

# *Outline of a method for discovering philosophy in development policy: Bangladeshi poverty reduction and the capability approach<sup>i</sup>*

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## *Abstract*

This article outlines a method for discovering political philosophical content in development policy. It puts the method to use by discussing whether Bangladeshi development policy has norms equal to those of the capability approach.

The interdisciplinary method seeks to combine elements of social anthropology with welfare economics. In order to see what political philosophical content lies in a given development policy, both of these spheres must firstly be analysed thoroughly, and to that end one can use social anthropology's ability to make diverse, context-sensitive descriptions. However, both philosophy and policy can be described in indefinitely many ways, and since it is not the aim of social anthropology to provide criteria of falsification, a harder science must be introduced to avoid an everything goes-situation. Therefore, the praxis of operationalisation which can be found in welfare economics is used to specify how a given philosophy and development policy should be analysed. The operationalisation does not entail quantifying essentially qualitative elements; contrarily, operationalisation of philosophy and policy must display their underlying irreducible values.

To test the method, the capability approach can be operationalised as three fields of investigation, viz. the value of freedom for the deprived, the value of reducing inequality and the value of ensuring a minimum threshold of a good life. A field work has been carried out in Bangladesh to determine whether the elite of the country acknowledges these values. The first is partly valued, the second not at all, but the third is fully valued. Hence the method has shown its explanatory power,

demonstrating that the development policy of Bangladesh partly has values like those of the capability approach. The policy does attempt to ensure basic rights, but according to the capability approach it should have increased focus on reducing inequality and guarantee freedom for the deprived to choose their own values.

## Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche sets up a mighty program in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, proclaiming a whole new science which mixes natural scientific elements with subjectivity and art and makes theoretical philosophy useful to society. Unfortunately, his instructions are not very clear - but his intentions are admirable and can serve as an inspiration to create interdisciplinary research, demonstrating the usefulness of philosophy. This is what the present article will attempt.

Firstly, a method for describing what political philosophy lies in development policy shall be outlined, and secondly it shall be tested to what extent such a description is possible by comparing the development policy of Bangladesh with the capability approach.

Combining philosophy and policy has not previously been the focus in development theory. However, if it is possible to describe what political philosophy lies behind a development policy, both disciplines will be strengthened. The resulting knowledge will be salient to a political negotiator who needs to know the direction in which development goes before he can have influence on it.

Political philosophy will show that it can contribute to a practical field in stead of remaining purely theoretical, demonstrating its value for a discipline with direct influence on many people's lives. Development policy will have better theoretical arguments for its actions when a political philosophical discussion lies behind it, and hence not be dependent on practical, contingent considerations alone.

Developing and discussing the possibility of a method which shows political philosophical content in development policy is no attempt to show that these two disciplines are identical or that the one can be reduced to the other. It is simply a tool of analysing development policy in a different academic context, with the hope that it will provide new insights.

Politicians are obviously not philosophers, but some consideration of what is intrinsically good will always be at the bottom of their policy. Philosophy is the field in which intrinsic values are discussed, as it will be argued in the following, and hence the present method will be relevant.

The article has two main parts, the first being an outline of the method and the second being the

implementation.

Part one describes firstly how social anthropology can contribute to the method and secondly discusses the contribution of welfare economics. It shall be demonstrated how this interdisciplinary context enables the method we are looking for, since the different parts make up for each other's shortages.

Methodological considerations would not have much value, though, if they were not tested on an empirical case. Therefore, in part two the proposed method will be applied to discuss whether the norms of the capability approach are present in Bangladeshi development policy. The discussion will be made on the basis of qualitative data which has been gathered during a field work in Bangladesh in spring 2009 and which consists of semi-structured interviews with the political elite of the country.

## **Part one. Outline of a method for discovering philosophical content in development policy**

### **I. Definitions**

In the following, the social anthropological praxis of making contextual descriptions will be outlined, discussing how it can be applied to the method in question. However, in order to see the connection between such big concepts as development policy and political philosophy - which can be understood in infinitely many ways - an initial definition of these two disciplines is necessary.

Fully acknowledging that others may use the concept of political philosophy broader and differently, it will serve the purpose of this article to define it as coherent claims about what the good life is in a society and followingly claims about what intrinsic values should be promoted.

Political philosophy will, as Amartya Sen puts it, define the space in which equality should be present (Sen 1995: 3), a space being a dimension of intrinsic values like primary goods, capabilities, or justice. Sen's emphasis on space captures the fact that every political philosophy must present the end goal of society and discuss how ensuring equality will allow people to obtain an intrinsic value.

This quite narrow definition allows for a distinction between instrumentalist debates and debates about intrinsic values for which one cannot argue further, ultimately based on a view of the essence of a human life - e.g. freedom, *zoon politikon* or happiness, as in the case of liberalism, capability

approach and utilitarianism.

The narrow definition serves the overall intention of this investigation: To demonstrate how views and arguments about end values can contribute to practical policy considerations. Using the term ideology in stead of political philosophy would have captured the normative content equally well, but it would miss the historical weight which political philosophy has from being an academic subject dating back to ancient Greece and producing schools of thought like socialism, liberalism, communism etc.

David Easton's classical definition of politics is "authoritative allocation of value" (Easton 1965: 177), and following this, policy will here be looked upon as the execution of politics in tangible actions by authorities.

Contrary to political philosophy, debates about policy will exclusively present instrumental arguments, presenting an action, for instance a change in resource allocation, and showing that it is good for some reason, i.e. promoting a goal which is not discussed in itself.

## **II. The social anthropological praxis**

Needless to say, a thorough description of a given development policy is a necessary condition for revealing what political philosophy lies behind it. Such a description can be made in a vast number of academic contexts, ranging from clinical psychology to constitutional jurisprudence, where the former could describe the behaviour of political actors in terms of dysfunctional physiological elements in their brain and the latter could study the years of imprisonment they would face for making laws that are against the constitution.

However, using social anthropological descriptions will allow for a holistic understanding, since the essence of the social anthropological method is comparing several of the informants' different spheres of life, Marilyn Strathern argues. In her article *The nice thing about culture is that everybody has it*, she demonstrates that the aim of social anthropology is making diverse descriptions and in that way avoid reducing a society to empty descriptions of culture (Strathern 1995: 160).

