



Democratising Participatory Research

Pathways to Social Justice from the South

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4. Democratising Participatory Research: A Capabilitarian Conceptualisation

We live in a society where some people are more equal than others. One gender is better than the other. One sex group is better than the others. One skin colour is better than others. One religion, background, even how you look, some people who look a certain way are taken as more beautiful than the other ones.

Power is the mother of all oppressors. People oppress the opposite group. Because they want power. They want to become dominant so they belittle the other group to feel power.

All these things that we are oppressed by are things we don't choose to be. But what do these groups do for power?

Children are raped, people are unfairly dismissed, and blood is spilled all over because you are different to your oppressor. All because the other group wants you to die in silence.

When will it all come to an end?

When will our land be a safe place where you would want to raise your child?

When will our land be a safe place to be black?

When will our land be a safe place to leave our grandmothers at home so we can work without fear that they will be raped?

When will it be okay not to be straight?

When will it be okay to follow any religion you want?

When will we be completely free?

Narratives on Social Injustices: Undergraduate Voices, 2018

4.1 Introduction

This chapter poses the question of how, if coloniality is central for participatory practices, we can resolve the field's limitations and controversies? For this reason, the chapter introduces the Capabilities Approach, linking its foundational elements with those of decolonial debates. This section aims to illustrate the current commonalities between both positions and the potential of the Capabilities Approach to fill some of the limitations in the field of participatory practices. To this end, the chapter uses an open-ended version of the Capabilities Approach defended by Amartya Sen (1999; 2009).

Furthermore, the chapter continues to conceptualise Democratic Capabilities Research (DCR) through five open-ended principles that accommodate the variety of practices and implementations needed to democratise participatory research from a combined decolonial, capabilities and Southern perspective. This perspective is flexible and contextually related—thus, open-ended—as is the view of the Capabilities Approach supported in this chapter.

4.2 The Capabilities Approach and Decoloniality: A Possible Bond Despite Discrepancies

Despite the global influence of human development from positivist perspectives, the Capabilities Approach (the foundational formulation of human development) presents a radical shift from traditional tendencies. While Western intellectual currents opt for aggregation and universal formulas, which align with the modernist and imperialist *modus operandi*, the Capabilities Approach calls for stakeholder engagement (Sen 1999; Spreafico 2016). It brings the individual to the fore, with a strong sense of democracy and diversity of voices (Sen 1999). It displaces the technocratic analysis/solution, and represents a unique, singular perspective among all those available. Nevertheless, this vision of the CA is not always channeled towards its grassroots potential.

Therefore, this section highlights the importance of the Capabilities Approach as a means of balancing Western thinking with Southern epistemic systems. It develops a theoretical space that is incomplete, and therefore able to accommodate contexts that are essentially different

from Western and Eurocentric societies. This theoretical contribution is relevant and necessary after the previous chapters. Thus, the following sections argue, without being dogmatic, that the Capabilities Approach sustains an ontologically incomplete positionality than enables it to embrace different cultural specificities. It provides a diversified epistemic space that is capable of accommodating a more robust understanding of participation from a decolonial perspective of justice in education, and of challenging homogenising participatory tendencies, even if this might involve foundational reconsideration of this approach.

4.2.1 A Capabilities Overview

Firstly, to elaborate on some of the major elements of the Capabilities Approach, the work of Amartya Sen mainly focuses on outlining an approach that might provide better ways to evaluate human development. Sen (1999) criticises previous theorists, because their evaluative frameworks are incomplete; for instance, exclusively focusing on economic features such as GDP. Thus, he introduces a new way to look at human development that relies on an evaluative space that is determined by the freedoms that people enjoy; a space that is people-centred and multidimensional (Sen 1999, 2009).

For Sen, freedom is the basis of development, not just as an end, but also as a principal means to that end (Sen 1999). The development aim is to remove the ‘unfreedoms’ that ‘leave people with few choices and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency’ (Sen 1999, xii). It refers to the real freedoms that people have to be and to do the things that they have reason to value (Sen 2009). This is why, if we want to evaluate an individual’s well-being, we must pay attention to their effective freedoms/capabilities (Robeyns 2005; Nussbaum 2011).

