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# Policy brief

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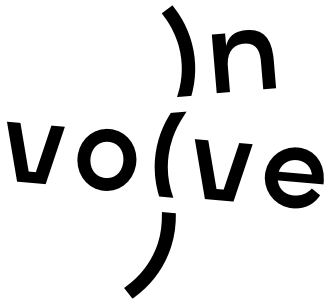
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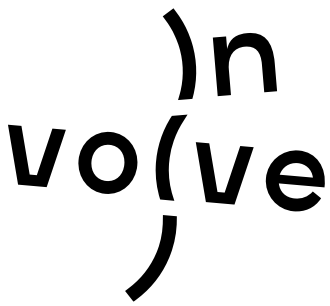
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# Putting aspirations and capability to aspire at the core of social services and institutions<sup>1</sup>

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## Moving towards aspirational social services and institutions: What is at stake?

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Up to now, social services and institutions have mostly followed two main logics: decommodification, represented by the so-called welfare state which supports vulnerable people without market income either financially/materially or psychologically; and recommodification, represented by the social investment state or the human capital approach, which activate jobless people in various ways to reintegrate them into the labor market as quickly as possible. In both cases, people's aspirations are not considered: while the so-called welfare state helps people cope with their vulnerable conditions without taking account of their wishes or aspirations, activation programs set up in line with the social investment model or the human capital approach most often impose on them official expectations about how they should behave and what degree of effort they must deploy to find a job. The Involve project suggests departing from these two visions and recommends that people's aspirations should be the very foundation of social services and institutions, thus calling for a deep-seated change in their design and organization. This is certainly one of the boldest proposals of the Involve project. In a nutshell, it implies transforming social policies and institutions into aspirational tools, which entails three main changes to dominant conceptions of social services and institutions:

- a) Social services and institutions should foster people's capability to develop their own aspirations (rather than endorse socially dominant norms or institutional expectations). This means they should be places where people are encouraged and allowed to question their current aspirations and develop new ones where relevant.
- b) Social services and institutions should also be places where people are enabled and encouraged to voice their aspirations, in contrast with institutions asking people to comply silently with official norms. As Drèze and Sen (2002) recall, silence is the worst enemy of social justice and it is crucial to allow people to voice their claims and aspirations in an environment where these voices are taken seriously

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<sup>1</sup> This policy brief is strongly inspired by the special issue of the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, "Capability to Aspire and Transformative Institutions", 25(4), co-directed by Jean-Michel Bonvin and Bénédicte Zimmermann and published at the end of 2024. Many papers in the list of references are part of this special issue - see here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjhd20/25/4?nav=toCList>

and not just paid lip service; this entails that such voices can make a difference on how programs are designed and implemented.

- c) Social services and institutions should provide the means and spaces to test and experiment such aspirations. This is the very condition for moving beyond formal freedom towards real freedom to lead a life one has reason to value (Sen, 1985, 2009). If people are encouraged to articulate their own aspirations and voice them but are not given the possibility to test and realize them, institutions do not enhance their capabilities or real freedoms.

The Involve project claims that aspirational social services and institutions are crucial in relation to combating citizens' decreasing trust and lack of participation. The gap between what institutions actually have on offer and citizens' aspirations is certainly a factor of distrust. Transforming and redesigning institutions along the aim of promoting all citizens' capability to aspire, to voice their aspirations and to realize them, is therefore the key to restoring citizen trust and commitment to the polity and society at large. However, it raises numerous challenges that can be fully grasped only with a proper understanding of what "capability to aspire" means and what its implications are for the design and operation of social institutions and services. In this policy brief, we first explain the main theoretical foundations of this notion, before drawing conclusions for its practical implementation.

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## Understanding what capability to aspire is and entails

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Aspirations do not grow in a vacuum, they raise temporal issues – people's past trajectories have an impact on the kind of aspirations they may develop (undocumented migrants and upper-class white collars are not equal in how they can aspire to better and more emancipatory futures) – as well as relational and social issues, since aspirations take shape in connection with people's relationships and environment – the "thick of social life" in Appadurai's words (Appadurai, 2004). They are deeply influenced by culture, society, and politics, insofar as the latter contribute to drawing a horizon of possible futures and impact whether people are able (or not) to realise their aspirations. Against such a backdrop, it comes as no surprise that people are unequal in terms of their capability to aspire: disadvantaged and well-off people, national citizens and migrants, or highly qualified and poorly qualified workers are not able to develop to the same degree their capability to aspire to better futures, just as women and men are differently impacted by contexts of structural gender inequalities. Unequal capability to aspire is maybe one of the most unfair disadvantages as it implies not only that people do not enjoy the same living conditions, but also that they do not have the same ability to imagine a better future. Due to their circumstances, some people have a more limited capability to imagine that their future life could be different and feel stuck in their vulnerable or precarious situation.

When striving to restore disadvantaged people's capability to aspire, it is important to keep in mind this twofold embeddedness – temporal and relational/cultural – of aspirations. This entails understanding how the capability to aspire is fostered or hindered by people's past trajectory and by their cultural, social and political circumstances. Thus, the discussion on the development of the capability to aspire needs to incorporate issues of context and intersectional inequalities, together with issues of repair and refusal of the past (Walker, 2024). Aspirations take place at the nexus of past, present and future possibilities, while being socially and institutionally shaped. Taking into account the temporal and social processes involved in shaping aspirations and the capability to aspire should thus be a central concern for public institutions. This is even more crucial since the capability to aspire is the key to developing most other capabilities: aspiring to something is a prerequisite to the freedom to achieve it (Zimmermann, 2024).

