The Capability Approach and Disadvantaged Young People in the Labour Market

Professor Ronald McQuaid, Dr Emma Hollywood, Dr Valerie Egdell
Employment Research Institute,
Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK
http://www.napier.ac.uk/eri

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Outline

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• Implications of the Capability Approach
• Capability friendly action
• Workable: using the Capability Approach to examine the transitions of disadvantaged youth
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The Capability Approach?

Amartya Sen (e.g. 1985, 2009) (for other views see, e.g. Nussbaum, 2000)

• Emphasises practical functional capabilities (e.g. ability to live healthily to an old age, or to engage in meaningful and fulfilling work)

• The Capability Approach has been widely used in considering developments in human development, for instance through the UN’s Human Development Index.
What are Capabilities?

A young person in precarious employment or looking for work may lack:
• resources, and/or
• the knowledge to use these, and/or
• have appropriate services available, and/or
• the ability or motivation to act

• Any of these may result in a lack of capability or the ability to make appropriate choices. Improving capabilities should enable people to participate more fully in society etc.
What are Capabilities (2)?

Three key dimensions:

1. The *commodities* that the person possesses; including goods, services and resources they have access to (the focus of much policy debate)

2. Their *capability* set or the extent to which they are really free to lead the life they value (focus on who can do what, Sen (1984), - which may include unobservable opportunities)

3. Their *functionings* or the life they actually lead; which is the actualization of chosen capabilities (e.g. their ‘observable’ outcomes)
Diversity under a Capability Approach

• Under a Capability Approach, inequality should not be limited to material dimensions such as a person’s income or wealth, but should include things that are only partly influenced by their affluence, such as the richness of family life, relationships, capacity to influence the public sphere and politics and sustainability of their lifestyles.

• The CA recognises: differences and diversity between people (heterogeneity); the different or multi-dimensional influences on someone’s welfare; and the crucial importance of autonomy and freedom of choice. As the ability to convert commodities or resources into functioning or outcomes varies, so equal access to resources is insufficient in itself. Sen argues we should not seek equality of capabilities as capabilities are characteristics of individual advantages and do not adequately focus on fairness or equity of processes.

• The CA focuses on what individuals, who are socially and culturally situated and embedded, are able to do and to be.
Implications of a Capability Approach (1)

So rather than just focusing on whether a young person is in work and the conditions of the work that they do.....

we would also need to consider their access to resources to get or improve their job and their motivation and what they value and their ability to identify and take opportunities that they value etc.

There are other areas of debate, such as the role of the responsibilities of individuals etc.
Implications of a Capability Approach (2)

• “A person’s advantage in terms of opportunities is judged to be lower than that of another if she has less capability – less real opportunity – to achieve those things that she has reason to value” (Sen, 2009: 232)

• CA focuses on the (“substantive”) freedom of people to choose what they value as opposed to narrowly focusing on utility maximization (e.g. happiness) or access to resources (such as income). The approach is concerned with what people can do rather than what they actually do. (Sen, 2009: 231)

• So analysis and data gathered should consider and seek to identify and measure what young people value and the conditions that help them to make decisions on what they value
Implications of a Capability Approach (3)

• Accordingly, for the Capability Approach, wellbeing should be assessed with reference to what people are free to be or do; for example, being able to work, to care, and to participate in the life of the community.

• Capabilities represent the potential to achieve ...
  – for example, having access to skills, development opportunities, working in an environment where individuals have the opportunity to make constructive contributions and engage in social interactions, and the extent to which people regardless of their class, gender and race are permitted to participate in work and learning.
Implications of a Capability Approach (4)

• “Evaluating capabilities rather than resources or outcomes shifts the axis of analysis to establishing and evaluating the conditions that enable individuals to take decisions based on what they have reason to value” (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007: 3)

• From a capabilities perspective, it is important to see unemployment or precarious employment in terms of impacts on wellbeing and quality of life as well as just economic penalties for the individual and a mis-aligned labour market

• After controlling for loss of income, unemployed people report ‘lower life evaluations’ and negative effects in terms of stress and anxiety
‘Capabilities-friendly’ action

A ‘capabilities-friendly’ form of public action to activate the unemployed or support those in precarious employment may involve (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2007):

- a discursive process to inform policy from the bottom-up;
- a long-term perspective, based on promoting individuals’ freedom to choose the work and learning that they value; and
- an acknowledgement of both individual and collective responsibilities to act to promote capabilities for work and learning.

*So the CA suggests that we need to ask more questions and to ask them in a different way*
Workable: using the Capability Approach to examine the transitions of disadvantaged youth

- Project is funded by the EU 7th Framework Research Programme. Number: 244909 - SSH-2009-1.1.1 Education in a European knowledge society

- Scrutinises strategies to enhance the social sustainability and economic competitiveness of Europe by strengthening the capabilities of young people to actively shape their personal and work lives in knowledge societies and cope with today’s economic, cultural, demographic and technological challenges. Four vulnerable target groups:
  - Early school leavers,
  - No exam in upper secondary education,
  - Young unemployed,
  - Unemployed young higher education graduates

- Multi-disciplinary: educational science, sociology, economics, philosophy, political studies and social work

- Applies the Capability Approach as a common conceptualization and heuristic framework in relation to the transition from school to work

- 12 partners in 10 European countries. BHPS, EU-SILC data and case studies
WorkAble members
Workable: Case Studies (1)

• At a general level for all age groups, the UK policy on unemployment and employability since 1997 has been driven by the view that work remains the best route out of poverty for most people.

