

## *New Frontiers of the Capability Approach*

For over three decades, the capability approach (CA) proposed and developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum has had a distinct impact on development theories and approaches. Going beyond a merely economic conception of development, it engages more widely with its normative aspects. This book explores the new frontiers of the CA and its links to human development in three main areas. First, it delves into the philosophical foundations of the approach, re-examining its links to concepts of common good, collective agency and epistemic diversity. Second, it addresses its 'operational frontier', aiming to give inclusive explanations of some of the most advanced methods available for capability researchers. Third, it discusses the wide range of applications for which this approach can be used, as carried out both by renowned capability scholars and by researchers from different disciplines. This broad interdisciplinary range includes the areas of human and sustainable development, inequalities, labour markets, education, special needs, cities, urban planning, housing, social capital and happiness studies, among others.

FLAVIO COMIM is an associate professor at the University Ramon Llull/IQS in Spain and an affiliated lecturer at the Centre of Development Studies, University of Cambridge. He has been a consultant for UNESCO, UNEP, FAO, WHO and UNDP. He co-edited the books *The Capability Approach: Concepts, Measures and Applications* (Cambridge, 2008), with Mozaffar Qizilbash and Sabina Alkire, and *Capabilities, Gender, Equality* (Cambridge, 2014), with Martha Nussbaum.

SHAILAJA FENNELL is **Senior Lecturer in Development Studies** at the University of Cambridge. Her previous publications include *Rules, Rubrics and Riches: The Interrelations between Legal Reform and International Development* (2010) and *Gender Education and Equality in a Global Context: Conceptual Frameworks and Policy Perspectives* (edited with M. Arnot, 2008).

P. B. ANAND is a reader in environmental economics and public policy at the University of Bradford where he has been teaching since 1998. His previous works include his book *Scarcity, Entitlements and the Economics of Water in Developing Countries* (2007) and papers on applying the capability approach to issues related to access to water and sustainability.

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*Edited by*

FLAVIO COMIM  
*IQS/Universitat Ramon Llull*

SHAILAJA FENNELL  
*University of Cambridge*

P. B. ANAND  
*University of Bradford*



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## *Contributors*

- Prachi Acharya, University of Cambridge  
P. B. Anand, University of Bradford  
Paul Anand, Open University  
Jérôme Ballet, University of Bordeaux and GREThA  
Matthew Barac, London Metropolitan University  
Mario Biggeri, University of Florence  
Morten F. Byskov, University of Warwick  
Enrica Chiappero, University of Pavia and CRHED University of Free State  
Flavio Comim, IQS/Universitat Ramon Llull and University of Cambridge  
Cristina Devecchi, University of Northampton  
Shailaja Fennell, University of Cambridge  
Des Gasper, International Institute of Social Studies (The Hague), Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands  
Gabriel Goldmeier, UCL Institute of Education  
Caroline Sarojini Hart, University of Sheffield  
Ma. Teresa Herrera Rendón Nebel, Universidad Popular Autonoma del Estado de Puebla  
Tadashi Hirai, University of Cambridge  
Kristin Huber, Universität  
Helena Kiff, University of East Anglia

*List of Contributors*

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- Jaya Krishnakumar, University of Geneva  
Iris Mantovani, London Economics  
Vincenzo Mauro, University of Pisa  
Gay Meeks, University of Cambridge  
Josh Platzky Miller, University of Cambridge  
Mathias Nebel, Universidad Popular Autonoma del Estado de Puebla  
Ricardo Nogales, University of Oxford and Universidad Privada Boliviana  
Macarena Orchard, University of Nottingham  
Jaime Royo-Olid, University of Cambridge  
Paola Salardi, University of Toronto  
Francesco Scervini, University of Pavia  
Stephanie Schrage, Universität Hamburg  
Razia Shariff, Canterbury Christ Church University  
Caroline Souza, University of Cambridge  
Meera Tiwari, University of East London  
Robin Vos, University of Bordeaux and GREThA  
Jonathan Warner, Quest University Canada  
Michael Watts, Education Consultant  
Martina Yopo, University of Cambridge

## *Preface and Acknowledgements*

This book is a result of the first Cambridge Capability Conference (CCC) held in June 2016. It is a testimony to the vitality of the approach to tackle emerging human development challenges. This conference was the start of a new phase of capability conferences in Cambridge. From the early Cambridge and Pavia Capability Conferences in the first half of the 2000s and the creation of the Human Development and Capability Association, the literature on the capability approach (CA) has seen a prolific expansion. While the impressive intellectual stature of the founding figures of the CA, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, has been a decisive factor in the multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary expansion of the approach, it is important to acknowledge that much of the proliferation has also been due to the development of a large community of capability scholars spread all over the world.

