

“Should humanitarians tolerate local oppression to avoid global imperialism?”

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Abstract: Most aid work to the deeply impoverished nations of the Global South takes the form of humanitarian assistance based on liberal-democratic ethical principles. The short-term goal is to procure immediate wellbeing and security for populations plagued by famine, genocide, disease, or disaster; while the longer-term goal is to design free societies that ensure peaceful coexistence across generations. Projects of both kinds are typically motivated by a commitment to the human-rights doctrine: e.g., the argument all people possess certain basic rights, including the right not to be deeply poor; or that citizens of the Global South are entitled to massive postcolonial reparations. The ethical character of these views have made global aid work the near-exclusive province of liberal-democratic humanists, many of whom subscribe to Amartya Sen’s and Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach to justice. But these principles overemphasize the individual person as the locus of moral importance and as the sole possessor of measurable welfare outcomes like wealth, happiness, and freedom. Despite some recent progress, contemporary development anthropology (and the moral philosophy that supports it, implicitly or explicitly) continues to have little regard for the collective and communal dimensions of wellbeing, which are much more pronounced in

orthodox societies and that play a crucial role in the very definition of *wellbeing*. This paper argues that the global agents of aid work, such as international NGOs and transnational activists, should design development projects according to more communitarian, morally particularistic, and non-liberal (but not illiberal) conceptions of wellbeing, freedom, and justice. Most importantly, they should not make aid delivery contingent on its recipients' support for the values of individual free agency and egalitarian democratic decision-making. This is for three reasons: (1) individuals in non-liberal societies have as much of a right as those in liberal societies to receive humanitarian or development aid, and perhaps more so; (2) non-liberal societies have a collective right to remain non-liberal and to still receive aid on other ethical grounds, such as duty of reciprocity or the duty of reparation; and (3) it is marginally better for aid-giving liberal societies to tolerate non-liberal conceptions of wellbeing than to impose culturally unpopular liberal conceptions of wellbeing in order to deliver aid. I.e., it is marginally better to allow "local oppression" to subsist than to practice "global imperialism," except in egregious cases where collective self-determination is rendered impossible in the first place, such as mass enslavement or genocide (which may be then criticized on non-ethical grounds). This proposal follows some recent shifts in the literature on the capability approach. Critics have argued that it does not respect sufficiently the ethical group values of many aid recipients, and thus that its liberal-humanist foundations hinder its usefulness in eradicating systemic poverty in some particularly orthodox and traditionalist societies. This paper sides with these critiques and takes them a step further, suggesting that international aid workers who use the capability approach should be much more tolerant of collectivist conceptions of wellbeing founded on moral particularism.

## 1. Introduction

Humanitarians and global aid workers have always had to balance their ethical principles with those of the political sovereignties where they operate. Seemingly harmless actions like providing shelter or healthcare often present deep dilemmas: the politics of donor agencies may be at odds with those of aid recipients; workers may misunderstand local politics and become unwitting allies in genocidal campaigns; multinational corporations may use NGOs to increase the reliance of developing nations on neoliberal business models that subjugate them; and so forth. Some humanitarians meet these challenges by remaining apolitical in the name of neutrality, while others posit specific agendas in the name of peace-building or development. Among the latter, many follow the guidelines of Amartya Sen's capability approach to justice, a theoretical framework that has proven popular in development circles and provided the methodological basis for the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.<sup>1</sup>

I argue that capability-minded humanitarians should design their development projects after a modified version of Sen's approach, one that deemphasizes democratic-liberal humanism in favor of a more collectivist, particularist, and moderately relativistic ethic. They should prioritize the collective ethics of their recipient communities, conceptualizing themselves as servants of Other-determined moralities and not as leaders, liberators, or activists. When the collective ethical determinations of aid recipients should clash with the normative commitments of humanitarians, it is the latter that should give way, not the former. That is, it is better to tolerate a little oppression (or what counts as "oppression" for us humanitarians) than to reinforce global imperialist mechanics through the unwelcome application of supposedly universalist ethical principles.

