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Edited by David Alexander Clark
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*David Clark dedicates this book
To Linda and Dave Morris, John and Lynn Dewar and Christine Dewar*

*And in loving memory of
Frederick ('Fred') Richard Dewar (1938–2016)*

*And in memory of Tammy Chen (1984–2017),
who was brave, kind-hearted and truly inspirational*

*Mario Biggeri and Alexandre Apsan Frediani dedicate this book
To our new participants in the world, Francesco and Dalia*

*And to the memory of Pagano Didla who dedicated his life to the well-being
and rights of the Adivasi (tribal) people in India*

FOREWORD

The premise of this book, as I understand it, is that there is an important affinity between the capability approach to development and participatory methods of research and action. This affinity arises from the fact that participation itself is one of the basic capabilities we have reason to be concerned with. Participation has both intrinsic value, as an aspect of the quality of life, and instrumental value, as a means of bringing about economic and social change in tune with people's priorities and aspirations.

So far so good. Translating these general ideas into practice, however, tends to raise a series of difficult questions. Consider, for instance, the idea, prominent in this book, that funding agencies should promote participatory ways of dealing with development issues such as the organisation of squatter settlements, the rights of disabled persons or the provision of schooling. To begin with, there is a tension in the idea that participation can be imposed or imparted from the top. Much as the employees of the funding agency may wish to treat the "participants" as equals, they have the money and the power, like it or not. The participants may have their own idea of how to negotiate or even subvert the project. The participatory process may lead to social or political tensions that would be difficult for the agency to deal with. The local non-governmental organisation (NGO) partner may be anxious not to antagonise the government, if the process goes too far. As several contributions to this book bring out, there is a tendency, in this sort of circumstances, for participatory processes to get trivialised and for participation to become a buzzword.

However, this is just one example of possible applications of the central idea of this book. There are many others, including some that avoid these

dilemmas to a large extent. As I write, for instance, thousands of Adivasi (indigenous) people in Jharkhand, eastern India, are agitating against dangerous amendments of land laws that have played a historic role in protecting not only their landholdings but also their communities, culture and way of life. The movement is remarkable in so far as it has the character of a largely spontaneous and decentralised protest, the energy and intensity of which reflect the deep attachment to land in Adivasi tradition. It illustrates a number of points that are made in this book, such as the power of participatory processes, their intrinsic value and their constructive role in the formation of values and priorities.

In a broader perspective, democracy itself can be regarded as a participatory process by excellence. It is sometimes said that democracy is “government by discussion”. That is a useful way of thinking about democracy, especially in contrast with various forms of despotism. But the quality of democracy depends a great deal on the conditions under which discussion takes place. A discussion between a powerful landlord and his poverty-stricken tenant may have the trappings of public debate and mutual learning, but it rests on a foundation of structural injustice that severely queers the pitch. As Dr Ambedkar, lead author of the Indian Constitution, stressed in a series of illuminating writings, political equality does not go very far in the absence of economic and social equality. To put it another way, the institutions of democracy are of limited value if most people are unable to participate in these institutions. Democracy, then, is not only about government by discussion but also about creating the conditions for wide, active, informed and equal participation in the discussion.

The capability approach, in so far as it provides a conceptual framework for thinking about development issues, also sheds some light on these matters. For instance, it helps to recognise the intrinsic value of participation as a basic human freedom, beyond the instrumental value it may have, say, in achieving better implementation of government schemes. Participation can also be seen as an important example of “agency freedom”—the freedom that we have to change the world we live in, not only for ourselves but also for others.

This book is not the last word on this subject, but it goes a long way in clarifying the conceptual issues that arise in viewing participation as a human capability. It also presents many interesting applications of these

ideas. Hopefully, the book will act as a springboard for further discussion of this important topic. Indeed, research, like democracy, can be seen as a form of discussion, and it works best when the ground has been well prepared.

