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From tyranny to capability? Exploring the potential of the capability approach in participatory designed processes

Stefano Mascia

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1. Frame for analysis

“The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you” (Arnstein, 1969, p.216).

This aphorism helps to open a wide reflection on the role of participation, its potential and threats. It refers not only to the positive impact that participation might have, but also to its possible counter effects. The metaphor points to a superficial cleansing of the conscience, an intervention that does not eradicate the problem altogether, in the way spinach might sporadically be eaten to cleanse the body of an unhealthy lifestyle. It means that participatory processes might be used, because of their ‘goodness,’ in a manipulative way. By proclaiming participation, I legitimise my intervention. The risk is that it becomes an antidote for societal ailments such as inequalities and oppression, but does not cure them. In community development and upgrading schemes, participatory mechanisms often risk reinforcing power unbalances and the status quo, facilitating what Cooke and Kothari define as “tyranny,” an “illegitimate and/or unjust exercise of power” (2001, p.4).

Their research attempts to move away from traditional interdisciplinary critiques of participatory approaches that focus on methodological improvements and take the overall benefit of participation for granted. Rather, Cooke and Kothari question and contest the legitimacy of participatory approaches’ origins, role, and accepted methods. The foundation of this school of thought is based on the recognition of the Foucauldian manifestation of power that is reinforced and challenged through participation. For theorists of this perspective, it is fundamental to avoid the ‘tyranny of technique’ and define a framework for participation that is critical to power and political structures and open to social change (Clever, 2001), and that rediscovers and reinterprets its lost radical meaning (Mohan, 2001; Hickey and Mohan, 2005).

This paper starts by investigating what Cooke and Kothari define as the “tyranny of decision making and control” where the risk is that in participatory processes “facilitators override existing legitimate decision-making process” (2001, p.8). Among the different ways in which participation might be conceived, the research here focuses on the bases of participatory processes that are ‘designed’ and ‘owned’ by external agents in developing programmes and initiatives. In the paper the term ‘external agent’ refers not only to individual facilitators

and practitioners but to all those stakeholders, such as public or private institutions at various scales, which, with different levels of interest, might lead or influence the participation of a specific group of people (that simplistically is usually referred to as ‘the community’) in a defined project or initiative.

Here the meaning of ‘design’ goes beyond the creation of a final output, focussing rather on the bivalent act of shaping the process of participatory initiatives: ‘process of design’ and the ‘design of the process.’ In other words, design is about the dynamics that move the wires behind the stage: who is the participatory process designed by, what is it designed for, and how? Is it just a process to reach a predefined goal or can it have transformative effects with empowerment for the people involved?

The capability approach has often been seen as an avenue to achieve social transformation and peoples’ empowerment. From this basis, several authors from different perspectives have tried to link participation and design to the capability approach. According to Frediani (n.d.), the capability approach has the potential, despite some challenges, to safeguard participation from the criticisms of the ‘tyranny’ theorists. This paper aims to investigate, through the lens of the capability approach, how and if participatory design-ed processes might address long-term changes and community engagement, ushering in transformation rather than enhancing embedded political and power structures. The paper will verify whether the theory of the capability approach addresses the issues raised by the tyranny prospectus and whether applications of the capability approach confirm the benefits claimed by its theory.

Chapter 2 highlights how the capability approach theory might have a transformative capacity when linked to participation. The first part analyses the work of theorists that have found links between participation and capabilities imbedded in theories of democracy. The second part explores how the concept of design has been developed within the capability approach, and how this might strengthen the participatory processes. Having laid this theoretical foundation, Chapter 3 identifies the gaps in the capability approach that need to be addressed in order to achieve its redeeming potential for participation. These gaps are conveyed through two interconnected key lenses of analysis: 1) the role of pol-

icy and institutions, and 2) the position of practitioners. The intent is to reflect on the position of these external agents that have the power of starting, implementing and influencing participatory interventions – essentially to inquire into the root of a 'designed' participatory 'design' process, in this way unpacking the question posed by Cooke and Kothari (2001) of whether participation can be redeemed or has to be abandoned.

This analysis is further supported through case studies that highlight the position and gaps in the capability approach theory and its application in participatory

processes. It emerges in conclusion that the capability approach does not guarantee the eradication of tyranny from participation, despite its benefits in improving the process of participation. Moreover, the conclusion highlights the risk of enhancing mistrust of participation, especially if the radically transformative potential of the capability approach is not fully conveyed through its application.

Ultimately, it is suggested for further research that the 'tyrannical' criticisms of participation might identify core elements for strengthening the capability approach.

2. Theoretical introductions: Why the capability approach in design and participation?

The following chapter highlights why, according to various authors, the capability approach can strengthen participatory design processes and vice versa. The review targets two key elements of analysis: democracy theories and the meaning of participation in the capability approach literature; and the role of design in participatory processes and the capability approach. This investigation lays the groundwork for the analysis, in the subsequent chapter, around the implications of the ‘tyrannical’ threat in participation.

2.1. People's participation: Democracy theories in the capabilities approach

In the capability approach framework, every human being is recognised as a fundamental agent for the achievement of his or her own envisioned functioning and well-being. Understanding the different ideas of democracy in the capability approach is important for the analysis of the legitimacy, potential, and effectiveness of participatory mechanisms and people’s role in decision-making processes. Indeed, democracy theories are at the root of every participatory process, hence, a first step is to explore which type of democracy has been linked to the capability approach discourse by various theorists, with what effectiveness and why.

Crocker (2003; 2006) finds the concept of deliberative democracy as the natural extension of Sen’s idea of public discussion and democratic decision-making as the congenital process to investigate, materialise and implement the capability approach. Crocker underlines the transformative potential of a deeper democratic system that supports cooperation and confrontation among group members, distinguishing this from traditions that “merely aggregate preferences” (2006, p.329).

