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A capability-approach perspective on regional development

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ABSTRACT

We argue for a broader and more deliberative regional policymaking process that can be used to better identify the needs of diverse left-behind communities and develop appropriate policies. We argue that the capability approach's quintessentially inclusive and broad scope, and focus on real opportunities, agency, and process might better address the challenges of regional development. We use these insights to lay out a practical guide for how the capability approach could be used in policymaking, breaking down the implementation approach into steps, and providing examples from a variety of contexts to show how each step might be achieved in practice.

KEYWORDS

regional development; regional policy; left-behind places; capability approach; agency

JEL D63, R28, R58

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1. INTRODUCTION

Following years of political neglect, the role of uneven regional development in national outcomes has been brought into sharp focus through a series of electoral shocks driven by dissatisfaction among residents of 'left behind' regions and communities (Martin et al., 2021; Willett et al., 2019). This has led to increased public interest in the causes and consequences of regional under-development, and the role of policy in addressing them effectively (Iammarino et al., 2019). In the UK, recent elections have been dominated by promises to 'level up' these communities, with similar political narratives taking hold in France, Italy, Germany, and Spain (MacKinnon et al., 2022).

Much of this debate has centred around the effectiveness of policies that aim to promote economic growth through investments in infrastructure, skills, and business incentives (Berkowitz et al., 2020). Targeted 'left behind' areas are typically characterised by economic underperformance, with poor access to employment and business opportunities, and a lack of effective public infrastructure and public support services. In the UK, this policy emphasis on promoting economic development, connectivity and regeneration is clear from UK government policy papers, and shapes eligibility criteria and accessibility to the government's Levelling Up Fund and post-European Union Shared Prosperity Fund, amongst others (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), 2022; HM Treasury, 2021). Additionally, the uneven process of development policy devolution across the UK, largely delivered through the creation of city-regions in the decade since 2013, has reinforced this equating of progress with economic scale and productivity (Beel et al., 2021).

However, the problems of the so-called left-behind places are not restricted to economic disadvantage. As has been well documented, they also include disaffected populations, political discontent, hopelessness regarding opportunities for social and economic mobility, and grievances relating to cultural and demographic change (Abreu & Jones, 2021). These grievances result in low levels of political efficacy and a general feeling of disillusionment with the policy making process. To illustrate the significance of the problem, a survey of town residents by DEMOS, a UK-based think tank, found that over 70% of respondents thought that the public should be more involved in decisions made by local governments about their town (DEMOS, 2020). A follow-up study found that 54% of residents were willing to forego higher spending in their area in exchange for a greater say over how the money was spent (DEMOS, 2021).

A large number of policy initiatives have been proposed as remedies for this situation, based on a diverse set of theoretical frameworks, ranging from new growth theory and spatial economics to innovation ecosystems,

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urban planning, and institutional approaches. Nevertheless, the ways through which these are translated into policy programmes have several things in common. First, the focus is almost exclusively on intermediate goals, such as improved transport infrastructure, enhanced business networks, or regenerated town centres, rather than on the ultimate opportunities and outcomes these policies might afford to local residents (e.g., Albanese et al., 2021). This poor focus on tangible ultimate outcomes may partly explain the lack of agency reported by residents of left-behind areas in polls and identified in a number of recent empirical and ethnographic studies.[1]

Second, the process is framed as essentially technocratic, run by (notionally) impartial administrators, and evaluated using a set of standardised indicators, with decisions on design, implementation, and evaluation taken by actors far removed (geographically and socially) from the beneficiary communities. In the UK, in particular, the parameters of regional development policy are increasingly decided by the central government, with local authorities and other layers of local government largely confined to competitively bidding for funds (Fransham et al., 2023). This focus on impartial and technocratic policy delivery, combined with a perception that local development is undertaken (or not) for national party-political reasons (Hanretty, 2021), in turn exacerbates the agency gap and creates information asymmetries.

Third, this lack of agency and process transparency further reduces resident support for the policy programmes that underpin the Levelling Up agenda. It is, for instance, very striking that Levelling Up funds are 'gifted' to communities following an arcane and complex bidding and evaluation process, in much the same way as were EU Structural Funds, despite findings that residents of regions that received substantial amounts of EU monies had such little appreciation of their value (Willett et al., 2019).

Fourth, methods for designing and evaluating regional development programmes tend to focus on regional averages in order to measure success, and rarely consider the impact of policies on specific individuals or groups at the tail end of the distribution (e.g., those on low incomes, those who are disabled or in ill-health, or those who are socially excluded) either at the policy design or at the evaluation stage. Some residents may face significant constraints in taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by new facilities or programmes, but this is often overlooked.

Given these challenges, we argue for a broader and more deliberative policymaking process that can be used to better identify the needs of diverse left-behind communities and suitable ameliorative strategies. We consider the possibilities offered by the capability approach, originally designed to address the challenge of international development, and not currently explicitly used in the context of regional development in high-income countries. We argue that the capability approach's quintessentially inclusive and broad scope, and focus on real opportunities, agency, and process might better address the challenges of regional development. We use the UK as a focal point to illustrate our arguments due to the current salience of the regional development ('Levelling Up') policy agenda in a post-Brexit context, but our framework is a more general one with wider applicability to regional policy beyond the UK.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. We start with an introduction to the capability approach and discuss the concepts of capabilities, functionings, and contextual factors, and how they relate to economic policy. We argue this lens might improve on more commonplace measures of regional development used in much of the current policy discourse. We then extend this simple framework to include other valuable outcomes such as agency and process (Section 2). We use these insights to lay out a practical guide for how the capability approach could be used in policymaking, breaking down the implementation approach into three steps, and providing examples from a variety of regional and national contexts to show how each step might be achieved in practice (Section 3). Finally, we address common criticisms, and discuss the opportunities and challenges arising from the proposals.

