

The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach

This landmark handbook collects in a single volume the current state of research on the capability approach. It includes a comprehensive introduction to the approach, as well as new research from leading scholars in this increasingly influential multidisciplinary field, including the pioneers of capability research, Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. Incorporating both approachable introductory chapters and more in-depth analysis relating to the central philosophical, conceptual and theoretical issues of capability research, this handbook also includes analytical and measurement tools, as well as policy approaches which have emerged in the recent literature. The handbook will be an invaluable resource for students coming to the capability approach for the first time, as well as for researchers engaged in advanced research in a wide range of disciplines, including development studies, economics, gender studies, political science and political philosophy.

ENRICA CHIAPPERO-MARTINETTI is Full Professor of Economic Policy at the University of Pavia. She teaches economics, sustainable development, and development economics and cooperation, at undergraduate and graduate levels. She has acted as Vice-President of the Human Development and Capability Association and currently serves that Association as editor of the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*.

SIDDIQUR OSMANI is Professor of Development Economics in the Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics at Ulster University. He has published widely on issues related to poverty, inequality, hunger, famine, nutrition, microcredit, the rights-based approach to development and development problems in general. He has been an editor of the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* and has served on the editorial board of a number of development-related journals.

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Edited by Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti , Siddiqur Osmani , Mozaffar Qizilbash

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MOZAFFAR QIZILBASH is Honorary Professor in the Departments of Economics and Philosophy at the University of York. He has published in journals in the fields of economics, philosophy and development studies. He has acted as Editor-at-Large as well as Vice-President of the Human Development and Capability Association, and as an editor of the *Journal of Human Development*.

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Edited by

Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti

University of Pavia

Siddiqur Osmani

Ulster University

Mozaffar Qizilbash

University of York



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In Memory of Tony Atkinson

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Contributors

SABINA ALKIRE, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI),
University of Oxford

RICHARD ARNESON, Distinguished Professor, Department of Philosophy, UC San
Diego. Holder of Valtz Family Chair in Philosophy

JEREMY BENDIK-KEYMER, Beamer-Schneider Professor in Ethics and Associate
Professor of Philosophy, Case Western Reserve University

MARIO BIGGERI, Associate Professor of Economics, University of Florence, and
Scientific Director of the research centre ARCO (Action Research for CO-
development)

ALEJANDRA BONI, Professor and Deputy Director, INGENIO, CSIC-Universitat
Politècnica de València

LUIGINO BRUNI, Professor of Political Economy, LUMSA University, Rome

TANIA BURCHARDT, Director, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London
School of Economics and Political Science

RUTGER CLAASSEN, Professor of Political Philosophy and Economic Ethics,
Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies, Utrecht University

ADEL DAOUD, Bell Fellow, Center for Population and Development Studies,
Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, Harvard University

KOEN DECANCO, Centre for Social Policy, University of Antwerp

SÉVERINE DENEULIN, Associate Professor in International Development,
University of Bath

JAY DRYDYK, Professor of Philosophy, Carleton University, Ottawa

ALEXANDRE APSAN FREDIANI, Principal researcher at the Human Settlements
Research Group of the International Institute for Environment and Development
(IIED)

DES GASPER, Professor (Emeritus) of Human Development, Development Ethics and Public Policy, International Institute of Social Studies (Erasmus University Rotterdam), The Hague

KATHARINE GELBER, Professor of Politics and Public Policy, School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland

SOLAVA IBRAHIM, Senior Lecturer, Anglia Ruskin University, Affiliated Lecturer, Centre of Development Studies, University of Cambridge

RAVI KANBUR, T. H. Lee Professor of World Affairs, International Professor of Applied Economics and Management, Professor of Economics, Cornell University

STEPHAN KLASSEN, Professor of Development Economics, University of Göttingen

JAYA KRISHNAKUMAR, Professor of Econometrics, University of Geneva

PETER J. LAMBERT, Department of Economics, University of Oregon

DAVID LEOPOLD, Associate Professor of Political Theory, University of Oxford, John Milton Fellow, Mansfield College, Oxford

MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM, Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago, appointed in the Law School and the Philosophy Department

ILSE OOSTERLAKEN, Postdoctoral researcher, Faculty of Humanities, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

PRASANTA K. PATTANAIK, Emeritus Professor of Economics, Department of Economics, University of California, Riverside

SANJAY G. REDDY, Associate Professor of Economics, The New School for Social Research, New York

HENRY S. RICHARDSON, Professor of Philosophy, Georgetown University

MAURICE SALLES, Professor of Economics Emeritus, CREM-CNRS and University of Caen-Normandy, Honorary Research Associate, CPNSS, London School of Economics, Murat Sertel Center for Advanced Economic Studies, Istanbul Bilgi University

MARIA EMMA SANTOS, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Universidad Nacional del Sur (UNS), Researcher of Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales del Sur (IIESS), UNS-CONICET, Bahía Blanca, Argentina, Research Associate of Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), University of Oxford

ERIK SCHOKKAERT, Department of Economics, University of Leuven

SUMAN SETH, Lecturer, Economics Division, Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, Research Associate, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), University of Oxford

S. SUBRAMANIAN, Independent researcher (formerly National Fellow of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, Professor, Madras Institute of Development Studies)

