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A SUFFICIENTARIAN PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Wouter Peeters

1. Introduction

Each account of justice should substantiate the *pattern* of distribution; the principle according to which distribution should take place. Examples include strict equality, a Rawlsian difference principle, sufficiency, priority, or a combination of some principles. The role of such principle is essentially to determine when justice obtains, and to guide policy decisions in a society aimed at achieving distributive justice for all of its members. In this context, it also forms the tacit foundation of human development goals.

Over the last few decades, the capabilities approach has become an influential voice in addressing issues of social justice. It has been theoretically developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, and has provided the core principles of the human development paradigm adopted by the *Human Development Reports* (HDRs) (UNDP, 1990, pp. 10-11). However, the capabilities approach's account about the pattern of distribution remains somewhat vague and underdeveloped.

Sen's capabilities approach and the social choice theory at its basis are «firmly tied to asking "comparative" questions: how can we advance justice or reduce injustice in the world?» (Sen 2008, p. 337). In contrast to Rawls's transcendental approach, Sen (2006, p. 216; 2009, pp. 101-102) argues that we should concentrate on ranking alternative social arrangements: advancing justice or reducing manifest injustices in a society «demands comparative judgments about justice, for which the identification of fully just social arrangements is neither necessary nor sufficient» (Sen, 2006, p. 217). We believe Sen partly confounds ideal theorizing and transcendental institutionalism. He rightly criticizes the latter, but he should not generalize his criticism to ideal theorizing: «even most nonphilosophers who

are active in the cause of justice do in fact have in mind, however vaguely, an ideal of justice toward which they take their campaigns to be ultimately directed» (Simmons, 2010, p. 36). We must have *some* idea of what social justice consists of, in order to guide policy decisions and to construct our development goals. Determining an appropriate principle of distribution is the most essential part of this ideal theorizing, since it specifies when and how justice obtains in a society.

Since it also adopts the comparative approach, the human development paradigm suffers from a similar deficiency. The first HDR defines human development as «a process of enlarging people's choices» (UNDP, 1990, p. 10), and this moral imperative is affirmed throughout the decades and by the 2013 HDR: «as ever, the aim is to expand choices and capabilities for all people, wherever they live» (UNDP, 2013, p. 8). As touting as this aim might be, the actual goals and targets of human development remain theoretically underdeveloped.

In contrast to Sen, Nussbaum has introduced the idea of a threshold level of each capability beneath which a life with human dignity cannot be achieved. The following section will introduce this idea and identify it as a *sufficientarian* account of justice. On this basis, in the third section, we will develop a sophisticated *multilevel sufficientarian model* of justice. Subsequently, we will make some suggestions with respect to the practical distribution of social and material conditions. The final section concludes.

2. Nussbaum's capability threshold

Nussbaum's (2006, p. 71) version of the capabilities approach focuses on a threshold level of each capability, «beneath which it is held that truly human functioning is not available to citizens; the social goal should be understood in terms of getting citizens above this capability threshold». The capability threshold reflects the idea that people are entitled to a life compatible with human dignity, which means that people have entitlements based on justice to a minimum —or a sufficiently high level— of her central capabilities (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 13; 2006, p. 292). This minimum account of social justice goes beyond Sen's «merely comparative use of the capability space to articulate an account of how capabilities, together with the idea of a threshold level of capabilities, can provide a basis for central constitutional principles that citizens have a right to demand from their governments» (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 12).

In earlier work, Nussbaum defends the threshold in view of a commitment to equality:

> The view treats all persons as equal bearers of human claims, no matter where they are starting from in terms of circumstances, special talents, wealth, gender, or race. […] Here my claim is that capability-equality, in the sense of moving all above the threshold, should be taken as the central goal (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 86).

In later work, she distinguishes more accurately between the two: «the notion of a threshold is more important in my account than the notion of full capability equality» (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 12). Even though the threshold might in some areas require equality (see section 4), it should be clear that it is a sufficientarian account of justice in terms of capability, since Nussbaum subscribes to the two theses that define sufficientarianism (see Casal, 2007, pp. 297-298). First, the *positive thesis* of sufficientarianism holds that «what *is* important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have *the same* but that each should have *enough*» (Frankfurt, 1987, p. 21; emphasis in original). Rather than pursuing an egalitarian distribution, Frankfurt (1987, p. 31) argues, we should distribute the available resources in such a way that as many people as possible have enough or, in other words, «maximize the incidence of sufficiency». Indeed, Nussbaum's (2011, p. 36) basic claim purports that respect for human dignity requires that citizens be placed above an ample threshold of capability. If people systematically fall below the threshold, this should be seen as an unjust situation, in need of urgent attention (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 71). Therefore, she argues that:

> The focus should always be on getting more to cross the threshold, rather than further enhancing the conditions of those who have already crossed it. This is so for two reasons. First, because that is what it is to treat citizens as free and equal. Second, because […] once a person has crossed that threshold, more is not necessarily better (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 229).

