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# A COMMON GOOD APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

Collective Dynamics of  
Development Processes



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Mathias Nebel, Oscar Garza-Vázquez and Clemens Sedmak (eds). *A Common Good Approach to Development: Matrix and Metric for a Collective Development Processes*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0290>

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ISBN Paperback: 9781800644045

ISBN Hardback: 9781800644052

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800644069

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 9781800644076

ISBN Digital ebook (AZW3): 9781800644083

ISBN XML: 9781800644090

ISBN Digital ebook (HTML): 9781800646742

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0290

Cover image: Cuetzalan, Puebla (2008). Photo by Oscar Garza-Vázquez.

Cover design by Anna Gatti

# 4. Collective Agency Freedom as the Engine of a Common Good Dynamic

## A Conceptual Proposal for Measurement

*Oscar Garza-Vázquez*

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The first part of this book proposes a practical notion of the common good that is dynamic and grounded in people's actions. It sees development as the result of collective processes and collective actions in which people's interactions shape their common destiny. In this sense, agency is posited as the engine of a common good approach to development that is truly human. In this chapter, I focus on this key driver of common good dynamics. My aim here is to reflect on what agency freedom could entail for such an approach by justifying its constitutive role for development and its collective nature, to then identify potential dimensions to measure it.

I identify at least two caveats in how agency is discussed in the literature: first, the notion is primarily discussed at the individual level, and second, existing indicators aiming at capturing this concept generally reflect this bias by over-emphasising the ability of individuals to make choices. Instead, I will argue that it is the collective aspect of agency that provides a more appropriate appraisal of agency for a common good approach, which I present broadly as the opportunity for a given population to identify, organise, and act together as a collective unit to achieve common goals. Three dimensions for its measurement

are proposed (freedom to imagine things together, freedom to organise around shared goals, and freedom to achieve things together).

The argument develops in three parts. In the first part, drawing on Sen's capability approach, I situate agency freedom as a normative element of development. The second part reviews the literature around agency, and it distinguishes between agency as the process aspect of freedom and agency as the 'freedom to choose'; it also argues that the former is collective rather than individual. The third part justifies agency freedom for the common good as something we do together as a collective. Finally, building on definitions of individual and collective agency, the chapter concludes by suggesting possible dimensions that could be used to appraise the proposed conceptualisation of agency freedom.

## 1. Agency and Development

Any development project, be it the construction of a road, improving the productivity of rural land, the reduction of any of the dimensions of poverty, or any other objective, necessarily involves taking a stand on what kind of development is appropriate, which processes and strategies are most likely to achieve such goals, and what actors make this progress possible. Therefore, development is about what, how, and by whom. For instance, for a long time, actual development practice was committed to bringing 'development' to 'underdeveloped' areas in the form of higher rates of national income (what), through processes of economic liberalisation, private enterprise, and productivity-raising activities (how), promoted and implemented by non-local technocratic experts (by whom) (Easterly 2013).

Yet, as development scholars and practitioners have repeatedly pointed out, this top-down approach has failed not only in achieving its goals effectively, but also in respecting and taking account of the rights, needs and knowledge of the very same people whose wellbeing was meant to be the main object of concern (Easterly 2013, Malavisi 2019, Mohan 2014). Indeed, there are countless real-life stories all over the world that vividly illustrate these worries; examples range from people being displaced from their livelihoods, the overexploitation of natural resources, direct human rights violations, and the deprivation

of people's wellbeing, among other things (e.g., see Chambers 1995, Deneulin 2014, Easterly 2013, Penz et al. 2011). As an alternative, at least since the 1970s onwards, development thinking started shifting towards a more process-oriented participatory approach in which people themselves become active subjects and participants of their own development (Crocker 2008, Mansuri and Rao 2013, Mohan 2014, Pham 2018).

In this context, Amartya Sen's freedom-based approach to development has done a great deal to cement this way of thinking and thus to challenge the limitations of traditional economic technocratic solutions, both in the ends and the means of development (Alkire 2010, Northover 2014, Mansuri and Rao 2013; see also UNDP Human Development Reports). In his framework, development is about expanding people's freedom, and freedom in turn is seen from two distinct but interrelated perspectives, what he calls the opportunity aspect and the process aspect (Alkire and Deneulin 2009). Although both are seen as constitutive of development and interrelated (Sen 1985, 1999a), they aim to capture different ideas. The opportunity aspect refers to real opportunities to choose between different kinds of lives—what Sen understands as people's freedom to achieve wellbeing. The process aspect refers to the process of creating and obtaining those opportunities to live well or to achieve other valuable ends—which captures the notion of agency freedom. The concept of capability captures the former, whereas the concept of agency captures the latter. Together, they offer an alternative account of the what, how, and by whom of development, to wit, people's freedoms are the ends and the means of development.

In this chapter, I am particularly concerned with the agency aspect, people's freedom to take an active role in shaping their own social, political, and economic lives—the whom of development. From this angle, people must be seen 'as active agents of change, rather than as passive recipients of dispensed benefits' (Sen 1999a, p. xiii). This is because even a situation that guarantees high standards of living can still be judged negatively if it 'prevents [people] from speaking freely, or from participating in public debates and decisions' (p. 36), or if it treats people merely as an object whose wants, values, and desires do not deserve attention. Accordingly, development is not only a matter of

improving end states, but also of how and *who* makes this improvement (De Herdt and Bastianensen 2008).

As Sen writes: ‘The ends and means of development call for placing the perspective of freedom at the centre of the stage. The people have to be seen, in this perspective, as being actively involved—given the opportunity—in shaping their own destiny...’ (p. 53). Hence, aside from any other desirable outcome, people’s empowerment, their political freedoms, their ability to participate, to influence and shape their social world are ‘constituent components’ of development beyond their instrumental role (Sen 1999a, pp. 4, 5, 17, 36–37, 291; Alkire 2010). Agency is thus seen as a central component of development. Only people-led development processes are truly human or ‘authentic’ (Crocker 2008) and the source of common good dynamics (see Chapter 2). However, once agency is established as a normative aspect of development, the challenge is to operationalise it. Although several conceptualisations of the term and of related concepts such as empowerment or autonomy have been proposed recently (e.g., see Alkire 2005, 2007, 2009; Alsop et al. 2006, Ibrahim and Alkire 2007, Samman and Santos 2009), still, what is meant by ‘being agents of their own development’, what kind of agency best accounts for it, and how it can be measured, remains vague.