L. W. SUMNER, University Professor Emeritus, Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto

KOTARO SUZUMURA[†], formerly Professor Emeritus and Honorary Fellow, School of Political Science and Economics, Waseda University, Professor Emeritus, Institute of Economic Research, Hitotsubashi University, Member of the Japan Academy

LORELLA TERZI, Professor of the Philosophy of Education, School of Education, University of Roehampton, London

ROLPH VAN DER HOEVEN, Professor (Emeritus), Employment and Development Economics, International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) at Erasmus University (EUR), The Hague

MARTIN VAN HEES, Professor of Ethics, Department of Philosophy, VU Amsterdam

POLLY VIZARD, Associate Professorial Research Fellow and Associate Director, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics

MELANIE WALKER, South African Research Chair in Higher Education and Human Development and Distinguished Professor at the University of the Free State

D. WEINSTEIN, Professor Emeritus, Wake Forest University, Honorary Professor, Institut für Philosophie, University of Oldenburg

JONATHAN WOLFF, Alfred Landecker Professor of Values and Public Policy, Blavatnik Professor of Public Policy, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford

YONGSHENG XU, Professor of Economics, Department of Economics, Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University

AUGUSTO ZAMPINI-DAVIES, Director of Development and Faith, Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

BLANCA ZULUAGA, Department of Economics, Icesi University

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Foreword

Amartya Sen

I am honoured to be asked to write a foreword to this extremely interesting Handbook, which can be seen – and admired – from many different perspectives. It is, at one level, a celebratory product, reflecting the fact that there is a good deal to applaud in the excellent work that has been done over the last four decades by a group of highly talented and innovative researchers on the reach and use of the capability approach. Each chapter has interesting things to say, while also reporting on the work that has been going on in this new – and very active – field.

If there are doubts about the sufficiency of the capability perspective in understanding the nature and contents of human welfare (I must confess that I do share some of the doubts about sufficiency as opposed to necessity), it is hard to deny the need for the capability perspective in making sense of our well-being and the importance of human freedom. The enormous contributions made by the capability perspective towards the discernment of human well-being and freedom have been well brought out by the papers in this Handbook. To appreciate their importance we do not need to champion any conviction that there is absolutely nothing more to say. The capability approach is a contribution to our understanding, not an attempt to annihilate all other insights that might come from elsewhere.

If celebration is a part of what the Handbook presents, what it offers as a guide and as a reference book is surely another. The nature, contents and relevance of different kinds of capabilities and their integration constitute a vast field of research, and it is very useful to have a monograph that can help the reader to understand the underlying ideas behind particular concerns (including providing references to writings on those ideas).

If these are uncomplicated contributions of the Handbook, we surely have reason to be interested in less simple virtues as well. To note a disagreement is not just the knowledge that there is an absence of an agreed position, it is also an opportunity to understand the respective reasoning behind conflicting positions that can be held on a particular question. Disagreements are important not merely because, as Publilius Syrus noted in conflict-ridden Rome in the first century BC, ‘Agreement is made more precious by disagreement’, but also because the survival of differing views can sometimes present alternative perspectives that may each offer some durable understanding of a complex issue.

For example, an insistence on a unique, canonical list of capabilities may be useful (for example, it can help in the fight for certain specific human rights,

ignoring other claims), and yet reserving certain choices for democratic decision (for example, in choosing priorities in policy-making) can give voice to all (even to the least advantaged), with reflective participation being seen as having importance of its own. The Handbook contains many examples of productive disagreement. It is important to appreciate that the persistence of disagreement is not just a reflection of the fact that the capability approach is a new field of research that calls for more work (that too, but not just that); it may indicate much more, for example the fact that the continuation of divergent resolutions may be entirely reasonable in a valuational subject – old and new.

I can also point to some other contributions that the Handbook makes, including identifying the need for more research in some established fields, as well as pointing to the case for opening up new areas of investigation which deserve to be brought into the enterprise of knowledge (to borrow a telling description from Isaac Levi). As we read the highly informative contributions included in the Handbook, we cannot miss the fact that some of the areas of capability research are splendidly incomplete. The Handbook is, thus, both a report on past work and an invitation to do fresh things, and that surely is also something to celebrate.

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Paul Anand
Prathivadi Bhayankaram (P. B.) Anand
Elizabeth Anderson
Jessica Begon
Constanze Binder
Alejandra Boni
Stephanie Bridges
Ian Carter
Clare Chambers
Rutger Claassen
Conchita D'Ambrosio
Koen Decancq
Maria Dimova-Cookson
Jean Drèze

Lucio Esposito
Shailaja Fennell
Alexandre Apsan Frediani
Sakiko Fukuda-Parr
Reiko Gotoh
Lori Keleher
Erin Kelly
Serene Khader
Jeni Klugman
Maria Ana Lugo
Gay Meeks
Sophie Mitra
Zina Nimeh
Prasanta Pattanaik
Eugenio Peluso
Angela Pepper
Iñaki Permyer Ugartemendia
Fabienne Peter
Henry Richardson
Maria Emma Santos
Sean Sayers
Francesco Scervini
Erik Schokkaert
Joshua W. Schulz
Stephanie Seguino
Amartya Sen
Frances Stewart
Robert Sugden
Lorella Terzi
Miriam Teschl
Martin van Hees
Thomas Wells
Merridy Wilson-Strydom
Jonathan Wolff
Yongsheng Xu

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