We stress here that our focus in this paper is on the process through which regional policies are identified, implemented, and reviewed, rather than on specific policies, on which there is an extensive literature (Grover et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2021; McCann, 2016; Tomaney & Pike, 2020, to give a few recent examples). Our proposed approach is therefore intended to work alongside, and not in opposition to, commonly used theories of socio-economic change. In addition, while our focus is on regional development, we acknowledge the role of meso- and macro-level policy processes, which we believe should sit alongside a more inclusive regional development process. As we argue below, a deliberative and broad-based Levelling Up agenda should increase support for meso- and macro-policies insofar as they are seen by residents to be supporting their personal human development goals. These feedback loops are a key component of our suggested framework.

2. PRINCIPLES OF THE CAPABILITY APPROACH

The capability approach emerged in the 1980s as an alternative framework for thinking about social welfare and human development, primarily in an international development context (Sen, 1980, 1985a, 1999, 2009, 2017). The aim was to counter an almost exclusive focus within the international development agenda on achieving growth in commodities or resources, an approach that was considered too narrow to capture the full nature and extent of human development. The capability approach has also argued for the need to move beyond frameworks that focus entirely on hedonistic theories of well-being, which, it is argued, are extremely important components of individual well-being (Sen, 2008), and (unlike the resources view of human development) focus on ultimate

outcomes of concern, but are insufficient on their own to capture the full extent of human development.

2.1. The principle of 'each person as an end'

A key aspect of the capability approach is the principle that individuals are the units of ultimate moral concern, and that each person therefore counts as a moral equal, a principle known as ethical or normative individualism.[2] This implies, from a policy point of view, that the key consideration when assessing policy proposals is their (direct or indirect) impact on each person, rather than on the average person, or on society as a whole.[3] As Nussbaum (2000, pp. 55–56) argues in a key passage:

> the account we search for should preserve liberties and opportunities for each and every person, taken one by one, respecting each of them as an end, rather than simply as the agent or supporter of the ends of others. … Programs aimed at raising general or average well-being do not improve the situation of the least well-off, unless they go to work directly to improve the quality of those people's lives. If we combine this observation with the thought … that each person is valuable and worthy of respect as an end, we must conclude that we should look not just to the total or the average, but to the functioning of each and every person. We may call this the *principle of each person as end*.

The implication is that regional policies should be designed with the aim of improving each person's set of valuable opportunities (or capabilities, as defined in the next section) as the ultimate goal. It follows that regional policies should not focus purely on intermediate goals such as raising productivity or improving transport infrastructure without a clear understanding as to how these intermediate goals contribute to the expansion of each person's valuable opportunities. In addition, it is critically important to consider how each (and not just the average) person will be able to transform those opportunities into achieved outcomes (or functionings), given the resources that are available to them, the constraints that they face, and their own individual preferences. We can also conclude that any policy framework is incomplete without consideration for the process through which each individual is able to identify and realise his or her opportunities (Sen, 1997).

This is not to say that policies should be space neutral. On the contrary, we argue that contextual variables that affect an individual's ability to transform resources into valuable capabilities are strongly placed-based in nature. We next discuss the concepts, and how they fit together, in more detail.

2.2. Capabilities and functionings

In its original incarnation, the capability approach argued that the focus of development programmes should be on growing each individual's set of valuable capabilities, where capabilities are real freedoms or opportunities to be or do the things that they consider valuable in their life. In other words, individuals should be enabled to act in a way that improves their quality of life. Given a particular set of valuable capabilities, each individual has the freedom to avail themselves of these opportunities and achieve particular outcomes, or functionings (sometimes called 'functions'). The latter are the beings and doings arising from the realisation of an individual's capabilities.

At this point it might be helpful to illustrate these concepts with some practical examples, shown in Table 1. A current important topic in the UK (and across Europe) is the effect of the cost-of-living crisis on adequate food consumption, and ultimately on nutrition and health. A regional development programme in a disadvantaged area might seek to improve household resources through income support, improved access to groceries, improved cooking skills, or access to energy-efficient kitchen appliances. These might in turn lead to greater expenditure on food, an increase in the number of meals consumed in a day, or an increase in caloric intake. However, the things that individuals ultimately value are the ability to be well nourished, the ability to enjoy food with family or other people, and the ability to provide for their children. Resources such as income, groceries, or appliances, may not automatically lead to these capabilities for some residents because their personal characteristics, or the context in which they live, restricts the extent to which they are able to turn these resources into capabilities. For instance, a disabled person might find it difficult to use her newly acquired resources to cook nutritious meals because her disability makes the process more time consuming or difficult (e.g., arthritis means that chopping or stirring become difficult or impossible). The resources that she has access to are therefore not translated into the ability to be well nourished. This is due to the presence of contextual factors (her disability) which restrict the extent to which she is able to convert her resources into capabilities. We return to the issue of contextual factors in Section 2.3. Table 1 also includes two further examples, taken from the transport and community policy themes.

These examples help to illustrate the shortcomings of common resource or consumption-based measures used to evaluate the success of regional development policies, such as household income, ownership of particular assets, use of public services, or town centre footfall. They focus on intermediate rather than ultimate outcomes and are sensitive to the demographic composition of a place, such as the proportion of high-income, able-bodied, or working-age households. They also give little consideration to the value of individual empowerment resulting from having the freedom to choose whether to realise the opportunities provided, separately from the value of the opportunities themselves (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1985a, 2009).

These issues are well known in the literature, and one proposed alternative is to instead focus on happiness, affective reactions, and subjective evaluation of the outcomes that result from the policies in question (see Fabian et al., 2021, for a critical survey). However, while desire

Table 1. Examples of resources, capabilities, and functionings for different policy contexts.

