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Further details regarding this paragraph are given in the Editorial Notes.

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INDEX

ARTICLES

- Les ambiguïtés axiologiques et normatives du leadership 7
Michel Dion
- Identifying the Theoretical Foundations for Common Good Leadership 41
Cynthia M. Montaudon-Tomas, Manuel Alejandro Gutiérrez-González, Ingrid N. Pinto-López & Claudia Malcón-Cervera.
- Design and Validation of a Scale to Evaluate Common Good Leadership 80
Claudia Malcón-Cervera, Cynthia M. Montaudon-Tomas, Ingrid N. Pinto-López & Manuel Alejandro Gutiérrez-González.
- Leadership for the Common Good on Economic and Administrative Students in the State of Queretaro, Mexico. 110
Manuel Alejandro Gutiérrez-González, Jana Mejía-Toiber, Cynthia Montaudon-Tomas, Claudia Malcón-Cervera & Ingrid Pinto-López.
- Common Good Leadership in Business School Students at a Private University in Puebla, Mexico. 129
Cynthia M. Montaudon-Tomas, Ingrid N. Pinto-López, Manuel Alejandro Gutiérrez-González & Anna Amsler.
- A Common Good Approach to Structural Forms of Poverty 169
Mathias Nebel

ESSAYS

- Tres visiones de la excelencia: a propósito de *The Tyranny of Merit* 189
de Michael Sandel
Juan Pablo Aranda

Universidad y bien común: Breve crítica a la *tiranía del mérito* de Sandel 206
Pedro Flores Crespo

BOOK REVIEW

Sandel, M., *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* UK: ALLAN LANE, 2020, 272 PP 218
Patrick Riordan SJ



ARTICLES



A COMMON GOOD APPROACH TO STRUCTURAL FORMS OF POVERTY

UNE APPROCHE PAR LE BIEN COMMUN DES FORMES DE PAUVRETÉ
STRUCTURELLES

Received: November 2021 I Accepted: February 2022

Dr. Mathias Nebel*

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article soutient que la pauvreté structurelle se comprend mieux si on ne l'aborde pas à partir de statistiques individuelles mais à partir de l'absence d'un ensemble spécifique de biens communs. Si tel est le cas, alors le sens et la valeur donnés par une société à cet ensemble de bien communs devient crucial et pointe vers les éléments culturels et éthiques de la pauvreté. Je soutiendrai en outre que cette approche peut aider à identifier certain des éléments caractéristiques qui contrôlent la dynamique négative de sous-systèmes sociaux malfaisants.

ABSTRACT

This article claims that structural forms of poverty are better understood not from the perspective of individual based statistics but from a lack of a specific set of common goods. The meaning and value given by a society to this set is therefore crucial and points toward the cultural and ethical elements of poverty. I will further argue that this approach may help identify the key elements of structural forms of poverty, that is, the features controlling the negative dynamic of wicked social subsystems.

Keywords: Development Ethics, Multidimensional poverty, Community based development programs, Common good approach to development.

Mots clés: Ethique du développement, Pauvreté multidimensionnelle, Programme de développement basés sur la communauté, Bien commun

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INTRODUCTION

Whereas extreme poverty is receding in most developing countries,¹ overall structural forms of poverty² are often stubbornly resistant to decades of efforts to bring them down. Embedded into the institutional framework organizing social life, essentially multidimensional, these systemic forms of poverty are dynamic, which is to say they can adapt quickly and resist change.³

The sheer complexity of these structural forms of poverty is such that no single social policy can address them on their own (OCDE, 2017). It is however still widely assumed that addressing the different issues at hand – housing, education, income, health –, one at a time, will somehow bring them down. This is however rather naïve since a social system is more than the sum of its individual parts (Le Blanc, 2015). Indeed, Objective 17 of the SDGs⁴ recognises the need for social policy integration but does not really say how to solve the issue (Boas, 2016).

Do we really have to surrender to complexity? Can't we address structural forms of poverty but through their different single effects? It might be that structural forms of poverty only appear complex because of the perspective from which we look at them. I will suggest here that structural forms of poverty partly escape what individual based data can teach us about them. I will further argue that a common good approach to society may help identify some key elements of structural forms of poverty, that is, the features controlling the negative dynamic of social subsystems.

The first part of this article investigates Mexico's endemic forms of poverty as they are documented and measured by the Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL). The second part will review the success and failure of the World Bank's Community Based Development Programs. The third proposes a common good approach to structural forms of poverty. We conclude that such perspective may reduce their apparent complexity and give new insights on how to disrupt their social replication.

