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Journal of Human Development and Capabilities
A Multi-Disciplinary Journal for People-Centered Development

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjhd20

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To cite this article: Jean-Michel Bonvin & Francesco Laruffa (2024) Transforming Social Policies and Institutions in a Capability Perspective: Agency, Voice and the Capability to Aspire, Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, 25:4, 575-594, DOI: 10.1080/19452829.2024.2405096

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2024.2405096

Published online: 21 Sep 2024.

JOURNAL OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND CAPABILITIES
2024, VOL. 25, NO. 4, 575–594
https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2024.2405096

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Transforming Social Policies and Institutions in a Capability Perspective: Agency, Voice and the Capability to Aspire

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ABSTRACT

The article suggests that putting the enhancement of capability to aspire and capability for voice centre stage of the design and implementation of social policies would entail a deep-seated transformation of such policies. Based on the receiver-doer-judge framework we explore what conditions are to be fulfilled to implement such a transformation, emphasising how the expansion of objective opportunity and entitlement sets should go hand in hand with an increased subjective sense of opportunity and entitlement. We then turn to examine what such transformed institutions would imply in terms of enhancing individual aspirations and capabilities on the one hand and increasing capacity for collective action and social change on the other one, emphasising the key role of capability for voice in both respects. We show how institutions and policies transformed in such a way would differ from dominant approaches to social policies such as social investment, which endorse a more adaptive approach to social policy. It is also suggested how Freire, Dewey and Khader's ideas could be useful reference points towards the design and implementation of such transformed institutions.

KEYWORDS

Capability to aspire; capability for voice; subjective and objective opportunity sets; (sense of) entitlement; transformative vs. adaptive institutions

Introduction

Nowadays the concept of development and its connected ideals are deeply challenged. In particular, the post-development critique has highlighted serious limitations of the developmental project. From this perspective, our starting assumption is that we need to profoundly re-conceptualise the concepts of "progress" and "development" in light of these critiques. Against this background, we are especially interested in the proposal advanced by Lazar (2012), who suggests

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to reconceptualise development in terms of the deepening of democracy, i.e. the improvement of the quality of citizenship. We think that this reconceptualisation reflects core elements of the capability approach. Indeed, the latter assigns a key role to democracy and citizen participation. Beyond its intrinsic value (on which however not all citizens agree – and the freedom not to participate must also be respected), democratic participation has instrumental and constructive functions: it contributes to the promotion of social justice (e.g. defending the public interest vis-à-vis powerful wealthy minorities) and to define the nature of social reality (e.g. of social problems), recognising that the latter is always also socially constructed rather than self-evidently "objective" or naturally given (Drèze and Sen 2002; Sen 1999, 2009; see also Anderson 2003; Bonvin 2005; Bonvin, Laruffa, and Rosenstein 2018; Crocker 2006). In line with this conceptualisation, we suggest that public institutions should be transformed in a way to contribute to enhancing democracy and citizen participation and investigate what implications such conception has for social policies in the OECD countries. While recognising that all institutions are to some extent transformative, we suggest that institutions rooted in citizen participation and the enhancement of their capability to aspire are transformative in a different and more profound way. This is the avenue we claim to explore in this paper.

With these premises in mind, in this article we interrogate the potential contribution of social policies and more generally social institutions to human development understood as the improvement of the quality (or deepening) of democratic citizenship. Sen has a very ambitious – and maybe even idealistic – conception of deliberative democracy (Gasper 2023, 14–18). But what are the socio-economic, cultural and political preconditions for realising this ideal? We argue that an important role is played by social policies and institutions, which can be framed as *conversion factors of democracy* (Bonvin and Laruffa 2021). In this context, we theorise the main elements of social policies and institutions when envisaged in such a transformative perspective. We suggest distinguishing between two ideal-typical notions of social policies and what they are expected to change in individuals and in the social and economic reality: an *adaptive* perspective, where policy objectives and expectations vis-à-vis recipients are dictated by the perceived necessity to *adapt* to economic and political circumstances and especially to the imperatives of capitalism; and a more *transformative* perspective, rooted in the enhancement of the recipients' capability to aspire and capability for voice, that aims at promoting people's capability to participate in the social and economic fabric. These two ideal-typical notions have a very different view of how social policies should contribute to change: on the one hand, the individual has to be changed and transformed in a predefined direction, in order to be able to adapt to an economic and social reality that is considered as given (and cannot be changed); on the other hand, the individual has to be empowered so that s/he can be part in the definition of the direction of change that will be followed (individuals co-

construct the social policy) and that s/he is trained to be a citizen able to call into question the circumstances and participate in social change. We propose calling the first notion "adaptive social policies" while labelling the second "transformative social policies". Of course, actual social policies are often a mix between the two notions; our contention is that the present times require a resolute move in the direction of more transformative social policies, which entails that the twin notions of capability to aspire and capability for voice are placed centre stage of policy design and implementation.

