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Working paper

Interim report on the theoretical foundations
for the understanding of the nexus “social
inequalities – trust – participation”

**Due date**

September 2023

Submission date

November 2023

Lead Beneficiary

Unige

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101094560. This publication reflects only the author's views and the European Union is not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.



This work receives funding from the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI)

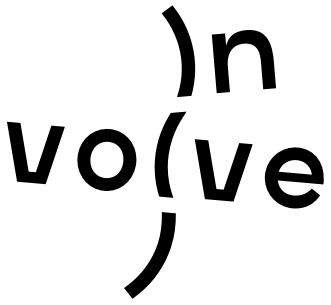


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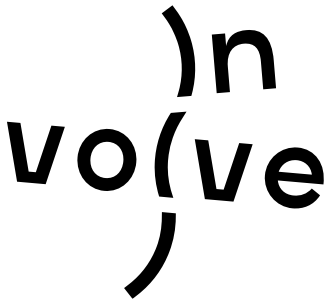
Dissemination level: public

Project: Involve

GA: 101094560

Call: HORIZON-CL2-2022-DEMOCRACY-01

Type of action: HORIZON-RIA



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Introduction

The aim of this report is to develop a theoretical framework. Like the glossary, also this report is conceived as an “evolving document” which we can update and ameliorate throughout the duration of the project. Also, we tried to be short as well as to avoid specialised jargon and unnecessary details, with a view to making this report of practical use.

The report is articulated in two main parts. In the first section, we sketch the most important elements of the theoretical framework. In the second section, we derive from this framework some central research questions (which may be relevant also for the quantitative part of the research). Finally, in the second report “Methodological guidebook to study public services from an RDJ perspective, giving due place to capability for voice and capacity to aspire”, we translate these rather abstract analytical questions into more concrete terms, providing a questionnaire for the qualitative research.

(The theoretical framework

The receiver-doer-judge framework

In our project, we draw from the “capability approach”. This is a broad framework for the evaluation of quality of life, the assessment of policies and the analysis of social change, which is focused on the real freedom that people have to lead meaningful and valuable lives (for more details see the entry on the capability approach in the glossary). From a capability perspective, people are viewed as “receivers”, as “doers” and as “judges”. In order to flourish, people generally need to *receive* some external support (e.g. to receive care during childhood, sickness and old age); to actively *do* something valuable (e.g. to engage in meaningful work, take care of one’s family members or participate in civic life); and to be able to *judge* and evaluate different situations (both in their individual lives and in the societies they live in), developing aspirations for better futures and having the chance to realize them (e.g. through participation in political actions – broadly understood). This multidimensional understanding of human beings can be used both to assess the situations in which people currently live (e.g. their quality of life; their vulnerabilities and disadvantages, etc.) and to evaluate the impact of public policies on their beneficiaries.

At the level of quality of life, this conceptualization of human beings implies a multidimensional understanding of both wellbeing and poverty. In particular each dimension relates to a different aspect of social disadvantage. Material deprivation, monetary poverty or lack of supportive care involve the receiver dimension. The lack of valuable opportunities for engaging in meaningful work and caregiving activities is a kind of deprivation that relates to the doer dimension. Finally, being deprived of the capacity to develop (individual and collective) aspirations for better futures and of the opportunity for realizing them – including through political participation – refers to disadvantages in the judge dimension.

At the level of policies, adopting this multidimensional conceptualization of beneficiaries implies that the latter should not be treated simply as passive recipients of welfare benefits, goods and services. Indeed, not only the receiver dimension is essential: the doer and judge dimensions are equally important. Moreover, these dimensions are non-substitutable. Thus, for example, one cannot compensate deprivations in the space of one dimension through the improvement of other aspects. Capability-oriented policies should address all three dimensions.

Take the example of unemployment policies. A capability-informed policy for unemployed persons cannot be limited to the provision of generous unemployment benefits. To be sure, this aspect will be an essential part of this policy, tackling the receiver dimension of unemployed people, who need enough income to lead a valuable and dignified life. But beyond that, policies should also help unemployed people to find a job that they value (or another meaningful activity that they value). If not, their deprivation in the doer dimension still remains, no matter how generous the unemployment benefits are.