The deliberative democracy theory, according to Habermas (1962), is based on the recognition of equal status among all participants, who share the same representative weight and freedom of speech in an equal and impartial arena. In democratic deliberation there is public negotiation over a social choice, whereby the agreed outcome, if not completely satisfactory to all participants, is created through building consensus on a level playing field. However, deliberative democracy’s assumption of equitable consensus-building is problematic.

In fact, the theory contains a diallel in that a state of equal footing for negotiations is both a goal and the necessary starting point of equitable consensus-building. Indeed, it seems unlikely that in contexts of inequality, an equal arena for deliberation can be reached. Acknowledging this point, Crocker (2003; 2006) raises the questions of who, how and to what extent people, groups and leaders should be involved in or elected to spearhead legitimate processes of deliberation. The same issues arise with the capability approach in relation to who is responsible and able to identify capabilities, functionings, and strategies for the future. Despite these considerations, Crocker sees an answer in targeting inequality and focuses on ‘egalitarian distribution’ and ‘deliberation’ to strengthen ‘democratic freedom’ and open the possibilities for a deliberative democracy (2006, p.332).

Unequal arenas of deliberation often arise from the imbedded social norms and realities that alienate certain people or groups (Cleaver, 2001). An additional limitation in participatory processes is that projects that challenge the status quo are often carried out on a small scale, and are therefore limited in their scope of stakeholders and interests. These barriers might leave possible root causes of the problems and structural constraints unsolved, limiting long-term sustainability.

Frediani and Boano (2012) suggest framing the capability approach in radical democracy theory, which seems more capable of addressing issues of power relations and marginality. Drawing from Miessen (2010), Mouffe (2000), and Ranciere (2010), they sustain that the “praxis of participation based on the underlying motivation of consensus has been criticized as a mechanism to shadow conflict and perpetuate existing inequalities” (Frediani and Boano, 2012, p.16). As an alternative to Crocker’s idea of “deliberative participation” (2003), they support participation based on “coalition through dissensus”, defined as “participatory design ... based on the ideal of deepening bonds of solidarity through the recognition of social complexities and diversity” (Frediani and Boano, 2012, p.16). Accordingly, ‘conflictual participation’ opens up opportunities to challenge the status quo, power relations, and constraints for people’s freedom and functioning. For Frediani and Boano, people’s involvement should start from the cases of marginality that not only have to be recognised in participatory processes but also interpreted as a strength and seen as a platform for solidarity and opportunities.

From the deliberative democracy perspective, radical democracy theory might have a tyrannical counter-effect due to the fact that a “small number of dissenters can block a decision to make changes” (Crocker, 2006, p.340). Conversely, in agreement with Ranciere (2010), Miessen maintains that “democratic consensus can be envisaged only as a ‘conflictual consensus’. Democratic debate is not a deliberation aimed at reaching ‘the one’ rational solution to be accepted by all, but a confrontation among adversaries” (Miessen, 2010, p.95). However, further reflection is needed to resolve how issues can be definitely resolved in a radical democracy in a way that gives a voice to every party and addresses issues of legitimacy in a participatory way.

Given this debate on the consensus and dissensus bringing about truer democracy, the main question concerns the legitimacy of the various actors and agents that put in place and shape a defined participatory design-ed process. This emerges as a major concern in the research conducted in this paper and is explored in Chapter 3 through the two lenses of analysis, the role of institutions and policy and the position of practitioners.

The theories of deliberative and radical democracy share the idea of confrontation and disagreement as a way of expanding knowledge and enriching discussion amongst differing interests, albeit ones originating from common points and principles. The core difference between the theories lies in their approach towards the platform of discussion and the way in which confrontation is handled. In the radical theory, the arena is politicised and there is the need for an outsider, an external or alien agent, a ‘dilettante’ with ‘curiosity’ and without constructed knowledge, who is able to generate conflictual engagement, collaboration and provocation, even while running the risk of mistakes and frictions (Miessen, 2010). On the other hand, deliberative theorists call for an impartial and ‘expert’ deliberator, capable, virtuous and impartial, that is able to alleviate and resolve differences on an impartial platform (Crocker, 2003; 2006).

The role of the practitioner, ‘expert’, or ‘dilettante’, in facilitating or sparking transformative participatory processes is explored further in Chapter 3, where the capability approach is used to reflect on how the actions of the practitioner can be institutionalised. According to Cornwall, a participatory process can be considered ‘transformative’ when people become ‘agents’ “to build political capabilities, critical consciousness and confidence; to [be able to] demand rights; to enhance accountability” (2003, p.1327). Hence, the position of the external agent that shapes the degree of the participants’ involvement is the crucial point. In preparation for that discussion, the next section turns to design as conceptualised in relation to the capability approach, and the threats and potential of external agents intervening in and designing participatory processes.

2.2. The concept of design in the capabilities approach

Within the capability approach discourse, there has been significant attention on the role of design in enhancing capabilities. The word ‘design’ in this sense refers to both the design of processes, and the process of designing, in addition to, where appropriate, the design of physical interventions. The capability approach has been applied to reinterpreting the design sphere, as a way to enhance its potential to facilitate just spatial production and outcomes (Nichols and Dong, 2012; Dong, 2008; Frediani, 2007; 2010; Frediani and Boano, 2012; Oosterlaken, 2008; 2012). The capability approach also incorporates notions of design as a means to enable people to achieve a wider range of capabilities and functionings, allowing them to “live the lives that they have reason to value” (Sen, 1999, quoted in Oosterlaken, 2008). The ideas discussed in this section hinge upon the meaning of design in the capability approach theory and the challenge of mitigating the conversion factors that prevent people from converting resources to functionings, which restrict people’s capabilities to design things and processes that they believe will lead to “the good life.”