Strathern shows that diversity must be the tool for making thorough descriptions, since it will allow the social anthropologist to understand how different parts of social life affect each other (Strathern 1995: 165). A social anthropological description must focus on context, emphasising that

no sphere of life is led isolated and hence pointing out that the key to understanding these spheres is comparing them to each other.

For example, culture must be understood as one sphere of life among others. It should be contextualised by other descriptions instead of working as a unison of spheres, Strathern argues. She demonstrates this point by running through a short history of the concept of culture which initially worked as a relational term in social anthropological descriptions. However, culture has recently laid claim of being a universal model of description, forming a false globalism - a false unison of spheres:

*"As long as [globalism] remained unitary, its questions remained locked into its own assumptions; as long as it remained Euro-American, it remained unitary"* (Strathern 1995: 163).

Such a false unison will make scholars forget that all descriptions must be seen in context and not as a global tendency; lack of diversity and contextuality in the description of development policy will ultimately lead to an ethnocentrist view without making us wiser on what political philosophy lies behind the policy.

Strathern points out that *"We had better pay attention to the contestability of universal claims"* (Strathern 1995: 163), since it is more often ethnocentrism than true universalism which motivates such claims. She outlines how a false dichotomy between the global and the local recently has been present, not only in social anthropology but in several academic disciplines. References to global culture has been used to promote a particular culture and set of norms, pretending that they are put forth from a neutral perspective. However, Strathern argues, there is no global culture - only different local contexts (Strathern 1995: 159). Trying to find a global culture is often just a commercial interest, Strathern says, and one could add the obvious rhetorical power that lies in defending a "global" standpoint and naming the view of an opponent provincial.

The social anthropological praxis should therefore be comparing different locales, and this will be highly relevant to our present purpose. When looking upon different locales, one can discover how culture, history, habits and other elements have influence on the norms in different instances of development policy and political philosophy. Such holistic descriptions are the first requirement for discovering philosophical content in development policy.

The global is not opposed to the local as a super-sphere or summing up of elements from different localities and similarly, seeing philosophy in politics is not seeing the universal in the concrete. Philosophy is simply a different praxis - that of finding arguments for norms - which cannot be done in politics, as previously argued. Hence, the present investigation shall follow Strathern's request for understanding social practises by analysing different contexts, described with diversity and without forgetting the irreducibility that lies in them.

### **III. operationalisation**

The aim of social anthropology is not to be a natural science which treats phenomena objectively and has strict criteria of falsification. However, some criteria of falsification are needed when searching for political philosophy in development policy. If such criteria lack, the search will swiftly end in an everything goes-situation where elements of all philosophies can be found in all policies since both of them entail broad description with numerous elements which can be interpreted in indefinitely many ways. Hence, the social anthropological descriptions must be accompanied by a science which also describes development policy and which does enable falsification: Welfare economics.

Welfare economics is no naïvely positivist science focusing only on how to raise the GDP of a country like fifty years ago - on the contrary, it can provide fruitful insights about the connection between philosophy and empirical data. In their article, *The Development of Capability Indicators*, Paul Anand et al. provide an example of welfare economics as a method that can explain what political philosophy lies behind some empirical observations. Anand operationalises the list of capabilities which Martha Nussbaum suggests are related to a good human life and investigates it as a set of empirically testable claims (Anand et al. 2009: 130). Through questionnaires, he measures which parameters are covariate with subjective wellbeing and in this way finds out what capabilities are most strongly correlated with a good human life .

Evidently, welfare economics has multiple agendas, and the intention of Anand is not the same as the aim of this article. Still, his method can serve as an example of a core tool of welfare economics, namely operationalisation. The reason why Anand operationalises both subjective wellbeing, the answers of his respondents, and the theory of Nussbaum is that he wants to see if a given theory has

explanatory power on a set of empirical observations; he looks for covariates between subjective wellbeing and a number of capabilities, hence testing if the covariates are equal to those which Nussbaum's philosophy expects (Anand et al. 2009: 130). Although our present purpose is not seeing whether a philosophy can predict covariation between empirical data but looking at the very link between philosophy and empirical praxis, the operationalisation will be the same: Anand demonstrates how welfare economics operationalises both theory and praxis. Equally, operationalising political philosophy and development policy will make claims of whether they have something in common falsifiable.

In order to get the testability Anand intends, he has to simplify firstly the philosophy of Nussbaum. He is of course aware that Nussbaum's theory is made up of advanced and interconnected arguments and cannot be understood independently of her other writings and the philosophical discussions she takes part in. But that does not make it wrong per se to summarise her claims in around fifty questions about the extend to which the respondents have certain capabilities. Contrary to the full theory, the operationalised result is falsifiable and consequently serves Anand's purpose.

Operationalising the empirical data is done with questions about the extend to which an informant has a certain capability, and the extend to which he has overall wellbeing, posed on a scale from 1 to 7 (Anand et al. 2009: 132).

Evidently, an operationalisation must be sufficiently specific to clearly distinguish it from other theories. If not, one could fear that what is operationalised is something different from the original theory. Taking the example of two political philosophical theories, both the capability approach and rawlsian liberalism could be operationalised as the claim that freedom is essential to a good life. But there is a substantial difference in that the capability approach has a positive concept of freedom as possibilities (Sen 2001: 37) whereas rawlsianism looks upon freedom from constraint (Rawls 1999: 14). Operationalising the capability approach and rawlsian liberalism simply as saying that freedom is essential to a good life would evidently be far too simplistic. It would be a sign of not understanding the two theories - and hence not a failure of the method, but rather a lack of meticulousness.

Operationalising a philosophical theory and ultimately reducing the capability approach of Nussbaum to 50 questions is naturally not without problems, and these will be discussed in a

moment. At present, though, we can outline how operationalisation can contribute to discovering philosophical content in development policy. Operationalisation will reveal something that is common between the different fields which one investigates. For Anand, the fifty capabilities are what the philosophy of Nussbaum and the respondents have in common. In the field of philosophy, the capabilities are the norm which a society should promote for its members, and in the field of the empirical observations, the capabilities are the norm which the respondents have to a certain degree.

