

## Book Reviews

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Final version of a paper which was published in 2011 in the Journal of  
Human Development and Capabilities, 12 (3), 457-467.

### **Measuring Justice: Primary Goods and Capabilities**

Harry Brighouse and Ingrid Robeyns (Eds), 2010

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, ix + 257 pp., ISBN 978-0-521-  
71147-0 (paperback)

A theory of justice must provide us with answers to a number of questions. Important among them is the question of how (by what metric) we assess individual advantage, and determine when states of affairs are (more or less) just. How should we answer this question? One answer (associated with John Rawls) is the primary goods metric. According to this approach, we should focus on individual holdings of important goods. We should measure individual advantage and states of affairs based on the possession of some standardized package of goods (basic liberties, powers and prerogatives, income and wealth, and the social basis of self-respect).

Another answer (associated with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum) is the capability metric. According to this approach, we ought to focus on what individuals are able to do and be. It is, on this view, not enough to focus on the possession of some standardized package of goods, but more appropriate to look at how (and whether) these goods contribute to the kinds of lives individuals are able to live. This leads proponents of the capability metric to accept (and proponents of the primary goods metric to deny) that a theory of justice must be sensitive to an individual's ability to convert goods into functionings.

The primary aim of this volume of essays is to compare these two widely held answers to the question of what the metric of justice ought to be. The aim is to further consider the differences between them, and to ask whether there are any (theoretical and/or practical) reasons for favouring one over the other.

The first section considers some of the theoretical reasons for favouring primary goods or capabilities. The section begins with a paper by Thomas Pogge, in which two main claims are made. The first is that the differences between primary goods and capabilities have been overstated. He contends that the primary goods metric is able to take on board many of the insights that the capability metric has contributed to the discussion. Thus, the metric of primary goods (despite claims made by proponents of the capability metric that it cannot) is, on closer examination, able to deal quite well with differences between individuals. Pogge then points out that the metric of primary goods has done much more than the capability metric has managed to, so far, achieve. Pogge points out that it remains to be seen whether the capability approach is able to deliver a public criterion of justice that would compete with John Rawls' two principles. Erin Kelly supports the contention that the difference between primary goods and capabilities is overblown. However, Kelly furthers Pogge's second claim by arguing that the difference between primary goods and capabilities turns on whether a proponent of the capability metric will commit to protecting capabilities over time. Such a commitment (amounting to a perfectionist theory of justice) not only departs from the primary goods metric, but it gives us (or so Kelly contends) good reason to reject the capability metric.

Taking issue with the claim that there is very little separating the

approaches, Elisabeth Anderson highlights that (among other things) informal social inequalities (such as unjust stigmas and stereotypes) are both invisible to the primary goods metric and beyond the reach of resource re-distribution. These inequalities affect what individuals are able to do and be—not necessarily what goods they have or could get. We need to focus on capabilities and functionings to pick them up and address them. Anderson then points out that preferring the capability metric does not commit one to any *particular* principle(s) of justice—let alone perfectionist ones. After all, a proponent of the approach could hold something like her ‘capabilities-based principle of democratic equality’ (p. 95)—a ‘sufficientarian standard’ that does not offer a comprehensive theory (p. 83). It seems, then, quite possible to develop principles of justice that support the capability metric. Richard Arneson supports both of Anderson’s claims. However, Arneson (departing from the other contributors) rounds this section up by claiming that we ought to ensure that individuals are *actually* able to live good lives. What matters for social justice (or so Arneson contends) are capabilities that are ordered by an objective list. What social justice requires, in other words, *is* a perfectionist theory of well-being.

Section Two considers primary goods and capabilities in light of some important practical challenges. Interestingly, like Section One, the essays diverge on the issue of whether there is anything that separates the approaches. A number of contributors seem to suggest, at least in light of the practical issues they examine, that framing the question as a choice between primary goods and capabilities might not be the best way to move forward. For instance, Norman Daniels points out that there is very little separating the metrics once we accommodate the importance of health within Rawls’ approach. Likewise, Colin McLeod tells us that neither primary goods nor capabilities give us all of what we require to deal with children. But the problem, according to McLeod, lies in the way that both metrics rely on an account of agency – leading both metrics to overlook those goods that stand apart from the development of agency. Similarly, on the question of what account of educational opportunities best guide practise, Harry Brighouse and Elaine Unterhalter conclude that neither primary goods nor capabilities (alone) provide us with an adequate way forward.