Second, the *negative thesis* of sufficientarianism holds that «if everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others» (Frankfurt, 1987, p. 21). Sufficientarianism thus denies the importance of egalitarian and prioritarian reasoning above the threshold level (Casal, 2007, p. 299). On the one hand, Nussbaum (1995, pp. 87-88; 2006, p. 75; 2011, p. 40) does not explicitly deny the importance of a distributive criterion above the threshold, but rather argues that her account is a minimal, partial account of social justice, compatible with different views about how to handle distributive issues that would arise once all citizens are above the threshold level. In her view, we may reasonably defer such questions «given that this getting all citizens above the threshold] already imposes a taxing and nowhere-realized standard» (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 12). On the other hand, she has also argued that individuals should be

given broad discretion about how to live their lives. Beyond the duty to support the capabilities of all up to the minimum threshold, «people are free to use their money, time and other resources as their own conception of the good dictates» (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 15). She thus denies further (re)distributive efforts beyond the threshold to reach equality of outcomes, thereby affirming the negative thesis of sufficientarianism.

3. MULTILEVEL SUFFICIENTARIANISM

Figure 1
The formal model of multilevel sufficientarianism
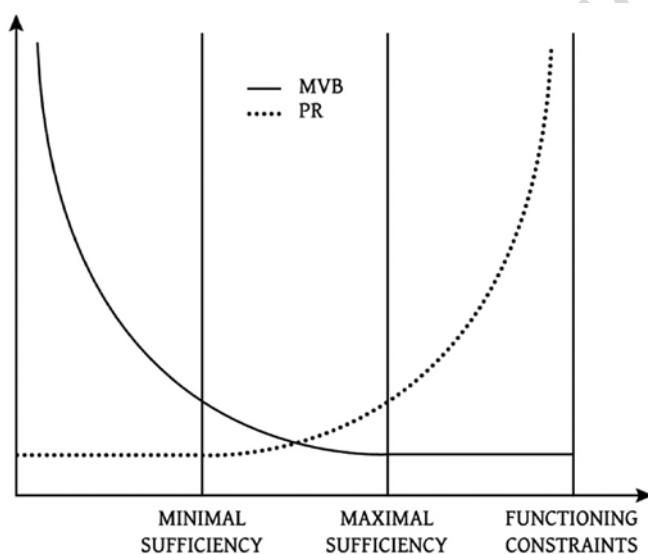
MVB = moral value of benefitting a person; *PR* = personal responsibility

3.1. Threshold determination

A pervasive objection against sufficientarianism in general (see Huseby, 2010, p. 180; Casal, 2007, pp. 312-314) and Nussbaum's account specifically (see Arneson, 2000b, p. 56) is that the threshold level cannot be set nonarbitrarily or unambiguously. It should indeed be recognized that the acceptability of a sufficientarian account largely depends on a convincing determination of the threshold. Nussbaum (2000, p. 77; 2011, pp. 41-42) evades this precarious issue, contending that precise determination evolves through interpretation and deliberation within each constitutional tradition, and that this process should be

flexible, taking local circumstances and possibilities into account (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 70).

This procedural openness is, however, vulnerable to some objection. Nation-specific capability thresholds might not adequately respond to the facts of globalization and (asymmetrical) interdependence that characterize human relations today. Human development does not occur in isolation of the economic world order and global processes. Some universal standards, rather than nation-specific thresholds, are needed to inform international or transnational policies regarding global issues, such as trade, poverty alleviation, human mobility, and global environmental problems. In addition, comparison of the quality of life of individual members of different societies requires universal criteria.

Most importantly, Nussbaum (1995, 2000) herself has provided powerful arguments against cultural relativism and in defence of universal values and norms. She defends her idea of a threshold level of each capability by referring to the notions of human dignity and truly human functioning (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 73-74; 2006, p. 292; 2011, p. 36), which essentially are *universal* attributes of *all* human beings. Leaving threshold determination to debates within societies seems to contradict this universalism. Nussbaum rightly emphasizes the importance of pluralism, yet if the threshold reflects human dignity, it would and *should* at least have a universal core. In later work, Nussbaum (2011, p. 41; emphasis added) seems to acknowledge this issue: «setting the threshold precisely is a matter for each nation, and *within certain limits*, it is reasonable for nations to do this differently, in keeping with their history and traditions». International diversity in determining the threshold for specific capabilities can be permissible if it respects such limits, which should be advocated as universally valid.

The only (tentative) suggestion Nussbaum makes regarding threshold determination is that both a lack of ambition and utopianism should be avoided. On the one hand, «we should not set our sights too low, deferring to present bad arrangements» (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 402). A low threshold might be easy to meet, but might also be less than what human dignity seems to require (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 42). Moreover, setting the threshold at a low level will arguably affirm the current vast inequities between rich and poor, because it would not require extensive redistribution. Such a *low-sufficientarian* policy may have difficulties gaining individuals' allegiance because it takes too little to be enough (Casal, 2007, p. 315)[1]. On the other hand, the threshold should not be set in a utopian or

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[1]   On the other hand, it might also be argued that since we currently do not even meet such small demands, the threshold should effectively be set at a low level. However, such a political realist stance clearly lacks ambition and does not challenge the unjust status quo.

unrealistic way (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 402). *High-sufficientarian* policies might fail to gain individuals' allegiance because they may detract from the goal of helping the worst-off in favour of ensuring that as many as possible already better-off would reach the high threshold (Casal, 2007, pp. 315-316).