• The UK approach to activation is essentially centralised and top-down, with limited voice and autonomy of individuals and communities to make choices and shape futures (the Work Programme allows some autonomy, but to the contractor primarily - and is a ‘black box’ approach to activation).

• The Scottish Workable case study aims to focus on two programmes that move away from a centralised work first approach and focus instead on promoting individuals’ capabilities to choose the work that they have reason to value and engages with the external, socio-economic conversion factors.
Workable: Case Studies (2)

- **Case study 1:**
  - Innovative programme aimed at disadvantaged young people age 16 to 24 in Scotland, delivered across urban, semi-rural, and rural areas
  - Six month work placement: first 13 weeks a young person is placed with an employer with no wage cost to the employer; weeks 14 to 26, the young person receives a subsidised wage
  - The focus of whole programme is on progress rather hard outcomes, and addressing the wider issues that may be acting as barriers to employment

- **Case study 2:**
  - Offers work experience to those aged 16 to 25 who are unemployed
  - Young people receive intensive training and experience in a specific sector. The sectors that the programme engages with are selected on where there are many jobs available, to give the young people the best chance of finding a job when the course finishes
  - Courses are run for between 5 to 12 weeks depending on the sector
  - The focus of the whole programme is on helping young people to find sustainable employment in a particular sector, as well as addressing the wider issues that may be acting as barriers to employment
Workable: Case Studies (3)

Research Methods
- Combination of document analysis and qualitative interviewing
- Qualitative interviews with: project managers; project workers; employee liaison officers; young people engaged in the two programmes

Research Questions
- Which conversion factors and capabilities does the programme seek to enhance?
- Are sufficient resources available to young people to enhance capabilities?
- How do external factors impact on the availability of resources, commodities or opportunities?
- Have the young people been sufficiently empowered to have autonomy and a voice in the delivery, implementation and evaluation of the programme?
Emerging themes (1)

• Importance of the skills of workers in the organisations delivering the programme

• Being flexible with who the organisations are working with – flexibility in funders requirements, but making sure they are working with the right young people i.e. the most disadvantaged. Participants: from disadvantaged areas; lack of qualifications; offenders; care leavers; learning disabilities

• Challenging the young people and developing their aspirations

• Restrictions imposed by available resources

• Restrictions imposed by availability of employers

• Impact of external factors such as the labour market and spending cuts in the public sector and third sector
Emerging themes (2)

Identifying what young people want to achieve (Voice (e.g. ability to effectively express their own opinions) and choice. What if some young people are not aware of the range of choices available to them?)

- “I think young people ... come in with a fixed idea of what they want to do ... [they] say either I want to be a builder or want to be a chef, or if I am a young woman I would quite like to go into hairdressing or childcare ... the narrowness of the perspective that young people have is informed by people they know, things that they see and actually what we try and do is blow the doors off” (Head of development, CS1)

- “So I think it can in the initial stages of the recruitment ... be difficult to establish whether: is this young person telling me this because that's what their Job Centre advisor told me to say sort of thing” (Project worker, CS2)

Family and housing issues etc. of young people on the programme

- “Finding sustainable employment is our, that's our goal. I think for me you can’t take that in isolation from everything else that's going on ...” (Service manager, CS1)
Emerging themes (3)

Identifying and developing positive capabilities (resilience, resourcefulness, commitment, motivation, self belief) as well as those lacking them

- “Well the philosophy is, the function is to get them into employment but the philosophy is to deal with all the other problems that have occurred as well ... we are looking to improve things like confidence and team work and reliability, you know all those kind of soft skills as well” (Project worker, CS2)
- “Before I was waking up not knowing what to do. It’s giving me a bit of maturity for my girlfriend and daughter” (Young male, CS2)

Not giving up on the young people

- “I have been involved with them since like December because I came on a course before and I got chucked out of it but they have given me a second chance, and this is the second day of it ... I am grateful for it because I don’t get that many second chances so I take it” (Young male, CS1)
Summary of emerging issues

• The importance of access to actual resources

• Conversion factors

• Limitations to people’s aspirations (societal, family, social network and self). Precarious employment cannot be understood without looking at factors such as family, social network and self

• The lack of data from main surveys (e.g. BHPS, LFS, EU-SILC)

• Are short term schemes exacerbating precariousness or providing a route out of precarious employment?
Conclusions

• A Capability Approach could:
  – lead to different information being gathered on youth employment and unemployment and how it was gathered
  – potentially add value to discussions of local labour market information and precarious employment by posing questions that are not addressed by more general employment debates

• An approach worth considering but much more work to be done
Some references:


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http://workable-eu.org/
Any Questions?

http://www.napier.ac.uk/eri/