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By the winner of the 1988 Nobel Prize in Economics, an essential and paradigm-altering framework for understanding economic development--for both rich and poor--in the twenty-first century.

Freedom, Sen argues, is both the end and most efficient means of sustaining economic life and the key to securing the general welfare of the world's entire population. Releasing the idea of individual freedom from association with any particular historical, intellectual, political, or religious tradition, Sen clearly demonstrates its current applicability and possibilities. In the new global economy, where, despite unprecedented increases in overall opulence, the contemporary world denies elementary freedoms to vast numbers--perhaps even the majority of people--he concludes, it is still possible to practically and optimistically restrain a sense of social accountability. Development as Freedom is essential reading.

When Sen, an Indian-born Cambridge economist, won the 1998 Nobel Prize for Economic Science, he was praised by the Nobel Committee for bringing an "ethical dimension" to a field recently dominated by technical specialists. Sen here argues that open dialogue, civil freedoms and political liberties are prerequisites for sustainable development. He tests his theory with examples ranging from the former Soviet bloc to Africa, but he puts special emphasis on China and India. How does one explain the recent gulf in economic progress between authoritarian yet fast-growing China and democratic, economically laggard India? For Sen, the answer is clear: India, with its massive neglect of public education, basic health care and literacy, was poorly prepared for a widely shared economic expansion; China, on the other hand, having made substantial advances in those areas, was able to capitalize on its market reforms. Yet Sen demolishes the notion that a specific set of "Asian values" exists that might provide a justification for authoritarian regimes. He observes that China's coercive system has contributed to massive famine and that Beijing's compulsory birth control policy--only one child per family--has led to fatal neglect of female children. Though not always easy reading for the layperson, Sen's book is an admirable and persuasive effort to define development not in terms of GDP but in terms of "the real freedoms that people enjoy."

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Amarty Sen is Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1988, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Science.