Capabilities thus, are the real opportunities people have to live the life they have reason to value or to be the person they want to be (Sen 1999, 2009; Nussbaum 2011) and functionings are the beings and doings that can be achieved through their capabilities (Sen 1999, 2009). Sen criticises approaches which focus on outcomes (functionings) because they have little information about real people’s lives (Sen 1999), even though they are also a necessary detail for evaluating human development. For instance, the fact that two students succeed at university and both

obtain their degrees actually says very little about their experiences during the process. If we consider that one of the students comes from a middle-class family while the other is from an Indigenous community, both may well obtain their degrees, but their experience, and the process by which they have done so, is completely different. Therefore, two similar outcomes, in this case obtaining a degree, can differ greatly from the capabilities they enjoy and the process towards achievement. The same scenario applies when we talk about institutions of knowledge production. For instance, there might be two research centres, one in the Global North and another in the Global South, and both secure funds for their research project. This says very little about their freedoms and the process to acquire those funds. While Global South institutions might experience many unfreedoms, having to overcome their epistemic marginalisation in order to win that funding, Global North institutions will manage much more easily because of their epistemic advantage in the global knowledge system (Walker & Martinez-Vargas 2020). Thus, the process and the capabilities, real freedoms that are available during that process, provide important information for determining someone's well-being in an evaluative and prospective framework of human development.

On the other hand, the Capabilities Approach does not ignore the context in which people are positioned and how this affects their available options and preferences. Firstly, it conceptualises three different conversion factors that interact in our opportunities and freedoms, either by enhancing or constraining them. These are social, personal and environmental conversion factors (Sen 1999; Robeyns 2005). Personal conversion factors refer to those personal features related to the individual's body. Thus, they are physical or mental disabilities, psychomotor skills or metabolism (Robeyns 2005). For instance, a student with limited mobility will need more resources than a person with no mobility disability in order to attend classes in a university, which has not implemented a plan to remove architectural barriers. Social conversion factors are those linked to our social context; they may be gender practices, social norms, hierarchies or government policies. All of these play a crucial role in the performance of our opportunities. Thus, a person who has been born in a country where democratic values are powerful will have more opportunities to achieve participation in their political sphere than someone who is born in a dictatorship, where

opportunities for participation and public reasoning are low. The last of the conversion factors are environmental conversion factors, which refer to public provisions, good climate and infrastructural facilities (Robeyns 2005). For instance, the installation of lighting on a street can affect the capability of free movement of a woman walking at night in a country where security is an issue.

Due to the specific context used in this book and its decolonial and Southern perspective, these conversion factors might not correspond with the experiences and cosmovisions of many in the South. That is why, in this book, I propose a merged category, a Southern and decolonial category that I have named 'Colonial Conversion Factors'. The main argument for defending this unique conversion factor is to provide the visibility needed to address colonial effects on individuals' freedoms for good and bad. It acknowledges Southern collectivist and critical cosmovisions that do not separate individuals from collectives and their social conditions (Tutu 1999). Hence, colonial conversion factors are neutral factors formed by historical events that shape the lives of many today and they are not divided among collective and individual levels. Any individual limitation or advantage is determined by the combination of social, historical and environmental circumstances. Thus, individual conversion factors are challenged by decolonial thought, as it presumes a 'normalcy' standard that categorises individuals as separate from their social and political contexts. It ignores the fact that critical disability theory deconstructs individual impairments as socially developed (Ndlovu 2021) as well as psychological, psychiatric profiling (Foucault 2013) and educational opportunities (Rosen-Velasquez 2016). Thus, individual and social advantages and disadvantages to exercise their freedoms are intertwined. As Ndlovu (2021, 73) attests, 'The process and the criteria used in the categorisation and naming of individuals and groups are a form of dehumanisation, because normalcy is a concept that cannot be universalised: It is a subjective and contextual phenomenon'. Therefore, social, environmental and individual 'normal' standards are determined by the political and social contexts. That is why colonial conversion factors confer huge advantages on those that were part of the powerful colonial system in the past and that continue to be part of its neo-colonial and Western system in the present. The colonial system allows them to fit into the 'normalcy' and 'human being' zone.