Political philosophy argues which norms are intrinsic, and development policy is concerned with carrying out instrumental norms, as it was discussed in the beginning of this article, and also in accordance with the investigation of Anand. Operationalising a political philosophical theory and a conducted development policy as norms is fruitful since it is an obvious common feature if these two fields. Hence, operationalising the two fields as norms will enable seeing identity between them, without claiming that the fields themselves are identical.

As mentioned above, the fact that a theory is made up of advanced arguments and is part of a greater whole does not make it wrong per se to summarise it. But an operationalisation is necessarily a reduction and - in the case of Anand - a quantification. It is not evident how the overall wellbeing of a person can be described in a scale of seven steps, and it is equally controversial how complicated social tragedies like domestic violence and racial discrimination can be understood when posed as yes/no questions (Anand et al. 2009: 132 and 135). Because of the necessary reduction, the operationalisation must be chosen with extreme caution; an operationalisation is problematic when it is not made on the ground of a discussion about how it could be alternatively operationalised or what arguments are the foundation of the theory in question. For instance, the subjective wellbeing of Anand's article, which Nussbaum calls the good life, is multidimensional in several ways. A number of capabilities (Nussbaum 1992: 221) are a necessary condition for a good life - as Anand also acknowledges - and realising them as functionings can be made in indefinitely many ways, specific to the culture and preferences of the individual. This diversity of needed functionings and ways in which persons can do or be what they value does not go well with the one-dimensional and quantified scale of seven steps on which Anand operationalises Nussbaum's theory.

#### **IV. Arbitrariness in the operationalisation**

This appears to be a general problem of welfare economics, Martin Ravallion writes in his article *The Debate on Globalisation, Poverty, and Inequality*, since every operationalisation has a large

degree of arbitrariness (Ravallion 2003: 745). Just like Strathern, he describes how everyone can make their own conclusion when talking about globalisation. However, instead of sharing her opinion that the very concept of globalisation is misleading, Ravallion points to the lack of data on which scholars build their operationalisations (Ravallion 2003: 748), and how this can lead both to the conclusion that globalisation benefits poverty reduction and that it does not.

Before continuing the discussion, it must be noted that the term poverty - which is the focus of Ravallion - and the term development policy - which is the focus of this article - can be used synonymously. One can look upon poverty reduction as the aim of development policy and it will add a more concrete objective to the issue of development policy. Concurrently, it still allows for multiple definitions of poverty, ranging from an insufficient material living standard to freedom deficiency or lack of capabilities. Hence it does not exclude any political philosophy, intrinsic values, or space.

Ravallion says that the reason for the usage of arbitrary data is the large number of approaches one can take when measuring poverty, and that the scholars have not realised that their position is not the only possibility. For instance, one can measure both poverty and inequality, and both relative and absolute poverty - a point on which Sen has also written extensively (e.g. Sen 1995).

Ravallion's point about the lack of consciousness of diversity among scholars can be seen more radically as a lack of the competence which social anthropology has: The ability to make diverse and context-sensitive descriptions of political philosophy and development policy, as Strathern suggests, without reducing the results to simplistic patterns that can be described with natural scientific accuracy.

Hence, welfare economics provides an excellent tool of operationalisation for discovering the philosophical content in development policy, but this tool can only be used if the operationalisation is based on solid anthropological descriptions. A clear instance of the problem is seen when research designs like that of Anand are based on quantifying what cannot be quantified. As previously mentioned, it is problematic to quantify Nussbaum's conception of the good life on a subjective wellbeing-scale of 1-7. An operationalisation of political philosophy must respect qualitative dimensions and reduce without quantifying. An example of doing so will be provided in part two with the research design of the field work in Bangladesh.

Economic operationalisation makes it possible to infer from praxis to theory, but potentially it will be too easy, Ravallion shows us. With an operationalisation based on insufficient data or superficial descriptions, anything can be concluded and the possibility of falsification is lost. "*Ambiguous concepts make deceptive statistics*" (Ravallion 2003: 740), and with social anthropology one can see that insufficient diversity is the reason for the ambiguity.

In a side remark, it can be added that Ravallion himself, who excellently raises the point about the necessity of sufficient operationalisation, fails to do so himself. Ironically, he never specifies exactly what he means with globalisation and globalisation policies, apart from the fact that it has to do with trade liberalisation (Ravallion 2003: 750) and that it is a process whose results for the poor scholars debate intensively. If we learn anything from this deficit, it appears to be the need for more focus on sufficient operationalisation...

## **V. The role of normativity**

Ravallion attempts to find the reason for the deficiency of analysing globalisation from arbitrary numbers which the scholars choose even though different measurement methods would lead to different results. He concludes that the problem lies in the subjectivity and normativity of the scholars:

*"It is not that one concept is 'right' and one 'wrong'. They simply reflect different value judgements about what constitutes higher 'inequality' "*  
(Ravallion 2003: 742)

However, having normativity in an analysis does not mean biased, subjective descriptions without good arguments or scientific quality, of which Ravallion gives an example when he describes a rejection of the empirical findings of a sample survey on the grounds of someone's limited, personal experience. Evidently, Ravallion is right in criticising such obviously bad uses of subjectivity, but he also acknowledges that every quantitative measure of poverty can "*miss important aspects of individual welfare*" (Ravallion 2003: 747), hence realising that the final aim of poverty reduction - which he also calls quality of life - is value-based and subjective.

Having taken this step, it is peculiar that Ravallion does not seem to realise its full consequences. Since it is the case that there is a degree of arbitrariness in all measurement and since it is also the

case that the final aim of Ravallion's field of investigation is ensuring something as subjective as quality of life, there are clearly limits to how far value-neutral research can take him.