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Jean Drèze

PREFACE

This book started life as a collaboration between researchers committed to applying the capability approach in real-world contexts. Although many attempts have been made to make the capability approach ‘operational’ (following Robert Sugden’s oft-cited critique), our book differs from most previous efforts by seeking to bridge the gap between the capability approach on the one hand and the literature on empowerment and participation on the other. As such, it complements *The Capability Approach: From Theory to Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and *Children and the Capability Approach* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), which have different remits and themes. The former is concerned with ideas, policy and practice, and looks well beyond participatory approaches for inspiration; the latter is primarily concerned with the promotion of children’s capabilities through a variety of research methods.

In our book, a more systematic approach is employed for integrating work on the capability approach and participation. Following Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, this book emphasises the importance of human agency and helps show that participation has intrinsic and instrumental value for human development and capabilities. Although contributions are many and varied (covering concepts, methods and applications), the primary goal is to support the empowerment of local people to exercise the voice and agency required for social and political change. In this respect, our book is about helping to create the necessary space for a bottom-up approach to development from a capability perspective. To achieve this end, our book engages not only with the literature on participatory research inspired by Robert Chambers and others but also with the seminal work of the radical

educator and activist, Paulo Freire, who argued in favour of a more critical pedagogy for driving participatory action research. Our book also considers new frontiers of research (such as emancipatory research) and reflects on the inspiration that traditional research methods (such as interviews and surveys) can draw from participatory approaches to human development.

The completion of this book has involved a long journey. Each of the chapters has been through multiple drafts and has been subject to blind peer-review in addition to feedback from the book's editors, publisher and book series editors, Andy Sumner and Ray Kiely. We would like to take this opportunity to apologise to the contributors who signed up early on, and have subsequently strived to update their work. At times, this project has been interrupted by work and family commitments as well as health crises, bereavement and the usual coordination problems associated with a collaborative work of this magnitude. This book has benefited enormously from the extra time, hard work and care that have been devoted to refining the final product. The editors are grateful to the contributors for their commitment, dedication and patience, as well as their comments on various drafts of the manuscript.

The editors would like to thank several anonymous referees for helpful comments and suggestions. Shailaja Fennell, Solava Ibrahim and Mozaffar Qizilbash have been constant sources of advice, support and inspiration. In addition, Ann Weekes has been immensely helpful in terms of checking citations and bibliographies across chapters and Jacobo Cammeo has helped prepare the index. Any remaining errors or omissions are, of course, our own.

Above all, the editors and authors of this volume are grateful to the people who willingly gave up their time to participate in the projects reported in these pages. We are highly indebted to the disabled women and researchers from Palestine; the people from the favelas in Brazil; those who took part in the RECOUP project (in parts of Ghana, Kenya, India and Pakistan); the African, European and other migrants interviewed in Canada; the participants of focus group discussions in the South Pacific and the people featured in the Central American and Moroccan case studies (who inspired the 'process freedom approach' described in Chap. 12) for their phenomenal contribution to the research process and for teaching us about development.

Cambridge, UK
Florence, Italy
London, UK
25 April 2019

David Alexander Clark
Mario Biggeri
Alexandre Apsan Frediani

Praise for *The Capability Approach, Empowerment and Participation*

“Defenders of the capability approach argue that capability can be understood as a form of power and that the approach shines a light on unjust social arrangements. Critics argue that by focussing on individual freedom and agency the approach neglects the importance of social power structures in the evaluation of development and justice. The emerging literature is more nuanced and an important stream in it uses participatory methods to apply the approach. This timely, comprehensive and well-organised volume brings together new work by some of the leading researchers in this expanding field. It will be essential reading for all students and researchers interested in the capability approach and its application.”

—Mozaffar Qizilbash, *Professor, University of York, UK*

“The capability approach has had a major impact on the conceptualization of well-being and on discussions of the fundamental objectives of development. But its eventual adoption by research and policy analysts depends on the development of methods and applications which demonstrate implementation of the approach in concrete settings. This excellent volume contributes to this important task by linking concepts, methods and application, and by highlighting both the uses and the challenges of the capability approach.”

—Ravi Kanbur, *Professor, Cornell University, USA*

“The capability approach has been centrally influential in moving development policy towards highlighting the importance of processes of empowerment and participation. This book provides useful insights into how theory translates into the practical application of these valuable concepts.”