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<sup>1</sup> Kofi Annan, "In larger freedom: toward development, security, and human rights for all," 2005, [http://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/larger\\_freedom\\_exec\\_summary.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/larger_freedom_exec_summary.pdf)

This proposal follows a shift in some recent capability theory from more liberal versions of the approach (which require free political agency and democratic participation for all individuals) to the more communitarian versions (which give more weight to tradition, customs, collective will, and group capabilities, even as they continue to hold individual freedom in high regard). Unlike other accounts of development, which claim to remain neutral but instead affirm specific ideological assumptions—liberal, neoliberal, libertarian, liberatory, Marxist, anarchist, etc.—this proposal acknowledges its own partiality. It is at once particularistic, as it prioritizes situated and localized conceptions of capability; and moderately ethically relativistic, for it is not normative about values, principles, and conceptions of justice that the classic capability approach holds in high regard, such as democracy and individual freedom.

In the first section I defend a definition of development as long-term and politically engaged humanitarian action; in the second I present a collectivist revision of Sen's capability approach; and in the final section I discuss what this novel version entails for development aid as a whole.

## **2. The Concept of Development**

The international aid system comprises many kinds of intervention: short-term or long-term, neutral or politically engaged, nongovernmental or state-sponsored, financed privately or with public money, etc. Generally, the term “humanitarianism” denotes temporary relief aid aimed at the termination of immediate suffering, while “development” comprises enduring policy reforms

for the improvement of life conditions.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, humanitarians are often more concerned with simple charity, while the practice of global aid workers is more akin to political activism.<sup>3,4</sup>

At the same time, aid work can be classified not only by its quantitative involvement with power structures, but also by the qualitative content of its preexisting ideological commitments. According to ALNAP—a watchdog NGO comprising representatives from all constituent areas of the humanitarian sector—some actors are “concerned with reaffirming and strengthening the core humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence, while others are urging diversification and inclusion of different moral frameworks from which to pursue humanitarian action, such as local religious and cultural values, or broader peacebuilding goals.”<sup>5</sup> These “core humanitarian principles” are the same Red Cross values that have remained popular since the nineteenth century and that assume a basic moral egalitarianism in the liberal tradition. But those who urge diversification, as I do, worry that since most current international aid is financed by agencies based in the Global North, and as it stands under the legal and often military protection of the United Nations, it risks becoming “a vector of values and interests that are not universally shared in the places where [aid] intervenes.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein, “An introduction to the anthropology of humanitarianism,” in *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism between Ethics and Politics*, ed. authors (SAR Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Craig Calhoun, “The imperative to reduce suffering,” in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (Cornell University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See Weiss (1999) and Barnett & Snyder (2008) for more detailed discussions of the partitioning of the international aid space.

<sup>5</sup> ALNAP, *The State of the Humanitarian System* (ALNAP/ODI 2015), 108.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Collinson and Samir Elhawary, “Humanitarian space: a review of trends and issues,” *HPG Report 32* (2012). <http://www.odi.org/resources/docs/7643.pdf>

Whatever the ideological commitments of global aid workers may be, the very notion of ‘development’ requires what Gilbert Rist calls “the general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations” and their subsequent replacement with supposedly better ones.<sup>7</sup> To “do” development is to pursue specific socioeconomic goals. While all aid work is goal-oriented, development is teleological in a unique way, for it envisions a self-sustaining future characterized by stable peace or justice. It is no surprise that development projects are ideologically laden and ethically normative, or that global aid workers are often fluent in the language of human rights and global justice.

Amartya Sen’s capability approach is one popular way to think about development. According to Sen, development should be equated with personal wellbeing, not with economic growth.<sup>8</sup> Traditional development indicators such as GDP and industrialization say little about the actual resource distribution or people’s different abilities to convert resources into higher life quality. Thus, for Sen, our assessment of a society’s development should correspond with the actual wellbeing or welfare of its citizens. This wellbeing is not to be measured in outcomes (e.g., wealth) but in *capability*, each person’s free agency and free opportunity to make choices to direct the course of their own lives without undue hindrance or fear of repression or persecution. A developed society is one where as many people as possible have a high wellbeing measurable as capability. This definition needs some unpacking, as capability thus stated can be mistaken for opportunity, agency, or even a human right to social and political freedom. While it does share features with those ideas, the notion of capability stands apart in significant ways.

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<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (Zed Books: 1997), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Amartya Sen. “Equality of what?” in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Vol. I*, ed. Sterling M. McMurrin (University of Utah Press and Cambridge University Press, 1980).

For one, capability entails *the ability to live*: a person has a higher capability the more he is physically and psychologically able to live long and well. Food and water insecurity obviously detracts from capability, as do physical and mental disabilities. Other negative influences include material poverty, a short life expectancy, a high infant mortality rate in one's country, being the object of social or political persecution, living in a war zone, having a genetic predisposition to disease within one's population, etc. A long and secure life is a critical prerequisite of capability, for without it all else becomes harder or impossible.

