

# Capability theorising and the Miratho project ([www.miratho.com](http://www.miratho.com))

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# Higher education, inequalities, social mobility and the public good

- SA is grossly unequal: Gini of .69, skewed endowments of education and assets, wealth Gini of .95. Such inequality means there is no Plan B for poor students – neither government welfare nor families can help.
- Higher education is reproducing the individual and institutional inequalities that were entrenched by apartheid. (National Higher Education Summit, Ministerial Oversight Committee on Transformation in SA Public Universities, 2015)
- Higher education provides opportunities for social mobility. ‘It can strengthen equity, social justice and democracy.’ (NDP, 2011). HE offers high private (as opposed to public) returns in South Africa (World Bank). Long-run average unemployment for degree holders is 4.2%. (cf to around 68% youth unemployment).

# Miratho overview

Four year project (2016-2020) (ESRC-DFiD and NRF funded)

Capabilities conceptual framework: Sen: 'ultimately, the focus has to be on what life we lead and what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be' (Sen, 1999) –our effective opportunities to be whom we want to be. With freedom to shape our goals and future

How do 'disadvantaged' youth from rural and township schools access, participate in and succeed in higher education, and then move into work? What contextual dimensions of economic, policy, social and educational conditions enable or inhibit their access, participation and success?

Focus on inclusivity of access to HE and participation by rural and (some) township youth – five university sites (University pseudonyms: *Country* – HDI; *Rural* – HDI; *Provincial* –mid ranking traditional; *Metropolitan* – elite; *City* - comprehensive) Inequalities in society and in types of universities, access, participation and outcomes requires a multi-dimensional and intersectional framework.

# Basic capabilities assumption in the higher education space

‘The inequality which should bother all decent human beings is the unequal capability to function fully as a human being , the unequal capability to choose a life of dignity and well-being – under prevailing conditions of human technology and human knowledge’. (Goran Therborn, 2013, 48)

# Poverty in the space of the university – the material basis for educational

Possible capabilities gap with regard to educational well-being and poverty

Not an either-or argument (fix poverty first, then teach diverse students well – both are intertwined and both matter)

HE can be a source of social mobility – if students can get to the end. We have found that getting to the end requires above, all economic resources - *we are interested in what it means to be poor in the space of the university.*

# Capabilities theorising: Core ideas

Human development and human capabilities approach: 'an enabling environment for people to live long, healthy and creative lives'; 'a process of enlarging people's choices' (UNDP, 1990). Empowerment, equity, security, sustainability of valued achievements and opportunities. **HD 'anchors' capabilities expansion**

We ask not only about the person's satisfaction with what she does, but about what she does, and what she is in a position to do (what her opportunities and liberties are).

And we ask not just about the resources that are sitting around, but about how those do or do not go to work, enabling [a university student] to function in a fully human way.

(Amartya Sen, 2000)

Opportunity freedom (capability) 'is the extent to which a set of options offers a decision maker real opportunities to achieve' (Foster, 21011, 687)

The basic idea is that we use capabilities as the measure of development by looking at what people are actually able to choose – in an informed and reasoned way - to be and to in their lives, rather than evaluating income (national, household or individual) or subjective preferences (how satisfied are we). Capabilities are freedoms each person has to *choose a combination* of ways of beings and doings [*functionings*] they have *reason* to value for their own good life [*plurality*].

# Capabilities theorising: Education

To be educated is a multiplier/generative capability, contributing to the expansion of other valuable capabilities

Education has the potential, but is not guaranteed, to

- support individual well-being freedom - intrinsic contributions to the formation of persons with many interests and aspects to their well-being and life quality.
- influence social change (encouraging social participation and 'critical agency' Sen, 2002)
- influence economic production (developing an educated populace with potential to contribute to and drive economic production) -capabilities acknowledges education as an instrumental investment in human capital its importance to economic opportunities especially for disadvantaged students and communities.