Since my intention here is to reflect conceptually on a practical conception of agency freedom for a common good approach, in the remaining of this chapter I take the capability approach and related literature on agency as a starting point (e.g., see Alkire 2005, 2007; Ballet et al. 2007, Classen 2017, 2018; Crocker 2008, D’Agata 2017, Deneulin 2004, 2008; Drydyk 2013, Ibrahim 2008, 2018; Ibrahim and Alkire 2007, Leßmann 2011; Nebel and Herrera 2017, Pelenc et al. 2015). This is because, first, this approach has had a major influence on development discourse and practice around the globe. Second, by rooting his approach in people’s freedom, it provides a strong normative anchor for establishing agency not only as a means but also as an end of development. Third, the approach and its collective extensions serve as an inspiration for the common good approach developed in this book. And fourth, as Alkire (2009) recognises, its theoretical framework underpins many of the

empirical proposals to measure agency and related concepts.<sup>1</sup> Building on such conceptual work and empirical proposals to assess agency, I will argue that agency for the common good approach must capture its collective aspect; i.e., the extent to which people are free to collectively identify their own objectives, organise, act, and bring about the changes they value.

## 2. What Is Agency?

Broadly speaking, agency refers to people's capacity to make decisions and act on behalf of their reasoned intentions within specific contexts. In Sen's words, agency has to do with the person's freedom 'to do and achieve [...] whatever goals or values he or she regards as important' (Sen 1985, p. 203), and with 'bring[ing] about the achievements [...] one attempts to produce' (Sen 1992, p. 57), 'which can extend beyond [one's] own interests and needs' (Sen 2009, p. 252). In other words, agency is about taking an active role in the world one inhabits, deciding for oneself and acting towards realising one's own values, objectives, and goals (Claassen 2018, Crocker 2008, List and Pettit 2011). In contrast, a non-agent would be someone who 'may be alienated in their behavior, coerced or forced into a situation, oppressed or simply passive' (Pelenc et al. 2015, p. 227). Thus, an agent is 'someone who acts and brings about [any] change' the person has reason to value (Sen 1999a, p. 19).

In this sense, agency refers to a broad kind of freedom available to people, including the pursuit of self-regarding goals, but also the pursuit of other-regarding goals and social commitments that the person might value (aside from her own wellbeing). That is, agency and wellbeing can interrelate in different ways as agency may lead to personal wellbeing or not. For instance, they may be positively related, as we may use our agency to achieve wellbeing goals (e.g., exercising to promote health) and, at the same time, wellbeing achievements (e.g., being healthy) strengthen our ability to be more effective agents. Likewise, according to Sen, exercising agency may be an integral part of our own wellbeing

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1 Here I concentrate on the way we currently understand agency as this informs many of the measurements proposed for related concepts as well. For revisions of different conceptualisations of agency, empowerment, and autonomy, and further literature see Alkire (2005, 2007, 2009), Cross Riddle (2018), Ibrahim and Alkire (2007), Kamruzzaman and White (2018), Samman and Santos (2009).

(see also Alkire 2005). Yet, agency and wellbeing may also pull in opposite directions; if one uses her agency to achieve non-wellbeing goals at the expense of her own wellbeing (e.g., when someone joins a protest against injustice even if it might be risky to do so; see Alkire 2009, Crocker and Robeyns 2009, Hamilton 2019, Sen 1985, 2009). Thus, there seems to be no clear-cut distinction between the notion of agency freedom in general and wellbeing freedom in particular.<sup>2</sup>

This interlinkage between the terms, however, has had the unfortunate consequence of representing and measuring agency in much narrower terms. So even if these two aspects of freedom (wellbeing and agency) may sometimes be indistinguishable in practice (Nebel and Herrera 2017), is important to clarify further how these concepts differ as they do account for distinct aspects of freedom and may have different implications for policy (Hamilton 2019). Indeed, this analytical division will prove useful to delineate what we can mean when we talk about (collective) agency freedom.

Sen has tried to clarify the distinction between the terms by emphasising that a ‘person’s “agency freedom” refers to what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important.’ Consequently, agency-goals are related to, and should be assessed in relation to, the agent’s own ‘aims, objectives, allegiances, obligations, and—in a broad sense—the person’s conception of the good’ (Sen 1985, p. 203; see also Sen 1999a, p. 19). In contrast, the exercise of agency related to self-regarding goals strictly connected to one’s own wellbeing and the freedom to achieve them is what Sen refers to as ‘wellbeing freedom’ (Sen 1985, p. 203). In turn, this notion of wellbeing freedom is what the concept of capabilities aims to capture. As stated above, this distinction between “agency freedom” and “wellbeing freedom” implies that, on the one hand, the notion of agency is a more general or broader type of freedom that encompasses the opportunity to achieve a wide variety of goals, whether connected to one’s wellbeing or not. On the other hand, wellbeing freedom is a subset of agency, accounting only for those opportunities to achieve personal wellbeing goals.

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2 Some authors argue that agency precedes and takes preeminence over the conception of capabilities. They suggest that agency might be better understood as a meta-capability (see Crocker 2008, Ballet et al. 2014, Nebel and Herrera 2017).



This distinction is advantageous in that it shows that the notion of agency emphasises that personal goals need not be related only to self-interest; what people value can go beyond purely personal gain. The concept of agency thus extends standard economic theory, which when describing or predicting people's behaviour, characterises persons as purely self-interested maximisers by assuming that a person will engage in an activity insofar as the personal marginal gains exceed the personal marginal costs of performing the action. Certainly, there are countless situations in which people's actions *are* based on improving their own personal situation and nothing else. However, we do not have to think hard to realise that our behaviour responds to much more complex drivers than what narrow economic theory suggests. Just as we do act on self-interest on many occasions, we also do many things where we put others or other goals before ourselves.

For instance, in today's climate crisis, people engage in many non-self-interested actions such as: recycling even if it costs more to do so, or constraining one's own consumption (not buying extra clothes, less driving, less travelling by air, etc.), even if these actions would have had a net positive individual effect. People also protest and put their lives in danger in order to protect the environment from exploitation or over-pollution by corporations. These actions make sense only when we hold to a more accurate portrayal of human beings who are moved—as we are—by a plurality of reasons, and not only self-interest.

Yet, helpful as this distinction between wellbeing and agency freedom may be to clarify the difference between capabilities on the one hand (freedom for the narrower goal of achieving personal wellbeing), and agency on the other (a broader conception of freedom to achieve goals and objectives that transcend one's own wellbeing), it has also created confusion. More clarity is needed in recognising that agency refers to a process and not only to valuable ends separate from one's own personal wellbeing; that agency is built into both the opportunity (consequential) aspect of freedom and the process aspect; and, finally, that agency is therefore a trait of both individuals and collectivities. I briefly touch upon these points below to clarify that when we talk about agency within the process aspect of freedom, then agency should be understood as a kind of a collective freedom.