¹Cf. <https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty>

²“Social structure, describe in sociology, the distinctive, stable arrangement of institutions whereby human beings in a society interact and live together”. Encyclopedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-structure>. I mostly follow regarding social structures the work of sociologists Ross and Nisbet (2011).

³For the concept of structural poverty, please consult my previous work in Deneulin, Nebel & Sagovski (2006, 1-16). Structural forms of poverty (Calnitsky 2018) refer to specific social situation where poverty relates not primarily to individual features but is linked to the way a society is structured. In that perspective, poverty is not to be understood as the mere mis-functioning of social institutions but rather their normal outcome. This article seeks to understand this “normality of poverty”.

⁴Goal 17. “Partnership for the goals: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development” Cf. <https://www.globalgoals.org/17-partnerships-for-the-goals>



ENDEMIC FORMS OF POVERTY IN MEXICO

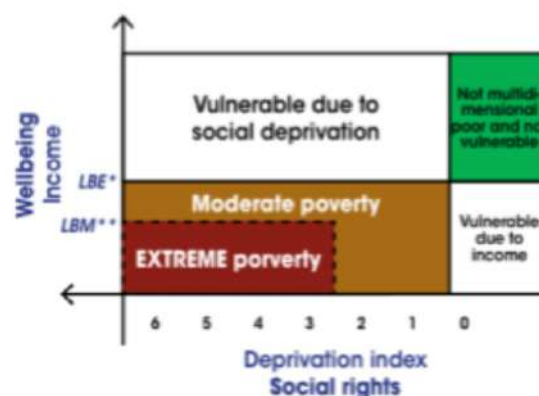
Since the creation of the Human Development Index, poverty is ever more recognised as being multidimensional. Among many others countries, the Mexican government created in 2005 an agency named CONEVAL to address the challenge of massive poverty, beginning with the way it is measured. The CONEVAL is an autonomous but state funded institute dedicated to document and measure poverty and to assess public policies aimed at reducing it. Its approach to poverty is multidimensional. Poverty is seen as the result of a set of deprivations. Lack of income is obviously identified as an important dimension of poverty. It is approached through two poverty lines. The first describes a monetary well-being threshold (LBE) while the second draws a survival line contemplating the price of essential goods (LBM). Other six social deprivations are further analysed as: ‘Educational lag’, ‘Lack of access to health services’, ‘Lack of access to social security’, ‘Inadequate housing’, ‘Inadequate housing services’, ‘Food deprivation’. A last dimension was incorporated in 2014: the ‘Degree of social cohesion’⁵.

Along this line, CONEVAL intersects *economic conditions* and *social deprivations* to map out the complexity of poverty in Mexico. The following graph represents this cross section. Extreme poverty flags out at the bottom of the two axes, with individuals presenting an income lower than the LBM and more than two social deprivations. Moderate poverty captures individuals that do not reach the LBE and suffer from at least one social deprivation. The graph also highlights the part of the population that cannot be classified as poor but is vulnerable either because of income or other social deprivations. In 2018, 42% of the population was poor, 36% was identified as vulnerable while the non-poor and non-vulnerable only amounted to 22%.⁶

Figure 1. CONEVAL's Six Dimensions of Poverty



Figure 2. CONEVAL's Mapping of Poverty



⁵However, the measurement of this dimension and its coherence with the previous framework is still quite shabby and will have, in the words of CONEVAL itself, “to be further researched”.

⁶Cf. https://www.coneval.org.mx/Medicion/MP/Documents/Pobreza_18/Pobreza_2018_CONEVAL.pdf (accessed november 2019).



While the two well-being thresholds are quite classic, to measure social deprivation CONEVAL takes *social rights* as the basis for identifying structural forms of deprivation, following the ‘International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights’ (1966). It then proposes that these social rights be understood as *public goods*, which must be *efficiently provided by the state* and *fairly distributed among the population* (fair provision, equality of access, equality of opportunity). CONEVAL has given advice to all the different Mexican administrations for the past 15 years. Over the same period, it also assessed the quality and impact of all the social policies set by state. It is therefore useful to revise the results of such multidimensional approach to poverty. Has it drastically reduced poverty levels? Has it been able to address the endemic forms of poverty in Mexico? Unfortunately, not.

