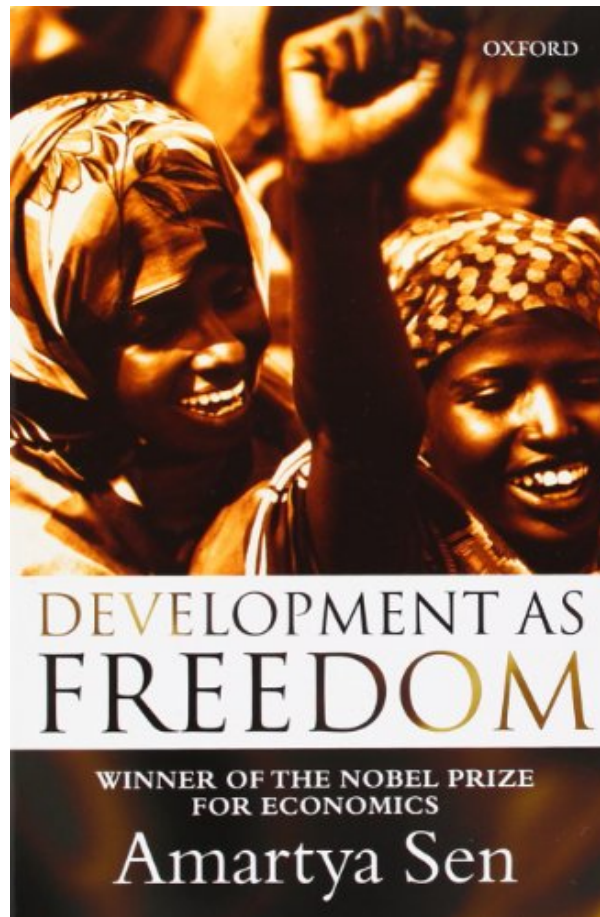
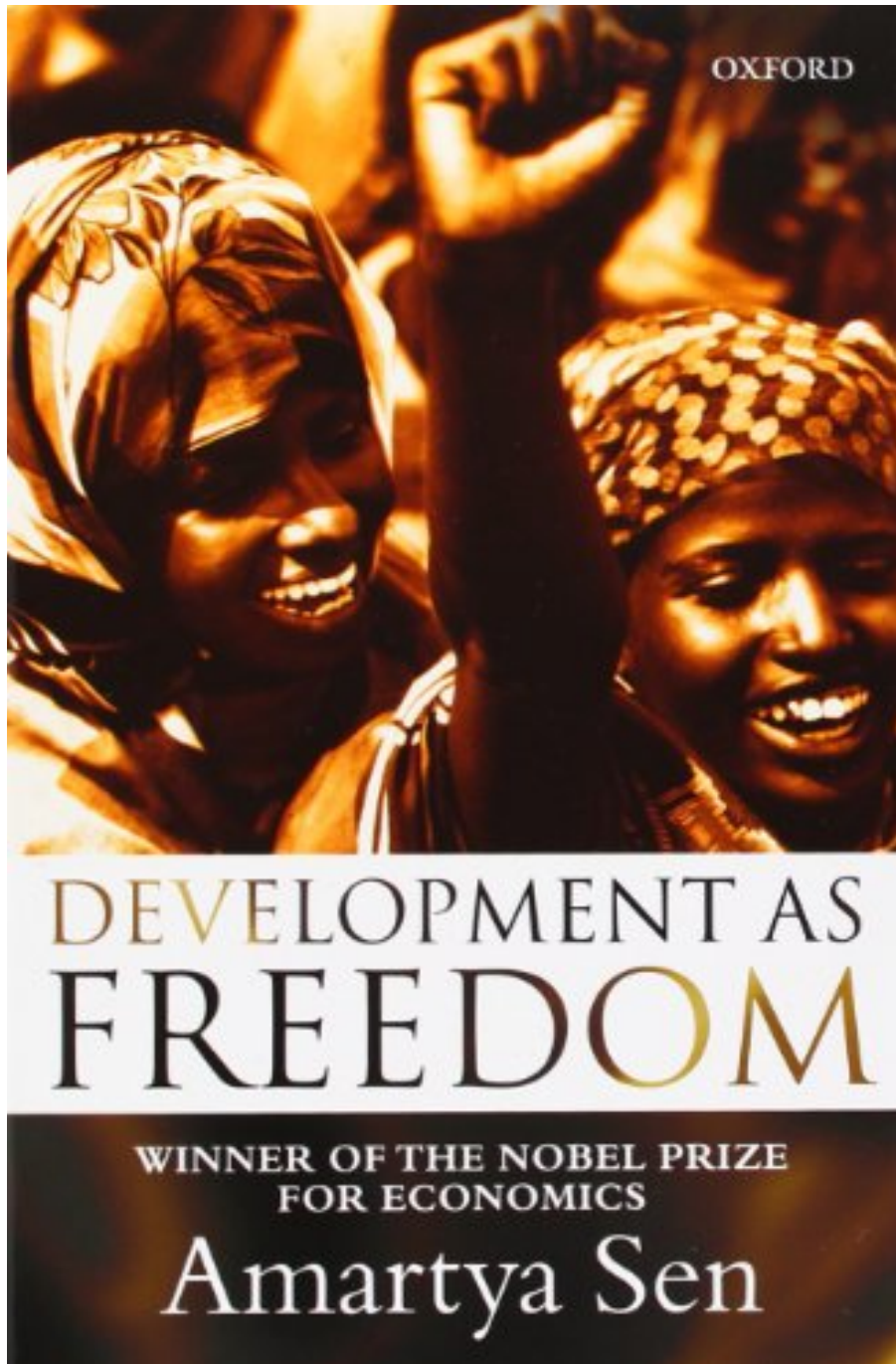


