

# 1 *Introduction*

FLAVIO COMIM, SHAILAJA  
FENNELL AND P. B. ANAND

The Capability Approach is an evaluative framework for assessing people's advantage. It focuses on distributive issues; in particular, those concerned with justice and equality. It shares a research agenda with the Human Development perspective, tackling issues of poverty, inequality, health and education, labour and human rights, among so many others still to be explored. The capability approach has become an important framework for thinking about development and quality of life because it changes the analytical locus of attention from resources and subjective views into objective 'doings and beings' (called functionings) and their corresponding freedoms (called capabilities) in evaluating how well people are living. As such, it broadens different informational spaces in carrying out inter-subjective comparisons of individuals' well-being and agency. Despite the considerable progress that has been achieved by this approach in the last three decades, it continues to offer new perspectives to be explored.

This book starts with a chapter based on Gay Meeks's keynote speech paper, 'On Sen on the Capability of Capabilities: The story of a not-for-profit enterprise', where she offers a historical reconstruction of Sen's capability approach, metaphorically seeing it in terms of growth phases of a successful company. By doing so, Meeks offers a rich, authoritative and unique narrative of the creation of the approach in which its different parts are seen as stages of a coherent strategy. Her paper is an essential call to see the capability approach as part of Sen's long-term intellectual enterprise. Indeed, it is remarkable to note how he laid out the foundations of the Capability Approach back in his early social choice writings in the early 1970s, pursuing the same research agenda for almost fifty years.

The book is then divided into five parts, namely, (i) foundations, (ii) operationalisation, (iii) from concepts to applications, (iv) capabilities, cities and institutions and (v) capabilities and education. These parts

were chosen to represent some of the ‘new frontiers of the capability approach’ addressed by this book.

The first group of chapters examines the foundations of the capability approach, critically delving into its individualistic nature and putting forward a range of alternatives to overcome what several authors consider as a key limitation of the approach. Jonathan Warner raises the point that human flourishing should be seen as a coordination exercise. The problem, as he sees it, is related to a certain overemphasis on the notion of agency sponsored by the approach. But what happens, he asks, when agency clashes with other values? This seems to be a question that has been hanging for some time in the literature and that can allow us to see its shortcomings and expand its frontiers by developing new analytical structures. Warner puts forward the concept of a ‘flourishing community’ and ‘the common good’ as strategic orientating principles to advance the notion of public interest. He follows an Aristotelian root, expanding on a now well-established debate on the capability literature.

A core concept for Warner is the notion of ‘virtue’. This is a point also discussed by Caroline Souza and Gabriel Goldmeier within the context of political science. The authors, however, follow a different route from Warner’s, addressing the debate in terms of the social contractarian tradition followed by the approach rather than in terms of its individualistic nature. In particular, they examine a debate between hypothetical contracts versus social contracts, exploring the ideas of Gauthier as a way of discussing the roots of cooperative behaviour. They address the same set of issues raised by Warner. However, instead of talking about individualist agency as he does, they address the issue of the limits of self-interest and its links with social choice theory, a theme also explored in this book by Comim. At the end, Souza and Goldmeier share Warner’s proposal that ‘common civic values’ have a role to play in examining social arrangements

Mathias Nebel and Ma. Teresa Herrera Rendón Nebel also focus on the concept of agency as the *locus* to investigate critically the shortcomings of the Capability Approach. But instead of proceeding in the direction of Warner and Souza and Goldmeier, they prefer to put forward the notion of meta-capability of agency (that they define as the ability that people have of exercising their freedoms) establishing a link with the concept of responsibility (that they argue has been neglected by the approach). They choose the meta-capability of agency as a way of

embedding agency within social relations, what analytically speaking is in the same direction suggested by the other papers. But they choose a different theoretical foundation to complement the approach based on the work by Ricoeur and Lèvinas. Their chapter moves beyond the philosophical frontier by examining possible empirical indicators for levels of responsibility, using as an example labour processes.

Josh Platzky Miller tackles the same question about the individualistic nature of the capability approach. But the way that he chooses to explore alternative conceptions of intersubjective personhood, as he puts it, is by considering a co-existence between different alternatives. In particular, he concentrates on ‘assemblage theory’ and ‘communities’. The first characterises irreducible properties of social structures and how interrelations between parts cannot be fully captured by the capability approach; the second raises the political dimension of mobilisation that it is necessary for characterising communities and people’s humanity in their social complexity. The merge with different theories is also the strategy chosen by Razia Shariff. Her way to build these new foundational frontiers entails the use of critical theory (in particular by using Foucault and Bordieu). Her argument is that critical theory can offer a broader ontology of social change than the one provided by Rawlsian theory, which, to a large extent, is a theme shared with Souza and Goldmeier. However, her emphasis is on understanding social transformation and for this reason she advocates that the concept of power needs to be taken more seriously. These critical thoughts are applied constructively to Sen’s notions of instrumental freedoms, showing how they can be seen in a historical case (the Shahbag Movement).