(This capability-oriented support provided to unemployed persons has something in common with the “activation” paradigm in social policy but differs from the latter in at least two crucial ways. First, the capability-informed approach rejects the idea of a possible trade-off between the receiver and the doer dimension. This position thus stands in clear opposition to those approaches that suggest that in order to “activate” unemployed people, unemployed benefits should be reduced. In contrast, from a capability perspective, the receiver dimension is seen as an essential precondition for a genuine doer dimension to develop. Indeed, the purpose here is not that unemployed people find a job – no matter its qualities – so that reducing their benefits provides an incentive for them to accept any job offered. Rather, the goal is to allow unemployed people to find a job (or activity) that they value – and receiving decent benefits represents an enabling condition for achieving this objective. The second difference with the activation paradigm is that the latter tends to take a supply-side perspective. In order to “activate” unemployed people, policies focus on training them or on ameliorating their motivation through coaching and psychological support. For example, approaches inspired by “social investment” principles would give priority to interventions centred on enhancing unemployed people’s “human capital”. Without downplaying the importance of measures aimed at ameliorating the skills and competences of unemployed people, a capability perspective would however consider the fact that if in an economy there are no jobs, unemployed people will not find work – no matter how skilled or motivated they are. Therefore, enhancing the doer dimension of unemployed people also requires macroeconomic, demand-side policies to make sure that there are enough valuable jobs (or other meaningful activities) in a society so that people have a real opportunity to develop their doer dimension.

Finally, a capability-informed policy for unemployed people should be conceived with them rather than only for them. In fact, unemployed people are considered not only as receivers and doers but also as judges, who hold views and knowledge about the world (and especially about their personal situation) and as citizens who have values and opinions on how a good society should look like. This means that, at the individual level, each unemployed person should be free to co-develop his or her project of inclusion in the world of work. In this context, services should make sure that unemployed people resist – as far as possible – the problem of adaptive preferences, whereby people tend to scale down their aspirations to what is perceived to be a harsh but unmodifiable reality. Instead, policies should nourish people’s aspirations for better futures and support and sustain them in trying to realize those aspirations. This directly links also to the collective-political aspects of the judge dimension: unemployed people should have the real opportunity to co-develop unemployment policy at the local, regional, national and international level, contributing to establish priorities and modalities of intervention. Even more broadly, policies and services for unemployed people should try to encourage them to participate in politics – in a large sense – in order to make their voice heard in the public debates on the direction of social change. Indeed, in a capability perspective, social policies are called to become enabling conversion factors of democracy, which have the potential to support equal citizenship and political participation.

But the receiver, doer and judge dimensions are not only equally important and non-substitutable, they are also interdependent. For example, the receiver and doer dimensions

are essential preconditions for the judge dimension, e.g. challenging socioeconomic inequalities is crucial for reducing political poverty and inequalities in participation. Moreover, the judge dimension is also instrumental for defining the content of the other two, i.e. the definition of the benefits and services that should be developed (the receiver dimension) and the kind of agency that should be supported (the doer dimension) – and this is why it is possible to distinguish “receivers-judges” and “doers-judges” (where people can co-determine the nature of the receiver and doer dimensions) from “receivers-non-judges” and “doers-non-judges” (where people are treated as “objects” because they cannot co-define the policies oriented towards the promotion of their receiver and doer dimensions). Social policies and public services can enhance – but also undermine – these three dimensions. One central goal of our project is to evaluate, from a quantitative and qualitative perspective, these three dimensions and how social policies and public services support/weaken them.

Trust, aspirations and voice: the relevance of participatory methodologies

Among the three dimensions, the judge dimension is surely the least theorised and discussed both in academic and public debates on social policy. The latter is usually framed in terms of benefits and services (receiver dimension) or with respect to its capacity to help people to be included in the labour market (restrictive view of the doer dimension). Instead, in our project we give great importance to the judge dimension. In particular, we are interested in two distinct albeit interconnected aspects or mechanisms. On the one hand, we see social policies and public services in their receiver and doer dimensions as preconditions or instrumental inputs for the judge dimension. In this context, we want to study how the provision of policies and services improve the quality of our democracies. On the other hand, we see also social policies and public services as democratic objects in themselves, i.e. areas in which democratic agency can and should be exerted. This reflects the figures of the receivers-judges and the doers-judges mentioned above: people should have a say on the benefits and services they get as well as on the activities that the policies support. These two aspects cannot always be separated in the empirical analysis, but it is essential to see the importance of both.

