

Theology and development as capability expansion



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For the last 25 years, human development has become part of official development discourses. It takes the normative position that the success of policies depends on whether they have expanded human flourishing, or expanded the 'freedoms' or 'capabilities' people have 'reason to value', as Amartya Sen would put it. It emphasises the importance of institutions to facilitate such expansion, and the agency of people to create such institutions. The ability of institutions to be conducive to human flourishing depends on the nature of human interaction. When human interaction no longer has the flourishing of other persons as its aim, it can create structures which then constrain human agency. The article argues that the human development perspective could be enriched by theological insights such as structural sin and the contribution of religious narratives to public reasoning. It concentrates on the idea of justice of one biblical parable, and illustrates its argument with examples from the Argentine labour context.

Introduction

Since 1990, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been publishing annually its Human Development Report (HDR). As the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon puts it in his twenty-fifth anniversary congratulatory message, 'For too long before the advent of this landmark series, a nation's prosperity was viewed solely through the lens of economic growth. This approach obscured a central truth: people are the real wealth of a nation. The HDR helped change the perspective, from the things that a nation produces – to the people who actually produce them' (UNDP 2015).

The human development approach is conceptually based on the 'capability approach'. Amartya Sen introduced the idea of 'capability' in the late 1970s as an alternative space to utility and primary goods to measure equality (Sen 1980). He identifies the capability approach as a moral approach to assess and judge states of affairs from the perspective of human freedom, in its dual aspects of wellbeing and agency (Sen 1985, 1992, 1993). The approach conceives wellbeing as opportunities people have to function well as human beings, that is, to enjoy valuable 'beings and doings', which he calls 'functionings'. This can be, among others, appearing in public without shame or pursuing knowledge, or being healthy or being in harmonious relationships with relatives and friends. A capability set is then 'the set of functioning vectors within his or her reach' (Sen 1985:201), or 'a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being' (Sen 1993:30). A person who works as a carpenter because he had no opportunity to study and do another type of work has, in the capability approach sense, a different wellbeing to another carpenter who went to university and abandoned his profession of accountant in order to work as a carpenter. Both have the same 'doing' or 'functioning', but not the same capability. One has the choice to work in another profession, the other has not.

Whether functionings or capabilities matter more for evaluating states of affairs depends on context, information availability and purpose of evaluation. An example of using the capability approach in policy has been multi-dimensional measures of poverty. For the past decade, a multi-dimensional poverty index has been developed to capture the idea that people's income does not adequately reflect the quality of their lives (Alkire *et al.* 2015). Poverty, within the multi-dimensional poverty index, is defined as being deprived in at least one third of the three dimensions of health, education and living standards. The index includes internationally comparable indicators of functionings, or achieved states of being or doing, such as living in adequate accommodation, being healthy and attending primary school. The importance of this way of measuring poverty, instead of income poverty, has been recognised by different countries. Some of them, such as Mexico, Colombia and the Philippines, are designing their own multi-dimensional indices of poverty in order to include context-specific dimensions.¹

1. See the Multi-Dimensional Poverty Peer Network at <http://www.mppn.org>

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Another key feature of the human development approach is the centrality of agency, and the freedom people have to pursue valuable goals, such as pursuing campaigning work to stop deforestation, even at the risk of one's own life. This agency aspect, most importantly, includes the active involvement of people themselves in shaping their lives and the norms and institutions which affect them. Yet, agency is not just about individual freedom and participation. Development 'as capability expansion' (Sen 1989) or 'as freedom' (Sen 1999) presupposes institutions which are functioning in view of enabling people to function well as human beings. Stewart (2013) introduced the idea of 'social competences' to broaden the human development perspective beyond the notion of what individuals can be or do to include what institutions can be or do.² This idea was fully taken on in the 2014 HDR. Well-functioning institutions, in the form of social norms, social behaviours, and whatever rule binds a society together, are an essential component of the flourishing of individual lives. A society where racist prejudices prevail and people of different colour are discriminated against, is not conducive to human flourishing. A society where patriarchal norms rule and women are seen as a commodity at the service of men, seriously undermines opportunities women have to achieve valuable sets of beings and doings. A society where nature is seen as means to satisfy unlimited human desires, and where unlimited material consumption is viewed as a sign of human progress, is not conducive to creating an environment where individuals can pursue a fulfilling and meaningful life in harmony with our common home, that is the earth.