These chapters, when taken together, not only question the individualistic nature of the capability approach, but also propose a rich range of alternatives, or ‘new frontiers’, as we say in this book, of the capability approach. Thus, they move beyond this well-established debate by suggesting concrete candidates as complementary concepts (in no particular order) such as ‘common civic values’, ‘the common good’, ‘the meta-capability of agency’, ‘assemblage theory’ or ‘critical theory’.

The next group of chapters offers new perspectives on issues related to the operationalisation of the approach. Flavio Comim investigates the social choice roots of Sen’s capability approach, putting forward its main implications for examining human development issues. He suggests that the principles of pluralism, comparative analysis and

reasoned scrutiny can take us a long way in using the approach and that ‘capabilities’ per se will not do all the methodological work that needs to be done in applying the approach to human development issues, in line with Meeks’s concluding remarks. Rather than attempting a taxonomy of different methods, such as the one offered by Byskov, he focuses on the field of rankings and meta-rankings that he argues are more compatible with Sen’s approach. One can pay lip-service to any of the principles mentioned above; the real issue is about how to engage with them. On the other hand, Morten Byskov examines different methods for selecting capabilities. He classifies current methodologies into four groups, namely, ad hoc methods, foundational methods, procedural methods and multi-staged methods including the so-called synthesising method that promotes a dialectical dialogue between normative theory and the democratic decision-making process.

Another chapter that explores a potential empirical strategy for operationalising the capability approach is that written by Enrica Chiappero, Paola Salardi and Francesco Scervini. The focus of their attention is on the concept of ‘conversion rate’ and how the existing literature, as they argue, has often imprecisely defined and estimated this rate. Within this context, they put forward a conceptual framework for defining conversion factors and conversion rates. Similar to Comim, who focuses on the notion of rankings, and to Byskov, who puts forward the synthesising method, they concentrate on a key concept and explore its potential policy implications. Their paper, however, moves beyond measurement to discuss estimation challenges, such as endogeneity. By doing so, they engage with an empirical agenda similar to the one suggested by Jaya Krishnakumar and Ricardo Nogales.

In what has been named ‘the operationalisation frontier’, it is indeed important to distinguish between measurement, applications and estimation. Whereas measurement is about working with variables that can be described within capabilities spaces, applications could explore different aspects of the approach and estimation tackles the most suitable techniques to work with capability data. Krishnakumar and Nogales discuss one of the most promising frontiers in the operationalisation of the capability approach by analysing the potential role of simultaneous equation models. These models allow for a complete description of human development from a multidimensional and interconnected perspective, taking into account social, economic, political and institutional factors, that are key for the conversion issues as

explored by Chiappero, Salardi and Scervini. In estimation exercises, it is essential for a human development agenda to compare between different groups of individuals and Krishnakumar and Nogales demonstrate in their chapter with two empirical applications how this can be achieved.

The operationalisation frontier remains one of the most challenging aspects of the capability approach because the translation of its theoretical richness into practical and concrete contexts faces several empirical hurdles. Taken together, however, these chapters provide some alternatives to handling these difficulties. They are not the only chapters in the book to engage with empirical issues but they are distinguished in the sense that they chose to structure their analyses with an emphasis on general instruments.

Nevertheless, one can also appreciate the relevance of history and political context in understanding the potential application of the approach. In this sense, Gasper's chapter provides a unique account of Sen's influence on the contemporary development arena in India by contrasting the impact of his and Jean Drèze's book, *India: Uncertain Glory* against the impact of other books that convey different visions of India. Des Gasper shows that, historically speaking, Drèze and Sen operate at the reasoned level of universalistic humanists, focusing on what happens to the poorest and most excluded groups in Indian society. Their vision, motivated by the capability approach, contrasts with visions of 'dreaming engineers, nationalist leaders and chauvinistic crowds', as Gasper puts it. Without anticipating Gasper's main conclusions, it is interesting to see that the application of the capability approach has a social context that needs to be appreciated. As such, Gasper's chapter nicely complements Meeks's discussion, seeing Sen's work on India as part of a wider political and social context. Gasper also invites the reader to think about development as a vision and as a set of practices with political significance.

Another important direction in which the application of the capability approach spreads is in tackling technical issues related to the elaboration of composite indicators. Mario Biggeri and Vincenzo Mauro face the challenge of exploring new frontiers of the Human Development Index (HDI) by applying the Multidimensional Synthesis of Indicators (MSI) approach to the traditional HDI. This allows them to expand the scope of informational spaces considered by the HDI in order to include other freedoms such as political, civil and

environmental freedoms. Their paper discusses the differences in using arithmetic vis-à-vis geometric means in elaborating composite capability indicators. Whereas Biggeri and Mauro offer a discussion that it is *prima facie* very different from Gasper's narrative, both chapters explore new frontiers in which the capability approach can engage with civil society and promote public reason, competing with visions or with alternative indicators in order to guide public policy.

