justice, founded on the work of Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, and now used by the World Bank, the IMF, the *Arab Human Development Report*, and the United Nations Development Programme. (S. A. Mason *Choice* 2011-10-01)

About the Author

Martha C. Nussbaum is Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago.

Users Review

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