—Vijayendra Rao, *Lead Economist, Development Research Group, World Bank, USA*

“... there is an important affinity between the capability approach to development and participatory methods of research and action... This book ... goes a long way in clarifying the conceptual issues that arise in viewing participation as a human capability. It also presents many interesting applications of these ideas.”

—Jean Drèze, *Visiting Professor, Ranchi University, India*

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PART I

Introduction



CHAPTER 1

Human Development and the Capability Approach: The Role of Empowerment and Participation

*Alexandre Apsan Frediani, David Alexander Clark,
and Mario Biggeri*

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The role and concept of participation are at the heart of current development thinking and practice. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognise in several instances the importance of participatory processes for achieving many of their targets in an effective, accountable and inclusive manner. Significantly, target 7 of SDG 16 aims to ‘ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels’

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(United Nations, 2018). Meanwhile, target 3 of SDG 11 aims to build capacity for participatory planning and management of sustainable human settlements; target 5 of goal 5 articulates the need to ensure women's full and effective participation at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life; and target 6(b) of goal 6 calls for the support and strengthening of the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management.

Participation has been advocated through various discourses and with a diverse amount of interests and intentions. Some articulate participation from an apolitical and pragmatic perspective: better involvement of 'beneficiaries' in development projects and initiatives would lead to responsive solutions, addressing people's diverse needs and aspirations. Others have used cost-benefit analysis to argue that actually participation is a mechanism to reduce the expenditure of programmes by engaging local communities on the implementation and maintenance of interventions. Such a perspective follows from arguing that a sense of ownership of interventions would lead to continued maintenance of project outputs.

As already explored in existent literature, this apolitical and instrumental approach to participation has led to a series of problematic applications of participatory methodologies often reproducing processes of exploitation and perpetuating the causes of injustices (Cooke & Kothari, 2001a). However, rather than focusing on the instrumental role of participation for project effectiveness, the original motivations for bringing participation to the heart of the development process has been to enable a personal, collective and structural process of empowerment.

Such a perspective on participation resonates with the underlying values associated with human development and the concept of freedom put forward by Amartya Sen (1999) and further developed through the capability approach.¹ On the one hand, the capability approach is concerned with personal and societal transformation. Freedom is defined as the choice, ability and opportunity people have to pursue their aspirations. Therefore, the capability approach is precisely interested in revealing the processes

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that shape what people value and the enabling and constraining factors influencing people's freedom to pursue such values. At the core of this concept of freedom is the notion of agency comprising the individual's and collectives' ability to act upon what is valued.² This book argues that the capability approach is a comprehensive theoretical framework that can contribute to the elaboration of methodologies and approaches that is in line with the original Paulo Freirean tradition of participation³ thus focusing on how people 'gain confidence and abilities to alter unjust conditions and structures' of societies (Freire, 1997, p. xi).

While the capability approach has been focusing on concepts of agency and well-being, the literature on the human development paradigm articulates the macro level intentions of development initiatives, more closely related to redistribution and the process aspect of development rather than merely growth of GDP. As stated by the UNDP (2004), participation is at the core of the concept of human development as 'people are both the beneficiaries of such development and the agents of the progress and change that bring it about. This process must benefit all individuals equitably and build on the participation of each of them' (p. 127). The human development paradigm prioritises 'social development' (i.e. education and health) and equity (drawing special attention towards those most vulnerable), supports democratic governance that secures human rights and collective agency, and is motivated towards building policy and institutional reforms not merely at local and national level, but at the global scale (Fukuda-Parr, 2005). Such a paradigm of development aims at embedding participation in wider process of democratisation and deliberation, establishing the linkages between local and global processes shaping development and justice.

Nevertheless, while it is often stated that human development puts 'people at the centre of development' and views 'people as agents of change', in practice many attempts to promote, study and report people's capabilities make no tangible attempt to engage with ordinary people or empower the poor through participatory processes.⁴ This book argues that there is a complementarity between the human development and capability approach and participatory methods and aims to shed light on the existing work addressing this complementarity.⁵ On the one hand, participatory tools can democratise the application of human development perspective; on the other hand, Amartya Sen's concepts of freedom can provide a comprehensive framework to guide and safeguard the transformative roots of the participatory approach. This introductory chapter will first explore the similarities, criticisms and complementarities between the capability approach and participatory methodologies. Then it examines in

more detail the role of participation in the current literature on human development and capabilities. The last section of this chapter describes the structure, content and purpose of the book.