This discussion would not be complete without a proper account of the role of inequality in thinking about human development policies. Macarena Orchard and Martina Yopo face this challenging issue, expanding the capability framework to the literature on empirical measurements of multidimensional inequality. They do not limit their discussion to a simple review of the debate but rather, by using cluster analysis and a pluralist context-specific approach, they put forward a methodology for considering bi-dimensional capabilities (including objective functionings and subjective evaluations). Indeed, their technical work illustrates Meeks's discussion about the scope of the application of the approach. It is very interesting to note how they move from a direct principle that 'some capabilities are more unequally distributed than others' towards a discussion of intersectionality of capabilities, using Chilean data for empirical discussions.

The intersectionality of capabilities is also a theme (although it does not appear with this name) of Stephanie Schrage and Kristin Huber's chapter. They start from a series of empirical questions concerning what is a living wage and how to define a minimum level of well-being (a central question that the capability approach inherited from John Rawls's concern with primary goods as a pre-condition for social justice). The problem, as they discuss, is that the international garment industry has seen the emergency of multiple and overlapping standards with considerable variation. For them, changing the focus from the means of living to people's actual opportunities and real freedoms is the way forward. They ground their analysis on normative theory, as Byskov would put it, and put forward a conceptual framework that they call 'the living wages approach' that takes into account several features of the capability approach. Similarly to Orchard and Yopo, they also face the tensions between objective and subjective informational spaces.

Indeed, the issues about the use of subjective information and the difficulties in achieving intersubjective comparability in normative

evaluations have given rise to a wide range of debates, such as the one on adaptive preferences. A new frontier of the capability approach, explored in this book in the chapter by Tadashi Hirai, delves into different interpretations of ‘happiness’ by Nussbaum and Sen. These are not issues that are relevant for merely theoretical reasons but that have deep practical importance to empirical work. As a matter of fact, what counts or not for normative evaluations are often at the core of public policy discussions. Hirai suggests that the big divide with regard to subjective information between Nussbaum and Sen is that whereas Sen considers that ‘happiness’ can have evidential value for evaluations, Nussbaum goes beyond this, arguing that happiness, as general subjective information, can be important to explain people’s motivations and can be, for this reason, used in an eudaimonic perspective, such as the one, put forward by self-determination theory (SDT).

The theme of motivations as the theme of aspirations is usually discussed in capability literature from an individual perspective. However, in this book Meera Tiwari examines the influence of middle classes’ aspirations, mobility and values in India on policy-making, a topic that engages with Gasper’s analysis of interpretations of India. To such an extent, Tiwari works with categories of analysis that emerge from Bourdieu’s writings (such as ‘habitus’ and ‘doxa’) that overlap with Shariff’s defence of critical theory as a way of providing a broader social ontology to the capability approach. As a result, Tiwari sees how middle classes’ aspirations shape from residential patterns in cities (an issue also discussed by Shailaja Fennell, Jaime Royo-Olid and Matthew Barac) to a promotion of lifestyles and how they strongly influence policy-making in India. She suggests an aspiration-agency-capability mapping as a way of examining these socially embedded links. An alternative approach to social links is put forward by Paul Anand, who explores the value of social capital as a social resource. His approach raises theoretical, conceptual and methodological questions about how capability research can or should engage with the literature on social resources.

The book continues to explore new frontiers of the capability approach and the following chapters could have been a straightforward continuation of the sequence just described. However, they constitute key clusters of ideas about ‘cities and the urban space’ and ‘education capabilities’ and, in order to appreciate more what they are collectively arguing, they were grouped into different sections. Indeed,

Fennell, Royo-Olvid and Barac introduce key conceptual distinctions, for instance between ‘habitation’ and ‘habitare’, that are essential for evaluating housing and habitation programmes from a capability perspective. By doing so, they not only demonstrate how the approach can be used but also compare it with alternatives, such as the basic needs, participatory and affordable housing approaches. They argue that a capability-imbued housing approach is demand-driven because it respects people’s agency and goes beyond a conception of housing as merely shelter by expanding into people’s positive freedoms. It is also process-sensitive, allowing incremental self-building.

Prachi Acharya applies the capability approach to examine building regulatory frameworks. The problem addressed by all these chapters in this section is that often housing, building and urban policies do not take into account what people value and how living in cities shapes and is shaped by their capabilities. Acharya shows how the approach can be applied to very specific issues, such as to certain aspects of construction methods and materials. Her argument for taking more seriously the issue of building codes for low-income housing in the global south echoes the message from the initial chapters of this book that collective alternatives must be considered for a more inclusive human development. The chapter also contrasts the capability alternative against basic needs and participatory approaches and highlights the importance of agency in building more inclusive and equitable construction standards.

