

# **No Small Hope: The Basic Goods Imperative<sup>1</sup>**

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## No Small Hope: The Basic Goods Imperative

*Abstract-* This paper argues in favor of a *basic goods approach* to outcomes assessment in development policy analysis. It contrasts the basic goods approach with the utility-of-consumption and capabilities approaches and argues, on a number of grounds, that it is a more relevant and appropriate framework. The dimensions of the basic goods approach analyzed include a common, minimalist character, sense of justice, subjectivist-objectivist considerations, the human condition, relationship to policy space, and the theoretical and empirical role of basic needs. Taken as a whole, these perspectives suggest that the basic goods approach offers key advantages not found in the two relevant alternatives.

“And if, like archers, we have a target, are we not more likely to hit the right mark?”  
–Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Roger Crisp.

This paper argues in favor of a *basic goods approach* to outcomes assessment in development policy analysis. The basic goods approach possesses a number of key advantages over the utility-of-consumption and capabilities approaches. First, it is based on a common, minimalist ethics and thereby avoids universalistic, maximalist claims that are difficult to support. Second, it corresponds to a non-procedural sense of justice, avoiding appeals to external sources of values that tend to be incorporated into proceduralist ethics. Third, the approach selects objects of value largely at the intersection of subjectivist and objectivist ethical traditions, avoiding unnecessary conflict between these two competing schools of thought. Fourth, the approach reflects relevant aspects of the human condition, namely the prevalence of suffering and the widespread failure to meet basic needs. Fifth, the approach resides in the analytical space in which most policies are actually formulated, rather than largely outside of this space as in the capabilities approach. Finally, the use of basic needs to identify relevant basic goods has both theoretical and empirical support in the economics of consumer behavior.

The fundamental characteristic of the basic goods approach is that it evaluates outcomes and policies strictly in terms of the provision of basic goods rather than in terms of goods of all kinds. The term “basic goods” is not used here in the sense of Nussbaum (2000), namely to refer to basic desiderata such as capabilities. Nor is it

equivalent to Rawls's (1999) "primary goods." Instead, basic goods are the subset of produced goods (commodities and services, private and public) that are characterized by their ability to *alleviate suffering* and *meet basic needs*.<sup>2</sup> The basic goods approach is thereby distinct from the utility-of-consumption view in that it does *not* take an agnostic view of consumption. It makes choices regarding what kinds of consumption are valued. Given the persistent deprivation that characterizes the human condition, and the opportunity costs involved in non-basic consumption, the basic goods approach is an attractive alternative.<sup>3</sup>

Before beginning a discussion of the basic goods approach, we must briefly consider the two alternatives considered in this paper, namely, the utility-of-consumption approach and the capabilities approach, focusing on key characteristics and limitations that will be taken up at subsequent points in the paper.

### **Utility-of-Consumption and Capabilities Approaches**

Contemporary economic methodology engages in outcomes assessment based on subjectivist notions of desire fulfillment, asserting the role of *utility* as the primary object of value and relegating other considerations to the category of "non-economic objectives."<sup>4</sup> The utility concept is subjectivist because it satisfies Sumner's (1995) criterion that the welfare subject's pro-attitude be a necessary condition for conferring value on a potential welfare object. The key problem with the utility-of-consumption approach arises in what Hicks (1969) referred to as "the transition from Utility to the more general good, Welfare" (p. 95), and it is here that we encounter the distinction between unrestricted and restricted utilitarianism.

In the unrestricted utilitarianism of Jevons (1965, orig. 1905), for example, "objects intended for immoral or criminal purposes... also have utility; the fact that they are desired by certain persons, and are accordingly manufactured, sold, and bought,

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<sup>2</sup> As is common usage in economics, commodities are tangible and storable, whereas services are intangible and non-storable. The approach taken here also eschews Lancaster's (1966) notion of goods as "characteristics" because it is difficult to implement empirically.

<sup>3</sup> To limit scope, the paper operates under what Reinert (2004) termed the *teleological restriction* limiting welfare subjects to human beings. Of course, from some ethical viewpoints, this approach is considered to be inappropriate. See, for example, Taylor (1986).

<sup>4</sup> See Maneschi (2004).

establishes the fact” (p. 12). Moreover, “Even that which is *hurtful* to a person may by ignorance be desired, purchased and used; it has then utility” (p. 12, emphasis added). This version of the utility-of-consumption approach is, to put it mildly, a handicap for a field of inquiry with “scientific” and policy aspirations.<sup>5</sup> It fails to distinguish between beneficial and harmful consumption, implying that tobacco products, child pornography, and land mines are all potentially welfare enhancing. This handicap arises from “non-prudential desire” (e.g., Arneson, 1999) or “false beliefs” (e.g., Hausman and McPherson, 1993) and represents a major limitation in the deployment of the utility-of-consumption approach in policy analysis.<sup>6</sup> As noted by Griffin (1986), for example, relevant objections to the actual-desire account of unrestricted utilitarianism are “overwhelming” (p. 10).

To escape the problem of non-prudential desire endemic to unrestricted utilitarianism, economists have turned to a few possible escape routes that characterize restricted utilitarianism.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most straightforward approach is to appeal to legality with subjectivist evaluations taking place only within the space of legal consumption in order to exclude some kinds of harmful consumption as being welfare enhancing: child pornography out, tobacco and (in some instances) land mines in. A second approach is Harsanyi’s (1977) in which three distinctions are made: between “manifest” and “true” preferences, between “rational” and “irrational” preferences, and between “social” and “antisocial” preferences. With reference to a particular male agent, “true” preferences are “the preferences he would have if he had all the relevant factual information, always reasoned with the greatest possible care, and were in a state of mind most conducive to rational choice” (p. 646). However, even “true” and “rational”

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<sup>5</sup> This could reflect the fact that, as Nussbaum (2000) suggests, “Economists are not trained in normative argument.... And yet they routinely offer controversial judgments regarding normative matters, judgments that often reflect tacit assumptions and unargued specifications of core concepts” (p. 299).