Hence, in many ways colonial conversion factors affect populations and historically oppressed communities in the Global South. The point is to highlight that colonial conversion factors are important for an understanding of social and political challenges in the Global South and in a context such as South Africa. Further, it is necessary for scholars in the Global North to acknowledge them, if we want to start questioning the ways in which epistemic injustices are understood and reproduced. Certainly, the type of oppression that are experienced in the Global South are not the same as those in the Global North. We need to acknowledge and differentiate these types of oppression through our theoretical foundations, by conceptualising terms that better represent and reflect these varied experiences and cosmovisions. Challenging traditional concepts and their theorisations is foundational to decolonial and epistemological resistances. However, I will come back to these concepts in other parts of the book, exploring their conceptualisation and its effects on valued capabilities in the empirical chapters (Chapters Five, Six and Seven).

Another important element of the Capabilities Approach is agency. In this area, Crocker (2008) says that individuals are affected by the daily dynamics of life and the ways in which we act in the world, co-opted by major forces and not as full agents. That is why he states (2008, 156157) that:

a person is an agent with respect to action x just in case she (1) decides for herself rather than someone or something else forcing the decision to do x ; (2) bases her decisions on reasons, such as the pursuit of goals; (3) performs or has a role in performing x ; and (4) thereby brings about or contributes to the bringing about of change in the world.

Therefore, the point is not to achieve a perfect exercise of our agency, but rather to try, in each of the four components, to achieve it to the maximum, despite the circumstances surrounding us. The aim is to overcome passivity and rather promote the full, or much fuller, exercise of our agency, i.e. acting 'consciously, on purpose and for a purpose' (Crocker 2008, 157).

Nevertheless, the Capabilities Approach is not only a prospective and evaluative framework through which to assess human development and well-being. Beyond that, it represents an incomplete idea of justice. Generally, social justice seems to be as ambiguous as the term

'participatory', and perhaps even more so (Buchanan & Mathieu 1986). It is a term whose definition has historically been ascribed to the few elites able to influence its understanding (Capeheart & Milovanovic 2007). Moreover, it has become a highly contested idea that differs according to individuals and place. Sen (2009) claims that there is a need to identify unfair situations through an evaluative framework in order to take action against them. However, this identification is not based on a dichotomous frame, but as a continuum, where situations can be assessed as more or less according to the individual capabilities evaluation. Moreover, Sen (2009) addresses questions such as how to enhance justice or remove injustices rather than resolve the question of what justice is, or how a perfectly just society would look, and how that might differ according to time and place. The use of capabilities as a means of assessing individuals and detecting shortfalls is a sufficient way to promote an open-ended version of justice, which does not aim to build itself as a complete theory of justice. It is not a question of building a justice theory, but of allowing partial justices to understand one another in a plural world.

Hence, moving beyond a transcendental institutionalism is precisely what the Capabilities Approach contributes to debates on justice. The Capabilities Approach connects justice 'with the way people's lives go, and not merely with the nature of the institutions surrounding them' (Sen 2009, x). These implications are far-reaching for participatory approaches and decolonial ideas. The introduction of a capabilities-based participatory research not only pays attention to the diverse lives the members have reason to value, but equally uses the processes as a catalyst of member's freedoms. However, these ideas will be developed in the following section. Firstly, we will investigate the commonalities between the Capabilities Approach and the decolonial debate.

4.2.2 An Incomplete Theoretical Foundation

The potential contribution of the Capabilities Approach to decoloniality and to participatory approaches lies in its incompleteness and non-universalist perspective. Frequently, Eurocentric theories tend to orient participatory practices and conceptualisations of participation. Nevertheless, this vision of theory as universal and totalising is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment period as part of the Eurocentric-modern

project (Mignolo 2007). This is why scholars have, for several decades, been pointing out that knowledge is contextual and should be assessed according to the place and time whence it emerges, and should then be connected globally throughout epistemic system networks (De Sousa Santos, 2014).

