



Citizenlab/Workshop on Aspirations, Capabilities and Transformative Institutions (8-9 February 2024)

The February meeting of the consortium Involve ended with a workshop on "Aspirations, Capabilities and Transformative Institutions". This workshop brought together researchers from different disciplines, some of whom are part of the Involve network, to explore how the capacity to aspire relates to human development, defined by Amartya Sen as the expansion of people's real freedom to live the kind of life they have reason to value (Sen 1999, 18). During two days, we discussed the theoretical, empirical and methodological implications of the capacity to aspire and how it relates to the capability to aspire. In the framework of the Involve project that analyses the role of social policies and services in promoting trust and democratic participation, these concepts help to address the relation between welfare institutions and the empowerment of vulnerable people. Some of the presentations were more theoretical in scope and aimed to discuss the reciprocal contributions of the work of Amartya Sen and Arjun Appadurai, while others focused on concrete social policies, drawing on empirical research into education, health and immigration policies. In these presentations, the notion of the « collective » took different meanings that we propose to explore by a short report on each presentation.

Various contributions to the workshop addressed the role of the social context as hindering or fostering the formation of aspirations. Ortrud Lessmann reminded us that, according to Appadurai, aspirations do not depend just on individuals' preferences and emotions, but on the capacity to aspire that is collectively and culturally shaped, and that provides an ethical horizon for the development of people's capabilities.

Caroline Hart finds in Bourdieu's work the tools for an understanding of why some aspirations are possible to achieve and others are not, how structural forces and agency enter in dialogue to foster or hinder aspirations and their achievement.

Evelyne Baillergeau drew on the work of Bourdieu but she invites Alfred Schutz in the discussion, to refine the conceptual apparatus for theorizing the future. She underlined



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that aspiration is part of the "archive of experience", i.e. the set of resources available to individuals in relation to the social conditions of their own lives, from which they produce knowledge about the world and assess the feasibility of their plans. By comparing aspirations with what Dewey calls « ends in view », Bénédicte Zimmermann emphasised the extent to which aspirations depend on agency (they are agentic) but are also a prerequisite for it, and as such are agentic. To explore this pivotal role of aspirations, she invited us to develop means for studying the feedback loop between situated agency, aspirations and capabilities.

The environment in which experience is formed, which is at the heart of pragmatist thinking, is crystallised in particular by institutions and collective organisations, which can be understood as a means of developing people's capacity to aspire. Some contributions studied how public policies, which by the way of norms set the horizon for individual and collective practices, can constitute resources or, on the contrary, constraints in the formation of aspirations.

Through a meticulous survey of undocumented migrants who were regularized through a specific policy in Geneva, Liana Consoli explored whether and how institutional change can induce a change in migrants' capability to aspire and what temporal dynamic of aspirations it shapes.

Josiane Vero and Camille Stephanus showed that in France, in a context where public policies emphasise the freedom to choose one's professional future, low-skilled employees have very few public resources at their disposal to make their professional retraining choices heard, in the face of employment policies that give priority to adapting employees to the needs of the labour market.

By producing rich data on the complex interrelationship between opportunities and the way in which they collectively and individually influence the imagination of young people entering university with regard to their future, Melanie Walker developed the concept of reparation, which places aspirations at the intersection of a past that traps young people in oppressive relationships, a present in which they act and a future that they dream of and work towards. This notion of « reparation » can play a key role in the process of recognising the collective nature of agency. Individual aspirations are in this case fed by collective aspirations, which in turn develop an environment conducive to the



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realisation of those aspirations, a process captured by the notion of a retroactive loop between agency and aspirations advanced by Bénédicte Zimmermann.

If collective institutions and organisations play a key role in transforming social contexts, how can they be reinvented in ways that contribute to developing the capacity to aspire ? What role should institutions play in a structural context of uncertainty? From this perspective, the « collective » becomes a goal that requires action as well as research, to improve its theoretical, empirical and political understanding.

By looking at the context of healthcare services during the Covid pandemic in Northern Italy, Lavinia Bifulco examined a case where the individual and collective experience of uncertainty gave way to the imagination of new institutions. She analysed the effects of a policy implemented at the micro level and the transformations it allowed in terms of capacity. Healthcare services were also discussed by Caroline Hart, who, after many years scrutinizing school systems and the aspirations politics meant to increase the number of students going on to higher education, is leading action-research in NHS in England.

Finally, by drawing on the capability approach, Jean-Michel Bonvin and Francesco Laruffa proposed a new horizon for social policies that would aim to develop people's capability to aspire rather than adapting them to the economic imperatives of capitalism as it is the case in current welfare policies. Against this background, they proposed to conceive transformative institutions as being able to nourish aspirations and bring back vulnerable people's voice into the democratic debate. Participatory action research would then take on its full meaning to develop aspirations and collective agency for more participative and inclusive public policies, by making vulnerable people actors and judges in the debates about how institutions should be framed and should work

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Policy recommendations

Institutions and organisations play an important role in developing aspirations. They can promote or hinder them. Both individual expectations and collective aspirations can be promoted by these institutions.

Aspirations are the engine of change. Individual aspirations can guide individuals using these institutions to improve their lives. Collective aspirations, based on dialogue, guide society.

Institutions should consequently reflect on their role. After all, they are more than just giving under conditions of support. Reflection is about what support, what conditions, what possibility of agency, how the voice of user can be heard and translated into support.

Institutions can already reflect on their operation and the role of the user. Good examples of involving users and their environment can be found in several countries. These examples serve as a starting point for their own reflection. Being a starting point, Involve shows that they need to move beyond involving. After all, it is about building (local) society. From this broad involvement, trust can grow in this society.

This requires a methodology that institutions can work with. This methodology is based on involving the user in a thorough dialogue about the institution's goals, mission, ways of working.

Involve will apply and experiment with a methodology in pilots. Preparatory steps have been taken with a series of interviews.



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