A study carried out by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and the Universidad Iberoamericana in 2017, shows the mismatch between the intention of this approach and its results (Teruel & Lopez, 2017). Flagship social programs were launched under this new approach to poverty called, first *Oportunidades* and then *Prospera*.⁷ They tried to address the poverty gap in education, health and diet by increasing the opportunity set for the poor. The program grew from 5 million beneficiaries in 1997 to 25 million in 2014 (1/5 of the population). Billions of dollars were invested and new ad-hoc institutions were created (Barajas-Martínez, 2016). The results however are ambiguous. On the positive side, extreme poverty receded over the last 15 years (Niño-Zarazúa, 2017), especially regarding access to medical care (from 42% deprived in 2000 to 16% in 2018). However, the *total amount of poor people is stable since 1992*, especially due to the resilience of income deprivation (LBE & LBM). A closer look shows a darker picture (De la Fuente & Alii, 2018). First *Prospera* – when successful – has mainly lifted poor just above the thresholds, increasing the number of the ‘vulnerable population’. These groups of people might ‘fall back’ quickly if the social gains are not sustained and their benefits not transmitted to the next generation.⁸ Secondly, the focus on increasing access to food, health and education certainly had an impact, but did not ‘sum up’ and created a positive social dynamic that would have allowed these persons to overcome the other dimensions of poverty.

All in all, we can say that besides our best efforts having invested billions of dollars into social programs over 20 years, Mexico has not been able to overcome the structural level of poverty affecting the country. We must be doing something wrong, either in the way we understand poverty or in the way we draft social policies. What are we doing wrong? Hereafter are three blind spots of the CONEVAL approach to poverty.

⁷ Cf. <https://www.gob.mx/prospera/documentos/que-es-prospera> (Accessed May 2019). The program was widely acclaimed and reproduced in more than 52 countries.

⁸ CEEY, *Informe de movilidad social en México 2019*. Cf. <https://ceey.org.mx/informe-de-movilidad-social-mexico-2019/>



First, most if not all of the data on income and social deprivation is based on information from individuals or households. The information is then aggregated in different forms to reach the final data. This is standard procedure. Is there anything wrong with it? As it happens with numbers, their apparent objectivity obscures the assumptions made previously to the calculations. A clever aggregation of individual realities still doesn't account for the social dynamics generating poverty. The moment we add the capability space of individual (A) to that of individual (B), we totally oversee how this aggregation process takes actually place in a society and altogether postulate that it is, in fact, a sum. The science of complex living systems proves that this is a weak assumption (Luhmann, 1984; Sawyer, 2005). Social systems are more than the sum of their parts; their logic can't be reduced to an aggregation of individual behaviours. Take, for example, a group of children playing in a courtyard. You will gather from each individual behaviour something about their personal ability, but in order to understand their game you must study their interactions as a group. Because the play is more than the personal abilities of each one. It stems from us, as a group, playing together a game. The play's rationality belongs to the group and can't be reduced to the reasonings of each individual in the game.

This is quite important with regards to poverty measurement. If poverty in developing countries is systemic, i.e. is the result of the *normal functioning of a social system*, then measuring it from the perspective of individual deprivations is to be blind to the logic of the system creating this poverty. In other words, if the social system does not change, neither will structural forms of poverty.

Therefore, the very statistics CONEVAL generates - however useful and needed - also create a blind spot: they do not give us meaningful information on why people are stuck in poverty and more crucially on how we may overcome these structural forms of poverty. Worse still: social policies, because of their statistical assessment in terms of individual functionings, will almost naturally focus on how to 'lift individuals out of poverty'. One outcome of these policies being the increase of vulnerable people, that is people living just out of the poverty zone and thus not appearing any more as 'poor' on national statistics (Khalid, 2014, 55-76).

A second blind spot is linked to the assumption made by CONEVAL that social rights - rights to education, to health care, social security, food and adequate housing - are matched by the fair provision and distribution of public goods by the State. Can we equate social rights and public goods? Does the fair provision and distribution of education, health, food or housing account for what is meant by a social right?