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# DEVELOPMENT AS FREEDOM BY AMARTYA K. SEN PDF

In *Development as Freedom* Amartya Sen explains how in a world of unprecedented increase in overall opulence millions of people living in the Third World are still unfree. Even if they are not technically slaves, they are denied elementary freedoms and remain imprisoned in one way or another by economic poverty, social deprivation, political tyranny or cultural authoritarianism. The main purpose of development is to spread freedom and its 'thousand charms' to the unfree citizens. Freedom, Sen persuasively argues, is at once the ultimate goal of social and economic arrangements and the most efficient means of realizing general welfare. Social institutions like markets, political parties, legislatures, the judiciary, and the media contribute to development by enhancing individual freedom and are in turn sustained by social values. Values, institutions, development, and freedom are all closely interrelated, and Sen links them together in an elegant analytical framework. By asking 'What is the relation between our collective economic wealth and our individual ability to live as we would like?' and by incorporating individual freedom as a social commitment into his analysis Sen allows economics once again, as it did in the time of Adam Smith, to address the social basis of individual well-being and freedom.

- Sales Rank: #1251879 in Books
- Published on: 2001-05-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.76" h x .83" w x 5.08" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 366 pages

From Publishers Weekly

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A fabulous thesis...poorly defended

By T. Graczewski

I so wanted to be won over by this book by the brilliant Indian economist, Amartya Sen. His central thesis is simple and compelling: "...the basic idea that enhancement of human freedom is both the main object and the primary means of development." However, the empirical evidence he musters to support his case is often weak and disappointing.

I read "Development as Freedom" while traveling around South Asia with a contingent from a large American-based economic development foundation. A few of us gathered at the bar one night in Colombo, Sri Lanka to discuss the current state of affairs in that country, which we had just toured from north to south. After three decades of civil war, prospects in Sri Lanka are really looking up, at least superficially (that is, economically). We arrived to an expansive new airport, traveled into downtown on a brand new super highway (funded by the Chinese), and stayed at a plush Western style resort, which was encircled by high rise cranes constructing new office buildings, hotels and casinos. The sense of economic growth and future prosperity was palpable everywhere, even in the far northern city of Jaffna, the Tamil heartland, where the streets were new and clean, the library reconstructed and a new municipal council building with computerized record keeping open for business.

Yet, all is not well in Sri Lanka, certainly not from a political or human rights perspective. The Rajapaksa family is tightening their grip on power, recently overturning a constitutional requirement of term limits. Freedom of the press is non-existent. The judiciary is cowed. Minorities - Tamil Hindus, evangelical Christians, and Muslims - are threatened and attacked with alarming frequency. In short, behind the patina of economic prosperity across the island, Sri Lanka is bleeding. And things are only going to get worse.

As we discussed the disturbing prospects for the island one of my traveling companions asked a basic question: "Why should people care if their freedoms are abridged, especially the majority Sinhalese Buddhists, so long as there are jobs and standards of living are rising?" It was a question that hit right at the heart of the thesis of "Development as Freedom." Sen writes: "Capability deprivation is more important as a criterion of disadvantage than is the lowness of income, since income is only instrumentally important and its derivative value is contingent on many social and economic circumstances." And he takes a rather expansive view of these capabilities, which he calls "substantive freedoms" that include "elementary capabilities like being able to avoid such deprivations as starvation, undernourishment, escapable morbidity and premature mortality, as well as freedoms that are associated with being literate and numerate, enjoying political participation and uncensored speech and so on." From that perspective, the Rajapaksa regime has a spotty record at best. Literacy on the island is well over 90%, far better than the 50% often seen just twenty miles across the Palk Strait in southern India. Healthcare is modernized, as are other components of the economy. But the political side of the equation is decidedly stunted. And that, for me, is the rub with this book.