Multiple purposes: effect on quality of life; economic opportunities; political voice' ; better health; human rights; understanding and use of legal rights; empowerment of girls and women; reduce class (and other) inequalities; enjoyable, creative, rewarding(Dreze and Sen 2013)

# Ingrid Robeyns (2016)

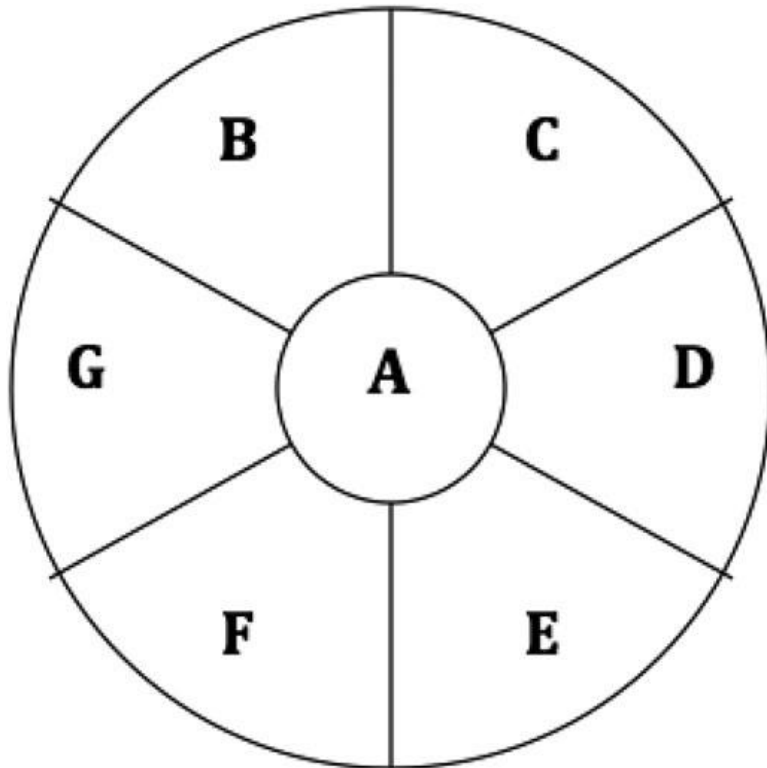
Robeyns (2016) what exactly, is the ultimate core of capabilitarianism?

Rejects Nussbaum approach of either theorizing basic social justice OR an approach to comparative quality of life evaluations. Bi-fold distinction overlooks work by capabilitarian scholars, which does not fit neatly into either category

Her 'cartwheel approach' of 'Core' (required) + 'Modules' (optional).



# Robeyns' 'cartwheel'



- A. Core
- B. Purpose
- C. Meta-theoretical commitments
- D. Social ontology and explanatory theories
- E. Selection of functionings and/or capabilities, and aggregation
- F. Measurement and empirical issues
- G. Additional normative commitments

# Capabilities theorising: Core

With respect to the Core (A), Robeyns suggests that all capabilitarian theories must focus on: what a person is able to be and to do (her capabilities or opportunities, her potential beings and doings), and those capabilities she has realized (her functionings or actual beings and doings).

functionings and capabilities are the core concepts for human well-being: ‘They are the distinctive feature of all capabilitarian theories’ (2016, p.405).

focus on freedoms (agency, choice) to be and to do – good for the person, good for society (or university)

Capabilities (not resources) is the space for identifying dis/advantage; more capabilities translate into more advantage, and fewer capabilities into disadvantage and deprivation, which may become clustered and corrosive.

Robeyns – capabilities are morally neutral in the core (we do not say which matter)- ‘the moral relevance lies in whether capabilities *are truly available to us*’ (2016, p.406)

# Capabilities theorising; Core

**Means-end distinction:** Interpersonal comparisons are based on people's functionings and their capabilities - the well-being of people is the end of development not economic growth/development.

**Conversion factors.** Inequalities are produced and sustained by systemic processes and arrangements and by distributive action. CF which refers to the different opportunities people have to convert their bundles of resources into capabilities and functionings. These may be personal, social or environmental and will generally intersect and be further shaped by context. (In Miratho we find the conversion trilogy of family, school and community with the individual shaping access)

**Structures (class, ethnicity, gender etc).** Variations in capabilities may be caused directly, Robeyns writes, by 'structural constraints' (p.407) that affect different members of group differently. Adds 'bite' to neutral conversion factors.