<sup>6</sup> The problem of non-prudential desire has perhaps been best captured by Griffin (1986) who stated that “the trouble is that one’s desires spread themselves so widely over the world that their objects extend far outside the bound of what, with any plausibility, one could take as touching one’s well-being” (p. 17). Hurka (1999) is more specific: “The desire for something as good involves a sophisticated evaluative thought about an object that is not present in many desires.... This point may be obscured if the good is defined subjectively, as whatever a person desires, but that definition reduces the indirect claim about desire to the tautology that humans desire what they desire. When the claim is read non-tautologically, so that people can be wrong about their good, it is not true that they always desire the good” (pp. 47-48).

<sup>7</sup> Attempts to restrict utilitarianism in economics go at least as far back as Harrod (1936).

preference can be antisocial in the sense of being characterized by “sadism, envy, resentment, and malice” (p. 647). Therefore, in this approach, utility is assessed using “social,” “true” and “rational” preferences.

A third approach to non-prudential desire is to give the agent or welfare subject some supervision in the form of an “ideal advisor” that is actually a different version of the agent him- or herself, a sort of Benthamite guardian angel. Unlike the actual agent, the ideal advisor is fully informed, fully rational, perfect in every way. In the words of Railton (1986), for example, “an individual’s good consists in what he would *want himself to want*, or to pursue, were he to contemplate his present situation from a standpoint *fully and vividly informed* about himself and his circumstances, and *entirely free of cognitive error* or lapses of instrumental rationality” (p. 16, emphases added).

It is difficult to see any of these restriction options as satisfactory. The legal-illegal distinction is not helpful because there are legal goods that are manifestly harmful (tobacco and weapons) and illegal goods that might indeed be beneficial (medical marijuana). Although this is a convenient approach, especially because the legal-illegal boundary is often one that determines data availability, it is not conceptually correct. The Harsanyi distinctions are similarly not helpful. Is the apparent preference for trade in arms and child pornography a symptom of “sadism, envy, resentment, and malice”? Who is to say? Most would include (correctly) child pornography as “antisocial.” Fewer would include arms in this category. With regard to the role of rationality, Hurka (1999) has correctly pointed out that it is a *distinct* concept from virtue or the good.<sup>8</sup> Highly anti-social choices can be rational. Harsanyi recognizes this, but still leaves us evaluating options in terms of unobservables.<sup>9</sup> Finally, in the ideal advisor approach, we have preferences about preferences or perhaps desires about desires, on the part of a non-observable being. It simply borders on the absurd.

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<sup>8</sup> In a related comment, Harrod (1936) notes that “The attempt to give a rational justification for morality, so that the decision to be moral appears to be inferred as a conclusion from premises, can but lead to confusion” (p. 156).

<sup>9</sup> Harsanyi (1977) is rightly critical of Moore’s (1903) ideal utilitarianism defined in terms of “mental states of intrinsic worth.” He notes that “the criteria by which ‘mental states of intrinsic worth’ can be distinguished from other kinds of mental states are extremely unclear” (p. 645). But the same might be said of Harsanyi’s “state of mind most conducive to rational choice.” Griffen’s (1986) frustration with such informed-desire approaches is noteworthy: “Is it even intelligible?” (p. 16).

Despite some efforts, then, Sobel (1997) is correct in his observation that “the job of finding a convincing method of separating out the well-being-determining subset of our preferences from the other motivational factors remains a crucial but neglected component of a satisfactory subjectivist account of well-being” (p. 505). An alternative approach to the persistent problem of non-prudential desire is to simply abandon subjectivism altogether. The motivation for this is summarized in a key passage from Griffen (1986):

What makes us desire the things we desire, when informed, is something about them—*their* feature or properties. But why bother then with informed desire, when we can go directly to what it is about objects that shape informed desires in the first place? If what really matters are certain sorts of reason for action, to be found outside desires in qualities of their objects, why not explain well-being directly in terms of them? (p. 17).

Why not indeed? This sort of insight has led some economists such as Sen (1987) in an entirely different direction, towards an *objectivist* approach.<sup>10</sup> It needs to be understood that objectivist approaches can be associated with any of a number of object categories, from goods to capabilities. In Sen’s (1987) view, “(a)s a direction to go, concentration on the possession of vital commodities seems fair enough” (p. 15), and this approach characterizes his work on famines. However, Sen contends that “vital commodity possession” is inferior in general to an approach based on the neo-Aristotelian notions of functioning and capability.<sup>11</sup> In this view, utility-of-consumption is only *distantly* related to welfare instead of *identical* to welfare. Sen (1987) notes that “it is reasonable to argue that while well-being is related to being well off, they are not the same and may possible diverge a good deal” (p. 15).

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<sup>10</sup> The objectivist approach is supported by Hausman and McPherson (1993) on that grounds that it “link(s) up more naturally to the normative terms in which policy is debated” (p. 692). We will return to this issue below. The term “objectivist” here does *not* relate in any way to the popular term “Objectivist” associated with the writings of Ayn Rand.

<sup>11</sup> The neo-Aristotelian literature springs in part from Aristotle’s assertion in *Nicomachen Ethics* (Crisp, 2000) that “wealth is clearly not the good we are seeking, since it is merely useful, for getting something else” (p. 7). Rawls (1999, orig. 1971) refers to the role of capabilities in the *Nicomachen Ethics* as “the Aristotelian Principle.” It also springs from the role of Aristotle’s use of the *ergon* notion, which has been translated into the notion of functioning within capability boundaries.