Second, capability entails *the freedom to self-determine life paths or "functionings"*: a person has a higher capability the more he is actually and meaningfully free to choose for himself what his life will be like. At a minimum, this freedom must be guaranteed legally, such as when it is enshrined in a constitutional document, but also it must be actual and not only nominal. Say, a person whose caste or family lives in subservience to another is less meaningfully free than one in a casteless society, and thus has lower capability (on account of social status anyway). Ideally, a person is both legally and actually free to choose among life paths without fear of repression or persecution from the state or society.

Third, capability entails *the realistic availability of life paths*: a person has a higher capability the more life paths he can realistically choose from and the more varied they are. It is not enough to guarantee that people be legally and actually free to choose if there is little they can choose from. A person born in extreme poverty "can" choose whether to starve or turn to crime, and a woman in a repressive patriarchal society "can" choose whether to be persecuted or submit to male power. But these choices are not significantly free enough for capability theorists: a variety of life paths must be realistically available to choose from, without requiring exceptional luck or super-human sacrifice. For example, the life path of emigrating to Europe or America to make a better

living is nominally available to all human beings, but realistically available only to certain citizens of certain countries, and only at great personal risk.

The upshot of the capability approach is that global aid workers should focus on increasing people's capabilities because development *just is* the widespread presence of capability. The resulting process is obviously political, for capability increases require Rist's socioeconomic "destructions and transformations." In fact, development-as-capability is political in both ways just discussed: it is quantitatively politically engaged in the power structures of its target localities and it is also qualitatively ideologically non-neutral. In my view, it is this latter feature that creates a problem for the approach, not because development work should be neutral (which is impossible), but because the specific non-neutrality that Sen advocates is problematic. I discuss why in the next section.

### **3. A Collectivist Capability Approach**

On the view just presented, development is capability and capability is freedom—but whose freedom and whose capability? Sen emphasizes the freedom of individual persons, for the individual is the locus of moral importance and the possessor of a special agency, the capacity to act and choose according to her rational will. Since people's free agency does not exist in a vacuum but is continuously negotiated within their social environments, Sen argues that each society determines which capabilities are worth securing for its citizens; and that this determination should take place

through “public discussion and a democratic understanding and acceptance.”<sup>9</sup> This emphasis situates Sen’s work in the liberal tradition in Western philosophy, and some Anglo-Saxon capability theorists have argued similarly.<sup>10</sup>

But this choice may be troubling from a non-Western perspective, not because the peoples of the Global South do not value personal freedom or are inherently undemocratic, but because they have not *institutionally* prioritized these ideas as much, in large part precisely because they have been prevented from doing so by their colonial masters. Even though the basic liberal-democratic values are shared in some form by almost everyone,<sup>11</sup> from a political standpoint they have been the near-exclusive province of the well-fed and well-housed citizens of the Global North.<sup>12,13</sup> A view of development that put these values front and center would either be unpopular or require forceful imposition, which would defy the purpose of the approach in the first place. Moreover, it encourages the detailed specification of lists of basic capabilities without which life is not even fully human at all, a dubious sort of essentialist universalism.<sup>14</sup>

These worries may be allayed by noticing that development-as-capability does not *require* an ideological commitment to democratic-liberal humanism, even if it has often been proposed that way. I contend that it would work just as well, or better, with a communitarian moral framework:

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<sup>9</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Random House: 1999): 76-81.

<sup>10</sup> See Nussbaum (1997) and Alkire (2002).

<sup>11</sup> See Walzer (1989) and Appiah (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rorty, “Who are we? Moral universalism and economic triage,” *Diogenes* 44, no. 173 (1996): 5-15.

<sup>13</sup> But see Taylor (2008) for a good discussion and partial debunking of the so-called collectivist “Asian values” in a contemporary context.

<sup>14</sup> Martha Nussbaum, “Capabilities and human rights,” *Fordham Law Review* 66, no. 2 (1997): 273-300.

**Collectivist capabilityarianism** Development work may increase capability in any way collectively determined by its beneficiaries, not seeking to design an ideal society but assisting in procuring the capabilities that are internally chosen as worth pursuing.

This differs from Sen's approach both substantially (because those chosen capabilities need not include equal freedoms or value everyone's agency in the same way) and procedurally (because the process by which capabilities are chosen and assessed need not be democratic or egalitarian). In a nutshell, development work should increase capabilities by its beneficiaries' lights even if the resulting social arrangements were non-liberal or illiberal—a possibility that, no doubt, is at odds with the classic versions of the approach.