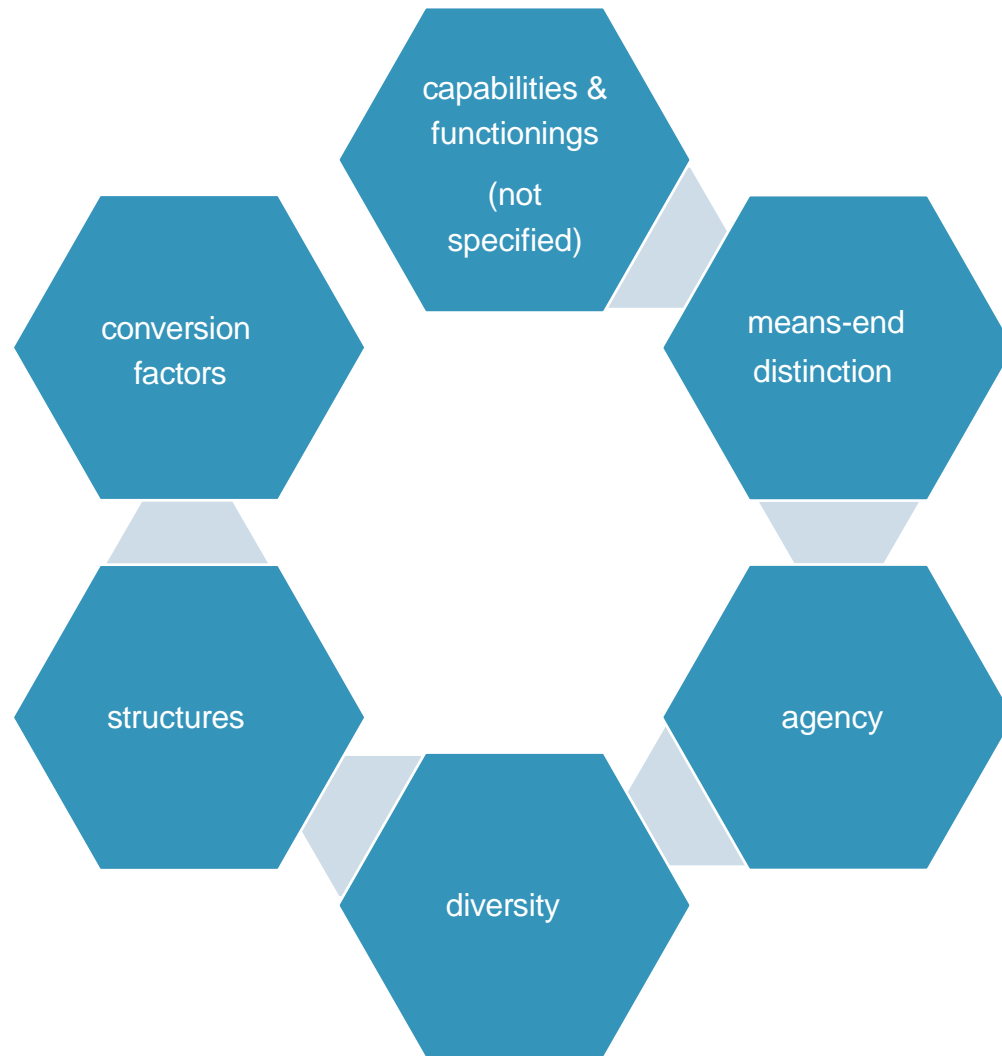
The maldistribution of power- whether of income and wealth, horizontal inequalities such as ethnicity, or agency inequalities - operationalized in, through and by structural constraints (for example of social class) may seriously restrict the capabilities of some groups. I therefore think that both core elements can be justified in strengthening social justice.

# Capabilities theorising

**Human diversity** – people are diverse, they value different dimensions to their lives

**Agency** a ‘minimalistic’ claim in that agency ‘cannot simply be ignored and must be accounted for’ (p.407) but it could have a key role in capability theorizing, or a lesser role.

Overall capabilities can account for freedoms and choice, for agency and for what is actually possible in each person’s life. It shifts the policy focus from commodities to capabilities. It pays attention to multi-dimensional and intersecting conversion factors and structures that shape opportunity sets. It locates higher education in development debates beyond education.



