

FSN FORUM DISCUSSION No. 38

FOOD SECURITY AND THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

FROM 25 JUNE TO 24 JULY 2009

Dear colleagues,

I'm Thais Bassinello, from Brazil. I'm currently undertaking a Master's course in Human Development and Food Security, offered by Università degli Studi Roma Tre. Before coming to Rome, I worked for the Brazilian Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger.

My dissertation for the Master will be a study of one of the social protection programmes being undertaken in Kenya, and its impacts on the well-being of the beneficiaries (especially food security). The conceptual framework will be the Capabilities Approach, formulated by Amartya Sen. The Capabilities Approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies and proposals about social change in society. "Capabilities" are defined as the substantive freedoms that one enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value, or the real actual possibilities open to a person. From this capability "set", a person chooses his or her "functionings", the particular beings (like being well-nourished) and doings he or she enjoys at a particular point of time.

The approach gave birth to the Human Development paradigm. Hence, Human Development can be seen as the process of expansion of people's capabilities. In opposition to the traditional welfare economics, this paradigm doesn't use income as the informational basis to assess well-being. Whether or not this will become the leading development paradigm is yet to be seen. For the time being, some attempts have been made to focus on the expansion of freedoms when assessing projects and policies.

Of particular importance is the on-going debate on how to operationalize the capabilities approach in the design of interventions. International Organizations (like FAO) and NGOs (like Oxfam) currently use the Livelihoods Approach as the conceptual framework for the design and assessment of food security interventions. It seems that, despite of its strengths, the Livelihoods Approach also focus primarily on (income) poverty reduction, since people's access to social, human, physical, financial and natural capital (or assets), and their ability to put these to productive use, is in the core of the approach.

In the view that I'm especially concerned with the application of the Capabilities Approach in the design and evaluation of food security interventions, I'd like to request the Forum's members to share:

- Information about organizations or individuals that use / have used the Capabilities Approach when designing, implementing or assessing food security interventions;
- Documents about the operationalization of the Capabilities Approach in food security projects or programmes;
- Any thoughts on the debate Capabilities x Livelihoods Approach, especially on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each approach when dealing with food security issues.

Many thanks in advance for your attention.

Sincerely,
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