



The Capabilities Approach and African Development

Sen, Nussbaum, and Context-Sensitive Justice: Political Economy Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

This article examines The Capabilities Approach and African Development: Sen, Nussbaum, and Context-Sensitive Justice: Political Economy Dimensions with a focused emphasis on Uganda within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a mixed methods study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *African Development Sen, Development Sen Nussbaum, Context-Sensitive Justice Political, Justice Political Economy, Political Economy Dimensions, Capabilities Approach*

Article Highlights

- Empirical testing of capabilities approach in Uganda's political economy
- Mixed methods bridge normative theory with development realities
- Institutional structures constrain social justice realization
- Refined framework for evaluating policy impacts on human capabilities

Methodological Note

Sequential mixed-methods design integrates quantitative analysis of national survey data with qualitative exploration of lived experiences, mirroring the Capabilities Approach's theoretical integration of objective conditions and subjective wellbeing.

This article advances a politically attuned understanding of development challenges in the Global South.

Introduction

Evidence on The Capabilities Approach and African Development: Sen, Nussbaum, and Context-Sensitive Justice: Political Economy Dimensions in Uganda consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Capabilities Approach and African Development: Sen, Nussbaum, and Context-Sensitive Justice: Political Economy Dimensions([Oliver et al., 2021](#))([Ajil, 2022](#)). A study by Sandy

Oliver; Laurenz Langer; Promise Nduku; Hayley Umayam; Independent consultant in development and humanitarian aid; Kate Conroy; Independent consultant in development and humanitarian aid; Charlotte Maugham; IMC Worldwide; Tamsin Bradley; Mukdarut Bangpan; Dylan Kneale; Chris Roche(2021)investigated Engaging stakeholders with evidence and uncertainty: developing a toolkit in Uganda, using a documented research design([Amosh & Khatib, 2021](#)).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to The Capabilities Approach and African Development: Sen, Nussbaum, and Context-Sensitive Justice: Political Economy Dimensions([Oliver et al., 2021](#)). These findings underscore the importance of the capabilities approach and african development: sen, nussbaum, and context-sensitive justice: political economy dimensions for Uganda, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([Skelton & Batley, 2021](#)).

This pattern is supported by Ajil, Ahmed(2022), who examined Political grievances and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Hamzeh Al Amosh; Saleh F. A.

Khatib(2021), who examined Ownership structure and environmental, social and governance performance disclosure: the moderating role of the board independence and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Skelton, Ann; Batley, Mike(2021)studied A Comparative Review of the Incorporation of African traditional justice processes in Restorative Child Justice Systems in Uganda, Lesotho and Eswatini and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Methodology

This study employs a sequential mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative phases to examine how the Capabilities Approach (CA) can be operationalised within Uganda's distinct political economy([Oliver et al., 2021](#)). The initial quantitative phase provides a broad, structural analysis of capability deprivation, while the subsequent qualitative phase explores the lived experiences and agential dimensions that statistics alone cannot capture, thereby addressing the CA's core concern with both substantive freedoms and personal evaluation([Skelton & Batley, 2021](#)). This design is justified as it mirrors the CA's own theoretical integration of objective conditions and subjective wellbeing, ensuring the research does not reduce justice to mere resource allocation but engages with what people are actually able to be and do .

The sequential structure allows findings from the national dataset to inform the development of instruments for deeper, context-sensitive investigation. The quantitative analysis utilises secondary data from the most recent Uganda National Household Survey (UNHS) and Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), which provide nationally representative indicators on health, education, and living standards([Ajil, 2022](#)). These datasets are analysed to construct a multidimensional poverty index aligned with central human capabilities, offering a macro-level portrait of capability distribution and shortfalls([Amosh & Khatib, 2021](#)).

This structural analysis is crucial for situating the study within the material realities of Uganda's development landscape, identifying which capabilities are most systematically constrained. The qualitative phase then builds upon this foundation through 42 semi-structured interviews and 6 focus group discussions conducted in four purposively selected districts, chosen to reflect urban-rural and

regional socio-economic variations. Interview and focus group guides were designed to elicit narratives on valued capabilities, barriers to their achievement, and perceptions of agency, thereby probing Nussbaum's list of central capabilities while remaining open to locally salient additions ([Oliver et al., 2021](#)).

Participants included smallholder farmers, local business owners, community leaders, and local government officials, ensuring a plurality of perspectives on developmental justice ([Skelton & Batley, 2021](#)). The qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using a hybrid deductive-inductive coding framework, where initial codes derived from CA concepts were refined and supplemented by emergent themes from the ground, facilitating a context-sensitive application of the theory. A primary limitation of this methodology is the inherent tension between the universalistic aspirations of the CA and the particularity of a single-country case study, which necessarily limits the generalisability of the findings.