A human development perspective on policy puts particular emphasis on the agency of those who suffer capability deprivation. But given the interconnection between agency and social competences, this emphasis on enhancing individual capabilities can take the form of actions that may ensure the existence of institutions which promote human flourishing. This means institutions that can contribute to generate an inclusive and non-racist or non-macho culture, or institutions capable of integrating individual freedoms while caring for the environments in which individuals live and breathe, for integral human flourishing cannot be conceived outside the biosphere in which humans develop.

The aim of the article is to examine how some theological concepts can contribute to a better understanding of capability expansion. It starts by discussing how social competences, agency and human flourishing interact, using examples from the Argentine labour context. It then links this interaction with the theological concept of structural sin, and introduces the idea of 'structural in-competence' as a bridge between theology and the social sciences. Finally, it discusses how religious narratives, in particular the New Testament parable of *The Workers in the Vineyard*, can enrich this socio-theological interaction and bring some light to transforming it in view of strengthening social competences and promoting human flourishing.

2. Some have also used the term 'social' or 'collective' capabilities; see Ibrahim (2013).

Work and human flourishing

In his proposal of a new evaluative framework for states of affairs, Sen has left the specification of valuable capabilities open-ended. The range of 'valuable' capabilities can be extensive, depending on the purpose and context of the evaluation (Sen 2004). Given the aim of the article – to demonstrate the usefulness of theological insights for the human development perspective – we will limit ourselves to the capability of work given its central importance for human flourishing.

If one person is forced into unemployment, or forced to have an insecure and unsafe job because of no other work opportunities, this can severely affect their mental and physical health. Being unemployed can lead to loss of social relations and a lower self-esteem. Or working through temporary contracts can lead to levels of stress and inability to plan for the future. Working without labour and health insurance means that, when one suffers a labour accident, one loses the ability to work and earn an income altogether. This has a knock-on effect on other members of the household. Insecure work, or lack of work, means no extra money available for necessary house repairs, and forces the family to live in unsuitable conditions. It can also mean members of the family going without food during the days when no work is to be found, or children having to work and miss school.³ It is not surprising, therefore, that work has long been considered by the Catholic Church as 'a key, probably the essential key to the whole social question' (Pope John Paul II 1981:3), and a central area of its mission. Work, as Pope Francis has recently put it, is not only a vocation, but also 'a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfilment' (Pope Francis 2015:128). Development programmes which promote wealth at the expense of human work, progressively erode trust, respect for rules, and social coexistence: 'To stop investing in people in order to gain short-term financial gain, is bad business for society' (Pope Francis 2015:128).

About 1.5 billion people are estimated to work globally in informal employment, that is, about half of the working population worldwide works outside the jurisdiction of labour legislation and social protection (UNDP 2014:68). In Argentina, there is an estimated 7.2 million informal sector workers, or about 46.8% of the working population (International Labour Organisation 2014). Of these, only approximately 20 000 workers, or about 0.3%, are estimated to have acquired labour rights so far.⁴

The low level of social competences, or 'what institutions can be or do' (UNDP 2014:133), plays a big part in accounting for the capability deprivations of individuals and the fact that nearly half of the economically active Argentine population has to work in informal conditions and has limited access to

3. For a survey of family life conditions in the slums of the city of Buenos Aires, see Suárez, Lépore and Mitchell (2014)

4. Personal communication of one coordinator of the Argentine Confederation of Popular Economy Workers, September 2014. See Chen (2014) for the relation of informal economy workers to the state and labour rights.

labour and social protection, this despite the fact that Argentina has recognised labour rights in its constitution since 1945. What lies behind this state of affairs is a failure of economic institutions and a failure of the norms and rules which guide economic production to have human flourishing as their ultimate objective.

In order to better understand the relationship between individual capabilities, social competences and agency, we briefly consider four concrete cases of working situations of people who live in marginal urban areas of Buenos Aires. They manifest at the micro-level the social in-competences at the macro-level. Two stories are taken from the informal sector (illegal work in formal company and illegal and self-employed work),⁵ and two from the formal sector with employers displaying different kinds of behaviours.⁶

Antonio is a young man who has had to abandon secondary school in order to find odd chores to bring extra income to the family table. He had at last found employment in a company packing some goods into boxes. Even if the employment was not sealed by a formal labour contract, it brought the prospect of some security and relief from the daily uncertainty of casual chores work. On the third week in the job, Antonio went to a football match in which some troubles between supporters and police occurred. He was caught up in the violence and a rubber bullet accidentally hit one of his eyes. He was unable to work for a few weeks. He was able though to get free treatment at a public hospital but due to the slow process of attendance, it was too late for his sight to be saved and he lost one eye. When fit enough, he presented himself again to the company, but the manager told him that someone else was now doing his work.

