

# Reframing Development: What Can African Communitarian Ethics Offer to the Capabilities Approach?

---

Festus Chukwunweike Ogonegbu<sup>1</sup>, Grace Ogelenya<sup>2</sup>

---

**Abstract:** The capabilities approach, advanced by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, represents a significant paradigm shift in development discourse, moving beyond economic indicators to emphasize human flourishing and the freedom to achieve well-being. Yet, despite its progressive outlook, the framework has been critiqued for its individualistic orientation and insufficient grounding in communal values, especially in non-Western contexts. African communitarian ethics, deeply rooted in the ontological centrality of community and relational existence, presents a powerful corrective and complement. This paper argues that the African moral framework, with its emphasis on mutual responsibility, solidarity, and harmony, can enrich the capabilities approach by addressing its cultural limitations and enhancing its contextual adaptability. Through a philosophical analysis and hermeneutical lens, the article demonstrates how a dialogical relationship between the two traditions can yield a more holistic and culturally resonant vision of development, one that foregrounds not just individual agency, but the communal networks that sustain it.

**Keywords:** capabilities approach, African communitarianism, development ethics, human flourishing, Ubuntu, solidarity

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Religious Studies & Philosophy, Delta State University Abraka, Nigeria, fogonegbu@delsu.edu.ng

<sup>2</sup> Department of Religious Studies & Philosophy, Delta State University Abraka, Nigeria, ogelenyagrace@delsu.edu.ng

## Introduction

In the evolving discourse of development theory, a significant shift has occurred from traditional economic indicators, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), to frameworks that center human well-being and agency. Among the most influential paradigms in this shift is the capabilities approach, pioneered by Amartya Sen (1999) and later expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2011). This approach redefines development by focusing on what individuals are actually able to do and be emphasizing functions, agency, and the substantive freedoms people have to lead lives they value.

While the capabilities approach has been lauded for its normative depth and human-centered focus, it has also drawn criticism for its grounding in liberal individualism. Scholars have argued that the model, in emphasizing individual agency and personal choice, often underrepresents the social and communal contexts that shape and sustain those very capabilities (Comim, 2008; Deneulin, 2006). This critique becomes especially salient when the framework is applied in African settings, where philosophical traditions such as Ubuntu foreground interconnectedness, solidarity, and communal responsibility over individual autonomy (Gyekye, 1997; Ramose, 2002).

This paper contends that African communitarian ethics, rooted in a relational ontology and moral culture that emphasizes mutual responsibility and the common good, can offer a compelling enrichment of the capabilities approach. It argues that incorporating African ethical perspectives into the capabilities framework not only addresses its cultural limitations but also enhances its applicability in diverse socio-cultural contexts. Through philosophical analysis and cross-cultural dialogue, the paper seeks to reframe development as a relational and communal pursuit, not merely a collection of individual achievements.

## Communitarianism and the Capabilities Approach in Dialogue

The theoretical grounding of this paper lies in a dialogical philosophical method, bringing African communitarian ethics into conversation with the capabilities approach. While both traditions originate in distinct intellectual and cultural milieus; liberal Western political theory on one hand, and African moral thought on the other, they converge on a shared concern for human dignity, flourishing, and ethical life. However, they differ markedly in how they conceptualize the individual, community, and the moral grounds of development.

The capabilities approach, particularly as articulated by Sen (1999), is deeply rooted in liberalism and rational choice theory. It emphasizes the freedom of individuals to pursue lives they have reason to value and insists on a pluralistic space where people's values, choices, and contexts are respected. Nussbaum (2000, 2011), while sharing Sen's commitment to individual freedom, goes further to propose a universal list of ten central capabilities which she argues are essential to any life lived with dignity. However, this normative focus on individuals, while valuable, often overlooks or under-theorizes the communal dimensions that shape capability formation. As Deneulin and Stewart (2002) point out, individual capabilities do not emerge in a vacuum; they are nurtured, sustained, or undermined by complex social relationships and structures. Here, African communitarian ethics offers a vital corrective.

African communitarianism, grounded in traditions such as Ubuntu, holds that a person becomes a person through others: "I am because we are" (Tutu, 1999). This perspective challenges atomistic notions of the self, emphasizing instead a relational ontology in which human identity is constituted by community. As Gyekye (1997) and Mbiti (1969) argue, moral duties in African

ethics are often directed not just toward individual rights, but toward maintaining harmony, solidarity, and interdependence within the community.

In this sense, African communitarianism is not simply a descriptive account of African social life, but a normative ethical theory. It posits that moral excellence is realized through one's obligations to others and the well-being of the group. These obligations are not at odds with individual flourishing; rather, they are the very conditions through which such flourishing becomes possible. As Wiredu (1996) observes, the individual and the community are mutually constitutive, not opposed.