All of this has created fruitful debates. It has certainly brought about a shift in the means of theorising, especially in the field of social sciences. For instance, Hoffmann and Metz say that ‘theory cannot provide a pre-defined, absolute set of procedures’ (2017, 2). Thus, flexible approaches are required, ‘incomplete theories’ that can act as a space in which to translate different cultural assumptions (De Sousa Santos 2006a). Similarly, De Sousa Santos (2006a) says:

Knowledge as emancipation does not pretend to build itself as a big theory but as a translation theory that can convert in the epistemological base of the emancipatory practices, being these practices finite, incomplete and thus only sustainable if it is able to be incorporated into networks. (2006a, 30)

In this incompleteness, the Capabilities Approach, in its more flexible and open perspective as presented by Amartya Sen (1999; 2009), is a suitable and appropriate partial theory. It can be a translation tool to promote decoloniality and recognition of other epistemologies and worldviews. Moreover, it frames participatory practices according to a group’s specificities and respects their own cultural frameworks. This can be achieved through the Capabilities Approach’s notion of ‘positional objectivity’ (Sen 2004), which recognises the varying views of different actors situated in the social fabric. ‘Positional objectivity is both objective and relative to the position of the observer’ (Bonvin, Laruffa & Rosenstein 2017, 7). It challenges positivist views, arguing that an objective position and a relative position are both necessary and substantial.

Indeed, although the terminology is slightly different, the decolonial debate advocates the very same idea. Dussel (2007) argues that what has to be promoted through a pluriverse is a ‘subjectivity of intersubjectivities’—in the sense of an incomplete positionality that needs a compendium of subjectivities—in the same way that Sen promotes the diversification and inclusion of ‘positional objectivities’. Bonvin, Laruffa and Rosenstein argue that:

The issue, then, is not to create the conditions allowing people to abstract themselves from their own interest and situations, but also give equal weight to all existing positional objectivities, which requires overcoming the material, symbolic and cognitive barriers identified. (Bonvin et al. 2017, 8)

Nevertheless, the democratic potential of the Capabilities Approach is jeopardised when arguing for a universalisation of capabilities or a universal conception of well-being. This reverses its foundational incompleteness into a universal theory of justice. Within the CA, a group of scholars supports the universalisation of capabilities, with the creation of a global capabilities list (Nussbaum 2011). Without diminishing its relevance and importance in such complex times of injustice and global inequalities, it perhaps simplifies the colonial challenge of Global South societies ignoring the power that certain societies exercise over others.

This position might impede the agency of individuals to decide their relevant capabilities in their own time and context. It might decrease the democratic potential, or freeze the context and time that greatly influences capabilities choices in a constantly changing reality. Sen supports a partial onto-epistemological incompleteness, which is well described in the following quote:

Pure theory, Sen contends ‘Cannot freeze’ a list of capabilities for all societies for all times to come, irrespective of what the citizens come to understand and value. That would not only be a denial of the reach of democracy, but also a misunderstanding of what a pure theory can do. (Hoffman & Metz 2017, 2)

Therefore, the potential of the Capabilities Approach as a decolonial tool lies in its understanding, from an emancipatory perspective, that is its being able to acknowledge and recognise the diversity of lives that different people have reason to value, including the knowledges they value (Sen 1999). As Watene (2016, 287) claims, ‘the approach recognises that culture is a constitutive part of well-being and a constructive factor in how life is valued’. Thus, the Capabilities Approach avoids the claim of universalism, inasmuch as it is able to locate and provide the space for an imperfect pluriverse. Bonvin et al. (2017) agree that the idea of ‘reason to value’ for Sen transcends the universalistic misrepresentation of rationality from deliberative theorists. The incompleteness of the approach is a means of avoiding parochialism, but equally of broadening

the notions of rational public debate and democracy beyond their Western definitions. Hence, Sen's approach provides a more adequate platform to sustain cross-cultural and participatory dialogue, whilst leaving the diverse reasons and values open through the centrality of agency in his approach (Watene 2016).