Carlos is a street vendor in his late thirties. So far, the federal capital city of Buenos Aires prohibits the sale of goods on pavements, public transport or cafés and restaurants. His work is thus illegal, but in the absence of other work opportunities, street vending is a popular form of economic survival activity in Buenos Aires. The city administration has consistently refused to emit permits to street vendors who asked to sell their goods legally. This means that police bribery is thriving. Carlos has started to unite street vendors so that, together, they can change the situation and have their work recognised as a legitimate form of work. ‘Why do we have to receive constant threats from the police in order to work?’, he asked. And Ana, a street vendor who sells sweets on pavements and who attends the weekly meetings organised by Carlos, was painfully sharing her recent experience of seeing her children going hungry because she had not been able to work during a prolonged period of heavy rain.

5.The International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2014) defines informal work as work conducted in productive units which either do not constitute a legal entity, or have no formal accounting system, or have no registration of their production activities, and work in formal companies carried out without a legal employment contract.

6.Data collected through informal conversations by the first author between August and December 2014 whilst sharing the life of a parish in the urban margins of Greater Buenos Aires, and by the second author while working as a priest in the diocese of San Isidro in Greater Buenos Aires. All names have been changed.

José and Teresa are a couple in their early sixties, with both having no qualification beyond secondary school level. Teresa has been working in the same local mailing company for 30 years, with a legal employment contract. José has been working as a chauffeur for another company for about the same time, also under legal employment contract, and has developed quasi-family relationships with his employer, with services going both ways between employer and employee well beyond contractual relations, e.g. using the professional van to carry goods for a local event in the neighbourhood, or to go to medical appointments. Their formal employment, stable and secure, has enabled them to neatly arrange their modest house, and all their children have studied beyond secondary education, have also formal employment, and live in other areas with better infrastructure and public service provision.

Nora is a young legal immigrant from Peru and was able to find work quickly as a domestic servant in a wealthy household. Given the government policy to legalise domestic workers, until recently she was employed legally with labour protection. However, she met someone and when she became pregnant, her employers decided they no longer needed a maid and made her redundant. She had been treated as a member of the family, and the announcement of her redundancy was particularly devastating. Despite receiving a good redundancy package, it was not enough because she had only worked for one year. Given her specific situation, being a young immigrant who had recently arrived in the country, and pregnant, her situation was worse than other legally employed domestic workers.

These four stories of (1) the football fan Antonio, (2) Carlos and his fellows street vendors, (3) the committed labourer couple Teresa and José, and (4) the Peruvian Nora, show that social competences, or social in-competences, intervene at many levels. In the case of Antonio, the free public health system, although available for all, was not efficient enough to save his eye. Because he was not employed legally, he did not have any union to help him fight for his rights. In Carlos’ case, because of the refusal of the city government to make street vending legal, or to tackle police bribery, street vendors are extremely vulnerable to physical and employment insecurity. They also lack organisational representation before the authorities. Because their work is illegal, they have no labour protection. When the weather prevents them from working, there is no insurance to protect them from the temporary loss of earnings. As these two cases show, informal employment, as an institutional malfunctioning, negatively affects people’s opportunities to flourish.

Conversely, formal employment, as in the cases of José and Teresa, is more prone to embodying sets of social competences which are conducive to providing opportunities for human flourishing. They both were employed legally throughout their working life, which has given them employment security to raise their family. Still, the opportunities they had were beyond the formal and legal nature of social competences. The relationship between employer-employee

was such that the employer went beyond its contractual obligations to enhance his opportunities and that of his family to flourish (e.g. using the van for personal use). In contrast, Nora's relationship with her employers was not of such quality. Although she benefited from social competences, she was left on her own when in dire need of secure employment and social support.

In summary, social competences are necessary for human flourishing, but not sufficient on their own. Moreover, social competences are not a given; they are constructed and deconstructed through human actions, such as voice and representation, and through processes where power dynamics between different groups play a critical part. However, those with informal and insecure employment have limited capacity to shape the institutions in which they live, and therefore little capacity to build social competences, as the cases of Antonio and Carlos show. As the HDR 2014 has noted, 'those with the least capacity to cope with shocks are the least involved in creating regulations, norms and goals of global governance' (UNDP 2014:9). These situations can give rise to what theologians have called 'structures of sin'.