A moderate collectivist shift in this general direction has already taken place in the capability literature of the last decade. The objection that Sen and Nussbaum do not give communities their due respect unless they operate democratically has grown more popular, and I believe that this is symptomatic of a widespread discontent with the ethical and methodological individualism of the approach. For example, Frances Stewart has argued that since social collectives—like societies, communities, groups, etc.—are crucial to the origination and sustenance of capabilities for their members, capability theorists should treat them as primary subjects of analysis instead of relegating them to mere instruments for the procurement of capabilities for individual persons.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, for Séverine Deneulin the quality of our “structures of living together” (SLTs), the sum total of our social-political-cultural collective milieus, essentially defines our possibility to attain individual capabilities to begin with.<sup>16</sup> For Deneulin, certain SLTs “can have a negative

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<sup>15</sup> Frances Stewart, “Groups and capabilities,” *Journal of Human Development* 6, no. 2 (2005): 185-204.

<sup>16</sup> Séverine Deneulin, *The Capability Approach and the Praxis of Development* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

effect upon the good living of [their] members, such as structures of inequalities and oppression caused by an unequal distribution of power”; or they may explain “the successes and failures of countries to promote the capabilities that [their] people have reason to value.”<sup>17</sup> In short, these authors argue that better capabilities are attained by supporting the collectives that promote them and opposing those that do not, regardless of which capabilities people find valuable or which collectives they find good. While the criteria for defining ‘valuable’ and ‘good’ must be defended by separate arguments, that is not the business of the capability theorist or global aid worker.

Sen has expressed partial agreement with these arguments, because even on his version of the approach collectives play an important role in choosing and assessing capabilities. However, he seems to believe that this is all there is to the collectivist critics, that they misunderstand his view only to suggest a similar one. For example, in *The Idea of Justice* he refutes Deneulin’s objection that the approach suffers from methodological individualism, the idea that individual free agency should be detached from the social influences around it: “the capability approach not only does not assume such detachment, its concern with people’s ability to live the kind of lives they have reason to value brings in social influences both in terms of what they value ... and what influences operate on their values.”<sup>18</sup>

But there is much more to the collectivist objection than Sen appreciates. First, he overlooks Deneulin’s argument that collectives are *inherently morally valuable* and not only instrumentally useful for individual capabilities. SLTs are a collective’s “group capability,” and they embody its socio-historical agency, moral character, traditions, and culture above and beyond the preferences

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<sup>17</sup> Séverine Deneulin, “Beyond individual freedom and agency: structures of living together and the capability approach,” in *The Capability Approach: Concepts, Measures, and Applications*, ed. Flavio Comim, Mozaffar Qizilbash, and Sabina Alkire (Cambridge University Press, 2008): 111-112.

<sup>18</sup> Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Belknap, 2009): 244.

of its constituents.<sup>19</sup> For that reason, on the collectivist argument, SLTs are a precondition of people's individual capabilities, which would not exist at all without the capabilities of the collectives of which those individuals are members. As such, collectives should be primary analytical subjects within the capability approach, at least as much as persons are if not more so. Then it remains true that some collectives are more conducive to capability than others. Sen does not deny that—indeed, it justifies his endorsement of democracy as the main means of capability evaluation—but neither does Deneulin present it as a novel idea. Rather, the point is that as collectives enable the attainment of individual capabilities in the first place, they too (like individuals) are inherently valuable and should be respected at least as much as individuals are.

Second, Sen fails to give proper weight to the fact that *collectives are also a precondition of our choices of ethical values and principles*. Even if we think that there exist certain universal values or absolute moral rules, rarely do the principles by which we live out our lives arise in the abstract or take universal form. Our social identities and the power structures that affect us heavily influence our ethical determinations, even if we believe the latter to be independent or freely chosen.<sup>20</sup> It is surprising that Sen never discusses these claims in detail, for he agrees that ethical preferences are formed through social interaction; yet he merely remarks on this fact in passing, and it plays an insignificant role in his account as a whole.<sup>21,22</sup>

To understand this argument properly one must notice a subtle but important difference in the two senses of the word 'precondition' in the previous paragraph. Collectives are a precondition of

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<sup>19</sup> Deneulin, "Beyond individual freedom," 113.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-117.

<sup>21</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 9, 257, 280.