These considerations lead Sen to put capabilities and associated functionings front and center in outcomes assessment. However, the capabilities approach suffers from some of the problems that plague the utility-of-consumption approach. First, capabilities can be identified in categories but are an unobservable envelope for the narrower and observable set of characterizing functions. Second, just as there is non-prudential desire, there are “disvaluable functionings” (Olsaretti, 2005) such as the ability to kill other human welfare subjects. Just like desires, then, functionings must be restricted, either through subjectivist pro-attitudes or through an objective list approach. The latter has been taken up most thoroughly by Nussbaum (2000) in her defense of a list of central human capabilities. These are: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one’s environment.<sup>12</sup> The spirit of her approach is well expressed in the following:

(T)he capabilities account deals well with the problems that plague the preference-based approach. It does not waste time trying to smuggle a substantive account of central capabilities into a procedure for winnowing desire: it goes directly and forthrightly to the good (and the right), taking an unambiguously clear stand on the need for these items, as an enabling core for whatever else human beings choose (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 149).

Even with this objective list of capabilities in place, however, two further problems remain. First, the listed capabilities are largely outside of the space in which relevant policies are made. The necessitates that Nussbaum, for example, emphasize the important role of the “material preconditions” of capabilities and to emphasize the important role of non-capabilities, such as sanitation and clean water, two items that are basic goods in the sense of this paper. Second, there is a *reluctance* to set priorities or allow for trade-offs among the central capabilities as appropriate and necessary in

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<sup>12</sup> There is an emphasis placed in the capabilities approach on regarding human subjects as ends as opposed to means. This is taken up in Sen (1989) but is more emphatic in Nussbaum (2000). Nussbaum introduces the “principle of each person as an end,” namely “that the separate person should be the basic unit for political distribution” and that “basic political principles mandate that the society secure a threshold level of the basic goods to *each*, seeing each life as deserving of basic life support” (p. 247). This principle is not limited to the capabilities approach, however, and can characterize other ethical frameworks, including the one proposed here. Indeed, Nussbaum (2005) recognizes this, noting the radical nature of early utilitarianism, which included “counting all people equally.”

policymaking as expressed by Nussbaum (2000).<sup>13</sup> In a world of widespread state failure and revenue deficiency, this is a significant limitation. For example, the approach avoids potential, lexicographical ordering of capabilities that might be very relevant in some contexts. In the development context, it is difficult to develop capabilities to play when engulfed in a malarial fever, and government priorities to provide bed-nets can indeed be an appropriate priority.<sup>14</sup>

With these preliminary considerations established, we can turn to a set of more detailed issues organized around the six dimensions of the basic goods approach identified in the introduction: minimalism, sense of justice, objectivist/subjectivist considerations, the human condition, policy considerations, and basic needs. We consider each in turn and how it contributes to a more satisfactory approach for outcomes assessment in development policy analysis.

### **Minimalism and Sense of Justice**

A fundamental advantage of a basic goods approach is its common, minimalist ethics. The term “common” is used here in the sense of Bok (2002) as being “easily recognized across societal and other boundaries” and “so clear-cut as to offer standards for critiquing abuses” (p. 1). The term “minimalist” is used in the sense of its main proponent, Walzer (1994), as “a simplified... morality” (p. 39) based on “mutual recognition among the protagonists of different fully developed cultures” (p. 17) that offers “a certain limited, though important and heartening solidarity” (p. 11).<sup>15</sup> More formally, if  $\mathbf{C}$  is a set of contexts  $\mathbf{C} = \{1,2,3, \dots\}$  and  $\mathbf{P}$  is a set of ethical principles  $\mathbf{P} = \{1,2,3, \dots\}$ , a common, minimalist ethics is characterized by a  $\mathbf{P}$  with a *small* number of elements applying over

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<sup>13</sup> The term “reluctance” used here seems accurate given Nussbaum’s (2000) statements. For example, she states that “The list is, emphatically, a list of *separate components*. We cannot satisfy the need for one of them by giving up a larger amount of another one.... The irreducible plurality of the list limits the trade-offs that it will be reasonable to make.... (T)hus there is a tragic aspect to any choice in which citizens are pushed below the threshold in one of the central areas” (p. 81). She also states that “Sometimes the state’s role... is understood in a narrow way that focuses on literacy and other basic skills that are important for technical and economic development, and perhaps on political skills understood in a narrow sense. My argument emphatically opposes such a narrow focus. In order to be doing what they should be for their citizens, state must be concerned with all the capabilities” (p. 90).

<sup>14</sup> Gould (2004, Chapter 2) criticizes the capabilities approach on grounds not taken up here, namely its abstract universality and essentialism that lead to cultural bias.

<sup>15</sup> Similar and important considerations can also be found in Hampshire (1989).

all elements of **C**.<sup>16</sup> This approach fully recognizes relativist concerns regarding incommensurability but shuns the assertion that set **P** applying over all elements of **C** is necessarily empty. A Muslim citizen of Pakistan who lacks shelter in the winter months due to the recent earthquake and the Christian citizen of Honduras, similarly lacking shelter due to a mudslide, despite residing in very different cultural spaces, would agree that the basic good shelter is of utmost value. Similarly, a Hindu Indian and an Animist West African, both suffering from malaria, would agree that bed-nets are of value. It is precisely such *real* and *existing* overlaps that make common, minimalist ethics both possible and urgent.<sup>17</sup>

The common, minimalist ethics of the basic goods approach avoids claims of *comprehensive* universalism, preferring a *narrowly-defined* universalism as all that can be expected and focusing on both existing and potential areas of agreement or overlap in valued, basic goods provision. Both comprehensively-universalist and relativist arguments are susceptible to what Bok (2002) calls *premature closure*. This is characterized by “either holding one particular set of values to be so self-evident as to require no further justification or allowing the rhetoric of moral incommensurability to block every inquiry concerning them” (p. 49). Common, minimalist ethics avoids both kinds of premature closure. The approach also avoids proceduralist remedies to relativist concerns, which invariably import or smuggle in additional sources of values in support of procedural success.<sup>18</sup> Instead of invoking procedure, the common, minimalist approach identifies objects of value directly and explicitly.