### 3. Agency as the Process Aspect of Freedom: Beyond the Goal One Pursues

One issue with the previous distinction between agency freedom and wellbeing freedom (i.e., capability) is that it concentrates *on the goal* the person is aiming for (the wellbeing or non-wellbeing objective), whether she achieves it, and her degree of freedom in the process. Because of this narrow distinction, the concept of agency has been reduced to mean merely freedom of choice and people's success in achieving their goals.

For instance, Crocker and Robeyns (2009) explain that Sen's descriptive version of agency freedom is about 'acting on the basis of what he or she values [...] the freedom to so decide and the power to act and be effective' (p. 75). Likewise, in his reconstruction of agency, Crocker (2008) states, 'persons are agents to the extent that they are able to scrutinize critically their options, themselves decide (rather than have the decision made by someone else or some external or internal force), act to realize their purposes, and have [a positive] impact on the world' (pp. 219–220). In other words, the 'core idea' of Crocker's notion of agency is 'the degree to which one's activities are one's own [... and] autonomous personal involvement in activities' (pp. 252–253). More explicitly, Alsop et al. (2006) define agency as 'an actor's or group's ability to make purposeful choices—that is, the actor is able to envisage and purposively choose options' (p. 11). Similarly, in a more recent account, Claassen (2018) conceptualises agency as 'free and autonomous' individual actions within social practices. As a result, these conceptualisations of agency reduce the meaning of 'agency freedom' to mean simply 'freedom of (autonomous) choice', while 'agency achievement' refers to the actual attainment of the desired or valued goal.

This understanding of agency, however, is only partially accurate. It offers a very 'thin' view of what we may expect from a proper account of agency, which is introduced as 'the process aspect' of a 'broad notion of freedom'. In fact, note that when we associate agency with freedom of choice, we remain within an outcome-oriented approach to development where the outcome stands for having the real opportunity to choose *x* or *y*. From this 'choice' perspective, it not only matters that the person manages to do or be a certain thing (e.g., working out), but also that this

doing (exercise) was a real option for the person to freely decide (rather than being imposed upon her). In this example, although information about the process *is* included in the form of the agency involved in reaching a certain outcome (Sen 1999a, p. 27), the focus is nevertheless on an outcome.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we can distinguish that agency plays a role in the *opportunity* (consequential) aspect of freedom by focusing on the process involved in the choosing of any functioning (i.e., whether the person had a real opportunity to choose it or not).<sup>4</sup> It is in this sense that Sen can claim that there is a violation of agency freedom when someone forces you to do whatever you would have chosen anyway (Sen 2004 cited by Crocker and Robeyns 2009; see also Sen 1999a, p. 36; Sen 2009, pp. 229–230).

The problem with interpreting agency in such a narrow way is that it ignores the *processes* through which the freedom to choose (and its subsequent achievement) came about in the first place. A valuable contribution of the notion of agency freedom is (or should be) that it makes us go beyond a narrow concern with outcomes alone—even if outcomes are of a comprehensive kind—to focus instead on the actual process aspect of freedom. From this broader perspective, attention is directed towards whether people themselves are involved in the process of deciding which outcomes/freedoms they want, how they want to generate them, and of organising and producing these real opportunities to reach their (wellbeing or non-wellbeing) goals. These procedural actions matter even if people were ultimately unsuccessful in bringing about a particular opportunity. In other words, in this broader view of agency, the emphasis is not so much on people having a free choice, but on having a voice. It is not so much about deciding to do something or not, but about constructing these opportunities and deciding for ourselves how to do so.

Indeed, when people go out into the streets to protest against unjust economic, social, and political policies, or against an environmentally damaged world, they are not only choosing how to use their freedom.

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3 This is what Sen calls a ‘comprehensive outcome’ as opposed to culmination outcomes.

4 I am using here the term ‘opportunity aspect of freedom’ in such a way that it includes the freedom to achieve both wellbeing and non-wellbeing functionings. This will serve the purpose of distinguishing between the distinct roles of agency that I identify in this chapter.

They are also shaping, transforming, and creating new realities—what, in part, being human is all about. Animals can decide (or are free to choose) whether to eat or not, to run or not, to bark or not at a given time, but only humans can intentionally transform—for good or bad—the dynamics and structures of the world they inhabit. This is a crucial and distinct expression of agency that belongs to the *process aspect* of freedom (as opposed to its role in the *opportunity aspect*). The focus shifts towards the processes that produce social change and transform the current state of the world. In addition to seeing an individual as a free decision-maker, it sees people as agents of change.

Hence, it is important to recognise that agency is part of both:

- In the *opportunity* aspect of freedom, it focuses on whether a person has a choice or not in achieving a particular functioning.
- In the *process* aspect of freedom, it focuses on the process itself of creating, obtaining, and shaping the opportunities to live well or to achieve other valuable ends.

These two roles—one narrower, one broader—embody different understandings of agency, and neither of the two subsumes the other. In this chapter, I am concerned primarily with the latter, the process aspect of agency.

This distinction is crucial since our view of agency informs how we measure it and what the relevant unit of analysis is, i.e., the question of *who* the agent is. In the literature, for example, existing measures tend to associate agency with a person's ability to shape her own destiny in individual terms. Even if indicators are diverse, the focus is primarily on whether individuals are free to decide how to use their freedom. For instance, some emphasise the resources people possess and their internal abilities to act as decision-maker agents; indicators include material assets (income, resources, tools, and ownership of land) and non-material assets (literacy, health, self-esteem, ability to speak in public, etc.) as proxies to measure individual agency. However, these measures have been criticised because they capture prerequisites of agency rather than agency itself, becoming undistinguishable from measures of poverty (Alkire 2009). Instead, other scholars advocate for more direct measures of actual purposeful choices with respect to different goals within crucial spheres of life, such as the economic, political, relational, and familial (e.g., see Alkire 2005, 2007; Ibrahim

and Alkire 2007, Samman and Santos 2009). While these proposals offer a more direct measure of agency, the same narrow focus of agency remains. What matters is still whether individuals, especially women, the poor, or the marginalised, are able to make decisions or have control in the areas that affect their own private lives (e.g., see Malhotra et al. 2002, Ruiz-Bravo et al. 2018).