1.2 SIMILARITIES, LIMITATIONS AND COMPLEMENTARITIES

While being developed through different academic streams, the capability approach and participatory methods share many common attributes, resembling each other theoretically and also having similar strengths and weaknesses.

1.2.1 *Similarities*

Both the capability approach and participatory methods literature share a common critique of the utilitarian and income-led perception of poverty. Chambers (1997, p. 45) points out that ‘deprivation as poor people perceive it has many dimensions, including not only lack of income and wealth, but also social inferiority, physical weakness, disability and sickness, vulnerability, physical and social isolation, powerlessness, and humiliation’. Shaffer (2002) argues that the analysis of poverty through participatory approaches captures the complexities and underlying dynamics of poverty, while economics is only able to measure through indicators the manifestations of poverty.⁶ Meanwhile Sen’s (1985, 1999, 2009) main argument for expanding the concept of development has been to break away from the utilitarian and income-led approaches in order to better capture the complexities of multidimensional poverty and well-being.

The reflection on the process of knowledge production is also presented in the participatory methods literature as well as in grassroots explorations of human capabilities. The Enlightenment epistemology that defends objectivity and the superiority of technocrats is criticised as both literatures position the poor as active members in the process of knowledge production and change. Freire (1997), a much-quoted author by advocates of the capability approach and practitioners of participatory approaches, argues that people who are the focus of research have a universal right⁷ to participate in the production of knowledge.

In this process, people rupture their existing attitudes of silence, accommodation and passivity, and gain confidence and abilities to alter unjust conditions and structures. This is an authentic power for liberation that ultimately destroys a passive awaiting of fate. (Freire, 1997, p. xi)

Within the capability literature, a series of works have recently emerged focusing on collaborative forms of knowledge production. Ibrahim (2014, p. 10ff) defined these studies as one of two types of application of the capability approach focused on ‘grassroots exploration of human capabilities’ rather than ‘distant assessment of human capabilities’. While the latter application would adopt an objective positivist methodological approach, the former would take a constructivist and subjective approach, using qualitative, mixed methods and potentially participatory approaches. Boni and Frediani (forthcoming) have built on this trend, by positioning grassroots explorations of human capabilities within the tradition of participatory action research. Their work examines how participatory approaches can expand the capabilities and agency of research participants.

Both the capability and participatory literatures emphasise the need to contextualise the concept of poverty, thus unpacking the local dynamics embedded in the social reality of each particular case study. Sen (1999) argues for the fundamental importance of public debate, public scrutiny and deliberate participation in the process of choosing the dimensions of poverty. Meanwhile Brock (2002) argues that participatory approaches can capture the ‘diverse ways of knowing poverty’ and ‘that understanding these better can contribute to improvements both in content and process of poverty reduction policy’ (p. 2).

Similarly, both strands of literature recognise that the poor and marginalised are more than capable of making informed judgments, analysing their situation and articulating their interests. To quote Robert Chambers, there is a wealth of evidence from participatory poverty studies around the world showing that ‘they can do it’ (1997, p. 131). From a capability perspective Clark (2002, 2003, 2005, 2017) and others (most notably Biggeri, Libanora, Mariani & Menchini, 2006 and Ibrahim, 2008)⁸ have shown that ordinary people are more than capable of articulating a ‘good’ form of life and identifying the capabilities they have reason to value. In addition, Frediani (2015) has developed the concept of ‘participatory capabilities’, which is related to people’s choices, abilities and opportunities to engage in the process of participation, and is driven by the goal of deepening democratic practices as well as personal and collective forms of critical awareness. The value of Frediani’s work is that it emphasises the need for participatory processes to focus not just on people’s abilities and capacities to engage in public reasoning, but also on the background conditions for participation as well as the democratic ideals associated with participatory practices.⁹