Social rights are collective rights and refer to social norms that can't be renounced without hurting justice and the very dignity of every human beings. Social rights refer to what Rawls calls the basic institutions providing a community with the public goods that



benefit everyone (a just society). However, as Ostrom shows (1990, 1-23), the assumptions made by Samuelson (1954) over public goods are too narrow. They do not account for non-state/non-market mechanisms allowing common-pool-resources to exist, be governed and sustained over very long periods of time. The dichotomy between public good and private good must be enlarged, argues Ostrom, to include ‘impure public goods’, especially what she calls ‘common-pool resources’ (1990, 30-32). But Ostrom’s work goes far beyond adding a new category to Samuelson’s distinction. She brings attention to an aspect that was overlooked in the literature on public goods. The process by which commons are created and sustained is deeply political. It depends on the *political will* of a community and the *meaning* given by that community to the social good (Williams, 2004). The value given to a common by a community is key to set how it must be produced and distributed. In the case of CONEVAL, does the Mexican people really value “health care” as a common? The public hospital systems (IMSS, ISSTE) are shun by the topier of the society who prefer to pay for private health care insurance, while the people working in the informal sector (over 65% of the economy) prefer not to report their business, partly to avoid paying the share legally due to fund the IMSS or ISSTE. This is not only a question of incentives, but rather a question of the social value given to health care and if we want it to be universally available.¹⁰

And this precisely comes as the third blind spot of CONEVAL’s statistics on poverty. The way we look and understand structural poverty through their data is driven by the absence of some individual utility function - be it education, health, housing or income. Neither does it consider the meaning given to that good by the community nor the political will required to achieve it. In other words, we see the absence of a social good through the narrowing lens of its distribution to individuals, not as the outcome of a social process.

What is left out of the picture? The key role of the local community itself! Does this community want a school to be built? Does it value the provision of clean water or electricity? Most people - most development scholars - just assume that people must want these basic social goods. Who does not want to have access to education? Who does not want to be provided with clean water or electricity? But the question is: does the community want this at any cost? Does it value education, electricity and clean water above everything else? Is an indigenous community, for example, willing to lose its own identity and language in order to be connected to the modern world? Moreover, does the

⁹This is in stark contrast with Samuelson assumption that the production and distribution of goods depends on their intrinsic qualities, namely rivalry in consumption and excludability. If we assume that the meaning and value given by a community to a good is the main factor to decide how it should be produced, managed and distributed, we must admit that the ethical value give to the good is ultimately what control’s the substitution rate of goods. Indeed, the limits of Samuelson’s distinction relies on the social utility function he posits. Human rights normativity can’t be reduced to a social utility function as their claim is universal and unconditional. This ethical dimension will be further addressed in the last section of this article.
CEEY, *Informe de movilidad social en México 2019*. Cf. <https://ceey.org.mx/informe-de-movilidad-social-mexico-2019/>

¹⁰This point is clearly made in CEEY, *Propuesta para transformar el Sistema Nacional de Salud*, 2013. <https://ceey.org.mx/el-mexico-del-2013-propuesta-para-transformar-el-sistema-nacional-de-salud/>



elite of a community which already enjoys clean water, electricity and schools agrees that these benefits should be expanded to all members of the community?

These questions are not rhetorical. They illustrate that most of the time development planners just assume that basic goods must have some sort of 'universal value' while at the same time positing that the values of existing social goods are compatible with them. It is the universal claim that allows them to dismiss the need for the local community to decide on the opportunity to get these basic goods. We do not need to worry about how electricity, clean water, roads or education fit into an existing society because these are basic goods! Now, the point is that even basic goods can't be detangled from all the other social goods already existing in the community.

What is left out of the picture is the free collective agency - the political will - of this community. As long as we understand the participation of local communities as a means to achieve an end - to build schools and roads, to provide water and electricity - we will fail in our development practices (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). While we see the empowerment of local communities only as instruments for achieving a specific social good, then the well-being of local communities is little more than a dispensable abstraction. Development practices will never be sustainable as long as the will that drives them is that of development planners and not that of the local community.

An institution as CONEVAL is certainly not redundant and gives a much-needed picture of the multidimensionality of poverty in Mexico. Its existence is, in itself, an achievement. However, its reports on poverty and its impact assessment of public policies, are essentially directed at the State, which is responsible to guarantee basic human rights. The provision of these basic human rights in turn implies that these aspects of poverty must be resolved by the State, essentially through the public goods. Policies recommendation based on such an approach are doomed to be top down and blind to the three difficulties mentioned in the previous points, which may also explain why they so often fail to achieve their objective.

How can we include local participation and collective agency to our understanding of poverty? The next paragraph explores how the ideas of Ostrom inspired community based development programs, as well as their shortcomings.