Against this background, we are interested in exploring the connections between welfare provision, the reduction of various forms of inequality, political participation and trust both at the macro-level (i.e. in aggregate terms) and at the micro-level (i.e. at the individual level). There is some work that shows a positive link between welfare states and political participation (for example in elections) at the macro-level. This link seems to be mediated by two distinct mechanisms. On the one hand, social policy reduces various forms of social disadvantage and inequalities (e.g. providing universal healthcare and education or cash benefits for unemployed people). Given the strong relation between socioeconomic disadvantage and lack of political participation, welfare policies thus potentially contribute to directly reduce political inequalities. On the other hand, bigger welfare states increase the relevance of politics for citizens, thereby encouraging participation. If everything in society could be bought in the market (e.g. education in private schools and healthcare in private hospitals), citizens would not have any self-evident interest in participating in

politics. In contrast, the presence of essential public services – such as public education and healthcare systems – enhances the visibility of the salience of politics. When the state becomes an evident key actor in directly influencing people’s wellbeing, there is a clear incentive for citizens to participate in the definition of state policies: increasing the number of issues at stake (multiplying services and benefits) is likely to intensify the relevance of politics for people’s life and thus the importance of participating.

Similarly, some studies have shown a positive relationship between trust, welfare provision (incl. public services), equality and political participation (but these self-reinforcing cycles can be either virtuous or vicious). Thus, higher levels of inequality potentially lead to lower levels of trust in fellow citizens and institutions; more generous welfare states and services are theoretically associated with higher levels of trust; and higher levels of trust are possibly associated with higher degrees of participation and involvement in politics (broadly understood). But these relationships are also relevant for understanding the individual level: people who have (or had in the past) positive experiences with various kinds of (welfare) institutions and public services may also display higher levels of trust and political participation.

Crucially, there is no fully conclusive finding on these topics. Hence, these various hypothetical connections (both at the micro and macro levels) should be further investigated in our quantitative and qualitative research. This, indeed, is one of the essential aims of our project.

We also want to study how public services and policies sustain (or undermine) people’s “capability to aspire”, i.e. their capacity to project themselves into a desirable future and to imagine more emancipatory alternatives to the status quo, both for themselves and for society at large (see the entry in the glossary for further details). This capability is unequally distributed among the population, with more privileged people more easily aspiring to good/better futures than disadvantaged ones. Our project focuses especially on vulnerable groups, asking to what extent policies and services nourish or undermine their capability to aspire. For example, generous social policies and services can help people maintaining their standard of living during an economic recession, thereby sustaining also their aspirations. Also, welfare benefits and services can provide an “exit-option”, thereby allowing people to refuse jobs that they do not value. On the contrary, within a “workfare” paradigm oriented towards people’s inclusion in the labour market at any cost, people may be encouraged – or even obliged – to accept precarious, alienating and exploitative jobs that clearly weaken their capacity to aspire. Similarly, education services have a great potential to nourish (yet unfortunately also to undermine) people’s aspirations.

The connection between aspirations, participation and trust involves again self-reinforcing circles. On the one hand, collective aspirations for social change are nourished through political participation while at the same time these aspirations also inspire further political engagement for realizing them: the capability to aspire thus appears to be an essential component (as well as a precondition and a result) of political participation. On the other hand, people can better develop aspirations – both for themselves and for society at large – in a context of generalised trust. This is also because, in an environment characterised by generalised trust, one is more able to voice one’s own aspirations, which leads us to our next concept.

(The “capability for voice”, i.e. the real opportunity to express one’s opinion and make it count when decisions are taken, is at the core of the judge dimension. This capability refers to the possibility that people have to influence the content of policies, voicing their views, values and aspirations. In this context, it should be emphasized that policies/institutions/services that do *not* promote the capability for voice tend to sustain processes of “adaptive preferences”, whereby people adapt their desires and aspirations to their deprived situations. Conversely, enhancing people’s capability to aspire requires institutions and services that encourage individuals (both as individuals and as organised collectives) to speak for themselves, rather than having their needs defined by others (politicians, administrators, “experts”). From this perspective, the focus is here on how policies can promote people’s capability to aspire and for voice, acting both on the individual-internal aspects (e.g. through an education policy aimed at enhancing people’s self-esteem and enabling them to become judges) and on the contextual-external aspects (e.g. offering space for co-determination in a specific policy).

The relevance of the judge dimension has also specific implications for our empirical research. Indeed, this dimension demands to contribute to the promotion of people’s (equal) participation also in the research process, with the explicit purpose of nourishing their capability to aspire and for voice in a trustful research environment. In other words, the values that we study in the project (trust, equality, participation, voice, aspirations, etc.) are not only the objects of our analyses (the “what”) but also inform our methodological approach (the “how” we conduct our research). This is the main reason why we decided to embrace the methodology and principles of participatory-action research. In the latter, vulnerable people are not conceived (only) as research objects or as sources of information but (also) as equal partners (co-researchers), who should co-determine the content of the study. Also, the overall purpose of the research process is not only to produce (scientific) knowledge but also to generate participants’ empowerment as well as a kind of knowledge, which is relevant to political actions aimed at emancipatory social change.