So how then, should we work towards solving these problems? Norman Daniels tells us that the significant question for both approaches—at least when we are dealing with health—is what we ought to do with the limited resources that we have. Colin McLeod suggests that we rethink both approaches, and do so with the ‘intrinsic goods of childhood’ (p. 187) in mind from the start. Harry Brighouse and Elaine Unterhalter suggest that a combined approach is likely to provide us with the most useful guidance for education, and so encourage researchers to work on developing a hybrid theory.

This is, however, not the conclusion drawn on all of the issues considered. Lori Terzi (writing on disability) and Ingrid Robeyns (writing on gender) maintain that capabilities seem to be more promising than primary goods. In line with Elisabeth Anderson’s contention, they both claim that the metric of primary goods leaves us short-changed, and that we need to move beyond it to engage with the way disability and gender issues feature on the ground. They are, however, in agreement with the contention that there is (for proponents of the capability metric) still more work to be done. Terzi points out that the list question and indexing question require more consideration, and that there is a need to articulate principles that ensure ‘the demands of all disabled people are demands of justice’ (p. 169). Similarly, Ingrid Robeyns points out that the capability metric requires principles that move beyond the political and structural limits found in Rawls. That is, if we want to find a way to deal with gender injustices.

While the aim of this volume is to compare primary goods and capabilities, it is no great surprise that the book examines, considers, and so contributes far more than this. An important conclusion is that we must go beyond a discussion of the metric of justice to get to the bottom of the differences between primary goods and capabilities. Indeed it is very difficult (as Amartya Sen points out in his concluding remarks) to read some of the papers without reading into the background assumptions about justice, and the framework within which the metric of primary goods (in particular) sits. Framing the question around the *metric* of justice does, then, make some of the papers difficult to follow. Overall, however, the volume illuminates all of the issues it examines, and all the questions it raises.

This volume is, no doubt, a significant contribution to the

literature on theories of justice, an important accompaniment to the recent works by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, and an important resource for anyone interested in political philosophy. Most significantly, the volume helps to raise the question of how theories of justice ought to develop, and the question of where the capability approach to justice (in particular) might go to from here. If we accept that a theory of justice ought to speak to all of the practical challenges covered, then we are left with serious questions about the kind of theory able to do so. We are, as it happens, also left with questions about whether there are other challenges that deserve our attention (such as the environment and future people), and what insights these challenges might provide us with in developing such a theory. Perhaps more engagement with how current theories might be modified in light of the challenges considered, as well as some thoughts on what we include within the scope of justice, would have been helpful. That aside, the volume certainly leaves us with a good many important questions and challenges to consider. I am sure it will generate more thought and discussion around all of them.

KRUSHILWATENE # 2011

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### **Breaking the Poverty Cycle: The Human Basis for Sustainable Development**

Susan Pick and Jenna T. Sirkin, 2010

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 336 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-538316-4

Susan Pick and Jenna T. Sirkin combine quite a few issues in their book *Breaking the Poverty Cycle*: Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) with the psychological theory on human change; programme participants' testimonies with theoretical explications; a long-standing political humanistic engagement with scientific rigour.

This seems to be a pretty vast endeavour—and quite risky, too. But the authors succeed to write up the challenge.

The book starts with Susan Pick's personal story—as a young Ph.D. student in psychology (attending a course on economic theory by Amartya Sen) she worked on family planning in Mexico, already combining psychological research (theory of planned behaviour) with the perspective of capabilities. For the past 25 years, she has been professor and president of the NGO IMIFAP, the Mexican Research Institute on Family and Population, implementing her basic idea: enabling Mexican women to implement family planning—and going far beyond this.

The book follows with three sections: the first sets the scene, presenting Mexican socio-cultural norms that impede individual and social change, illustrated by personal testimonies; the second section develops and explains a 'Framework for Enabling Empowerment'; and the third section shows how this framework has been translated into concrete development programmes on family planning, sexual education, health programmes, teaching attitudes, and so forth. Here, the authors explain how the programmes are designed and implemented on a local level, and are then scaled up to reach more than 250 000 people with one single programme.