Ravallion's article is an important contribution to understanding the arbitrariness of every operationalisation but further steps towards making the operationalisations value-neutral would not solve the problems. He declares that a norm - the quality of life - is what welfare economics investigates and that we must simply choose "*some agreed measure*" (Ravallion 2003: 752) for measuring growth. Clearly, then, some normative choices - like operationalising either absolute or relative poverty - must be consciously made, and hiding from them (like most scholars do) or criticising this hiding (like Ravallion does) are insufficient solutions.

That normativity should be a part of the welfare economic research is of course no new insight. In 1970 the economist Gunnar Myrdal wrote *Objectivity in Social Research*, demonstrating the deficiency of the criteria of objectivity, as it will be discussed in a moment. At first, though, it can be briefly summed up that the findings of Ravallion contribute greatly to the method of seeing political philosophical content in development policy. That can be done by operationalising both, but only after having made a clear choice of what elements should be operationalised. It is a warning not to choose any elements without realising that alternative operationalisations are possible, and not to quantify what cannot be quantified

## **VI. The contribution of Gunnar Myrdal**

Strathern demonstrates how we must analyse fields like development policy and political philosophy as different domains in order to see similarities between them. However, the social anthropological praxis attempts complete value neutrality. She considers it the foremost virtue not to exercise what she calls cultural fundamentalism (Strathern 1995: 168), and Ravallion similarly looks upon subjectivity as a problem for academic research, as previously discussed. But making an analysis of the "*value of an action*" (Strathern 1995: 160) will be problematic if the analyser maintains a neutral perspective.

Making a thorough analysis of a conducted development policy cannot be done without having values and taking them into account in the findings. The end goal of development policy is no natural scientific equation or neutral description: It is improving living conditions for human beings which is a highly value-laden activity and would be unthinkable without an initial set of norms and subjective intentions. Similarly, the core activities of political philosophy are discussions about

which values are the most important and how a society can promote them.

When Anand shows how subjective wellbeing can be operationalised by quantifying on a scale from 1 to 7, it witnesses a great improvement of welfare economics, since only fifty years ago crudely measured material wealth was the only focus of the discipline. However, economists like Myrdal displays that one must move even further away from attempting objectivity in social research. As previously shown, norms are what should be operationalised when looking for political philosophy in development policy. It is understandable that every science longs for universality, but the necessary choices of research design will always reflect a value, e.g. caring more about relative than absolute poverty or vice versa. Such choices cannot be measured against a higher truth, Myrdal argues (Myrdal 1969: 4), since the reflected values per definition are intrinsic.

Using the capability approach as an example, two aspects of the theory can be emphasised. Either one can focus on the essentialist perspective, that there is a common human function, as specified e.g. in Nussbaum's list, pointing out that there is a number of capabilities which should be ensured for every individual irrespective of age, class, culture, citizenship or gender. Contrarily, one can also emphasise the liberalist perspective, saying that it is the choice of the individual how to realise the essential capabilities into valued functionings and that this choice should not be dictated by any other person or public instance. The above does not show any argumentative weakness or unclarity about the capability approach; it merely illustrates the fact that there is always a normative choice in every operationalisation which cannot be made on grounds of rationalist arguments or natural scientific investigations.

The methodological consideration one can make when discovering philosophical content in development policy, is ascertaining and make explicit what valuations have been made in the operationalisation, as Myrdal suggests (Myrdal 1969: 72). On the grounds of extensive analysis of man's need to rationalise and reduce, Myrdal notices like Ravallion that people "*draw conclusions...from their favourite poverty numbers*" (Ravallion 2003: 749) but contrary to Ravallion he draws the evident conclusion that an operationalisation must make its valuations clear instead of making an impossible attempt to rule out everything but objectivity.

## **VII. Conclusion of the method**

After operationalising and hence reducing a whole philosophy and policy to a set of norms, not much of the original intention behind them is left, it can be argued, and knowledge of some norms

is far more limited than knowledge about the philosophy and policy themselves. However, the operationalisation is not intended to give full knowledge about these fields - the aim is making them comparable by finding what they have in common. It entails no claim that this operationalisation is all that the fields contain; it is only making a comparison falsifiable.

Putting together the two traditions of social anthropology and welfare economics will enable us to analyse what political philosophy lies behind a development policy.

From Strathern's program for social anthropology, it is seen that holistic knowledge about development policy and political philosophy can be obtained through diverse, context-sensitive descriptions. She encourages finding other spheres than the cultural and this is done when the political and the philosophical sphere are described.

However, it is not the role of social anthropology to have strict criteria of falsification and hence we turn to welfare economics. This discipline shows how falsification can be made through firstly operationalising both development policy and political philosophy and secondly comparing the operationalisations. Still, there is a problem with much economical operationalisation, as Ravallion argues, when it is done without sufficient initial analysis and from arbitrary data. In that case, over-simplified analysis will follow and substantially qualitative aspects of a theory will be quantified.

The economic theory of Myrdal can overcome this problem by revealing the values that necessarily lie in every philosophy and policy instead of pretending to describe them from a neutral point of view. Both policy and philosophy relate to norms, and therefore operationalisation must be done in norms. Operationalising them in what only relates to one of the fields - e.g. as the number of lives they have saved in the 1990'ies - will provide no comparison since no lives are saved by discussing philosophy.

## **Part two. Application of the method on Bangladeshi development policy and the capability approach**

### **I. Research design**

As initially argued, the outlined method will have much greater value if it is tested on an empirical case, and to do so, a field work has been conducted in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

The rest of this article will test the outlined method by describing and operationalising the findings

of the field work and equally describing and operationalising the capability approach. In that way, it will be seen to what extent the method succeeds in its task of discovering what political philosophy lies in a development policy.

The definition of the political elite of Bangladesh is:

People who

- (i) engage openly in political negotiations,
- (ii) define themselves as Bangladeshi or representing Bangladeshi interests, and
- (iii) are capable of influencing the pursued policy of the administration of Bangladesh on a national level.

Because of the subject of the field work, the group of informants were de facto further narrowed down to members of the elite who have the poverty reduction process as their field of work.

The group of informants counted three subgroups, namely

- a) incumbent politicians,
- b) members of the political opposition and
- c) leaders of major poverty-related NGO's.