COMMUNITY BASED DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

The recognition of the importance of the political will of local communities is nowadays widely admitted by development economics. It is less certain however that we know how to deal with it in practice. Much has been written on empowerment and social capital in development projects but results are often ambiguous and experience shows that 'doing



participation' is harder than we assume in theory (Clark, Biggeri et Frediani, 2019). This second part of the article follows the World Bank's set of programs known as 'Community Based Development Programs'. They were meant to embody a participatory approach to development. Almost 25 years later, their assessment is ambiguous and point to some shortcomings of the participatory approach.

In her landmark book on the governance of commons (1990), Ostrom proposes a set of guidelines needed for commons to exist and be sustained. Her writings, part of a wider interest for participation and social capital, were swiftly picked up by the World Bank which launched Community Based or Driven Development project (CBDs). The importance of the right political will needed for projects to achieve their results was rife at the time, with other initiatives like the WB Governance Index being launched at the same time. Equally important and related was the need to embed development practice in local communities whenever possible.¹¹ These CBDs programs became a growing trend in the following years, quickly attracting huge investments by international aid agencies (Narayan, 1995, Mansury & Rao, 2004, 2013).

Why? CBDs programs stem from a wide recognition of the failure of a top down, provider approach to development. As stated in 1995 by Narayan: "From time immemorial, societies have organized themselves to take care of collective and individual needs. Why then have so many attempts at getting people to participate and take responsibility for community based development failed in the last fifty years? One reason is that never before in the history of humankind has there been such a massive experiment to include change through the infusion of external ideas, management, funds and technology, all controlled from places far distant from the site of development." (1995, 1-2). To be sustainable and meaningful, the development program needs to be locally embedded. This evidence called for a participatory approach to development. CBDs answer that call to embed development practices. They emphasize community control over planning, decision and investment resources. Three points are central to these programs (Narayan 1995, 5):

1. Adopting processes that strengthen the *capacity of a community to organize and sustain development*.
2. Supporting *community empowerment* through user participation in decision-making.
3. Reversing control and accountability from central authorities to community organization.

It was thought that this sort of radical turn would bring about an increase in efficiency, cost effectiveness and sustainability of development projects, while at the same time increasing the empowerment of the local population and bring forth a change in the behavioural patterns. The three points mentioned above were intuitively tied together: you can't achieve results if you don't get the population to participate in the project and the project doesn't last long if coherent patterns of behaviour do not sustain the result.

¹¹ See for example the publication at the time of the World Bank Participation Sourcebook (WB, 1996).



This is basically Ostrom's point: the building of a local irrigation system does not last long if the local population is not involved in its governance and does not behave according to rules that are consistent with the preservation of the irrigation system (1990, 157ff).

Now, after 25 years of practice and billions of dollars invested in CBDs, we can assess the effectiveness of these claims. Results have varied (Mansuri & Rao, 2004, 2013). A growing debate presses the need for a further clarification on the theories of social change implicitly assumed by these sorts of programs. Authors such as Wong (2012), Mansuri & Rao (2004, 2013), King (2013), Bennet and d'Onofrio (2015) see both the potential of these programs and the need to rethink their theoretical frameworks and purpose.

First, the positive: The WB assessment by Susan Wong (2012) of their own CBDs programs shows they have a positive impact on the provision and access to services and goods. Compared to other modes of service delivery, they achieve a higher cost effectiveness and rate of return. On the negative side, they have limited or no impact on social capital and behaviours. A wider study by Mansuri & Rao (2013) on the impact of participatory programs is harsher. It analyses the results of over 500 studies covering decades of development projects. Empirical results do not sustain the two main assumptions widely held as true: (1) involving communities in the design and implementation of development will *automatically increase the adequate delivery of service and goods*; (2) *participatory practice delivers higher level of local cooperation and governance* and builds up social capital (2013, 7-8). Mansuri & Rao successfully argue that *civil society failure* occurs just as frequently as government and market failure do (2013, 59-79). Does participation improve development outcomes? Modestly and then usually to the advantage of the higher tiers of the population (6-9, 221-224). Does participation strengthen civil society? Not really, at least not in the long term (9-11, 275-277).¹²

Other two key findings of the report are noteworthy. First that participatory interventions work better and last longer when they are embedded in the wider social system and supported by the State (11-12, 288ff). This relationship to the context is of such importance that projects should have built-in mechanisms of learning and adaptability. Secondly, the authors note the difference between building bridges and roads and seeking social change. The former may be planned and the results assessed in terms of production costs and access to service but the latter is complex and must contemplate the long term. "Repairing civil society and political failure requires a shift in the social equilibrium that derives from a change in the nature of social interactions and from modifying norms and local culture. These much more difficult tasks require a