# Capabilities theorising: normative claims

- This set of concepts cannot in themselves ground a normative theory and hence part of the core must include normative claims (how things ought to be and how we ought to act morally speaking), but in this respect capability theory 'entails an incomplete and underspecified normative theory' (2016, p.407).
- In particular we need to specify which capabilities matter for our particular theory

# Capabilities theorising: three disagreements

**Disagreement 1: Non-western, non-liberal ontologies vs a liberal, western ontology**, ‘the ultimate concern is the advantage of each and very affected individual’ – each person as an end - and ‘the effects on other entities are only relevant insofar as, and to the extent that, they affect the interests of individuals’ (p.408). The relevant unit of evaluation and concern is the individual. Not resolved through Module D (social ontology)

But, ontologically relationship could be ‘the fundamental unit of moral analysis and prescription’ (Metz, 2013, p.78), ‘an ideal regarding the way members of a group ought to relate to one another’ (Metz, 2013, p.81) so that relationships (including extended families in which, for example, my ‘sister’ could be my cousin) are good for their own sake and core to what it means to be human. Relationships of solidarity with others are key to learning how to acting rightly and hence relationships are intrinsically good, valued for their own sake, worth pursuing for their own sake.

Metz suggests that ‘the most important capability might be the capacity to prize relationships of identity and solidarity’ (2016, p.146).

Note that autonomy (right or freedom to choose) could be shared or collective freedom and is not identical to individualism (Fischer 2014).

Robeyn’s (2005) earlier explanation of the approach being ethically individualistic may offer a way into acknowledging non-Western ontologies.

# Capabilities theorising

## Disagreement 2: Specifying some capabilities in the Core not just in the Module E- in education but not only in education (?)

The point here is that public deliberation for Sen is the process needed to specify capabilities. But we must then surely secure the core capabilities in people that enables this kind of process. Of course, what comes first may be an issue - the democratic process or the capabilities, or we might see as both being constructed together but requiring that the capability is developed and an entitlement for all citizens seems rather important. For Fricker such deliberation fundamentally requires the capability for what she calls '**epistemic contribution**' (crucial for epistemic justice, epistemic agency, and hence decolonization), that is being recognised both as a knower who receives knowledge and a knower who contributes to the pool of shared understandings. Absent this, it is hard to see how deliberative processes based in knowledge and information would be inclusive.

Bornman (2017, p.13) 'Nothing creates greater vulnerability than not having a voice. Without a voice you have no opinion', you become invisible and your human rights can be safely ignored. *Until lions learn to speak, we will only hear the story from the hunter's perspective.*



# Normatively, capabilities and functionings – in education

In education capabilities **and** functionings matter for evaluating advantage (access, epistemic access etc.) – Joanna and Lerato.

Nussbaum (2000) explains that to develop a functioning (for example for critical thinking), we need to promote a relevant capability ‘by requiring the functioning that nourishes it’.

The more crucial a function is to attaining and sustaining other capabilities, the more we need to promote actual functioning.

# Capabilities theorising

## **Disagreement 3: material resources (or their absence) as the basis for educational well-being**

Failure to address economic capabilities as core seems to risk severing capabilitarianism from poverty, development ethics and debates about inequality of power and inequalities of economic power (Crocker 2014).

University students, for example, do not leave socio-economic inequalities behind when they come to university. The 2016 Student Engagement Survey (SASSE, 2016) in South Africa found that: 1) only 15% of students never worry about day to day living expenses and only 18% never worry about how they will pay university fees; 2) only 29% are NSFAS funded; and 3) 69% indicated they ran out of food without being able to buy more and 23% indicated this happened most days or every day. Experiences of financial stress affect their studies. It also affects participation in extra-curricular activities (62% do not participate) and buying academic study materials (70% do not because of the cost). What emerges is 'a worrying picture of long-standing socio-economic inequalities'. These factors have a significant impact on the educational experiences, identities and general well-being of students' (SASSE, 2016, 2).