Another key point to argue regarding the Capabilities Approach and its potential contribution to decoloniality is its individual focus, the individual person being the final entity but also being able to decide which freedoms are important and relevant. Whilst this individualism has been conceptualised as an anthropocentric understanding, Robeyns (2005) has defended it as an ethical or methodological individualism, which differs from an ontological individualism. In the case of the Capabilities Approach, ethical individualism situates the person as the moral unit but does not restrict reality to a person's view, due to the substantial position of democracy and public scrutiny. This debate is especially relevant in its introduction to participatory approaches and ecologies of knowledge, due to the anthropocentric Western perspective of life (Zaffaroni 2012). First, scholars advocating decoloniality maintain that cultures, like groups, are not homogeneous (Dussel 2007). They stress the need to understand the individualities that compose a particular group (Dussel 2007; De Sousa Santos 2010; Mignolo 2007), an aspect which the Capabilities Approach is able to capture. And secondly, the 'anthropocentric fear' with regard to the Capabilities Approach is unjustified, provided that the approach is incomplete and therefore, flexible enough to transcend the individual as the unique capabilities-deserving entity or the focus of attention for capabilities. For instance, D'Amato (2020) has eloquently explored this in his article 'Collectivist Capabilitarianism'. Furthermore, another option could be to provide animals or rivers with capabilities, which is already an ongoing topic of debate in the capabilities literature (Nussbaum 2017; Kramm 2020). As mentioned above, the Capabilities Approach is an incomplete theoretical foundation which can be revised and complemented to better adjust it to our specific context and ontological positions, even if it needs further revisions and reconceptualisations of its fundamental elements. Moreover, there have been many debates about collective capabilities (Ibrahim 2006; Rosignoli 2019) and structures of living together that explore the interrelation between individuals and their

capabilities, adjusting the approach to more collective frameworks (Deneulin 2006). Certainly, this does not mean that the Capabilities Approach is intrinsically suited to a decolonial perspective, but rather that the approach is open enough to re-work and accommodate different cosmologies. As Watene (2016, 294) eloquently confirms in his discussion of Maori cosmovisions, ‘while Sen’s theory cannot fully appreciate Maori values that are not grounded in human freedom, his theory is open to them’, however, ‘rethinking capability theories and looking for spaces beyond the capability approach are required to make development conversations truly inclusive and truly global’.

On the other hand, capabilities can be defended as being aligned with decolonial ideas, due to the concept of ‘diatopical hermeneutics’ defended by De Sousa Santos (2006b; 2010). To bring about the ecology of knowledges, it is necessary to make use of what Santos (2006a; 2015) has called a ‘Diatopical hermeneutics’, which is the practice of dialogue where different knowledges can be translated into a something comprehensible to others. It is partly a theory of translation, which makes cultures and local cosmovisions understandable to each other. The role of a diatopical hermeneutic is not only to translate local worldviews but also to look for ‘isomorphic’ issues and their different responses to it. It provides the assumption that all cultures are incomplete and relative,¹ and therefore that all of them can gain from being in translation with each other (De Sousa Santos 2010). Sen (1999) equally sustains this idea, when he defines democracy as the inclusion of as many positional objectivities as possible (Bonvin et al. 2017). In this case, capabilities can be used as part of diatopical hermeneutics, providing the space to translate between different cultures, and diverse means of human flourishing, well-being, and human development. Capabilities can look for isomorphic elements among diverse cultures, and act as a link for them to understand each other in a space of democratic dialogue, as the following chapters will demonstrate.

All of the above situates the Capabilities Approach in a similar perspective on justice, while the decolonial debate calls for the removal of historical injustices through the conservation and promotion of

1 The use of the word ‘relative’ does not claim for a philosophical posture of cultural relativism. De Sousa Santos himself states that cultural relativism is an erroneous positionality, just like cultural universalism (De Sousa Santos 2010).

diversity in the world, throughout the pluriverse project. The Capabilities Approach fosters the expansion of the freedoms that people need in order to lead different lives, not only in terms of basic resources but also the mere consideration of open spaces for diverse individuals’ and groups’ valuable lives (Sen 2009).

