



# Capability, collectivities and participatory research

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## Executive summary

This paper takes a new look at the long-standing debate about whether the capability approach is too individualistic and how best to take account of collectivity. The debate has been summarised several times (Robeyns, 2005; Alkire, 2008) but it is still ongoing with some recent contributions to the empirical as well as the conceptual level (Godfrey-Wood & Mamani-Vargas, 2016; John B. Davis, 2015; Hall, 2016).

This paper broadens the view by going beyond the papers that stirred the question of individualism and tracing more broadly various strands of the relevant literature. In order to get a grip on the large range of papers a classification scheme is proposed first. The literature can be classified according to how it conceives collectives. Some understand collective in a descriptive way, assigning membership to all people who share certain characteristics regardless of their own view. For example, Stewart's (Stewart, 2005; 2010) research on 'group capability' and 'horizontal inequality' shows impressively that group deprivations are lasting longer than individual deprivations by relying on statistical analysis and external descriptions of deprived groups. In contrast to that the well-known notion of 'collective capabilities' (Evans, 2002; Ibrahim, 2006) refers to groups based on voluntary and conscious membership. In their case, people are committed to the group in question and usually know its members personally. Thus, this kind of collective is probably much smaller than that referred to by Stewart.

A second criterion for classifying the strands of literature derives from the goals the groups are pursuing: The capability approach is in general mainly concerned with well-being. The literature on collectives point to the positive instrumental role groups play in promoting the well-being of disadvantaged people. Sen (1985c) holds that the capability approach is especially apt for assessing well-being, but that humans usually have goals beyond their own well-being. These 'agency goals' differ widely from person to person as they encompass commitments to groups, political convictions and 'the morals' more generally. According to Sen (1999d) commitments may drive a wedge between a person's choice and her well-being, thus it is important to distinguish well-being and agency. Collectives play an important role in exercising agency hence contributing to the constitutive role of democracy by providing spaces for public deliberation. Some collectives mainly aim at improving the well-being of their members, others mostly at strengthening their agency. This is the second classification criterion.

The paper then surveys the literature and distinguishes five main strands classified according to the criteria. Collective capabilities are but one way to conceive groups from a capability perspective.

The classification frame can also be applied to the participatory research process followed in the project RE-InVEST. Some problems of doing participatory research on the subject of social policy and within a huge third-party-funded project are highlighted.

The conclusion summarises the main findings and shows how the various approaches complement each other in explaining various aspects of reality.

## Preface

I would like to thank Francesco Laruffa and Jérôme Pelenc who gave me some advice on the paper during their stays as scholars in residence at the IFZ in 2016. My thanks for the funding of this program go to the University of Salzburg. I would also like to thank Gunter Graf who has commented on the paper in several stages. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss earlier versions of the paper with the RE-InVEST consortium at our meeting in Turin and with some German-speaking colleagues during our Fachgespräch (workshop) on social investment. The ground for this paper was laid in another project of mine and I would like to express my gratitude for discussions and encouragement to my former colleagues in GeNECA.

# Contents

<b>List of tables</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>List of figures</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1. A framework for classifying capability-approaches to collectivity</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1 Characterising collectivities	9
1.2 Well-being and agency goals	10
1.3 The resulting framework for approaching collectivities from a capability perspective	11
<b>2. Capability and collectivity – a survey</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 Individualism, structures of living together and horizontal inequality	12
2.1.1 Structures of living together (Deneulin)	13
2.1.2 Group capabilities and horizontal inequality	14
2.2 Collective capabilities	15
2.2.1 Collective capabilities – conceptual development	15
2.2.2 External and joint capabilities	18
2.2.3 Disputing collective capabilities	19
2.3 Rationality, commitment and identity	20
2.3.1 Collective intentionality and identity	20
2.3.2 Commitment and actions	22
2.3.3 Public reasoning or self-determination as collective capabilities	22
2.4 Debating methodological individualism	23
2.4.1 The debate on methodological and normative individualism in development studies	24
2.4.2 Group identity in economics	25
2.4.3 Relational capabilities	25
2.4.4 Social and relational ontology	26
2.5 The duality of structure	27
<b>3. Applying the framework to RE-InVEST</b>	<b>29</b>
3.1 Characteristics of the collectivities the project focuses on	29
3.2 Aims with regard to well-being and agency	30
<b>4. Conclusion</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>34</b>

# List of tables

Table 3.1 WP 3 vulnerable groups affected by the crisis

30

# List of figures

Figure 2.1	Strands of the capability-literature on collectivity	12
Figure 2.2	Conceptualising interactions between the individual and collective levels in the CA	17

# Introduction

*The conception of the individual as a very 'private' person - unconcerned about the rest of the world - has been seen, in my judgement rightly, as both empirically unrealistic and theoretically misleading. Sen (1985b)*

In their appreciation of Amartya Sen's contribution to development thinking Frances Stewart and Séverine Deneulin (2002) also broached a fundamental critique of the capability approach. They argued that the capability approach was too individualistic and asked for incorporating 'structures of living together' in the capability approach since only collective action could effectively counter prevailing market forces. In the same issue of the *Journal of Development Studies*, Peter Evans (2002) introduced the notion of 'collective capabilities' and established a close link of the term with collective action. The notion of 'collective capabilities' appeals to many scholars of the capability approach in making the idea explicit that the approach has to take note of the role of collectivities in enhancing people's lives. The notion has inspired much research – and debate. The notion is contested since most scholars of the capability approach also agree on its 'ethical individualism' (Robeyns 2005) holding that situations should be evaluated according to the individual well-being they offer. Further, there is no agreed-upon definition of the term collective capability but rather a number of competing conceptions. What they have, however, in common is an orientation towards social change (as Alkire, 2008 already noted).

The debate has been summarised by Robeyns (2005), Alkire (2008) and Godfrey-Wood and Mamani-Vargas (2016). A brief overview of the literature on collectivities in the capability approach has been provided by a Maitreyee issue edited by Leßmann and Roche (2013). The literature has expanded further since and the subject deserves a more comprehensive survey of the various approaches that have been suggested to account for the importance of collectives for human development. This paper aims at providing such a survey. It also aims at broadening the perspective and going beyond the literature on 'collective capabilities' highlighting the various strands of the debate. For example, by mentioning the term 'methodological individualism' in their seminal article, Stewart and Deneulin triggered a debate about whether the capability approach adheres to methodological, ethical or ontological individualism. Furthermore, Sen's writings about commitment and identity are obviously related since the prime example of commitment is that to a group who shares certain goals. Thus, there is an overlap with the well-developed philosophical literature on collective intentionality. In contrast to that, Stewart's notion of 'group capability' does not relate to groups defined by a shared intention, but rather to 'horizontal inequality'. Adding to these strands there are related debates on aspirations, adaptive preferences, identity, agency, empowerment, institutions and social development.

The many strands of the debate on how to refer to collectivities in the capability approach may soon lead astray without a clear frame of what is at issue. This paper is concerned with Sen's version of the capability approach and collectivities. After developing a framework for classifying the various strands of the debate according to the concept of collective and to the goals the collective is striving at in Section 1, Section 2 uses the framework to survey the various strands of literature along the four classes built in the framework. Section 3 applies the framework to analyse the empirical approach in the research project RE-InVEST. Section 4 concludes.

# 1. A framework for classifying capability-approaches to collectivity

In order to get a grip on the various strands of the debate on the role of collectives in the capability literature this paper introduces a framework that looks at the various forms of collectives on the one hand and on the goals pursued by or assigned to these collectives on the other hand. The first criterion regards the nature of the ‘collectivity’-part in the concept while the second one the ‘capability’-part in the concept. Other classifications may be possible, but this paper shows the forceful analytical power of this classification.

## 1.1 Characterising collectivities

The notions of ‘collective’ and ‘collectivity’ are very broad. Collectives range from small groups with face-to-face interaction to big groups that are characterised by some common feature. Even ‘a society’ may be regarded as a collective, but while this seems to mostly refer to the society of a nation state there may be different definitions of societies as well.

The size of the collective is an important characteristic that governs other features. In particular the nature of interaction differs a lot: Face-to-face interaction is only possible in small groups such as families, local cooperatives, clubs and associations. Bigger groups that extend their geographical reach beyond narrow borders will need different forms of interaction such as written documents and modern devices for telecommunication. The extent to which they have shared goals will also differ: Small groups such as families often pursue more than one goal together and share a lifestyle whereas associations are usually formed for the pursuit of one or a small number of particular goals such as doing sport together, campaigning for a particular idea or professional exchange. On the basis of a particular goal collectives are even formed on the international level. As Sen (Sen; 2005: 9) has pointed out, the anti-globalisation movement is ‘perhaps the most globalised moral movement in the world today’. Whatever the size of the collective the examples given in this paragraph all refer to collectives that share a common goal. Speaking of a collective often refers to such groups which are built by members who voluntarily enter the collective because they share the common goal. These are collectives from an internal point of view.

Yet, there are also collectives that are based on the ascription by others and are not formed by voluntary membership. Societies of a nation state or any regional demarcation are an example for this, but also ethnic and religious groups into which the members are often born. The same is true for groups formed by those who share a certain physical feature such as sex or being blue-eyed, etc. Of course, since these collectives sometimes appeal to the solidarity of their members or have rites that confirm membership as is the case in most religions, it is not always clear whether or not they pursue common goals. In any case they have a characteristic in common which allows calling them members of a collective from an external point of view.

Within the literature on the capability approach collectives have been discussed in both ways: The notion of collective capabilities (Evans, 2002; Ibrahim, 2006; 2013) usually employs the idea of collectives formed on the basis of voluntary membership whereas the notion of group capabilities introduced by Stewart (2005) refers to ‘culturally determined groups, groups that have salience for their members and/or others in society’ (Stewart, 2009: 316). Groups formed by voluntary membership can best be identified from an internal point of view. Empirical studies in this case often investigate the motivation to take part in the group and the

effects on the members. Often these studies use a qualitative research design whereas groups whose members can be identified from an external point of view on the basis of a common socio-demographic characteristic can be studied with a quantitative research design.

Hence, the first distinction I suggest for classifying capability approaches to collectives is the nature of the collective: Those which are formed by voluntary membership and defined from an internal point of view mostly refer to small groups. They differ profoundly from groupings done from an external point of view where membership is assigned on the basis of some shared characteristic. The latter may also refer to broad classes of people or big collectives to which their members need not adhere. Yet, defining groups in this way is useful for showing some structural features of societies and the way in which having some characteristic may influence a person's ability to live a good life.