Taking these issues serious, we would advocate *multilevel sufficientarianism* as an ideal for distributive justice[2]. In earlier work, Nussbaum (1995, p. 81) has argued for the adoption of two distinct thresholds: a lower threshold describing *minimal characteristics for a life to be human* and a higher threshold describing *a good human life*. She has abandoned this distinction in later work, but we would like to take up and refine this line of thought.

First, the *minimal sufficiency threshold* refers to meeting basic needs, basic capabilities, and basic rights. Huseby (2010, p. 180) focuses on *basic human needs*: everyone needs goods, clothing, and shelter; having these needs met is a precondition for having one's further needs met and preferences satisfied. However, Sen (2009, p. 250) criticizes a focus on basic needs for conveying an inadequate view of humanity. Instead, we might refer to Sen's (1992, p. 45, n19) concept of *basic capabilities*[3], separating out «the ability to satisfy certain elementary and crucially important functionings up to certain levels». These basic capabilities might include the *ability to move*, the *ability to meet one's nutritional requirements*, the *wherewithal to be clothed and sheltered*, and the *power to participate in the social life of the community* (Sen, 1979, p. 218). We can also refer to Shue's (1996) influential account of *basic rights*. Rights are *basic* if enjoyment of them is essential to the enjoyment of all other rights: «any attempt to enjoy any other right by sacrificing the basic right would be quite literally self-defeating, cutting the ground from beneath itself» (Shue, 1996, p. 19). In addition to the right to subsistence, basic rights include security rights and some social and political liberties. These basic rights should be regarded as the content of the minimal sufficiency threshold, since they «provide some minimal protection against utter helplessness to those too weak to protect themselves» (Shue, 1996, p. 18). Indeed, in earlier work, Nussbaum (1995, p. 81) defines the lower threshold as describing minimal characteristics for a life to be human: it is «a threshold of

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[2] Without having the opportunity to discuss this into much detail, in the remainder of this chapter, we advocate a cosmopolitan stance that adopts universal multilevel sufficientarianism. Alternatively, corresponding to Nussbaum's (2011, p. 41) remarks, multilevel sufficientarianism could also be considered to determine the upper and lower limit to nations' latitude in determining their specific threshold(s).

[3] The terminology in the literature has changed over time, which has led to some confusion. In our usage of *basic capabilities*, we follow Sen rather Nussbaum (2000, p. 84; 2011, p. 24), who has used this term to denote the innate equipment of individuals necessary for developing more advanced capabilities.

capability to function beneath which life will be so impoverished that it will not be human at all». In sum, whether expressed in basic needs, basic capabilities or basic rights, the lower threshold should be understood as marking the point where minimal well-being and rudimentary agency replace utter helplessness and abhorrent deprivation.

Second, following Frankfurt, Huseby (2010, p. 181) proposes to identify the *maximal sufficiency threshold* as a level of welfare with which a person is content, meaning satisfaction with the overall quality of one's life. He considers the psychological assumption to be true that «people can indeed be content without having all their preferences met, and even that they can be content while not having some of their important preferences met» (Huseby, 2010, p. 181). In order to encompass the difficulty that some people (for example, people with severe disabilities) might require unusually large resources to achieve this level of welfare, he makes the amendment that people are sufficiently well off if their welfare level gives them a *reasonable chance of being content*. This account is nevertheless problematic because it relies on subjective preference satisfaction or contentment, which cannot be compared interpersonally (Sen, 1999, p. 60; Sen, 2009, p. 277). Moreover, Huseby (2010, pp. 182-183) claims that relative deprivation will partly determine the level of sufficiency, since it is harder for people to be content if many are much better off: the higher the welfare level in society, the higher the maximal threshold. This specification cannot avoid the *adaptive preferences* problem: a deprived person might not appear to be badly off in terms of contentment, «if the hardship is accepted with non-grumbling resignation» (Sen, 1992, p. 55). In Nussbaum's (2006, p. 73) words: «people adjust their preferences to what they think they can achieve, and also to what their society tells them a suitable achievement is for someone like them». Therefore, defining the maximal sufficiency threshold in terms of contentment seems misguided. Rather, we should conceptualize maximal sufficiency in terms of capabilities that are realizable in multiple ways, giving people ample freedoms and control over their life, but probably excluding expensive tastes and satisfaction of mere preferences. Alternatively, we could again appeal to Shue's (1996, pp. 117-118) account. He asserts that *non-basic rights* and *cultural enrichment* take priority over *preference satisfaction*. The maximal sufficiency threshold then describes a level of well-being that allows for non-basic rights and cultural enrichment to be realized, in addition to the conditions of minimal sufficiency. A higher extent of societal protection (pertaining to the satisfaction of mere preferences) cannot be the subject of distributive justice claims.