Certainly, these ideas are all important contributions to our understanding of *individual* agency, but these indicators do not tell us anything about the process aspect of freedom—the *processes* through which people together take an active role in determining their circumstances—which is inherently a social-collective process. If anything, these indicators inform us only about whether institutional arrangements and social influences end up facilitating or thwarting individuals' exercise of freedom. This information is useful only insofar as we are interested in looking at individuals' ability to convert their material and non-material assets into their autonomously chosen preferences in a static context, i.e., 'the conversion factor problem' (Otano 2015, p. 115). But such an understanding provides a very static view of social states. It offers no information whatsoever about the processes of how people came to value these freedoms, or the processes that generated one social state or another, or how people envision doing so.

In short, individual indicators of agency do not say anything about how people join efforts to actively shape their social context (Otano 2015). Such indicators do not account for the underlying (ex-ante) *processes* through which people interact, organise, share objectives, and act together towards the consecution of common goals, the production of opportunities to live well, and other social goods. These processes are inherently collective. Thus, when we shift the focus of agency from *choice* to the *process* aspect of development, the relevant actor is primarily the collective and not the individual. In other words, taking the process aspect of freedom seriously implies that agency of a collective kind must figure in our assessments of development. As I explain below, this does not mean that one needs to ignore the moral relevance of individuals' freedom to act as agents in shaping their own lives, nor the relevance

of individuals' expression of agency within groups and collectivities.<sup>5</sup> But these other ends of development should not detract us either from recognising the collective nature of agency processes. Therefore, although agency freedom encompasses both individual and collective components, in the next section I will briefly discuss why the collective aspect of agency is the true essence of a common good approach.

#### 4. Collective Agency as the Engine of a Common Good Approach

The common good approach presented in this book begins from the understanding that there are common values, goals, institutions, and practices worth caring about and striving for as a collective, in cooperation with others, and sees these as constitutive goods of our capacity to live well together. It is first and foremost a relational view of development. Hence, the emphasis of the approach is in the 'common' (see Chapter 2). From this perspective, it is the commonality of people's valuation of something (a goal, objective, etc.) that makes that something a *good*, and it is because it is pursued, produced, and enjoyed together that a certain good becomes a *common* good. The approach puts its emphasis on the how (processes) and by whom of development, which it understands as being inextricably linked. Whereas the process of common good dynamics is meant to be captured by the quality of the nexus as a whole, underlying this whole process, the engine that fuels and sets the common good machinery into motion, are people themselves and their shared actions (see Chapter 1).

Since previous chapters of this book have already discussed and justified the profound social and collective nature of the approach, in this section I only briefly highlight two contributions that this approach

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5 Several studies address the 'individualistic' tendency in the capability approach and aim at expanding its scope to account for the institutional and collective aspects directly (e.g., see D'Agata 2017, Ballet et al. 2007, Deneulin 2008, 2011; Deneulin et al. 2006, Evans 2002, Giraud et al. 2008, Ibrahim 2006, Pelenc et al. 2015, Raushmayer et al. 2018, Stewart 2005, 2013; Stewart and Deneulin 2002; for responses to critiques, see Alkire 2008, Davis 2015, Sen 2002, Volkert 2013). Below, I rely on some ideas within this debate to illustrate my point (for general reviews, see Ibrahim 2018, 2019; HDCA 2013; for brief reviews, see Garza-Vázquez and Deneulin 2019, Robeyns 2005, 2017).

can make to the theory and practice of development. Both points show why agency for a common good approach is collective rather than individual.

First, a common good approach goes beyond individual achievements by directing our attention to the socio-structural aspect of development that enables, facilitates, and co-constructs people's freedom to live well. In this regard, several scholars have long advocated to recognise and account for the pervasive influence of social and historical institutions on people's reasoning, their values, objectives, and on the way they exercise their agency (Claassen 2018, Deneulin 2008, 2011; Evans 2002, Gore 1997, Stewart 2005, 2013; Stewart and Deneulin 2002). They have argued that, although it is individuals' actions and interactions that reinforce or undermine certain institutions and social practices, this process occurs within a specific social and historical structure that provides meaning to their actions (Deneulin 2008, Raushmayer et al. 2018, Sewell 1992). As such, from this view, people's agency is inherently social in the sense that individuals are always situated within a socio-cultural context (Chapter 1).

However, the social embeddedness of agency is not the only place where the collective aspect of agency lies in the common good approach. Rather than taking the social nature of individual agency as its primary object of study, the common approach focuses directly on the (collective) processes through which people produce and maintain the socio-institutional reality as such. Indeed, the nexus of the common good can be broadly understood as the interconnected web of formal and informal institutions in which individuals are situated that give life to our coexistence. Since this institutional arrangement is the result of shared social practices and the joint efforts of people acting together, coordinating and cooperating with each other, agency for the common good can only be a collective agency.

Second, it understands this process-focused approach to development as a dynamic process that is always in the making. This dynamic process is the result of people acting together organised around a set of shared values and practices. This view is in line with several studies that recognise the potential opportunity that groups, or collectives, provide for successfully acting together in the consecution of shared objectives (e.g., see Giraud et al. 2013, Giraud and Renouard

2009, Ibrahim 2006, 2017; Ostrom 1990, Stewart 2005). These scholars highlight the fact that social progress—transforming unjust structures, opening up new spaces for action, attaining new rights and freedoms, and creating an enabling social environment in which to live well—is the result of people pooling their resources and acting together as agents of their own development. From this perspective, it is through self-help groups, neighbourhood assemblies, social movements, co-operatives, civil society, or other specific groups that people strengthen their voices and attain new freedoms and other valuable goals (see Ibrahim 2006, 2017; Ibrahim and Alkire 2007, Murphy 2014; see Gammage et al. 2016 for more references). As Raushmayer et al. (2018, p. 359) put it, it is by cooperating with others through collective action that ‘a group creates a collective potential beyond any individual’s capability and may provide a vehicle for increased agency’ (see also Evans 2002, Ibrahim 2008, 2018; Volkert 2013).

Similarly, a practical notion of the common good understands development as a dynamic, relational process in which people’s actions and their shared practices are protagonists. From this perspective, human development is something we do together. Accordingly, these two features (the focusing on the shared social practices underlying the dynamics of the social world) illustrate that, from a common good perspective, it is agency of a collective kind which is at the root of any common good dynamics. As such, to assess and promote ‘authentic’ development—to use Crocker’s term—in which people are agents of their own development, our measures must account for the shared freedom of people to act together as a collectivity. In the next and final section, I shall offer some thoughts about what measuring collective agency might imply. But before going in that direction, first it is important to address some of the concerns raised in the literature regarding the adoption of a collective view of freedom.