Social in-competences and structures of sin

For most Christian traditions, a sin is an action that goes against the will of God and the good of neighbours. The Catholic tradition has particularly developed the idea of social and structural sin, distinguishing three levels. Firstly, although a sin is always personal – because it depends of the free will of an individual, a sin is also always somehow social, insofar as it has inevitable social consequences. If José decides not to work and do nothing at home, his decision will unquestionably affect his wife Teresa and his whole family, and probably the social welfare system too. This is why Christians believe that when a person sins, they⁷ are abusing their own freedom, and becomes alienated, because they are distancing themselves from God, from themselves and from those surrounding them (Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace – PCJP 2004:116).⁸

The second level of social sin is related to the object of certain actions. When sins are a direct assault on one's neighbour, or when they go against justice in relationships, particularly the relationships between communities or between communities and individuals, or when they directly affect the rights of people, they cannot but be considered social. Although this does not diminish the responsibility of individuals committing the sins – and the need for their conversion and redemption in order to reverse the consequences of their sins, the social networks involved in these sins are wide enough to go beyond the mere consideration of the will of the individuals who commit them (PCJP 2004:117–118). For instance, the police in Buenos Aires act against the flourishing of street vendors when they force them to pay bribes in order not to be brutally displaced from the streets.

⁷To avoid a cumbersome 's/he' when a person is referred to, the plural form has been used throughout.

⁸Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2004), *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, p. 116.

Finally, when sin grows stronger and becomes source of other sins, and when the consequences of sin perpetuate, this conditions the behaviour of individuals in such a way that their personal capacity to omit or overcome sin is reduced to the minimum. At this stage, sin is not just personal or social, but also structural (PCJP, 199). Usually, as Pope John Paul II (1987:36) explained, at the core of socio-structural sin lies the individual thirst for power combined with the intention of imposing one's will upon others, or the 'all-consuming' desire for profit at any price. Perhaps the clearest example is environmental degradation, caused by the ill-considered exploitation of nature in order to promote economic development, and a throw-away and consumerist culture (Pope Francis 2015:20–22). In these cases, although individual conversion towards a more environmentally friendly lifestyle is important, it can neither address nor redress the socio-structural causes and consequences of ecological sins. As the Argentine Pope (2015:221) puts it, 'social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum individual good deeds', thus an 'ecological conversion' requires also a 'community conversion'.

For the Catholic tradition, every person is free to collude or not, engage or not in human interaction which goes against human flourishing. Similarly, in the capability approach, this point is particularly captured by the idea of agency, and the choices people make to act, even against their own wellbeing, for the sake of other goals they value pursuing. For instance, whilst one person can choose leaving the comfort of one's home and risk being arrested in a protest against a new local trade law that will affect the lives of street vendors who already live in a situation of high vulnerability, another person can choose to stay safe at home and be disengaged from the policy decision which will negatively affect the wellbeing of others (Robeyns 2005). It is in that person's free response that social sin is being reproduced. The manager who hired Antonio could have taken him back after losing his eye. A police officer can choose not to ask for a bribe when encountering street vendors. Or Antonio could have started to mobilise other workers like him, or take legal action against the company who hired him illegally. Strictly speaking, Antonio thus 'sinned' when resigning to his lot, or Carlos and the street vendors 'sin' when deciding to pay bribes to the police. But do they? Are there no other forces involved in the way they deploy their individual agency? And if so, how can they overcome those forces?

Sins, as performed by acts of individuals ('doings' in the language of the capability approach), do contribute to framing social groups and structures, that is the 'being' of institutions. Analogically, the way institutions are organised and working does influence people's decisions and actions. Still, however influenced a person may be by institutions, they can always reject sinning by exercising her agency. In this way, we cannot affirm that the 'being' of institutions determine the 'doings' of individuals. Nonetheless, when the social sin is widespread and socially accepted, its influence can be such that individuals can be prevented from being aware that their actions go against their own flourishing and their neighbours'.

Worse, even if individuals acknowledge that their actions hinder human flourishing, they can have little agency to change their wrongdoing when structures of society are embedded in sin.