## 1.2 Well-being and agency goals

While the capability approach is mainly an approach to the understanding and definition of persons' well-being, it is also concerned with people's freedom to choose a life they value and have reason to value (Sen, 1999b). This freedom is related not only to well-being in the sense of (material) standard of living, but also to deliberating about ends in life or what John Rawls has called the 'moral powers' of persons. Sen (1985c) has suggested to distinguish between well-being and agency along these lines: Well-being refers to the standard of living of a person. There is widespread agreement about some essential constituents of well-being 'ranging from such elementary things as being adequately nourished, being in good health, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, etc. to more complex achievements such as being happy, having self-respect, taking part in the life of the community and so on' (Sen, 1992: 39). These are examples for functionings which serve as the metric of the capability approach. Sen holds that while 'both well-being and agency involve various functionings' (Sen, 1987: 59), 'the space of functionings may be rather restrictive [in the case of agency], since the person's goals may well include other types of objective' (Sen, 1993: 37). For distinguishing between well-being and agency goals, Sen (1987: 28) refers to the distinction between sympathy and commitment: Acting for reasons of sympathy, e.g. caring for someone, aims at well-being whereas acting for reasons of commitment is a case of agency. A major difference between the two is 'that behaviour based on sympathy is in an important sense egoistic' (Sen 1999d: 92) or self-interested (Sen, 2009: 189). Commitment, in contrast, 'drives a wedge between personal choice and personal welfare' (Sen, 1999d: 94).

Commitments usually refer to other-regarding goals and may be in conflict with personal well-being as in the example of a person who sits on a bench next to a river eating a sandwich when she observes someone falling into the river and decides to rescue the other person (Sen, 1985c: 206). Rather than being in line with narrow self-interest, this action is motivated by the person's commitment to the value of human life. Agency and commitment are confined to following motives 'closely connected with one's morals' as Sen (1999b, 93) explains. He further draws a close link between agency, commitment and groups, by pointing out that groups 'provide the focus of many actions involving commitment' (Sen, 1999b: 106). The examples Sen gives for groups people are committed to comprise 'families, friends, local communities, peer groups, and economic and social classes' (Sen, 1999b: 85).

To sum up: well-being goals are specific whereas agency goals are not tied to one type of aim; thus there is broader agreement on the constituents of well-being than about agency goals; the concern for well-being is in some ways self-interested whereas agency goals usually refer to others and a person's commitment to a group. Yet, there are many interdependencies between the two (Leßmann, 2011: 56).

While Sen has drawn a direct link between agency and involvement in groups, the literature on collectivity need not focus on the agency aspect: Many writings such as that on collective capabilities and that on group capabilities focus on the effect of group-membership on well-being. There is, however, also a large literature that focuses on Sen's term of commitment such as Davis (2004) and Cudd (2014). Furthermore, the debate about methodological versus ethical or ontological individualism triggered by the initial contribution of Stewart and Deneulin (2002) is not restricted to the goal of improving well-being, but concerns the question of human interaction in a more general sense.

### 1.3 The resulting framework for approaching collectivities from a capability perspective

The two criteria for classifying approaches to the issue of collectivity from a capability perspective hence yield a 4-fields matrix:

	definition of collective	
	external	internal
well-being	A	B
agency	C	D

There are works analysing externally defined collectives with regard to their effects on individual well-being (A) and others looking at the agency of these groups (C). Similarly, internally defined collectives may aim mainly at improving the well-being of their members (B) or highlight their importance for the agency of their members (D). However, while it is possible to restrict the analysis of an externally defined group to well-being aspects, it is much less straightforward to restrict the analysis of internally defined collectives to the well-being aspect since there is commitment to this group involved. Indeed, some of the works on collective capabilities try to capture the interdependency between enhancing people's agency and their joint work on improving their well-being.

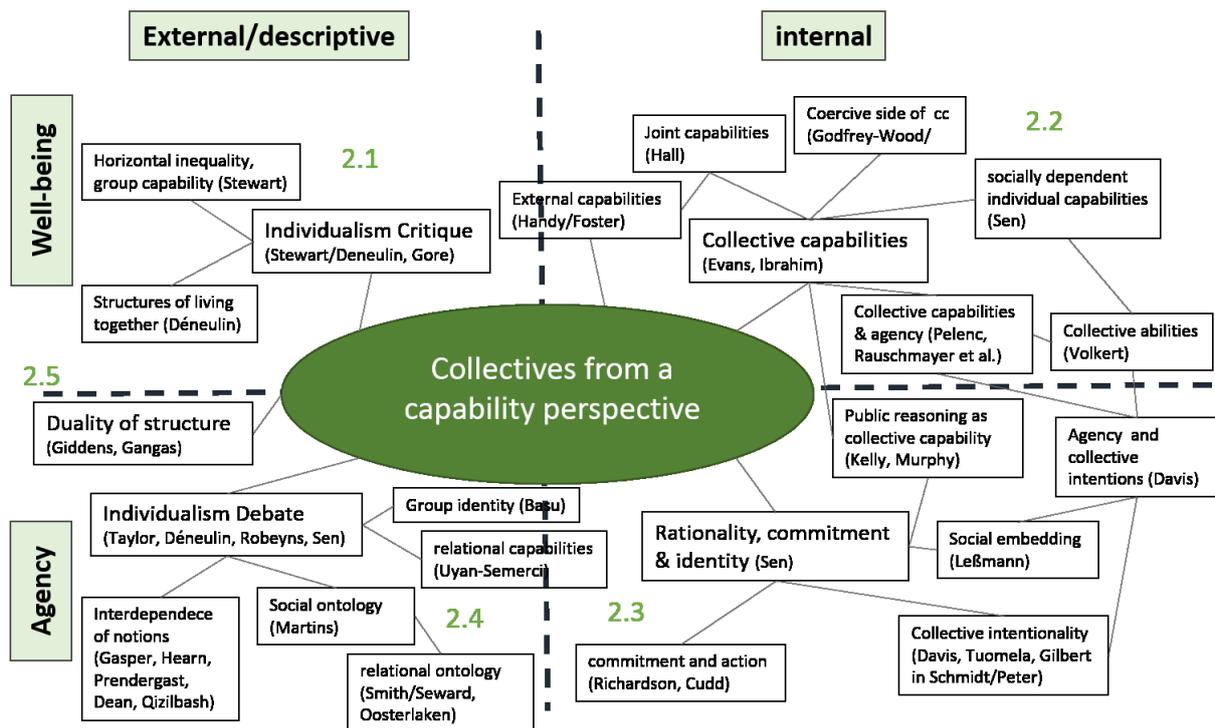
It is also possible to highlight the way in which collectives are defined: The analysis of collectives' effects on their members' individual well-being may be done by observing membership from an external point of view (A) or on the basis of people's avowal of their membership (B). If the avowal takes the form of an official membership in a church, a party or similar formal associations, the membership may well be observed from the outside. At the same time, as long as the members have an instrumental attitude towards membership, internally defined collectives do not really share a common goal but use the group to pursue their individual goals. Analysing the agency effects of externally defined groups (C) means to take the standpoint of a distant observer on people's interaction whereas analysing agency of internally defined collectives (D) shifts attention to members' joint deliberation about issues concerning their morals.

## 2. Capability and collectivity – a survey

In the following the various ways how the capability approach has been related to collectivity will be introduced using the framework outlined in the last section. Thus the guiding questions are: (1) How is the collective defined: from an external or internal point of view? (2) Is the work mainly concerned with the link between collectives and well-being of people or with their agency?

The survey starts with the seminal critique of Stewart and Deneulin and their divergent proposals how to overcome the individualistic bias of Sen’s capability approach (2.1). Then the suggestion of collective capabilities by Evans in response to their critique and the various conceptualisations are presented in Section 2.2. Section 2.3 focuses on Sen’s writing on commitment and how it was linked to theories of collective intentionality. Section 2.4 takes the debate about various forms of individualism – methodological, normative, ontological, and ethical – as the starting point and discusses social ontology as a perspective on the capability approach and collectivity. Finally, Section 2.5 is concerned with the idea of agency within structure or the duality of structure. Figure 2.1 summarises the survey.

Figure 2.1 Strands of the capability-literature on collectivity



Source: Own drawing

### 2.1 Individualism, structures of living together and horizontal inequality

As stated in the introduction, the discussion about the right way to deal with collectives in the capability approach started with an article by Stewart and Deneulin where they criticise ‘the individualistic orientation’ of Sen’s capability approach (Stewart & Deneulin, 2002, 66). They identify two problems arising from this

orientation: First, they claim that the capability approach is an example of methodological individualism (see Section 2.4) and does not acknowledge the existence of irreducible social goods – taking up a criticism of Gore (1997). Deneulin has elaborated this critique and argued for introducing the concept of ‘structures of living together’ for amending the approach in several articles (Section 2.1.1). Secondly, they criticise that the capability approach does not pay enough attention to political economy. They argue that seeing individuals as separate actors precludes the recognition of collective action as a countervailing power to the power of large transnational corporations. This critique of Sen’s positive attitude towards markets reverberates in the contributions of others (Evans, 2002; Gasper, 2002; Prendergast, 2005; O’Hearn, 2009; Dean, 2009; Prendergast, 2011) (see as well Section 2.4.1). Stewart and Deneulin (2002: 69) further argue that Sen views groups in a purely instrumental way. This is the starting point of Stewart’s empirical work on horizontal inequality (Section 2.1.2).

### 2.1.1 Structures of living together (Deneulin)

Following Gore (1997), Deneulin (2008) endorses his claim that the capability approach is individualistic in the sense that it does not value irreducible social goods intrinsically. Thus she follows him also in establishing a link to communitarian thinking, more specifically to the concept of irreducibly social goods brought forward by Taylor (1990). Taylor has pointed out that much of economics adheres to methodological individualism because this is inherent in welfarism. While Sen (1985a) has criticised welfarism mainly because of the utility-metric and partly because of its consequentialism, Taylor sets out to criticise the idea that the ‘utilities ... are those of individuals’ (Taylor, 1990: 45). He is not concerned with Sen’s capability approach. It is Gore who applies Taylor’s argument about irreducibly social goods to Sen’s capability approach and argues that since it assigns the metric of functionings to individuals and does not attach intrinsic value to social goods, it is flawed in the same way as utilitarianism – without, however, saying that the capability approach is an example of methodological individualism. Deneulin and Stewart are the ones who draw this link.

Taylor takes ‘culture’ as a central example for irreducibly social goods and Gore (1997, 246) echoes this by claiming that it would be ‘difficult to apply the [capability] approach for assessing inequality in individual well-being within multicultural societies’. Deneulin (2008) adopts this view. She defines an irreducibly social good as ‘a good irreducible to any individual component or characteristic’ that yet ‘remain[s] a component of individual lives’ (Deneulin, 2008: 110). She proposes to use the notion ‘structures of living together’ introduced by Paul Ricoeur instead of irreducibly social goods since it suggests that living together ‘constitutes the condition under which individual human lives may flourish’ (Deneulin, 2008: 110-11). Structures of living together further refer to a particular historical community. As Taylor and Gore she refers to examples involving the idea that there needs to be a structure like a language<sup>1</sup> or a culture in order to give words and acts a meaning (Deneulin, 2008: 111). Though she acknowledges that Sen in fact recognises the importance of democratic freedom for individual capabilities (Deneulin, 2008: 109, 112) she argues that in order to understand why different democratic states do not promote human flourishing to the same extent, it is necessary to look at the underlying structures of living together. These would explain ‘the successes and failures of countries to promote the capabilities that people have reason to choose and value’ (Deneulin, 2008: 112). She backs up her claim with an example from Costa Rica.