Nichols and Dong argue that design is “not only about form-giving, spatial layouts, or solving a problem” but rather “a projection of possibilities, of the creation of a world that does not yet exist” (2012, p.191). Drawing from Nussbaum’s list of central capabilities, in particular, the capabilities of “senses, imagination, and thought,” “control over one’s (material) environment,” and “practical reasoning,” they sustain that design is also a central capability because it implies “visualizing and realizing a valued material world as central capabilities” (Nichols and Dong, 2012, p.194). For Nichols and Dong, the “capability to design” is built on a “multidimensional set of capabilities that makes design possible, ... all the activities associated with devising artefacts that achieve goals,” or the “capability set for design” (ibid, p.195). The set is grouped into six categories (Figure 2.1) and could be taken as points to direct policy interventions that aim to make the capability to design a reality for all citizens (Dong, 2008, p.82).

Frediani takes a different approach to design in his concept of ‘capability space’ (2007; 2010). Positioning himself opposite Nichols and Dong (2012) in the debate over the endorsement of a list of central capabilities, he contends that starting from a set of capabilities to design risks generalisation and de-contextualisation. Instead, his concept of “capability space” focuses on people’s choice, ability, and opportunity to transform resources (tangible or intangible) into achieved functionings (2010, p.178), addressing conversion factors on individual, local, and structural levels. The recognition of these factors helps to unpack the barriers that prevent people and communities from achieving the goals they value. In a case study in Salvador

de Bahia, Brazil, Frediani (2007) identifies how the design of a slum upgrading project affected capabilities (which were identified by residents as being most valued in their context) to live with dignity. This example shows how it is possible to operationalise the capability approach by identifying specific, locally-defined capabilities that together form the capability to achieve a particular design functioning (in this case, dignified homes).

Despite their differences, the authors agree that design through the capability approach has a socially empowering potential beyond the physical production of outcomes. Nichols and Dong (2012) explain that the capability to design has 'intrinsic' and 'instrumental' value. Not only does it give people the opportunity to envisage and realise a valued material world, but it has the instrumental value of "providing fundamental amenities" which determine whether people can achieve a wide range of material functionings (such as shelter, nourishment, community, etc.) (Nichols and Dong, 2012, p.201).

Meanwhile, Frediani and Boano (2012) use their concept of 'capability space' (building upon Frediani's work [2010]) to discuss how participatory design mechanisms can produce unique spatial outcomes that have the power to alter the status quo, challenging power relations and co-opted design structures, thereby addressing root causes of inequalities.

Oosterlaken's (2008; 2012) starting point for linking the capability approach with design is through the artefact. She sees 'inclusive design' as a space whereby designers can address ideas of justice and development through their designed artefacts, and 'universal design' as promoting flexibility and diversity of uses in order to unlock a wide range of functionings. Oosterlaken (2012) puts forth the concept of 'capability-sensitive design,' which focuses attention to the impacts a specific design product might have in terms of its appropriateness for users and enhancement of their capabilities. She sustains that while some artefacts may particularly benefit a particular group of people, they need not be unjust for others. The capability approach is helpful in identifying the 'justness' of designed products and scrutinising the implications between the "person, the artefact/resource, and the environment" (2012, p.242). The capability approach can thus guide practitioners, particularly engineers, through a reflective process for the materialisation of just artefacts that help people achieve functionings and freedom. The capability approach allows the scope for practitioners to consider the consequent political and ethical implications of their design proposals, instead of focusing on numerical distribution of resources.

While the contributions from the authors discussed in this section advocate diverse approaches to incorporating design notions to enhance the applicability of

Figure 2.1. Capability set for design. Source: Dong (2008, p.83)

CAPABILITY	DESCRIPTION
INFORMATION	Have transparent access to all technical, financial, community, and political information relevant to a design work. Be in contact with communities and experts who have faced similar design problems as sources of ideas and solutions.
KNOWLEDGE	Have sufficient numeric, mathematical, and scientific training to engage in a conceptual and technical understanding of the design work. Knowledge of technical design methodologies. Have knowledge of making and interpreting relevant technical standards and codes.
ABSTRACTION	Develop aptitude for analysis and contextualization of design work at multiple levels of abstraction, from low-level functional, behavioral, and structural aspects to higher-order aspects such as systems integration, lifecycle maintenance and operations, and disposal.
EVALUATION	Be able to engage in a critical evaluation of the implications of the design work on matters such as the welfare of the community, the health of the environment, and economic viability. The welfare of the community includes individual concerns such as cognitive and physical ergonomics and universal design.
PARTICIPATION	Be part of, and collaborate with, others in the design process; from early project definition stages, through to conceptual design, concept testing, prototype development, prototype testing, prototype review, full-scale implementation, and final project delivery and validation. The formation of a shared understanding of all aspects of design work is paramount.
AUTHORITY	Have the power and right to enact a design work rather than token "paper studies." Have the authority to commission reports and information. Have the authority to select and set criteria and requirements for design work.

the capability approach, they share a common aim of addressing conversion factors that inhibit capabilities through design. From this discussion, we can conclude that design from the capability approach perspective is a promising direction for unpacking the equivalent of conversion factors in participatory processes in order to root out the sources of tyranny.

In Chapter 2, it has been highlighted that the transformative capacity in the capability approach can emerge when it is complemented with democracy theories and design processes. Furthermore, through the frames of design and democracy, the capability approach arguably has the potential to challenge the ‘tyrannical’ threats to participatory processes. There are diverse opinions on

how design can increase people’s agency, both in terms of production of material things and public mobilisation. Regardless of the different directions (public policy or public mobilisation, deliberative or radical democracy, consensus or dissensus), the capability approach contributes to the development of applicability and builds a guide for revealing people's values and aspirations.

Nonetheless, poignant criticisms made by ‘tyrannical’ theorists in regard to legitimacy, accountability and representation in the process still need to be addressed. In order to fully explore its transformative potential, the role of institutions and policy, and the position of practitioners in the capability approach and participatory design are explored in the following section.