One example of ‘structural sin’ is the absence of legal obligations for companies to offer minimum social and labour protection to their employers, or the absence of sanctions for non-compliance.⁹ This is not a structure oriented at the flourishing of the workers. But the manager employing people illegally has little control in not engaging in the illegal practice. Higher management may force him/her to do so. A conversion of social competences is required so as to change the sinful structure and thus enhance the flourishing of individuals. For that to happen, a given society would need to develop a set of social virtuous, ethical decisions that, as Sen (2009) would put it, cannot but come from public reasoning processes of dialogue and respect. Imposing one’s views on others, as John Paul II described, is foundational to sin, and one sin cannot bring about the transformation needed to cure the effects of other sins.

As mentioned earlier, in its account of structural sin, Catholic theology does not detract individual moral responsibility from it, for it is the sum of all individual actions which build up over time a structure of sin. If a large number of individuals cease to reproduce the malpractice (e.g. hiring workers illegally), the practice would eventually end. However, when the capabilities of individuals are undermined by deficient social competences, people have little power, as individuals, to make institutions ‘socially competent’. This is the vicious circle of structural sin. Antonio, on his own, is not able to change the inefficiencies of the Argentinian public health system or the lack of social protection for workers. Carlos, on his own, cannot eliminate the violence against street sellers or make their work less insecure. But even if all the ‘Antonios’ and ‘Carlos’ could make a difference by their personal virtuous decisions, they would need, first and foremost, the individual strength and freedom to take those decisions. Given that they are trapped in the ‘structural’ conduct set-up, social institutions should provide assistance to free them from the constraints (such as lack of confidence to speak up, lack of ability to articulate their needs). Still, in order to provide such assistance, structures would need the virtuous input of individuals that may change them too. It seems, therefore, that the way out of this vicious circle produced by structural sin is a change in relationships, the place where individuals and social competences meet. New relationships can trigger social imagination so as to enhance human flourishing through the building of the necessary social competences. The question is how are these novel bonds to be born? We argue that religious narratives may help generate such relationships.

9. For more detailed discussions on structural sins, their institutional manifestation, and their connection with individual freedom, see, among others, Fuchs (1980), Guidi (1975), Kearns (1974), Nebel (2011), Nelson (2009), Sobrino (1972), Vidal (1991), and West (2005).

Religious narratives, individual actions and social competences

Because biblical parables, particularly those of the New Testament, deal with perennial dilemmas of human social existence, such as issues of ‘power’ or ‘oppression’ (Dodd 1961; Söding 2012), generally linked to economic systems, they can be relevant for seeking solutions to socio-economic problems in the public sphere irrespective of religious beliefs. It is not a coincidence that Sen (2009:170–173) uses the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* to illustrate how justice includes values such as responsibility towards strangers, which he then connects with enhancing freedom and agency in a global context. Sen also makes references to religious stories drawn from the Hindu tradition to explain matters on justice, such as ancient Sanskrit stories to explain the meaning of wealth and freedom.¹⁰ This is also consistent with the aim of the parables themselves. As biblical scholar, Dodd (1961:21) argues, one of the main functions of the parables is to ‘entice the hearer to a judgement upon the situation depicted’, and then challenge the listener, ‘directly or by implication, to apply that judgement to the matter in hand’. These stories have therefore, to paraphrase Sen, good reasons to be valued.

Moreover, parables are a valid theological vehicle to counter-argue the prevailing utilitarian narratives of contemporary economics, which the capability approach provides a thorough critique of. Because parables have helped Christian communities throughout history to read the signs of their times and to discover unknown hermeneutical horizons for their problems, they are fundamental historical testimonies which could help find future semantic innovations in our economic-ridden era (Verstraeten 2005). In particular, and considering the lack of creative incentives for actual social transformation in present economies, which are based on the predominant narratives of ‘tough’ business, on mere retributive justice, and/or the need to cultivate ‘greed’ and mercilessness in order to be successful (Akerlof & Shiller 2009; Sen 1987), parables may be taken as ‘great or classic art’. As such, they are narratives with the capacity to transcend the limitations of historical, geographical and even religious contexts (Schneiders 1991), and inspire novel thinking and acting regarding matters of human flourishing and justice, including work.

Among the many different parables of the New Testament we have selected the parable of *The Workers in the Vineyard* (Mt 20:1–16).¹¹ The general topic of this parable, that is equality-inequality, economic relations and the market, personal attitudes towards justice and structural transformation, seems conducive to analyse, in the light of both Catholic theology and the capability approach, the question we put previously: how to overcome structural sin through novel relationships?