Though Deneulin does not repeat the claim that the capability approach is an example of methodological individualism, she goes beyond Gore’s critique by arguing against ethical individualism (see 2.4), i.e. the idea that ‘only individuals are the units of moral concern’ (Robeyns, 2005: 107). In Deneulin’s (2008: 114) view this ‘leads to an excessive focus on existing individual lives’. She thus insists that structures of living together need ‘to be assessed because they are good for individuals’ and ‘according to whether they promote the collective structures which help individuals to flourish’ (Deneulin, 2008: 114). However, it remains unclear

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, Taylor (1990: 50) invokes Wittgenstein who discusses the non-decomposable nature of language in his *Philosophical Investigations* (see 2.5 as well).

whether this demand amounts to including structures of living together along with functionings in any evaluation of individual well-being or rather to highlighting their role and importance as an additional requirement for well-being.

Responding to Deneulin and Stewart, Sen (2002b: 80) points out that in his view methodological individualism amounts to seeing individuals as ‘detached’ or ‘separated’ from their social surroundings. He disputes holding this view by pointing to his recognition of the role of democratic understanding and value-formation. In *The Idea of Justice* Sen (2009: 246) repeats and elaborates his response by saying that one would ultimately have to draw on individual evaluation ‘while recognising the profound interdependence of the evaluation of individuals who interact with each other’. Deneulin replies by insisting that it ‘is not a matter of ‘inter-dependence’ but of co-constitution’ (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010: 510). She disputes Sen’s (2009: 246) view that by valuing people’s ability to take part in social life the capability approach puts enough importance to the life of society itself. Deneulin and McGregor (2010: 509) rather demand to introduce ‘living well together’ as the ‘telos’ or aim of freedom. They accuse Sen of an ‘unshakable faith in human reasoning’ and see a need for acknowledging ‘explicitly how the inevitable conflicts that arise from people’s different conceptions of wellbeing are ultimately to be resolved’ (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010: 513). However, it remains unclear how introducing ‘living well together’ as the aim of freedom helps achieving this.

Answering the two guiding questions for classifying this approach to collectivity, I take Deneulin to be concerned (1) with collectives from an *external* point of view. She describes collectives as the entities that share a structure of living together, independently of whether their members identify with the collective or not. With regard to question (2) her approach is focused on *well-being* although a major concern is the influence of structures of living together on the values of people. In her view these should be directed towards living well together and enhancing well-being.

### 2.1.2 Group capabilities and horizontal inequality

Stewart takes the critique into a different direction than Deneulin. She advocates investigating ‘group capabilities’ which she defines in different ways: ‘Group capabilities include the resource access ... of the group’ as well as ‘the way the group operates and the resulting impact on members of the group’, they ‘belong to groups even though the groups are made up of individuals and the behaviour of the group affects individuals’ (Stewart, 2005: 199–200). The last characterisation mirrors Deneulin’s characterisation of irreducible social goods as not being reducible to any individual component but remaining components of individual lives from the group’s point of view. Stewart (2005: 200, 186) gives the following examples: ‘a political system, a university, traffic rules or language, a family or a hockey team’ as well as identities related to ethnicity, gender, age, sporting interests, professional qualifications, a political party, a housing association or a mothers’ association.

In her analysis, Stewart (2005: 190) highlights three important ways how group membership affects individual well-being: because they ‘affect people’s sense of well-being’, because ‘groups are important instrumentally’ and because they ‘influence values and choices’. Hence, in contrast to Deneulin she does not challenge the idea of ethical individualism. She rather suggests an empirical research program starting from the observation that ‘a central source of group conflict is group difference in access to economic resources or political power, or *horizontal inequalities*’ (Stewart, 2005: 192). She goes on to indicate how she will apply this concept empirically: ‘These group capabilities are made up of individual capabilities - indeed, they are the average of the capabilities ... of all individuals in the selected groups - but the focus here is on group achievements and inequalities (or horizontal inequalities)’.

She has started this line of empirical research and has inspired others to follow her (Ranis, Stewart & Samman 2006; 2007; Stewart, 2008; 2009; 2010; 2016). Horizontal inequalities, she clarifies, ‘are inequalities among culturally determined groups, groups that have salience for their members and/or others in society’ (Stewart 2009, 316). In particular, she has fruitfully applied the concept for analysing violent conflicts among groups in multi-ethnic societies (Stewart, 2008). She advocates employing the concept of capability ‘broadly defined’ in order to go beyond a strictly individualistic list of capabilities and identifies four dimensions of

capability in which horizontal inequality is relevant: ‘political, economic, social and cultural status’ (Stewart 2009, 317–18). Finally, she shows horizontal inequalities to be more persistent than vertical inequalities and concludes that members of deprived groups have less chance for social mobility than members of richer groups. In consequence horizontal inequalities are harder to escape from than inequalities that are not group related (Stewart, 2009: 318-19).

Answering the two guiding questions I assign Stewart’s approach to the same category as Deneulin’s despite all their differences: (1) Although Stewart motivates her approach by the importance of groups for individual identity – or their salience, she needs to categorise groups from an *external* point of view for her empirical work. (2) Her main concern is *well-being* while she highlights that inequalities between groups are often at the heart of violent conflicts and hence trigger a form of agency.

## 2.2 Collective capabilities

The term ‘collective capability’ was suggested by Evans (2002: 56) since he regards collectives as a necessary link between individuals and the overall social context. Many others have followed him in using this term (Ibrahim, 2006; Ballet, Dubois & Mahieu, 2007; Dubois et al., 2008; Pelenc, Bazile & Ceruti, 2015; Griewald & Rauschmayer, 2014) (Section 2.2.1). The papers linking the term to agency (Davis, 2015), public reasoning (Kelly, 2011) and self-determination (Murphy, 2014) are summarised in Section 2.3. Other scholars have introduced different but related notions like ‘external capabilities’ (Foster & Handy, 2009) or ‘joint capabilities’ (Hall, 2016) (Section 2.2.2). Furthermore, some have argued against the term and suggested other notions like ‘socially dependent individual capabilities’ (Sen, 2002b) or ‘collective abilities’ (Volkert, 2013) or have pointed out the social embedding of institutions (Rauschmayer, Mock & Omann, 2017) or the coercive side of collective capabilities (Godfrey-Wood & Mamani-Vargas, 2016) (Section 2.2.3).

### 2.2.1 Collective capabilities – conceptual development

When suggesting the term ‘collective capability’ Evans (2002: 56) points out that ‘for the less privileged attaining development as freedom requires collective action’. He draws a close link between freedom and the collective level. His first example of a collective capability is the capability of choosing since it depends on public discussions and interchange – collective endeavours to which Sen attaches a lot of importance.

Evans (2002: 56) further seems to identify collective capability with the ‘opportunity to join peers in collective action’ and emphasises that it has both intrinsic and instrumental value. The examples he gives for collectives mainly stem from the political sphere: ‘unions, political parties, village councils and women’s groups’ (Evans, 2002: 56) and he highlights the importance of ‘politically potent’ and ‘purposive organisations’ that go beyond ‘naturally occurring forms of associational life – as in families and neighbourhoods’ (Evans, 2002: 57). His use of the term remains highly ambivalent: When he maintains that ‘[i]ndividual capabilities depend on collective capabilities’ he presupposes collective capabilities to exist independent or prior to individual ones. Whereas his definition of collective capability as an ‘opportunity to join peers in collective action’ can be read as an individual capability to take part in collective action and thus points to the dependence of collective capabilities on individual ones. He does not take the concept much further but expresses his view that Sen’s capability approach ‘is a foundation that must be built on, not just admired’ (Evans, 2002: 59).

Ibrahim (2006) is the first who systematically introduces the concept of collective capabilities. She defines them as ‘the newly generated functioning bundles a person obtains by virtue of his/her engagement in a collectivity that helps her/him achieve a life he/she has reason to value’ (Ibrahim 2006, 398) She goes on to specify two criteria for identifying collective capabilities: They ‘are only present through a process of collective action’ and ‘the collectivity at large ... can benefit from these newly generated capabilities’ (Ibrahim, 2006: 398, 404). The former criterion is close to Evans’ idea of having the opportunity to join peers and his emphasis on collective action. With regard to the latter Ibrahim argues that collective freedoms constitute the new range of choices gained as a result of collective action. She gives two examples for this

(Ibrahim, 2013: 404–5): (1) if a group of women fight female genital mutilation, they will not only fight for themselves but for all women who might suffer genital mutilation. In the same way (2) self-help groups may benefit others in the area. She further argues that this need not lead to a reduction of freedom of other groups in the area as others have claimed, but that it is possible to increase overall collective freedoms. The reference collective of collective freedom is unclear in Ibrahim's concept: Does collective freedom refer to the collective who campaigns for this freedom or does the freedom – always - refer to the collectivity or society at large, i.e. does collective freedom always apply beyond the group who advocates it?

Concerning collective actions Ibrahim (2006: 406-7) highlights that they are (1) instrumentally valuable, (2) intrinsically important for value formation, (3) they reinforce collective freedoms and vice versa and (4) the ability to take part in collective action can be seen as a capability itself. However, she also says that group affiliation may have negative effects if the group norms are restrictive. Collective action need not foster human capabilities, but may to the contrary nurture conflicts. Hence, she searches for criteria for identifying groups that are based on cooperation and pursue a common social goal and lists 10 criteria for successful self-help groups. Furthermore she discusses the difficulties of group formation among the poor (lack of assets, self-respect, power, ...) and argues that though they mostly appear as obstacles to group formation they constitute incentives for it at the same time.

Ibrahim (2006: 410) finally sketches an analytical framework for collective capabilities drawing links between individual capabilities, individual endowments and social capital to collective action and institutions and then to collective agency, collective capability and collective functionings amounting to increased 'individual and communal well-beings'.

In later contributions (Ibrahim, 2008; 2013) she expands on the issue of collective agency and states the concept of collective capabilities more precisely. In particular, she qualifies the nature of involvement as a necessary condition for generating collective capabilities as '*free and voluntary* participation of the collectivity members' (Ibrahim, 2013: 7). In her later contributions she draws a closer link between collective capabilities and the 'exercise of human agency' alluding to Sen's ideas on sympathy and commitment, well-being and agency (Ibrahim, 2008: 73-74).

Answering the two guiding questions, (1) the concept of collective capability in both Evans and Ibrahim highlights the voluntary nature of group membership by tying it to collective action. Ibrahim (2006: 407; 2013: 11) further explains that self-help groups should be small in size. Thus the concept takes an *internal view* of collectives. As regards the goals pursued by the collectives (2) the emphasis lies on *well-being* although the role of commitments and the role of groups in value formation is discussed.