The Involve project also emphasizes the importance of not considering the capability to aspire alone, but together with the capability to voice aspirations and to realize them. Indeed, fostering the capability to develop new aspirations without creating spaces to voice and test such aspirations, will not bring any concrete change in vulnerable people's life (they will at best develop new desirable projections into the future but without the means to realize them).

It is also important to remind that even a modest progress in terms of capability to aspire, towards what Walker calls “modest aspirations”, does not necessarily result in a reproductive or conformist outcome but can be the point of departure for a long-term transformation (Walker, 2024). This illustrates the possibility of a step-by-step approach towards aspirational social services and institutions, which is certainly more realistic than a call for a radical departure from existing practices.

In short, three main findings come out of our theoretical reflection:

- a) First, the development of aspirations is not only an individual endeavor; aspirations are embedded both temporally and socially, and collective action is needed to counteract existing inequalities in these respects.
- b) Second, developing people’s capability to aspire requires providing the spaces, opportunities and means to voice and achieve these aspirations. What is required is agency or the ability to move from aspirations to achievements (Zimmermann, 2024). Without agency, aspirations cannot result into enhanced capabilities or real freedoms to lead a life one has reason to value, which in turn discourages the formulation of any further aspiration.
- c) Third, modest progress in terms of the capability to aspire – which may appear as insufficient to contest structural inequalities and injustices – can nevertheless be the first step towards transforming social services and institutions into aspirational tools.

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## What it means for developing aspirational institutions

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Against this background, how can social services and institutions contribute to enhancing vulnerable people’s capability to aspire? Evidence shows that, while existing public institutions and social services may sometimes foster the capability to aspire, they more often impose constraints and conditions that impede it. Developing aspirational institutions is thus a major challenge. The Involve project suggests distinguishing between adaptive institutions – whereby citizens are called to adapt their aspirations to economic and social circumstances and to institutional requirements – and transformative or aspirational institutions, where citizens’ capability to aspire and capability for voice are effectively recognized so as to promote their full participation in the institutional programs and beyond (Bonvin and Laruffa, 2024). In adaptive institutions, the expected outcome is imposed from above and people are called to comply with it, while in transformative institutions the outcome of public action is not known beforehand, but co-constructed with beneficiaries, public agents and other institutional representatives. How institutions are designed and framed strongly influences how their users perceive the rights they can legitimately claim and the scope of opportunities available to them (Hobson 2018); thus, an institution’s design and mode of operation contributes to shape the beneficiaries’ capability to aspire to more emancipatory futures. Accordingly, transformative institutions are not understood here as institutions aiming to transform individuals in order to adapt them to the market or to their environment, but as aspirational institutions striving to change constraints and opportunities so as to enhance individual and collective power to aspire to a future people have reason to value (Bifulco, 2024). To this purpose, aspirational institutions are called to act on all temporal and social dimensions of the capability to aspire: culture, politics, time, society, etc.

For instance, institutions fostering reparative aspirations contribute to break the cycle between an unequal past and an unequal future (Walker, 2024). They generate a sense that a different future is possible and that vulnerable people are not trapped in long-term poverty, due to disadvantaged past trajectories or social backgrounds. As such, aspirational institutions open up the possibility to break with an oppressive past and aspire to new and enlarged lives. In this case, institutions act as factors that expand people’s capability to aspire and enable them questioning “inappropriately adaptive preferences” (Khader 2011) whereby people are resigned to their difficult circumstances. Crucially, the aspirations emerging from this questioning need to be supported towards their realization, otherwise they may lead to even higher frustration. This points to the necessity to offer people the opportunity not only to reverse past trajectories, but also to change their social and institutional environment. Indeed, the realization of many individual and collective aspirations requires adequate institutional and environmental support. There are many examples of seemingly aspirational

institutions, where the capability to aspire is formally encouraged but without giving people the means for achieving their aspirations. Such institutions fall short of being genuinely aspirational. Most important in this respect is to take due account of the capability to voice aspirations and the capability to realize them; failing to do so often leads to frustration that finally hampers one's capability to aspire (Stephanus and Vero, 2024; Hart, 2024).

Indeed, not only what institutions deliver matters, but also how benefits and services are delivered, i.e. how public services operate concretely. To what extent and how institutions integrate people's lived experiences and voices in the way they design and deliver services is a key issue for distinguishing between adaptive and aspirational institutions. Hence, genuinely transformative and aspirational institutions build on two complementary pillars: access to enhanced opportunities, rights and resources on the one hand, spaces where people can exercise their capability for voice (Bonvin, 2012) and express their aspirations on the other hand. Without such participatory spaces and opportunities for imagining different futures, the capability to aspire cannot be fully and durably realized.

The relevance and importance of four crucial dimensions should be emphasized here:

- a) First, enhancing the capability to aspire is not just an individual responsibility, it requires collective involvement of public institutions and services, together with NGOs.
- b) Second, aspirational institutions are less about transforming individuals than the environment and circumstances that shape their desires and possibilities. This underlines the tight interconnection between individual and collective change that is at the core of aspirational institutions (Bifulco, 2024).
- c) Third, aspirational institutions equally and interdependently support people's capability to aspire and their capability for voice, while offering them the means to transform their aspirations into achievements.
- d) Fourth, aspirational institutions create new "action – reflection – action" cycles (Freire 1970) whereby individuals become increasingly aware of their reality and step-by-step develop an ability to transform it.

To sum up, the Involve project identifies the conditions to set up more aspirational institutions that are also able to make a difference in terms of citizen trust and participation. Developing such institutions is both a duty inspired by social justice concerns and a condition to enhance the trustworthiness of social services and institutions in the eyes of their beneficiaries and citizens at large. This is a major challenge in the present context as the Involve project shows that aspirational institutions remain the exception and, when they exist, they are fragile, they need strong political support and require constant effort.

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