By juxtaposing these two traditions, this paper explores how communitarianism can reframe key assumptions in the capabilities approach. It suggests that freedom and development, when conceived relationally, must account for the social institutions, values, and obligations that scaffold individual agency. This shift from individual-centric to relationally-embedded capabilities opens new vistas for understanding development in contexts where communal life is central to moral reasoning and social organization.

## **Limitations of the Capabilities Approach and the Communitarian Corrective**

The capabilities approach has, without doubt, played a transformative role in reframing how development is measured and understood. By shifting the focus from mere resource distribution or economic growth to human freedom and agency, Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011) introduced an ethical dimension often lacking in traditional development models. However, this approach, in both theory and practice, reveals conceptual limitations when applied outside Western liberal societies.

One of the central critiques lies in its individualistic orientation. Both Sen and Nussbaum emphasize freedom as the cornerstone of development. While this emphasis responds to the poverty of deterministic economic models, it often presumes an autonomous, self-defining individual, a notion shaped by Enlightenment liberalism (Robeyns, 2005). In many non-Western contexts, especially in Africa, this conception does not adequately reflect the lived realities or moral worldviews of people whose identities are deeply embedded in communal life (Chuwa, 2014; Eze, 2011). For instance, the notion of practical reason in Nussbaum's list of capabilities assumes an internal deliberative process rooted in individual reflection. However, in African settings, moral decisions are often relationally negotiated, shaped by elders, customs, and shared histories. The individual is not simply a bearer of entitlements but a node in a web of mutual obligations. Without recognizing this embeddedness, the capabilities approach risks abstracting individuals from the very social environments that sustain their agency.

Moreover, the approach often places justice in terms of state responsibility to secure conditions for individual flourishing. While this is crucial, it overlooks the moral labor of the community, family networks, religious groups, and local elders that also play a central role in cultivating and protecting capabilities (Ikuenobe, 2006). In African communitarian thought, justice is not solely distributive but restorative and relational, aimed at mending broken relationships and maintaining social harmony (Metz, 2007).

African communitarian ethics offers an alternative normative grammar in which development is not only about the expansion of personal freedoms but also about cultivating communal well-being, solidarity, and mutual care. The concept of Ubuntu exemplifies this: to thrive is not merely to have choices, but to live well with others. As Tutu (1999) succinctly put it, "My humanity is bound up in yours." This communal view of personhood also brings with it an

emphasis on duties, which are often downplayed in capabilities discourse. While Nussbaum (2011) acknowledges that social relationships matter, her framework tends to prioritize entitlements over obligations. Yet, in many African societies, the ability to exercise a capability (e.g., education or health) is inextricably tied to one's role in a family or community. Rights and responsibilities are two sides of the same moral coin (Gyekye, 1997). This ethical orientation ensures that individual development is pursued not in isolation but in relation to others.

Ultimately, the capabilities approach stands to gain from integrating this relational ethic. Not as a rejection of agency, but as a recognition that agency itself is nurtured through interdependence. A human being does not come into the world ready to act autonomously; she must be supported, affirmed, and educated by a community. It is through this network of care and responsibility that real capabilities, meaningful freedoms, are formed and protected.

## **Synthesizing African Communitarian Ethics and Development Theory**

Bringing African communitarian ethics into dialogue with the capabilities approach does not require the abandonment of its core tenets, agency, dignity, and freedom. Rather, it calls for their re-contextualization within a relational moral landscape. Such a synthesis does not weaken the normative force of the capabilities framework; it strengthens it by embedding it more firmly in the social realities of the Global South. At the heart of this synthesis is the recognition that freedom is relational. The capabilities approach defines development as the expansion of people's substantive freedoms to live lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). However, what people value, and the ways in which they are able to pursue those values, are always shaped by relationships with family, community, institutions, and culture. In this sense, the African communitarian view does not negate individual agency but insists that agency is nurtured through interdependence.

This understanding finds expression in the African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." Development, from this perspective, is not a sprint toward individual empowerment but a shared journey toward collective flourishing. Integrating this ethic into the capabilities approach compels us to redefine the unit of moral analysis, not as the isolated individual, but the person-in-community. Such a shift has significant implications for development policy and practice. First, it reorients the assessment of well-being beyond individual capabilities to include communal functionings: the extent to which people participate in shared life, experience social harmony, and contribute to the common good. Metrics of development must therefore account not just for personal achievement, but also for social cohesion, mutual aid, and the health of relationships (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010).

