SOCIAL INNOVATION AND THE CAPABILITY APPROACH

The capability approach, an influential development in ethics, provides a way for the consideration of justice and democracy at the core of social innovation. It creates space for a critical reflection on and promotion of social innovation that is social both in its ends and in its means.

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INTRODUCTION

Social innovation and the capability approach (CA) belong to the family of progressive approaches to social change. Both cousins subscribe to the view that social improvements are possible and that there is a valid place for intentional efforts and hope in such changes. Both cousins had a growth spurt in the post-Cold War era. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the chances in favour of shared, global development suddenly seemed better. At the same time, economic globalization increased environmental unsustainability and economic inequality. Innovation as a driver of economic development thus appeared in need of qualification. Social innovation emerged and with it, a shift in focus from change in products to change in practices [1]. In parallel, economists and philosophers called for a shift away from development as merely economic growth in favour of a focus on human development based on the CA. This alternative conception of development provides a way to establish justice and democracy firmly at the core of social innovation; in turn, social innovation provides a reservoir of practical ideas to explore the CA.

THE CAPABILITY APPROACH: INTRODUCING THE COUSIN

In a series of classic contributions, economist and philosopher Amartya Sen argues that even philosophers in their discussion of justice tend towards an economic view, focused on goods and services, to the detriment of the question what people can do with these goods and services. As an alternative to such 'commodity fetishism', Sen, in co-operation with philosopher Martha Nussbaum and a growing, multi-disciplinary research community, developed an approach primarily focused on the opportunities and freedoms of people: the capability approach.

An example illustrates the shift in focus: three people receive the same amount of money. The first one is a healthy, young person, the second person has a physical impairment and the third person needs to take care of an infant. The effective opportunities associated with the same amount of money are different for each. For the person with the physical impairment, getting around is more difficult than for the other two. For the parent with the infant, there will be many additional care requirements that reduce the effective opportunity of using the money.

Shifting from money to goods, a variation of this point can be made: The same three people each receive a bicycle, the first person can use the bike, but not the person in the wheelchair; the parent can in principle use the bike, but it is not really useful – useful would be a special freight bicycle with a place for children and shopping bags etc. In short, once we pay attention to ends rather than means, the diversity of people and the diversity of their goals immediately becomes apparent. The CA tries to provide an improved space for taking this point seriously [2]:

- It posits an ethical focus on treating each person as an end. It says that we cannot calculate value or welfare in the aggregate but ultimately need to treat each person separately.
- Introduces the concept of functioning as the activities and states that make up a person's well-being or ill-being (for example, 'being healthy' or 'being sick').
- Introduces the concept of capability as the freedom of a person to enjoy various functionings that they value and have reason to value (we saw above that having a bike is not the same as having the opportunity to use it; in CA terminology, different people have different 'conversion functions', i.e. the ability of transforming a resource into a functioning).
- Puts a focus on agency: the ability of persons to pursue the goals that they value and have reason to value calls for an involvement in the process; people are not only

passive recipients of goods and welfare (in the second example, better than 'bikes for all' is a prior discussion of the appropriate means of mobility).

- Emphasizes pluralism: it is important to think about capabilities and functionings in the plural. Reductions to one single welfare measure only have intermediate, pragmatic justification (in our first example, money and income do not replace a discussion of the diverse ends of diverse people).
- Emphasizes diversity: as the bike example shows, treating people as equals and as ends does not mean treating them the same. The differences amongst people, including their personal traits and social and environmental contexts, also need to be considered.

