

The Basic Needs Approach

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In modern economics, the concept of human need is largely treated as irrelevant. To cite but one development-related example, Filmer, Hammer and Pritchett (2000) state that ‘economists tend to shy away from discussions of “need” because it is not directly observable and is an emotionally charged term’ (p. 214). As pointed out by Georgescu-Roegen (1954), this practice also reflects the fact that notions of need are theoretically unnecessary in modern economic theory being just another type of preference. The basic needs approach (BNA) goes against these tendencies in economics. It emphasizes that human needs are observable and that the needs concept is no more emotionally charged than other economic concepts (e.g., utility or growth). The BNA also situates human needs within economic and development ethics. Though short-lived as a popular development paradigm, it retains contemporary relevance.

The position of human needs in modern economics is at sharp variance with some important strands of moral philosophy and social policy. For example, in moral philosophy, Braybrooke (1987) emphasizes that ‘the concept of needs differs top and bottom from the concept of preferences’ (p. 5), and Griffen (1986) defines well-being as ‘the level to which basic needs are met so long as they retain importance’ (p. 42). In the realm of social policy, Doyal and Gough (1991) stress that needs are both ‘universal’ and ‘knowable’ and that ‘basic human needs... stipulate what persons must achieve if they are to avoid sustained and serious harm’ (p. 50). In the field of economics itself, Corning (2000) states that needs are ‘the inner logic... of economic life’ and ‘the skeletal structure upon which economies are built’ (p. 79). Further, as shown by Baxter and Moosa (1996), needs can be identified in econometric analysis as having a set of distinct characteristics. In the considerations of these and other researchers, the human needs concept has empirical validity, ethical weight, and policy importance. The BNA recognizes this.

Origins and Content

The institutional origins of the BNA go back to the 1976 International Labour Organization's (ILO) World Employment Conference. This conference spawned a report entitled *Employment, Growth, and Basic Needs: A One-World Problem* that briefly put the BNA on the global development policy agenda. The report emphasized the provision of food, clothing, shelter, housing, water, and sanitation. Unacknowledged at that time, and largely since, was the link to Pigou's (1932) 'minimum standard' concept that arose in the context of early Cambridge economics (e.g., Walker 1943). There was also a link back to the ILO's previous work on standards of living (e.g., ILO 1938).

The BNA takes journal article form in Lisk (1977) and the following important statement:

The basic needs approach recognizes that countries will have different requirements as a result of differences in their economic, social, political, and cultural characteristics. Nevertheless, there are certain minimum levels of personal consumption and access to public services that can be regarded as everywhere essential..., and in these cases it is possible to define targets in physical units on a global basis (p. 186).

Building on these origins, Streeten and Burki (1978) identify a hierarchy of basic needs as bare survival, continued survival, and productive survival that, together, constitute 'core basic needs'. They advocate the provision of particular goods and services and recommend a focus on access and delivery. They warn against the 'unrestricted exercise of consumers' demand in the market' and the 'artificial stimulation of wants' (p. 414). They explicitly link the BNA to the redistribution with growth concept of Chenery et al. (1974), another short-lived paradigm with continued relevance.

Streeten (1979) emphasizes six types of needs in the form of food and nutrition, basic educational services, basic health services, sanitation, water supply, and housing. But he explicates the BNA as both a relatively narrow, objective concept a very expansive, subjective concept. Indeed, Streeten (1979) includes a full list of 'non-material needs' such as 'self-determination, self-reliance, political freedom and security, participation in decision making, national and cultural identity, and a sense of purpose in life and work' (p. 136). In this latter mode of exposition, the

basic needs approach morphs into a call for human flourishing, a much more expansive agenda that was never fully defined in the BNA and about which there is still no consensus.

Streeten (1984) raises more questions than answers and casts the BNA in so many possible varieties that it almost loses any meaning at all. He again suggests that it might be cast in subjective terms but goes so far as to describe it in terms of wants satisfaction, making it indistinguishable from standard, neoclassical welfare analysis that has dispensed with needs altogether. As emphasized by Reinert (2018), the distinction between needs and wants goes back to the economics of both Adam Smith and Alfred Marshall. Glossing over this distinction unfortunately makes the BNA redundant and diminishes the needs concept. In this way, Streeten weakened rather than strengthened the BNA. As stated by Walker (1943) decades earlier, in the context of minimum standards, the satisfaction of newly created wants ‘does not contribute to welfare in the same way as the production of goods or services to meet an established and persistent need’ (p. 431).

The impact of the BNA on development policy was short-lived. Indeed, with its origin in 1976, its apogee has been located by Hoadley (1981) in the year 1980. Writing just before the debt crisis of the 1980s, Hoadley notes that an era of increased private capital flows and trade opportunities, the ascendancy of the World Bank over the ILO as a development policy institution, and the capture of donors’ imaginations by a further series of development policy themes, brought the short era of basic needs development lending to a premature end. The debt crises and eras of structural adjustment and the so-called Washington Consensus also furthered this shift. However, none of these factors lessened the ethical imperatives of continued basic needs deprivations (e.g., Reader, 2005).

Basic Needs and Basic Rights

There is an important link between the BNA and established notions of basic rights, particularly subsistence rights. For example, Stewart’s (1989) explication of the BNA explicitly links basic needs fulfilment to basic human rights. She states:

The basic needs approach to development (stresses) needs rather than wants in an effort to both recognize different priorities than those produced by the wants-driven system, and to give these priorities the moral legitimacy associated with the language of needs (p. 350).