Figure 2.2. Dissensus design. Source: Frediani and Boano (2012, pp.17-18)

DISSENSUS DESIGN	OPTIONS
Design as ANTI DESIGN (refusal)	Stemming from inappropriate design implementation, this implies not to assumingly engage in an object driven design response of 'build' and to avoid being complicit of dominant systems (economic, political, professional). This calls for abandon-ing craftsmanship and imaginative skills, forcing an individual or group to consider and prioritize the dynamics and processes of collective claims
Design as RESEARCH (evidence/dissensus)	Without completely abandoning creativity, imagination and craftsmanship skills, this entails making the invisible visible by employing a 'designerly' way of thinking, communicating, and reflecting that articulates and explores windows of opportunity for catalyst intervention and collectively derived design proposals within situations of uncertainty, instability and uniqueness
Design as CRITIQUE (demonstration and precedence)	Amongst debates of re-defining the urban this calls for the critical deployment of imagination and craftsmanship skills in order to question and understand complexities of contested situations. This reflective positioning offers options of speculating, mobilizing, and demonstrating the potential of informed spatial alternatives that contribute to inclusive transformation.
Design as RESISTANCE	In a direct response to reducing unjust domination, there exists a condition of possibility in which design becomes a convicted emancipator using craftsmanship and imagination to pro-mote opposition through feasible alternatives. Collectively questioning the spatial production not as objective provision, but a strategic arena for accommodating the convergence of policy, aspirations, struggles and the future.

3. Analytical lenses

“The capability perspective is not a set of mechanical formulae, but a framework for informational analysis, critical scrutiny and reflected judgments”
(Sen 1999, quoted in Alkire, 2004, p.154).

Sen’s formulation of the capability approach was deliberately left ‘incomplete’ by not specifying which capabilities are paramount, or how to define or select capabilities to pursue. This incompleteness makes it applicable to every context, yet adapted for none, and as such it contains procedural limitations for applying it in practice. Various theorists (Nussbaum, 2000; Clark, 2005; Alkire, 2004; Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 2005) have reflected and tried, sometimes contradictorily, to overcome the lack of procedural and evaluation methods by attempting to define people’s aspirations and values in general and in specific contexts, and devising methods to measure the effects of development projects by applying the capability approach.

As a theoretical framework, in a certain sense the capability approach needs to be processed, systemised, thought out and planned by an agent, with a high level of consciousness, at the genesis of the participatory process. In this way, the capability approach can have the power to identify and unpack the constraints and barriers to people attaining the freedom for various functionings. However, the role and legitimacy of external agents and experts, who can help direct the capability approach to transform participatory processes, are rarely questioned in international debate. Indeed, the ‘tyranny of participation’ argument points not to the

procedural application of participative methods, but rather to the roots of the legitimacy of the powers that put it into place.

In this paper the intent is not to explore the applicative methodology of the capability approach in a participatory process, but the dynamics by which and for whom this process is designed using the capability approach. The outcome of that reflection, if it exists, is crucial to comprehend the transformative or exploitative potential of applying the capability approach in participatory processes. The two key lenses for analysis, the institutionalisation of the capability approach and the role of institutions and position of practitioners, help to test the theoretical background of the capability approach and participation, crosschecking their exploitative tendencies in practice.

3.1 The role of policy and institutions

One of the main concerns of the ‘tyranny’ viewpoint on participation is over the role of institutions. In this analysis institutions are conceived, amongst differing meanings, as the organisations and public structures influencing policies that affect communities’ domain and their development. Indeed, institutions define and shape the degree of people’s involvement in development of processes, and are capable of exploitative participative mechanisms. According to Cornwall’s classification of modes of participation (see Figure 3.1), it is clear how institutions might

Figure 3.1. Modes of participation. Cornwall (2003, p.1327)

Mode of participation	Associated with ...	Why invite/involve?	Participants viewed as ...
Functional	Beneficiary participation	To enlist people in projects or processes, so as to secure compliance, minimize dissent, lend legitimacy	Objects
Instrumental	Community participation	To make projects or interventions run more efficiently, by enlisting contributions, delegating responsibilities	Instruments
Consultative	Stakeholder participation	To get in tune with public views and values, to garner good ideas, to defuse opposition, to enhance responsiveness	Actors
Transformative	Citizen participation	To build political capabilities, critical consciousness and confidence; to enable to demand rights; to enhance accountability	Agents

regard participants as objects or instruments in the process in order to minimise dissent or increase efficiency in pursuing their agenda. This section aims to show how the capability approach highlights the influence of institutions on issues of power, vulnerability, and context, in participatory processes.

According to Hickey and Mohan (2003; 2005), political capability and accountability increase when participation re-acquires its radical foundation, repositioning the meaning of citizenship. Consequently, participation should be able to contest power relations, involve and interact with broader political structures enabling people to be part of society and to influence and shape it (Cornwall, 2004; Gaventa, 2004). It is useful to question how institutions and policy may support structural change and the widening of political and other capabilities, or restrict participants to the narrow space of being “users and choosers” rather than “makers and shapers” (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001; Gaventa, 2002). Whether the capability approach can prompt such institutional responses is the subject of the following analysis.

The capability approach has been widely interpreted as needing to be institutionalised in order to constitute a practical guide for policies. The main attempt was promulgated by Nussbaum, who formulates a list of central human capabilities that has the specific goal of constituting a guide for political and institutional interventions (Alkire, 2004; Clark, 2006). Although the list addresses universal values and has remained substantially unchanged since its first formulation, it remains open to contributions for improvement and adaptations for different contexts¹ (Clark, 2006). There is, however, a structural disconnect in the attempt to combine universal values with local perspectives, as Clark shows in a study carried out in South Africa, where the capabilities identified locally were incongruent with what had been formulated theoretically by Nussbaum. Additionally, despite her specific focus on institutions, Nussbaum has never addressed the question on who has the responsibility and legitimacy to apply the list and how (Alkire, 2004).