Research questions

On the basis of this theoretical framework, we developed some key research questions. These are relevant for the whole project, including the quantitative part, but are especially important for the qualitative component of our empirical research. In the latter, we want to understand the relationship between the *quality* of public services / social policies and the inequality in trust/participation (with the latter understood in broad terms, incl. voting in elections, participation in demonstrations and protests; membership in a trade union, political party, social movement or another civil society organization, etc.). We study the quality of policies and services, using the receiver-doer-judge framework. Thus, we aim to investigate how policies and services take the various dimensions into account, examining the level and duration of benefits and services (receiver), the kind of agency supported (doer) and the degree of co-determination allowed (judge). Against this background, we ask: do better (in this multidimensional sense) social policies and public services lead to *higher* and *more equal* levels of political participation and trust?

While our project focuses on trust and political participation, we see these mainly as instruments for promoting a better society. Ultimately, our concerns are human wellbeing, social justice and democratic quality. Hence, at the most general level, we are interested in evaluating the capacity of public services and social policies to enhance people's capabilities, i.e. their real freedom to lead lives they have reason to value. This includes providing them with enough resources and support (receiver), promoting their freedom to engage in valuable activities (doer) and allowing them to co-determine both the content of the policies/services in question and, more broadly, the direction of social change – while making sure that they develop genuine, as opposed to adaptive, aspirations (judge). In the following we discuss in more detail each dimension, outlining for each dimension our key research questions. Though transversal to all dimensions, the issues of capability to aspire and for voice are more specifically tackled in the judge dimension.

Receiver dimension

In studying the receiver dimension, we focus on the kind of support that is provided (cash benefits, in-kind goods, services). In this context, we ask: beyond the material dimension (monetary or not), is relational-emotional-psychological support also provided in the service/policy in question? Do benefits/goods, services and other forms of support exist for each kind of vulnerability/disadvantage? Are these forms of support appropriate in terms of quality, quantity and duration? Do they contribute to reduce the vulnerabilities/difficulties of the participants?

We also want to know if there are any conditionality-criteria or requirements attached to the access to services, benefits and other forms of support and how the people perceive these demands. Moreover, we want to know whether support is made available to all people on an equal basis or if some categories or groups are excluded. This refers not only to the problem of active discrimination but also to that of self-exclusion and non-take-up. In the latter case, we want to understand the reasons behind this self-exclusion. Is it because of a lack of “sense of entitlement” (i.e. a form of adaptive preferences)? Or are people not

aware, i.e. they do not know about these institutional supports (lack of information, inadequacy of information – e.g. too complex or barely understandable – or of the channels to disseminate it)? Are they afraid of possible negative consequences of accepting the institutional support (e.g. stigmatization)? Or is this a political act and a form of protest (rejection of the “system”)? Are the conditions or requirements perceived as too difficult to meet or unacceptable?

Finally, we want to know whether there is a gap or mismatch between, on the one hand, people’s own views of their “problems” (vulnerabilities, difficulties) and the needed “solutions” (forms of institutional support) and, on the other hand, the definition of problems and solutions provided by the institutions themselves. In other words, are people treated as “receivers-judges” or as “receivers-non-judges”? Are their voices included when it comes to assessing their situation in terms of vulnerabilities or difficulties?

Doer dimension

In studying the doer dimension, we are interested in examining the kind of agency and activities that are supported by public services and policies (e.g. work, training, care, forms of civic commitment, political activities, citizenship, etc.). Does the policy/program adopt a broad vision of activation/empowerment with a plurality of valuable activities as possible outcomes? In particular, is it possible also to pursue non-productive activities (e.g. engage in care work or civic engagement *instead of* paid work)? Is there any room left for the beneficiaries to freely choose among different activities? Are they allowed to pursue their own life project or are they constrained to pursue certain activities? In other words, are people treated as “doers-judges”? Can beneficiaries of public services co-establish or co-construct what counts as valuable activity/agency or is the definition of the latter an exclusive prerogative of the institution?

Furthermore, as for the receiver dimension, we want to know if the various forms of agency-support are equally available for all, whether processes of discrimination and/or self-exclusion are in place and the reasons behind the latter. We also want to understand the behavioral conditionalities attached to the support received. In this context, we are interested in exploring how the receiver and doer dimensions are articulated in the policy/program in question: are generous benefits and material support (receiver) seen as a precondition for genuine and successful agency-empowerment (doer)? Or does the idea prevail that excessively generous benefits provide perverse incentives (trade-off between receiver and doer)? Is work (doer) seen as a pre-condition to material support (receiver), e.g., you must show that you apply for jobs to continue receiving benefits and/or if you refuse a job offer you lose your benefits?