It might be argued that multilevel sufficientarianism is even more vulnerable to the initial objection that threshold(s) cannot be set nonarbitrarily or

unambiguously. We recognize that this remains an important issue, but would respond by making two observations. First, the central problem is that the stakes involved in determining the threshold in *single-level sufficientiarianism* are very high. Indeed, Meyer and Roser argue that:

> The existence of thresholds where a tiny change (such as enhancing the well-being of an individual just below the threshold so as to place her just above the threshold) dramatically changes our evaluation of the total outcome, can be claimed to be alien to our moral intuitions (Meyer & Roser, 2009, p. 225).

We agree that it is implausible to assume that people's situation suddenly and radically changes merely because they cross some (arguably, arbitrary) threshold. However, as we will elaborate in section 3.3, multilevel sufficientarianism is not vulnerable to this objection, since it allows for gradually declining priority and gradually increasing personal responsibility between the two thresholds. It thus removes most of the pressure from which threshold determination in single-level sufficientarianism suffers. Moreover, single-level sufficientarianism does not allow for the intuition that, at intermediate levels of capability to function, benefitting people might have *some* moral value while at the same time holding them personally responsible to *some* extent. Our model of multilevel sufficientarianism does allow for this possibility. In sum, whereas the absoluteness of the threshold indeed renders single-level sufficientarianism unacceptable, multilevel sufficientarianism mitigates this problem by building in some essential latitude between the two thresholds.

Second, we agree with Shue, who has argued in a different context that:

> Distinctions like the one between needs and wants, or the one between the urgent and the trivial, are of course highly contested and messy […] To ignore *these* distinctions, however, is to discard the most fundamental differences in kind that we understand (Shue, 1993, 55; emphasis in original).

Arbitrariness and ambiguity in threshold determination might not be avoidable, but neither can we ignore these important moral distinctions.

3.2. Functioning constraints

The capabilities approach and the human development paradigm at least give the impression that the expansion of freedoms —*simpliciter*— could proceed *ad libitum* (Crabtree, 2010, p. 163; Peeters, Dirix & Sterckx, 2013, p. 63). Indeed, the 1990 HDR argues that human development is a process of enlarging people's chocies that in principle «can be *infinite* and change over time» (UNDP, 1990,

p. 10, box 1.1; emphasis added). However, this does not take into account that people's choices can have important consequences for other people's lives. It is implausible to assume that capabilities to function can increase unlimitedly beyond the threshold of maximal sufficiency, since they might harm others. As we have argued elsewhere (Peeters, Dirix & Sterckx, 2013, 2015a, 2015b), this is especially problematic in the context of environmental sustainability: there is a real risk that ever-expanding freedoms are used for unsustainable actions (Rauschmayer, Omann & Frühmann, 2011, p. 13).

Hence, people's freedoms should be restricted in order to prevent people from harming others. We do not have the space here to deal with this issue in any detail. Elsewhere, we have argued extensively that the idea of capability threshold(s) should be supplemented with *functioning constraints* in order to prevent people from harming others (Peeters, Dirix & Sterckx, 2013, 2015a). Although this might seem a paternalistic and intolerable intervention into their lives, it is in fact legitimized by the harm principle, which is recognized by liberalism and the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 53; Peeters, Dirix & Sterckx, 2015b, p. 485).

3.3. The moral value of benefitting people

The multilevel sufficientarianism we advocate affirms the *positive thesis* of sufficientarianism according to which everyone should first and foremost have *enough*. In contrast to Nussbaum and traditional versions of sufficientarianism, however, it does not accept the *negative thesis* that rejects the values of equality and priority altogether. The multilevel sufficientarianism we propose as a model for distributive justice in terms of capabilities to function is represented in Figure 1. In this section, we will elaborate the *moral value of benefitting people*. In the following section, we will explain the allocation of *personal responsibility*.

Why should we accept sufficientarianism in favour of the much less complicated principles of *equality* or *priority*? The ideal of *equality* indeed seems the most straightforward and common-sense principle of distributive justice (Meyer & Roser, 2006, p. 233). However, it is vulnerable to the *levelling-down objection*, which criticizes the strict egalitarian belief «that a state of affairs in which nobody is well off but they are equally so, is better, in one respect, than a state in which some people are not well off and others are well off» (Meyer & Roser, 2009, p. 220). The egalitarian view for example implies that in at least one respect it would be better if everybody was blind rather than some blind and some sighted (Casal, 2007, p. 319; Huseby, 2010, p. 186; Meyer & Roser, 2006, p. 234). Although the reasons in favour of achieving equality in such a way will probably be outweighed by other concerns (*inter alia* the intrusion of personal

liberty), emphasizing the intrinsic value of equality gives *a* reason to blind the sighted. The problem is that strict egalitarianism is not primarily concerned with the well-being of individuals in *absolute terms*, but rather with the *relation* between individuals: how do they fare *compared* to each other? (Meyer & Roser, 2006, p. 235)[4].