### **2.2.1.1 Sustainability, agency and collective capability**

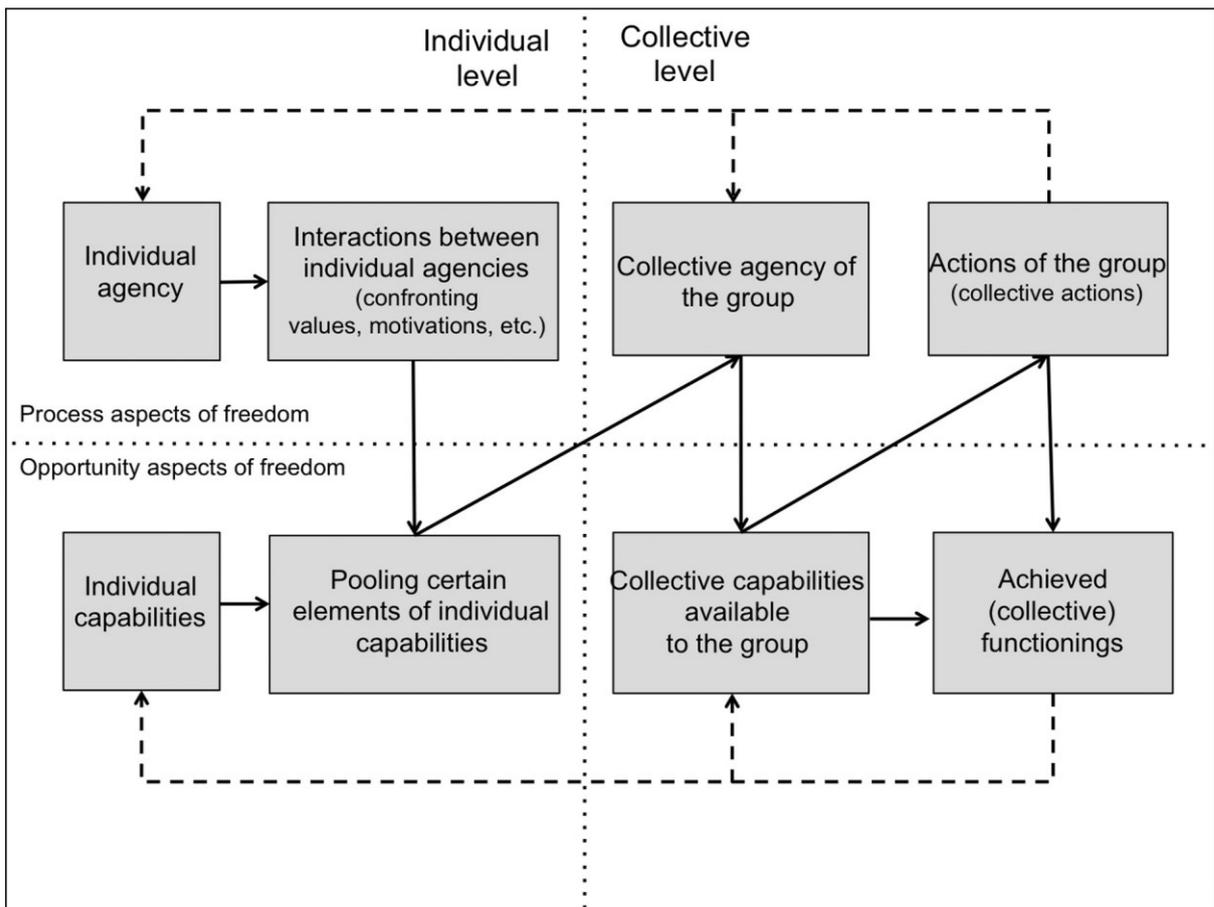
Several scholars have become interested in the issue of collectivity in the capability approach in the course of applying it in the field of sustainability. A major problem of sustainable development is the tension between its collective nature - support and actions on all collective levels is needed in order to achieve sustainability - and the marginal impact of the individual who always faces a strong incentive for free-riding. Hence, to demand 'sustainable' behaviour from individual seems like 'morally overburden' individuals. One way to avoid this lies appealing to the collective (Leßmann & Rauschmayer, 2013).

Hence it is in their book on social sustainability that Ballet, Dubois and Mahieu (2005) first argue for the importance of taking into account personal responsibility for 'structuring' or coordinating one's capability. They assign part of the individual capability to collectives since responsibilities and obligations express 'social interactions' and these result in collective capabilities (2007: 197). However, their remarks on agency, the allegedly missing reference to personal responsibility in the capability approach and their model or idea of a 'capability structure' remain cryptic and sketchy.

Pelenc et al. (2013) elaborate on this and state that 'collective capabilities emerge from social interactions guided by a shared representation of responsibility' (Pelenc et al., 2013: 88). Pelenc, Bazile and Ceruti (2015) further develop a framework linking individual and collective agency and capability illustrating it with an application to participatory action research. They highlight the importance of collective discussion and deliberation for developing a sense of responsibility towards others and sharing certain values. If these

discussions result in a convergence of values, further social interaction is going to follow and may lead to collective action based on these shared values (Pelenc et al. 2013, fig. 1). To put collective action into practice, group-building needs to take place. One crucial step in this process is the pooling of resources. Thus, group members provide some of their private resources (and powers in the case of social relations) for the collective action. From this (new) collective capabilities emerge that may be exercised in collective action, just as Ibrahim (2006) has suggested. The interesting point in this framework is that it links the preconditions of individual capabilities - namely resources and conversion factors - to the collective level as well as individual and collective agency. Figure 2.2 (Pelenc et al., 2013: 230) tries to disentangle the interdependence between these concepts.

**Figure 2.2 Conceptualising interactions between the individual and collective levels in the CA**



Source: (Pelenc et al., 2013: 230)

By pointing to the importance of collectively shared values and goals Pelenc and his co-authors clearly take an *internal view* of collectives (1). At the same time with respect to question (2) the formation of shared values and intentions can be regarded as an agency-goal. However, the ultimate goal of the collective still is collective action in order to improve individual and collective *well-being* as they point out quoting Ibrahim.

### 2.2.1.2 Collective in analogy to individual capabilities

One way of interpreting collective capabilities is to envision them in analogy to individual capabilities as the outcome of collective resources and collective conversion factors. The collective body is taken in this model as an individual actor. The internal decision procedures and struggles for power within the collective are not taken into consideration. Griewald and Rauschmayer (2014) use this interpretation of collective capabilities to analyse an environmental conflict between different collective actors such as administrative units and

NGOs. Pelenc, Bazile and Ceruti (2015) follow them in this regard. By treating the collective body as a single actor the collective capability is assigned to the whole collective thus implying that all members of the collective enjoy the capability to the same extent. This is in line with the theoretical demands put forward by Sen ((2002b) see 2.2.3), but can be questioned in view of differences in powers and roles. However, the authors found the analytical distinction between resources and conversion factors useful even on the collective level in order to understand the environmental conflict (Griewald & Rauschmayer, 2014: 37) or the options an NGO has (Pelenc, Bazile & Ceruti, 2015: 234).

This interpretation assumes a collective identity without necessarily adhering to an *internal* or *external view* (1). It is concerned with *organisational well-being* (2).

## 2.2.2 External and joint capabilities

### 2.2.2.1 External capabilities

Somewhat independently of the concepts explained so far, Foster and Handy (2009) develop the concept of external capability.<sup>2</sup> They propose the term ‘external capabilities’ ‘to describe cases in which a person is able to achieve additional functionings through a direct connection with another person.’ (Foster & Handy, 2009: 364) and give the following examples: (a) A farmer who has no access to internet himself relies on a friend for getting information on the crop prices in nearby markets in order to gain a better price for his products. (b) Children’s health depends much on what their mothers do such as instruct the children in basic hygiene, follow the courses at the local health centre and so on. In both cases the achievement is brought about through another person, but these examples fall short of being collective capabilities since only two persons are involved. Furthermore, the external capability only refers to one of the two while the capability of the other is not affected or restricted, i.e. the farmer with internet access retains this access even if he stopped to share his information with the other farmer; the health capability of the mother does not depend in the same way on the actions of her child as it is the case reversely. Foster and Handy (2009: 370-71) briefly discuss these differences to group or collective capabilities while acknowledging the similarities.

Hence, (1) they question whether external capabilities refer to a collective at all, but the relationship between the persons is on a *voluntary basis*. They are mainly concerned (2) with the effect of external capabilities on the *well-being* of people.

### 2.2.2.2 Joint capabilities

Similar to the concept of external capabilities Hall’s (2016) conception of joint capabilities does not refer to (larger) collectivities. Referring to Gilbert (1996) she ties the concept to collective intentions and argues that joint capabilities are situated on a ‘meso-level’ between individuals and collectives (Hall, 2016: 9). In particular she applies the concept to the family as the unit of analysis, but also allows for smaller groups. There are three defining characteristics: (1) the values are held communally, (2) joint agency is employed to pursue shared goals and (3) the benefits of these activities are distributed within the group. Hence, her concept contrasts with Ibrahim’s in that the benefits need not be ‘new’ and they can be distributed (rather than enjoyed collectively like a public good).

Thus, small groups with shared intentions enjoy joint capabilities, this is the (1) description of the group from an *internal* point of view. Although Hall speaks about agency, the main aim of joint capabilities is to foster *well-being* of group members.

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<sup>2</sup> This term is unfortunate since Nussbaum (1988) used the same term for referring to external conditions of exercising one’s (internal) capabilities. However, she later changed this to ‘combined capabilities’ (Nussbaum, 2000).

### 2.2.3 Disputing collective capabilities

In his response to Evans (Section 2.2.1) Sen (2002b: 85) has argued that his notion of collective capabilities is misleading and would better be replaced by ‘socially dependent individual capabilities’ since the intrinsic satisfactions occur in *individuals’* lives. Sen considers the possibility of ‘genuine collective capabilities’ and gives some examples such as ‘the capability of a world nuclear power to kill the entire population of the world’, ‘the capability of the Hutu activists to decimate the Tutsis’ and the ‘capability of humanity as a whole ... to cut child mortality’ (Sen 2002b: 85).

Ibrahim (2006, 404) interprets Sen’s idea of collective capabilities to refer to the global in contrast to the local level. I believe this is a misinterpretation since Sen’s (2002b: 85) main argument is that collective capabilities ‘in the genuinely integrated sense’ are not a part in any individual’s lives or ‘within any individual’s capability’. These phrases are similar to the way public goods are characterised in economics as being indivisible in production and by the impossibility or inefficiency to exclude others from consumption (Mueller, 1979: 13). Public goods can be global as the impact of rain forests on global climate or local as the fireworks during a celebration. In both cases it is impossible to exclude people in a certain region from consuming the good even though the fireworks may not be seen at a larger distance.

The definition of public goods as goods ‘that must be provided in the same amount to all the affected consumers’ (Varian, 1993: 580) seems to guide the implicit critique of Foster and Handy ((2009) see 2.2.2) who classify their concept as not referring to a collective on the basis of the asymmetry in benefitting from external capabilities. This may also be a criterion to judge if there are ‘genuinely’ collective capabilities.

Looking at the kind of groups Sen has in mind, it seems that answering question (1) he takes a more *external* point of view (and in this regard Ibrahim’s reaction points to an important difference indeed). Concerning goals (2), both Sen’s notion of ‘socially dependent individual capabilities’ as well as his examples for genuinely collective capabilities are concerned with *well-being*.

#### 2.2.3.1 Collective abilities

Starting with a discussion of Sen’s (1999b: 18-19) understanding of an agent as ‘someone who acts and brings about change’, Volkert (2013) expands on the notion of ‘agency’ by distinguishing between direct and indirect agency success. He thus takes account of Sen’s view that a person need not directly control matters in order to enjoy freedom such as the freedom from Malaria. Hence, indirect agency success refers to a situation when a person benefits or indirectly controls an institution. In particular, he views public reasoning envisioning a ‘government by discussion’ (Sen 2009: 324) as a form of indirect agency.