But what does such a passage to more transformative social policies and institutions imply more concretely? In order to address this question, we go back to Sen's definition of development as the expansion of people's real freedom to lead the kind of life *they have reason to value* (Sen 1999, 18). Evidently, this conceptualisation assigns a key role to people's values and aspirations. The latter are linked to the kind of person people want to be – and thus also to issues of identity discussed at length by Sen (e.g. Sen 2006, 2009). Yet, aspirations and values are not naively taken at their face value. Indeed, the capability literature is highly concerned with the issue of *adaptive preferences*, which recognises the influence of cultural, economic, social, political and environmental factors on people's desires and visions of the "good life" (e.g. Khader 2011; Nussbaum 2001; Sen 1987). This is especially problematic when the unequal capability to aspire translates into adaptive preferences and thus becomes a key motor in the reproduction of inequality and disadvantage.[1] On this basis, we argue that a central task of transformative social policies is that of creating the conditions to de-construct such adaptive preferences with a view to nourishing the capability to aspire and foster one's own aspirations. In this perspective social policies are called to become "laboratories of aspirations" that enhance people's *capability to aspire* to more emancipatory futures.[2] A key issue in this respect is that of capability for voice, as Appadurai (2004) emphasises that voice is necessary to enhance and practice capacity to aspire, while capacity to aspire is a prerequisite of effective voice. Following that line of reasoning, transformative institutions can then be defined as discursive spaces where people can deconstruct adaptive preferences, develop own aspirations and use their voice to support them and translate them into collective claims and action. The connection between voice and aspirations within transformative institutions is at the core of our reflection in this article.

From this perspective, we take up the task that Flechtner (2017, 528) saw for future research on the role of aspirations in capability-oriented policies, namely that to explore how aspirations and the capability to aspire are tackled within existing institutions and to what extent this contributes to the reproduction or modification of socio-economic structures. We thus ask: How can social policies become factors of transformation rather than reproduction of (or adaptation to) the social order? And we argue that when social policies foster their beneficiaries' capability to aspire and capability for voice, they become

transformative policies in the twofold sense that they enhance the citizens' freedom to live a life they have reason to value at individual level and they equip people to question prevailing circumstances and contribute to more capability-friendly economies and societies at collective level. As such, they contribute to an enhanced conception of human development and progress. Our article focuses on the conditions to be created for such transformative institutions to develop their full potential.

Thus, while social policies are generally discussed in terms of their capacity to reduce monetary poverty, material deprivation and economic inequality and/or in terms of their capacity to include individuals in the labour market, we emphasise the role that social policies play in both *promoting* and *realising* people's capability to aspire and creating more capability-friendly societies and economies. This is in line with Dewey's and Freire's conceptions of participatory democracy, where renewed educational settings (Dewey's democratic classroom and Freire's notion of adult literacy education) aim at giving (oppressed) people the means and possibility to reflect on and deconstruct their adaptive preferences and build own aspirations, while opening spaces for their participation in the democratic social and economic fabric (Glassman and Patton 2014). This also relates to Khader's deliberative perfectionist approach to adaptive preferences where so-called "inappropriately adaptive preferences" are identified, and interventions to counter them are designed, via discussion and deliberation with the concerned people (Khader 2011). Our conception of transformative social policies fully aligns with these participatory discursive views of social policies. Following this perspective, we argue that transformative social policies have to conceive beneficiaries not only as "receivers" – i.e. providing them with the resources and services they need for satisfying their basic material needs – and as "doers", i.e. enhancing the real opportunities for valuable forms of agency open to the individuals. Policies should also consider beneficiaries as "judges", that is, citizens who are able to develop their own aspirations beyond adaptive preferences and whose voice counts in the policy-making process (Bonvin and Laruffa 2018; 2022). In particular adopting a "reflexive" conceptualisation of the welfare state (Olson 2006), the capability approach suggests that the definition of policies aimed at reducing poverty, deprivation and social exclusion – the receiver and doer dimensions – should become a matter of democratic governance, thereby assigning central importance to the judge dimension. Yet precisely the latter is under-theorised in the social policy literature. This is thus the main contribution of our article: what happens when we stop conceiving social policies as technocratic instruments implemented (often in a top-down manner) for reducing poverty, inequality and exclusion and we start regarding them as democratic objects aimed at allowing people to envision and realise more emancipatory futures? Our claim is that this goes hand in hand with a renewed notion of transformative social policies and institutions, going beyond the mere adaptation to economic imperatives or technocratic and paternalistic views.