In support of the list, Deneulin (2010) sustains the importance of identifying and entrusting reasonable capabilities in order to constitute a ‘telos’ for policy, while at the same time recognising different understandings of “the good life”. This claim recognises that some people might be prevented from making individual choices to identify capabilities for “the good life” due to unjust “structures of inequalities and discrimination” (Deneulin, 2010, p.32). However, some contradictions emerge on how this framework might be put into practice. For instance, an example of this ‘telos’ is seen in the Millennium Development Goals developed by the United Nations in the 1990s. While the MDGs could be said to establish universal values and capabilities, they are conceived with

the same instrumental and numerical parameters that the capability approach seeks to contest. For example, gender equality is equated to the ratio of girls to boys attending school and the ratio of literate females and males (Deneulin, 2010, p.34). Furthermore, statistics to measure success which are taken at national or regional levels, such as the amount of national expenditure allocated to primary health care and education, do not take into account the status quo and specific beneficiaries of the expenditure; this is a contradiction to the capability approach’s focus on individual freedoms and conversion factors determining an individual’s capabilities and well-being. Trani et al (2011) assert that such policy programmes are not able to address individual needs, especially for the most vulnerable.

Further critiques point out how the establishment of a universal list underrates participatory approaches and people’s freedoms; instead, any list of capabilities should, according to Sen, be based on ‘social discussion’ and ‘public reasoning’ (Clark, 2006). From this basis, Crocker (2003; 2006) claims that participation should be institutionalised as part of policy agendas in order to formalise and protect people’s agency. Nevertheless, Crocker’s claim brings us back to deliberation through consensus, which, as highlighted in section 2.1, raises concerns about power imbalances in participation.

Perhaps more problematically, Dong (2008) treats participation as a procedural tool for policy implementation when he suggests that policy interventions might expand people’s capability to design by endorsing participation as part of the capability set for design (see Figure 3.1). In its application, participatory processes become an “operational condition [that] transforms capabilities into functionings and are likely to be related to a specific design project” (2008, p.85), losing intrinsic value in the process. Indeed, the lack of assessment on how citizens should be involved, by focusing on guideline proposals for policy-makers and professionals, leaves problems of power relations unsolved (Frediani and Bono, 2012). The same critique made for Nussbaum’s list can be made of Dong’s work in terms of procedural and methodological lacking, identification of responsibilities, and contextual considerations.

Dong (2008) recognises that there exist socio-spatial barriers to achieving the necessary ‘pre-conditions’ for achieving the capability to design; these pre-conditions, such as ‘openness to knowledge’ and ‘stimulation of people’s imagination and skills’, have universal value and exist separately from any particular design process. To achieve these general pre-conditions, however, Dong remains vague. For instance, when he talks of the multimedia and interactive museum provision as an example for stimulating design imagination and creativity, he does not question the fact that in some contexts some people, especially the most vulnerable, would have difficulty

accessing these services, and that these interventions might only be used by people who already possess the necessary knowledge, interests or capacity.

Whether through using the capability approach to define institutions' plans of action or by making participation a requisite for mainstreaming capabilities, the risk is that instead of being used as a real transformative approach, the capability approach might be used as a way of renaming traditional participatory processes that have limited empowering capacities. Indeed, there is a danger of using the label 'capability approach' as a way to justify and legitimise participation that does not contest the status quo, and that serves to implement governments', NGOs' and outsiders' pre-determined plans for communities.

An example of Sen's writings being adopted in name but not in principle by an institution comes from the World Bank. The Bank sees Sen's definition of development as freedom as a possible framework for conceptualising and tackling poverty through poverty alleviation initiatives. Although its strategy focuses on people-oriented freedom, it does not have a fully comprehensive application of the capability approach (Frediani, 2007). Frediani sustains that there is an incongruence between the 'language of the policy' adopted by the World Bank and the 'content' of its methodologies. Indeed, while the policy language claims to handle people's freedom and multidimensionality of poverty, vulnerability, and well-being, the content reinterprets the same failure of the previous approaches based on market orientation, private sectors and NGOs. Frediani demonstrates this theory through analysing a participatory upgrading project in a squatter area called Ribeira Azul, in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, financed by the World Bank in 2003. Through a participatory process, residents of Ribeira Azul identified five freedoms that were then used to evaluate the impact of the Bank's upgrading project, which ultimately failed to fulfil residents' needs and aspirations.

In this case, the World Bank's endorsement of Sen's writings did not prevent design failure of the participatory process, in terms of both designing the process of participation in the upgrading project and the final achievements. Frediani argues that weak consideration of the local context and culture, which should have been at the core of its use of Sen's thinking on development, foiled the World Bank's intentions to support a participatory design process. The fixed and rigid design solutions implemented during the project show how the participatory and multidimensional discourse was undertaken merely to legitimise the project and mask power structures, limiting the residents' decision-making abilities. The communities' involvement has also failed to meet more responsive and comprehensive design solutions for the neighbourhood upgrading. This is evidenced by the fact that on some occasions the housing designs were modified and readjusted by the residents accord-

ing to their needs after the project's end. Furthermore, this example shows the potential danger in using the capability approach to enhance certain capabilities in predefined upgrading programmes. It may happen, for instance, that some capabilities might be selected by the decision-makers or financiers; in other words, that "...voices in visible places are but echoes of what the power holders who shaped those places want to hear" (Gaventa, 2006, p.29).

The Ribeira Azul case study suggests that the capability approach requires clear frame for policy that can steer institutional strategies. Deneulin et al argue, "[The capability approach is too] 'thin' to offer guidelines for actions which could transform the unjust structures that impede many people from exercising the capabilities they have reason to choose and value. [...]Because of the fragility and fallibility of the exercise of human freedom, policy decisions which are purely based on the exercise of freedom in the political community need to be thickened by procedures of decision-making which make less fragile the processes by which the conditions for a good human life are secured" (2010, p.9). Participatory approaches could fill the requirement for other methodological contributions in order to 'thicken' the capability approach.