Broadly speaking, for a collective notion of agency, there are two potential challenges that deserve attention (see Ibrahim 2019 for a summary of this debate). On the one hand, some worry about the possible tension between collective and individual freedoms, and instead advocate for an ‘ethical individualist’ view, i.e., holding ‘individuals and only individuals [as] the units of moral concern’ (Robeyns 2005, p. 107). As many have pointed out, placing the collective



as the unit of concern may overlook existing or potential heterogeneities, inequalities, oppression, and power relations *within* the group (e.g., see Alkire 2008, Robeyns 2005, Sen 2002), and *towards* the members of other groups (Kosko 2019; see also Cleaver 1999, Godfrey-Wood and Mamani-Vargas 2017 cited in Ibrahim 2018). On the other hand, pointing out the possibility of collective failures, others wonder whether group action and inclusive collective agency is possible at all, especially in unequal contexts. For instance, empirical work on participatory development has found that some members of the community (usually the poor, women, or members of disadvantaged groups) are often less able to participate and form groups; that not all members participate or use their voices equally; and that development processes and benefits can be skewed towards the interest of the elite (Boni et al. 2018, Mansuri and Rao 2013, Mohan 2014).

There is no doubt that these are all extremely relevant concerns that we should all care about. But, for the purposes of this chapter, one should note, first, that here I am concentrating on process freedoms only; and advocating for acknowledging its collective feature does not imply ignoring individual (process and opportunity) freedoms. As recognised above, agency is relevant for both the individual (being able to choose how to use one's freedom) and the collective (freedom to collectively shape the social world), and both are part of a true human development. While there are excellent reasons to care about the extent to which individuals are able to control their circumstances or are freely and autonomously 'participating in and within' social practices (Claassen 2018), analysing the way in which people's shared values and collective practices are able to generate such possibility or not also deserves normative attention. Depending on the particular development problem at hand, one of these expressions of agency may take a more prominent role. Despite their potential flaws and difficulties, collectivities may still be the best way for the deprived and the marginalised to change their situation and attain individual freedoms that they value (Ibrahim 2019, Murphy 2014, Stewart 2005).

Second, more importantly, a practical notion of collective agency freedom must be concerned with what the community is actually able to do to act together, it must inform us about the processes through which people interact, organise, and pursue their objectives. That is, the notion

of collective agency freedom includes but is not exhausted by the way in which the community participates in specific development projects. And aside from hermits or those completely excluded from social life, people of different socioeconomic backgrounds coordinate to act with others around a common goal, i.e., they exercise collective agency even if at varying degrees of opportunity. In short, development processes *are* collective processes. People's actions and their acting together in a shared institutional framework are the drivers or impediments of development. In this sense, Beretta and Nebel (2020) write:

Understanding (and measuring) development is (or ought to be) an intrinsically dynamic endeavor. It mirrors the process of generating development, where actual people, in the here and now of history, mysteriously drive history. In other words, development is a practical, intrinsically dynamic process where people are protagonist. (p. 372)

Hence, as I argued above, in so far as the process aspect of freedom is intrinsic to development, then our normative assessments must include information about the freedom to act collectively. This does not mean that people's shared practices, collectivities, or collective agency for that matter, always produce positive social dynamics. But it does ask us to recognise that social ailments such as the subjugation of women, climate change, poverty, inequality, or corruption, among other issues, can only change through the coordination of multiple people acting together, joining efforts with others, constructing, and adapting shared objectives, values, actions, and narratives about the (social) good they wish to establish. Notwithstanding the possibility of extraordinary individual acts, common goods are first and foremost the product of solidarity and cooperation among people (although not without conflict) (see also Biggeri et al. 2018). It is in this sense that collective agency freedom is the precondition for a dynamic notion of the common good approach. Agency for the common good is thus collective agency.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, advocating for a collective view of agency does not imply ignoring the many issues involved in making collectivities a unit of

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6 The reader should also note that collective agency is only one of the normative aspects of development processes. The common good matrix includes four other normative components aside from collective agency, namely, governance, justice, stability, and humanity. The quality of the development process with the nexus of the common good as proxy is determined by the interrelation and coherence of these five drivers (see Chapter 2).

normative analysis, or the difficulties of generating free and inclusive collective action. Rather, it highlights that our discussions and measures need to go beyond the narrow view of agency in the form of individual choice to also account for the more significant and broader understanding of agency which sees people as doers and makers of the common world we inhabit, and of our shared role in generating (or not) individual and social improvements.<sup>7</sup> In fact, this is in line with Sen's own writings when he talks about 'the *public* not merely as "the patient" whose wellbeing commands attention, but also as "the agent" whose actions can *transform* society' (Drèze and Sen 1989, p. 279 cited by Alkire 2006; emphasis in original, italics are mine). Individual expressions of agency do not exhaust people's exercise of agency freedom; agency matters concern both individual and collective freedoms (Alkire 2010, Biggeri et al. 2018, Crocker 2008, Crocker and Robeyns 2009, Deneulin 2008, 2014; Murphy 2014).

A practical notion of the common good, then, must aim at capturing empirically the political reality through which people exercise collective agency: the degree of shared freedom that people actually enjoy to together be the engine of opportunities to live well, and to generate and attain objectives valuable to them and to others.

## 5. Measuring Collective Agency for the Common Good

So far, I have argued that from a common good perspective, we need to understand agency in its transformative social sense, and that this role is a collective rather than an individual enterprise. However, in drawing this conclusion I have also used the term rather loosely. In this section I offer, first, some thoughts on the conceptualisation of collective agency to then, second, identify *potential* dimensions and indicators to operationalise it.

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7 Of course, this understanding of agency as the process aspect of freedom is not foreign to the capability literature. However, Sen's language on agency is vague, and when he refers to it, he does it without explicitly distinguishing the distinct roles that agency plays within his whole framework. Overall, the point that I want to make is the following: most of the literature has concentrated on 'the choice aspect' of agency—especially the literature on measurement—and this limits our view of development. Instead, in this chapter I put the emphasis on the broader—grander—role of agency, the process aspect.

One of the first difficulties of moving towards measurement is that the notion of collective agency has been little theorised in the development literature.<sup>8</sup> Although many scholars recognise the need to go beyond individual indicators of agency to account for its collective aspect (e.g., Ibrahim and Alkire 2007, Samman and Santos 2009), they do not undertake such a task. The reality is that the vast majority of references to any sort of collective agency are made in a rather general way and mainly to defend the existence and the significance of people's collective capacities to improve their (and others') lives for the better.