This is a powerful reason to reject strict egalitarianism in favour of *prioritarianism*. In general terms, the priority view holds that the moral value of benefitting a person is greater the worse off the person is. Since this view does not attach intrinsic value to equality as such, it is not open to the levelling-down objection. At the same time, prioritarianism retains a tendency towards equality, since it gives at least a *prima facie* reason for promoting the well-being of *x* rather than the well-being of *y*, if *x* is worse off than *y* (Meyer & Roser, 2009, pp. 221-222; see also Arneson, 2000a, pp. 343-344; Casal, 2007, p. 296). Prioritarianism and egalitarianism may thus look rather similar, but prioritarianism cares about the *absolute* level of well-being of individuals, not about their *relative* standing (Arneson, 2000a, pp. 343-344; Meyer & Roser, 2006, p. 238; 2009, p. 222). The priority view might thus be described as non-relational egalitarianism (Meyer & Roser, 2009, p. 222).

Prioritarianism is an attractive theory, and it seems to provide the best account of our basic intuition that we ought to give priority to benefitting the worst-off (Meyer & Roser, 2009, p. 225). However, it does not make a qualitative distinction between a bad and a good life, or between morally important or urgent needs, and mere wishes or trivial preferences. As mentioned in the previous section, such distinctions admittedly remain ambiguous and (to a certain extent) arbitrary, but cannot be ignored either. In addition, the traditional priority view is unrestricted in that the priority to be given would decrease to zero only when people's well-being is perfect —when it cannot be improved further (Meyer & Roser, 2009, p. 222).

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[4] This relativity is an important objection against the ranking of countries in the HDRs according to their score on the *Human Development Index* (HDI) as well. Until the 2014 HDR, country classification according was relative: the category of countries with *very high human development* consisted of the 47 countries ranking highest on the HDI; the following 47 countries made up the category of *high human development*; the subsequent 47 that of *medium human development*; and the category of *low human development* consisted of the 46 lowest ranking countries (UNDP, 2013, p. 140). Hence, the classification of a country did not depend on its own development, but more so on the status and development of other countries. A country in which quality of life was steadily improving for decades could thus keep finding itself, year in year out, in the same category. Luckily, the 2014 HDI introduces *fixed* —and hence *absolute* rather than *relative*— cut-off points for the classification of countries (UNDP, 2014, p. 2). This allows for each country to be able to aspire the status of *very high development*, and the category of *low human development* to become smaller and smaller over time.

This objection can be avoided by «embracing *sufficiency-constrained prioritarianism*, a hybrid that prohibits leaving some below a critical threshold to serve the interests —including the trivial interests— of those above it» (Casal, 2007, p. 320; emphasis in original). However, *single-level* sufficientarianism is problematic, since it is implausible to assume that by crossing a unique threshold, individuals can suddenly plummet from having absolute priority to having no priority whatsoever (Casal, 2007, p. 317). Therefore, our model supports strong priority below the minimal sufficiency threshold, but gradually decreasing priority between the two thresholds, which becomes (almost) zero at the maximal sufficiency threshold. This represents the «reasonable feature that the value of benefits at low levels is very high, while the value of benefits at high levels slowly fades» (Huseby, 2010, p. 185). The maximal sufficiency threshold thus ultimately constrains priority (see also Huseby, 2010, pp. 184-185).

3.4. Personal responsibility

Most commentators have treated personal responsibility as strictly inverse to the moral value of benefitting people: it is assumed that the lower the moral value of benefitting a person, the higher the personal responsibility. However, although we agree that there is a certain relation between the two functions, these are two analytically distinct issues. Our model indicates that personal responsibility mirrors the moral value of benefitting people.

Some additional concerns with the principles of *equality* and *priority* pertain precisely to this allocation of personal responsibility. Both strict egalitarianism and unrestricted prioritarianism arguably disregard the personal responsibility people have for their voluntary choices. On the one hand, they invite irresponsibility: if everyone is going to be bailed out of the situations they get into because of their own imprudence, then why act prudently? In order to avoid putting overly heavy strains on the social system, there is a need to uphold personal responsibility. On the other hand, strict equality and unrestricted prioritarianism also disregard arguments that justify inequalities when they stem from voluntary choices.

Luck egalitarianism, in contrast, holds that it is unjust for individuals to be worse off than others through no choice of their own, but denies that inequalities are unjust when produced by voluntary choice against a background of equal opportunity (Casal, 2007, pp. 321-322). Luck egalitarianism thus responds to the objections against strict equality and unrestricted priority by promoting personal responsibility. These aspects might be important in constructing a feasible account of distributive justice, and also partly motivate a focus on capabilities rather than functionings (Fleurbaey, 2006, p. 305; Robeyns, 2006, p. 353; Sen, 1992, p. 148).

However, unqualified luck egalitarianism has also met some fierce criticism: its extremely permissive attitude toward voluntary inequalities is implausible[5]. Similarly, Fleurbaey (2002, p. 74) states that an exclusive focus on capabilities is not enough: although equalizing capabilities would certainly lead to a substantial redistribution, one should take into account exactly which opportunities are offered and which social or psychological factors influence individual success or failure before judging people to be personally responsible for it. He rightly observes that responsibility is not a value that can justify large inequalities:

> Leaving individuals in a very bad situation just because they are responsible for it seems to emanate from an archaic morality. Although most of the literature is strangely silent about this, it is probably reasonable to say that there is a consensus about the need for safety nets protecting individuals from misery (Fleurbaey, 2006, p. 306).