Policy area	Resources	Consumption	Capabilities	Functionings
Food and nutrition	• Income • Access to grocery shops • Home storage capacity • Cooking skills • Access to kitchen appliances	• Expenditure on food • Number of full meals consumed per day • Calories consumed per day	• Ability to be well nourished • Ability to enjoy food with others • Ability to provide for family	• Being well nourished • Enjoying a meal with friends • Providing good-quality meals for one's children
Transport	• Income • Owning a car, bike • Driving, cycling skills • Time	• Miles travelled • Weekly journeys	• Ability to travel to work • Ability to meet friends and family • Ability to visit shops and services • Ability to enjoy scenic landscapes	• Commuting to work • Meeting friends • Shopping for essentials • Enjoying scenic landscapes
Community	• Income • Social capital • Human capital • Access to public transport	• Town centre footfall • Library visits • Use of local park	• Ability to participate in public events • Ability to participate in social events • Ability to enjoy nature	• Participating in a debate • Attending a reading group • Exercising in a local park

fulfilment is an important component of individual well-being, an exclusive focus on subjective well-being as the key outcome of policy is arguably too narrow to capture the full extent of human development. One difficulty arises from the complex process through which preferences are developed, and the resulting problem of adaptative preferences (Elster, 1982; Nussbaum, 2000). Individuals might adjust their expectations for specific outcomes in the light of current adverse living conditions (e.g., poverty, poor health, low-quality environment), so that their life satisfaction or happiness is relatively high, but their real opportunities and their standard of living relative to others are quite poor.

The ability to be happy or satisfied with one's life of course remains an important capability and therefore an important ultimate goal of public policy. But, we argue, it is not sufficient to aim for high levels of life satisfaction, without also understanding the objective list of the things that individuals are able to be or do as a result of the policy (Robeyns, 2017, pp. 125–126). Additionally, an exclusive focus on subjective well-being has the effect of reducing the dimensions of well-being to just one dimension (mental state), thereby obscuring our understanding of what constitutes well-being and quality of life across a plurality of informational spaces, and ultimately limiting policy decisions.[4]

The above argument in no way implies that economic resources and subjective well-being should be discarded as informational spaces in normative evaluations of an individual's quality of life. Instead, we argue that they should be part of informationally richer accounts of well-being, so that we can assess their relative contribution (Sen, 2017).

2.3. The role of conversion factors

A key element of the capability approach is the role of conversion factors in mediating the ability of individuals to convert resources and consumption into capability sets and achieved functionings (Chiappero et al., 2018; Sen, 1985a, 1999). Conversion factors are influenced by individual characteristics, such as age, gender, physical ability, ethnicity, and socio-economic class, as well as by the demographic, social, cultural, environmental, and economic contexts in which an individual lives. They shape the extent to which individuals endowed with similar resources are able to attain comparable capability sets. Because most regional development programmes focus on measuring average outcomes, they often overlook the constraints faced by individuals in putting the new infrastructure, support services, and financial resources to their own use.

As an example, consider a government programme that provides funding for a new business park in a particular location. The features and contents of the facility might be decided by the national and regional government officials, together with local business groups and community representatives. However, it is rare that a wide cross-section of individual residents is meaningfully included in the detailed design, development, and evaluation of the facility, limited consultation exercises notwithstanding. As a result, the project development team could overlook (or deliberately ignore) constraints faced by residents in transforming the new resource into valuable capabilities and realised functionings. For instance, a lack of suitable transport options may prevent use of the new facility by entrepreneurs and workers who are disabled, financially disadvantaged, or young, and who

therefore lack access to suitable private transportation. Or units at the new facility might be allocated on a basis that excludes local businesses, for instance, through setting high rents or dedicating the site to a specific industrial sector.[5]

As a result, programmes that provide public facilities, not just business parks but schools, transport infrastructure, healthcare facilities and so on, may not translate into improved capabilities and better quality of life for the largest reasonable number of residents, even though the programme outcomes appear successful on paper. We argue that this issue could be addressed by improving the process through which local development policies are identified and implemented. For instance, the role of conversion factors could be identified through a deliberative participation process (such as a participatory budgeting or citizen's assembly approach) that involves a wide cross-section of the community in the design, delivery, and (crucially) evaluation of regional development programmes. We discuss these practical implementation challenges in more detail in Section 3.

It may be helpful at this point to summarise our discussion using Figure 1, starting from the left with the box labelled 'structural factors'. These are contextual factors such as institutions, social norms, the natural and built environments, infrastructure, and the media landscape. They shape the instrumental (or intermediate) freedoms enjoyed by residents, which include political freedoms such as those relating to political representation and freedom of association; economic facilities such as the condition of the regional labour market, the regional innovation ecosystem, the skills base, and regional demand; social opportunities such as those enabling social mobility and association; transparency guarantees such as those that cover openness, transparency, disclosure, and access to official information; and protective security meaning personal safety and property rights.[6]

As discussed previously, these instrumental (or intermediate) freedoms available to residents can be used, in combination with their intrinsic personal characteristics, to acquire resources. The latter include income, human capital, social capital, non-market production, and time. These resources can in turn be used to consume food, education, housing, transport, healthcare, and other essential or luxury items.

Given particular levels of consumption, individual residents vary in their ability to convert these into valuable capabilities (real opportunities) due to the influence of individual, social, or environmental factors, which constrain their choices. For instance, an individual may be unable to fully benefit from a new public leisure facility due to cultural norms that constrain members of her ethnicity or social class from accessing it. As an example, swimming facilities may not benefit (often poorer) Muslim women unless thoughtful and well communicated provision is made for female-only sessions (Lenneis et al., 2022). Similarly, a national government programme to fund new schools might be more impactful on education-related capabilities in a region where social norms encourage school attendance, which is less likely in places where 'at need' people live (Berrington et al., 2016).

2.4. Comprehensive outcomes

One particularly important issue, as discussed earlier, is the extent to which individuals living in peripheral and economically disadvantaged areas feel that they have little control over the important decisions that affect their lives. We argue that the capability approach provides a useful conceptual framework for thinking about this key component of the regional development agenda.