10. Sen calls the Mahabharata, a treatise of great ‘theological’ importance in Hindu philosophy, and he acknowledges that it has had a considerable influence on his thinking (see Sen 2005). See also Sen (2014) for the relevance of Buddha in his thinking.

11. For the full text, see <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+20:1-16&version=NABRE>

From a theological point of view, parables in general introduce a view of God whose power, justice and goodness contrast with the prevailing economic and religious notions of the time on those issues. In particular, in the parable of *The Workers*, God's justice is not introduced as mere 'retribution', nor is his power presented in a fatalistic way, as if it could not go beyond human choices (Söding 2012). Hence, the parable is open to, and indeed requires new ideas of justice so as to promote good and human flourishing.¹²

The parable is carefully framed in two scenes. In the first one (vv. 1–7), the master of a house goes out to hire labourers for his vineyard. Although many details are missed out, such as why the master keeps on going out till the last hour of daylight despite knowing that the workers would not have time to produce much, one thing is clearly stated: he will pay the first ones the average daily wage, one denarius, and he will pay the rest of the workers whatever is right or just. This is what generates great expectation in the listeners/readers. What would this 'right/just' reward be like?

From this first scene we know that characters are introduced on the basis of their mutual relationships, mainly the ones determined by a 'free' market place. For some scholars (e.g. Herzog 1994), Jesus is intending to denounce the unfairness of the labour market at the time, implying that workers were not actually free. The fact that potential workers were desperately and helplessly waiting at the market place for someone to hire them suggests a labour market characterised by labour insecurity. Moreover, the daily denarius wage depicts exploitative conditions. One denarius was just subsistence pay at best.¹³ Still, this denunciation does not seem to be the main point, at least in terms of revolutionising the system, because the owner of the vineyard is not introduced as a cruel employer. On the contrary, he goes out and hires workers (even if they may not have been needed), he does not take advantage of the wage agreement nor of the workers themselves, and he ends up paying more than anyone expected, for which reason he is regarded as 'good' (v. 15). Nonetheless, the parable does challenge the prevailing notion of justice of that time (and of ours too). Great expectations have been triggered by the uncertainty of the payment to the later workers. According to the principle of proportional justice, they should receive less than the first ones. Although something is better than nothing in their desperate situation, less than a denarius would be insufficient to feed their families that day. What is going to happen next?

In the second scene (vv. 8–15), listeners are surprised beyond expectation. The last workers are summoned first, and they received a full day's payment, even though they had only worked for one hour. Nothing is said about the workers who had worked for a couple of hours only. The story moves

12. For an in-depth analysis of the use of the parables in the light of the capability approach and Catholic social thought, see Zampini Davies (2014). Due to limitations of space, we do not analyse the parable from a strict exegetical and hermeneutical-theological perspective.

13. An adult in ancient Palestine was estimated to need about half a denarius a day to live. Thus an income of 200 denarii per year was a poverty line wage (Snodgrass 2008:370).

straight onto the first workers, who have been witnessing the events of the day. According to a common sense of justice, they have reason to believe that, if this master is so generous that he pays one denarius to those working just a few hours, he will pay them with similar generosity. Both listeners and the first workers presume an increase in their payment, but they are totally disappointed: the last workers receive only the agreed denarius. For them, this is not merely an unwelcome surprise, but a flagrant injustice. Their protest (or grievance) is not based on abstract principles of justice, but rather on the master's actions, who has made the last workers 'equal to [them]' (v. 12) (Söding 2012). This breaks the logic of the connection between work and reward.