Therefore, we will adopt Casal's (2007, p. 322) suggestion of a *sufficiency-constrained luck egalitarianism*, «which allows that some inequalities in outcome may arise justly but denies that individuals» having less than enough is ever justifiable by appeal to voluntary choice. Our account would not permit people falling below the minimal sufficiency threshold, not even if the deprivation is a result of their own voluntary choice. Consequently, people below the threshold of minimal sufficiency cannot be said to hold any responsibility for their fate[6]. Between the thresholds, personal responsibility gradually increases; beyond the maximal sufficiency threshold, voluntary choice and personal responsibility obtain rapidly increasing moral weight. This reflects the intuition that severely deprived people do not have any choice, and that personal responsibility for one's choices gradually increases with the expansion of one's capabilities to function (see Figure 1, PR).

The allocation of responsibility to advance justice for all remains crucially underdeveloped in the capabilities approach. Nussbaum (2006, pp. 279-280)

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[5] Anderson (1999) has severely criticized luck egalitarianism and has instead defended a sufficientarian capabilities approach under the heading of *democratic equality*. We believe that she is mistaken in assuming that the capabilities approach provides an answer to these objections, since an exclusive focus on capabilities can also be consistent with large inequalities in outcomes. Discussing her account falls beyond our scope here, but we would contend that our multisufficientarian model, in addition to adequately distinguishing between social and material conditions for enjoying capabilities, can avoid her objections. Our view is in fact a close relative of what Arneson (2000a) calls *responsibility-catering prioritarianism*.

[6] It might be argued that even the poor can be held responsible for some smaller decisions they make regarding their own life —they should not be considered as completely devoid of agency. However, recent research casts doubts on this assumption, finding that poverty-related concerns consume mental resources and therefore impede cognitive functions (Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir & Zhao, 2013).

concedes that we are all under a collective obligation to provide the people of the world with what they need. However, we share Miller's (2007, pp. 98-99) skepticism that such an undistributed duty, to which *everyone* is subject, is likely to be discharged by *nobody*, unless it can be effectively allocated in some way. If we simply assume that the obligations to ensure and protect capabilities to function falls on *human beings collectively*, and leave it at that, we risk falling into the familiar trap whereby no particular person or group of persons has a defined obligation, and each can excuse him- or herself from taking action, passing the responsibility to someone else.

Hence, any compelling account of justice should also clarify the individual shares in the collective responsibility. The allocation we propose is identical to the function of personal responsibility[7]. Those living below the *minimal threshold* cannot be required to sacrifice the fulfilment of their basic rights; they cannot be expected to bear any responsibility in ensuring the minimal threshold for all. In fact, no one can be compelled to sacrifice more than the satisfaction of preferences until everyone else who ought to have done so has been compelled to sacrifice preference satisfaction (Shue, 1996, pp. 116-117). Thus, it is especially those living above the *maximal sufficiency threshold* that should contribute to the collective duty of advancing justice in the world: the strongest shoulders should bear the heaviest burdens.

Between minimal and maximal sufficiency, matters are much murkier. We believe that individuals can be held responsible for choices they make regarding their own life goals and well-being; they do have *some* agency. Moreover, they can be held responsible for choices that afflict their associates and intimates, but they cannot be expected to bear a large share of the collective responsibility to advance justice in the world. Similar to personal responsibility, our model rather reflects the assumption that one's share gradually increases: the closer to maximal sufficiency, the more responsibility one bears.

Pogge and Sengupta (2014, p. 4) criticize the *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) on the issue of the allocation of responsibility: while the most influential agents are best able to divert attention away from their own responsibilities in achieving the MDGs, the poorest countries ended up being held solely responsible for not reducing their huge deprivation rates fast enough. Pogge and Snegupta (2014, p. 4) therefore conclude that «new development goals [i.e., the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) in the Post-2015 Development Agenda of the United

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[7] Both responsibility for one's personal fate and individual responsibility in advancing justice for everyone are based upon individual agency, understood as effective power (Sen, 2009, p. 271). Since agency and effective power increases with capability, responsibility increases with an increase in one's capabilities (see also Sen, 2008, pp. 335-336; 2009, p. 271).