# On Poverty

- With regard to poverty, CA focuses not on what you have but on what you can do and be; *poverty is a lack of overlapping freedoms*. Sen urges a redefinition of poverty as capability deprivation, given that low income or lack of wealth are just some of many different ways in which human beings can suffer capability deprivation.
- We are broadly in agreement...but
- Our data is showing that the capability for sufficient financial (material) resources needs to be secured before we consider other capability deprivations (broadly supported by Sen and perhaps by Nussbaum's notion of poverty as 'capability failure')
- Insecurity of resources persistently affects learning capabilities, even though learning cannot be reduced only to material capabilities
- Lotter (2011) and Wolff et al (2015) are helpful.
- Lotter (2011, 23): 'To describe someone as poor is the result of normative judgment that a specific human being has inadequate resources available to live a life that conforms to minimum standards a group of humans have implicitly agreed upon as minimally adequate for themselves'. Their situation is unacceptable (for example as an HE student)

# Poverty continued

- **Lotter** (2011) 'People are poor if they cannot obtain adequate economic resources, or do not have the requisite economic capacities to deal with resources fittingly to maintain physical health and engage in social activities distinctive of human beings in their respective societies (2011, p. 151). Harmful consequences.
- '**extreme poverty**' is the inability to achieve and sustain biological wholeness, i.e., health, due to lack of economic capacities'. (living on less than R441 pm) Decline may be gradual and thus harder to spot).
- **intermediate poverty**, falls in between extreme and no poverty. 'although people have adequate economic capacities to ...maintain their physical health, they cannot participate in activities regarded as indicative of being human in that society....People who are intermediately poor are excluded from living lives expressing their humanity in socially defined ways' (2011, pp. 161–162). Become eluded from generally accepted [HE] social activities. Loss of human dignity. Living on more than R991 pm
- Another category for those students who are better off - **emerging middle class** is likely to be relatively recent, hold on middle-classness is likely to be tenuous (Burger et al).
- All three groups of students will be incurring debt except for students on secure and generous bursaries.
- All the students conform to Peebles' idea of consumers who 'borrow speculative resources from his/her own future' – their bank of aspirations which will materialize at some point in the future; material debt is then set off against future hopes.

# Material basis of educational wellbeing

Poverty in relation to specificity of HE as social space of investigation	Extreme	Intermediate	Emergent (marginal) middle class
<b>Definition</b>	Basic needs not met Stats SA lower poverty level of R441 pm	Basic needs met, but loss of human dignity as a result of not being able to engage in typically human activities for normal decent human life (Lotter 2011) OR poor relative to others in the university/society. Probably slightly above upper poverty level of just under R1000 pm	Not in poverty but status precarious and will be first generation middle class. One or more family members/ siblings have completed HE, at least one parent has a secure job usually with govt. Sufficient disposable income to contribute to student's living and other costs (eg. laptop).
<b>Miratho numbers</b>	11.5%	73.1%	15.4%
<b>Indicative functionings</b>	Not able to afford a place to stay, to wash, or food to eat. Unable to pay university fees. Multi-dimensionally deprived; lack of economic and social freedoms.	Accommodation (may be 'squatting'), and food but some still food insecure. Unable to afford necessary toiletries or good clothing. Cannot always afford travel to Uni. Very limited family financial support. Capability deprivation in some aspects: respect, belonging, full participation in class, worries affect studies etc –social exclusion from range of university activities. But may still be included in human activity of classroom learning.	Access to 'hot knowledge' about HE. More security of income. Own laptop May still be income insecure in relation to payment of University fees Learning with far fewer worries

# Sen on Poverty

- ‘Income is a general purpose means the shortage of which can reduce a person to serious deprivation’ (Sen 2006, 33).  
Income statistics therefore significant in ‘explaining major deprivations related to economic causes’ (34).
- Sen’s question is whether income is enough to assess equity and social justice – we agree but it is also foundationally important in SA if we follow Lotter, even though income is only one means to good living and we need also to look at quality of life (capability deprivation).
- Also see Therborn for capability equalities resources (money) and existential resources intersect.

# Student lives: extreme poverty

Buzwe is 23 years old, from a rural town in the Eastern Cape, mother (now dead) and 5 siblings, and studying for a Dip in Acc at City. No-one working in his family he is the only one to go to university; he and one other learner from high school made it. Moved from eastern cape university to city because Thusani promised funding. But they only paid the fees.