The vagueness regarding institutional applicability of the capability approach allows it to remain open to manipulation and misrepresentation. However, it is certainly true that even though participatory design methods might be clearly defined within the capability approach framework, they cannot entirely guarantee transformation and social justice. Indeed, it seems quite unlikely that 'unjust structures' might use the capability approach if their status is threatened. In situations of 'unjust structures' the capability approach needs to be the liaison between the underprivileged and public society in general. Drèze and Sen express this potential highlighting the importance of "self-assertion ... of the underprivileged through political organization", and "solidarity with the underprivileged on the part of other members of the society, whose interest and commitments are broadly linked, and who are often better placed to advance the cause of the disadvantaged by virtue of their own privileges (e.g. formal education, access to the media, economic resources, political connections)" (Alkire, 2010, p.54). The individual will that emerges through the capability approach can shape collectivity and solidarity in order to fashion a power able to contest the unjust structures. This power might arise from collaboration which might either be manifested through dissensus that contests the status quo (Frediani and Boano, 2012), or through a "Trojan horse" tactic whereby members of the unjust power structure push for policy changes from the inside which aim to help level the playing field (Alkire, 2010). These concepts push for an active role for the external agent or practitioner, which is the subject of the following section.

3.2 The position of the practitioner

This section addresses the legitimacy of the practitioner in a central role in participatory processes, and his or her potential to enhance freedom and capabilities for people involved. From the 'tyranny' arguments, the main critique is that the debate on the role of the practitioner has remained imbedded in technocratic issues instead of questioning the source of the practitioner's legitimacy in the first place (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Cleaver, 2001). Similarly, in the capability approach discourse there is a substantial lack of definition of the practitioner's role. Debate has focused predominantly on the technical and methodological procedures for experts in order to support the identification of capabilities¹ (Alkire, 2004; 2007) and the evaluation of impacts of projects. Therefore, the approach seems too weak to safeguard participatory design from 'tyranny' critiques since it does not comprehensively evaluate why the practitioner does what he or she does. Several authors from the 'tyranny' school of thought criticise the presumed neutral role of practitioners, heavily influenced by Chambers' idea of an impartial facilitator who acknowledges debate and takes notes at public discussions and meetings (Cleaver, 2001; Mohan, 2001; Mosse, 2001). Indeed, for them this approach is populist and naïve, and runs the risk of influencing and leading the decision-making process in a deceptive way. As discussed in Chapter 2, these theorists claim that the practitioner should take on the 'politicised' role of an outsider that is able to generate frictions, deprivations, and build coalitions through dissensus (Miessen, 2010; Mouffe, 2000; Ranciere, 2010).

From within the capability approach discourse, Alkire (2010) has done the most work on expanding the theory of the practitioner's role beyond the technocracy in order to address issues related to power relations and unjust structures. Like Drèze and Sen, she promotes the idea of the 'committed powerbrokers' that can strengthen the power of self-assertion by those without power, and solidarity among people within the power structure with those outside. These 'partially decisive powerbrokers' should become 'committed activists' to work as 'Trojan horses' and stimulate change from within the system. However, there are challenges in working for change as an 'insider' in the power system, including barriers to action, difficulties of alliance and conflicting interests. Moreover, "when injustice is institutionalised, the danger is that the individuals who maintain these unjust structures will become blinded to the wrongdoing of their own actions" (Deneulin et al, 2010, p.7).

From the participatory design sphere, Hamdi sees the role of the participatory design practitioner as a 'placemaker', following the guidelines of "PEAS" – "Providing, Enabling, the capacity to be Adaptive, the capacity to Sustain" (2010, p.141). It should be noted that in PEAS, the idea of provision goes against the mainstream notion

of the practitioner as the provider of definitive or perfect answers and focussing attention to things rather than to people, or as someone pushed by "a moral superiority among providers" that is the mirror of 'charity' actions (ibid, pp.145-146). Conversely, he sees the 'placemaker' as a catalyst capable of enabling people and communities to "provide for themselves", "creating opportunities in order to build livelihoods, reduce vulnerability and sustain development" (ibid, p.147). Like Miessen (2010), Hamdi acknowledges the importance of dissensus and disagreements; nevertheless, a substantial difference is the fact that he sees a possible avenue for achievable solutions in consensus building (1999).

Like the capability approach, this participatory design strategy known as Action Planning (Hamdi and Goethert, 1997), despite a more 'problem-solving' orientation, takes a people-centred focus on well-being, rather than a focus on material goods and economic goals. Along the same lines as Frediani's capability space (2007), Hamdi (2010) sees cultural identity and existing resources as starting points for strategically enhancing people's capabilities in order to address people's needs and constraints. He highlights the importance of addressing the issues of invisibility and minority groups within communities, the legitimacy of practitioners and external agents, the co-opted views and perspectives that participants might have to power relations, subordination, vulnerability and scepticism. The acknowledgment of diversity and vulnerability and the focus on local capacity and knowledge are entry points that can lead participatory design initiatives to the line of the capability approach and reframe the position of the 'expert' outsider.

Nonetheless these contributions are still fragmented and disconnected from each other, incipient and hesitant in fully defining and safeguarding the root of the practitioner's role, which still remains shaded by the 'tyrannical' critique. It seems likely that the issues loomed by the 'tyranny' theorists might help to redefine the role of the practitioner within the capability approach discourse. While the capability approach has been used for evaluative projects, its radical potential has been underdeveloped. Currently, the lack of formulation of roles and responsibilities for the practitioner exposes the capability approach to the tyrannical side of participation. The position and power of the practitioner amidst stakeholders of a participatory project might condition how the capability approach is implemented, thus losing its transformative capacity.