The scope of the discussion is widened with P. B. Anand, who critiques the literature on cities and capabilities and then identifies potential ‘new frontiers’ for applying the capability approach to cities, examining, in particular, the criteria needed for inclusive and sustainable cities. He also focuses on the notion of agency embedded in different social contexts. He engages in a literature review in order to select key elements for building a capability grounded framework for urban issues. Once the framework is established, he uses it to examine empirical evidence about cities and a wide range of freedoms, from life expectancy to safety. The issue of housing, raised by Fennell, Royo-Olvid and Barac, also appears in his chapter, linking resources to functionalities and capabilities in an integrated way, also discussed by Orchard and Yopo. The empirical contribution of this chapter highlights that cities do not automatically lead to enhanced capabilities. The issue of life expectancy is a case in point – while increasing the share of urban



population led to significant gain in life expectancy in some countries, the relationship is quite complex. Likewise, increasing urbanisation does not always lead to reduction in extreme poverty. Anand identifies issues for further development of both theoretical and operational aspects of the capability approach in relation to cities.

Altogether these chapters provide a framework for thinking about cities and urban development from a capability perspective. Whereas it is true that they contribute specifically to the substantive issues that they discuss (housing, building regulations, development planning), they also put forward, based on the contributions of Arjun Appadurai and Alexandre Apsan Frediani, among others, a new set of conceptual and analytical tools that take the frontier of the approach further.

Finally, the last section of the book tackles the challenging prospects of education. The first chapter by Robin Vos and Jérôme Ballet examines the process formation of youth aspirations in France related to education systems. More concretely, they investigate the impact of formal education on students' aspirations in France. They put forward a dynamic view of capabilities, taking account of the results of the SDT literature, as evidenced by Hirai. By using factorial analysis and hierarchical cluster analysis, they isolate the impact of objective and subjective measures of students attending the lycée. Their conclusions raise concerns about the impact of formal education on students, namely, promoting a reduction on students' well-being and decreasing their capacity of aspiration (when one should expect just the opposite). Their results bring to the fore earlier results by Unterhalter on the ambiguous role of schools on children's development and raise the need for further scrutiny about how schools influence youth's aspirations.

Similar to Vos and Ballet, Cristina Devecchi and Michael Watts also investigate the impact of schools on children's capacity of adaptation and aspirations. In particular, they explore the impact of schools on children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities. These two chapters raise a critical similar point: education has the potential to empower, to raise expectations and reduce adaptive preferences. But the way in which it has been carried out has been, as Devecchi and Watts put it, a 'considerable disservice' to these causes. Moreover, in the case of children with SEN and disabilities, there are several barriers raised by education systems such as the nature of curricula, the structure of schooling, the assessment procedures used and the

adaptation processes that they trigger. It is interesting to note that these authors are facing some of the complexities of working with agency and social structures, proposed by some initial chapters. Devecchi and Watts, however, expand the frontiers of the debate by introducing new conceptual and narrative tools for tackling the problem of adaptive preferences.

But it is not all doom and gloom. The remaining two chapters of this section offer narratives about how certain interventions can be successful in expanding children's capabilities. Helena Kiff analyses the impact of 'the Writers' Workshop' on children's capabilities. It is important to note how a planned intervention can bring together many desired outcomes, such as allowing children to 'find a voice' or providing an environment for nurturing them or developing in them a sense of affiliation. The chapter then uses Nussbaum's capability perspective to code and classify the results from a twelve-month ethnographic study. The rich array of conclusions is impossible to present in this introduction but it is worth mentioning how the author explores the impacts of 'therapeutic writing'.

Caroline Sarojini Hart investigates how educational processes can contribute to the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. She raises a similar caveat regarding how educational opportunities might not be sufficient to produce just outcomes. But, she asks, can the individual pursuit of freedom overshadow the pursuit of collective values? There are key trade-offs between valuable capabilities that are difficult to sort. This discussion links with Comim's proposal for taking social choice more seriously as one of the engines of the capability approach. It also relates to the need to define concrete visions of development, as raised by Gasper. Hart, however, appeals to a richer ontology from critical theory, along the lines discussed by the Part I of this volume, by employing Bourdieu's diverse notions of capital related to education and pushing the frontier of the approach to consider a multi-stage process of converting, through the education process, commodities and different forms of capitals into functionings and capabilities. There is natural overlap with Chiappero, Salandi and Scervini's chapter on the conversion issue. Hart also discusses the importance of discussing trade-offs for public policy.

To conclude, this introduction provides a brief presentation of the chapters of the book, highlighting their main contributions and points of intersection. The division of the book into five parts aims to call