Volkert follows Sen (2002b) in his critical assessment of the notion ‘collective capability’ and suggests instead the notion ‘collective ability’ defined as the ‘potentials and outcomes that groups provide’. Furthermore, he argues that collective abilities help to achieve ‘durable empowerment’ (Drydyk, 2008; 2013), i.e. the power to achieve what group members actually value.

The notion of collective abilities thus mainly refers to groups (1) defined from an *internal point of view*, but links (2) *well-being outcomes* with *agency processes*.

#### 2.2.3.2 Collectives embedded in social institutions

In order to investigate the effects of community currencies, Rauschmayer, Mock and Omann (2017) develop a model of collectives that takes three layers of collectivity into account: the individual, collectives and institutions beyond the individual’s control. They build on Volkert’s (2013) distinction between direct and indirect control (see 2.2.3.1) and make his distinction between collectives and institutions more explicit. They then use the model to analyse the effects of collective agency – both direct and indirect – on individual well-being as well as individual and group agency. In particular, they argue that the individual’s perception of what is within or beyond her or his control will change. Institutions may be regarded beyond the individual’s control, but as a member of a group the individual may reassess her or his power and see a collective influence thereby broadening the perceived area of power.

Hence, Rauschmayer, Mock and Omann (2017) are concerned with collectives (1) from an *internal point of view*, and discuss both the effects of collectives on (2) *well-being* and *agency*.

### 2.2.3.3 Coercive side of collective capabilities

Godfrey-Wood and Mamani-Vargas (2016) look at three different social institutions in the Bolivian Altiplano in order to explore the relationship between individual and collective capabilities for the indigenous population: political institutions at village level, festive events and evangelical churches. These social institutions enable the communities to solve public problems by imposing obligations on their members. Godfrey-Wood and Mamani-Vargas highlight that the collectives demand specific behaviour such as contributing money and food to the festive events and drinking together that has some negative consequences for social cohesion. In particular they argue that some members of these communities commit to the strict rules of evangelical churches in order to escape some of these rites, thus choosing one set of collective rules over another or balancing them. They forcefully point to the negative side of collectives as not only enabling but also restricting the individual.

The analysis is concerned with collectives (1) from an *internal point of view* and discusses (2) some negative consequences on *well-being*, but it also shows the *individual agency* of members to use the various collective institutions in order to balance their demands.

## 2.3 Rationality, commitment and identity

In a famous paper Sen (1999d) criticised the behavioural assumptions of economic theory summarised in rational choice theory. Using Adam Smith's distinction between sympathy and commitment he argues that while relations to others based on sympathy may be taken into account as an argument in the utility function, rational choice theory cannot accommodate commitments. He thus called the homo economicus a 'rational fool'. The distinction between sympathy and commitment is also the core of the distinction between well-being and agency (Section 1.2). Later, Sen expanded on the idea of commitment as forming identity. He advocates the idea of multiple identities (Sen, 1999c; 2007) that refer to the manifold commitments such as being a mother - commitment to family, singing in a choir - commitment to a group, being a vegetarian - commitment to an idea, etc. In his seminal article, Sen (1999d: 94) pointed out that commitment 'drives a wedge between personal choice and personal welfare'. When introducing the distinction between well-being and agency he pushed this idea further and claimed that commitments may even drive a wedge between personal choice and personal goals insofar as 'the pursuit of private goals may well be compromised by the consideration of the goals of others in the group with whom the person has some sense of identity.' (Sen 1985c: 215) Thus, Sen holds that commitment to a group may lead a person to deviate from her own goals in favour of some goals she shares with the group. Pursuing the issue further, he compiled a collection of essays on 'Rationality and Freedom' (Sen, 2002a). In the introduction he distinguishes 'four aspects of the self' concerning welfare, goals, choice and reasoning. While he had discussed the deviation of personal choice from personal welfare and from personal goals before, he adds a fourth aspect of the self that is related to reasoning and critical scrutiny: 'A person is ... an entity that can examine one's values and objectives and choose in the light of those values and objectives.' (Sen, 2002a: 36) He emphasises that '[t]his type of reasoning ... has a social basis' which has been discussed by Kant, Smith and Rawls already (Sen, 2002a: 40). In this context, Sen (2002a: 41) discusses the possibility that '[t]he *unit of agency* in choice can itself be broader than individual action' since '[w]e sometimes act as a member of a group (e.g. 'we voted for our candidate') without seeing it as primarily an individual act (e.g., 'I voted for our candidate').'

Hence, Sen looks at commitments as the basis for (1) *voluntary involvement in a group* and (2) *agency*.

### 2.3.1 Collective intentionality and identity

In 2004 Fabienne Peter and Hans-Bernhard Schmid organised a workshop bringing philosophers and economists together for an exchange on Sen's ideas on rationality and commitment. They edited a book containing the contributions (Peter and Schmid, 2007). In particular, several philosophers working on the subject of collective intentions related this idea to Sen's understanding of rationality and commitment.

Schmid (2007) put Sen's work on commitment 'beyond self-goal choice' into the context of the philosophical literature on collective intentions. He argues that shared group goals are indeed not one's own, but also not those of someone else. Identifying with shared goals does not need to be self-eliminating, i.e. does not need to mean identifying with a specific other person or role (Schmid 2007, 219). It can also be self-contextualising as being part of a group. The goals are those of the group and belong to the group and to all members of the group, but they are not 'private' goals. The 'togetherness is *irreducible*' (Schmid 2007, 221). Thus Sen's claim that people sometimes choose goals that are not their own can be understood.

Gilbert (2007) very briefly refers to Sen, agreeing with his thesis that commitment needs to be accommodated as part of human behaviour. She then explains her own work. She distinguishes two kinds of 'collective action'. The first amounts to a coordination problem, the second involves what she calls 'joint commitments' (Gilbert, 2007: 264-68; 2015) (see Hall, 2016, Section 2.2.2). Like Schmid she highlights that joint commitments are commitments of the group and not conjunctions of 'personal commitments' (Gilbert, 2007: 264). Collective agency arises from joint commitments of the members of the collective: 'in order for a collective to act its members must correctly understand their situation in a certain way and their behaviour must in part be explicable in terms of this understanding'. Hence, 'collective agents ... *act through* their members'. (Gilbert, 2007: 271)

Tuomela (2007) does not refer to Sen's work directly but to game-theoretic accounts of cooperation and social choice theory. He, too, stresses the importance of shared intentions and advocates distinguishing between 'I-mode' and 'we-mode' reasoning. Though cooperation is possible in I-mode, the individuals cooperate because they believe cooperation to be conducive to their (private) goals. In we-mode the members of the group cooperate because they have a shared goal they want to achieve jointly. Tuomela suggests that goals and standards need to be attributable to groups in we-mode but holds that 'groups are not persons in the literal sense' (Tuomela, 2007: 234). He differentiates the I-mode further in 'pro-group I-mode' and 'plain I-mode' (Tuomela, 2007: 244; Hakli, Miller & Tuomela, 2010). The pro-group I-mode is concerned with promoting the group's interests without seeing the group as the primary agent. Yet, the 'group's action must be based on its members' action' with each doing their part 'in satisfying the group's preferred alternative' (Hakli, Miller & Tuomela, 2010: 296-97).

Thus, Schmid, Gilbert and Tuomela all emphasise that groups can be seen as agents with collective intentions that cannot be reduced to personal or private intentions (see as well Section 2.4.4.1 on related work). Like Schmid, Davis (2007) links Sen's work on aspects of the self and identity to the literature on collective intentions. If social identity takes the form of identifying with others and sharing goals with a group, Sen's claim that people have multiple identities raises a question about their personal identities, i.e. about their staying the same while identifying with various groups and taking on various roles such as being 'Italian, a woman, a feminist, a vegetarian, a novelist, a fiscal conservative, a jazz fan, and a Londoner' (Sen, 1999c: 14). Davis views the capability to have a personal identity that coordinates a person's multiple social identities as a central capability. He thereby uses the notion 'capability' in a sense different from Sen's who refers to the capability as the set of options consisting of functioning bundles. Choosing among multiple identities or coordinating them is not the same as choosing among different beings and doings. Choosing among identities is prior to choosing between actual functionings. It may be seen as a part of preference formation (cf. Hakli, Miller & Tuomela, 2010).

In a recent paper, Davis (2015) further links the basic idea of commitments as shared or collective intentions to the concept of collective capability as brought forward by Evans (2002) (see Section 2.2.1). To Evans he ascribes a view of groups and of collective capabilities that is similar to the self-elimination way of identifying with others described by Schmid (see above). Davis speaks about 'fully integrated groups'. According to Davis, Sen highlights the self-contextualising identification that allows people to be simultaneously members of various groups. Davis says this is a view of groups as not fully integrated. He claims that there is an interpretation of 'individually dependent collective capabilities' which can be reconciled with Sen's views. However, it remains unclear if Evans can be accused of holding the view of groups as 'fully integrated' and what, in fact, Davis' interpretation of collective capabilities is. The main point he makes is

that of mutual influences between the individual and the collective in the course of time. He thus emphasises the process aspect.

In sum, it seems that Sen's notion of 'commitment' can be interpreted in terms of collective intentions. Collective intentions go a long way to explain collective behaviour without necessarily introducing the concept of collective capability. The various authors offer different notions that allow distinguishing between personal and collective goals and thus give rise to a differentiated understanding of how groups come about and can exercise agency. The contributions are concerned with (1) *groups from an internal point of view* and (2) *agency*.

### 2.3.2 Commitment and actions

Pettit (2005) disputes Sen's idea that commitment may lead people to choose goals not of their own because this contradicts folk psychological explanation of action. The explanation given by Schmid, Tuomela and Gilbert (see Section 2.3.1) does not convince him since 'the goals endorsed in common with others are still goals we each endorse' (Pettit, 2005: 20). He distinguishes between 'goal-modifying commitments' that alter one's own goals due to "broader values" and 'goal-displacing commitments' that lead a person to take guidance from the goals others espouse (Pettit, 2005: 18). Pettit (2005: 19) says the latter is highly implausible while the former can be incorporated into rational choice theory.

Richardson (2011) and Cudd (2014) refer to Pettit's distinction but stick to Sen's arguments by offering a richer description of how goals motivate action. With reference to game-theory Cudd points to situations where we do better by following rules and norms of a group even if we do not endorse these norms in order to satisfy our own preferences (Cudd, 2014: 47-48). She then distinguishes two types of agency: autonomy-agency and identity-agency. The first is directed towards the agent's own goals while the latter is other-goal directed. Identity-agency may take the form of acting in line with group-norms even when the agent himself has not explicitly embraced these norms. Cudd (2014: 51) calls this a 'tacit commitment' and claims that it is a 'goal-displacing commitment'. 'They are externally created and imposed, but internalised in the behavioural patterns of individuals.' (Cudd, 2014: 52) It is a kind of agency because it is norm-governed, but it does not involve deliberation and is not intentional (as Pettit demands of agency).