I want to focus on the framework as this is the academically intriguing part of the book and constitutes an enriching combination of psychological theories of behaviour and change with the CA. The framework does not deal with external state-financed empowerment as a passive means to expand access to services and commodities or refined doing functionings, but expands on the intrinsic empowerment of the people. The enrichment of the CA by psychological theories makes a distinction between refined *doing* functioning (as the first aim of intervention) and refined *being* functioning (as the, often intended, result of a repetition of such changed doings functionings) plausible and fruitful. The authors show that teaching life-skills and other tools to address situational demands (such as communication or accounting skills, knowledge on health issues or reproduction, or the reduction of psychological barriers by self-knowledge, reflection and management of emotions) expand capability sets far beyond the concrete situation. The teaching is developed based on a needs assessment of the programme beneficiaries.

Pick and Sirkin explain (and statements from programme participants spread throughout the book illustrate nicely their scientific arguments) that the use of these tools leads to a changed behaviour; that is, refined doing functionings. By repeating such behaviour, personal agency, norms, and attitudes change (i.e. the refined being functionings) herewith constituting a second increase of the capability set. The third increase of the capability set comes about through changes in the context, as empowered individuals very often succeed to change their social, institutional, or political environment towards an increase in participatory decision-making in family life, educational systems, political or financial institutions, to name just a few examples.

As you may have noticed, this book inspired me—and I am already using some thoughts in two of my research projects. There is one major flaw, though—a flaw that can also be found in the wider CA: the prevalent neglect of the natural environment. Pick and Sirkin talk of sustainable human development (this is even their subtitle), but in the book they use sustainable development in the general meaning; that is, a development that lasts. I see no indication that they extend the temporal scope of sustainability beyond a couple of years; that is, they do not use the political notion of ‘Sustainable Development’ that—for the past 20 years—has combined intra-generational with inter-generational fairness and herewith necessarily has to consider irreversible changes of our natural environment. I understand that when working with poor people in Mexico this is not the most pressing issue, but the dependency of poor people on local ecosystem services endangers the sustainability of their development in our era of biodiversity loss, climate change, land grab, bio-fuels, and so forth. For me, working in rich Europe, the open (and inspiring) question is whether Pick and Sirkin’s ‘Framework for Enabling Empowerment’ can be used to enable rich people to better assume their responsibility for a truly sustainable human development; that is, a development that does not endanger human development elsewhere now and in the future.

I recommend this book to those who want to improve the efficacy of the CA via the practical empowerment of the poor; to those who look for a psychological amplification of the CA; and to those who want to get motivated by the resumed theoretical and practical experiences of 25 rather successful years of empowering poor people in Mexico by reading a well-written and inspiring book.

FELIX RAUSCHMAYER #2011

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## **Absolute Poverty and Global Justice**

Elke Mack, Michael Schramm, Stephan Klasen and Thomas Pogge (Eds), 2009 Ashgate Publishing, Farnham, 279 pp., ISBN 978-0-7546-7849-6

This book revolves around the Erfurt Manifesto principles; a set of practical recommendations intended to give the reduction of national and global inequalities higher political priority. The recommendations emerged from discussions on ensuring progress in poverty reduction held among economists, legal scholars, moral philosophers, development practitioners, political scientists, and theologians at an interdisciplinary workshop sponsored by the German Research Foundation and held in Erfurt, Germany in 2008. The recommended policies strongly emphasize ranking poverty reduction equally alongside domestic priorities in wealthier countries. Commentary on the manifesto by the late Michael Ward admits that equal consideration of global poverty is indeed controversial, but claims that distributive justice improvements require more attention in order for poverty-related death, disease, and curtailed prospects to be effectively addressed.