This is the case, for example, of scholars who try to integrate groups and collectivities into the capability approach through the concept of 'collective capabilities.' They argue that collective capabilities account for those freedoms that are unattainable by an individual acting alone and which, once generated, have irreducibly social benefits in that they are open to the collectivity as a whole and not only to individuals (e.g., Evans 2002, Ibrahim 2006, 2008; Murphy 2014). However, this concept of collective capabilities conflates in its definition both the collective nature of the process and whatever achievement results from it, which may be problematic (e.g., see Sen 2002, HDCA 2013). In contrast, here I am interested in the agency aspect only, i.e., the freedom of the process, and not so much in what comes out of it (Drydyk 2013); not because the content of the goal is unimportant, but for analytical and practical reasons (Raushmayer et al. 2018).<sup>9</sup>

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8 Some efforts within the literature on participatory development point in this direction when they direct our attention to the quality of the *process* through which local people participate and engage in *group* decision-making, which in turn is taken as a proxy of collective agency or empowerment or both (e.g., Drydyk 2005, Crocker 2008; Kosko 2013; see also Kamruzzaman and White 2018 for a summary of similar approaches). However, these discussions on the *forms* of participation tend to focus on how specific development projects ought to interact with or engage with the local population (see also Mansuri and Rao 2013). Hence, participation in this sense accounts only for a 'limited expression of agency' (Alkire 2006, p. 53). Although insights from this literature will be relevant, in the remainder of this chapter, the aim is to reflect on the conceptualisation of agency in a broader, more general way for the purpose of assessing the actual degree of collective agency embedded in the collective dynamics of a given population.

9 Note that the evaluation of end states is also a matter of collective choice. Thus, rather than imposing the notion of collective capability, we should leave space for collective agents to determine for themselves how the generated outcomes should be judged, either from the perspective of wellbeing freedom or from the point of view of other social concerns.

The question of interest is: How can we conceptualise collective agency and what should we focus on when assessing the degree of collective agency freedom in a population? In answering this question, I take existing analyses of the notion of (individual and collective) agency as starting point. In principle, there is no reason to think that the notion of agency would be radically different when the actor is an individual or a group. After all, when defining agency, it is sometimes implied that such a definition also applies for a group, even if the explanation of what agency entails revolves around the *individual* (e.g., Crocker 2008, Crocker and Robeyns 2009). But as we will see, when thought of in collective terms, the content of agency (what should one focus on) takes a very different form.

Starting, for example, with the basic trait of agency—seeing people as active subjects towards the consecution of valued goals—from a collective angle, the focus is no longer on *individuals* exercising their own agency, but on collective action; on how people act together to achieve a certain goal as a group or collectivity (Ibrahim 2006, Stewart and Deneulin 2002). Thus, we can start with Ibrahim's (2008) definition which suggests understanding collective agency '*as an exercise of human freedoms whereby a group /or a collectivity seeks to pursue goals collectively that go beyond their individual well-being concerns*' (p. 6; emphasis in original). The usefulness of this definition is that it already captures the fact that people can join forces with others to bring about a variety of objectives that 'can only occur via collective action of one sort or another' (Stewart and Deneulin 2002, p. 69) (e.g., rendering the government accountable, protecting their rights, providing a service, or challenging market forces and corporate power). But, we also need to say something about how such collective action happens.

What matters when assessing collective agency is not only the opportunity of 'joining and participating in a group' to pursue goals (Ibrahim 2006, p. 405). Though an important individual freedom in itself, it does not shed light on the actual possibility and the mechanisms of *acting together* 'in concert with others to achieve goals' (Ballet et al. 2007, p. 199). Simply finding and joining others with similar objectives does not automatically render a group of people able to act collectively in an effective and beneficial way (Mansuri and Rao 2013). The group also needs to have the capacity to *organise themselves*, which involves,

among other things, being able to devise and agree on a common strategy, coordinate, and cooperate with others (Ostrom 1990, Ostrom et al. 1999; Ibrahim 2006, 2008; see also Chapter 2). That is, as I briefly expand below, the possibility of people coming together *to organise themselves* and *act together* to pursue a common objective are important elements of a practical notion of collective agency. As such, one could argue that the degree of collective agency is greater the more a given population is able to organise itself to act together.

However, a successful organisation to achieve goals does not *fully* capture the notion of collective agency in the sense discussed above. Seeing people as social change actors and as masters of their own common development means that our conceptualisation of collective agency must be broader. Agency is not only about acting in the world but about acting autonomously, i.e., people themselves deciding what is of value to them (Claassen 2018, Crocker and Robeyns 2009, Drydyk 2013, Ibrahim 2017). In the context of collective agency this requirement can be associated with group self-determination and the process through which people are able, and empowered, to participate in setting their own development goals. Despite some differences, scholars within this area agree that simply executing or playing an instrumental role in bringing about a pre-chosen objective within pre-existing institutional settings entails a limited expression of agency. In contrast, the greater the control of local people to determine their own needs, priorities, objectives, and rules, the greater the degree of collective agency they enjoy (Crocker 2008, Drydyk 2005, Kamruzzaman and White 2018, Kosko 2013, Mohan 2014, Murphy 2014).

By putting the emphasis on the prosecution of goals, Ibrahim's definition, as well as Ostrom's empirical studies, concentrate only on a subsection of what collective agency entails, namely on people's coordination capacity to achieve a given objective. But there is no reference to the selection of the objective around which people organise, nor about whether that objective is commonly held as valuable by that group of people. Therefore, our conceptualisation of collective agency must go beyond to also capture people's freedom to together identify, form, and agree on a variety of *collective* goals and objectives that they seek to pursue. Since different people care about different things, a community of people needs to be able to decide what they

value together and what they want to achieve together, as a community (Ibrahim 2017). For example, people could collectively decide to transfer control of a natural resource they used to manage in common to a private or centralised entity to concentrate instead on other shared objectives, such as developing other sectors of their community. That is, aside from determining how to organise themselves around a common concern, people must also collectively decide which objectives they value together as commons and which they do not.