Richardson (2011) takes a different route to reconcile the folk-psychological explanation of action with Sen's idea of commitment. He refers to the Aristotelian notion of an end and distinguishes goals from ends arguing that they invoke two different kinds of counterfactuals. Goals as conceived as motives for action induce orderings over outcomes while a chain of ends takes the asymmetric or hierarchical form of pursuing an end for the sake of another - more final - end. Richardson (2011: 230) argues that ends are constitutive of a person's conceptions of the good and will regulate which actions are in line with these conceptions. The notion of an end is thus closely tied to the idea of reasoning and scrutiny that Sen develops in *The idea of justice* (and it also relates to the concept of identity that Cudd has used). According to Richardson (2011: 233-34) 'commitments can be different from acting in pursuit of a goal, and yet consistent with folk-psychological facts' if the Aristotelian idea of an end is used to explain why actions may deviate from self-goals.

Insofar as commitments constitute groups and are concerned with agency this literature stays in the field of (1) *voluntary membership in collectives* and (2) *agency*.

### 2.3.3 Public reasoning or self-determination as collective capabilities

In response to the publication of Sen's *The idea of justice*, Kelly (2011: 299) argues that public reasoning should be seen as a 'collective capability of a social group to bring about changes that enhance individual freedom'. She does not refer to the concept of collective capability by Evans or Ibrahim (see Section 2.2), but mentions Gilbert on collective intentions. She points out that 'collective' relates to both institutional agents and joint efforts of individuals. Kelly (Kelly, 2011: 306-8) places the collective capability of public reasoning between Rawls' ideal of a full overlapping consensus and what Rawls describes as a mere *modus vivendi* arguing that

though public reasoning need not lead to a full consensus it allows some approximation of positions and gives more legitimacy than the *modus vivendi* of contemporary practice. She exemplifies her ideas with the global public discourse on human rights and with the US-American discourse on same-sex marriage.

In a similar vein Murphy (2014) focuses on what he calls ‘political self-determination’ as a collective capability. In contrast to Kelly, he refers to the literature on collective capabilities and defines it as ‘a freedom which is only available to, and exercisable by, individual human agents working together as part of a group or collective’ (Murphy, 2014: 323). He claims that Sen himself has alluded to if not developed in full this definition. He admits that Sen and Nussbaum do not speak about this collective capability but holds that they ‘cannot but assume that this individual capability [of political self-determination] is to be realised within a freely self-determining political community’ (Murphy, 2014: 324). Thus the individual capability depends on the collective one. Murphy illustrates his argument with the situation of indigenous peoples around the world whose collective political self-determination is often limited by the rules of governance, usually set by another, dominant group. In analogy to Sen’s (1999a) work on democracy Murphy points to the intrinsic, instrumental and constructive value of collective political self-determination. However, he only briefly considers the critique that there is ‘a diversity of perspectives on the meaning and value of self-determination amongst indigenous peoples’ (Murphy, 2014: 328) and does not discuss the tension between individual and collective self-determination for some members of the community.

Although both papers do not refer to Sen’s idea of commitment, they discuss public reasoning as a collective frame of people’s judgments thereby alluding to the concept that Sen sketches as an alternative to the narrow concept of rationality. Hence, both papers present ideas that relate to (2) *agency*. They assume groups to have shared values explicitly in Kelly’s case and implicitly in Murphy’s. Thus they seem to refer to (1) *voluntary membership*, but not necessarily to a small group (Kelly).

## 2.4 Debating methodological individualism

The critique of the capability approach as too individualistic was first brought forward by Gore (1997) with reference to Taylor (1990) who blames economics to adhere to methodological individualism. This is a recurrent debate as Arrow’s (1994) discussion of the pro and cons of methodological individualism shows.<sup>3</sup> Answering the critique by Stewart and Deneulin (2002) Sen (2009: 244) quotes Lukes (1968) in order to direct attention to the difficulties of defining methodological individualism.

Methodological individualism is sometimes factorised in ontological and explanatory individualism. The former states that only individuals and their properties exist and all social events are nothing more than complexes thereof. The latter claims that all social phenomena can be explained in terms of individuals and their properties. Robeyns (2005; 2008) holds that the capability approach does not support either ontological or methodological individualism but is ethically individualistic. She defines the latter as the postulate ‘that individuals, and only individuals, are the ultimate units of moral concern’ (Robeyns, 2008: 90). The feminist reasoning behind ethical individualism is a point of agreement between Robeyns and Nussbaum (2000: 55-56) who introduces the ‘principle of each person as an end’. In order to see women as persons and not to subsume them under the household feminists should endorse ethical individualism. However, for recognising care and social relations they should also reject methodological and ontological individualism, Robeyns argues (2008). Thus she claims that the former need not coincide with the latter although the two individualisms may coincide.<sup>4</sup> In fact, there has been a debate in development ethics on this issue (Section 2.4.1).

Basu (1996; 2010; 2013) has taken the idea of identity as a challenge for (methodologically individualistic) economics and develops a model that takes account of social relations (Section 2.4.2). Based on Nussbaum’s

3 Arrow (1994: 4) calls game theory ‘the current formulation of methodological individualism’ and Hakli, Miller and Tuomela (2010, 298) also point out that game theory relies on methodological individualism. This is why they judge it to fall into ‘I-mode’ thinking (see Section 2.3.1).

4 Gasper (2002: 453) has put this question forward to Robeyns. Burchardt (2006: 6) also holds that it is possible to combine ethical individualism with methodological pluralism.

approach Uyan-Semerci (2007) has investigated women's capabilities in the suburbs of Istanbul in Turkey. To my knowledge this is the only contribution to the debate that exclusively refers to Nussbaum. For a comprehensive survey Section 2.4.3 is reserved for this contribution. Furthermore Section 2.4.4 summarises the social and relational ontological interpretations of the capability approach.

In general, collectives are defined negatively in this debate as something that is excluded by methodological individualism. This is a rather abstract definition of collectives that may pertain to externally or internally defined groups (1). Insofar as methodological individualism aims to understand agency (Heath, 2015) the debate is about agency rather than well-being (2).

#### **2.4.1 The debate on methodological and normative individualism in development studies**

The critique of methodological individualism by Gore (1997) may also extend to ethical individualism as Gasper (2002: 453) states. He has put the question forward that Robeyns answers negatively by claiming that it is possible to endorse ethical individualism without methodological or ontological individualism. In opposition to her, Prendergast (2004; 2005; 2011) thinks that Sen's capability approach is methodologically individualistic. She concedes that Robeyns may be right in claiming that it is impossible to speak meaningfully of the well-being of a group as distinct of the well-being of the group's members, but argues that this is not true for freedom and hence for capability. She demands 'the abandonment of methodological atomism' (Prendergast, 2004: 53) and reads Sen's (2009, chap. 11) statement that it is individuals who think, choose and act as a defence of 'his methodological individualism' (Prendergast, 2011: 217).

Similarly, O'Hearn (2009) sees Sen's capability approach as supporting what he calls 'possessive individualism' (O'Hearn, 2009: 13) and characterises as defining freedom by security of property. Both Prendergast (2004; 2005) and O'Hearn base their view on Fine's (2004) reading of Sen who has argued that the predecessor of the capability approach – the entitlement approach – is 'profoundly neutral with respect to social relations and the historical specificity' of entitlements. Given Sen's writings on commitment and identity (Section 2.3) this view is founded on a lopsided reading of parts of Sen. Although he clearly has a positive view of markets as a forum for making choices (Leßmann, 2011b), Sen does not advocate the market as an institution. He rather criticises some theories of justice for their 'transcendental institutionalism' (Sen, 2009) and refrains from giving strict advice on the ideal shape of the market. Prendergast - who presents a detailed analysis of the development in Sen's thought on freedom and markets (Prendergast, 2011) - takes the missing advice - falsely, I believe - as evidence for a neglect of the social and historical fabric of markets (Prendergast, 2011: 213).

In a related article - although without direct reference to the quoted ones - Qizilbash (2014) investigates if 'modern philosophical accounts of well-being [are] excessively "individualistic"' and takes the capability approach as one example of such a modern account of well-being. He distinguishes methodological from 'normative' and 'moral individualism'. His definition of 'normative individualism' is based on Taylor (1990) and Raz (1986) and takes it to be the view that 'all goods are goods for individuals and that any collective goods only have instrumental value' (Qizilbash, 2014: 176). The first part of it comes close to Robeyns' term of 'ethical individualism', but since it refers to goods and not to individuals as the unit of moral concern, the two individualisms are distinct. Qizilbash (2014: 185-86) comes to the conclusion that the capability approach preserves 'core elements of normative individualism'. In particular, he points out that the capability approach does not attach intrinsic value to social forms or culture, but argues that this need not be seen as problematic. The reason for this is mainly its emphasis on freedom as Qizilbash says: Sen (2004) addresses the question of cultural heritage and points to positive as well as negative roles of culture for a person's well-being. He contrasts these 'with reliance on free and informed choice' and a 'democratic commitment' (Sen, 2004: 55-56).

Hence, a core reason for Sen to stick to 'normative individualism' is his scepticism against ascribing an intrinsic value to social forms and culture. Since it may lead to the neglect of individual opposition to certain aspects of a culture, he emphasises the priority of individual choice particularly in this regard. So this debate

is about external ascription of group-membership (1) and agency (2) in the sense of decision on group-membership.

#### 2.4.2 Group identity in economics

In response to the recurrent discussion on methodological individualism in economics (Arrow, 1994), Basu (1996; 2008) has engaged in this discussion. He has also gone beyond individualism while sticking to the formalistic methods of economics (Basu 2010; 2013). He acknowledges that this may still seem close to methodological individualism, but points out that introducing the concept of identity ‘alters the way we reason in economics’ (Basu 2013: 335). When modelling other-regarding behaviour and productivity, Basu needs not assume differences between groups or individuals to get the model going. Rather, his models are driven by the identity ascribed to a person. Concerning other-regarding behaviour Basu (2010) shows first that there may be domino-effects so that if one person chooses not to cooperate, a new equilibrium of non-cooperation emerges. Second, he shows how in-group cooperation may be detrimental to all those who do not belong to the group that cooperates to exploit the others. With regard to productivity and the capability of people, Basu (2013) shows that there is often a self-fulfilling conjecture at work such that if all people believe that whites are better entrepreneurs than blacks they will indeed make more profit than blacks, not because of their innate talents but rather because they have better access to capital. He thus advocates affirmative action that aims at breaking this kind of self-fulfilling prophecies (Basu, 2013: 335).

Hence, Basu is explicitly concerned with external ascription of group identity (1) and how this influences a person’s agency freedom (2) and, in turn, her well-being.

#### 2.4.3 Relational capabilities

Uyan-Semerci (2007) provides a qualitative analysis of the capabilities of women who migrated from rural parts of Turkey to the suburbs of Istanbul. She calls them subaltern to hint at their inferior position in relation to their family. By speaking with these women on the ten central functional capabilities from Nussbaum’s (2000: 78-80) list she aims at testing the list in order to contribute to reaching the ‘reflective equilibrium’ that Nussbaum strives at (Uyan-Semerci, 2007: 204). She briefly discusses the issue of ethical individualism. While she does not question the cogency of ethical individualism, she reminds us ‘to acknowledge how well-being depends heavily on other people’s well-being’ (Uyan-Semerci, 2007: 205). She asserts that the women she interviewed ‘conceived autonomy and agency in relational terms and not in terms of the ‘autonomy of the individual’ (Uyan-Semerci, 2007: 206). At the same time she emphasises that the women even under their very restricted conditions tried to make some changes if mainly to enhance the capabilities of their children – and thus carry out agency.