¹²Participation is no magic bullet and collective agency processes are highly complex and context dependent. The political debate triggered by participation mechanisms reintroduce divergences of opinions and conflicts into development processes (William, 2004). This is one of the reasons why an insistence on collective agency alone frequently leads to failure. Our approach argues that collective agency freedom must be kept in check by other mechanisms, namely a wise governance of participation, a just distribution of power and a stability of the participation mechanisms. See below part III.



fundamentally different approach to development - one that is flexible, long term, self-critical and strongly infused with the spirit of learning by doing". (12-13, our emphasis). Mansury & Rao don't reject participatory approach but denounce some simplistic assumptions made by development planner and the need to rethink theoretical tenets of CBDs (291-294). Among the latter Bennet and d'Onofrio (2015) highlight two questions: (a) What do we really aim at when we seek participatory development? (b): How do we conceptualize social change interventions?

What have we achieved this far? The first part revised the assessment of structural forms of poverty by CONEVAL. It concluded that local political will and participation were key to address structural forms of poverty. The second section reviewed the practice of participatory development and its results, that is programs that took aim at the importance of political will and local involvement in fighting poverty. Key findings were that participation is no magic bullet. Transforming structural forms of poverty require participation, but participation alone is not enough. On top of collective local agency, you also need a normative anchor about the telos of development. You need to know why you want social change (Bennet & d'Onofrio, 2015). Whenever development is not about bridges, roads or schools but aims at transforming a society's values and behaviours, the 'why' question becomes unavoidable. What are we aiming at when we seek social change? What do we want to achieve through development? The last section of this article addresses this question.

A COMMON GOOD APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

What is a common good approach to development? For most, the notion of the common good is ill-defined and above all non-operational. This statement, while largely shared, is mostly uninformed. A small but consistent group of scholars has lately taken a renewed interest on the topic and show that the notion is neither vague nor vacuous (See among many others Sandell, 2020; Reich, 2018; Nebel & Collaud, 2018; Parilla-Martinez, 2017; Blum, 2015; Gorringer, 2014; Sluga 2014; Riordan, 2008, 2014; Zamagni, 2007; McCann & Miller, 2005; Münckler & Bluhm 2001-2004; Hollenbach, 2002).

A common good approach to development starts with Taylor's statement that beyond public goods or private goods, we must recognize the existence of intrinsically social good (Taylor, 1995, Chap VII). These are relational goods, inherent to the relationships existing between members of a society. Narrowing these goods to a sum of individual interests misjudges their real nature and gives a false picture of their inner logic (Deneulin, 2013). For example, you can consider our dignity as an individual feature or consider dignity as our common, shared dignity. Dignity is actually always a shared reality. I am human with and among other human being. It is not an I versus a We; an individual actor against a collective actor. It is rather a relationship mediated by an



interaction (Nebel, 2018b). It is a good generated and shared by free persons; a good which is ours before being mine, and ever only mine because it was previously ours. A society, under this perspective, may be described through the relational goods shaping our coexistence; i.e. the common goods driving us together in an organized way and as a human society (Nebel, 2018a).

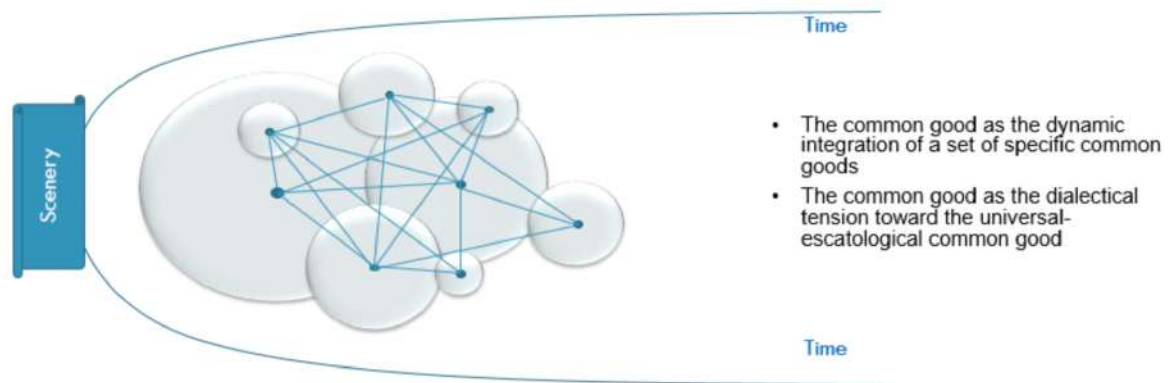
To look at a society from this perspective implies a shift of paradigm that goes beyond the classical distinctions of liberals versus communitarians. Zamagni (2017) highlights the difference in logic with the following metaphor: Most social contract theories understand societies as an aggregation of individual elements. In that scenario, if A, B and C are individuals - and given the case that A is zero - their sum $A+B+C$ is still equal to $B+C$. In a common good approach to society, says Zamagni, the logic is not that of a sum but a multiplication. If A is null and B and C natural numbers, then the product of factors will nonetheless be zero