For policy, the CA promotes an increased focus on functionings, such as years of school or life expectancy for the discussion of the development of a country, policy or project. Annual Human Development Reports give information around the Human Development Index that collects data on education, health and standard of living – and in this way, seeks to improve the informational basis of policy development and evaluation.
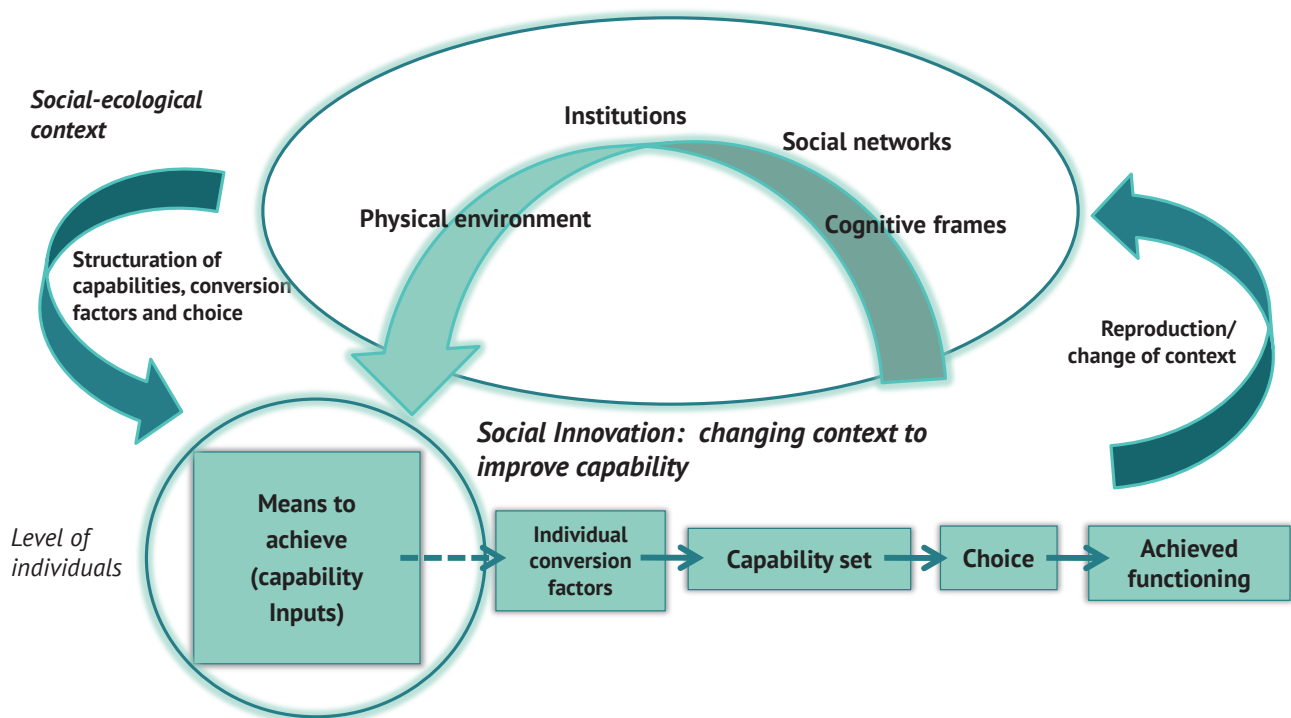
While functioning can be measured, capability freedom is much more difficult to be captured quantitatively. For this reason, the qualitative development of the CA as a multi-disciplinary approach across the social sciences and humanities is just as important.

A DEMANDING COUSIN I: ETHICS AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

The CA suggests a number of points for social innovation initiatives, policies and research. The first point is a distinct focus on the role of social innovation. In current societies, issues tend to be delegated to experts, sectors and specialized policy processes. While this dynamic is a part of modern societies, its downside is well known: silo-thinking and reductionist approaches that fail to connect the dots. The CA emphasizes both the plurality of values and goods, as well as their interlinkages. It has been used, for example, to empirically explore the causal relation between democracy and sufficient nutrition/health. In this way, it invites a distinct

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focus on social innovation in modern societies: capability innovations as the establishment and strengthening of capability interlinkages amongst sectors, for example between health and political participation. It highlights an integrative impulse that social innovation can contribute to highly differentiated societies. Social theory adds to this point that such impulses will only be effective if they change the social contexts, i.e. the institutions that regulate choices, the social networks that provide people with voices within

Capability approach and social innovation (Source: own, based on work within FP-7 project CrESSI and by Ingrid Robeyns).

institutions (which frequently need to first be created for a social innovation) and the cognitive frames that help interpret rules, legitimate issues and so forth. The graphic on the CA illustrates this point.

Second, the CA suggests a critical focus on policy. A CA-analysis of social innovation policy finds much official endorsement of social innovation as a participatory approach that includes people not only as passive welfare/aid recipients but also as agents co-determining ends and means. However, it finds only limited evidence of practical policies to implement such rhetoric [3].

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Third, the least-advantaged in society frequently lack the capability to associate and to make their voices heard [4]. As a practice-oriented approach, the CA seeks to provide tools that improve the capability to associate and increase informed, collective action of the disadvantaged [5].