Including NGO leaders in the group of informants may not be relevant in many other countries than Bangladesh. However, NGO's play a significant role in the development of Bangladesh, and there are three reasons for this, as Abul Hossain explains:

*"The first is the national emergency that followed the independence war, and the cyclone that came immediately afterwards was formative for the sector. The second factor is the powerful role played by foreign aid. And third, state failure is a commonly cited explanation for the growth of Bangladesh's NGO sector"* (A. Hossain 2006: 233)

The field work, titled *elite roles in poverty reduction*, investigates whether values found in the capability approach, looked upon as a political philosophy, are present in the development policy conducted by the political elite of Bangladesh. Drawing conclusions about the development policy

of a country based on interviews with the elite is evidently no easy task, and a number of precautions have been taken. These will be described in a moment, together with an account for the range and limits of the findings, but at first the research design will be outlined.

Collection of empirical data has been made from a number of sources, primarily semi-structured interviews with the informants. Apart from that, direct and indirect empirical material has been collected from a number of people that do not fall under the definition of the group of informants but whose knowledge is important none the less - e.g. deprived or landless people, ordinary citizens of Bangladesh, students and scholars with interest in the political sphere etc. Participant observation, excursions to deprived villages and talks varying from highly informal to regular interviews all contribute to creating a picture as complete as possible about the situation of the country.

The conducted interviews with the informants were semi-structured since a more structured or quantitative survey questionnaire or queries presented by the investigator would arise out of the culture and language of the researcher, hence facing the danger of imposing own norms on the people whose understanding one sets out to explain.

The informants were therefore asked a number of questions about their poverty reduction policy, evolving around the operationalisation of the capability approach, which will be described later. As previously argued, the term poverty reduction and the term development policy can be used synonymously. Looking upon poverty reduction allowed for a more specific focus of the interviews and consequently made it possible to ask more questions about a tangible policy, since eradicating poverty is considered the aim of development by the informants - disregarding their very diverse opinions on what poverty and development is.

## **II. Range and limits of the findings**

Telling the common Bangladeshi about a field study focusing on poverty reduction generally raises much appreciation and excitement. However, that attitude changes dramatically when it is added that national level politicians and elite groups are the focus of the study. "[in politics,] *everyone is corrupt. If I go to politics, I would also be corrupt. You are surrounded by corrupt people... We need new politicians*" a friend of mine explained (Stru Schmidt 2009: 155)<sup>ii</sup>, and ordinary citizens agree that concerning poverty, politicians are a part of the problem and not part of the solution. It

may be the case that Bangladesh has been ranked the most corrupt country in the world by Transparency International (N. Hossain 2008: 57) but that is no argument that the politicians do not have influence or that their influence is not worth investigating. The contribution to poverty reduction of a member of the elite may be large or small, but how the development - which does take place - is formed will be largely influenced by this group. Since the politicians do influence poverty reduction, an international negotiator coming to Bangladesh would need to know their norms and policy before he could negotiate with them.

Evidently, many other people than my informants have an influence on the development policy of Bangladesh, and so do the political structures of the country, the history, the laws, international interests, and a large number of other elements. However, trying to map out all these sources would be futile, and their existence do not negate the influence of the elite. The intended range of the field work is therefore not development policy in Bangladesh per se - only the contribution of the elite.

Another relevant limit of the empirical findings are the filters which must be assumed to exist between what the informants said in the interviews and what policy they carry out. Using the interview strategies which Spradley outlines (Spradley 1979) and including the other mentioned sources of data collection reduces but does not completely eradicate the problem. Just like it is not claimed that the informants are the only influence on development policy, it is not claimed that their full policy plans or intentions are present in the collected data. However, it is also the case that this incompleteness does not negate the substantial information which they do provide, and hence it is valuable to look upon the intention of the elite as an influence of the development policy.

It must also be mentioned that the field work makes no attempt to show unity between the informants. They are looked upon individually and have many differences. Still, it can be investigated what common traits and norms they have, and to what degree these norms are present in the capability approach.

Finally, let it be emphasised again that finding similarities between the norms of the elite and the capability approach entails no claim that the elite knows of or appreciates the capability approach as a political philosophy. It simply states, in case of significant similarities, that the elite holds a philosophy which can be looked upon as identical with the the values of the capability approach.

### III. Field results

In the following, it will be described how the capability approach can be operationalised in three fields of investigation, according to the method outlined in the first part of the article. Also, the data of the field work, i.e. the development policy of the elite, will be operationalised and the degree of similarity will hence be revealed.

This is not the place for a lengthy anthropological analysis of the conception of poverty held by the Bangladeshi elite, which has described elsewhere<sup>iii</sup>. Instead, the main conclusions of the field work will be described in order to illustrate the present methodological points.

Also, instead of looking upon the capability approach in general - which would be a far too extensive theory to operationalise - the following will focus on Sen's version of the theory as written in *Inequality Re-examined* and *Development as Freedom*.

### IV. First field of investigation

#### Operationalisation

Sen distinguishes between capabilities and functionings. Functionings are what we have achieved to do or be and thus aims to describe all that we value about ourselves (Sen 1995: 49). This is contrasted with capabilities which are our freedom to obtain functionings, i.e. our potentiality or, in Sen's words, the real alternatives that we have.

Sen's emphasis on the deprived as autonomous agents must be seen in the wider context of the capability approach, which argues that everyone must have substantive freedom, i.e. the positively existing option of actualizing the functionings one wants to do or be (Sen 2001: 56). Hence, what a society must ensure, is a number of capabilities to actualise the functionings valued by the individual. How and which of the capabilities the individual chooses to actualise, though, is a personal choice and should not be decided by society:

*"[T]he importance of agency...relates to the need, emphasized throughout this work, to see people - even beneficiaries - as agents rather than as motionless patients. The objects of 'targeting' are active themselves, and their activities can make the targeting-achievements quite different from*

*targeting attempts...*"(Sen 2001: 47),

This division between freedom of values and actualised values is not only an analytic description of a poverty reduction process. It is a radical change in the intrinsic aim of poverty reduction, since it moves the focus from the values that are to be actualised to the freedom of the deprived to choose such values for themselves. In this sense, freedom is not to be understood narrowly as political freedom or freedom of speech opposed to other values typically promoted in poverty reduction, e.g. health, education or material standards. That would be a negatively defined freedom from constraint, as it is seen in various liberalist theories, e.g. where freedom consists of an initial access to primary goods. Contrarily, Sen's concept of freedom is substantive, emphasising that a person must both have internal abilities as well as the right external conditions to actualise a functioning.