A common, minimalist approach focuses attention on highest-ranked priorities, potentially in a lexicographical sense. It makes room for the claim that violations of minimalist values are more important than other violations and are therefore more

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<sup>16</sup> The literature on minimalism often used the terms “thin” and “thick.” We eschew them here to avoid overlapping definitions.

<sup>17</sup> As noted by Maslow (1943), “Basic needs are *more* common-human than superficial desires or behaviors” (p. 390, emphasis in original). This consideration will lead us to consider basic needs below.

<sup>18</sup> Proceduralism (also known as contractarianism) sets out steps by which a “reasonable” or “cooperative” procedure can unearth ethical principles. Walzer (1994) notes that “the procedural minimalism turns out to be rather more than minimal” (p. 12), Blackburn (2001) notes that the proceduralist approach “just disguises the real source of values, which must lie elsewhere” (p. 126), and Gould (2004) criticizes the approach for being “excessively cognitivist” (p. 92) and for “translating substantive moral norms into matters of procedural decision” (p. 93).

deserving of attention. As such, the approach is proximate to a sense of justice, and this is its second fundamental advantage.<sup>19</sup> By “justice” here we do not mean a well-worked-out, procedural theory of justice along the lines of Rawls (1999, orig. 1971). Rather, it is a “common, garden variety justice” (Walzer, 1994, p. 2) or justice in the Aristotelian sense, namely that “what is useful, in common, is just” (Crisp, 2000, p. 155). In its focus on basic goods deprivations of the most serious sort, the approach is in full agreement with the famous statement of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1986) that “We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late” (pp. 632-633). Being too late in basic goods provision is a key instance of injustice to be redressed.

Some might argue that a minimalist, basic goods approach is *paternalistic*. How can we insist that one type of consumption is more important than another? The answer is that all diverse conceptions of human flourishing are predicated on human survival, and human survival requires a minimalist ethics of basic good provision.<sup>20</sup> Others might argue that a minimalist ethics is too *reticent* in scope; that more can and should be achieved. This is certainly the position of the utility-of-consumption view and the capabilities view. In a different context, however, Cohen (2004) noted that “the world that the minimalist imagines... is no small hope” (p. 191). Given the magnitude of basic goods deprivations to be discussed below, Cohen’s observation is relevant here as well.

### **Objectivist vs. Subjectivist Considerations**

The third fundamental advantage of the basic goods approach is its effective commonality with both objectivist and subjectivist schools of thought. Although subjectivist attempts to “winnow” desire have not been entirely satisfactory, subjectivism has its philosophical adherents, most notably Sumner (1995). While noting that “the concept of the subjective is one of the most treacherous in the philosopher’s lexicon” (p. 765), Sumner conceives of subjectivity as the requirement that pro-attitudes on the part of a welfare subjects are a *necessary* condition for conferring of value to potential welfare

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<sup>19</sup> Rosen (1977) questions the relationship between basic needs and justice, primarily on the basis of measurement issues. We will indeed motivate basic goods in terms of basic needs below, but will also address measurement issues in a manner that will largely address Rosen’s concerns.

<sup>20</sup> Again, see Bok (2002).

objects. Subjectivism attempts overcome the problem of non-prudential desire discussed above by not insisting that pro-attitudes be a *sufficient* condition for conferring of value. This approach is what Arneson (1999) terms the “endorsement constraint” and also characterizes some forms of the capabilities approach such as that of Olsaretti (2005).

Objectivist writers typically acknowledge the contribution of the endorsement constraint in overcoming at least some of the problems of non-prudential desire. However, some of them embrace a different approach in which pro-attitudes are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for conferring value to a potential welfare object. As stated by Arneson (1999), “there is no attitude that an individual must have toward an element in her life if that element is to qualify as intrinsically augmenting her well-being according to the objective list theory” (p. 142). So Sumner’s assertion that “objective theories exclude all reference to the subject’s attitudes or concerns” (p. 775) is correct at least in some important instances.<sup>21</sup> In other instances, however, objectivist writers more fully embrace the role of a necessary condition in the form of an endorsement constraint (e.g., Sobel 1997).<sup>22</sup>

In the context of evaluating the basic goods approach, two things should be acknowledged. First, much of Sumner’s critique of objectivism is directed at perfectionist, teleological theories, but the basic goods approach is a self-consciously *de minimus* theory associated with what Hampshire (1989) described as the “minimum common basis for a tolerable human life” or the “conditions of mere decency in human lives” (p. 33). Second, much of Arneson’s (1999) critique of the endorsement constraint takes place within a range of potential welfare objects radically larger than that considered in the basic goods approach. For this reason, Arneson’s concern that the endorsement constraint “has us swallowing a camel of implausibility to avoid ingesting an epistemic gnat” (p. 141) is less applicative here. As will be discussed at some length below, the basic goods approach does rest on the objectivist use of basic *needs* as a sufficient condition for conferring value. However, in so doing, it makes the likelihood

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<sup>21</sup> Sumner (1995) does not mince words. With regard to objectivist philosophers, he states “it is surprising how few of them have anything like a genuine theory to offer” (p. 776).

<sup>22</sup> Sobel (1997) stated that Sumner “did not notice that on the necessary condition interpretation the objectivist can allow that the agent’s attitudes play a (perhaps crucial) role in shaping her good. The more the objectivist allows this, the more they can capture the subjective-relativity of well-being in just the way that Sumner approves” (pp. 506-507).

that the included goods would not also pass an endorsement constraint *extremely unlikely*. In nearly every case, objective basic needs are addressed by basic goods characterized by pro-attitudes on the part of human welfare subjects. This is a result of what was recognized by Griffin (1986), namely, that any adequate subjectivist approach to outcomes assessment will necessarily be found at a very close distance to objectivist accounts.