These findings pose a challenge to ethical individualism insofar as it is difficult to judge individual achievements if the persons do not see them as such. Yet, Uyan-Semerci mainly takes her findings as a challenge of Nussbaum’s political liberalism. In particular she disputes the idea of distinguishing between a political and a comprehensive conception of the good. She further questions the role of religion in Nussbaum’s work.

Through linking her discussion of women’s agency with the debate on methodological individualism, Uyan-Semerci’s empirical work shows that the women she interviewed conceive themselves not as individuals but as part of the family. It can be questioned whether this constitutes a voluntary commitment since they obviously conceive this as their given role in God’s order and have internalised the constraints they face. Due to the internalisation their group-membership is also not an external ascription per se (1). The qualitative research was geared towards identifying agency and empowerment, but also well-being as such (2). So the answers to both questions are mixed.

#### 2.4.4 Social and relational ontology

Rather than disputing (ontological) individualism some scholars have interpreted the capability approach from a social or relational ontological point of view.

##### 2.4.4.1 Social ontology

Most notably, Martins has argued that the capability approach of Sen is best understood as an exercise in ontology. He claims that Sen is mainly concerned with ontological questions such as: ‘What is well-being?’, ‘What is capability?’ and ‘What is a functioning?’. This kind of questions is guiding an ‘enquiry into the nature of being’ and thus social ontology (Martins, 2007a: 42). This school of social ontology is also known as ‘critical realism’. Martins takes Sen’s work not to ‘engage in substantive theorising’ but to focus on the ontological description although Sen does not acknowledge doing so (Martins, 2007a: 37). More specifically, Martins draws an analogy between Lawson’s category of ‘causal power’ and Sen’s concept of ‘capability’ (Martins, 2005), and he views the ontological category of ‘structure’ to be present in Sen’s approach to social norms since they cannot be reduced to the atomistic interaction of agents in Sen’s account (Martins, 2007a: 48). Thus, the core of Martins’ argument with regard to individualism is that Sen has a social ontological understanding of the world that is opposed to ontological individualism (Martins, 2011: 3).<sup>5</sup>

Later on Martins (2009) further draws a link to the social ontology of Searle and his view of collective intentionality (independently of the work on collective intentions and commitment presented in Section 2.3.1). He describes how people form habits on the basis of social structure, but shows that the social structure need not be reproduced (by strict rule-following), but can be transformed by human agency. These ideas have been developed by Archer (2000; 2007) based on Giddens’ (1984) concept of ‘agency within structure’ (Section 2.5). Martins argues that the idea of ‘multiple identities’ present in Sen ‘presupposes a conception of a structured individual’ (Martins, 2009: 339). The developed social rules form a structure that enables and constrains individual agency. (This may thus constitute what Martins calls an ‘open system’ in his earlier work.)

Martins (2005; 2007a; 2007b; 2009; 2011; 2013) provides an interesting interpretation of Sen’s capability approach and draws a link to critical realism that constitutes an important school in philosophy of the social sciences. I would like to question the claim that Sen does not make any substantive points but stays on the level of (ontological) description.

In answering the two questions posed throughout this paper, Martins is opposed to methodological individualism and thus allows for group influences on an abstract level (1). He discusses mainly human agency understood as the transformation of systems rather than human well-being (2).

##### 2.4.4.2 Relational ontology

Smith and Seward (2009) develop an ontology of relational society based on Martins’ (2005; 2007a) view of capabilities as causal powers. They ask whether there is a coherent way to ‘incorporate the social’ in the capability approach and ‘argue that the capability approach implies a *relational* notion of society’ (Smith & Seward 2009: 221). This idea is driven by distinguishing between the roles and positions a society offers and the individual who chooses to fulfil a role. Rather than determining the behaviour of the individual a role or position will prompt some response by the individual. They even establish a link to some ‘form of methodological individualism [that] does not reduce society to individuals, but rather places the individual in relation to the social structures in which he is embedded’ (Smith & Seward 2009: 228). Being embedded means that the social structure shapes the individuals, their incentives and opportunities and how they perceive their situation. This comes close to the ideas about identities and collective intentions (Section 2.3.1).

Seward and Smith (2009: 221) claim that their relational conception of society has to be distinguished from (Giddens’) structuration theory without explaining this claim in much detail (see Section 2.5).

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5 In this article Martins misquotes an article of mine (Leßmann, 2011b), supposing that I deny a causal role of social relations or see them as oversocialised approaches. Rather than that I dispute the idea that Sen’s approach is best read as an example of the social ontology of Lawson and his system-view that I call oversocialised.

Central to the relational account is the interpretation of capabilities as the result of individual and structural mechanisms. Following Martins they view capabilities as potentials that may or may not be realised and define functionings as ‘the realisation (outcomes) of the activation of these causal mechanisms’ (Smith & Seward 2009: 218). By this definition the social ontological interpretation of capability is more in line with Nussbaum’s terminology than with Sen’s (Leßmann, 2007). Nussbaum develops the idea that human beings have innate ‘basic capabilities’ that have to be practiced and developed to become ‘internal capabilities’ which can be exercised as ‘combined capabilities’ if favourable ‘external conditions’ are present (Nussbaum, 2000: 84–85). In contrast to that Sen (1993: 38) defines capabilities ‘derivatively from functionings’ as a set of (multidimensional) bundles of functionings. Capability in his use of the terminology is a potential in the sense that the individual has to choose from the capability set but one combination of functionings.

Building on Martins’ and Smith and Seward’s social ontological account of the capability approach Oosterlaken (2011) sets out to incorporate technology in the capability approach as part of the context and thus of the social structures in which individuals are embedded. Her main point (following the critical realist Lawson) is that technical artefacts are best understood by looking how they expand human capabilities (Oosterlaken, 2011: 427). She briefly discusses methodological individualism and agrees with Smith and Seward that a form of *methodological* individualism may be recommendable even though *ontological* individualism (that is usually seen as an element of the former, see beginning of Section 2.4) is rejected. Without mentioning *ethical* individualism her argument seems to be that in order to comply with *ethical* individualism it is recommendable to use a *methodology* that focuses on individuals.

Hence, in contrast to Martins these authors allow for methodological but not ontological individualism. While discussing group affiliations as abstract as the former they are concerned with the relations between individuals and externally describe how these relations are constitutive for groups (1). Further, they are more concerned with explaining the possibility of agency rather than viewing groups as the basis for well-being (2).

## 2.5 The duality of structure

As Holmwood (2013: 1171) rightly states ‘sociology is the one discipline that has remained relatively immune to [Sen’s] influence’ – and, I may add, vice versa. Sen has been interviewed by Swedberg (1990) for his book on economics and sociology as early as 1990, but it seems that only recently the interest in exploring the common issues of the capability approach and sociology is rising. (One exception is to be seen in two European research projects - Eurocap and Capright - that were led by French economist Robert Salais and had many sociologists involved who published also on the issue at hand: see for example Zimmermann (2008) and Bartelheimer, Büttner and Schmidt (2011) as well as Kremakova’s (2013) review of the difficult relation between sociology and the capability approach.)

A sociological theory that bears some obvious links to the capability approach but is only now discovered as an important reference is Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Giddens has even used the word ‘capability’: ‘Action depends upon the capability of the individual to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs ... An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability ‘to make a difference’, that is, to exercise some sort of power.’ (Giddens, 1984: 14) Thus, he pictures the human agent as knowledgeable and competent as Ballet et al. (2007: 92) point out. In particular, individuals must know a lot about the structure and institutions of society in order to exercise agency. But their knowledge is mostly practical knowledge that does not amount to ‘discursive consciousness’ and hence they will not be able to express verbally what is motivating their actions. Yet, they will be able to act, to use their knowledge of the rules of behaviour, language and so on in order to change the pre-existing state of affairs (Kießling 1988, 291). In this way they may contribute to the reproduction of the structure or may transform it. Hence, structure is a

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Martin Schütz for reading and discussing the book with me as well as for pointing out the German summary provided by Joas and Knöbl (2004: 405–29) that proved extremely helpful for understanding the essence of Giddens’ theory. All errors in presenting the theory are mine.

precondition and an enabling factor for agency while it is at the same time constraining agency by structuring the 'usual' and accepted paths of behaviour.

Archer (1982: 456-57) views Giddens' structuration theory as aiming at overcoming three dichotomies: (a) between determinism and voluntarism of individual agency within structure, (b) between subject and object by assigning a major role to the knowledgeable ability of people and (c) between statics and dynamics. She blames Giddens for conflating agency and structure with a bias towards agency (Hvinden & Halvorsen, 2017: 3) and develops 'morphogenesis' as an alternative. In contrast to Giddens' structuration theory Archer's 'morphogenesis' allows for dynamics and endorses the social ontological idea that structures have an existence independently of the actors involved. This is why Martins (Section 2.4.4.1) as well as Smith and Seward (Section 2.4.4.2) refer to her theory of a dynamic relationship between structure and agency. Structures predate actions that may reproduce or transform the structure in an interaction. The outcome of this interaction is a (transformed) structure. Hence, there is a clear notion of time involved.

Giddens' use of the word 'capability' has inspired Gangas (2016, fig. 2) to position Sen in between Parsons and Giddens. He claims that Sen shares the normative orientation with Parsons: 'Even though 'capacity' appears in Parsons' systems theory in a cybernetic sense ..., it retains an agent-centric normative core' (Gangas, 2016: 30). However, Gangas (2016: 31) argues that in order to tie the notion of change to the individual it was necessary to shift from capacity to capability as Giddens does, even though this happens 'at the cost of discarding the normative parameters'.<sup>7</sup>

Hvinden and Halvorsen (2017) take a different route of linking the capability approach to Giddens' structuration theory. They are referring to Sen's conception of conversion and Robeyns' summary presentation of conversion factors as a way to link agency and structure. They ask whether conversion may also be seen as enabling or constraining 'active agency'. This is a concept that has been developed in order to facilitate the empirical application of Giddens' theory of agency within structure and covers the process of reflecting, evaluating one's experience and responding to the conditions in such a way that may also transform structures. Further, they emphasise that the resulting achieved functionings may enter and change future capability sets. They illustrate their ideas by exploring the prospects of people with disabilities to participate in society on an equal basis with others. While they discuss the distinction between Giddens and Archer and point out that the concept of 'active agency' moves the theory of structuration closer to Archer's critical realism, it remains unclear why and how far they remain in the tradition of the theory of structuration.

In fact, Smith and Seward (2009: 228) also mention Coleman (2000) in their plea for 'a form of methodological individualism' since in his visualisation of the macro-micro-linkage he reminds us that the macro-level structures result from micro-level decisions. I have used his visualisation for highlighting the role of individual freedom of choice in poverty alleviation (Leßmann, 2011b: 456). The main difference between all these sociological theories about 'agency within structure' seems to be the underlying epistemological and ontological beliefs rather than their vision of interaction between micro- and macro level in the course of time.