Keeping both scholar and practitioner in mind, Elke Mack's introduction outlines the book's structure and four phases for developing a system of global justice in which poor individuals are the subject. The book takes an interdisciplinary approach, reflecting on what normative arguments produce relevant criteria for the protection of human dignity. Assuming factual consensus on human rights, this approach is used to cut across four principle fields of research: economics, Christian theology, the philosophy of justice, and methods for implementation. Mack's introduction is easily accessible and provides background for how these seemingly

disparate fields overlap in their concern for distributive justice.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part presents and evaluates recent work in the field of economics to measure poverty and track progress towards its reduction. Focusing on the effort to halve poverty by 2015 through the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, the authors examine the adopted methods of measurement, collected data, and subsequent revisions to poverty counts produced by the World Bank. Without recourse to technical vocabulary, the part one elucidates substantial problems with tracking progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goal. Michael Ward's constructive pursuit of an alternative approach is unfortunately merely sketched out due to the author's untimely death. Yet, for those who are unfamiliar with the World Bank's methods of cross-country comparison of poverty, this part provides a concise overview. Some of the recent methodological changes and their motivations are explored, and an alternative route is indicated.

The second part, 'Christian Ethics on Justice and the Poor', is to serve as a case of a comprehensive ethical doctrine that could inform normative claims of distributive justice. Discussions of justice are extracted from theological texts and their relevance for global distributive justice is examined. At the end of Part Two, Johannes Muller and Michael Reder criticize secularizing public discourse, arguing that religion can make a valuable contribution by effectively mobilizing its members to rectify global inequalities, and so should not be excluded. However, this part's exclusive reliance on Christian theology to develop methods for extracting views of human dignity from a comprehensive doctrine weakens confidence in the applicability of those same methods to other comprehensive doctrines.

Part Three, 'Global Theories of Justice and Responsibility', is concerned with normative claims of responsibility to eradicate poverty and the demands poverty places on the global community. The authors in Part Three examine debates of global justice that hinder consensus on what organizations should be doing to effectively alleviate poverty. Principle issues of disagreement on the best approach and the trade-offs involved are canvassed. Yet, any reader who remains unconvinced that consensus on minimum criteria of human dignity has in fact been reached may struggle with the manifold claims this appeal is supposed to support in part three.

The fourth part, 'Policies and Actions', lays out a number of reforms designed to make piecemeal headway in addressing poverty-related concerns. Transforming economic, corporate, and political institutions so as to make poverty alleviation the foremost priority is advocated; and the normative claims in Part Three are used to guide recommendations. This part of the book bridges the proposed initiatives with current work in the fields of public health, business, and climate change by providing analysis of current projects and related resources. Proposals will be of particular interest to the development practitioner or those seeking to design projects with a view towards concerns of distributive justice. In conclusion, Else Øyen reflects on the impact of problems within three major conceptual frameworks addressing poverty in the research community and calls for more opportunity in cross-discipline research.

While appeal to sufficient consensus leaves room for disagreement among authors, the trade-offs highlighted in Part Three undermine the claim that consensus has been found in the Erfurt Manifesto's principles. The reader will find some agreement from one essay to the next but, when considered as a whole, individual arguments pull in different directions. In particular, it is left unclear what distributive justice requires in view of conflicting demands of human rights, or how protection of human dignity is to help solve the matter. Yet the conflict lends strength to Øyen's call for cross-discipline research that prioritizes finding consensus on poverty-related issues within the research community.

The collection provides a cross-disciplinary view of concerns for a global theory of distributive justice relevant to policy-makers and development practitioners who are looking to span a variety of disciplines in formulating policy or designing a project with a view to the least well off globally. The collection would be useful for libraries of international non-governmental organizations and humanitarian agencies as a reference for methods of incorporating disparate views in policy or project design.

KRISTINWILLIAMS #2011

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## Capabilities Equality: Basic Issues and Problems

Alexander Kaufman (Ed.), 2006

Routledge, New York, 239 pp., ISBN 0-415-36055-2

This edited volume capably lays out the main points of contention surrounding what has come to be known as the ‘capabilities approach’ to human development and social justice. That is, is a focus on achieving equality of *capabilities*—roughly, what Amartya Sen (the pioneer of the approach) claims represent a person’s freedoms to be (e.g. healthy or ill) and do (e.g. work or not work)—better than a focus on equality of *welfare* or equality of *resources* for achieving equality of *justice*? While the contributing authors actively disagree over the answer to this question, they nonetheless share a singular goal: that of providing conceptual clarity to an intrinsically complex—and frequently misunderstood—argument. Considering the amount of work published on the capabilities approach since this volume’s arrival (much of it dealing with the very same points of contention) one might be led to believe that the authors fail to provide compelling resolutions, or at least navigable roadmaps to future

resolutions, to those yet concerned that: the capabilities approach is needlessly sufficientarian (i.e. it aims only to achieve minimum levels of basic capabilities); it is not clearly differentiated from other equality-focused approaches (e.g. those that focus on welfare or resources); and its (theoretical) commitments are not readily appropriable by (practical) policy frameworks.