Alkire has an interesting example through her work with three micro-scale projects (loans for goat-rearing; adult literacy and community development; rose cultivation) financed by the international NGO OXFAM in three Pakistani villages. She assessed the impacts of the projects in terms of capabilities, implementing and conceptualising ways in which valuable capabilities can be identified,

measured and prioritised, combining participatory initiatives to support cost-benefit analysis and other social impact assessments (Alkire, 2004). Despite her important and well-developed theoretical methodology to apply the capability approach and to value capabilities¹, some concerns and gaps can be identified when she implemented the concepts in the field. Although this example refers to evaluative research for the OXFAM's projects, it is useful to show how the position of the researcher - practitioner that applied the capability approach might have influenced the findings and the effectiveness of the capability approach.

Firstly, it has been acknowledged that in the application of the methodology there was a lack of consideration for the multidimensionality of poverty and functioning identified conceptually (Clark, 2006). Secondly, the decision to focus on small projects with a homogeneous reality constituted by small and selected groups of participants left issues related to participation and conflicts untouched (Crocker, 2003). Possible conflicting interests that could have been raised from the involvement of more complex and heterogeneous realities might have contested the 'success' and the implementation of the projects or would have compromised the usability of the methods¹. There is, in this way, the risk that some differences might be misinterpreted or hidden: "Just as dividing communities along externally-defined axes of difference can obscure the intersections between these and other differences, it may take for granted forms of commonality that fail to match with people's own concerns, connections and agendas. This raises questions about the salience of a focus on particular axes of difference, such as gender, rather than on dimensions and positions of powerlessness" (Cornwall, 2003, p.1334). Another risk is the underestimation of social group dynamics, what Cooke (2001) calls 'social psychology', that might "lead members to shape group processes unintentionally, which in turn ultimately lead to 'bad' or 'wrong' decisions" (Cooke, 2001, p.116).

Thirdly, the involvement of the communities throughout the capability approach process was only for the evaluation of past projects, losing focus on future plans and decision-making. Therefore, the assessments produced by the facilitators, who also had language difficulties, were primarily for the NGO to decide whether to finance future projects or not (Crocker, 2003). Additionally, even in the evaluative purpose of the research, the position of the NGOs has not been assessed or questioned, only the effects of its activities. Although Alkire acknowledges the participation of the residents, in particular in the rose project where they decided which type of activity to conduct, most of activities implemented were already predetermined by OXFAM before the beginning of the projects (Alkire, 2004). Referring to Figure 3.1, it can be argued that participation might have had a "functional" factor, considering participants as "objects" of the inter-

vention, used "to enlist people in projects or processes, so as to secure compliance, minimise dissent, lend legitimacy" (Cornwall, 2003, p.1327).

Despite a deep methodological theorisation of the approach, the context and position in which the facilitator and external agent position themselves might create failures in its implementation, leaving unsolved questions of power, primary interests, scaling-up and decision-making. If the process, as is the case, remains on the scale of small projects, the transformative opportunities for communities involved are denied (Hickey and Mohan, 2005). It is true that the capability approach has been used to evaluate the result of past activities with the intent to guide future NGOs' financial strategies, nonetheless, the limitations highlighted emphasise the risk of misinterpretation and impediment in a practical process that limits people's agency, especially in complex and heterogeneous contexts.

The participatory process has been underestimated, affecting as a consequence the richness of the capability approach, which on the other hand did not safeguard the participation. Furthermore, in the research conducted with the capability approach, the methodologies adopted by OXFAM were not questioned by the researcher included the insightfulness of the participatory processes. Hence, even referring to further NGO's interventions, the capability approach became a way to legitimise outsider interventions rather than enhance people's agency. "... The patronising attitudes that 'they' need to be empowered according to our agenda" is a quote that could summarise the process (Mohan, 200, p.164).

The examples so far indicate that the role of the practitioner often risks being manipulative and counterproductive to the very essence of the capability approach. If practitioners remain sensitive to the specificities needed in the design process, and keep democratic participation central, they can perhaps contribute towards enabling the use of the capability approach to help make the communities the main drivers of the process. Ultimately, a further query about the position of the practitioner needs to be posed: can people's voices and their legitimacy always be taken for granted?

Cleverly clearly questions this:

"How then, do we deal with situations where 'local culture' is oppressive to certain people, where appeals to 'traditions' run contrary to the modernizing impulses of development projects? Why do we see little debate about these tensions in the development literature? Is it for fear of criticizing local practices and being seen as the professionals so roundly condemned in Chamber's works? Are we not in danger of swinging from one untenable position (we know best) to an equally untenable and damaging one (they know best)?" (2001, p.47)

For instance, how can we recognise if someone is deciding not to participate, thereby activating his freedom to decide, and leaving decisional responsibility to someone else, or if there is a lack of ability to participate such as shame or social relations? Yet, if the case is the former, how can we determine if the choices and participation are coerced?

How can 'false consciousness' and 'adaptive factors' be recognised? Where does a practitioner position himself with respect to cultural hierarchies or power relations or co-optative social group dynamics (Cooke, 2001)? Cornwall (2003), exploring specific gender issues, points out the tricky position of an outsider, in particular from a different background and culture, who might interpret, for instance, local women's desires and will as subordination imbedded in local constraints. In this case should they be considered a well-being freedom and act for their achievement? Or should they be recognised as achievements conditioned by an "invisible power"² (Gaventa, 2006, p.29) and "misrecognition"³ (Eyben et al, 2006, p.5) of the people involved? And if the answer is the first, how can the choices be safeguarded from the accusation of 'Western appropriation' of "the cultural realm over the material" in name of 'sustainability' (Mohan, 2001, p.159)? "One might ask, then, whether the women had the 'capability' to be empowered or whether their functioning of empowerment was realised without their choice. As this is a debated issue, especially in women's activities that have a further agenda of 'conscientisation' or empowerment, it bears some reflection as to how the criteria of 'free choice' or 'informed consent' apply" (Alkire, 2004, p.295).