Nations] should contain a clear reference to whose goals they are supposed to be, clearly specifying the responsibilities of competent agents». Even in reaching an abysmally low target such as *ending extreme poverty* (see section 4), the poorest countries will require substantial support from wealthier countries, which will in turn require institutional reform and real action commitments on part of the latter —«not merely in the marginal arena of development assistance, but across the board in all their policy and institutional design decisions, at both the domestic and especially the supranational level» (Pogge & Sengupta, 2014, p. 8)—. These remarks correspond to the allocation of responsibility in our model: it is far from just to hold the poorest responsible for their fate; in contrast, the strongest shoulders —the most competent and wealthiest agents— should bear the heaviest burden.
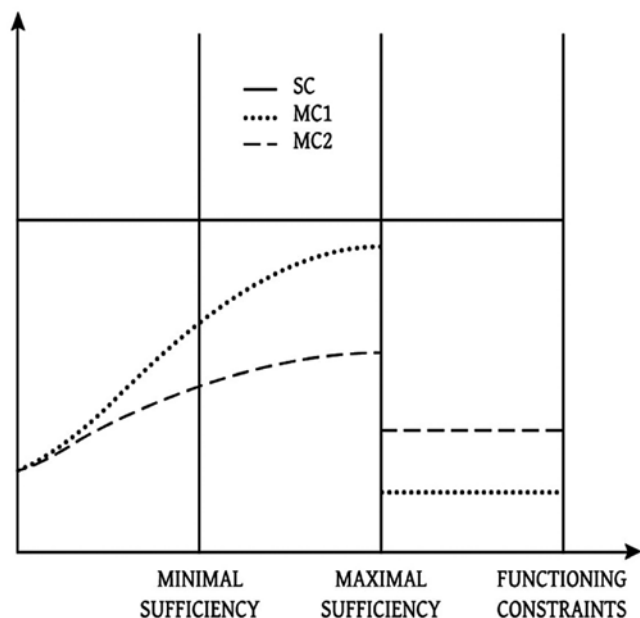
4. The practical distribution of social and material conditions

While the literature seems to equate the moral value of benefitting people with the distribution of resources, we believe the reality to be more complex. The moral value of benefitting people is expressed in terms of capabilities to function. Nussbaum differentiates between two kinds of capabilities. On the one hand, capabilities *closely related to human dignity* include, for example, political, religious, and civil liberties and the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation, and being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. In these cases, *equality* of capability is an essential social goal, because its absence would be connected with a deficit in dignity and self-respect (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 292; 2011, pp. 40-41). On the other hand, in the case of *capabilities closely connected with the idea of property or instrumental goods*, «what seems appropriate is *enough*» (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 293; emphasis in original). For example, she argues that equal human dignity presupposes an *adequate* rather than an *equal* house or shelter.

However, differentiating *between* capabilities fails to take account of the social conditions that are also inherent to material capabilities and the material conditions necessary to actually enjoy dignity-securing capabilities. First, all capabilities require the satisfaction of certain social conditions. Consider for example the *mobility* capability, which falls under Nussbaum's category of material capabilities. Being able to drive a bicycle indeed presupposes access to a bicycle and adequate bicycle lanes, which are material conditions. Yet it also presupposes the presence of some social conditions, including robust traffic regulations and a bicycle-friendly culture. Second, material conditions are inherent to *all* capabilities, including so-called dignity-securing capabilities. For example, the capability of *political liberty* at first appears to be a non-material or dignity-securing capability, since it most obviously

depends on the presence of some important social conditions (such as generalized and equal voting rights and freedom of speech). Nonetheless, having this capability also requires the satisfaction of certain material conditions, including the presence of a wheelchair ramp at the polling station, and a computer or pencil and paper to take minutes during meetings.

Figure 2
Practical distribution of social and material conditions

SC = hypothetical distribution function of social conditions; MC1 = hypothetical distribution of material conditions (at a low level of efficiency); MC2 = hypothetical distribution function of material conditions (at a high level of efficiency).

The distinction should thus rather be made *within* each capability, between *social conditions* and *material conditions*. First, *social conditions* (including legal rights, social norms, and cultural values) are closely related to human dignity and respect. Therefore, they should be secured *equally* for everyone and at each level of well-being, since —in contrast to Frankfurt (1997)— we believe it is people's *equal* human dignity and respect that demands recognition (Nussbaum, 2006, pp. 292 y 294; see Figure 2, SC). This is the sphere of the *politics of recognition*. Following Honneth (1995, pp. 107-120), we can distinguish between *formal* and *informal* relations within the public sphere. First, in the formal (or legal) sphere, the goal of the politics of recognition is to accord to all members of society *equal respect* in legal relations, which implies attributing equal rights to them (Honneth, 1995,

pp. 109-110). For example, the capability of *political participation* presupposes the right to vote. However, a polity that supports unequal voting rights (for example a multiple voting scheme or not granting certain groups the right to vote) does not respect its citizens equally. Second, in the informal or social sphere, the goal of the politics of recognition is to grant everyone *equal social esteem* (Honneth 1995, pp. 111-112).

The formal model of distribution introduced in the previous section implies that priority should be given to the claims of the worst off. We should be most concerned with minorities in an oppressive regime (such as women in a sexist culture, people of different races in a racist culture, or those who do not meet prevailing standards of beauty), for improving their situation has most moral value. However, policy measures should not be aimed at assimilation to the majority or dominant cultural norm: in order to attain equal respect and social esteem for everyone, the goal of the politics of recognition is to recognize human diversity (Fraser, 1996, p. 3; Honneth, 1995, pp. 113 y 122). Securing social conditions for everyone equally means that «institutionalized cultural patterns of interpretation and evaluation express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem. This condition precludes cultural patterns that systematically depreciate some categories of people and the qualities associated with them» (Fraser, 1996, p. 31).