Most of the capability approach literature includes an explicit or implicit account of agency, with an agent defined as 'someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well' (Sen, 1999, p. 19). Agency can be incorporated into a capability approach framework in several different ways. It can be treated as a structural factor that enhances or limits a person's ability to translate resources and consumption into valuable capabilities. With reference to Figure 1, this would fall under institutions or social norms in the structural factors box. Alternatively, agency can be treated as a capability in itself, capturing the ability to be in control of one's environment, or to be able to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life (Nussbaum, 2000). A third option, and our preferred one, is to treat agency as a separate dimension of ultimate value. In this we follow Sen (1985c) in highlighting the distinction between 'well-being freedom', which includes a person's capability set, and 'agency freedom', defined as 'what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important' (p. 203).

It may be helpful to give an example of this approach, adapted from Sen (2009, pp. 370–371), but using an education theme. Consider a young person who is deciding whether to pursue an academic or a vocational course at the local further education college. Having carefully considered the options, she decides that enrolling in the academic course would be most appropriate and conducive to her future career and well-being. However, some figures of authority decide that it would not be appropriate for her to enrol in this course, but that she must instead enrol in the vocational course. There are clearly two different kinds of violation to her freedoms in this example. First, the vocational course will result in an inferior capability set, given her values and preferences, resources, personal characteristics, and structural factors (such as the regional labour market, and social norms). Second, in taking away her freedom to choose, the authorities have also restricted her agency. To see this second aspect more clearly, consider a situation where the authorities instead order her to take the academic course. While this is the option the student would have chosen freely anyway, the curtailing of her agency freedom has reduced her well-being, even if the practical outcome is the same as before.

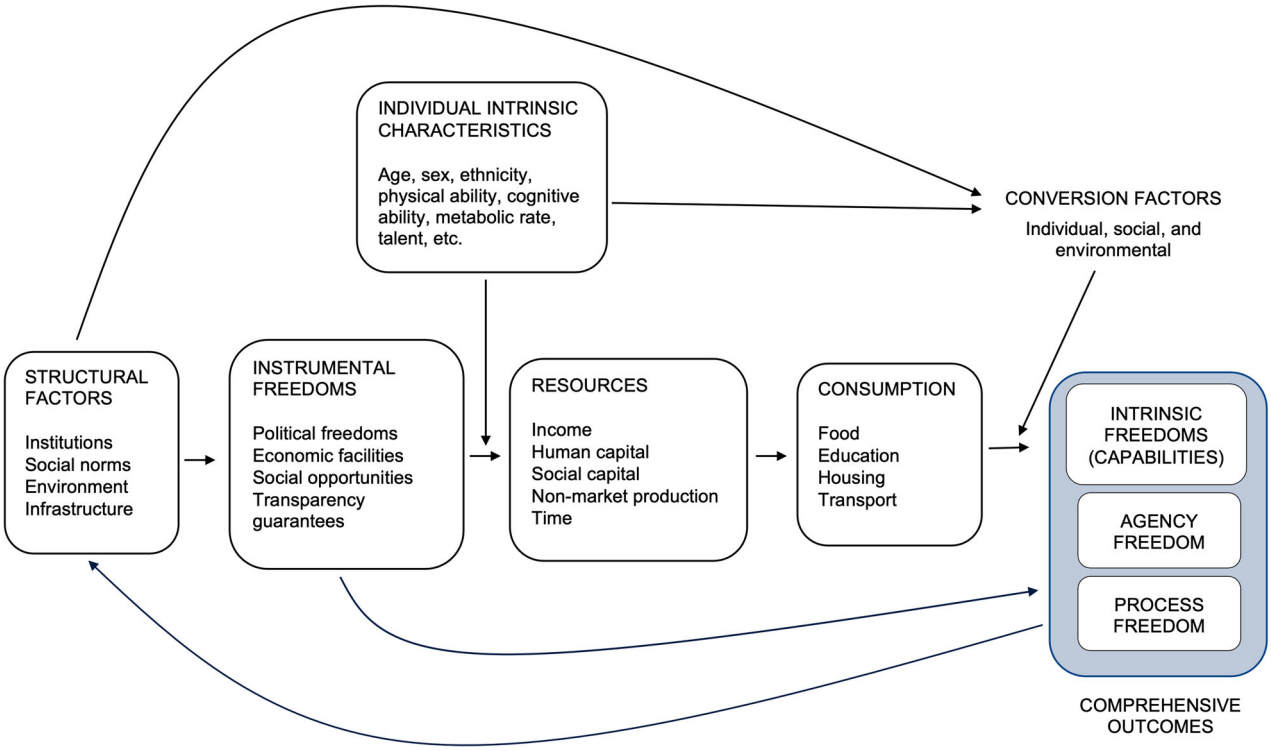

Figure 1. Elements of the capability approach.

This example suggests that agency freedom is valuable in itself, independently from actual policy outcomes. Moreover, agency does not have to be restricted to individual well-being or individual goals, but may be influenced by a sense of identity generated in a community (Sen, 1985b). The concept of agency freedom implies that people not only exercise their autonomy through their choices, but that they can benefit from the freedom arising from (valuable) available alternatives. For this reason, agency is important for a freedom-centred conceptual framework such as the capability approach. The 'act of choice' might be as important as the consequences of the choice, as it empowers the individual and increases their perceptions of agency and efficacy.

In addition, as argued by Sen (1997), when evaluating the success or otherwise of policy programmes it is not enough to focus on 'culmination outcomes' (capabilities and agency), but it is also important to consider 'comprehensive outcomes', which includes the choice process through which those outcomes are achieved. For instance, is the process that determines individual capabilities and agency more or less transparent, or more or less democratic? The implication is that the process through which outcomes are generated can be valuable or significant in itself. In Figure 1, there is an arrow feeding back from the box entitled 'comprehensive outcomes', which includes capabilities, agency, and process freedom, to the structural factors box on the left-hand side of the diagram. A regional policy framework that leads to valuable capabilities, engenders a sense of agency, and features a transparent design and implementation process, results in greater support by the general population for current institutions and social norms, thus reinforcing (in a positive way) the structural factors underpinning society. Alternatively, a lack of agency and process transparency can lead to a weakening and undermining of social cohesion, and a lack of trust (or even animosity) towards government institutions, such as that observed in the UK in the period leading up to the Brexit referendum.