($A \times B \times C = 0$). Zamagni's point is that you can't take out one member of society from the equation without affecting all the relationships that exist in that society. Individuals are not secluded from the rest of society; they are part of it. Each personal loss or gain is somehow affecting the whole. In this logic, there is no dispensable member of society. We are collectively less human if one of us is humiliated or sees its dignity denied. This is the logic of the common good, a perspective not only relevant argues Zamagni, but required to overcome the aporia of economic and political liberalism.¹³

What is a common good approach to society? One that understands a society as a complex and dynamic equilibrium of common goods (Nebel, 2018a, 2020, 2022). Then the key political questions become: is this system of common goods conducive to a shared humanity? Can we live together as human beings in this system? Moreover: how do the common goods of a society relate to each other? How are they organized? What sort of hierarchies exist among them? Are they efficiently produced and governed? Are they fairly shared among the population?

¹³ Other authors have developed the same idea. See for example Tudela-Fournet, 2017; Riordan, 2014, Sluga, 2014 or Hollenbach, 2002.

Figure 3. The nexus of the common good.



In figure 3, each bubble represents a specific common good, the links between them represent the nexus between common goods.¹⁴ The first visual evidence is that there are many common goods in a society and that they do not fully overlap. The second is that none involves the whole population.

The third is that the tensions between them must be many. The last is that the governance of this nexus may actually be the core task of politics. Let's retake these points.

Every society is built on a very broad set of common goods that only partially overlap. Moreover, they are related to each other. Most of them are complementary, overlapping and mutually reinforcing while others will be at odd or mutually exclusive. I use the expression 'nexus of common goods' to express the real relationships existing between these various specific common goods in a given society.

The nexus does not appear of its own accord, as a kind of spontaneous self-organisation of society (Luhmann, 1984, 15ff). On the one hand it is the result of a shared history – centuries of shared experience that have gradually brought various common goods together and organised them as a system – and on the other the constant efforts of the present generation to reframe and to some extent reinvent it. This is a shared responsibility; the political task par excellence. A nexus of common goods results from the use of our political responsibility. That is why it may differ considerably from one country to another. Its quality depends on past and the present generation's commitment to this political responsibility.

¹⁴ Rather than the terms 'web' I prefer the Latin term 'nexus', which means 'relationship, intertwining or linkage of causes', a term linked in Roman law to that of responsibility.



This commitment takes usually the form of a specific interaction seen as a particularly important social good: the one providing political governance to the nexus. It is political power itself that is here valued and constructed as a specific common, though one which is of crucial importance to any society. Indeed, the task of these governing bodies is to pursue an ever richer, deeper and more human integration of the nexus.

A frequent error is to believe that the humanity of the nexus of the common good is a given. On the contrary our humanity is a frail and dynamics equilibrium resulting from an age-old wisdom about which social practices are more and which are less human. This is not to say that collective blindness to structural injustices do not exist in a nexus. Indeed, as a human artefact, perhaps the most elaborate human artefact, the nexus is the result of past political choices. It embodies the will and wisdom of previous generations. In turn, the humanity of this nexus depends on today's political choices. Political governance requires assessing the human value and coherence of the present nexus of common goods. It compels politician, in other terms, to endeavour a moral judgement on the human quality of the nexus.

Can we say something about the ethical quality of a nexus? To answer this question, you may go either for a thin or a thick conception of ethics. On the thin side you may focus on a threshold of key elements – basic common goods – allowing people to live together as human being in a society. But since the nexus is a process, and since that process is intrinsically linked to our political freedom, the core norm will be about the end goal of this process, i.e. what Ricoeur would name the normative horizon of all nexus (Ricoeur, 1956). Following Fessard's (1944), the normative horizon of any nexus can be understood as the universal common good, by which he means the unity and solidarity of all human beings or in other words our *own and shared humanity*. Seeking the universal common good is for Fessard a dialectic process, not a linear one with apparent setbacks and moment of destruction and transformation needed to reach a deeper and broader humanity of the nexus (a more universal, a more human form of the nexus).