Unfortunately, the link from the BNA to basic or subsistence rights was never as fully explored as it might have been. In particular, the link to the work of Shue (1996) has been underdeveloped. Shue introduces the concept of *basic rights*, namely those rights that must be fulfilled so that other rights can be enjoyed. These include both security rights and subsistence rights. As argued by Reinert (2020), both these categories of basic rights involve meeting basic needs. There are important links to be made to contemporary treatments of subsistence rights such as those by Hertel and Minkler (2007). There are further underdeveloped links to the tradition of moral minimalism such as that developed by Walzer (1994) and to the common values of Bok (2002). Situating the BNA within the basic rights tradition would contribute to its continued relevance and deserves further exploration.

Basic Needs and Basic Goods

Reinert (2018) attempts to revive the BNA in the form of what he terms the basic goods approach (BGA). The BGA asserts that basic needs and their satisfaction are developmentally related to the human condition. It views basic goods and services as the ‘ingredients of well-being’ and that these goods and services need to be treated differently than others and given priority in policy deliberations. This last point is related to what Braybrooke (1987) terms the ‘principle of precedence’ and what Streeten (1979) calls the ‘selective approach’. These elements of the BGA are fully consistent with the BNA.

That said, there are three important contrasts between the BGA and the BNA. First, the BGA does not rely on either expansive or subjective criteria in developing a list of priorities as is sometime the case with the BNA. Instead, the BGA is developed in terms of an objective list justified in terms of basic needs. In this characteristic, it is connected to the objective list theory of human welfare (e.g., Arneson, 1999). Second, it explicitly focuses on the often-neglected issue of specific provisioning processes. This emphasis involves a combination of standard economic policy analysis with ongoing technological assessment, the latter often missing in the basic needs approach. Third, unlike the BNA, it is closely tied to the idea of basic security and subsistence rights (e.g., Reinert 2020). It is safe to say that this attempted revival is still a work in progress.

Needs Versus Capabilities

As noted by Reader (2006), the BNA has been eclipsed by the capabilities approach (CA). This line of thinking began with Amartya Sen’s book *The Standard of Living* (1987) and was further

developed by Sen (1989). The CA largely rejects basic needs and basic goods and services as a fundamental focus of development ethics, often relegating them to ‘commodity fetishism’. In situations of significant deprivations, this is not always appropriate or helpful because such deprivations significantly inhibit capability expansion. As stated by Clark (2005), an advocate of the CA, ‘people cannot live, let alone live well, without goods and services’ (p. 1341). Clark also states that the CA must ‘say something more concrete about the role of material things’ (p. 1362). As argued by Nelson (2008) and Reinert (2020), it has not yet done so in a satisfactory manner.

Despite the explicit rejection of the BNA by the capabilities approach, Laderchi, Saith and Stewart (2003) suggest that the capabilities approach is ‘virtually identical’ to the basic needs approach. This is emphatically *not* the case as is evidenced by the arguments made in defense of the CA by Alkire (2005), for example. Such misleading claims contribute to conceptual confusion in development policy. Remedying such confusions must be part of any revised BNA.

Reader (2006) argues that the BNA can withstand the criticism of the CA. She states that ‘the official story has always been that the BNA faces theoretical criticisms that the CA can avoid’ (p. 338). Reader disagrees and emphasizes the role of ‘vital needs’ or needs that must be met to avoid harm. This corresponds closely to the ‘core needs’ of Streeten and Burki (1978). She disputes the tendency in the CA to place ethical imperative on ultimate capabilities (e.g., as is done by Nussbaum, 2000, 2011) rather than on the satisfaction of vital needs. In Reader’s view, ‘moral requirements are limited to needs’ (p. 342), a view echoed in Reinert (2018, 2020).

Reader also defends the BNA approach against the claim of paternalism levied by both CA advocates (e.g., Alkire, 2005) and their nemesis, neoclassical economists. Reader suggests that any risks of alleged ‘commodity fetishism’ must be weighed against ‘freedom fetishism’. This is related to the unresolved issue of dis-valuable capabilities and the ‘freedom’ to pursue them. Any restriction of scope to valuable capabilities is analogous to restriction of scope regarding objective needs. Reinert (2018) also addresses this issue, stating that ‘some degree of paternalism is always involved in policy choices.... The question is when and what kind of paternalism is desirable’ (p. 46). It is difficult for any development policy paradigm to avoid this issue, and exclusively attributing it to the BNA is simply inaccurate.

Regarding capabilities theorists, Reader concludes that they ‘seem to think that we should conceal the reality of human vulnerability to helplessness and dependency behind brave talk of

human freedom to do and be' (p. 345). Annual infant and child mortality denominated in the millions suggests that this brave talk falls short and that Reader is correct. The BNA might be closer to the mark in addressing the multiple deprivations that contribute to such premature mortality. For these reasons, Reader's (2006) analysis is a notable contribution to the BNA.

Assessment

The BNA lasted only a short while as a popular development policy paradigm. It was overtaken by a resurgent development as growth paradigm, structural adjustment, the so-called Washington Consensus, and the capabilities approach. Human needs deprivations, however, have persisted, and this persistence is a statement of the continued ethical relevance of the BNA. As stated by Reader (2005):

The increased acceptance of the concept of need among philosophers, political theorists and development thinkers... has so far had little influence on the thinking of governments, economists, or executives of powerful corporations. The mistake such agents make is a moral one: They deny and ignore something of fundamental and obvious moral importance (p. 5).

Despite this unfortunate reality, as pointed out by Reinert (2018), development policy subcommunities exist across the full range of basic goods and services provision that address basic needs deprivation: food security, sanitation and development, water and development, and education and development just to cite four examples. What has been missing is an integrating framework across these various subcommunities. Both the BNA and its recasting in the form of the BGA can help support conversations and collaborations among the relevant sub-communities to form an overall policy perspective. For this reason, a revived BNA or BGA can play a continued, important role in development policy.

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