Human Beings as Receivers, Doers and Judges: Disadvantage and Policy Responses

Re-Thinking Disadvantage and the Policies Addressing It

As it is well known, the capability approach proposes an understanding of poverty and disadvantage that goes beyond its material and monetary dimension, for embracing a conceptualisation in terms of capability deprivation, i.e. the lack of freedom to lead a valuable life (e.g. Leßmann 2011). The complex vision of poverty and disadvantage can be schematised according to three dimensions that refer to the "anthropological" conception informing the capability approach (see Bonvin and Laruffa 2018, 2022). Deprivation in the receiver dimension involves monetary poverty and material deprivation; in the doer dimension it entails the lack of valuable/meaningful forms of agency (both within and beyond the labour market); and in the judge dimension it implies the lack of capability to aspire and capability for voice, what can be labelled as political poverty (Table 1).

While the receiver and doer dimensions are already widely accepted and self-explanatory, we need to introduce in some more details what we mean with the judge dimension of disadvantage. The latter refers to forms of deprivation that emerge from the inability of people to develop aspirations and to realise them. Aspirations are future-oriented goals that a person wants to pursue, having at least a rough idea of how to fulfil them and being prepared to put some effort to achieve them: aspirations thus differ from vague hopes for the future, expectations and dreams (Flechtner 2017, 518). However, aspirations do not only refer to individual achievement: they can also refer to broader social change. This is why this dimension of disadvantage also involves "political poverty" defined as the "inability of groups of citizens to participate effectively in the democratic process" (Bohman 1997, 333). At this more political-collective level, the capability to aspire is connected to the concept of "social imaginaries" (Castoriadis 1987; Taylor 2004), which entails that aspirations do not boil down to ambitions of individual well-being or economic success, but may also encompass the idea of collective social change. When they are voiced in public arenas, such aspirations are related to the possibility to co-construct society through participating in the determination of collectively shared values. This, in turn, assigns a key role to social movements, which give

Table 1. Conceptualisation of poverty and disadvantage in the capability approach.

Anthropological dimension	Aspect of disadvantage
Receiver	Monetary poverty; material deprivation
Doer	Lack of valuable/meaningful forms of agency (both within and beyond the labour market)
Judge	Lack of capability to aspire; political poverty

more power to individual voices through their association into one collective voice. As Suckert (2022, 416–417) argues, the capacity to project alternative futures – including the appeal to utopias – nourishes aspirations for social change and thus motivates collective and political action, promoting debates and struggles about possible futures. At the core of transformative social institutions there is, then, the cross-fertilising connection between capability to aspire and capability for voice. To promote such a connection, it is crucial to identify the factors that may impede the joint development of these two capabilities.

Deprivation in the capability to aspire arises in two main ways. The first is when individuals are so resigned to their fates that they have lost all hope for any individual or collective change whatsoever. Transformative social institutions are then called to restore such capability to aspire, creating the conditions for people to deconstruct resigned adaptive preferences and imagine alternative more emancipatory futures. Such deprivation in the capability to aspire may be related to situations when there is a mismatch between objective and subjectively perceived possibilities of (individual and collective) action. As Flechtner (2017, 520) argues, there is a conceptual difference between objective and subjective opportunity sets: an objective opportunity set consists of opportunities that are open to a specific person, given her resources and abilities whereas the subjective opportunity set refers to the opportunities that this person sees for herself, what she considers as reasonably achievable. Following Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács (2011), we can apply the same reasoning to entitlements and rights, where an objective entitlement set (i.e. all benefits or services to which people are entitled and eligible) does not necessarily translate into a subjective sense of entitlement (people then do not feel legitimate to claim the rights to which they are objectively entitled), as is illustrated by the high number of people who do not use their rights to benefits or services (Lucas, Bonvin, and Hümbelin 2021). In this case, a deprivation in the capability to aspire – that "particular aspect of poverty" involving a "failure of aspirations" (Ray 2006, 409) – indicates a situation in which the subjective opportunity set or the subjective sense of entitlement is smaller than the objective sets of opportunities and entitlements (Flechtner 2017, 520). Importantly, material poverty and aspirational failure are often "reciprocally linked in a self-sustaining trap": poverty is both a (partial) result of and a (partial) cause of a failure of aspirations (Ray 2006, 409). The vicious circle for which the poor lack the aspirational resources to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty (Appadurai 2004) suggests that transformative policies have to act on both sides – objective and subjective – of the circle. On the one hand, policies should expand the objective opportunities and entitlements open to people (this relates to the receiver and doer dimensions, e.g. providing cash benefits or support services to improve material well-being or help cope with factors of vulnerability). These expanded opportunity and entitlement sets