The workers have good reasons to protest, and both they and the listeners are expecting a response that can redress the matter. The master finally speaks out. Firstly, he asserts that there was no injustice whatsoever. If justice is to give to people what 'is theirs'¹⁴ (vv. 13–14a), then he has not wronged the first workers, who received their promised denarius. He has fulfilled the terms of 'retributive' justice, but went beyond too. Secondly, he explains that, as the owner and master of that house, he has the right to use his goods in the way he considers appropriate (vv. 14b–15a). Free market operations require free will to dispose of one's wealth. However, the master is not implying that he can do whatever occurs to him with his property, an ultra-liberal argument. In Sen's language, he is explaining that he has reasons for acting as he did, reasons that could be scrutinised publicly, as he had not undermined anyone's wellbeing. On the contrary, his actions, in his mind, have been 'good' and have helped people to increase or at least maintain their wellbeing. Finally, the master, aware that doing 'good' does not only promote wellbeing, but can also provoke envy or jealousy, asks a direct question: 'Why should you be envious because I am generous?' (v. 15b). This suggests that giving to the last workers more than everybody had predicted was a *good* action, even though there was *no proportion* between the work done and the payment received. Conversely, the early workers' protest about 'making them equal to the last workers', although based on an idea of *proportional justice*, was *wrong*, because it was driven by envy. Their envious cry of indignation is the opposite of what Thomas Aquinas¹⁵ calls 'holy indignation' or 'righteous anger', which normally comes from a sense of actual injustice, or what Sen (2009) calls a reasonable movement or emotion towards the desire to reduce injustices.

At this stage, the first workers and listeners find themselves in a truly uncomfortable situation. On the one hand, they still feel a sense of unfairness.¹⁶ On the other, they are implicitly accused of being unjust themselves! Is Jesus reversing some values such as proportional justice and just rewards? Although

14. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV.1 and Aquinas, *Summa Theologica II-IIae*, q.58, art. 1. Aquinas defines justice as 'the habit whereby a person with a lasting and constant will renders to each his due'.

15. *Summa Theologica II-II*, qs.23;46;158.

16. History of the effects of the parable shows that listeners/readers are not convinced with the solution the parable offers, and that a sense of internal groaning remains in many (Söding 2012).

rewards are not wrong per se, what the parable clearly rejects are rewards that create status or ranking among the members of the Kingdom of God. This is reflected in two key sentences: that those hired first thought and expected they would receive *more than the rest* (v. 10); and that the same workers protest because the master '*equalises' them to the rest* (v. 12).

If we connect this parable with our Argentine labour cases, some relevant ideas emerge. Firstly, this religious story challenges listeners with regard to their notion of 'just rewards' and the criteria to judge what is good and just. Many listeners tend to identify themselves with the first workers and perceive the master's action as unfair because their reasoning is confined to the 'commitment-merit-reward' logic. But this limited approach to justice, particularly in a free labour market, increases inequality. This could be the case of citizens who feel that Antonio or Carlos deserves to struggle for their survival because they have an informal job. Such logic of strict retribution forges a system where those who have the chance to work more deserve more reward, and those who have neither a decent job nor skills for economic transactions merit less. This institutional model not only promotes inequality, but also foments social incompetences and prevents human flourishing. Without rejecting entirely the logic of retributive justice, the parable of *The Workers* complements it and invites listeners to revisit their personal judgement on the goodness of labour transactions, which need to go beyond the 'merit-reward' parameter, and calls for structural transformation by doing so. It drags listeners to feel uneasy with the decision of the master, and to find themselves on the wrong side of the plot, questioned by the master's words: 'Why are you envious because I am generous?' Hence, they are invited to revisit their judgement and find inspirational ways for transformation.

Secondly, the first workers, who ended upset with their employer, were missing the opportunity created by the master of promoting equality and better communal wellbeing, which in the long term could be beneficiary for them too. Their short-sighted understanding of justice, or the unique criterion of merit-reward to judge good labour transactions, prevents them from realising what they have in common with other workers: their dignity and their desire to work, to sustain their families, and to flourish in a more just and secure labour system. These grumbling workers define justice from a self-centred perspective, as something which is merely to their own advantage (Snodgrass 2008:377). Consequently, 'injustice', for these workers, is what happens to their disadvantage. They are reluctant to admit that self-advantage could be sometimes unjust. The fact that they were employed first was merely luck, and the situation of the desperate non-employed people waiting in the market place was a patent unjust situation that they also should take into account in their reaction. This could be the case of Carlos and other street workers. Seeing other street vendors who can freely operate without bribing or suffering from police violence might make them feel upset. Rather than generating 'joy' for the companion who has the chance to work, hence to live with dignity and flourish, they may feel envy, and

address the situation as unjust. But what is actually unjust is the structural sin or social in-competences. Being angry and fighting against other street vendors' benefit will increase the problem. Conversely, being angry and working (and even protesting) against the structural issue, according to the theology underpinning the parable, is a 'holy' indignation. Translated into Sen's language, this sort of indignation could help raise the awareness of a concrete unjust mechanism that needs to be redressed through a public reasoning process. Still, people's reasons and protests, however valuable, are not enough in themselves. The parable highlights that going beyond one's interest and being focused on the relations we have with others, is a necessary criterion for determining what is 'good' and 'just', and for promoting human flourishing.