Some capability theorists worry about adaptive preferences or emphasise the importance of ‘educating’ people’s capabilities (Khader, 2009; Nussbaum, 2000, 2006; Vaughan & Walker, 2012). While it is always possible to find examples of people who may have adapted (more on this presently),¹⁰ it is important to remember that there are far more documented examples of successful participatory studies that capture the hopes, values and aspirations of the poor.¹¹ Given the volume and weight of the available evidence, it is no longer ethically acceptable to assume that the less fortunate automatically adapt or that preferences ‘we’ find questionable must *necessarily* be malformed in some sense. Indeed, Sen (2006a, p. xiii) himself is highly critical of such elitism arguing that: ‘The critical voice is the traditional ally of the aggrieved and participation in arguments is a general opportunity, not a particularly specialised skill (like composing sonnets or performing trapeze acts)’.

1.2.2 *Limitations*

While sharing common theoretical underpinnings, participatory methods and the capability approach have received similar criticisms. Both types of literature have not reached a consensus on the targeted participants of their analysis: are evaluations to be based on the perspective of individuals, groups or both? While the capability approach literature has been criticised as being too individualistic (Deneulin, 2005; Evans, 2002, p. 56),¹² recent applications of participatory methods have also been criticised for focusing on the ‘empowerment’ of individuals and for moving away from its collective traditions. ‘As “empowerment” has become a buzzword in development, an essential objective of [participatory] projects, its radical, challenging and transformatory edge has been lost. The concept of action has become individualized, empowerment depoliticized’ (Cleaver, 2001, p. 37).

Another critique made of both approaches is that they propose local solutions to global problems, thus not tackling structural inequalities. Gore (2000) refers to the capability approach process as the partial globalization of development policy, providing local solutions to global problems. Furthermore, Sen’s writings have been criticised for focussing mostly on the immediate causes of poverty and neglecting the underlying social processes (Patnaik, 1998). Meanwhile critiques of participatory methods have argued that their localised and problem-solving application captures merely the manifestation of poverty and ‘ignores the structural and material constraints of globalized capitalism’ (Mohan, 2001, p. 156). As Cooke & Kothari (2001b, p. 14) indicate, participatory methods’ ‘emphasis on the micro level of intervention can obscure, and indeed sustain, broader macro level inequalities and injustices’.

Meanwhile both approaches have been criticised as being ahistorical, and not providing a sufficient analysis of the complexities of power and power relations. For example, Gore (2000) criticises the capability approach because its focus on local knowledge overshadows a deeper analysis of long-term sequences of economic and social changes. Similarly, according to Mohan (2001), participatory approaches perceive local knowledge to be undermined by the societal relation of power, which is divided between the holders of power and the subjects of power, the macro/micro, central/local, powerful/powerless. Mohan (2001) argues that this dichotomy of participatory approaches limits the understanding of power as a social and political process, by encouraging a perception based on materialistic realities. 'Thus participatory approaches can unearth who gets what, when and where, but not necessarily the processes by which this happens or the ways in which knowledge produced through participatory techniques is a normalized one that reflects and articulates wider power relations in society' (ibid., p. 141).

The critiques of participatory methods have analysed the many ways that power relations influence development analysis based on participation. Cooke (2001) uses social psychology to analyse the subtle ways in which groups make decisions to demonstrate the less visible ways that participation is used as an instrument of control and maintenance of the status quo through the production of consensus. According to Mohan (2001, p. 160), 'the danger from a policy point of view is that the actions based on consensus may in fact further empower the powerful vested interests that manipulated the research in the first place'. Finally, Mosse (2001) also argues that the main limitation of participatory methods is its potential to be used as means to restrict and control the analysis of development policies: 'Far from being continually challenged, prevailing preconceptions are confirmed, options narrowed, information flows into a project restricted, in a system that is increasingly controllable and closed' (ibid., p. 25).