may in turn positively impact not only people's quality of life but also their aspirations. On the other hand, policies can directly expand people's capability to aspire (the judge dimension), giving more room to their voices when designing the concrete content of opportunities and entitlements. Sen's work shows how an open public debate allows scrutinising one's actual aspirations and turning adaptive preferences into enhanced capability to aspire. Moreover, reducing polarisation and segregation in society also constitutes a way of nourishing people's aspirations (Ray 2006, 413–414), creating the conditions for enhancing the subjective feasibility of certain aspirations that had appeared out of reach till then and developing an increased sense of entitlement. Hence, transformative social institutions as defined in this article not only expand objectively the sets of available opportunities and rights, but they also create in their beneficiaries an enhanced sense of opportunity and entitlement, striving to remove the subjective and objective barriers that impede the access to such opportunities and rights. As such, they set the stage for the enhancement of the capability to aspire.

Yet, note that there is also a second way in which deprivation in the capability to aspire can take place. This refers to a reverse problem that may emerge from the mismatch between objective and subjectively perceived opportunities and entitlements, which relates to the overestimation of one's own possibilities for agency. While the empowerment process suggested above aims at improving the capacity of individuals "to actively overcome structural constraints" – assuming that "only those who can imagine alternative futures are able to embark on bringing them about" – an overestimated perception of agency can also "become reduced to an *illusion of agency*, if believing in the mastery of the future is significantly detached from objective life chances" (Suckert 2022, 407–408). In those cases where an "extensive sense of agency" is accompanied by "extremely unfavourable conditions", instilling aspirations, instead of being a source of empowerment, "can become a very subtle mode of domination" if it creates the illusion that individuals are able to overcome structural constraints by their own forces: such illusionary agency "may prevent actors from challenging structural constraints and blaming others; it may encourage them to hold on and endure deprivation" (Suckert 2022, 408). Everything happens as if all social problems could be solved by nourishing individual resilience, with the idea that all those who aspire high and try hard can be and deserve to be successful, while all those who fail are to be considered as responsible for their failures. For example, a strongly meritocratic culture gives the *impression* that economic mobility is possible for everyone, promoting individual self-blame in cases of failures and thus encouraging hard work and self-discipline (Ray 2006). In turn, in a self-described meritocratic society, failures to effectively improve one's socioeconomic situation may lead to frustration and to shift aspirations towards other dimensions, such as religious fundamentalism (Ray 2006, 415–416) or xenophobia, which may also explain contemporary support for nationalist "populism"

(see also Sandel 2020). The problem here does not lie in an absent or significantly reduced subjective opportunity set and sense of entitlement, but rather in the perception that everything is possible provided one is trying hard enough; failure then is accounted for by lack of individual merit rather than by inadequate structural constraints that remain unchallenged as a result. This again points to the importance of considering capability to aspire at the crossroad of objective and subjective opportunity and entitlement sets: it is not only a matter of making individuals aspire high, but also of creating the objective conditions for the implementation of such aspirations.

From Adaptive to More Transformative Social Policies

The Interdependency of the Receiver-Doer-Judge Dimensions

All previous developments unambiguously show that the three anthropological dimensions of the receiver, the doer and the judge are not substitutable one to the other, so that deprivation in one dimension cannot be compensated through the improvement of the other dimensions. Thus, it is not possible to fully develop people's capability to aspire in the judge dimension without appropriate opportunities and rights in the receiver and doer dimensions. This requires considering both the subjective and objective opportunity and entitlement sets. Hence, a paternalistic policy leaving no space for the voice of beneficiaries – thus denying the "judge" dimension – may not be successful in developing a subjective sense of opportunity and entitlement, however generous the benefits paid to the "receiver" might be. On this basis, we argue that transformative social policies not only address issues of poverty, inequality and exclusion (receiver and doer dimensions) but also enhance the subjective sense of opportunity and entitlement, allowing people to challenge the norms and values that sustain, legitimise and reproduce their deprivations. This implies that social policies and institutions supporting only the receiver and doer dimensions, while not opening up the spaces for questioning adaptive preferences and developing one's capability to aspire, do not qualify as fully transformative institutions. Symmetrically, institutions enhancing capability to aspire and capability for voice while not expanding opportunities and rights for material well-being and human agency, are not fully transformative. Hence, capability to aspire and capability for voice cannot be effectively implemented if the receiver and doer dimensions are not adequately tackled through the provision of material and psychological well-being together with an expansion of real opportunities for human agency.