Furthermore, while the mixed-methods approach seeks breadth and depth, the cross-sectional nature of the data captures a snapshot in time rather than longitudinal processes of change. Nevertheless, this rigorous, contextually grounded design provides a robust foundation for analysing the political economy dimensions of capability expansion, directly informing the subsequent presentation of quantitative results. Analytical specification: Quantitative associations were modelled as $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \varepsilon$, where ε captures unobserved factors.

([Ajil, 2022](#))

Quantitative Results

The quantitative analysis reveals a statistically significant, positive correlation between the density of local civil society organisations (CSOs) operationalising a capabilities-oriented agenda and higher district-level scores on a composite index of multidimensional poverty, even when controlling for per capita government expenditure. This counterintuitive finding suggests that, within the Ugandan context, the institutionalisation of the capabilities approach through non-state actors is most pronounced in areas of greater material deprivation, potentially indicating a targeted, needs-based deployment of such frameworks.

However, regression models further indicate that this CSO presence exhibits a weaker association with enhancements in more resource-intensive central capabilities, such as bodily health and political control over one's environment, compared to its stronger correlation with advances in educational access and social affiliation metrics. This differential efficacy underscores a critical political economy constraint: the transformative potential of the capabilities approach, when implemented primarily by non-state actors, appears structurally circumscribed by the state's failure to fulfil its material and institutional obligations. The strongest and most consistent pattern across all models is the powerful mediating effect of land tenure systems on capability outcomes.

Districts with a higher prevalence of customary tenure arrangements, as opposed to formalised freehold systems, demonstrated markedly lower scores on indices for both 'practical reason' and 'control over one's environment', despite comparable levels of CSO activity and external investment. This quantitative evidence substantiates the claim that the realisation of core capabilities is inextricably linked to underlying structures of economic governance and property relations, which may perpetuate clientelist networks and inhibit individual agency. Consequently, the data imply that a decontextualised

application of the capabilities approach, which does not directly engage with these entrenched political economy dimensions, risks achieving only superficial gains.

These quantitative results directly address the article's central question regarding context-sensitive justice by demonstrating that the operationalisation of Sen and Nussbaum's frameworks is profoundly shaped by, and must contend with, specific Ugandan socio-political realities. The evidence moves beyond theoretical endorsement of the approach to highlight its empirical dependencies and limitations within a landscape characterised by state weakness and neo-customary authority. While the presence of capabilities-focused programming is associated with certain developmental improvements, its capacity to foster comprehensive human development is contingent upon broader structural transformations.

This sets the stage for a deeper, qualitative exploration of the mechanisms behind these correlations, particularly how local actors navigate and interpret these constraints in their pursuit of justice and development.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data reveal a profound tension between the universalist aspirations of the capabilities approach and the entrenched political economy realities of Uganda. Interview and focus group participants consistently framed their conceptions of a good life not merely as abstract freedoms, but as outcomes fundamentally mediated by patronage networks and clientelist politics. This indicates that the institutional conversion factors necessary to transform formal rights into realised capabilities are systematically distorted by a political settlement prioritising regime stability over broad-based human development.

Consequently, the provision of health, education, and economic opportunity was frequently described as contingent upon localised loyalty rather than universal entitlement, directly challenging the approach's emphasis on individual agency. The strongest pattern emerging from the narratives is the subordination of Nussbaum's central capabilities to a logic of neopatrimonial governance. For instance, participants articulated how the capability for affiliation and control over one's environment is often co-opted into vertical relationships of dependence, wherein support for the ruling coalition is exchanged for access to basic services.

This instrumentalisation of social relations suggests that applying the capabilities framework without a rigorous analysis of power structures risks offering an incomplete, even naive, diagnostic of developmental constraints. The evidence thus underscores that the substantive freedoms Sen champions are not merely absent but are actively reconfigured by the political economy. These findings directly address the article's core question regarding context-sensitive justice, demonstrating that the localised context is not a neutral backdrop but a field of power requiring explicit theorisation.

The qualitative accounts compellingly show that the pursuit of social justice through capabilities in Uganda necessitates a prior confrontation with the distribution of political power and the ownership of productive assets. Therefore, the capabilities approach, while providing a vital normative end, demands integration with political economy analysis to illuminate the obstructive pathways and vested interests that stifle its realisation. This situated evidence sets the stage for a critical interpretation of how abstract normative theory engages with complex African realities.

The persistent disconnect between de jure policy commitments to capability expansion and the de facto practices of neopatrimonialism forms a central paradox that the subsequent discussion must unravel. The qualitative findings thus provide the necessary empirical depth to move beyond theoretical endorsement towards a more politically grounded understanding of developmental justice.

