A Participatory Approach to Choosing Dimensions

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As Sabina Alkire's opening piece highlighted, participatory methods are one way of identifying, exploring and evaluating the dimensions of well-being. This short essay describes how participatory methods can be used to evaluate a squatter upgrading programme in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. The capability approach is employed to identify and explore through participatory methods one aspect of well-being: *housing freedoms.*[1] While complementing each other in a variety of ways, the research reveals that participatory methods and the capability approach also share similar limitations and challenges.

Since the 1970s many different participatory approaches to research, policy making and planning have been put forward. However it has been only since the 1990s that participatory methods have entered the development mainstream. Participation became a buzzword in poverty research and development projects. The best known participatory approach in the current development scene, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), was elaborated in the late 1980s in India and Kenya. According to Robert Chambers, "PRA is a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor and evaluate" (Chambers, 1997: 102).

A variety of participatory tools have been developed, where the outsider (researcher or practitioner) is perceived as a facilitator who encourages and enables local people to express their own reality. These include group activities, visual diagrams and mapping. Although developed to be used in rural areas, PRA techniques and similar participatory methods have been applied in many different studies, practices and in a variety of contexts (Cornwall and

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[1] This study has been undertaken in the context of my doctoral research. Housing is understood as the on-going activity that associates to a certain set of functions of the house. Such functions, or *doings*, *beings* and *havings* are perceived as housing functionings. 'Housing freedoms' are the capability people have to achieve their valued housing functionings.

Pratt, 2003). Unfortunately some recent applications of participatory approaches in the development mainstream fall short of their original intentions. Participation is sometimes used merely as a tool for achieving pre-set objectives and not as a process to empower groups and individuals to take leadership, envision their futures, and improve their lives (Cornwall, 2000; Cleaver, 2001).

Sen does not write directly on PRA or participatory methods. However other authors have elaborated on the links between the capability approach and participatory methods (Alkire, 2002; Croker, 2005). They argue that Sen's writings acknowledge participatory methods as the principal process by which many evaluative issues may be resolved. Comparisons made between participatory and capability approaches unfold series of similarities: they criticize the income-led definition of poverty; they view people as active agents in the process of change; while emphasizing the need to contextualize the conceptualization of poverty, thus unfolding the local dynamics embedded in the social reality of each particular case of study.

The initial challenge of the evaluation of the squatter upgrading programme was to adapt participatory tools to the exploration of capabilities and not merely needs. Traditionally participatory tools are identifying and evaluating physical and social conditions of a certain group or community. Instead of evaluating merely the characteristics of the house and the residents' access to social facilities, this application of the capability approach aimed at exploring more broadly how the urban intervention has impacted on residents' *housing freedoms*. In this context, the research developed into two stages: firstly dimensions of housing were to be identified; and then they were to be evaluated.

The first stage of the evaluation involved a focus group activity with a group of young adults from a squatter settlement in Salvador da Bahia and who had been under a course of capacity building of a local NGO. The objective of the session was to draw and explore a list of housing functionings based on a dialogue between the focus group and a list developed by the researcher based on a review of the existing literature on urban development. The discussions were recorded by participants in the form of diagrams and tables. The result was a comprehensive set of housing functionings (i.e. individualize/expand; healthy environment; afford living costs; participation; and maintain social networks) and an elaborated list of associated features that impacts on the freedom to achieve these functionings. Examples of such features include housing typology, mechanisms of participation, social facilities, etc.

Out of these findings, a card game was developed to evaluate the impacts of the squatter upgrading programme. Focus group activities were set-up to seek out people's understandings of housing, poverty and well-being; to prioritize the valued features of housing; and to compare their choices with the squatter upgrading intervention. The dialogue that took place around the features and dimensions of housing aimed to unfold the underlying dynamics of transforming resources into achieved *housing functionings*.

This process of evaluation revealed a series of complementarities between the capability approach and participatory methods. By moving away from the utilitarian approach of development, the capability approach wrests back participation from its instrumental application. The elaborated evaluative framework of the capability approach provides the participatory literature with a comprehensive and flexible theory of wellbeing that can capture the multiple, complex and dynamic aspects of poverty. In the context of housing, the capability framework redirects the informational space that participatory methods should be addressing: moving away from housing needs to housing freedoms. In this way local housing strategies are explored, unfolding the underlying dynamics that shape people's livelihoods. Finally the capability approach enhances the researchers' critical self-awareness, by raising issues such as adaptive preferences, process freedom and agency.

Meanwhile participatory methods contribute to the capability approach by offering a variety of thoroughly developed and researched tools and techniques. Participatory methods can adapt to different purposes of studies, unfolding dimensions not only of well-being, but also of the specific factors that constitute well-being such as housing; they can capture many aspects and dynamics that influence the transformation of opportunities into achievements; and finally participatory research methods have the potential to expand capabilities by encouraging public debate and stimulating local-level action.

However, while complementing each other in a variety of ways, participatory methods and the capability approach share similar weaknesses and challenges. Out of the study of the squatter upgrading programme, the following issues were raised. First, neither set of literature has reached a consensus on the targeted participants of their analysis: are evaluations based on the perspective of individuals, groups or both? The analysis of 'housing freedoms', led to the differentiation between the individual features (such as typology of houses, individual land title) and collective features (such as communitarian centre, cooperative). Instead of separating collective and individual *capabilities*, this research explored the collective and individual *features* that constitute people's housing freedoms.

Another critique made of both approaches is that they propose local solutions to global problems, thus not tackling structural inequalities (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Indeed, this evaluation of the squatter upgrading programme captured how global processes (such as the increasing role of international NGOs, the shift from state government to governance, growing global competitiveness of cities) impacted on the lives of local residents and their livelihood strategies. However it falls short on proposing global solutions that could address broader macro level inequalities and injustices.

A final issue raised was that of the influence of power relations on participation-based development analysis (Cooke, 2001; Mohan, 2001). The use of social psychology literature on the analyses of the subtle ways in which groups make decisions disclosed the less visible ways of participation being used as instruments of control and maintenance of the status quo through the production of consensus. During the analysis of the squatter upgrading programme, existent local power relations were identified which could undermine the validity of the research findings. But by perceiving participation through the lens of capabilities, these power relations became part of the investigation of the residents' freedom. Instead of avoiding aspects that might interfere on the outcome of the study, the capability approach informed the questions in a way which addressed power relations.

The application of the capability approach through participatory methods explicitly thus aims to tackle the limitations of participatory methods, such as the lack of consensus on targeted participants, partial globalization of development policy analysis, and the lack of analysis of the impacts of power relations on participatory activities. When exploring housing freedoms, individual and collective focuses are addressed as both approaches analyse well-being from a variety of perspectives. Sen's perception of the poor as agents of change aims to address the existent local and structural power inequalities. Meanwhile the combination of both approaches fell short on this application in proposing global solutions of local problems. However it explicates local impacts of global processes, with the potential to capture the issues concerning the practical manifestation of poverty as well as unfold the dynamics influencing the causes of inequalities. Thus, the body of literature exploring the practical application of Sen's writings can serve as an evaluative framework that safeguards the radical roots of participatory methods, encouraging critical engagement, while also assessing and challenging structures of subordination.

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