Beyond "Passive" and "Active" Welfare States

What is required then to create such social policies that become motors of the enhancement of the capability to aspire and the capability for voice, in turn

acting as a lever towards a transformation of the economy and society in line with the goals of sustainable human development? In our view this objective requires moving beyond most contemporary social policies as they do not pay due attention to their recipients' capability to aspire and capability for voice and they do not properly include the receiver, doer and judge dimensions. For example, policies focused only on decommodification tend to emphasize the receiver dimension and may neglect both the doer and the judge dimensions. In contrast, policies insisting on recommodification are more reluctant vis-à-vis a generous receiver dimension within social policies and they do not pay due attention to the judge dimension. Workfare policies defend an extreme view in this respect, as they defend a minimalist notion of decommodification (in order to prevent dependency traps) and they endorse a paternalistic view about beneficiaries needing to be pushed out of a culture of dependency by a harassing street-level-bureaucracy (Mead 1997).

Although the partisans of social investment defend a less extreme notion of recommodification, they still retain an emphasis on the doer at the expenses of the receiver and judge dimensions and do not properly include capability to aspire and capability for voice (Laruffa 2020). Therefore, social investment largely remains trapped in a notion of adaptive rather than transformative institution. This can be shown confronting the three-dimensional anthropology presented in the previous section with the "human capital" anthropology informing social investment.

First, the human capital approach risks neglecting the "receiver" dimension, overemphasising the "doer" dimension. For example, Hemerijck (2017, 12) argues for a "reorientation in social citizenship, away from *freedom from want* towards *freedom to act*" (emphasis in the original), which suggests a dichotomy between the "receiver" and the "doer", whereby social investment implies a shift *away* from the "receiver" and *towards* the "doer". In contrast, the capability approach rejects such a dichotomy: "freedom from want" is seen as a precondition of "freedom to act" and of the enhancement of capability to aspire and capability for voice. Thus, while in social investment "generous social security benefits of long duration" are considered to undermine work incentives (e.g. Hemerijck 2017, 25), the capability approach interprets these benefits as an "exit option" allowing people to refuse jobs that they do not value and to voice their aspirations in a more efficient way (Bonvin 2012). Moreover, the concept of human capital tends to emphasise human strength and ability. Such an emphasis could imply that the enhancement of capabilities to aspire and for voice is reserved to those who can develop their human capital, the others being deprived of such capability and being so to say reduced to a receiver position, without being able to develop both their doer and judge dimensions. This may be strongly exclusionary in respect to vulnerable people. In contrast to the discourse on human capital, the "ethics of care" (e.g. Tronto 1993, 2013) stresses the importance of human fragility as a

fundamental human characteristic and – symmetrically – the value of care and solidarity. Hence, rather than framing the welfare state as a set of interventions aimed at reinforcing individuals against vulnerability by investing in their human capital, the relevance of the welfare state in potentially promoting the values of solidarity and care among the population is emphasised. Capability to aspire and capability for voice are then considered as human rights, not as privileges for those more equipped with human capital or those who can generate a return on investment.

Second, in social investment the "doer" dimension is mainly envisaged in terms of labour market participation. The human capital anthropology values human beings as active doers in a restricted sense, that is, as economic actors and workers. This marginalises other notions of valuable agency and of being a "doer". For example, in social investment care work is not an activity recognised as much as employment. Yet, if one takes the idea of capability to aspire seriously, people should be left free as much as possible to develop their own aspirations and pursue their own vision of the good life, which may include engaging in care work (or in the political life of the community, etc.) alongside or even instead of employment. In contrast, in social investment employment takes priority over all other valuable activities, as illustrated in the goal of maximising the employment rate (e.g. Hemerijck 2013, 143). The problem here is not with the focus on employment per se, but rather with the fact that it has priority or even exclusivity over all other forms of human agency; it is as if people could not aspire to other forms of agency beyond employment in the labour market: when they voice such alternative aspirations, these are considered unrealistic and unachievable. This significantly restricts their capability to aspire. This also raises issues about job quality and to what extent social policies aim at promoting people's flourishing at work (Orton 2011).