<sup>22</sup> Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, xii, 244.

individual capabilities in that they are *necessary for* capabilities to exist. This is a political and procedural claim that explains how people’s capabilities derive from the sociopolitical structures that affect them. On the other hand, collectives are a precondition of values in that they are *prior to* values, because they influence and justify the moral principles we hold as individuals. This is an ethical and epistemological claim, which in my view commits the approach to a more collectivist conception of the Good—that is, a *non-liberal, communitarian ethic*. No capability theorist that I know of goes as far as arguing for that particular view, but I do.

The capability approach in all its forms is inherently moral, meaning that it makes normative recommendations about which ethical principles are worth striving for and what it means to live a “Good Life” more generally. This is why Sen posits freedom of choice as a basic human good and Nussbaum defines capability in terms of virtue ethics. But there are many rival conceptions of the Good, and some of them place a higher premium on how our social milieus influence our values and principles. A communitarian ethic does not entail that our preferences are *defined* in a socially deterministic manner, nor that individual differences become irrelevant, but it does place more emphasis on the importance of our originating collectives. Typically, this ethic is expressed in the argument that our native community is where our principles come from in the first place;<sup>23</sup> or that human morality is primarily particularistic and that whatever global or multicultural commonalities we find result from post-facto observation and not from the ethical or epistemic priority of universal values.<sup>24,25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Amitai Etzioni, *The Common Good* (Polity, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (Norton, 2007).

That being said, no serious self-defined communitarian believes that collectives do or should have the final say on all ethical questions, nor that the special duties toward “our” people always supersede our duties to “strangers.” There may still be some minimal standards of decency that should not be violated, such as protections against slavery and genocide,<sup>26</sup> remedial duties in cases of dire humanitarian emergency,<sup>27</sup> or “rights-protection without rights-centeredness,”<sup>28</sup> the idea that certain principles are worth protecting even without being globally institutionalized as “universal” or “human” rights.

As concerns capability, communitarians often feel similarly about individual free agency and democracy: they respect them but without fetishizing them. Free agency must be discovered and developed while being part of a particular collective, one where people negotiate their respective agencies with those of others and with the values and traditions of the communities they belong to by fate or choice. Free agency is always valuable, but it is not necessarily equal and equally free, nor is it “given” to someone merely by virtue of his existing. Both classic and contemporary communitarians support this view, for instance by arguing that free choice does not exist aside from the ties of community that are antecedent to it,<sup>29</sup> or when they caution against the “lure of absolutes,” insisting that even seemingly universal values and principles must be evaluated within their contingent localities.<sup>30</sup> Deneulin herself supports this notion: “agency is not a tabula rasa, but is

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<sup>26</sup> Walzer, *Thick and Thin*.

<sup>27</sup> David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Philip Selznick, *The Communitarian Persuasion* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002): 73.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Sandel, “The procedural republic and the unencumbered self,” *Political Theory* 12, no. 1 (1984): 86-87.

<sup>30</sup> Selznick, *The Communitarian Persuasion*, 74-78.

itself the product of certain SLTs.”<sup>31</sup> Again, the argument is not that individual free agency is irrelevant—just as most contemporary liberals do not believe that it ought to be unlimited—but that it is so deeply entangled with the social circumstances of its discovery and exercise that it does not deserve the theoretical prominence that Sen grants to it.

The preceding survey of communitarian ethics is necessarily brief, but it is sufficient to make two key points in this section before moving on to a final discussion. (1) Since individuals assess the value of capabilities through their ethical principles, and since those principles are influenced strongly by the collectives in which individuals live, the assessment of capabilities is primarily and most relevantly a *social* affair. (2) Some ethical principles may be so strongly identified with a collective—especially one that was culturally homogeneous—that we should speak of them as “belonging to” it or even as being “defining of” it. Societies routinely exercise their collective will to assess the value of individual capabilities, and these collective assessments can and often do override the discrete preferences of individual persons.

This collectivist interpretation of the capability approach is a partial but firm departure from Sen’s work. On the one hand, it joins Sen in defining development as capability and in seeking to expand the free choices of individuals. On the other hand, it gives proper relevance to collective determinations of ethical principles, allowing them to override personal preferences consistently with local culture and tradition. And while Sen does agree that collectives play a crucial role in assessing capabilities, he requires that they do so only under a democratic-egalitarian framework, which my collectivist approach does not require.

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<sup>31</sup> Deneulin, “Beyond individual freedom,” 119.