To give a final example from transport policy, the existence of a transparent and inclusive process for ensuring that all residents have access to essential transport and mobility options, with a resulting expanded mobility capability set, should in turn increase public support for legislation and public spending that further improves transport and mobility outcomes.

3. POLICY IMPLICATIONS: THE CAPABILITY APPROACH AND REGIONAL POLICY

The regional dimension is significantly under-represented in the capability literature and incorporating it remains an important area for further research.[7] Most studies focus on one of the following two spatial dimensions: (1) the very local level (villages, municipalities, urban neighbourhoods), using an immersive deliberative participation approach that seeks to identify the opportunities and challenges faced by residents, and involve them in the development of local policy initiatives; or (2) the macro scale (countries, or very occasionally, larger subnational units), using a data-driven approach with the aim of creating indices that capture human development, broadly defined. Examples include the multidimensional poverty index

(MPI), developed by the Oxford Poverty and human development initiative (OPHI) (Alkire & Santos, 2014), or the regional development index (RDI) developed by Perrons (2012). Across this literature, the role of regional institutions, infrastructure, and policy processes is left almost entirely unexplored.

It is worth mentioning a separate strand of research, originating in sociology and human geography, where a small number of studies have used the capability approach to conceptualise spatial justice. This literature is mostly theoretical, combining the capability approach with other philosophical approaches such as the capital and habitus theories of Pierre Bourdieu (Israel & Frenkel, 2018), but a number of studies have operationalised spatial justice at the local scale, using a combination of functionings, measures of agency and choice (Israel & Frenkel, 2020), and measures of local context (Tovar & Bourdeau-Lepage, 2013).

In the studies mentioned above, the spatial dimension is operationalised using a measure of the average capabilities or functionings in each spatial unit. For instance, countries are said to have higher levels of well-being or human development if they score higher according to an index that captures education, health, and living standards. These average measures are determined by a combination of the characteristics of residents in a particular location (e.g., their demographic profile, income, education level, etc.), and the quality of the local institutions. However, when it comes to policy, we feel that this obscures the important normative focus on the outcomes of each individual. We therefore adopt a different view of what 'regional' means. Our focus in this paper is on the opportunities (or freedoms) available to each individual if they reside in one particular region as opposed to in another. This is different from arguing that one region has greater capabilities than another, based on the average opportunities enjoyed by residents in that region, vs. those enjoyed by the residents of another region.

The regional dimension enters into our framework (Figure 1) in three ways: (1) through structural factors that are spatial in nature (roads, ports, green spaces, business networks, schools); (2) through contextual factors that affect how individuals convert resources into capabilities, which are determined by a combination of structural factors and personal characteristics; and (3) through the resources available to individuals, some of which are supported or enhanced by regional policy (e.g., income, skills, time due to better public transport).

Our goal with this paper is to show how the capability approach can be used in regional policymaking in a simple and practical way. We do this by proposing a three-step approach to implementation: (1) articulate a conceptual shift in emphasis towards capabilities, agency, and process; (2) use a democratic deliberation approach to identify ultimate policy goals; and (3) democratise programme metrics to improve process transparency and accountability. For each step we provide policy examples, from the UK and other countries, to illustrate how it can be achieved in practice. None of the examples covers the entirety of our proposed approach, but they illustrate what is achievable, based on what has been tried and tested before.

3.1. Articulate a conceptual shift in emphasis towards capabilities, agency, and process

As discussed in Section 2, it is important to state the ultimate goals of regional policy fully and transparently, keeping a focus on the things that people value in their lives, and then work backwards to identify the policies needed to achieve them. This is important to ensure that human development goals remain broad-based, and that the policy process to be perceived as transparent and fair.

As an example of how this approach might improve on current ones, consider the Oxford–Cambridge Arc, a proposal covering five UK counties, with the aim of improving infrastructure and housing between the high-innovation cities of Oxford and Cambridge.[8] The proposal has run into considerable opposition from local residents, despite strong support from elected representatives across the region. The issue is partly the project's emphasis on intermediate goals: infrastructure, economic growth, jobs, housing, without a clear narrative of how this might fit with the things that residents in the area ultimately value in their lives, for example, the opportunity to have a fulfilling job (rather than simply more jobs in the local area, which might not be quality jobs, or might not go to local residents), the ability to engage in various forms of social interaction (rather than just better transport infrastructure), or the ability to enjoy natural environments (rather than just sustainable development). We contend that a better articulated policy framework focusing on ultimate goals would have gone a long way towards addressing local opposition to the proposals.

Similarly, and at a broader national level, the recent White Paper setting out the UK's Levelling Up agenda mentions a range of desirable regional policy goals, including higher income, productivity, education, employment, lower crime, better housing, better health, political engagement, and well-being (HM Government, 2022, p. 21). However, these outcomes are almost entirely intermediate. The two exceptions are life satisfaction, a realisation of the capability 'being able to live a happy and fulfilling life', and life expectancy, relating to the capability 'being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living' (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 33). Of the remaining measures, education is not an ultimate goal but rather an instrumental one that facilitates the attainment of capabilities such as the ability to be well informed, and the ability to seek employment on an equal basis with others. Further on in the document, the Levelling Up Missions come closer to articulating ultimate goals, but even here, only two of the missions, health (based on life expectancy) and well-being (based on life satisfaction) are ultimate ones. The others are all intermediate ones, as the White Paper itself acknowledges (HM Government, 2022, p. 21).