The deprived person must be an active agent in two ways, viz. in defining and in fighting her own poverty. The values with which poverty is understood will evidently vary between persons - this we see from the empirical fact that people disagree about defining poverty - and the question therefore is about whose values are to be focused upon and subsequently actualized in a process of poverty reduction. Since the intention of poverty reduction is to help the deprived (and not to help an external facilitator of the process), one can hardly avoid the conclusion that the promoted values must be held by the deprived (Sen 2001: 13).

Similar to the two ways in which the active agent should be active in the poverty reduction process, viz. by defining and actualising the values, external agents - like the policy-making elite - also holds a double role. Firstly, the external agent should let the deprived formulate what values they want to actualize, and in this way the elite can be said to hold the *metadiscourse*: They can give freedom to let the deprived decide the discourse and be autonomous agents in the value definition process, or they can keep the discourse themselves. Secondly, the elite must hand over the process of actualisation to the active agents which should make the actualisation of the poverty reduction process. Hence, the elite can also be said to have *metaactivity*: They can choose to keep the actualisation of poverty reduction to themselves, or they can hand this activity over to the deprived.

Hence, the first field of investigation can be operationalised as the value that the deprived are

looked upon as autonomous agents in a poverty reduction process. They must play the central role instead of being recipients of help and must be given the opportunity to both define and actualise the functionings they value.

In case the development policy of the elite promotes this value and acknowledges the autonomy of the deprived - particularly when their wills differ - their norms have a similarity and it can be looked upon as an element of the capability approach in their development policy.

### Empirical findings

When asking the informants the most general question about how to eradicate poverty, a vast majority pointed to education as the first priority. Like the rest of the country, the elite is proud of the large number of Bangladeshi Nobel prize winners and they are very aware that an educated population will be advantageous for development in a number of ways - ranging from better job possibilities to family planning, fighting corruption, and consolidation of democratic institutions.

The value of education is so highly cherished not only for being an intrinsic good thing but also for its contribution to create freedom; when I asked an informant about the value of education, the answer came promptly:

*"Because education gives you better opportunities to look for your own job, to take care of yourself - [it gives you] awareness. So you can move around... do something for yourself"* (Stru Schmidt 2009: 43)

There is a widespread conviction that poverty reduction can only be carried out by the deprived themselves and that education, awareness, and local empowerment must accompany external aid. Decentralising decisions will to a larger extent take what an informant called "*ground realities*" (Stru Schmidt 2009: 135) into consideration, meaning that poverty issues always have a particular local structure and that it will be no good to make a decision in Dhaka about how to fight a repressive local strongman in a village in Khulna Division, for instance. Therefore, decentralisation is looked upon positively, adding to the clear impression that autonomy is valued as a means of development.

Asking the elite about how they look upon microcredit loans also provides some interesting insight. Many mention that the system is not working (Stru Schmidt 2009: 116) for various reasons, e.g. that the interest rate is too high or that the loan is not followed by sufficient information for the

loan takers. Still, the elite considers the micro credit business a very good idea which just needs practical regulation and once that has been one, it will be a way in which the deprived can create their own possibilities. This positive attitude contributes to the impression that autonomy in the process of fighting poverty is a value held by the elite.

The Bangladeshis look upon autonomy on all levels of society as an important value which two tendencies among the informants witness. Firstly, there is a great consciousness about the war of 1971 with Pakistan - a topic which is regarded as formative for the free spirit of the Bangladeshi national identity and brought up in a number of different contexts; it is unanimously praised by the elite as a fight for liberation and freedom. Secondly, when the external influence of development policy becomes too strong, the elite loses its faith in it. Hence, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper for Bangladesh, in which international scholars have played a significant role is not looked mildly upon, some stating that its conclusions should be more drastic, and some explicitly calling it worthless for its lack of tangibility or insight in the Bangladeshi society (Stru Schmidt 2009: 16).

As previously mentioned, the capability approach has the value of letting the deprived be autonomous agents that define and fight their own poverty. From the above empirical findings it stands clear that the elite shares the value of autonomy in fighting poverty - not taking any stance of how they look upon autonomy in the definition process which will be discussed in a moment.

The elite praises autonomy in fighting poverty as they say directly on several occasions. They value decentralisation, the freedom which lies in education, and autonomy also on the national level. There is clear accord between the Bangladeshi elite and the capability approach on this issue which witnesses an instance in which one can infer from development policy to political philosophy.

However, turning to the question of how the elite looks upon autonomy in the process of defining poverty, the picture changes. Economists talk about various possible intrinsic values as different spaces in which one can consider poverty issues (Sen 1995: 2). For instance, material wealth is such a space since a poverty reduction process can have it as a goal to raise material wealth. Similarly, the space can be the life expectancy or educational level of a population.

The informants do not agree concerning whether the deprived define their own values and hence choose their own space or not; most of the interviewed politicians and some among the NGO leaders do not display any concern for this issue and consider material wealth the only space in

which poverty reduction should take place. This does not mean that raising the individual's GDP is considered the only means of poverty reduction. Various instruments like education and decentralisation are clearly valued, as mentioned above, but they are only valued instrumentally as a means of raising the material living standard. For example, when asked the reason for raising the level of education, an informant said that it was obviously done for creating job opportunities (Stru Schmidt 2009: 64). This does not conflict with the fact that education is valued as a means of giving more freedom to the deprived in the way poverty is fought; it simply shows that elites look upon material wealth as the only intrinsic value - evidently not because of a wish to repress the deprived but rather because of a lack of awareness about the potential multidimensionality of poverty reduction. Freedom is granted by the elite in the way process - but not so with regards to the end goal, i.e. how poverty is defined.