We can then define collective agency as ‘the capacity of the group to define common goals and the freedom to act to reach the chosen goals’ (Pelenc et al. 2015, p. 229). This definition is more complete in the sense that it recognises that prior to people’s organisation in the form of collective action, they must be able to form shared objectives and a shared vision of what they wish to change together and how. This does not mean that people will always reach a unanimous agreement, or that life in the community should see them become a group homogenous in their values, beliefs, and objectives. On the contrary, it means that it is possible for people to get together, discuss ideas and share their views with others in order to influence their social reality (Drydyk 2005, UNDP 2002). As Sen argues, collective deliberation and democratic practice can have a ‘constructive role’ by facilitating the reformulation of people’s values, preferences, and priorities (Sen 1999a, 1999b). Yet, in so far as we are interested in collective agency, it is not enough to account for the person’s civil and political freedoms (e.g., electoral rights, freedom of expression) and her ability to exercise them (Drèze and Sen 2002, p. 10). The focus should be on the group’s capacity and their mechanisms to engage in collective deliberation and collective thinking to identify and form new shared objectives, envision new realities, and reach collective decisions (Boni et al. 2018, Ibrahim 2017, Murphy 2014). Hence, assessments of collective agency must go beyond the organisational capacities of the group and include information on what we may call people’s opportunity to *imagine things together* to identify and devise *collective* goals.<sup>10</sup>

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10 This does not mean, however, ignoring the many flaws and hindrances that this collective process may entail. For instance, to name a few, unequal power relations (Stewart 2005), social and economic inequalities (Drèze and Sen 2002), different levels of participation and voice (Boni et al. 2018), as well as different degrees of personal agreement, commitment, and involvement with the group (Hainz et al.

Bringing the three elements together means that a group of people acting as a collective agent must: validate a particular appraisal of the world, envision ways to modify it, organise together, and act to bring these changes about. In other words, a process of collective agency entails that the subject of action is a collectivity of people with 'joint intentions,' whose organising and subsequent activity require an element of coordination between the members and whose identity 'can survive changes of membership' (List and Pettit 2011, p. 31).

To illustrate how a collective assessment of agency differs from an individualist one, let's consider, on the one hand, the (collective) process of winning women's right to vote, and on the other hand, the multiple acts of (individual) agency taking place when women exercise their vote in national elections. Whereas both settings may involve a group of people, the former (acquiring rights to vote) differs from the notion of individual agency in a number of ways. First, the agent who performs the action is a group, rather than an individual. Second, there is a joint intention. Women who cast their vote individually do not necessarily have a common intention, as they might be voting for different social projects. In contrast, groups of women such as the suffragists who fought for the right to vote had a clear goal that members shared. Third, individual agency and collective agency also differ in whether the identity of a group of people depends on its members or not. In the example of individual women voting, the identity of a group of women changes as women enter and exit the polling place, whereas in the second case, the identity of the group remains even if membership changes.

Succinctly put, only the first scenario involved a group of people that *imagined* together and formed a joint intention, that *organised* their members and *acted together* to bring about change. If this reading seems acceptable, then we can interpret collective agency as an exercise of freedom composed of different practices of collective action: imagining things together (i.e., forming and identifying commons), organising around these shared objectives (i.e., developing rules and mechanisms to coordinate their actions), and achieving things together

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2016, Rauschmayer et al. 2018), among others. Rather, than ignoring these issues, bringing this element to our conceptualisation implies that a useful measure of agency must be able to capture these deficiencies and make them visible.



(i.e., cooperating to bring about their objectives). An advantage of this interpretation is that, by disaggregating it into three different forms of collective action, we are in a better position to inform the development of indicators for each stage and to observe how a certain group of people fares in these distinct components of collective agency.

However, before briefly expanding in each of these dimensions, there is one more element to include in the conceptualisation of collective agency, namely, the socio-institutional context in which collective agency takes place—which may or may not facilitate these forms of collective abilities. This assertion follows on from a point discussed in the previous section, namely the profound influence of social structures on people's values, aspirations, and thus in the way they exercise their agency. But it also follows on from the recognition that the freedom we enjoy to exercise agency is both 'enabled and constrained' by the institutional framework (Claassen 2018, p. 58; Sen 1999a). In Crocker and Robeyns's (2009) words, '[...] social arrangements can also extend the reach of agency achievements and agency freedom.' In different social contexts, '[...] people have more or less freedom to decide, act, and make a difference in the world [...]' (p. 64; see also Biggeri et al. 2018, Cleaver 2007, Ibrahim 2006, 2008; Ibrahim and Alkire 2007, Pelenc et al. 2015).

Institutional arrangements structure people's actions and interactions through both formal and informal rules, which can include legal norms, institutionalised patterns of behaviour, social norms, cultural values (Claassen 2018). As such, this element works like an overarching component that cuts across collective action in all three of its forms. For instance, in addition to what people actually do to act collectively, the extent to which people are able to exercise this freedom depends on laws regarding freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, on whether people actually value this opportunity, on a community's level of social capital, on whether there are (non)governmental institutions that can provide them with support of one kind or another, and structural inequalities, among others. A measurement of collective agency freedom must also aim at capturing the extent to which the *structural and social processes* in a given population potentialise the shared freedom that people have at their disposal to collectively determine their own lives.

Therefore, flowing from the discussion presented so far, I propose the following conceptualisation to operationalise the concept of collective agency freedom for the common good: *the real opportunity of a group of people to exercise the shared freedom to define goals together, and to organise and act as a collectivity to reach such common goals (wellbeing or non-wellbeing related) in accordance with their common values and objectives.*

For practical purposes, this notion of collective agency freedom for the common good would call for empirical measures on the institutional background and the social dynamics within a community in the three dimensions identified above: the freedom to imagine things together, the freedom to organise around shared goals, and the freedom to achieve things together.<sup>11</sup> The actual selection and justification of indicators for each of these dimensions would involve different methodological decisions which are out of the scope of this conceptual chapter (see Chapter 3; see also Alkire 2009, Ibrahim and Alkire 2007). However, with the intention to motivate this discussion, here I briefly expand on what each of these dimensions could aspire to capture in practice and what sort of information might be included to do so.<sup>12</sup>

1. **People's freedom to imagine things together.** If collective agency is the source of a common good dynamic, then the real opportunity to imagine things together is the pre-condition of the freedom to act together. This dimension should aim to assess the ability of people 'to form collective intentions' (Davis 2015) or 'communal vision' (Ibrahim 2017). It is concerned with the extent to which people have the opportunity to talk to each other, listen to each other, reflect with each other, justify to each other their interests and, more importantly, co-construct common values, objectives, and ideas in public spaces. It serves also as a process of 'conscientisation' of their shared reality (Ibrahim 2017). As Pelenc et al. (2015) point out 'social

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11 To a certain extent, this conceptualisation of collective agency freedom offers a collective understanding of Crocker's (2008) reconstruction of agency. He states, 'persons are agents to the extent that they are able to scrutinize critically their options, themselves decide (rather than have the decision made by someone else or some external or internal force), act to realize their purposes, and have [a positive] impact on the world' (pp. 219–220).