Second, this relational model brings moral obligations into the foreground. While the capabilities approach tends to emphasize rights and entitlements, African communitarian ethics foregrounds duties, especially those tied to caring for others, resolving conflict, and contributing to community welfare (Ikuenobe, 2018). In this way, the pursuit of capabilities is tempered by an ethic of responsibility. One does not claim capabilities in a vacuum but exercises them with a view toward their impact on others.

Third, the synthesis redefines what counts as agency. In Western liberal theory, agency often means autonomy, being self-governing and independent. But in African communitarianism, agency includes the capacity to maintain relationships, fulfill one's social role, and act in ways that uphold communal values (Metz, 2011). A young person who sacrifices personal ambition to care for aging relatives is not seen as less free, but as morally mature and socially responsive.

In this light, agency must be reimagined not as freedom from others, but as freedom with and for others.

Finally, this integration paves the way for development rooted in cultural legitimacy. One of the perennial challenges in global development is the imposition of frameworks that do not resonate with local values or moral logics. A capabilities approach informed by African communitarian ethics resists this tendency by grounding its prescriptions in ethical traditions already alive in the communities it seeks to serve. This cultural resonance fosters both relevance and receptivity, enhancing the impact and sustainability of development initiatives (Gyekye, 1997; Chuwa, 2014).

In summary, synthesizing African communitarianism with the capabilities approach produces a relational capabilities framework, one that holds together individual dignity and communal responsibility, personal freedoms and shared obligations, human agency and moral interdependence. It is a framework that not only measures what people can do, but also asks who they are doing it with, for, and alongside.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to bring African communitarian ethics into critical and constructive dialogue with the capabilities approach, arguing that such an engagement offers a more nuanced, contextually grounded, and ethically resonant vision of human development. While the capabilities framework has advanced the field of development ethics by foregrounding human dignity, freedom, and agency, its individualistic foundations leave certain relational dimensions underexplored—particularly in contexts where community, solidarity, and mutual care form the bedrock of social life.

African communitarianism, as expressed through Ubuntu and related philosophical traditions, provides a compelling corrective. It does not oppose agency, but redefines it in relational terms; it does not deny freedom, but situates it within the web of social responsibility. By integrating this moral tradition, the capabilities approach can become more than a list of entitlements or a toolkit for policy, it can evolve into a genuinely pluralistic, culturally embedded framework that values both the individual and the community as co-constructors of human flourishing. In practical terms, this means rethinking development not merely as the enhancement of personal choice, but as the cultivation of shared life. It requires policies that support not just individual functionings, but communal well-being; that protect not just rights, but nurture responsibilities. It also demands that development theories remain attentive to the ethical vocabularies and lived experiences of the people they aim to serve.

Ultimately, the fusion of African communitarian ethics with the capabilities approach invites us to reclaim development as a shared moral project, one that honors both the autonomy of persons and the social bonds that make autonomy meaningful. In a world increasingly fragmented by inequality, alienation, and ecological crisis, this integrated vision offers not only philosophical insight but practical guidance for reimagining development in ways that are just, humane, and sustainable.

## References

- Chuwa, Laurenti Magesa. *African Indigenous Ethics in Global Bioethics: Interpreting Ubuntu*. Springer, 2014.
- Comim, Flavio. "Measuring Capabilities." In *The Capability Approach: Concepts, Measures and Applications*, edited by Flavio Comim, Mozaffar Qizilbash, and Sabina Alkire, 157–200. Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Deneulin, Séverine. *The Capability Approach and the Praxis of Development*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Deneulin, Séverine, and J. Allister McGregor. "The Capability Approach and the Politics of a Social Conception of Wellbeing." *European Journal of Social Theory* 13, no. 4 (2010): 501–519. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431010382762>
- Deneulin, Séverine, and Frances Stewart. "Amartya Sen's Contribution to Development Thinking." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 37, no. 2 (2002): 61–70. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02686352>.
- Eze, Michael Onyebuchi. *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Gyekye, Kwame. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Ikuenobe, Polycarp. *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*. Lexington Books, 2006.
- Ikuenobe, Polycarp. "African Communitarianism and the Role of the Individual in the Community." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 52, no. 2 (2018): 195–213. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-018-9642-4>.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann, 1969.
- Metz, Thaddeus. "Toward an African Moral Theory." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2007): 321–341. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2007.00280.x>.
- . "Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa." *African Human Rights Law Journal* 11, no. 2 (2011): 532–559.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- . *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Ramose, Mogobe B. *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. Mond Books, 2002.
- Robeyns, Ingrid. "The Capability Approach: A Theoretical Survey." *Journal of Human Development* 6, no. 1 (2005): 93–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/146498805200034266>.
- Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Tutu, Desmond. *No Future without Forgiveness*. Rider, 1999.
- Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Indiana University Press, 1996.