Integration and Discussion

The findings of this study collectively underscore that the application of the Capabilities Approach (CA) to African development, while normatively powerful, requires a rigorous engagement with the political economy structures that actively constrain capability expansion in contexts like Uganda. The qualitative data reveal that the lived experience of injustice is not merely an absence of resources but is fundamentally shaped by entrenched clientelist networks and a patrimonial state, dynamics which both Sen's focus on public reasoning and Nussbaum's list of central capabilities tend to under-theorise .

This necessitates moving beyond a philosophical application of the CA to a context-sensitive analysis of the power relations that determine whose capabilities are prioritised and how they are realised, aligning with critiques that the approach can be naively apolitical if divorced from institutional analysis . Consequently, the pursuit of context-sensitive justice in Uganda cannot be a technocratic exercise of capability measurement alone but must confront the political settlement that governs resource allocation. The evidence suggests that development programmes framed around capability enhancement frequently become subsumed within existing patronage systems, whereby access to healthcare, education, or agricultural inputs is mediated by local power brokers.

This illustrates a critical tension: while the CA provides an ideal framework for evaluating development ends, its implementation is inevitably filtered through a political economy that instrumentalises those ends for regime maintenance, a reality often obscured in theoretical discussions . Therefore, the CA's emphasis on agency and freedom must be explicitly linked to strategies for challenging the structural barriers to collective political agency. The practical implication for policymakers and practitioners in Uganda is that interventions informed by the CA must incorporate explicit political economy analyses to avoid co-option or ineffectiveness.

Programmes aimed at expanding capabilities in education or health must, for instance, account for and seek to mitigate the informal fees and patrimonial gatekeeping that distort access, rather than simply increasing supply-side inputs. This study indicates that sustainable capability expansion is inseparable from broader governance reforms that strengthen transparency and accountability, moving towards a form of development that is not only context-sensitive but also power-aware. Ultimately, the CA's contribution to African development discourse is significantly enhanced when it actively integrates the political economy dimensions that define the real-world constraints on justice and human flourishing.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that while the Capabilities Approach (CA) provides a vital normative framework for reorienting development towards human flourishing, its application within Uganda's political economy necessitates a deeply context-sensitive interpretation of justice. The findings indicate that the formal freedoms central to Sen's conceptualisation are frequently circumscribed by entrenched neo-patrimonial networks, which distort resource allocation and limit effective agency, particularly for

marginalised groups. Concurrently, Nussbaum's threshold of central capabilities, though valuable as an aspirational checklist, requires substantive localisation to address the specific gendered and socio-economic barriers identified, moving beyond a universalist prescription.

The integration of qualitative and quantitative data reveals that capabilities are not merely expanded through technical programmes but are fundamentally shaped by power relations and institutional histories, affirming the necessity of a political economy lens. The primary contribution of this research lies in its systematic theorisation and empirical validation of a context-sensitive CA, which explicitly integrates an analysis of domestic political settlement and global economic positioning into the evaluation of justice and development in Uganda. By critiquing and extending the work of Sen and Nussbaum through this grounded, mixed-methods approach, the paper moves the philosophical discourse on capabilities into the granular realities of a specific African political economy, thereby bridging a persistent gap in the literature.

It establishes that a politically disembodied CA risks offering an incomplete diagnostic of developmental constraints, a theoretical refinement with significant methodological implications for future studies. The most pressing practical implication for Ugandan policymakers is that initiatives aimed at capability expansion must consciously engage with, and seek to transform, the underlying political and economic structures that perpetuate deprivation. Programmes in education, health, or economic empowerment should therefore incorporate explicit governance components designed to enhance transparency, accountability, and civic participation, thereby challenging the neo-patrimonial logics that undermine resource distribution.

Evidence from this study suggests that supporting grassroots social movements and independent media may be as critical to sustainable capability development as direct service delivery, fostering the agency and public debate that Sen champions. A logical next step for research would be a comparative study examining how varying political settlements across East African Community states differentially mediate the translation of economic growth into capability expansion, testing the robustness of this paper's framework. Future work must also continue to refine context-specific indicators for Nussbaum's central capabilities, ensuring they capture locally salient dimensions of well-being and injustice.

Ultimately, realising the emancipatory potential of the Capabilities Approach in Africa demands that scholars and practitioners remain attuned to the dynamic interplay between philosophical ideals and the complex, often contradictory, realities of political and economic power.

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by empirically testing the capabilities approach within a specific African political economy. It provides novel, context-sensitive evidence from Uganda on how institutional and economic structures constrain the realisation of social justice, moving beyond theoretical application.

The integrated mixed methods analysis bridges normative political theory with the empirical realities of development, offering a refined framework for evaluating policy impacts on human capabilities. Consequently, the research advances a more grounded and politically attuned understanding of development challenges in the Global South.

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