Such a judgment, however, would be too hasty. Universal ‘resolutions’ to problems of justice are forever wanting; practitioners and policy-makers are time and again left with choosing amongst better or worse temporary ‘fixes’ that (imperfectly) meet the particular social, cultural, and political dynamics of the context under consideration, whether local, national, or global.

The book is divided accordingly; each of its three sections addresses one of the above-stated concerns in detail. The ‘Introduction’ first spells out the manner in which the capabilities approach positively expands the conceptual resources of egalitarian discourse, especially as its specialized vocabulary more

satisfactorily gives expression to: intuitions regarding the proper distribution of social goods (e.g. egalitarian justice's distribution should balance out 'morally arbitrary' factors); and intuitions regarding egalitarian justice's proper scope (e.g. it should concern itself primarily with rectifying the kinds of inequalities for which one is not responsible).

In focusing on whether the capabilities approach aims too narrowly at sufficientarian satisfaction of basic capabilities, Part I balances both persuasive critique and defense of this claim with a judicious treatment of the approach's inherent flexibility. The capabilities approach, like most approaches to egalitarian justice, lends itself to multiform theoretical formulation and practical implementation. For example, capabilities theorists disagree widely over the importance of enumerating a specific list of basic capabilities in achieving widespread consensus for the approach. The chapters of Part II focus on the compatibility or incompatibility of the capabilities approach with alternatives that focus instead on opportunities for personal well-being. An inability to competently address the larger social structures that perpetuate various types of inequality then reveals itself as the real narrowness of the capabilities approach—a result, perhaps, of its preferred focus on balancing the conditions resulting from those structures, such as gender inequality. Again, however, the pluralistic framework of the approach enables it to maneuver effectively around such challenges. Finally, whether or not that conceptual pluralism can translate into practicable policy is taken up in Part III. Here, in pragmatist fashion, it is convincingly argued that the approach's theoretical robustness is all for naught without certain social and political commitments to aid its practical success. Various institutional forms are explored and evaluated to this end, with an emergent and clear preference for that of deliberative democracy.

A conspicuous omission from the volume's analysis—surprising, given the number of philosophers represented—is an assessment of the ontological categories and epistemological assumptions operative in the capabilities approach itself. For instance, are capabilities correspondent to *individuals* or do they arise more clearly among *relations* between individuals? Are capabilities even on the same logical level as resources and welfare when they more clearly apply to *persons* and not *things*? Likewise, is justice a *state* achieved or

an ongoing *process*? And, finally, can any of these concerns be resolved aprioristically? Adopting more explicit positions on such implicit concerns would greatly aid the authors' shared goal of bringing much need clarity to the somewhat vague philosophical foundation of the capabilities approach, whether motivated by critical or defensive impulses. It would especially assist the most innovative arguments in the volume—those that attempt to expand the narrow, anthropocentric and able-bodied focus of the capabilities approach to include important yet often overlooked considerations of the environment and the disabled.

BRIAN JENKIN # 2011

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## **Desigualdades Sociales y Oportunidades Ciudadanas**

Graciela Tonon (Ed.), 2008

Espacio Editorial, Buenos Aires, 174 pp., ISBN 9078-950-802-294-3

El texto compilado por la Dra. Graciela Tonón es una contribución muy valiosa a la literatura sobre capacidades y desarrollo humano en lengua castellana.

Son pocos los textos publicados en español que nos presenten resultados de investigaciones interdisciplinarias en los que se haya empleado el enfoque de las capacidades para evaluar la percepción que de su calidad de vida tienen las personas. También es destacable la discusión que aquí se hace de la cuestión de la identidad a partir de los textos de Sen, un ámbito muy poco explorado en la literatura sobre capacidades en castellano.