The capability approach helps to identify and recognise these risks that in traditional participatory mechanisms

might remain hidden or imbedded in the practices. Sen identifies an achieving 'basic judgment' through removing 'factual assumption' about what those freedoms look like (Alkire, 2004, pp.133-136). For example, if 'health freedom' is what is sought after in a community, the 'factual assumption' that this entails a new hospital may prove contrary to real needs if the lack of health freedom is due to various barriers to access. External agents, which are not imbedded in the social reality, might help to unpack these 'factual assumptions.' Alkire sustains, supporting Sen, that it is not always possible to completely uncover 'basic judgments'; however, the 'reflective process' used to approximate those basic valued freedoms is a useful exercise that can help dispel biases and misinterpretations of how to enable those freedoms. The capability approach has, thus, the potential to guide the reflective approach to local knowledge, perhaps protecting it from misinterpretation or exploitation. This avenue would be a 'hybrid' between the contribution of outsiders and insiders (Mohan, 2001; Rydin, 2007).

Certainly the capability approach, in Frediani's words, "contributes to participatory literature by providing this comprehensive and flexible theory focusing on what a good life should comprise while capturing multiple, complex and dynamic aspects of poverty" (n.d). It represents an essential frame that may guide external agents to more comprehensive and 'just' procedures, a 'criteria' to stabilise what is 'appropriate' (Nichols and Dong, 2012; Oosterlaken, 2012); nonetheless, how they are designed and for whom, as seen above, might remain for the sake of stakeholders, in their subjectivity and powerful position that can surely have a certain form of co-option or critique.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

¹ In a general summary, Alkire argues that the creation of an absolute list, as proposed by Nussbaum, has several problems; however, there is a need to define some guiding principles in order to recognise and evaluate achievable freedoms. Alkire suggests identifying "capabilities to meet basic human needs" (2004, p.163), with the goal to expand these basic capabilities to meet basic needs, not meet the basic needs per se. Basic capabilities are identified according to the relativity of context and time and the competence of people involved, and should be, consequently, applicable in micro interventions. Alkire identifies five possible ways to apply the approach in research, which can be combined with each other: "Existing data or convention"; "Normative Assumptions"; "Public consensus"; "On-going deliberative participatory processes"; "Empirical evidence regarding people's values" (2007, p.7).

² "Invisible power: shaping meaning and what is acceptable. Probably the most insidious of the three dimensions of power,

invisible power shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation. Significant problems and issues are not only kept from the decision-making table, but also from the minds and consciousness of the different players involved, even those directly affected by the problem. By influencing how individuals think about their place in the world, this level of power shapes people's beliefs, sense of self and acceptance of the status quo – even their own superiority or inferiority. Processes of socialization, culture and ideology perpetuate exclusion and inequality by defining what is normal, acceptable and safe." (Gaventa, 2006, p.29).

³ "Misrecognition" is a notion defined by Navarro and explained by Eyben et al.: "mystification by which the powerful use their symbolic capital to prevent individuals from recognizing that their subordination is culturally constructed rather than 'natural'" (Eyben, et al., 2006, p.5).

4. Closing the frame

Referring back to the metaphor at the start of Chapter 1, reflecting on the ‘goodness’ of participation, the impression emerging is that the capability approach, considered as a frame for participation, might constitute a coercive legitimisation of the already deceitful participatory mechanism that does not challenge its orthodoxy. As shown in the two lenses for analysis in the Chapter 3, the promising benefits highlighted in Chapter 2 could just remain in theory. Indeed, it seems not fully able to safeguard participation from ‘tyrannical’ systemic tendencies. Looking at the experience of the World Bank in Brazil and of OXFAM in Pakistan, a dangerous risk emerges that the capability approach might not assist participation and design solutions to address social transformation, or worse that it could be used in a manner that leaves unchallenged unbalanced and coerced decision-making processes. Factors such as gaps in the approach, the challenges of theoretical application, and its openness to interpretation (which might, however, also be one of its strengths) do not necessarily protect interventions from unjust procedures carried out by external agents. The lack of definitions of responsibilities and representativeness leaves the exclusionary mechanism and processes of domination untouched, especially for the most vulnerable and invisible. Participatory processes need to find the transformative and radical meaning that follow Freire’s social justice and radical political ideas (1973). Power structures are gradient, Foucauldian, transversal throughout all society, hence structurally imbedded in social practice that impedes the legitimisation or recognition of people’s choices, co-opting them, thus hijacking the essence of the approach.

Nonetheless, what could be suggested is that all these risks shown above might be considered as a productive starting point that may help to develop the approach, starting from the positive base that has emerged in the research. Indeed, some directions highlighted have

the potential to support the participatory process in its transformative challenge where other methods have failed, despite the difficulties shown in its institutionalisation and systematisation. The capability approach seems to shape participatory process in a more comprehensive direction, particularly during the process of implementation in the investigation of people’s desires and in the reflective process of the various stakeholders. From here, then, the awareness built by the ‘tyranny’ school of thought, rather than reducing the use of the capability approach, might help it develop and expand its transformative capacity.

Eventually, it may be useful not only for participatory design processes but also for its application in the diverse realities that face development and policy. Hence, the lack of theory that emerged in the link between participatory design and the capability approach in the sphere of application can be developed starting from this awareness, from which further research might be conducted. What the title of this paper “From tyranny to capability?” initially sought to question was whether the capability approach can effectively safeguard participation from tyranny. In conclusion, the title might be reinterpreted the other way around as a starting question for new avenues of research: from tyranny can the capability approach be taken to new levels? In this way a framework for participation will perhaps be constituted, or vice versa. The entry point is that both schools of thought can and need to benefit from each other. The capability approach has mostly been used for evaluative procedures; future experiences in design and planning processes may contribute to the development of its theory and be tested on the ground. There is hope that the capability approach, in this way, might have the potential to align with democratic and inclusive participatory design processes to lead just and transformative interventions.

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