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Research paper

## Reconciling the capability approach and the ICF



### *Réconcilier l'approche par les capacités et la CIF*

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#### ABSTRACT

The literature on applications of the so-called “Capability Approach” of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum is extensive, but it is only recently that some have argued that its application to the analysis of disability would be a great advantage over existing analyses, and in particular preferable to the model of functioning and disability found in the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). I argue here that care must be taken in this head-to-head comparison between the Capability Approach and ICF since the former is essentially a political-theoretical account of equalitarian justice, whereas the latter is a model of a classification system for describing disability that is explicitly neutral between any theory of distributive justice. Nonetheless, this paper argues that a careful comparison of the two approaches to the conceptualisation of disability reveals salient aspects of convergence that, arguably, point to a potential synergy between the Capability Approach as applied to disability and the ICF.

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#### RÉSUMÉ

La littérature portant sur les applications de l'approche par les capacités d'Amartya Sen et de Martha Nussbaum est abondante, mais ce n'est que récemment que certains ont soutenu l'idée que son application à l'analyse des handicaps présenterait un réel avantage par rapport aux analyses existantes, et en particulier qu'elle serait préférable au modèle du fonctionnement et du handicap que l'on trouve dans la Classification Internationale du Fonctionnement,

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du Handicap et de la Santé (CIF) de l'Organisation mondiale de la santé. Je soutiens dans cet article qu'une comparaison directe entre l'approche par les capacités et la CIF doit être menée avec beaucoup de précaution, parce que la première est essentiellement une analyse théorico-politique de justice égalitaire, alors que la seconde est un modèle de système de classification pour décrire le handicap qui est explicitement neutre vis-à-vis de toute théorie de justice distributive. Néanmoins, cet article montre qu'une comparaison attentive de ces deux conceptualisations du handicap révèle des aspects saillants de convergence qui indiquent une synergie potentielle entre l'approche par les capacités appliquée au handicap et la CIF.

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Recent attempts to analyse the concept of disability in terms of the Capability Approach (CA) of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have argued that this analysis may be preferable to the model of functioning and disability found in the World Health Organization's *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (ICF) (WHO, 2001) – for example, Mitra, 2006; Trani & Bakhshi, 2008; Terzi, 2005a, 2005b, 2010; Trani, Bakhshi, Bellanca, Biggeri, & Marchetta (2011). This paper examines this claim and argues that, once conceptual confusions are set aside and a more defensible relationship between the Capability Approach and the ICF is constructed, the two frameworks are independently justifiable, reconcilable and potentially synergetic.

Using the Sen-Nussbaum Capability Theory as a theoretical framework for analysing health in general, and disability in particular, is understandable since both Sen and Nussbaum have taken this step, although with different results. The recent work of Jennifer Prah Ruger and Sridhar Venkatapuram (Ruger, 2010; Venkatapuram, 2011) has demonstrated both the added value and pitfalls of employing CA to health and health systems research. The same can be said of the application of CA to the concept of disability.

At first blush, however, it might be objected that CA and ICF are not even comparable: the Capability Approach provides a normative framework for assessing objective well-being (in Sen's version) or a political-theoretical account of egalitarian justice (in Nussbaum's), whereas the ICF does not purport to assess well-being, or indeed any ethical or political domain, and was explicitly designed to be a model and classification system for the description of functioning and disability, toward the production of comparable data. The ICF, in short, was designed to be useful for scientific purposes or normative applications precisely because it was neutral between any theory of distributive justice, whether egalitarian or not.

Keeping this in mind, the paper begins with a summary of the basic components of the Capability Approach, in both Sen's original and Nussbaum's later versions. This review is unavoidable since to move too quickly over this complex conceptual domain would only perpetuate misunderstandings later. An analytic comparison between the ICF analysis of functioning and disability and recent attempts at a CA analysis of these notions will reveal aspects of convergence and divergence that, I will argue, make out the case for potential synergy.

## 1. The Capability Approach

### 1.1. Sen's Capability Approach

As initially developed by Amartya Sen (Sen, 1980, 1992), the Capability Approach was not intended as a general theory of social justice, but rather as a critique of prominent economic metrics of social equality, and in particular a response to the dominant view of John Rawls that inequality should be measured in terms of "primary social goods", in particular income, wealth and the bases of self-respect (Rawls, 1971). In many of his early writings, Sen uses the approach merely as a formula for making interpersonal comparisons of objective well-being or welfare, and even decades later he insisted that

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