

Planning for Freedoms: The Contribution of Sen's Capability Approach to Development Practice

By Dr Alexandre Apsan Frediani

Planning for freedoms is a framework for planning, monitoring and evaluation of development programmes which aims at focusing on people's capabilities to achieve the things they value. The framework is based on Amartya Sen's Capability Approach. This approach is people centered and is concerned with what people value, their aspirations and their freedom to achieve them. While people are perceived as drivers of change, the Capability Approach aims at strengthening the enabling environment for the realisation of people's aspirations. This briefing on the Capability Approach outlines some basic elements of the framework and its contributions to development practice.

1- From Capacity to Capabilities:

The Capability Approach aims at moving beyond a focus on abilities and skills, by grasping also people's opportunities and choice to achieve the things they value. This is where the main distinction between capacity and capabilities lies. While the former is normally associated with enhancing skills and abilities, capabilities is a concept that incorporates also the idea of increase choice and preparing people to grasp opportunities. The underlying assumption of the Capability Approach is that in the absence of appropriate opportunities, capacity building programmes, aimed at the development of new skills and abilities, will not be sufficient to enable people to achieve their well-being values.

Example 1: When a local entrepreneur installs a water tap in a squatter settlement, people might have the ability and skills to have access to it, but what are their opportunities to use the water in a way that will allow them to achieve the things they value? Are there opportunities in the market for commodities produced with water purchased? Are people having the choice to decide where the tap is installed or upgraded, and therefore having a role in the decision making process within that community? Furthermore, do those squatter inhabitants actually have a choice to go somewhere else for water, such as a communal water tap, or are they being exploited by that local monopoly?

The framework guides development practitioners to make the linkages between local and structural processes, incorporating political, sociological and economical dimensions, and unpacking power relations.

2- From what things are to what things do:

When thinking about alternative technologies suitable to local contexts, the expansion of scope from capacities to capabilities contributes to a broadened understanding of the use of the improved infrastructure.

The Capability Approach encourages reflection on issues such as:

- how are initiatives selected, maintained and reproduced, and what are the impacts of such procedures?
- how is the process of intervention affecting dimensions of well-being, such as possibly belonging to social networks and political empowerment?

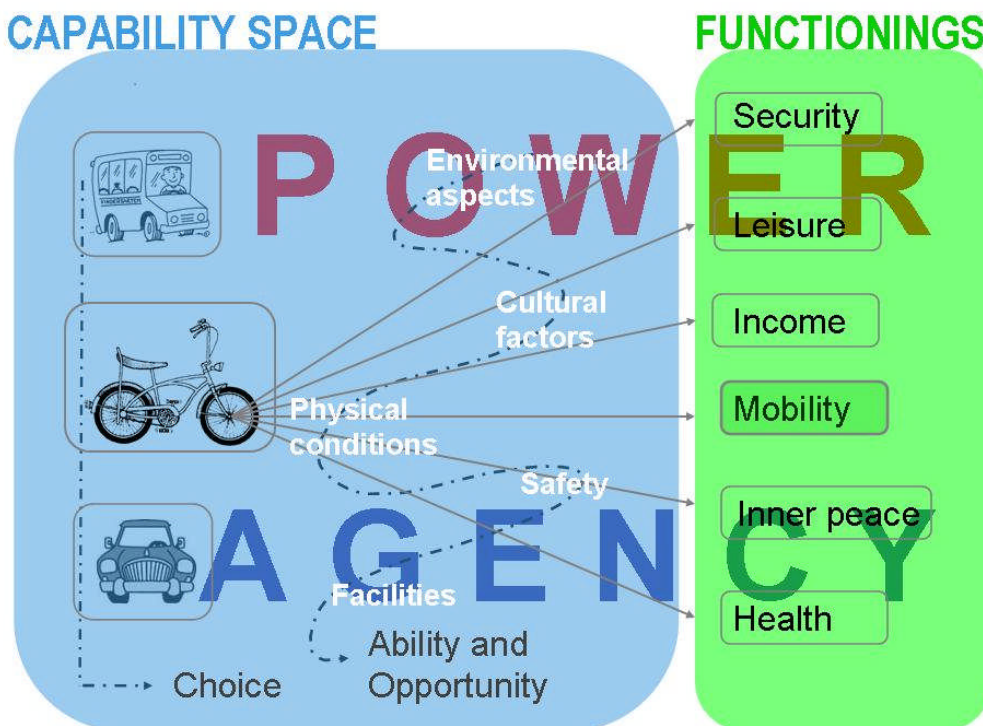
Example 2: When supporting a shelter initiative, the Capability Approach starts from the premise of strengthening local communities by using local resources and technologies. However, instead of thinking about a house, the Capability Approach aims at uncovering the various values people attach to the process of housing, in other words, their meaning of home. Then, local processes are explored as mechanisms to strengthen residents' capabilities to achieve those dimensions of housing. Frediani (2007) applied the Capability Approach for an evaluation of a squatter settlement upgrading project in Salvador da Bahia, and revealed five housing aspirations: to individualize and expand; to afford living costs; to participate in decision making; to maintain social networks; and to have a healthy environment. The squatter upgrading project was assessed in relation to the impacts on these dimensions of housing, therefore revealing what a house *does*, and not merely what it *is*.