Still, a minority of the informants, especially among the NGO leaders, have a more liberal perspective, and mention that the values of the deprived should be looked upon as the end goal (Stru Schmidt 2009: 113). However, even among these informants, as among the rest of the ethnic Bengali who form a vast majority of the country, ethnic minorities and their different culture, language and way of living receive no attention. All informants insist upon the homogeneity of the country which they see as an advantage, and the issue of repression of the minorities is on no one's agenda. When asked about the loss of culture, an NGO leader said:

*"Cultures come and go. Shall we mourn that the culture of the Roman empire is no longer present? The minorities will assimilate. It is not a problem"* (Stru Schmidt 2009: 142)

It can therefore be concluded that the elite does not value freedom for the deprived regarding poverty definition. Various means of freedom are valued as a way of creating material wealth but other goals are disregarded. Even the NGO leaders show little concern for ethnic minorities, indicating norms which are different from that of the capability approach.

## **V. Second field of investigation**

### Operationalisation

Sen describes an absolute and a relative approach to poverty and argues that the relative (Sen

2006: 37) is preferable. In the absolute approach a certain level of poverty - disregarding whether it is measured in income, capabilities or another space - is compared to the level found somewhere else. The level of poverty is compared crossculturally and hence does not take into account what level of e.g. income is needed in a given society for a person to be considered deprived. Contrarily, the relative approach to poverty does take these cultural surroundings into account, since the idea is that a certain level of poverty is partly a social construction. A person who is considered deeply deprived in Western Europe may be looked upon as rather wealthy in a Bangladeshi village with the same level of material wealth, education etc.

The result of evaluating poverty with the relative approach is that inequality becomes a central concept; one cannot measure the level of poverty in a society, disregarding its general living standards.

In itself, the choice between an absolute and a relative approach to poverty is independent of the space in which poverty is situated. It is simply taking a stance on the extent to which inequality should be fought when reducing poverty.

In addition to the emphasis of the cultural surrounding of the deprived, there is an intuitive argument for focusing on inequality. No matter what philosophical stance one takes about society, it seems to entail establishing equality somehow. For instance, Rawls' initial situation seeks that everyone is equal at the theoretical foundation of society.

*"The major ethical theories of social arrangement all share an endorsement of equality in terms of some focal variable, even though the variables that are selected are frequently very different between one theory and another"*  
(Sen 1995: 3, emphasis in original)

The second field of investigation is therefore operationalised as the value of fighting inequality instead of focusing on an absolute approach to poverty reduction. It will be investigated to what extent the Bangladeshi elite uses a relative approach and takes the cultural surroundings of the deprived into account. There will be similarity with the norm of the capability approach and the elite in case the latter attempts to reduce the differences in society in the space they find relevant.

### Empirical findings

As said before, the informants are of course far from being the only influence on the development policy, and investigating the elite does not give full knowledge on the final political outcome of Bangladesh. In the case of inequality, there may be a particular bias since reducing differences between rich and poor will affect the elite personally. Being far more affluent than the average Bangladeshi, they will have their personal interests better served by an absolute approach to poverty which focuses on the level of the poor instead of involving the rich also. Unless the elite has a sufficient high level of idealism to be willing to put their personal living standard into the political game, it could therefore be expected that interest in larger inequality might to a larger degree come from grass root level.

When asking the informants about inequality, everyone initially agreed about its importance in poverty reduction. However, the absolute standard seems to be much more present than the relative, since nobody considers the living standard of the rich a problem. During the interviews, the informants never raised the issue by themselves, which in itself shows that it is not their priority. Besides, when asked directly about it, they turned it into a question of the living standard of the deprived. An informant was asked if he considered the distance between rich and poor a problem in it self. He answered in the affirmative:

*"Correct, so when we talk about poverty reduction..., we are talking about what is the minimum needed for a human person to survive - in basic needs like food, clothing, shelter, medical care and education" (Stru Schmidt 2009: 41)*

This is clearly an absolute approach and a rather significant one, since the question was clearly on the role of inequality and the answer pertains just as clearly to the minimum level of the poor, i.e. an absolute approach.

Another issue which was never raised by the informants, was the cultural surroundings of the deprived. They did not mention what the deprived thought of the rich or how they looked upon their own status in society compared to the affluent. An informant said that meetings between rich and poor that would make the poor feel inferior seldom happened and consequently it was more important to raised the absolute level than equalling out differences. For example, pupils in a school

are from the same background, and in the villages, peoples' expectation are modest, he said (Stru Schmidt 2009: 49).

Like in the case of autonomy, there was a bit of variance internally in the group of informants, the NGO leaders showing more concern for the relative approach. A few NGO leaders expressed worry about the modest size of the middle class, saying that it should grow whereas the extreme upper- and lower class should vanish (Stru Schmidt 2009: 125). Still, the overall picture among the vast majority of the elite is that an absolute level of wealth for the deprived is much more appreciated than reducing inequality, and the aim of the informants is promoting a certain threshold of wealth which is independent of the level of the affluent. Their value on this issue differs substantially for that of the capability approach.

## **VI. Third field of investigation**

### Operationalisation

As Sen writes, some traits are common to all human beings, in spite of the substantial differences between us and the numerous ways in which one can actualise functionings. These common core capabilities which everyone should have a freedom to realise together make an essentialist description of what constitutes a human life. Nussbaum exemplifies this with a list of human capabilities (Nussbaum 1992: 222) whereas Sen abstains from being so specific. Nonetheless, they agree about the fact that there can be found a central human essence and in that way bring a neoaristotelian element to the capability approach. Aristotle's concept of *ergon* (function) describes how man as a race - opposed to a plant or an animal - has a limited set of properties and that the aim of a human life is to realise this *ergon*.

Similarly, the capability approach uses an Aristotelian division between potentiality and actuality - equal to the distinction between capabilities and functioning - to show that even though it is specific to the individual and his culture how a capability is realised, there is a common human essence. It values that some basic needs should be ensured for everyone, irrespective of culture, place or time.

When man has a common essence - e.g. the right to his own body and the right to have social relations - paternalist or repressive societies cannot be accepted with the argument that they belong to a specific culture or time. Contrarily, it will be the duty of political actors to ensure a different development.