Second, the *politics of redistribution* concerns *material conditions*, including food, energy, and income. The capabilities approach is famous for showing that an egalitarian distribution of material conditions might lead to serious inequalities in actual freedoms enjoyed by different persons, since the conversion of resources into freedoms may vary from person to person (Sen, 1992, p. 20; 1999, pp. 70-71; 2009, pp. 255-256)[8]. Hence, material preconditions should be provided *adequately*, and this can clearly differ from person to person, depending on the conversion factors. For example, in order to achieve a sufficiently high level of mobility, people with a physical disability might need a wheelchair, prostheses, or a customized car. Consider also that in a fossil-fuel dependent economy, people will emit more greenhouse gases to produce enough energy than when renewable sources of energy are available. In Figure 2, the difference between the hypothetical distributions of material conditions MC1 and MC2 reflects the crucial importance of technological efficiency: the lower the level of technological efficiency in a society, the more material conditions people need to attain a particular level of well-being.

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[8] Robeyns (2003) argues that the capabilities approach as a social justice framework can encompass both redistribution and recognition. Although our account is slightly different, we believe there is ample convergence with respect to the capabilities approach's recognition of human diversity in distributive justice.

Again, priority should be given to the worst off: we should be most concerned with improving the situation of poor and malnourished people, because benefitting them has more value in moral terms than benefitting a better-off person. However, the amount of resources that will have to go to expanding their capabilities to function depends not only on conversion factors, but also on the level of capabilities to function aimed at. Other things being equal, expanding the capabilities to function of a person to minimal sufficiency (for example, basic health and basic hygiene) is probably less resource-intensive than further expanding the capabilities of people at a higher level of well-being (say, from access to basic subsistence to a level of material comfort). Both hypothetical distributions of material conditions depicted in Figure 2 (MC1 and MC2) are based on this assumption, although distribution may take other forms, depending on the conversion factors mentioned above.

The target of the first MDG was to halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people living in *extreme poverty* (i.e., an income of less than $1.25 a day) (UN, 2015). This target was 'met' in 2010, which received much international attention and celebration. However, in our opinion, this celebration was inappropriate, since millions of people remained (and remain) in extreme poverty. The first proposed SDG therefore aims to *eradicate* extreme poverty (UNDESA, 2015, p. 7). Nonetheless, Pogge (2013, pp. 210-216) and Pogge & Sengupta (2014, pp. 4-5) refer to the deceitful determination of the poverty line and the biased calculation of the proportion of people living below it. Moreover, the $1.25 per person per day is, in fact, «an abysmally low poverty line» (Pogge & Sengupta, 2014, p. 4). Pogge (2013, p. 210) suggestively asks whether living at the even the much higher poverty line of $2 a day would accord with the standard of living affirmed in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights: «everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services» (UN, 1948). Since $2 a day —let alone $1.25— is obviously not sufficient to ensure such a standard of living, the international development agenda clearly falls into the trap of low-sufficientarian policies, setting the target lower than what human dignity seems to require. Through this lack of ambition, the international development agenda fails to challenge the unjust status quo in any meaningful way.

5. Concluding remarks

Our point of departure for this analysis was that the pattern of distribution is essential for any account of justice. Moreover, such principle guides policy decisions and also forms the tacit foundation of development goals. However, both Sen's

version of the capabilities approach and the human development paradigm that builds upon it have embraced a comparative approach. The pattern of distribution in these accounts remains vague.

Building upon a critical assessment of Nussbaum's idea of a capability threshold, we have explored a multilevel sufficientarian model of justice in terms of capabilities to function. The model consists of a *minimal sufficiency threshold* —the level of well-being at which basic needs, basic rights, basic capabilities are met and rudimentary agency replaces utter helplessness— and a *maximal sufficiency threshold* —the level of well-being at which minimal sufficiency is supplemented by non-basic rights and cultural enrichment and which forms the cut-off point with mere preferences. In addition, we would argue to constrain people's functionings beyond maximal sufficiency in order to prevent them from harming others.

On the one hand, in terms of *the moral value of benefitting people*, our model can be characterized as prioritarianism constrained by the threshold of maximal sufficiency: it supports strong priority below minimal sufficiency, gradually decreasing priority between the two thresholds, and zero priority beyond maximal sufficiency. On the other hand, people's *responsibility* for their own fate as well as in advancing justice for everyone is constrained by the threshold of minimal sufficiency: people cannot be permitted to fall below minimal sufficiency, implying that they cannot be held responsible. With improving agency between the two thresholds, responsibility gradually increases, but it is especially beyond maximal sufficiency that people's individual responsibility rapidly increases.

This model informs the practical distribution of social and material conditions. On the one hand, *social conditions* should be secured equally for everyone at each level, aimed at equal respect and equal social esteem. On the other hand, the distribution of material conditions depends on the conversion factors, and a crucial factor is the technological efficiency in a society.

We have only had the opportunity to introduce this model and to make some brief comments regarding human development. More analysis is needed to further substantiate the theoretical model and its implications for determining the goals of human development.

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