Finally, we want to know whether the doer dimension is conceived mostly as a matter of adapting/equipping individuals (focus on supply-side) or if there is also an action on the environment (demand-side), through the creation of valuable opportunities such as jobs and apprenticeships.

Judge dimension

In studying the judge dimension, we are interested in two distinct aspects. First, we want to assess the degree of participation, co-determination and aspirational support involved *within* the policy/program under study. Second, we are interested in examining the impact of the policy/service under study on people's judge dimension (participation, trust, etc.) in the broader society, i.e. *beyond* the specific policy/program under study.

Concerning the "within-perspective", we want to know whether people have a say on the (co-)establishment of the content of programs and services. Is beneficiaries' participation promoted along the different phases of social policies: planning/design (at macro-level), delivery/implementation (at meso-level, with social services agents, esp. when it comes to defining the individual project) and evaluation (while monitoring/checking public services)? Moreover, we want to understand the forms of participation. What are the possibilities to exit or refuse proposals? Is the role of participation merely informative/consultative or does it directly influence decisions? What is negotiable/disputable within public services? What is not? Is participation confined only to certain stages of the public policy cycle and/or to certain topics? Does participation take a deliberative form (as opposed to negotiation/bargaining)?¹

Furthermore, as for the receiver and doer dimensions, also in this case we want to know if participation in the definition of the nature of the public service is genuinely open to all, including vulnerable people. Thus, we need to establish how inclusive participation effectively is: who does participate? Are there inequalities in participation that reflect socioeconomic inequalities and/or discriminations along class, gender, race, etc.? What is the role played by lack of time and/or material resources and/or accessibility (e.g. public transport) in the non-participation of beneficiaries? Are there other explanations: lack of interest, perceived lack of cognitive abilities and competences/expertise, etc.?

We are also interested in understanding – as far as possible – the reasons behind the promotion of participation. Is participation promoted for efficiency reasons (e.g. reducing costs) or for epistemic reasons (i.e. using citizens' knowledge for better design and delivery)? Similarly: is participation oriented towards loyalty and compliance (convincing beneficiaries that institutional solutions are adequate), thereby promoting adaptive preferences? Is it a way to increase beneficiaries' responsibility? Or is there space to really co-construct services and programs?

Finally, we want to evaluate the impact (if any) of participation on the content and the modalities of service provision (including in the receiver and doer dimensions). In this context, we are also interested in the potential of policies/services in nourishing/restoring people's aspirations and in countering adaptive preferences. What space is given to listening to people's aspirations and desires in the definition and implementation of public

¹ This question refers to two different conceptions of democracy in political theory: one in which actors follow solely their own interest and political choices are determined by the relative power of the different actors (actors negotiate among them and their power is the relevant criterion) and the other ("deliberative democracy"), which assumes that actors openly discuss about common problems and solutions and seek to promote the "common good", putting their particular interests aside (actors deliberate among them and the rationality of their arguments is the most important factor). For deeper discussions on conceptions of democracy and citizenship, see the glossary.

services? To what extent do social services promote self-esteem, self-efficacy and other such conditions of the enhancement of capability to aspire?

Concerning the judge dimension from a “beyond-perspective”, we want to study the impact of policies/services on inequalities, political participation and trust in society more generally. For example, do more generous policies (in terms of the receiver and the doer dimensions) increase people’s political participation and/or trust? Do more participatory services and policies (the “within perspective”) lead to higher levels of trust and political participation? Do public services / social policies nourish citizens’ “capability to aspire”, i.e. their capability to imagine more emancipatory (individual and/or collective) futures with respect to the status quo? Or do they encourage (esp. vulnerable) citizens to adapt their preferences to the “harsh reality” of the contemporary competitive and exclusionary socioeconomic model (e.g. concerning their integration in the labour market or finding suitable housing)?

We want to understand whether participatory services and policies function as a kind of “school of democracy” with broader spill-over effects in other domains (e.g. increasing the interest in politics, providing a positive experience of self-efficacy and empowerment, and changing the way in which people think of themselves as “citizens”). Do citizens’ values and sense of agency change thanks to participation in public services? Does citizen participation in public services enable challenging broader structural inequalities?

In the following report, we translate these analytical – and still rather abstract – research questions into concrete questions that can be used in the qualitative research (esp. individual interviews).

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