### **The Human Condition**

The fourth fundamental advantage of the basic goods approach is its ability to speak directly to relevant and persistent aspects of the human condition. Much of the literature on the ethics of outcomes assessment is devoid of context, with references to the human condition being largely allegorical.<sup>23</sup> This is a mistake: at some point, logic needs to give way to human experience. As noted by Dewey (1958), “(W)hen one neglects the connection of... scientific objects with the affairs of primary experience, the result is a picture of a world of things indifferent to human interests because it is wholly apart from experience” (p. 11). Or, in the lexicon of Hampshire (1989), we cling to innocence and fail to face experience. The basic goods approach avoids this by being firmly rooted in the pervasive human experience of deprivation. Consider the most basic measure of global deprivation in the form of infant mortality. This is plotted in Figure 1 with a dashed, logarithmic trend line.<sup>24</sup> There is (thankfully) a downward trend, but in the most recent year for which data are available, the total infant mortality is *seven million*. On a cumulative basis from 1970 to 2004, the total is on the order of a quarter billion infants. This *excludes* the more expansive indicator of infant and child mortality. As is evident from the trend line ( $R^2 = 0.981$ ), the slope in the graph is also *decreasingly* negative, which indicates that progress in addressing this annual tragedy is diminishing over time. Of course, most of the infants who perish are in developing countries. For those who survive into childhood in these countries, the World Bank (2005) reports that one third

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<sup>23</sup> Miller (1992), Nussbaum (2000) and Pogge (2002) are some notable exceptions.

<sup>24</sup> This figure is drawn from World Bank data. Interestingly, total infant mortality itself is not reported in the data but needs to be calculated from rates. In keeping with Nussbaum’s principle of *each person as an end*, the totals are presented and emphasized here.

are underweight or stunted. One third of the developing-world population as a whole (adults and children) suffers from micronutrient deficiencies.

The contention of this paper is that mortality on this order of magnitude reflects a *profound crisis of basic goods under-provision*. Basic health services, clean water, and sanitation are obvious examples of under-provided basic goods complicit in this tragedy.<sup>25</sup> Again, as Martin Luther King, Jr. (1986) stated, “there is such a thing as being too late” (pp. 632-633). It is difficult to see even a restricted utility-of-consumption approach as being on the mark in the face of this empirical reality. Of course, the utility-of-consumption approach values basic health services positively, but no more so than tobacco, champagne or firearms.<sup>26</sup> It is as if, when we need to travel due north, it point directly to the northeast. Admittedly, it doesn’t point east or west, no less to the south. But it misses true north by 45 degrees.

Unlike the utility-of-consumption approach, the capabilities approach puts health issues directly in front of us. The first three central human capabilities of Nussbaum (2000) are life, bodily health, and bodily integrity. The direction here is much clearer than in the utility-of-consumption approach. The capabilities approach, however, is silent on the steps forward. It lacks what Bok (2002) refers to as a “stepwise, limited, and admittedly imperfect minimalist (approach) to social change” (p. 59). The basic goods approach both indicates where we want to go in the face of the human condition and how we want to get there. It is also broadly consistent with a conception of the good suggested by Hampshire (1989), namely, the prevention of great evils of which millions of perishing infants is clearly an example.<sup>27</sup> It is thus fully consistent with the notion of negative virtue.

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<sup>25</sup> The United Nations Development Program (2006) attributes 2 million infant and child deaths annually to the lack of clean water and sanitation. It also estimates the number of people without access to basic sanitation at 2.6 billion.

<sup>26</sup> In the case of firearms and other weapons, of approximately US\$25 billion in global arms sales in 2002, about US\$17 billion was in sales to developing countries (Grimmett, 2003). It is estimated that these trade flows contribute to the deaths of more than 300,000 persons each year (World Health Organization, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> As Hampshire (1989) notes, “There is nothing mysterious or ‘subjective’ or culture-bound in the great evils of human existence” (p. 90). Hampshire weighs in on the side of procedural justice as an antidote to these evils in a way that is not entirely convincing. In this paper, we instead support a more substantive notion of justice.

## Policy Considerations

The fifth fundamental advantage of the basic goods approach is the large area of intersection between the spaces defined by basic goods and relevant policies, particularly development policies. This is a characteristic shared with the utility-of-consumption approach but not with the capabilities approach. Behind basic capabilities lie basic goods, and behind basic goods lie basic needs. But only one of these three categories (basic capabilities, basic goods, and basic needs) corresponds in large measure to policy space. This is basic goods.

Why is this important? A close correspondence between the outcome of concern and the relevant policy instruments helps one to closely link the two and supports success in promoting the outcome. It also removes “slack” in the evaluative framework that tends to obscure the issue being addressed. Consider for example, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in place since 2000 (United Nations, 2008). This is a collection of eight goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators. It is an amalgam of measures based on income, capabilities achievement, basic goods provision, specific policies, expenditures, and physical outcomes (e.g., emissions). One of the most important and straightforward MDG is Goal 4 to “reduce child mortality.” This is related to a target (4A) in the form of “reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.” This is, in turn, related to three indicators (4.1-4.3): the under-five mortality rate; the infant mortality rate; and the proportion of 1 year-old children immunized against measles. The first two elements of this third analytical layer are overlapping outcomes in the form of capability achievement, while the third is in the form of basic goods provision. So we have three analytical layers, the last of which embodies an inconsistency and which does not reach the provision of all the relevant basic goods.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This multi-layered approach is necessarily mirrored in attempts to model the MDG process, most notably that of Bourguignon et al. (2004). In order to assess MDG outcomes, the modelers must first focus on a set of *basic goods* in the form of a detailed treatment of government production and consumption, divided into education, health services, water and sanitation, and infrastructure. It is here that actual policies enter into the model. Progress in meeting MDGs must be assessed in terms of an *additional* set of MDG functions that link MDG indicators to sets of determining factors, including the provision of government services. The MDGs are *analytically separate* from policies, and the model would be sufficient without them.