Similarly, the Levelling Up fund index of priority places, used to target the Levelling Up fund, is composed

entirely of narrowly defined intermediate goals: productivity, skills, unemployment, transport connectivity, and property vacancy rates. The link between these measures and the opportunities that people ultimately value is not well articulated, leading to criticism and accusations of unfairness and lack of transparency in the process.

The first step in our proposal is therefore to use the capability approach as a theoretical framework, to guide the purpose, principles, and structure of policy programmes in order to re-orient the narrative towards the promotion of real opportunities. More specifically, we argue that such policy frameworks should emphasise the ultimate goals of the policy programme, rather than the intermediate ones. For example, the focus could be on 'the ability to provide for one's family' rather than on 'increasing regional productivity'; and on 'the ability to visit local shops and services' rather than on 'increasing the frequency of public transport'. Such a shift in focus would be relatively straightforward to achieve with appropriate stakeholder involvement, while clearly signalling that the policy is designed to address the things that residents consider most valuable in their lives, thereby improving trust in the policymaking process, a crucial component of our framework in Figure 1.

A good example of the capability approach as a conceptual framework can be found in the Poverty and Wealth Report (*Armuts- und Reichtumsbericht*), published by the German government every three to five years. In 2005, the reports adopted a theoretical framework based on the capability approach, with a view of broadening the definition of deprivation, and encouraging a wider and better-informed discussion about its causes. The report defines poverty as capability deprivation, and wealth as the possession of a very extensive capability set (Arndt & Volkert, 2011, p. 315).

The capability approach was also used as the theoretical basis for the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) Measurement Framework in the UK (Burchardt & Vizard, 2011). As with the previous example, the framework was developed using theoretical insights in conjunction with a process of public reasoning and democratic deliberation. The indicators used were based on capabilities identified from theory, principles listed in human rights conventions, interviews with experts, and insights from workshops held at a range of locations across the UK. The process was designed to be fair and inclusive, with the aim of providing a broad-based view of the things that people value in their lives. A great deal of emphasis was placed on understanding the constraints experienced by particular groups, and the consequent inequalities. Importantly, the organisers focused on ensuring that a range of participants were able to contribute to the development of the framework, and that participants were not just representative of the general population, but also included sufficient representation from a wide range of minority groups.

To conclude, a capability-inspired regional development programme would acknowledge that the ultimate opportunities and outcomes of value for individuals extend well beyond the immediate objectives. It would also stress that not all individuals are equally able to convert resources into valuable capabilities and functionings, and carefully consider the role of contextual factors in shaping programme outcomes, while steering away from the use of purely aggregate (or population averaged) measures. The framework should therefore explicitly incorporate strategies for dealing with unequal access to the opportunities generated by the proposed policies.

3.2. Use a democratic deliberation approach to identify regional policy goals

The second step in our proposal concerns the need to identify the things that people value in their lives, or in other words, the valuable capabilities that policymakers should ultimately target.

The capability approach places great emphasis on the opportunities and outcomes of each individual, the 'principle of each person as an end', and as such its practical implementation would require some form of deliberative participation, where local residents are directly involved in the policy decision-making process. There are many models of participatory democracy, and a comprehensive review is beyond the scope of this paper, but for our present purposes they all share three key elements, as highlighted by Fung and Wright (2001): (1) a focus on specific and tangible problems; (2) the involvement in the deliberative process of individuals directly affected by those problems, as well as their local elected officials; and (3) the development of solutions to these problems through a deliberative method.

In order to be effective, this requires a participatory process that goes beyond the usual consultative or petitionary model, where the role of local residents is restricted to providing information, or airing their grievances and opinions, while the elected officials and civil servants select and implement the final policy programme (Crocker, 2007). Our proposal would require officials to go further than this and involve local residents in the policy design process in a more meaningful way, by encouraging them to engage in a discussion on priorities, opportunities, and constraints with policymakers and, crucially, deliberate amongst themselves to agree on a solution. In what follows, we highlight a few examples in order to show that it is possible, and indeed not particularly complex, to implement such an approach in the context of regional development.

A good example is the Poverty Truth Commission initiative, which has emerged in the UK as a response to the cost-of-living crisis, with the aim of identifying new ways of supporting local residents living in poverty. It works by bringing together residents who have a direct experience of poverty (the community commissioners), with government officials, civic organisations, and business representatives (the civic commissioners). The commission works at arms' length from the government, identifying key priorities for local residents, and forming working groups to identify solutions.[9]

Along similar lines but on a larger scale, the New Deal for Communities (NDC) policy initiative ran in the UK between 1999 and 2011 and involved 39 highly deprived urban areas. The goals of the programme were to devolve power and funding to communities, with budgets of around £50 million each over a 10-year period. The aim was to allow these communities to directly identify the priorities that mattered most to its residents, involve residents in a meaningful way in the running of the programme, and thereby generate agency and trust in the regeneration process.

While the national government decided on a set of overarching policy targets, each local area had considerable autonomy in selecting and implementing specific local development projects. The programme was delivered through local NDC Partnerships, each led by a public, private, or third sector representative, but involving a significant number of residents, as well as health, education, police, and job centre officials. The extent of resident involvement varied by location and was affected by local skills and capacity, but crucially, residents were invited to attend as independent participants, rather than through their representatives in community organisations. Evaluations of the programme have highlighted the subsequent deepening of community ties and the empowerment of local residents that resulted from the structure of the programme. For instance, out of 36 outcome indicators, 32 showed an overall improvement, with the largest shifts occurring in indicators capturing satisfaction with the area (an increase of 13 percentage points), and a feeling that the area had improved (an increase of 18 percentage points) (Batty et al., 2010).