Sen takes issue with the Singaporean Lee Kwan Yew school of thought that political freedoms are a luxury that developing economies can ill afford and more often than not are detrimental to economic prosperity. My traveling companion challenged me to defend the notion that democracy and core political freedoms support economic growth, citing China, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and more recently Vietnam and even Sri Lanka as counter examples. "Development as Freedom" was in my travel bag and the arguments of its author still fresh in my head, yet I couldn't mount a very effective defense. "No multi-party, democratically elected government has ever experienced a famine," I replied, a fun fact that I picked up from reading "Development as Freedom." That was the best (indeed, only) argument that I could draw from reading this book. Not terrible, but hardly a slam dunk. I went to bed that night a bit gloomy, rather certain that while things would get decidedly better in Sri Lanka in the coming years economically speaking, it would also abet the serious decline in political freedoms and minority human rights across the island. And the vast majority of its citizens would simply not care. Why should they?

In fairness, Sen does not claim that his thesis is easy or foolproof. In fact, he concedes that his argument "cannot yield a view of development that translates readily into some simple 'formula' of accumulation of capital, or opening up of markets, or having efficient economic planning. The organizing principle that places all the different bits and pieces into an integrated whole is the overarching concern with the process of enhancing individual freedoms and the social commitment to help bring it about."

Perhaps a better way to win the argument, he suggests, is to reframe the debate. "We must see a frequently asked question in the development literature to be fundamentally misdirected: Do democracy and basic political and civil rights help to promote the process of development? Rather, the emergence and consolidation of these rights can be seen as being constitutive of the process of development." Fair enough, I suppose. But that's pretty watered down and not going to win many converts, especially those from a cultural tradition that places less importance on individual freedoms and political participation.

To make matters worse, much of this book is difficult read. The chapters are relatively short and broken up into thematic parts, but Sen's writing is often as impenetrable as Karl Popper, although I don't believe that his arguments are particularly sophisticated.

In the end, I'm incredibly sympathetic to the core argument of "Development as Freedom" and wanted desperately to love it and walk away armed with a strong defense of the importance of freedom in my future debates in the development community. Alas, that is not the case, much to my disappointment.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.



I would certainly recommend this book to those actively working in the field ...

By Eastern Eagle

Sen's work helps to create a humane worldview in which we can humanely conceptualize development today. His view of an interconnected system of freedoms that are both the ends and means of development is fascinating. *Development as Freedom* manages to make this concept very approachable while not compromising the core values in which it hopes to instill. I would certainly recommend this book to those actively working in the field of development, as well as those who want to expand their understanding of how to address poverty and aid the oppressed. It should be noted that Sen does use a broad stroke approach that may leave the reader with questions about specific strategic interventions, but addressing these more detail oriented scenarios was not the author's intent.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Great Political Economy

By -\_Tim\_-

In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen tells us that the process of development is best understood as expansion of the freedoms that people enjoy in five spheres: political, economic, social, transparency (in the sense that important information is available to the public), and personal security. Each of these types of freedoms reinforce one another and contribute to outcomes such as higher incomes, better health, and longevity. Sen quotes Peter Bauer, an iconoclast in the development field, as saying that "I regard the extension of the range of choice, that is, an increase in the range of effective alternatives open to the people, as the principle objective and criterion of economic development; and I judge a measure principally by its probable effects on the range of alternatives open to individuals."

Sen points out that markets are not simply a means to an end but rather a fundamental freedom. All people want to enter into exchanges with others, and this is how people everywhere behave unless they are prevented from doing so. Sen shows that markets are not an expression of rapacious self-interest but rather are dependent on virtues such as trust and rectitude. Seen in this light, market exchanges are an expression of deep human needs. Yet Sen realizes that markets have limitations and he argues for non-market decisions to optimally provide for education, health care, protection of the environment, and prevention of the grossest inequalities in income distribution.

As an illustration of the interrelationships between the different types of freedoms, and between these freedoms and economic outcomes, Sen explains the Asian economic crises of the late 1990s as partly a result of a lack of transparency: that is, a lack of public participation in reviewing financial and business arrangements. Had they been able to, members of the public likely would have demanded greater transparency and the crises might have been averted; however, authoritarian political arrangements prevented effective demands for transparency. And, once the crises struck, the response of governments in the region was inadequate. Had these governments been democratically accountable, they would have responded more quickly and forcefully to boost employment and otherwise cushion the impact of the crises on the poorest members of their societies.

Sen, the winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in economic science, has aimed this work at a general audience. For specialists, though, the book offers an extended discussion of methodological issues introduced by Sen's view of development as freedom, more than 50 pages of end notes, and an index of names and subjects. This book will be an adventure for readers interested in the greatest problem us at the outset of the 21st century: how can the poorest people in the world live better lives?

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