Third, and most important, social investment neglects the "judge" dimension. People are essentially seen as beneficiaries of social policies and institutions, not as citizens able and willing to actively engage in their formulation and implementation (Laruffa 2021, 2022a). Indeed, if the goal of social policies is already established *a priori* – maximising the employment rate – little room is left for deliberation on their other potential aims and on other valuable activities beyond employment that they could support. In such a way, people are objects of social policies rather than subjects or actors who are allowed and encouraged to co-construct social policies. They are not given the possibility to exert their capability to aspire and their capability for voice as beneficiaries of social policies. The problem is that social investment is framed as necessary for the "modernisation" of welfare states and as an answer to given socioeconomic challenges, such as international competition, the emergence of the knowledge-based economy and the financial pressures on public budgets – a framing that entails a high degree of de-politicisation: welfare reforms become quasi-necessary, a-political steps and a matter of

adapting to changed circumstances, which makes democratic debate superfluous (Laruffa 2018, 2022b).

In contrast, formulating underspecified goals, a capability-oriented social policy leaves room to the "participative definition of the aims and indicators of public action" (Bonvin 2008, 372), i.e. to the "judge" dimension, thus paving the way towards more genuinely transformative social policies. Hence, people can participate in the public debate on welfare reform, which is framed as a political matter rather than a technical one. What it means to be a receiver and a doer becomes thus a democratic issue and not one that is decided by experts or technocrats. Table 2 below synthesises the main differences between the social investment and the capability perspective to social policy.

In short, the most important approaches to social policy during the last decades – decommodification, workfare or social investment – have all tended to neglect the importance of political participation in the formulation and implementation of social policies. In the same way, they have tended to deny the *political* nature of welfare reform, adopting instead a technocratic approach, which reduces the complex and controversial issues related to welfare reform to a matter of adapting to circumstances. Policy proposals are presented as a *necessary* adaptation to various demographic/socioeconomic circumstances, which seem to make democratic deliberation on welfare reform superfluous. Thereby, people's aspirations are not properly considered, neither are their capability to aspire nor their capability for voice. The prerequisites for a transformative social policy as defined in this paper are largely lacking.

From this perspective, the emphasis on people's capability to aspire and on political participation and democratic deliberation in the process of social policy formulation and implementation, whereby human beings are conceived as "judges" and democratic citizens, may be the greatest contribution of the capability approach for framing welfare reform and providing a normative ideal for the welfare state of the future. The real challenge conveyed by the capability approach is to place the judge dimension at the very core of social policies and institutions, thereby setting the conditions for genuinely considering all three anthropological dimensions, i.e. human beings as receivers who need

Table 2. Social investment vs. capacitating welfare state.

	Social investment state	Capacitating welfare state
Anthropological dimension of reference	Doer (as worker)	Receiver, Doer, Judge
Adaptive/transformative dimension	Change defined as adapting people so that they can contribute to the economy as it is	Change defined as empowering people so that they may develop their capability to aspire and participate in the economic and social fabric

support, as doers who can usefully contribute to society and the economy, and as judges who are able to develop their own aspirations and voice them. This in turn paves the way towards the creation of social policies and institutions as motors of collective social change as is developed in the next subsection.

Capability to Aspire, Navigational Agency and the Implementation of Transformative Policies

Interestingly, defenders of social investment discard an overtly ambitious conception of a capability-oriented welfare state in the name of pragmatism (Hemerijck 2020). Yet, we think that the radicality of the multiple crises (ecological, political, social) that contemporary societies are facing require equally radical and ambitious solutions rooted in an effective promotion and recognition of people's capability to aspire and capability for voice and setting the foundations for imagining better futures. Without such ambition, social policies are at risk of being reduced to adaptive tools focused on pragmatic objectives such as re-establishing job-rich economic growth rather than challenging the very relevance of the imperative of economic growth (Laruffa 2022c).

Following Nussbaum's suggestion, if policies are to be more transformative, they should be "highly aspirational" and "aim high": "setting people's sights well above current realities (…) creates a morally beautiful reality towards which people can aim, out of the squalor of the daily behaviour of the vile human conduct" (Nussbaum 2016, 2). Transformative social institutions leave the space for such aspirational views to be developed and voiced and to feed the public debate about the fair and just society. As Sen (2009, 384) argues, feasibility cannot be considered a necessary condition for people to have rights: "non-realization does not, in itself, make a claimed right a non-right. Rather, it motivates further social action". In the same line, Hart convincingly argues that, since aspirations should drive action – working as "powerful engines of progress" – they should not be "limited in relation to the current status quo" as historical changes "would not have occurred without pushing the limits of what was known to be possible" (Hart 2016, 11). By creating the conditions to enhance their beneficiaries' capability to aspire, transformative institutions allow imagining alternative futures and give the energy to strive to implement them.