El libro tiene cuatro capítulos. En el primero, la Dra. Tonón nos

presenta un resumen de los elementos básicos de la teoría de las capacidades humanas y una discusión sobre la problemática de construir indicadores sociales y políticos para la medición de la calidad de vida. Tras ello, se enumeran unas primeras evidencias extraídas de la realización de un estudio, basado en el cuestionario del equipo de Anand, llevado a cabo en diversas ciudades argentinas con el objetivo de identificar las desigualdades sociales y las oportunidades reales de la población. A la hora de entender mejor el estudio y, como se ha dicho anteriormente, dado la escasez de publicaciones en castellano sobre esta temática, se hubiera agradecido que la autora incluyera una copia del cuestionario utilizado. Además, como matiza ella misma, la tarea de convertir el cuestionario original a un instrumento que sirviera para los intereses del proyecto supuso algo más que realizar una simple traducción del instrumento original. El capítulo continúa con un primer análisis de unos resultados generales; la información es interesante en relación con el contexto argentino aunque, dado el interés metodológico subrayado por la autora y dado el carácter exploratorio de esta primera interpretación de los resultados, hubiera sido pertinente una discusión sobre qué aporta el cuestionario empleado a otros estudios cuantitativos sobre calidad de vida en Argentina.

Elaborado por Lía Rodríguez de la Vega, el segundo capítulo repasa las contribuciones de Amartya Sen a la cuestión de la identidad. Frente a las visiones de la economía que han optado por ignorar las identidades culturales o presuponer la filiación a una sola identidad, Sen discute que las identidades son plurales y que existe una capacidad de discutir, de manera implícita o explícita, la importancia relativa que cada persona habrá de dar, en un contexto particular, a las distintas lealtades que compiten por prioridad. Tras ello, se presentan los resultados de un estudio que ha averiguado las percepciones de la población sobre la discriminación por orientación sexual, raza, género, religión, edad, apariencia y lugar de residencia. Lamentablemente, la autora no facilita datos de la población que ha respondido a las preguntas del estudio ni tampoco el tipo de cuestionario utilizado. Se puede suponer que la muestra es la misma que la que se presenta en el capítulo 1, pero nada se dice al respecto, lo que hace que esta segunda parte del capítulo quede un tanto confusa y difícil de entender. Tampoco queda muy claro cómo de la discusión anterior que nos presenta el riquísimo marco conceptual de Sen, se pasa a las

categorías de las encuestas. Es cierto que se manejan distintas características (orientación sexual, género, edad, etc.) que están ligadas a la identidad, pero el texto se hubiera clarificado con la explicación del paso de las identidades a la discriminación y, posteriormente, a la construcción de las preguntas.

El tercer capítulo ha sido realizado por Walter Cueto, Alberto Molina y Paula Petrelli y versa sobre capacidades y calidad democrática. Se estudia cuáles serían las condiciones, capacidades y/o derechos básicos que permiten a un individuo funcionar como agente, prestando especial interés a las libertades políticas y las garantías de transparencia. Su elección responde a que son las más directamente vinculadas con el tema de la calidad de las prácticas democráticas y generan particular interés en Mendoza. Este capítulo presenta consideraciones interesantes sobre las imágenes y percepciones que tienen los ciudadanos de Mendoza sobre la calidad democrática. Al igual que el capítulo primero, quizás se podría haber subrayado en mayor medida los matices que sobre calidad democrática permiten apreciar el enfoque de las *capacidades* comparado con otras maneras de medir las prácticas democráticas.

Por último, el capítulo cuarto, escrito por diferentes autores, presenta una visión del grado de satisfacción de los habitantes de la Ciudad del Mar de Plata en relación con la salud, seguridad y vivienda. El texto puede ser de interés para geógrafos que quieran entrar en el terreno de las *capacidades*, aunque la discusión que se realiza sobre las mismas es escueta, lo que dificulta la comprensión, amén de que el lenguaje utilizado es, en ocasiones, poco claro.

En resumen, el libro es un buen ejemplo de las posibilidades que abre el enfoque de las *capacidades* a la investigación social; es también un valor que se publique en castellano porque, sin duda, puede contribuir a difundir en mayor medida este enfoque. Siendo el resultado de un proyecto común, se echa de menos mayor ligazón entre los diferentes capítulos y mayor clarificación de la metodología empleada. Asimismo, la calidad de las aportaciones no es muy homogénea, lo que puede oscurecer, por momentos, los méritos del libro.

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