Fourth, with a view to specific social innovation initiatives, its focus on persons as ends puts the emphasis on value scrutiny: are the values of social innovators also those of the people they help? What about value conflicts and trade-offs in the initiative and its environment, for example if it is easier to support the least disadvantaged of the marginalized rather than supporting at higher costs and less prospect of success the most marginalized?

In the background, the pioneers of the CA suggest two broad avenues for the further exploration of these evaluative questions:
- A focus on basic justice and central capabilities: If social innovation is to address pressing social needs, a focus on entitlements and basic rights suggests itself. What are the main areas of injustice and marginalization, and how does social innovation tackle these? For this question, Nussbaum proposes a list of central capabilities as a comprehensive starting point for basic justice violations.
- A focus on discussion and social choice: If social innovation is to include people not only as recipients but as active participants, how is it linked to the public discussion of ends and means? Sen specifically underlines the importance of public discussion, and the roots of democracy, which are not only Western, in such a discussion.

Finally, a word on ethics in relation to social innovation research. Social innovation researchers point out that social innovation is neither good nor bad. This is an important point, not least as good intentions can have bad outcomes. However, they sometimes like to add to this that their own research is value-free, not normative. Here things become trickier: social innovation discourse includes a normative element.

The European Union defines social innovation as 'the development of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create social relationships or collaborations. It represents new responses to pressing social demands, which affect the process of social interactions. It is aimed at improving human well-being. Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means'. What are pressing social demands? What is human well-being? These are normative questions about what is right and what is good. Claims about social innovations are normative claims about improvements and well-being. While social scientists can make important contributions on the distribution, mechanisms and impact of social innovation, they must know what a social innovation is so as to undertake such positive analysis. This point is all the more important as, frequently, the initiatives studied as social innovations do not label themselves as social innovations. An implicit or explicit normative vision shapes the selection process. Moreover, social innovation research is situated in a context of calls for transformative change, sustainable development and so forth. With the CA, research and policy can make this ethical aspect explicit.

The CA is a leading approach in the discussion of justice and democracy, but intellectual honesty requires us to note that there are alternative ethical theories. The good news is that the emphasis on agency and discussion in practice promotes precisely this: consideration of a variety of views.

A DEMANDING COUSIN II: SOCIAL INNOVATION AND ETHICS

The emphasis of the CA on freedom and choice also raises further ethical questions:
(a) What about beings deserving of moral concern, but not able to make choices, i.e. cannot act as moral agents asking and giving reasons?
(b) What about moral agents who upon closer perspective do not act according to the reasons they say they value, i.e. who, even on their own terms as agents, make bad choices [6]?

The first question takes us to animal and environmental ethics. Some pioneering works notwithstanding, the CA-focus on choice tends towards a human-centred perspective, which treats the environment as an end only and not something that we stand in a valuable relation to, or even as including valuable ends in itself. Social innovation as a

phenomenon of practice is less limited by such a conceptual heritage. Many social innovation initiatives are actually just as much about protecting other species. For example, better living with bees in cities. Or better relating to an entire ecosystem, as in the big jump movement, which seeks to reconcile people with their rivers via joint swimming events. In this way, social innovation helps overcome narrowly human-focused research approaches in favour of a more-than-human world.

Similarly, in the absence of rational decision-making and action new ways of thinking are called for: nudges and concrete alternatives if people are not only to talk about values, but also to change their practices. Again, social innovation offers a reservoir of studying creative ways of problem reconfiguration, alternative options etc. that is relevant for human development and the all-too-human problems all of us face in dealing with change in practice.

OUTLOOK

Innovation is part of the anatomy of modern societies. Social innovation gets to a core issue, and opens it up for new actors, networks and ideas. Due to this structural link, it also faces the challenge of making a structural difference rather than being co-opted and the 'social' only playing an

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ornamental role. Part of the challenge is to firmly link social innovation to justice and democracy. For this, the CA insists on the role of humans as agents in social processes. Its emphasis on central capabilities as requirements of justice worldwide points to the areas where social innovation is needed most. It does so with a focus on human diversity in actual contexts. Paraphrasing Ivan Illich, the way to a better world has to be taken by bike, to which the CA adds an ethical-pragmatic question: what kind of bike, for whom, with what end? It is not more products that are needed, but more space for people to effectively ride towards the doings and beings they value.

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This article has benefited from comments by Amelia Pope, Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti and Nadia von Jacobi.

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