#### 4. Applications and Objections

A proper appreciation of the importance of a communitarian ethic for the capability approach constitutes a strong reason why the approach should address itself primarily to collectives instead of to individuals. Recall that the approach is used both as a measure of existing socioeconomic conditions and as a set of theoretical parameters to design new development work; Sen himself has often spoken of the approach in both of these terms, and a vast literature exists on how it can be operationalized and quantified for practical applications.<sup>32</sup>

The approach's proven usefulness for applied development work cries out for a more communal emphasis. Global aid workers often interact with the beneficiaries of development at the group level, for instance by engaging political communities (such as towns or districts), social communities (unemployed women, at-risk youths), economic communities (unions, firms), etc. Likewise, development work typically benefits entire groups by affecting social structures (such as through educational reforms or political activism) or material infrastructures (such as through water sanitation or electrification projects). In whatever way a community may define itself, global aid workers deal with it as a collective and as a whole. Given this, and if my argument from the previous section is also accepted, the capability approach ought to have a much more pronounced collectivist emphasis if it is to inform the actions and choices of those humanitarians who employ it in their development work.

The emphasis that I advocate prescribes strong reliance on the ethical principles held by the recipients of development; that is, it demands that the choice and assessment of capabilities be

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<sup>32</sup> See Qizilbash (1996), Alkire (2002), Fukuda-Parr (2003), Mooney (2005), Qizilbash & Clark (2005), Comim, Qizilbash & Alkire (2008), Roche & Chiappero-Martinetti (2009).

determined ultimately by their beneficiaries. Collectives that partake in development projects already contribute all the moral and ideological material required to specify which capabilities are worth pursuing for that collective at that time, how their members will benefit from them, and which changes in the local SLTs that particular project should bring about to increase those capabilities. And even though “professional” global aid workers from the Global North may still contribute material resources or deploy technically proficient methods of assistance, the bulk of the theoretical baggage must be carried by the recipient collectives.<sup>33</sup>

More in general, a valid criterion to regulate the role of the citizens of the Global North in development aid is to do all and only what is asked of us—provide resources and perform labor not as “needed,” but as asked; not as “required,” but as requested; not as “we” will, but as they will, where ‘they’ means a collective that we have chosen to serve. Then that choice will happen in the conventional ways, where global aid workers are personally or politically motivated to answer a particular call for help—say, Marxist transnational activists typically work with unions, feminist NGOs with women’s groups, etc. If there is a concern with unjust or oppressive power structures, that concern will play a role in the choice of which collectives to serve or which sides to take. Surely this response flies in the face of those global aid workers who abide by the principles of neutrality and impartiality; or who are animated by a desire to reduce suffering; or who believe in liberating the oppressed wherever oppression exists; or who think that the North’s postcolonial remedial duties include the procurement of global justice and universal rights<sup>34</sup>—but these dissatisfactions are a natural consequence of my choice of guiding principles.

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<sup>33</sup> See Ferguson (1990) and Dichter (2003) for critiques of “technically proficient” development.

<sup>34</sup> Miller, *National Responsibility*.

The view that I present is simplistic in some ways. For example, there may be little unity in heterogeneous collectives that include many competing voices regarding what ideal development should look like: communities do not speak with one voice, as it were. This is particularly true of the fragmented sociopolitical landscapes of the Global South still struggling with decolonization within the artificial political borders imposed by their former colonial masters.<sup>35</sup> But while this is an obstacle indeed, it is no reason to override local determinations in favor of self-righteous ideological agendas peremptorily imposed from without. The dangers of hijacking the self-expressed agencies of local communities is simply too high, and the history of development is ridden with “good intentions” or “savior complexes” gone bad.<sup>36</sup>

Surely the more radical critics of the very notion of development will not be satisfied with this account. After all, what I propose is yet another round of technical and theoretical adjustments without altering the general paradigm that the Global South needs to develop and that the Global North needs to help. I do not deny this, especially as I believe that the North has large remedial responsibilities to the South following centuries of brutal exploitation. But I hope to have shown with some clarity that the concept of development that I defend, based largely on an amended capability approach, is sufficiently respectful of the collective agencies of those that it intends to serve, while at the same time disavowing claims to the superiority of “the West.” That, I believe, should be plain even to those who would dispose of the concept of development altogether.

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Pogge, “‘Assisting’ the global poor,” *The Proceedings of the Twenty-First World Congress of Philosophy* 13 (2003): 189-215.

<sup>36</sup> See Terry (2002), Dichter (2003), Barnett (2011).

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