1.2.3 *Complementarities*

Due to the limitations reviewed above, Cornwall (2000) and Cleaver (2001) argue that some recent applications of participatory approaches in the development mainstream fall short of their original intention. 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 (Cooke &

Kothari, 2001a; Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Therefore, Cleaver (2001, p. 38) argues that participatory methods need to be complemented by a theory that explores the nature of people's lives and the relations between the many dimensions of well-being: 'there is a need to conceptualize participatory approaches more broadly, for more complex analyses of the linkages between intervention, participation and empowerment'. The capability approach contributes to the participatory literature by providing this comprehensive and flexible theory of well-being that can capture the multiple, complex and dynamic aspects of poverty.

Hickey and Mohan (2004, p. 12) also argue that 'participation must be ideologically explicit and tied to a coherent theory of development'. They propose radical citizenship as a theoretical framework that can safeguard participation from its populist application. Their recommendation also stresses the need to focus on agency and structure, thus revealing local power relations and the underlying processes that reproduce social injustices. The focus on citizenship provides a political perspective on participation by recognising the importance of political rights for the process of development (Biggeri, Arciprete, Barbuto, Ciani, & Griffo, 2017). However, this approach often falls short of an operational mechanism to facilitate development initiatives. A citizenship orientated approach may also be too narrow to relate to participatory initiatives, as it inherits inconclusive debates about nation-states and the nature of citizenship among disfranchised groups, especially migrants.

It follows that the capability approach—by focusing on the connections between the many different aspects of human well-being—can contribute to the aforementioned limitation of the radical citizenship approach through safeguarding the empowerment aspect of participation. Sen's capability approach focuses on agency and, like the radical citizenship approach, questions universal conceptualisations of development. Like rights-based approaches, participation is seen as instrumental and intrinsic to the process of development. Participation is a means for identifying functionalities and exploring the processes that shape general capabilities (Frediani, 2010); it is also an aspiration in itself that constitutes a constituent element of well-being and freedom (Sen, 1999). The success of participation is therefore not merely measured in relation to the efficient implementation of a project or piece of research, but most importantly to their impact on the agency of individuals and groups.

It is worth noting that this book has more in common with Amartya Sen's capability approach to development than Martha Nussbaum's 'capabilities approach' *plural*. These two approaches are often conflated, but

have some important differences (see Nussbaum, 2003 versus Sen, 2004). The former creates conceptual space for human agency and leaves individuals and groups with the freedom to define and expand their capabilities. The latter advocates a list of ‘central human capabilities’ (with limited space for negotiating how these capabilities might be realised in concrete situations) and is routinely sceptical of any values or preferences that depart from the established (Aristotelian) ‘norms’.¹³ Nussbaum’s capabilities approach has cultivated a vast literature in philosophy and social theory that is top-down by nature (despite the accompanying rhetoric), and runs the risk of lapsing into paternalism. A more grounded bottom-up approach to development of the kind envisaged in this book is not only more respectful of other people but is likely to yield a more rounded view of development (as the chapters in this book show). It also recognises that participation itself has intrinsic and instrumental significance for human capabilities and development (as Drèze & Sen, 2002 argue).

1.3 PARTICIPATION WITHIN THE CAPABILITY APPROACH LITERATURE

The concept of participation has been addressed in the capability approach literature from a variety of angles. Human development and democracy has been analysed by the 2002 *Human Development Report* (UNDP, 2002), as well as Sen (1999), Drèze and Sen (2002, 2013), Crocker (2008), Deneulin (2009), Claassen (2011), McCowan and Unterhalter (2013), Glassman and Patton (2014), Byskov (2017) and Clark (2019). How far have participatory methods been linked to Amartya Sen’s conception of freedom? Apart from seminal contributions from Alkire (2002) and Crocker (2008), which are philosophical in nature and leave some important questions unanswered (such as the selection of valuable capabilities in local contexts), there has been limited work on participation as a tool to implementing the capability approach for evaluative or planning purposes.¹⁴ A recent special issue in the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* has begun to address this gap and encourage further contributions—especially by emphasising the role of participatory processes. This book aims to build on this work (Frediani, Boni, & Gasper, 2014). The remainder of this section briefly reviews discussion of two issues relating to the capability approach and participation that are critical for bringing these approaches together and for moving towards a participatory capability framework, namely, well-being and adaptation.