

Capability

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(note: * refers to other entries in the encyclopaedia)

The capability approach, which was first proposed by *Amartya Sen, suggests that the evaluation of individual well-being and social arrangements be based on what people are able to be and do. It thus shifts the evaluation away from *utility, resources or income to functionings. Functionings are people's beings and doings, like being healthy, being part of a social network, being sheltered, and so forth. Functionings include, but go beyond material aspects of well-being. Functionings can be specified at the realised level (achieved functionings) or at the potential level (capabilities).

The capability approach advocates that when we conceptualise or evaluate *poverty levels, *inequality, *social policy, *efficiency, or development, we should do this in the space of functionings and capabilities. The approach focuses on people's substantive freedoms or real opportunities by looking at their capabilities. Policies should concentrate on expanding people's capabilities. However, including a focus on achieved functionings could sometimes be more appropriate, e.g. when addressing the impact of a famine on people's well-being.

Sen himself has deliberately formulated the capability approach as a broad framework of thought implying that further specifications and applications should always be context dependent. The capability approach has been taken up by scholars in a wide range of fields. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has developed her own version of the capability approach to argue for minimal levels of capabilities as a constitutional guarantee. An important policy application of the capability approach is the Human Development Index, which has been developed by the *United Nations Development Programme.