As a consequence of the multiple-layered outcomes structure, the whole MDG project has been plagued by trying to legislate and enforce outcomes too far removed from the relevant and actual policies. An alternative approach advocated here is to simply and directly focus on the relevant basic goods provisions. In the case of MDG Goal 4 these would be prenatal care, accompanying births by health professionals, postnatal care, oral re-hydration solutions, clean water, sanitation, and vaccinations.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, much of the MDG framework could be recast in terms of basic goods provision, putting it in closer touch with actual policies.<sup>30</sup>

The relationship between objects of value and the policies relevant to these objects matters a great deal more than is typically recognized in deliberations over ethical frameworks. A large part of the success of the utility-of-consumption approach is due to the close correspondence between goods space and policy space. While not decisive in and of itself, this correspondence being better focused on essentials in the basic goods approach is a significant advantage vis-à-vis the capabilities approach. It is of course not the case that all policies take the form of basic goods provision. Institutions do matter a great deal to development outcomes. But institutions without basic goods provision can be hollow with effective access limited to those who are able to secure access to basic goods.

### **Basic Goods and Basic Needs**

The sixth fundamental advantage of the basic goods approach is the theoretical and empirical support given to defining basic goods in terms of basic needs. Indeed, the entire basic goods approach rests on a priority claim for a subset of goods that address basic

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<sup>29</sup> In its own assessment of Goal 4, the United Nations (2008) notes that “The leading causes of childhood deaths – pneumonia, diarrhoea, malaria and measles – are easily prevented through simple improvements in basic health services and proven interventions, such as oral rehydration therapy, insecticide-treated mosquito nets and vaccinations,” all basic goods in the sense of this paper.

<sup>30</sup> The aim here is not to cast a negative light on the human development paradigm *per se* that emerged from the capabilities approach. Despite a mixed methodology in its inclusion of the non-capability income, which casts the paradigm as a Rawlsian primary goods framework rather than a capabilities framework, the human development paradigm has indeed made a lasting contribution in expanding the dimensionality of development thinking, conceptions of poverty or deprivation, and development policy itself.

needs.<sup>31</sup> This characteristic might, at first blush, indicate an extensive regression to successively prior concepts. This is not the case, however. Theoretical and empirical support for this analytical structure is actually quite strong.

One characteristic of basic needs is that they are developmentally related to the human condition and can be verified as being so. A serious deprivation of basic needs has negative ramifications for the human organism. For a need to be authentic and therefore recognized as legitimate in the basic goods approach, it must support the life of the human organism. As stated by Griffin (1986), basic needs are “what we need to survive, to be healthy, to avoid harm, to function properly” (p. 42). Or as Gough (2000) states: “Needs are defined, and distinguished from wants, by appealing to an externally verifiable stock of codified knowledge” (p. 36). Therefore, while an individual might claim a “need” for tobacco or cocaine, objective scientific evidence would dispute this and obviate inclusion of these items. While a government might claim that its citizens “need” a widespread proliferation of small arms, objective scientific evidence would again obviate inclusion. For these reasons, and according to the account of Arneson (1999), the basic goods approach can be seen as falling into the category of “objective list” theory. In particular, it embodies what Arneson terms the “claim of realism” about value in that it holds that “claims about what is good can be correct or incorrect and that the correctness of a claim about a person’s good is determined independently of that person’s volition, attitudes, and opinions” (p. 115).

Both Nussbaum and Sen argue against the use of basic goods provision as a measure of wellbeing on the grounds that it fails to address important individual differences in needs. They both do this in terms of individuals “A” and “B.” Nussbaum (2000) argues:

To treat A and B as equally well-off because they command the same amount of resources is... to neglect A’s separate and distinct life, to pretend that A’s circumstances are interchangeable with B’s, which may not be the case (p. 69).

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<sup>31</sup> Among philosophers, the role of basic needs was given some emphasis by Belsey (1992). More recently, Gould (2004, Chapter 3) has taken up needs in general, including basic needs, as part of what she terms “embodied politics.” The needs considered in this paper fall under her category of “material needs.”

Similarly, Sen (1987) argues:

Consider two persons A and B. Both are quite poor, but B is poorer. A has a higher income and succeeds in particular in buying more food and consuming more of it. But A also has a higher metabolic rate and some parasitic disease, so that despite his higher food consumption, he is in fact more undernourished and debilitated than B is” (p. 15).

This individuation argument has validity and does tip the analytical scale in the direction of the capabilities approach. Three further observations are relevant, however. First, as discussed above, the capabilities approach exists largely outside of policy space, and this limits its usefulness in addressing basic needs, individualized or not. Second, policies generally are not made at the individual level. There are indeed limits to accounting for individual metabolic rates in development policy formation, and the case of parasitic disease needs to be addressed through the provision of basic goods in the form of appropriate health services. Third, despite the role of household survey data in econometric modeling, the bulk of applied economic modeling is across aggregates of individuals and households. Thus, it is not clear that, in practice, the individuation argument is enough to obviate the advantages of the basic goods approach.