Cambridge, both the University and the city, is home to many people working on the CA and has been an integral part of this history. It has provided a vibrant and stimulating environment for the delivery of lectures, convening of conferences, writing of PhD theses and undertaking of research on human development from a capability perspective. In fact, one of the best-kept Cambridge secrets is that for more than thirty-five years, the University has benefited from lectures on the CA offered by Gay Meeks. Gentle and reserved, she does not like to talk about her own achievements, a rare virtue nowadays, some might say. Yet, she is extremely influential not only due to the elegance of her writing, but also because of her generosity in lecturing to generations of students. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that many of us would not have learnt to understand and value the CA if we had not had the opportunity to sit in on her authoritative and stimulating lectures.

This book is first and foremost a record of our gratitude and admiration for Meeks who was invited to be the first keynote speaker of this conference series where we try to recreate the intellectually challenging

environment of her lectures and the intimate intellectual atmosphere of the early Capability Conferences.

Meeks started her academic life getting a first in her BA at ‘the other place’ (the University of Oxford) in philosophy, politics and economics in 1971, followed by her PhD at the University of Edinburgh in 1975. During her PhD days she worked as a tutor in philosophy at the University of Glasgow. When she finished, she became an ESRC post-doctoral fellow at the Faculty of Economics and a Calouste Gulbenkian research fellow at Lucy Cavendish College in Cambridge. From 1978 to 1980 she was a lecturer in economics for St Anne’s College, Oxford (yes, that college of Michael Sandel’s 50p story!), a junior dean and joint warden of St Anne’s-Balliol Graduate Centre. From 1985 to 1994 she was a fellow and director of studies in economics for Robinson College, in Cambridge. That overlapped with her appointment as a research associate from 1984 to 2001 at the Department of Applied Economics, Cambridge. During the twenty-two years, from 1986 to 2008, she was an affiliated lecturer at the Faculty of Economics in Cambridge. In 2001, she resumed her fellowship at Robinson College that continued until 2009. Since 2001, she has been appointed senior research associate, first in the Faculty of Economics, now in POLIS.

For so many of us, Meeks was the lecturer of an intriguing and challenging paper called ‘Philosophical Issues in Economics’. This paper was given as part of the MPhil in economics until 2008 and from then on in the MPhil in development studies in Cambridge. This paper introduced the CA and provided a critical view of normative economics, a different kind of development based on principles broader than utilitarianism can offer, at least in its narrower forms.

The paper has also been an exemplar in academic excellence: from her meticulous notes, usually revised and amended, Meeks would not simply offer the key concepts to understand complex methodological debates, but also provide an impressive list of scholars who had already discussed the topics, accompanied by questions through which her students could develop their own thinking. If one felt intimidated by reading the ‘giants’ of economics and philosophy, Meeks would offer sets of tailored questions that would induce and empower her students to think critically about core issues for the understanding of economics as a moral science. This is not a minor achievement. One did not simply read Sen’s ‘Rational Fools’. One was invited to think about it. One was also invited to consider others’ arguments and

points of view (the mark of a good essay!), never forgetting, of course, as she would repeat two to three times during the academic year, that ‘Sen was the hero’ of the paper.

One would ‘learn by doing’ that in order to be a good academic one would have to confront opposing views, stimulating values of tolerance and sympathy in the training of future generations of lecturers and professionals in other fields. But that was only half of the story: Meeks has always been an extremely gentle and kind teacher, offering generous office hours for seeing students, who would bring their ideas, hypotheses, misunderstandings and, yes, delusions (not always in comprehensible English) to her and receive kind and wise ministering.

We are delighted to be able to express our gratitude to Dr Meeks, as well as to all other participants of our first CCC and to the Centre of Development Studies in Cambridge that provided an interdisciplinary home for this forum. Our thanks also go to Doreen Woolfrey, because without her help the conference would not have been possible. We are also very grateful to our editor, Phil Good, who believed in this project when it was only an incipient idea.