This abstract type of theory makes room for collectives without clarifying if the individual needs to identify with the collective or if membership is assigned externally (1). It is mainly concerned with the conditions of agency rather than well-being (2).

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7 I wonder what normative parameters are present in Archer's as well as the social ontological work.

### 3. Applying the framework to RE-InVEST

This paper has been written as part of the research project RE-InVEST that aims to evaluate the social investment policy of the European Union from a human rights and capability perspective. To this end the research consortium developed a Participatory Action Human Rights and Capability Approach (PAHRCA) methodology (Murphy and Hearne 2015). Research groups were set up in 12 European countries. The PAHRCA methodology was applied in all the countries. Yet, varying degrees of participation were achieved depending on the specific local constellation of researchers, NGOs and participants as well as the topic chosen.

The topics all relate in some way to social investment policy. The general idea of social investment is to ‘invest in people’ so that they can help themselves. In contrast to former social policy paradigms such as the neoliberal ‘making work pay’ or the conservative of workfare, rights and duties (Nicaise 2016; Nicaise and Schepers 2013), welfare payments are seen as potential investments that will pay off in the long run. Instead of viewing individuals in dire straits in need of compassion, they are seen as potentially productive members of society who may need some support in navigating the complex features of today’s economic and social system. The aim of social investment is social cohesion. Proper investment relies on an analysis of common features of individuals who need support and what support is best. Hence, identifying groups of people sharing some characteristics is crucial for applying this paradigm.

As Nicaise (2016) points out there is the narrow economic interpretation of social investment that focuses on human capital formation and aims at improving well-being by employment and a broader interpretation of investing in people in order to enhance their capability to lead a life they value and have reason to value. RE-InVEST takes the latter view and thus aims to take account of people’s ideas of a good life. Hence the participatory approach.

This section applies the scheme developed in Section 1 to the participatory research process and reflects on the appropriateness of PAHRCA for investigating social investment policies.

#### 3.1 Characteristics of the collectivities the project focuses on

The empirical part of the project started with analysing which groups have been particularly affected by the economic and financial crisis of 2008-09. This kind of analysis is close to Stewart’s (2.1.2) approach to group capabilities. The group is defined from an *external* point of view regardless of members’ identification with this characterisation of the group. These are the groups identified as particularly vulnerable and hit by the crisis:

**Table 3.1 WP 3 vulnerable groups affected by the crisis**

Cluster	Country	Group
Unemployment	Austria	Older job seekers
	Germany	Long-term unemployed people
	Portugal	Young people
	Switzerland	Early school leavers
Migration	Belgium	Newly arrived immigrants in Flanders
	France	African immigrant women living in suburbs
	Romania	Romanian migrants
Health issues	England	Mental health care users
	Latvia	People with disabilities
	Italy	People with health problems
Housing issues	The Netherlands	Households that have difficulties with making ends meet
	Scotland	Lone parents
	Ireland	Homeless people

Source: Own compilation

The project further proceeded to recruit participants for participatory research groups from this spectrum. This decision was partly guided by the prior analysis and partly by more practical questions such as finding an NGO for cooperation in order to comply with research ethics (Murphy & Hearne, 2015). The participatory research was mainly done in these small groups. Participation was voluntary. However, some of these groups started out as a set of people who did not know each other while others consisted mainly of an existing group and could build on mutual acquaintance. Nevertheless, the groups mostly did not start with a group identity, much less an identity based on the characteristics on which they were chosen. They rather started as research groups.

The participatory process involved some steps of trust-building and interactive methods (Murphy and Hearne 2015) which in some cases led to a degree of group identity. Furthermore, the research methodology subscribed to participatory *action* research hence including a joint action of researchers and participants. This can be seen as an instance of collective action characterising group formation from an *internal* point of view. Yet, as the group formation took place in the context of a research project the groups were set up as temporary groups, probably ending when the research finished. In the scheme presented in Section 1 the role of time in group-building has been neglected. For the research process it is important to keep the temporal aspect in mind.

The action part of the participatory research usually aims at voicing the concerns of the group as *representatives* or *examples* of the social group they were chosen to represent in the first place. Insofar as this is true the perspective is changed from an *internal* point of view to an *external* one.

### 3.2 Aims with regard to well-being and agency

The initial aim of the participatory research in RE-InVEST was to identify the ‘social damage’ of the crisis. Though this includes effects concerning the efficacy of collective agency and the impact on solidarity and trust, the main focus was the deterioration of people’s well-being. However, by listening to them, recognising their deprivation in contrast to others but also by raising awareness of their rights and capability the research had an empowering effect on participants as most of the research groups reported (see e.g. Lace & Rungule, 2016; Greener & Lavalette, 2016; Rovere 2016).

The material well-being of participants has not really been affected by research since the payment they got essentially covered their expenses. Of course even the food offered during the research meetings may have helped some participants to get by in this time, but had no sustainable effect. Hence, the empowerment

is mainly linked to strengthened agency: the experience of being heard, of being respected, of having rights and a voice. The immediate improvement of participants' lives was not in terms of improved well-being or standard of living, but in terms of recognition and respect as the basis for agency. Yet, strengthened agency also has a positive effect on well-being because of the experience of self-efficacy. With regained confidence problem-solving is generally enhanced. This can help to overcome some of the deprivations.

However, the aim of the research was not to solve the problems of individual participants but rather to understand their deprivation as a result of interaction between individual and collective features with the institutions and welfare systems. The action part of the research mainly took the form of making the results public and raising attention to the situation of the wider group. Hence the action part of the PAHRCA gave participants an opportunity to voice their concerns and strengthened their agency. But since the research is directed towards social investment on the level of social policy programs, the prospects of directly improving the situation of participants are small. Through the research they may get to know a policy measure eligible for them or means to enforce their rights, but these positive effects are side-products rather than main objectives of the research. The research objective was to *identify* the social damage of the crises and *evaluate* social policy with respect to compliance with the idea of social investment. Furthermore, social investment is usually tied to the idea of improving the well-being of vulnerable people through investing in their human capital rather than by strengthening their agency.

Two questions thus emerge: First, with regard to using participatory methods for research on social policy the aim of participation has to be clarified further. Participatory methods aim to go beyond usual qualitative methods by not only listening to people but allowing participants to influence the research process from beginning to end. However, this aim is compromised in the case of a research project funded by agencies such as the European Commission because the proposal for the funding agency must outline some steps of the research process beforehand, reports need to be delivered and the funding will cover only a limited time. Thus, the scope for participation and joint actions is limited. In RE-InVEST we tried to face this problem by working with NGOs that are already involved in the field and can continue the process. It remains to be seen if we succeeded in ensuring participation and continuation.

Secondly, with regard to social investment the PAHRCA method and in particular the distinction between well-being and agency points to the need to clarify whether social investment is geared to well-being or agency. As Bonvin and Laruffa (2017) show the social investment paradigm does not entail public deliberation on what life people value. However, if the aim is to 'invest in people' so that they can better help themselves, it is hard to restrict the effects of e.g. investment in education to the instrumental use for employability. Thus, there are good reasons to elaborate a capability-based social investment approach that explicates the role of deliberation for social investment. The participatory research in RE-InVEST may then be seen as creating a space – however limited – for public deliberation on the aims and methods of social investment.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper has surveyed the manifold suggestions how Sen's capability approach can take account of collectives. For doing so a framework has been developed that classifies the suggestions according to two characteristics: On the one hand it distinguishes externally and internally defined groups and on the other hand it suggests looking whether the main aim of these groups is to improve well-being or agency of their members. Five strands of literature have been identified and presented that fall in the resulting four categories of externally or internally defined groups aiming at well-being and agency respectively. On the background of this framework the participatory research in the project RE-InVEST has been analysed concerning the conception of the group and the well-being/agency goals involved.

The well-known notion of 'collective capabilities' has attracted a lot of attention and thus takes a dominant place in discussions of the capability approach and collectives. Alkire (2008: 40-41) summarises which features have led to the attraction and gives an account of the core argument against this concept. The survey shows that a lot of other ways to account for collectives have been suggested. The framework highlights the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches. For example, Stewart's work on horizontal inequality (Section 2.1.2) has revealed that group deprivations are often more persistent than individual deprivations. This kind of (quantitative) evaluation is based on ascribing group-membership and focusing on well-being achievements. Thus it makes hidden influences of group-membership visible, but it does not sketch which role the groups play in countering their deprivation. In contrast to that the work on collective capabilities (Section 2.2) targets in general rather small groups based on voluntary membership. The notion of collective capabilities captures that collaboration has often the effect to empower the collective's members. The literature has also pointed to the main difficulties of this concept: (1) that there may be a 'coercive side' of collective capabilities (Section 2.2.3.3) if not all members equally benefit from the collective, (2) that there may be conflicts among collectives (Section 2.4.2) and (3) that the 'upscaling' of collectives is not easy even though they may expand members' feeling of self-efficacy (Section 2.2.3.2). Hence, collective capabilities – despite aiming mainly at improving well-being – work through strengthening agency (sections 2.2.1.1, 2.2.2.2, 2.2.3.1, 2.2.3.2 and 2.3.3).

Public reasoning as a specific form of agency is a recurrent theme in the literature. Sen's work on reasoning emerged from his critique of rational choice theory (Section 2.3). While the interpretation of commitments as collective intentions (Section 2.3.1) seems straightforward, there is a variety of proposals how this may be done (Section 2.3.1 and 2.4.4.1). As long as the individual is concerned shared intentions constitute an important and peculiar motivation for action (Section 2.3.1 and 2.3.2) and can explain some behaviour. The view that the idea of collective intentions entails a social ontology (Section 2.4.4.1) seems to lead to a system-view of society that rests uneasily with the ethical individualism of the capability approach (Section 2.4.4.2). However, the debate on methodological individualism has shown that there is a range of definitions of the term and depending on the definition used the capability approach is judged to fall into this category or not.

Applying the framework to the participatory research on social investment (Section 3) helps clarifying the scope and limits of the research. While it is important to identify group deprivations in order to guide social policy, there remains a gap between the small research groups and broader collective targets as well as between concrete social policy measures and social policy programs on a more abstract level such as social investment. In fact, the capability approach does not outline how the knowledge on commitments and shared intentions as motives for action or on the role of agency can be directly used in setting up policies. Groups do play a role as fora for public debate. Participatory research can be seen as an instance

of public reasoning. This all contributes to transforming the world by ‘agency within structure’ (Section 2.5), but there is no recipe how to move into a particular direction, no ‘transcendental theory of justice’ (Sen, 2009) that sets the goal.

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## RE-InVEST - Rebuilding an Inclusive, Value-based Europe of Solidarity and Trust through Social Investments

In 2013, as a response to rising inequalities, poverty and distrust in the EU, the Commission launched a major endeavour to rebalance economic and social policies with the Social Investment Package (SIP). RE-InVEST aims to strengthen the philosophical, institutional and empirical underpinnings of the SIP, based on social investment in human rights and capabilities. Our consortium is embedded in the 'Alliances to Fight Poverty'. We will actively involve European citizens severely affected by the crisis in the co-construction of a more powerful and effective social investment agenda with policy recommendations.

<http://www.re-invest.eu/>

### Co-ordinators

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Michel Debruyne (Beweging vzw), network co-ordinator



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