Given these considerations, we adopt basic needs as the ethical ground of the basic goods approach.<sup>32</sup> However, the notion of basic needs is not only an ethical category, but a concept with *both* theoretical *and* empirical validity in the economics of consumer behavior. This goes back to the work of Maslow (1943), Georgescu-Roegen (1954) and Stone (1954). As is well known, Maslow posited a hierarchy of needs that began with the economically most-relevant categories of physiological and safety needs and then progressed to higher levels. Georgescu-Roegen noted that needs (along with wants and uses) are *prior to* any well-thought-out conception of utility. Stone’s linear expenditure system made a distinction between basic consumption (or subsistence requirements) and other expenditures, a preference structure applying to the latter. This approach allowed income elasticities of demand to diverge from unity. Deaton and Muellbauer (1980) used the typical concept of “necessities” as being those goods for which the income elasticity of demand is less than unity and budget shares fall with

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<sup>32</sup> In this, we are following Griffin (1986): “*Well-being... is the level to which basic needs are met*” (p. 42, italics in original).

income level, and Harberger (1984) addressed the role of basic needs in cost-benefit analysis.<sup>33</sup> In his survey of consumer behavior, Blundell (1988) presented evidence of both the less than unity character of basic needs income elasticities and the fact that these elasticities decline with income levels.

In the realm of social theory and social policy, needs were put at center stage by Doyal and Gough (1991). In the view of these authors, social progress is predicated upon a needs-based theory of the human condition. Importantly, they stress that needs are “universal” and “knowable” (p. 4). In a similar way to the discussion above on the human condition, Doyal and Gough state the “Basic human needs... stipulate what persons must achieve if they are to avoid sustained and serious harm” (p. 50). However, these authors take a more expansive approach allowing for “human autonomy” as well as health. Therefore, what they term “universal satisfier characteristics” that meet needs is larger than would be allowable in the basic goods approach.<sup>34</sup> Despite this difference, the work of Doyal and Gough shows that the basic goods approach, in resting on the prior concept of need, can fit into a broader conception of social (as opposed to just economic) theory and policy.

The translation of the needs concept into the economics of consumer expenditure was part of post-Keynesian thinking in the work of Pasinetti (1981) and Lavoie (1992), as well as the work of Seeley (1992). A more recent and quite complete treatment of basic needs is that of Baxter and Moosa (1996) who provide an explicit list of basic needs characteristics: universal, hierarchical, satiable, measurable, irreducible, continuing, stable, additive (or proportional to population), and absolute. Based on an econometric analysis, these authors show that: basic needs are characterized by income elasticities less than unity; these income elasticities decline with income; and that from a number of different points of view, basic needs expenditures are more stable than other types of expenditures. Their overall conclusion is that “basic needs expenditure should be

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<sup>33</sup> More specifically, Harberger (1984) associates an externality with basic needs fulfillment and contrasts this approach with the use of distributional weights.

<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, their list of intermediate needs includes many items that could also be conceived of a basic goods: nutritional food and clean water; protective housing; non-hazardous work environment; appropriate healthcare; appropriate health care; and safe childbearing.

distinguished from other expenditure on non-durable items. This distinction should be made on the theoretical level as well as in... model building” (p. 98).

One might question why we are reviving what is now sometimes referred to as a development “fad” in the form of the basic needs approach of Streeten (1979, 1984), Streeten and Burki (1978) and Hicks and Streenen (1979) among others. This approach emphasized six types of needs in the form of food and nutrition, basic educational services, basic health services, sanitation, water supply and housing. The basic needs approach, however, was not as well worked out as it could have been. It was sometimes stated as an expansive, subjective concept and sometimes as a relatively narrow objective concept. It was never closely related to the economics of consumer behavior as suggested here. For these reasons perhaps, Sen (1987) casts it aside in favor of capabilities. It should, however, be revived with the tools of consumer theory and econometrics in hand.

Far from relying on “states of mind conducive to rational choice” (Harsanyi, 1977), an imaginary ideal advisor (Railton, 1986), agreement among “decent” and/or “rational” people (Moore, 1903 and Gutman, 1993), or other questionable supporting devices, the basic goods approach is grounded on a *verifiable* concept of basic needs that has proved to be both *observable* and relatively *stable*. The issues of the “indeterminacy” of basic needs (and therefore basic goods) are much less pressing that sometimes suggested.<sup>35</sup> The basic goods approach therefore has legs to stand on.

## **Summary and Discussion**

As an analytical framework, the basic goods approach cuts in a number of directions. First, it downgrades the valuation of non-basic consumption as not contributing substantially to essential welfare. Consequently, while the priority claim for basic goods is not absolute, it does lend itself to a potential lexicographical ordering of basic and non-basic consumption for the purpose of outcomes assessment.<sup>36</sup> Second, it potentially

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Chapter III of Griffin (1986).

<sup>36</sup> Given the reputation of oddity conferred to lexicographical preferences in the economics profession, it is perhaps worth noting that such orderings “represent a perfectly reasonable system of choice” (Deaton and Muellbauer, 1980, p. 27). Griffin (1986) draws attention to the need for “flexibility” in basic needs accounts. While appearing to object to strict lexicographical orderings as being too inflexible, he does propose the following modified formulation that is largely consistent with the one advocated here: “*well-being is the level to which basic needs are met so*

allows for harmful, non-basic consumption to be considered as welfare worsening, even if legally consumed as in the case of tobacco and armaments. Third, it draws attention to the welfare-enhancing consequences of basic consumption that satisfies basic needs. Due to the potential lexicographical ordering, the basic goods approach can violate the continuity axiom of choice theory, therefore disallowing the use of indifference surfaces in outcomes assessment. This does not preclude, however, the use of indifference surfaces at the level of household behavior.

From a teleological perspective, the utility-of-consumption approach is both off target and overly restrictive. It is off target because it fails to recognize that some forms of consumption undermine human ends. It is overly restrictive because its conception of these ends is in terms of nothing but desire fulfillment, prudential or not. These two qualities are related in that being on target is sacrificed by the utility-of-consumption approach to ensure the central place of desire fulfillment. The teleology of the capabilities approach is more on target if we strip out “disvaluable functionings,” better structured, and more reasonable than the utility-of-consumption approach. It is, however, overly expansive for use in policy-based outcomes assessment, covering nearly every conceivable aspect of human life in analytical spaces not well overlapped with policies. The basic goods approach is on target and restrictive, but the latter has an ordered logic to it and focuses demands on crucial, reasonable objects of value. This is in line with Blackburn’s (2001) assertion that ethical principles need to be practical and limited in demands.