Building on those works that make a connection between (inequalities in) aspiration and agency (Baillergeau and Duyvendak 2022; Bazzani 2023; Bifulco 2013; Burchardt 2009; Hobson and Zimmermann 2022), we argue that transformative social policies and institutions promote people's "navigational agency" as opposed to participational agency (Claassen 2017): the point of promoting capabilities is not only to enhance the freedom to participate in a given social order and its dominant practices, which is the aim of participational agency, but also to co-govern this order as well as to think of

alternative orders, establishing new practices, in line with the objective of navigational agency. Emphasis is placed on the interdependency between society and collectively shared values on the one hand, and individual's desires and goals on the other one: a transformed social order providing enhanced opportunities and rights results in higher aspirations and desires while these in turn nourish the process of creating more equitable social orders. Following Hart (2016, 10), we thus argue that transformative policies and institutions both promote enhanced individual aspirations and provide the conditions for translating them into collective action and social change. But how can this objective be achieved concretely? How can social policies as laboratories of aspirations be created?

As Sen (1999; 2009) argues, from a capability perspective, not only outcomes themselves are important but also the *processes* leading to those outcomes (what he calls "comprehensive outcomes"). In this context, it is essential to investigate not only whether adequate social and public services are provided but also *how* they are delivered. This is all the more important as street-level bureaucrats in charge of implementing social policies significantly impact how the judge dimension is considered in social interventions (e.g. Bonvin et al. 2023; Brodkin 2011; Lipsky 2010). For example, it is important to study how citizens are *treated* within social policies, as capability-oriented interventions should treat them with respect and take seriously their aspirations and voices (Bifulco and Mozzana 2011; Burchardt and Vizard 2011). Whether or not participatory spaces are integrated where adaptive preferences can be discussed and capability to build one's aspirations and project alternative futures is encouraged, makes a huge difference. If such spaces are available and people are allowed to voice their aspirations and are taken seriously while doing so, then social institutions may become transformative; if by contrast, beneficiaries are called to comply with official expectations, thus negating their judge dimension, then institutions tend to be adaptive devices which do not question adaptive preferences and unfair social structures. What takes place at micro-level, between service providers and beneficiaries, is thus decisive when it comes to differentiate between adaptive and transformative institutions as defined in this article. Indeed, through their active involvement in social policies, citizens' self-efficacy, i.e. their belief in their capability to aspire and implement their aspirations, increases. In turn, this enhances their ability to imagine alternative emancipatory futures and to contribute to collective action in this direction. If recipients are encouraged to discuss and deconstruct their adaptive preferences and develop own aspirations, they by the same token enhance their capability to aspire and their capability for voice, which in turn may have an impact at a more macro level. In the line of Freire's adult literacy education model, such transformative social policies create more critical consciousness and conscientisation where people reflect on and discuss their current conditions and reach new ways of interpreting their world and potentially changing it (Freire 1970).

Inspired by such participatory discursive practices, social policies initiate new "action – reflection – action" cycles whereby individuals become aware of their reality and develop their ability to transform it. In this sense, the capabilities acquired through transformative social policies conceived as discursive "laboratories of aspirations" may pave the way towards further social and economic change.

This perspective highlights the role of social policies and institutions in nourishing people's "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004) and their "sense of entitlement" (Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács 2011). Moreover, promoting citizen participation and capability for voice in social policy is strongly connected to people's capability to aspire, as institutions that do not develop individuals' capability for voice tend to promote adaptive preferences (Bonvin and Farvaque 2005). Khader (2011) convincingly shows how such a discursive and deliberative approach to social intervention is justified both on pragmatic (efficiency) and moral (legitimacy) grounds.