An alternative model for involving residents in the policy implementation process is participatory budgeting (PB), an approach that emerged in the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil, and has been implemented in a large number of cities, towns, and rural communities around the world (Shah, 2007). The key principle is that individual residents should have a direct say over public funding decisions in their local area, beyond their indirect influence via the election of public representatives. It can be operationalised at any spatial scale, or on a multi-level model using a tiered structure, with lower level assemblies identifying and developing policy proposals that are then further discussed and voted on in higher level assemblies. The government provides funding, training, and support, identifies the available budget, and commits to implementing the final funding decisions.

PB has proved to be particularly popular in Scotland, and there are numerous examples of successful initiatives, particularly in the Glasgow City area. More recently, Scottish local authorities and the Scottish government have jointly committed to support the allocation of at least 1% of local government budgets in this way by 2021 (Harkins et al., 2016), with training and other support provided via the Community Choices Fund. A review of the Glasgow City pilot found that a citizens' panel approach proved to be an effective PB model, with an emphasis placed on deliberation and dialogue (Harkins, 2019).

Evidence shows that participatory budgeting can lead to better long-term policy choices, with greater amounts of funding allocated to health and education spending, and resulting improved outcomes such as lower infant mortality rates (Gonçalves, 2014). It has also been shown to lead to greater fiscal discipline, and greater engagement by participants in other forms of civic life, such as increased participation in elections (Johnson et al., 2021). However, PB on its own does not guarantee that local residents will see an improvement in their capabilities and functionings, or that they will necessarily feel empowered by the process. It is also important that the ultimate aims of the process are clearly stated at the outset, so that challenges such as elite capture and uneven participation are addressed, and the outcomes of the process can be evaluated transparently by all participants.

These examples of democratic participation are not exhaustive, and there is a growing body of research and case study evidence on other approaches, such as citizens' assemblies and jury panels, which may be more appropriate for dealing with specific thematic topics, such as regional responses to the climate emergency (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020; Reuchamps et al., 2023). The appropriate approach may require some experimentation, and tailoring to the policy priorities of the region, as shown by the Scottish PB example.

3.3. Democratise programme metrics to improve transparency and accountability

The third step in our proposed framework is the use of appropriate, fair, and transparent metrics to ensure that there is accountability in the implementation and evaluation stages of the policy process. We argue that this is necessary given the broad-based nature of the approach we are proposing, with the ultimate policy goals determined by the priorities of the region's residents.

A good example on the use of capability-inspired metrics is the EHRC Measurement Framework discussed in Section 3.1. As discussed, the framework is based on a set of capabilities identified by theory and in human rights treaties, further refined through a deliberative participation process involving members of the public, including those of minority groups (Alkire et al., 2009). The resulting set of indicators includes both objective and subjective realised functionings, measures of fairness and transparency in the process (such as unequal treatment, discrimination, lack of dignity and respect), and measures of autonomy or agency (such as empowerment, choice, and control). For example, progress on the capability 'attain the highest possible standard of knowledge, understanding, and reasoning' is evaluated using a combination of education attainment indicators, subjective measures of satisfaction with education, and measures of agency ('how much choice?', 'I feel discriminated', 'I feel treated with respect'). Care is also taken to ensure that variations in these measures across groups (ethnic and religious minorities, children, teens, the elderly, people with physical or cognitive disabilities, etc.) are adequately captured, to

identify the role played by contextual factors in the attainment of the outcomes.

At a regional level, the NDC programme (discussed in Section 3.2) also considered objective and subjective outcomes (capturing realised functionings and satisfaction with outcomes) and focused on the long-term structural factors identified as most important and urgent by the NDC Partnership, which included community representatives. While the indicators used to evaluate the programme are not specific to each location, but are used to evaluate the programme as a whole, they follow the principles of the capability approach, and cover a range of outcomes that are closely linked to capabilities (Batty et al., 2010). For instance, on the crime theme, indicators include both objective outcome measures (lawlessness and dereliction index, % of residents who are victims of crime) and subjective measures (fear of crime index, 'I feel unsafe after dark'), as well as measures of agency and process ('I can influence decisions that affect area'). Similarly, on health, it includes objective outcome indicators (mental health index), subjective measures (% who feel own health not good, % with health worse than a year ago), and measures of agency (% satisfied with family doctor).

A final example illustrates the role deliberative participation can play in the selection of evaluation measures, and how residents can be involved in the evaluation process on a long-term basis. The town of Whistler, a popular skiing resort in Canada, developed a community plan in 2005, with the aim of improving the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the community by 2020 (Whistler2020). This followed the principles of deliberative democracy and was developed by task forces composed of local residents, government officials, business representatives, tourism organisations, and other local bodies who agreed on the programme priorities, and developed strategies in order to achieve them. While not a fully fledged participatory budgeting framework, the plan is unusual in that the community is also fully involved in the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the programme, identifying 'descriptions of success' for each of the programme priorities, indicators to measure success, and commissioning the collection of appropriate data, while progress on all priority areas is shown on a website, which is fully accessible to residents. The ultimate aim of this process is to ensure transparency and trust in the community plan. Although the Whistler2020 programme concluded in 2020, the Community Monitoring Dashboard, which is the visible output of the community-driven indicators programme, has continued and expanded, showing the value of the measurement initiative.[10]

4. CONCLUSIONS

Shaping regional development with reference to a holistic understanding of individual flourishing is challenging, especially for a public sector that has, since the 1980s, suffered from underfunding and functional 'hollowing out', leading to an inability to satisfactorily organise policy in a complex world, at either national or devolved scale (Beel et al., 2021; Farnsworth, 2021; Flinders & Huggins, 2021). There would seem to be a number of necessary (if not sufficient) changes required of public sector agencies for a capability approach to be viable or successful.

First, there is a requirement to view people as the fundamental 'unit of analysis'. This approach is gaining visibility, for instance as 'patient centred care' in the UK's national health and social services. It is indeed already well embedded in parts of UK public services, notably the Jobcentre Plus service operated by the Department for Work and Pensions that integrates the benefits system with job search. Whilst this last example often results in a punitive and purely transactional relationship between state and citizen (Wright et al., 2020), it is at least an example that person-centred implementation of policy is *bureaucratically* possible.