The basic goods approach most certainly relates to and endorses what Gough (2002) refers to as the “common project” of Doyal and Gough (1991), Nussbaum (2000) and others, namely: “to clarify and defend those universal human interests which alone can underpin an emancipatory and effective political programme for all women and men” (p. 2). It relates directly to the way the “common project” avoids relativism and proceduralism in favor of a specific sort of universalism. It most emphatically embraces Doyal and Gough’s concern with ameliorating “serious harm” and “profound suffering.” That said, because the basic goods approach still reflects a predisposition towards a

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*long as they retain importance*” (p. 52, italics in original). Lexicographic preferences in the context of basic needs are explored by Zaman (1986).

standard economic analysis, it is less oriented towards the constitutional issues at the center of Doyal and Gough (1991) and Nussbaum (2000). Consequently, its scope is significantly narrower.<sup>37</sup> It is not a theory of human flourishing, but rather a framework of economic welfare developed outside of the preference-based, utility of consumption tradition.

How would the basic goods approach proceed in its assessment of welfare? It most certainly would focus on unmet needs as evidenced in basic goods deprivations. It would no doubt employ household survey data. For example, Ngwane, Yadavalli and Steffens (2002) measured basic goods deprivation in South Africa in the form of housing, access to safe water, sanitation services, refuse removal services and electricity, with differences among regions and races being analyzed for statistical significance. In cases where the Millennium Development Goals have been set out in terms of basic goods provision rather than in terms of a higher-level objective, a similar focus on deprivation is relevant. However, further inquiry into the institutional environment of basic goods provision is also possible as in the case of Spencer et al. (2008) in the case of water (MDG Goal 7, along with sanitation). In such inquiries, concern with the human condition and with specific policy analysis can come together in practical and important ways. It is important to recognize throughout, however, that basic goods include *public* as well as private goods and to adjust the inquiry accordingly.

Considerations of outcomes assessment in economics, philosophy, and related disciplines tend to focus on one or two dimensions of the problem. Emphasis might be put on logical consistency to the exclusion of the human condition, for example, or on the human condition to the exclusion of empirical support. None of the considerations discussed here in favor of the basic goods approach is decisive *in and of itself*, because each focuses on a particular dimension of the problem. However, the combination of the six considerations analyzed here, taken as a set, lend a great deal of pragmatic support to the approach. Satisfying the basic goods imperative is clearly more important than increasing overly-agnostic equivalent variation measures or non-basic capabilities, and the unfulfilled needs reflected in the seven million infants who currently perishing annually testify to this fact. Satisfying the basic needs imperative is also more important

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<sup>37</sup> Gasper (1996) considers this to be both appropriate and useful.

than achieving more advanced forms of capabilities and indeed is a prerequisite to this achievement. It is, emphatically, no small hope.

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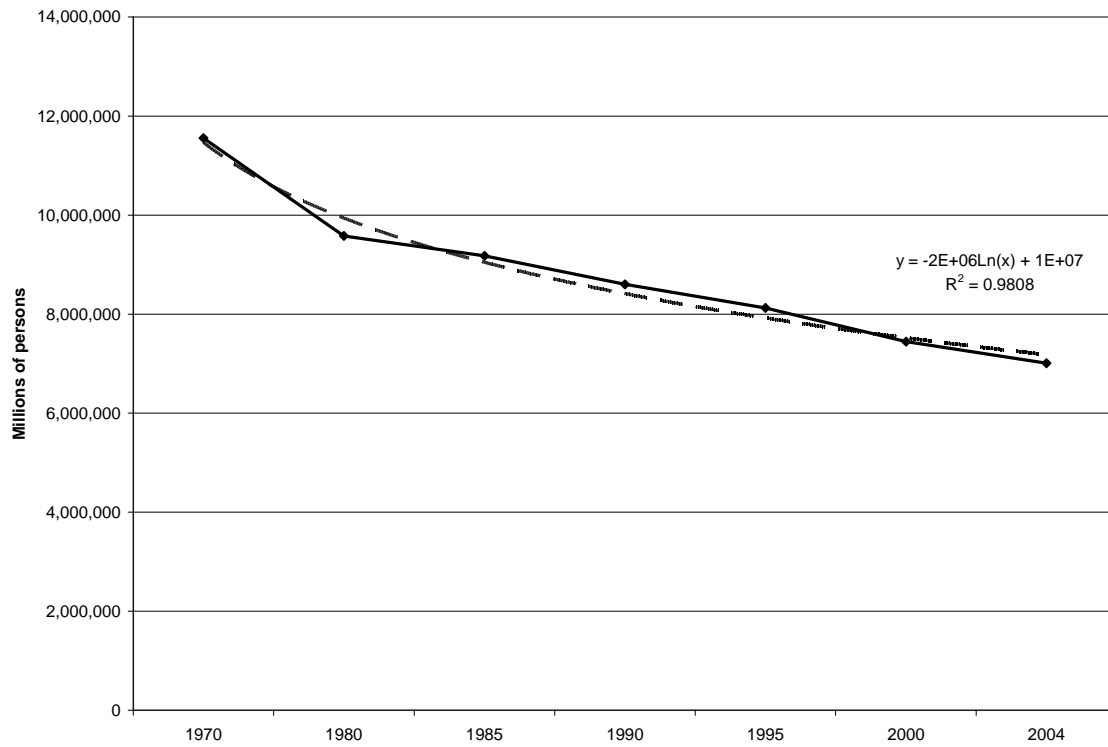
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Figure 1. Global Infant Mortality with Logarithmic Trend Line



Source: author's calculations based on data from the World Bank's 2006 World Development Indicators. Note: Trend line is dashed.