12 See Chapter 3 for the proposed indicators of collective agency freedom for the common good matrix presented in this book.

interactions, such as group discussions, community meetings, participatory workshops or informal conversations provide the opportunity for people to share their representation of the “common good” and wellbeing with others’ (p. 228; emphasis in original). It accounts for the ‘inventiveness and creativity’ of associative life (Chapter 2). In practice, this dimension should assess to what extent people have a *real opportunity to participate* in the social and political life of the community through groups and organised collectivities. These groups can vary in their degree of formality and may include voluntary associations, neighbourhood meetings, NGOs and civil organisations, churches, schools, unions, village councils, etc. It should capture whether people in the community gather, whether they do it frequently, the extent to which these forms of organisation extend to the whole community, and the extent to which this freedom is valued in the community.

2. **People’s freedom to organise around shared goals.** Aside from providing a space for the formulation of ‘collective or joint intentions,’ groups and collectivities provide the space to develop collective strategies ‘and instruments for pursuing them, even in the face of powerful opposition’ (Evans 2002, p. 56). Since it is not enough to want things together, this dimension aims at capturing the effectiveness of organising as a collectivity around a common desire, to procure a shared goal. This may involve coordinating the roles of group members (List and Pettit 2011), combining people’s material and human resources (Pelenc et al. 2015), and establishing rules, sanctions, and mechanisms to solve conflicts (Ostrom 1990). As Bandura (2000) states, ‘a group’s attainments are the product not only of shared knowledge and skills of its different members, but also of the interactive, coordinative, and synergistic dynamics of their transactions’; this is a ‘group level property’ (pp. 75–76). In practice, this dimension should assess *the capacity and effectiveness of people to organise themselves*. An appraisal could include indicators of social capital, such as social and community networks, degree of solidarity, and norms of cooperation, reciprocity, and trust (Giraud and Renouard

2009, Ibrahim 2008, Pelenc et al. 2015, Rosignoli 2018). The group capacity to build consensus and synergies with other groups as well as with existing institutions in order to solve a common problem or reach a common goal (Ibrahim 2017).

3. **People's freedom to achieve things together.** Perhaps there is no better proof of the existence of collective agency than the actual dynamism of the community and its actual success in producing commons and social goods. This dimension makes reference to the actual actions taken by the group and its actual power to achieve their objectives. This is in fact what most scholars have in mind when they refer to the effectiveness of collective agency to promote people's freedoms or other social goods. We can relate this aspect to the notions of 'control' and 'effective power' mentioned by Alkire (2009) but from a collective perspective. *Control* would 'refer [...] to the [...] ability to make choices and to control procedures directly (whether or not [the group] is successful in achieving the desired goal).' *Effective power* 'is the [...] group's "power to achieve chosen results"' (Alkire 2009, p. 458; emphasis in original). According to Crocker (2008), this exercise of freedom by the people is a crucial aspect of the notion of collective agency, seeing them as the true masters and shapers of their common life. In practice, this dimension should measure *the capacity of the group to achieve its goals and shape their destiny*.

In short, these dimensions attempt to capture the real opportunity of a group of people to freely act together as agents of social change.<sup>13</sup> Such action refers to the processes through which people organise themselves to exercise their freedom in the three dimensions within an agency-enabling environment—hence the emphasis on freedoms in each dimension. By accounting for this freedom to act collectively, a people-centred approach to development can not only be a means to more efficient, sustainable results, but it can also promote a kind of development that better reflects our humanity and the process through which our societies, and our lives within them, develop (even if the

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13 Even though here I present them as distinct components for analytical reasons, in practice, they interrelate and influence each other.

degree to which this freedom is valued and the forms it takes may vary greatly from one place to another).

Moreover, this collective development process represents not only an intrinsic aspect of development but also a common good in itself. That is because the process itself creates something of value: social dynamics that go beyond individual wellbeing and beyond the achievements of individual agency. Through collective action people establish rules in accordance with their social, cultural, and political environment to generate social benefits that improve their lives. In doing so, they also end up promoting a culture of political practice, a way of doing in the community, a way of conquering new spaces. These social practices develop through a constant process of social learning that goes beyond individuals; these processes originate within and gradually shape a culture that existed before and will remain even when those individuals of today are no longer there. Ultimately, the social institutions, the political culture, and people's ways of doing belong to the community as a whole and to its history; these things become an integrated part of the community and not the property of single individuals—even if institutions, culture, and ways of doing can later be modified by another group of people. In other words, collective agency represents both the embodiment of a common good and the source of causation of common goods.

## Conclusion

Following the conceptual framework of this book and Sen's conceptual framework of development as freedom, I attempted to develop three points in this chapter. First, I argued that agency embodies the process aspect of freedom, which is in turn a central aspect of a process of development that is truly human. I also identified that agency can be interpreted either as 'an expansion of individual choice' or as 'the processes through which social change is generated,' and the primacy of the former in the literature comes at the expense of the latter. I showed that this bias in the literature has led to an over-individualisation of our understanding of agency, and consequently, to the indicators developed to measure agency. Instead, second, I identified that a notion of agency understood as the process aspect of freedom entails collective aspects. I

argued that this collective interpretation of agency was the true engine of a common good approach that sees development as a dynamic process. Third, I developed a general notion of collective agency freedom in order to shed light on what it would entail to measure this collective aspect of the term.

Broadly speaking, I defined collective agency as the real freedom of a given population to self-organise in order to form goals, coordinate, and act together as a collectivity to achieve common goals. This definition tries to clarify that, while the opportunities of joining, forming, and belonging to groups or the exercise of political rights by a person are individual expressions of agency, the way in which these groups form, develop common objectives, organise, and achieve goals is a matter of collective agency. I argued that to properly understand and orient development dynamics, we must *also* aim to capture empirically a notion of collective agency, which accounts for the institutional framework and the processes through which people interact to produce their joint intentions.

While the conception offered in this chapter remains at an exploratory level, and several questions may remain open for a more complete understanding of collective agency in future work, I urge the reader to recognise that, by hyper-individualising our understanding of agency, we are missing an important aspect of a notion of development that is concerned with people living well *together* in society. Sen has long insisted that an 'adequate understanding of development' (p. 37) 'cannot be confined only to [its] outcomes', a freedom-based approach must also see freedom processes 'as constitutive parts of the ends of development in themselves' (p. 291; quotes are from Sen 1999a). To do so, I have argued, the theory and practice of development must leave conceptual and practical space for a notion of agency as a process freedom understood as something that we do together with others. Unless we do this, our ideas of development cannot be the true embodiment of a human-centred approach.

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