Consequently, the third field of investigation can be operationalised as the norm that every society must guarantee certain essential capabilities for the deprived for the sole reason that they are human.

### Empirical findings

Investigating whether the elite conducts essentialist development policy is no easy task, since questions about human rights or the intrinsic value of every human being almost always will be answered in the affirmative. Some criteria of falsification must therefore initially be developed. For this reason, questions about the level to which the problems and solutions to the development of Bangladesh is specific to the country and time were added to the direct questions about whether the informants supported equal rights for everyone.

If the informants think that there is a particular Bangladeshi way of conducting development, not only in the means but also in the final aim, this would speak against essentialist norms.

One thing indicating that the elite does in fact have an essentialist approach to poverty is the frequency with which they mentioned human rights during the interviews, irrespective of the fact that it did not always relate directly to the topic (Stru Schmidt 2009: 83).

To a stunning degree, the informants not only agreed about the fact that there is a common human essence, or, as many expressed it, some basic rights. They also agreed about what these rights are, everyone mentioning a list of 5 to 6 elements: Water and food, clothing, shelter, medical care and education. (Stru Schmidt 2009: 25, 41, 136). The following is very typical of what the informants said:

*"[development and civilization will never come] if he cannot send his children to the school... If these children have not accessibility to pure drinking water... If that family is not ensured of his own food...; if he is not assured of a shelter... If he can't go to hospital. These are five basic human necessities" (Stru Schmidt 2009: 105)*

Although some did not name the full list of basic rights and a few did not touch upon the subject at all, nobody mentioned other rights than those above. It is a rather materialist picture of human life

but still an essentialist description, and the lack of elements confirms the conclusive finding from the first field of investigation: No freedom of speech, freedom to define your own life, or similar basic right are mentioned which is surely not because the elite is actively against these rights but rather because they are not in focus.

When asked, the informants denied that this focus should be something particular to Bangladesh or to the present situation. They considered their priorities universal and the same could be implemented everywhere. For example, a politician said, there is hunger in New York now, and they must take the same measures as in Bangladesh since ensuring sufficient food for the population should always be the first priority of a country (Stru Schmidt 2009: 25).

Regarding the third field of investigation, it can therefore be concluded that the elite shares the essentialist norm of the capability approach and considers it important to ensure a number of basic rights across time and place. The list of the rights may be more materialist orientated than e.g. the list of Nussbaum, but it is still essentialism.

## **VII. Empirical conclusion**

Having operationalised both the capability approach and the empirical findings of the field work, it will now be possible to estimate to what degree the elite of Bangladesh conducts a development policy which has norms equal to the capability approach.

The capability approach finds its strength in that it entails claims about basic human rights to be ensured across time and culture while still allowing for people to unfold their lives as different as they wish inside this frame of the human *ergon*. A policy which does not acknowledge both of these aspects cannot be said to follow the capability approach.

The essentialist aspect is clearly followed by the elite, as demonstrated in the third field of investigation. As for the freedom aspect, the picture is not so clear. The elite grants freedom instrumentally in the actualisation of poverty reduction, but seems to overlook the freedom of the deprived to define their own goals and reduce poverty in the way they wish. Additionally, the elite does not share the value of reducing inequality.

Hence it must be concluded that the elite does not follow the capability approach overall, although

it does share some of its values. A development lobbyist who wishes to change Bangladeshi development policy in the direction of the capability approach will not start from scratch. He can enjoy the common value of essentialism and instrumental freedom but must concentrate on convincing the politicians about inequality being a better measure of poverty, and also make them pay increased attention to the multidimensionality of poverty: The deprived may have other goals than increasing material wealth a live a different life with self-defined values.

### **General conclusion**

Combining social anthropological analysis with the tools of welfare economics has provided an interdisciplinary method which can discover political philosophy in development policy. It has been demonstrated that diverse, context-sensitive descriptions can be the point of departure for an operationalisation, and that the operationalisation does not need to be a quantification. Instead, an operationalisation can capture what norms are present in both a political philosophy and a development policy, hence enabling a claim of similarity between e.g. the capability approach and a conducted poverty reduction policy to be falsifiable.

To the advantage of both disciplines, this shows that subjectivity is no antipode of social analysis but rather a field to which social research can contribute. Political philosophy will benefit from being connected with development policy because its intrinsic arguments are put into action, and similarly development policy will be strengthened when supported by theoretical arguments.

That the method is in fact viable and has explanatory power is demonstrated when it is tested. It is useful for showing the degree to which there can be found similarities between the capability approach and Bangladeshi development policy.

The capability approach values that the deprived should be looked upon as autonomous agents who define their own norms and play an active part in poverty reduction. The elite is happy to grant the deprived independence in the poverty reduction process, but only as an instrumental means of fighting poverty in the way the elite itself defines it. Also, the informants hold values different from the capability approach's concern for inequality. Whereas Sen suggests a relative approach to reducing poverty, the informants tend to have an absolute approach. However, there is a large

degree of consensus between the norms of Sen and the elite with respect to the value of ensuring essentialist basic human rights.

The empirical lesson learned is therefore that the political elite of Bangladesh does embrace some values that are common with the capability approach, most notably its essentialism. Making their norms more similar to the capability approach would entail convincing them about the multiplicity of goals which a deprived person can have, and make them pay increased attention to reducing inequality.

Evidently, the present article only provides a brief outline of the method; more lengthy theoretical discussions would strengthen it and application on other cases would be illustrative. That task completed, a prescriptive element may even be added to its descriptive nature: Presently it can be described what philosophy lies behind a development policy. Being able to make prescriptions about what policy should be conducted on the basis of theoretical philosophical arguments would be truly interesting.

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- ii All informants are anonymised. Citations from Stru Schmidt 2009 indicate that it is direct speech by the informants which has been recorded during the field work in Bangladesh. The full interviews can be found in the paper in progress by Stru Schmidt (2009). The informants count 14 party leaders, ministers of state, former ministers, joint secretary generals and directors of influential NGOs.
- iii Ibid. Hossain, N (2005) or Stru Schmidt (2009)