3- Building on Demand

In development practice, there are existing demand-responsive approaches to the provision of assets which have provided a framework to overcome supply oriented practices. While the supply oriented model aimed at providing the most amount of equipments for the greatest numbers, projects prioritising communities' demands focus on communities' participation in the processes of financing, elaborating, delivering and maintaining initiatives. The demand model aims to enable people to build and operate themselves. In this context, the Capability Approach can contribute to the demand model by expanding on individuals and communities' capabilities to actually engage in such enabling process of development. By elaborating on what improved assets (i.e. infrastructure) do to people and communities', the Capability Approach aims at generating development programmes that enhance local resources, initiatives and ownership rather than adding extra burden to the poor and make them more dependent.

Example 3: A demand-responsive approach to provision of sanitation emphasizes the need to involve local residents in the financing, management and delivery of services. However, how can one assure that communities have the ability and opportunity to play such roles? Furthermore, would such model benefit the well organized communities and leave behind those most vulnerable and most in need for assistance? The Orangi Pilot Project in Pakistan has unfolded exactly these tensions in the process of providing sanitation in informal settlements in Karachi. On the one hand mobilized communities were able to finance, manage and build internal development (sanitary latrines inside homes, underground sewers in lanes and neighbourhood collector sewers). On the other hand, it was also revealed that the government has a crucial role on the provision of external development (trunk sewers and treatment plants) and on the provision of various type of political and social support to strengthen local capabilities, such as: technical support, mobilization and formation of grass-root organizations, and transparency of governments.

Figure 1: The Capability Approach Framework



4- The Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the Capability Approach framework applied to measure the impacts of a certain resource (tangible or intangible). In this example the framework is applied to measure the impact of a project providing bikes for residents of a poor neighbourhood.

The first component of the framework is the various things people value, called by Amartya Sen (1999) as *functionings*. In the context of the bike provision scheme, they are: security, mobility, income, leisure, inner-peace and health.

Functionings are the reasons why people use a bike, such as moving around, generating income and/or for leisure. Depending on the purpose of the activity, these dimensions can be identified through participatory methods or international conventions (Alkire, 2007). The capabilities to achieve such functionings are related to choice, ability and opportunity. The following questions arise in relation to choice: do the residents from that neighbourhood have the alternative to choose for another type of transport if they wish? Would they ride a bike because of lack of alternative or out of choice?

In relation to ability and opportunity, they are the factors transforming choices into aspirations. They relate for example to residents' physical conditions, as people might have some sort of disability, which might impede them from using the bike. Local factors and collective norms are also influential, as in certain contexts women might not be accepted to ride bikes, or in some neighbourhoods might not be safe to ride a bike. Finally, structural factors also influence this process of conversion, as the security and conditions of roads or the availability of cycle paths would also influence one's freedom to ride.

5- Participatory Planning

The involvement of local communities in the process of planning has been increasingly supported as means of empowering communities and enhancing the responsiveness of projects. Instead of planning *for* communities, the strategy of planning *with* communities hopes to identify and address people's real needs and demands. However, in practice the application of participatory tools have not always corresponded to such expectations. Participation is sometimes used merely as a tool for achieving pre-set objectives and not as a process to empower groups and individuals to take leadership, envision their futures, and improve their lives. It may lead to rigid plans, inclined more towards physical infrastructure. Real aspirations and opportunities are taken over by rigid project designs and fixed indicators to measure the impact.

The Capability Approach can contribute to the shortcoming applications of participatory methods by providing a framework that safeguards the transformative nature of participation. The same framework presented in figure 1 can be used to assess and guide the participatory planning process (see figure 2). Participatory Capabilities refer to individuals and groups' choice, ability and opportunity to actually achieve a certain list of participatory principles and identify outcomes. Egger and Mejerer (1992) propose that participation should rest on seven key principles: inclusion, equal partnership, transparency, sharing power, sharing responsibility, empowerment and cooperation. These principles have instrumental value, as they can be means to achieve each other, but also intrinsic value, as they are ends in themselves.

Therefore when implementing participatory planning, initiatives need to focus on the following challenges:

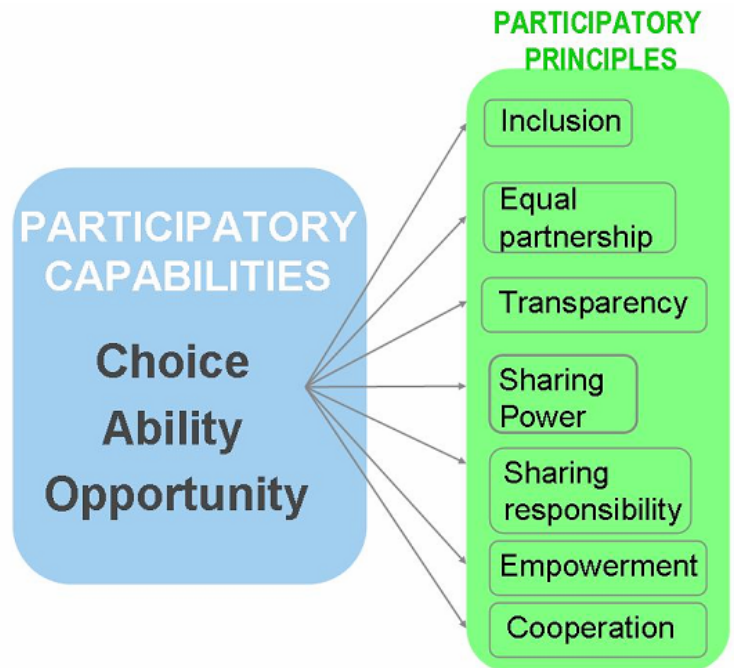
Choice

What are the different participatory strategies available for the implementation of the project? Is the project working through existing grass-root organizations or selecting new local leaders through an elective mechanism to overcome local power inequalities? How would these choices impact on the participatory principles?

Ability

Do different members of the community have the ability to participate on the decision making process in a manner that will enhance the principles of participation? Are people being trained to take projects in their own hands to support cooperation and empowerment? Therefore it is crucial here to address the capacity of communities to be participatory.

Figure 2: Participatory Capabilities



Opportunity

The opportunity aspect of the participatory capabilities relate the relationship between stake holders and the amount of decision making provided to communities. Are communities being empowered and being agents of change, or are they just being consulted, manipulated or co-opted to the implementation of pre-established objectives? Is power being shared with and within communities? Opportunity also relates here to the excluded and marginalised within communities, are they also being able to participate on the decision making process?

Example 4: The squatter settlement upgrading programme Ribeira Azul in Salvador da Bahia (Brazil) has been praised as a successful participatory programme. However, an evaluation of the participatory capabilities of communities to engage in the decision making process have shown a different picture. The programme decided to work with elected street leaders, who were trained and consulted regularly. The *participatory ability* of such leaders were enhanced, as they went through capacity building courses to elaborate social projects. However, the purpose of the consultation was merely to assure transparency, as meetings only reviewed costs and expenditure of the programme, and did not address the main characteristics of the squatter settlement programme. Street-leaders were not given the *opportunity* to engage in the main decisions about the project. As a result the community became frustrated with the programme while also losing their trust on elected street-leaders (Frediani, 2007).

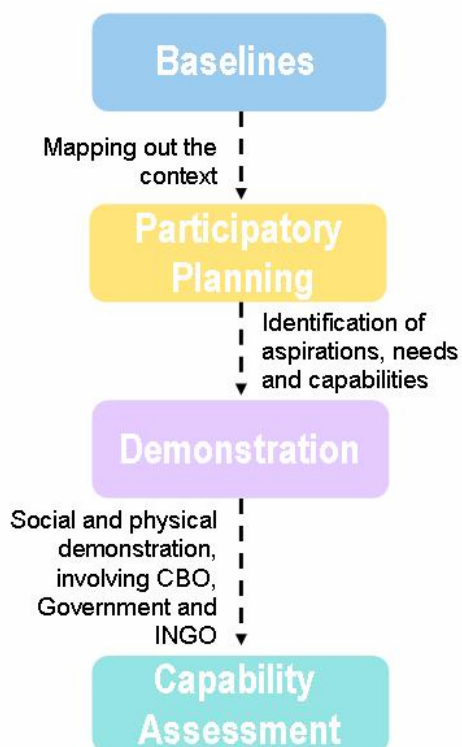
6- Project Cycle for Technological Innovations

The Capability Approach framework has also implications in the project cycle of initiatives aimed at the development of technological innovations. The conventional approach consists of firstly an initial baseline research, secondly the participatory planning stage identifies local needs, and then a demonstration/model development with stakeholders on the expectation of scaling up and further dissemination of the technological innovation.

However, such project cycles need to link with how people choose, use and transform technological innovations. By planning initiatives through the Capability Approach, participatory planning would include not only what people need, but what they value and aspire. Therefore, once demonstration takes place, the capability assessment stage can then investigate how the technological innovation is impacting on individuals and communities' well-being dimensions.

The process of capability assessment using participatory methods aims not only on the monitoring of the impacts, but it also intends to expand the capabilities of communities to use such resource on the achievement of the things they value. Therefore, the capability approach hopes to enhance the project cycle to support the sustainability of the demonstration activities.

Figure 3: Project Cycle through Capability Approach



Contributions of the Capability Approach:

- It establishes a direct link between resource uses and dimensions of well-being;
- It elaborates on what things do, rather than merely what they are;
- It starts from people's resources and strategies, but takes into consideration local and structural processes related to the opportunities to achieve the things people value;
- Safeguarding participatory planning by addressing the capabilities of individuals and communities to achieve a set of participatory principles;
- Enhancing the project cycle by including a capability assessment.

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