Wrote first year exams while homeless, sleeping in university lab and showering at residence had no money for accommodation or food. Reliant on gift of the givers for food. Now rents cheap room far from campus. No bursary, fee debt, poor unsafe accommodation and not enough money for transport or food every day. But he managed to pass the first year altho his results were withheld for the second semester because fees had not been paid.

'I'm struggling here, I have nothing, I have nothing to eat, so since last year I was surviving with Gift of the Givers, at City University we have Gift of the Givers. In the morning, its three slices in the morning and then in the afternoon around three o'clock it's a plate, you get a plate around three o'clock. ...I'm still surviving with Gift of the Givers.

'Sometimes I used to not go to school because I didn't have money or sometimes I had to sacrifice, if I know maybe Monday I'm attending some of my majors, maybe on Friday, maybe on Thursday I have some economics. Sometimes I decided not to go maybe on Thursday and Friday because I know I must not miss the class of Monday and Tuesday'.

# Student lives: intermediate poverty

Anathi – 21 years, female student, B.Ed, Provincial University, from rural Eastern Cape, mother domestic worker, four siblings, one completed school now unemployed, two still at school, has one cousin who is employed at supermarket

“You know, for my first year, like since I didn't have those expensive clothes, expensive things, you see how people dress on campus and stuff. I would feel so small. I would just sit in the corner and be like no, what am I doing here? I am just fooling with myself. I don't belong here and stuff. It's not actually nice. Even though like it was kind of difficult for me to ask for help, because I see people, I view them as they are different from me. Like, they won't understand even though I ask for help and stuff, so I just do things on my own...

I still feel like that. It hasn't changed. I still feel like that. Whenever we are going to class and then I see these girls talking and stuff and laughing and they talk about something I know, I still find it difficult for me to talk because it's like they are not there and they don't notice me. I don't know what I should improve, or I should improve my wardrobe or what, for them to notice me.”



# Student lives: emerging middle class

Wanga – 18 years, female student, Mechanical Engineering, Metropolitan University, from rural Limpopo, mother works for Department of Agriculture (fisheries) 5 siblings, all attended college, brother is a teacher.

Gets an allowance of R1000 per month from her mother, and mother also pays rent of R1250 per month (shared flat)

When asked what she uses her allowance for:

“Okay, like I have to buy toiletries, and they cost around R300, all of them, which means I am left with R700, just because now I am self-catering, I have to buy groceries, and it’s around R400. I am left with only R300, and then I have to go to church also, and I spend about R35 per day, if I go like three times in a month, then it’s not enough.”

# Poverty categories and capabilities shift

- Capabilities and hence poverty categories are dynamic and shifting.
- Lwazi, Rural University, 4<sup>th</sup> year medicine:
- ‘the struggle never ends, especially for a black child, it never ends. You want to think that you’ve went that uphill, but there’s another coming’.
- Nearly all the students do not engage in social and cultural activities at their universities because they spend nearly all their time studying - and we can assume, cannot afford this anyway.

# Value of HE to Miratho students

Every student expects that HE will make difference to their lives and that of their families. They have reason to value it significantly. On the other hand in the short term accumulated fees debt will prevent student from graduating and being able to use his/her degree for a job until the debt has been paid. This may severely constrain their upward mobility.

# What can/ought universities to do?

**Two central overlapping/intersecting capabilities as the what and how of evaluation/measurement:**

1. to be able to have sufficient and secure financial resources for access into and through HE (even while we recognize that material resources alone do not equate to well-being).
2. epistemic access/epistemic contribution (recognition and agency/actions as knowers) at university.

Both are complex and imprecise – this is not a weakness.(cf Sen)

Not an ideal account of flourishing in education - but grounded dialogically in the voices of ordinary students and their everyday experiences.

These align with Therborn's (2013) resource inequality and existential (personhood) inequality.

These should feature in ANY education capabilities core and arguably in the capabilities core. They are both *multiplier* capabilities and *fertile* functionings. **Both are required to function fully as a human being in the space of higher education.**

Both functional capabilities are strengthened by solidarity/harmonious relationships/relational ontology (in the core or not?).

The conversion and structural factors that enable *and secure* these two capabilities, for whom, and under what university conditions, merit investigation, debate and change where necessary.