To extend this person-centricity into regional development requires, second, abandoning its 'projectification', whereby the solutions to problems that have taken generations to emerge, resulting from complex, interactive processes, are sought via singular interventions in a particular place, or even swathes of the same, often unrelated. Turning policy into projects has numerous attractions for public agencies, but can result in dysfunction, and significant 'distance' between funder and eventual beneficiary (Hodgson et al., 2019). This process has expanded in the UK since Brexit, with EU Cohesion funding, which is organised into programmes of seven years' duration, covering large spatial scales and which is (notionally) coherent and evaluated, replaced by a ragbag of Levelling Up funds with little clear coherence or underlying theory of change. Reversing this projectification in favour of holism, a clear explanation of expected cause and effect, and consistency over time, would be paramount.

Third, embedding a capability focus into regional development requires policy objectives to be shared by all place-relevant public agencies, going beyond economic development and planning, and into health, education, and service delivery. The prospect for this might seem daunting, but it is worth noting that there are examples from within the UK showing that it is possible. For instance, in Wales, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act legally requires *all* public agencies to make and implement policy, and to audit all actions, in terms of how they contribute to seven 'well-being goals', and indeed also requires inclusive, engaged, integrated and long-termist ways of working towards their achievement (Jones, 2022).[11] The Act and its implementation are far from perfect, but the focus on people being the ultimate goal of all public policy, and resulting large policy differentiation between Wales and England in recent years, highlight the value of our proposed approach. Our paper is an attempt to formalise these ideas into a framework that can be implemented more widely.

A decentralised, capability approach to regional development would, we argue, place citizens more fully in processes that shape their environments. It might also, however, bring into sharp focus tensions and uncertainties

regarding the extent to which individuals understand what actually drives their own well-being and flourishing. This is especially true in a context where the dominant mode of production and consumption engenders immersive, profit-oriented, and individualised narratives that actively damage health and well-being for even the most basic commodities (van Tulleken, 2023). Further, where local governance is not (yet) robust, 'tragedies of the commons' must be addressed, whereby individual flourishing might be deeply at odds with the aggregate well-being or coherence of a community (Ostrom et al., 1999). For example, the increasing size and weight of personal vehicles throughout the world in recent decades confers perceived comfort and real safety benefits for drivers and their families, but significantly negative consequences, both in climate terms, and locally as roads and related physical infrastructures creak under the strain and higher numbers of pedestrians (especially children) are injured and killed. The democratic participation approach proposed in this paper highlights this tension, but also stresses that while individual priorities may not be aligned with social priorities, the process of public and informed deliberation is intended to provide a framework to allow these tensions to be deliberated and scrutinised publicly.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

1. For example, see the work by 'Beyond Left Behind Places'; https://research.ncl.ac.uk/beyondleftbehindplaces
2. This principle originates in the ethical theories of Aristotle and Kant, more recently revised and updated by Rawls (1971, 2001).
3. This is different from other approaches such as methodological or onthological individualism, which argue that only individuals and their properties exist or matter, and society is made up of a sum of individuals and their properties. Normative individualism, as used in the capability approach, recognises the importance of relationships and connections between people, and the social context, but argues that each person should be recognised as an end in themselves for policy purposes, rather than a means to achieving someone else's ends. See Robeyns (2017, pp. 184–189) for a detailed discussion.
4. An interesting question arises as to whether the capability approach is an objective or a subjective approach to human development. On the one hand, capabilities themselves are quintessentially objective because they are grounded on objective beings and doings realised by individuals. Sen's ground-breaking work explains how capabilities represent possibilities that people can choose from different objective scenarios (Sen, 1980). He later formalises these relations, arguing that capabilities are sets of objective functionings (Sen, 1985a). As such, capabilities are a space that does not suffer from the shortcomings of subjective spaces: it is not about what people think or feel but about what they are able to be or to do. On the other hand, the broader formulation of the capability approach used in this paper includes subjective information, rights, and resources in addition to capabilities. Sen (2008) confirms that subjective information should not be fully discarded, but it is not in his view sufficient for assessing all aspects of our lives. More generally, we would argue that the capability approach should include subjective information, validating it with objective information based on other informational spaces (Comim, 2021).
5. It is important to note that the term 'capabilities' used in the capability approach literature is different from the term 'capabilities' used in the entrepreneurship literature, although there are some overlaps. In the former, the term is taken to mean the existence of real opportunities, available to individuals, to be or do things that are considered valuable. In the latter, capabilities are abilities, by entrepreneurs, to identify and make use of entrepreneurial opportunities. Entrepreneurial capabilities include skills, experience, social contacts, and other enabling factors embedded in the individual entrepreneur. Moreover, while capabilities are outcomes of ultimate concern in the capability approach, in the entrepreneurship literature they are considered intermediate factors needed to enable entrepreneurship. Within our framework, entrepreneurial capabilities are important intermediate policy goals and fall under 'resources' in Figure 1.
6. See also the discussion and diagram in Sen (1985a), which form the original basis for our diagram, adapted to the regional policy context.
7. For instance, the regional dimension is almost entirely absent from a recent comprehensive review of the capability approach literature, except as a brief mention in the context of multi-dimensional poverty indices, noting that they can be implemented at the subnational level (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2020).
8. See https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/creating-a-vision-for-the-oxford-cambridge-arc/creating-a-vision-for-the-oxford-cambridge-arc
9. There are currently over 20 poverty truth commissions in the UK, including in cities as varied as Hull, Birmingham, Manchester, Blackpool, Lincoln, Swansea and Dundee; https://povertytruthnetwork.org/commissions/what-is-a-poverty-truth-commission
10. See https://performance.whistler.ca
11. See www.futuregenerations.wales

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