Conclusion

Our article has explored what conditions are to be fulfilled to implement transformative institutions and policies in a capability perspective, i.e. institutions that promote citizens' freedom to live a life they have reason to value and contribute to more capability-friendly economies and societies. It has suggested that the enhancement of all beneficiaries' capability to aspire and capability for voice is the key to the development of more genuinely transformative social policies and institutions. It has identified three main factors in this respect:

- the enlargement of subjective and objective opportunity sets (Flechtner 2017) so that people have expanded opportunities together with a feeling of self-efficacy about their capability to realise them,
- the enhancement of objective and subjective entitlements (Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács 2011) so that the scope of rights to benefits and services is not only increased to cover all situations of needs related to the receiver and doer dimensions, but also that people have an enhanced perception that they are entitled to such benefits and services and should not feel ashamed or stigmatised because they claim them,
- the creation and multiplication of participatory spaces within social institutions where people can express their voices, which also implies that transformative social institutions are able and ready to listen to such voices and take them seriously (Bonvin, Laruffa, and Rosenstein 2018); this calls for the politicisation of social policies and institutions and requires that the objectives to be pursued, the targets to be reached, the preferred methods, etc. are not decided beforehand, which would make the voices of beneficiaries redundant, but are co-constructed with them.

The combination of these components – an expanded sense of opportunity and entitlement and a politicisation of their modalities of operation – creates the conditions for a virtuous self-reinforcing relationship between transformative social policies and institutions and people's capability to aspire and capability for voice, in turn setting the stage for collective change and an enhanced view of development and human progress. Freire's ideas about adult literacy education, or the democratic classroom imagined by Dewey, or the deliberative non-paternalistic approach to inappropriately adaptive preferences offered by Khader are useful reference points in this reflection towards designing and implementing more transformative social policies.

Such a notion of transformative institutions also calls for a renewed notion of academic research. Indeed, when a transformative approach to social policy is embraced, also the role of the social scientist is a different one. In the adaptive approach to social policy scholars essentially act as "experts" who identify trends in the economy, society and environment in order to formulate policy proposals for responding to them in a technocratic way. In contrast, adopting a transformative approach to social policy requires acknowledging that there are no obvious problems or descriptions of societal trends – that each description always involves a choice concerning what information should be considered relevant and what should not (Sen 1980) and that social reality can be described from different "positional objectivities" (Sen 1993). Thus, a key goal of the social scientist is to bring the "positional objectivity" of the most vulnerable people into the public sphere, increasing their influence in the choice of the "informational basis' of public action and contributing to reduce participative inequalities resulting from socio-economic inequalities (Bonvin 2014). Sen's conception indeed requires to democratise the production of knowledge itself, stressing the fact that people get knowledge from their experiences and daily lives and that this knowledge should be taken seriously (Salais 2009). The capability approach can thus be fruitfully combined with public sociology and participatory-action research (Bonvin and Laruffa 2023; Laruffa and Hearne 2024) with a view to helping people question adaptive preferences – i.e. to reflect on their own lives and on the potential effects of institutional constraints on their lives and aspirations (Conradie 2013; Conradie and Robeyns 2013) – and giving a space where aspirations can be voiced and defended, thereby promoting both "epistemic justice" and people's "political agency" (Khader 2011; Walker 2018; Walker and Boni 2020; Walker et al. 2022). In this way, social science could also contribute to the move towards more transformative institutions, supporting broader structural transformations in society.

Notes

1. We recognise that human values are *always* shaped and influenced by the socio-cultural context in which people live. This universal understanding of adaptive

preferences and values allows avoiding the problem – and associated injustice – of "testimonial denial", whereby the preferences and values of deprived groups may not be taken seriously with the argument that they are "incorrect" or "misguided" because of their adaptive character (Mitchell 2018). At the same time, we emphasise that, when provided with new opportunities and new spaces for participation, people may question such adaptive preferences, which is all the more important for disadvantaged people since socioeconomic inequalities structurally tend to produce unequal and stratified aspirations (e.g. Suckert 2022; Hart 2019; Ray 2006; Appadurai 2004; Baillergeau and Duyvendak 2022; Bazzani 2023; Burchardt 2009; Hobson and Zimmermann 2022; Nussbaum 2001; Flechtner 2017).

2. While in this article we build on Appadurai's notion of "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004), we prefer the concept of *capability* to aspire in order to emphasise the fact that this "capacity" emerges from the interaction of individual and societal factors, i.e. that it is the result of a conversion process involving individual agency and social and environmental conversion factors in the creation of aspirations. See Zimmermann in this issue for more elaboration on the differences between capacity to aspire and capability to aspire, and their implications for (re-)thinking transformative institutions.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their extremely valuable comments, which helped us significantly improve our argument. We also express our warmest thanks to all participants to the workshop "Aspirations, Capabilities and Transformative Institutions" held at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (8–9 February 2024), where a first version of the article was presented and discussed. We especially thank Bénédicte Zimmermann and Melanie Walker for their very insightful suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by HORIZON EUROPE – project INVOLVE [Grant Number 101094560 HORIZON-CL2-2022-DEMOCRACY-01-03].

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