CHAPTER 7

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PROMOTING CAPABILITY FOR WORK

The Role of Local Actors

INTRODUCTION

This chapter advocates a capability perspective, drawing on Amartya Sen’s works, for analysing and designing contemporary social policies aimed at tackling social exclusion from the labour market. We will analyse the relevance of the capability approach as an alternative framework for critical assessment of public structures in the field of social integration policies, as well as a framework for action and reform when such structures appear unjust.

Sen’s framework has inspired many people in academic audiences as well as in activist or political spheres. The relevance of the capability approach, which first emerged as an alternative approach for the study of poverty in developing countries, has been aptly underlined for developed economies as well. The perspective of “development as freedom,” which aims at enhancing people’s real freedoms through public action, should equally apply to developed countries, as is evidenced by the high levels of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion experienced by rich countries, in particular in Europe. Many studies have developed this capability or “freedom” perspective with regard to the situation of the poorest in rich countries, highlighting what a capability framework would entail. In particular, some of them have emphasised the alternative cognitive potential of the capability approach in the field of work and social policies. Works inspired by the capability approach have facilitated the measurement of social exclusion and poverty with a renewed basis of judgement, leading to alternative ways of identifying the poor and the excluded. These studies showed that a significant proportion of poor people in terms of capabilities are not being helped by public institutions, for they do not appear in official commodity-based accountings. Similar observations concerning the labour market show that standard measures of unemployment, i.e. based on standard “informational bases of judgement in justice” (henceforward IBJJ) are totally blind to the limitations faced by job-seekers. By contrast, a pool of studies inspired by the capability approach have identified the constraints, unfreedoms or “penalties” jobless people suffer in different parts of Europe. A study has shown that, for contemporary Britain, nearly three-quarters of women who are not in paid employment lack

S. Denneulin et al. (eds.), Transforming Unjust Structures: The Capability Approach, 121-142.
“employment capability”, that is, face severe constraints vis-à-vis employment opportunities. The very problem is that, according to Burchardt, only one out of three unemployed women is picked up in official unemployment statistics. If public action relies on this standard measure, then a large majority of “capability-missing” persons will not be considered as relevant targets.

The choice of the IBJJ is not neutral for the way public policies are designed and implemented. Indeed, it implies a selection of specific factual data or information which is then considered as the adequate yardstick for public evaluation and action. This data selection coincides with the exclusion, explicit or not, of other information seen as irrelevant. The narrow link between the IBJJ mobilised for public evaluation and the content and objectives of public action is thus evidenced.

Integrating capabilities in the IBJJ brings about deep-seated consequences for social integration policies. If contemporary social policies can certainly all be said to share a common ambition to enhance people’s possibilities and opportunities on the labour market, not all of them can be considered as equally capability-friendly. The capability framework requires assessing the precise significance and impact of these policies in terms of functionings and capabilities. In substantial terms, the priority of public action is then to ensure that everyone can effectively have the capability to achieve functionings that are conventionally recognised as valuable, typically the capability to get a valuable job. Another crucial issue relates to the procedure through which social integration policies are being designed, implemented and assessed: are these policies controlled from above by technocrats seeking to impose predetermined functionings on benefit recipients, or is their content deliberated between all local actors involved, including job-seekers? The two options lead to contrasted results in terms of capabilities. Hence, at both substantial and procedural levels, the capability approach allows the raising of critical issues about contemporary transformations of social policies (especially the introduction of the language of opportunity and of “rights and duties” approaches) and acts as a normative framework against which such policies can be assessed. The use of the capability approach also questions the impact of the constraints imposed on the recipients by the public services: do they really improve their prospects in terms of capabilities? In all these matters, the choice of the capability IBJJ makes a huge difference.

Our argumentation will develop along the following lines. We first briefly recall the main concepts of the capability framework and propose the extension of the capability approach to the general issue of the conversion of all formal rights into real rights or capabilities. We then apply this extended capability approach to the critical notion of capability for work. The combined significance of process and opportunity freedom as well as of individual and social responsibility is underlined. The following three sections elaborate a critical analysis of contemporary social policies against the “capability for work” framework. “Social Policies, Cash Benefits and the Capability Approach” envisages the politics of decommodification (providing people outside the labour market with cash benefits). “Training Programmes, Employability and Human Capital” is devoted to human capital approaches to social integration policies (programmes making job-seekers more employable via training mechanisms), and finally, “Workfare, People’s Behaviour