This movement toward the universal common good is of crucial importance (Nebel, 2018b). It means that the search for the common good is a never ending task. A task that must be retaken anew by each generation. Any historical nexus is transient, a mere prefiguration of something that is always beyond and further ahead. The dialectic dimension of the dynamic also hints at the conflictive nature of this task. As the nexus deepens and expands the population it involves change. This transformation sparks power-plays within the nexus that will have to be resolved. But to acknowledge this conflictive nature of the search for the common good does not mean that we settle for conflicts. It means that the conflicts will have to be resolved in the light of the universal common good. It is in this hope and desire for peace that we face and can resolve conflicts.



CONCLUSION: A COMMON GOOD APPROACH TO STRUCTURAL FORMS OF POVERTY.

What does a common good approach add to our understanding of structural forms of poverty? First it strongly contends the idea that poverty can ever be reduced to an individual phenomenon. Whereas poverty is always suffered by a specific person and linked to his specific capabilities, most deprivations are also linked to the way a society organise itself, that is, to the institutions structuring our social life. The quality and functioning of this institutional framework is key to address long term poverty challenges in developing countries. To be sustainable, the fight against poverty must tackle the embedded social structures that preserve and reproduce poverty pattern.

Secondly, the previous section of this paper has argued that a participatory approach to development projects only had a limited impact on structural forms of poverty. The concepts of participation and social change implicit to these programs were too narrow to create the social momentum needed to overcome structural forms of poverty. Three elements were found to be of crucial importance for the success of participatory development programs. The first is a revised attention given to interaction and social change models; the second is the necessary inclusion of development programs in the wider social, cultural and political context; the third was the clarification of their objectives (what do we seek to achieve) and the normative claim involved in them. A common good approach to development helps address these three elements. How so?

First, it frames development practices as part of a wider effort to trigger common good dynamics in a society; as part of an effort to create a more human coexistence in that society. Development is either human or is not development at all. Setting a development program as an intervention occurring in a nexus of the common good specifies what we understand as the wider social, cultural and political context. It forces programs developers to think and embed their intervention in an existing nexus. It crucially changes the way we think about the goal of these projects. Interventions should not be about social change, but actually a contribution to an existing nexus of common goods. Intervention should aim at triggering new social processes that add momentum to the overall dynamic of the common good.

Secondly, a common good approach to development changes the way we look at structural forms of poverty. It does not focus on individual deprivations but rather on the absence or perversion of a common good. To fight structural poverty is to concentrate on the social processes providing and distributing a common. A process that begins with the social value and meaning given to this good by a society and the common political will



needed to achieve it.

Thirdly, a common good approach to development shifts priorities. The following list summarizes some of these shifts:¹⁵

1. Do not start with the individual deprivations of structural forms of poverty but the community and how together they could address the structural forms of poverty.
2. Help the community identify the common goods that are absent or corrupted: see how they are valued and what they mean for the local community.
3. Focus on the community and its agency, on the will to achieve a common good.
4. Create open ended processes, do not seek nor set immediate outcomes.
5. Create local governance.
6. Set the rule for a just distribution of the shared benefit; look for a local supervision of these rules and the existence of conflict resolution processes.
7. Look for the stability of the process.
8. Judge the outcome of the process at the light of its impact on our common/shared humanity (on the shared practices that embed our humanity *hic et nunc*).¹⁶

Does this approach give us a better chance at tackling structural forms of poverty? I do think so. It gives us at least a chance to do so. By shifting the main concern from lifting individuals out of poverty to the generation of common goods needed to overcome structural forms of poverty, we do put at the centre of development practice, the political definition of commons and their social meaning. Hence the main concern comes to be the present architecture of the nexus and the systemic logic by which so many people are excluded or deprived of a specific set of common goods.

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¹⁵The list is based on the results of two applications of our metric of common good dynamics in Mexico. Cf. Garza-Vázquez, Aranda-Vargas & Herd-Núñez, 2020; Nebel & Arbesu-Verduzco, 2020; Ramirez & Garza-Vázquez, 2020.

¹⁶Such a list is obviously a shortcut and has to be taken with a pinch of salt. But nonetheless it highlights the different modalities and priorities set forth by a common good approach to development.



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