

## BOOK REVIEW

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### Breaking the Poverty Cycle: The Human Basis for Sustainable Development

Susan Pick & Jenna T. Sirkin  
Oxford University Press, 2010

Existing programs for sustainable development in deprived populations too often fail to produce the long term increase of well-being that was the aim of the program (UNDP 2006). In this book Pick and Sirkin argue that this relative failure is the consequence of the strong and almost exclusive focus on economic and legislative measures in these programs. Such measures fail to take into account the strong socio-cultural barriers that keep people from taking advantage of the opportunities that are available: disadvantaged or oppressed people do not feel capable or entitled to use these facilities and opportunities, even if they are clearly available. Examples of these psychological and socio-cultural barriers are abundantly and vividly described throughout the book. Fortunately the authors do not restrict themselves to describing these crippling psychological mechanisms. They explain how these barriers can be overcome, and how groups of people can be encouraged to take their own life in their own hands, and in doing so, to achieve sustainable control over their situation. The way to durably achieve this necessary psychological step, is the development of personal agency and intrinsic empowerment, based on Sen's Capability Approach (Sen 1999) : the person learns to overcome the (often socio-cultural) barriers that keep it from even trying to know its own motives, from exercising its rights and from taking advantage of the opportunities that exist. The authors convincingly argue that this personal development is necessary for long-term successful changes in the living situation of people in general and of deprived or oppressed people in particular. If this step is not taken, economic and legislative efforts will remain ineffective. To know *what* has to change is one thing. To say *how* this change has to be produced is another. In Section 2 of the book, IMIFAP's (Mexican Institute of Family and Population Research) "FrEE" (Framework for Enabling

Empowerment) program is presented in detail. Starting from a general model that operationalizes the Capability Approach (Chapter 5), the authors develop the different components of the FrEE program.

As a scientific basis for the development of the intervention tools, the authors acknowledge the central role of Fishbein and Ajzen's (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). It becomes, however, soon evident that in practice they go far beyond TRA, including e.g. elements from behavioral economics, skills training, the stages of change perspective, social and political advocacy etc. Components of the FrEE approach include decision making, communication skills, negotiation, self-knowledge, identifying and managing emotions, empathy and perspective taking and reflection. Overall these training modules serve to help people to develop a sense of personal agency, to make their own decisions and pursue their realization in interaction with relevant others in the existing socio-cultural and economic context.

The book contains 3 sections and a number of appendices. After an introductory paragraph describing the history of IMIFAP, the first section "sets the scene", describing the Mexican context that is characterized as paternalistic and inducing a sense of guilt and learned helplessness in a large part of the population. Section 2 describes how sustainable human development can be promoted – the FrEE program, its conceptual basis and its different components; a number of concrete elaborations of these components are given in appendix. In the final section 3 the stages of the development and the implementation of the program are discussed.

Given that this program offers a potential answer to the pressing question of how to reduce existing social inequalities, a crucial question is "Does it really work?". The authors themselves indeed notice that "In the presence of these seemingly insurmountable [socio-