Thirdly, the master's agency proves to be creative enough to go beyond the injustices of the system. By paying all workers a minimum wage and offering them the equal opportunity to work, he is transforming an unjust system which left workers out. On the other hand, by fulfilling his contractual obligations, the master is not undermining the system. Yet, by complementing his obligations with a logic of 'unproportional gift' to the last workers, he is challenging an understanding of labour market economy reduced to material rewards. Including 'gratuitousness' within economic transactions is not necessarily irrational (cf. Sen 1987), as the cases of Teresa and José's employer showed, who always fulfilled, but went beyond his contractual obligations. What the parable addresses is the motivation for including this 'gift-logic'. Rather than following an altruistic principle, the master seems to respond to the relational aspect of labour on the one hand, and the need for continuing structural transformation on the other. This is why his 'being' good/just is inextricably connected with his 'doing'. To disconnect these two dimensions risks weakening the building of social competences. Nora's employers did fulfil their legal promises by paying the required compensation for redundancy, but were neither interested in the wellbeing of their employee nor in forging the spirit of the law: to generate labour stability. Even if they could not keep Nora at home, they could at least have tried to find her another place, or offer personal support, particularly given her first pregnancy and lack of acquaintances in the country. If all employers were to exercise their agency that way, the system would be debilitated in such a way that it would be open for structural sin. For that, certain individual-relational actions are needed so as to sustain institutions that are critical to promote human flourishing. The absence of both of them proves to be detrimental to development, as Antonio's case shows: he lost his eye and his job due to the lack of both social competences and individual 'good' doings.

The last idea we can extract from the parable is that justice is a work in process that requires permanent adjustments, because there is no perfect system or institution that forges total justice. This resonates with the capability-centred idea of justice: a practical and agent-focused way of addressing injustices through continual public reasoning processes, which needs to be completed by other approaches (Sen 2009).

But the adjustments of the process towards a more just social order, as the parable implies, should not focus on pleasing the privileged who complain (the displeased first workers), but rather on improving people's wellbeing, particularly the disadvantaged (last workers). As for the followers of Christ, called to promote the justice of his Kingdom on earth, the parable also reaffirms that justice in the labour sphere is not going to be installed by God from above, but rather from 'good doings and beings' of people operating in it. Hence, Christ's disciples on their own cannot instil actual justice on earth; they need to stand alongside those who might coincide with some of the Kingdom's justice principles, and with them, promote human flourishing through a smooth connection and mutual reinforcement of personal actions and social competences.

Concluding remarks

The human development perspective on policy, and its philosophical basis in the capability approach, has put the human being, and her flourishing, as the central concern. It also takes an institutionally integrated view and sees what institutions can 'be or do' as essential to enabling individuals' development. Using four examples of Argentine workers living in deprived areas, we have shown how the capability approach provides a useful analytical framework to understand the connections between the opportunities people have to flourish, how well – or not – the institutions in which they live function (social competences), and how human action (agency) shapes both social competences and people's opportunities to flourish. However, on its own, the capability approach falls short to consider that sometimes, 'agency' can divert rather than promote the flourishing of others. In this respect, theology offers some valuable insights.

By introducing the theological idea of 'structural sin', we have provided an in-depth analysis of social in-competences. We argued that such in-competences can be transformed, hence human flourishing be promoted, when agency is exercised beyond self-interests and in view of the good of others. As Sen refers to religious narratives so as to philosophically underpin his concept of development, so the article has explored how one Christian narrative, the New Testament parable of *The Workers in the Vineyard*, can help generate novel labour relations and a transformation of social in-competences. Rather than exploring a direct link between the parable and public policy, the article has sought to contribute to what Sen calls 'public reasoning', examining how a particular religious story can broaden the imagination of its listeners, and bring them to unexpected places so as to challenge their current understanding of what is 'just'. As we have learned from the analysed parable, religious narratives do not have the solution to remedying unjust situations, but they can certainly offer valuable insights about how to do so. They can help motivate action and create the conditions for each person to fulfil their potential.

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Authors' contributions

S.D. and A.Z.D. wrote the article jointly, with S.D. taking the lead in the sections on the capability approach and social policy analysis and A.Z.D. taking the lead in the sections on the Biblical parable and theological analysis.

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