Thus, to conclude, the table below summarises the different elements discussed in this section, detailing the commonalities between the Capabilities Approach and decoloniality.

Table 4: Comparing Decoloniality and the Capabilities Approach.

	Decoloniality	Capabilities Approach
Theoretical space	(Non-universalism) Partial theory: Ontologically incomplete and epistemologically diverse.	Incomplete theory — Approach: As a cultural translation theory. Ontologically open and able to accommodate epistemic diversity reworking central elements and ideas of this approach.
Voices	Subjectivities of intersubjectivities.	Positional objectivities.
Individualism/ Anthropocentrism	Pay attention to individuals that compose groups, but equally oppressed groups and entities that are beyond humans (beyond anthropocentrism).	Moral individualism. Flexible enough to reconsider humans as the only capabilities deserving attention.
Democracy	Non Western-institutionalised. Democracy, participation as central.	Acknowledge the Western appropriation and imposition of democratic institutions. Consider democracy in a broad sense, as inclusion of voices from different positionalities.

Diversity	<p>Universe to be transformed into a pluriverse, which highlights and promotes diverse knowledges and cosmovisions. Allows individuals to live out of the hegemonic mono-culture.</p> <p>Promotion of ecology of knowledges.</p>	<p>Development as the expansion of freedoms that different individuals have reason to value (doings and beings). Promoting different lives that individuals have reason to value.</p>
Units for cultural translation	Diatopic hermeneutic.	Capabilities.
Justice	<p>Onto-epistemological justice, removing hegemonic structures that do not allow diverse people to lead different lives and recognise diverse knowledges.</p>	<p>Removal of unfreedoms and promotion of the different lives diverse individuals have reason to value.</p> <p>Pay attention to processes and outcomes.</p>

Therefore, this section has corroborated that even with foundational limitations the Capabilities Approach can be aligned with decolonial ideas, when certain aspects of this approach are reconsidered. Firstly, it presents an open-ended, onto-epistemological position that embraces a diversity of perspectives. This is framed in an incomplete theoretical foundation for decoloniality. This position does not acquire a radical positionality, as has been true of certain decolonial perspectives. It does not deny the richness of the European tradition or the relevance of Western knowledge, but positions it on an equal footing with other traditions, and displaces its superiority. For instance, it does not deny universal capabilities lists but reminds us that capabilities choices and conceptualisations are culturally related; and they require global discussions, especially with communities in the Global South if they are to be considered global (rather than universal). Secondly, democracy is approached broadly, including many voices in a horizontal dialogue.

This is especially relevant with the use of participatory approaches that include processes of knowledge production much more than a classified and reduced group of individuals selected by an institution in a hierarchic system. It not only represents the inclusion of diverse voices, but also the representation and validation of other knowledge systems and cosmovisions in order to enhance our democratic spaces. Thirdly, the ecology of knowledges is compatible with the Capabilities Approach as the latter is able to value other lives that different individuals have reason to value, and therefore, other knowledge systems. This section has claimed that capabilities can be used as a multi-cultural translation tool, helping us to look for isomorphic elements in different cosmologies. This does not mean unifying these elements, but rather looking within the cultural specificities for elements that are not the same, but that retain symbolic similarities. This section has concluded that both the Capabilities Approach and decoloniality sustain the preservation of our Global South diversity as a way to achieve social justice. It has also claimed that the issue is not only related to resource inequalities, but also to historical structures of oppression, such as colonial conversion factors. Thus, multidimensional oppressions hinder different peoples from living the lives that they, diverse individuals in the South and North, have reason to value in different places and times (Sen 1999).

4.3 Conceptualising a Capabilities-Based Research Process

Participatory approaches are of interest in the area of human development and the Capabilities Approach. Whilst the combination of both fields is a relatively recent phenomenon, more scholars are becoming interested in this approach, due to its participatory nature and the centrality of public scrutiny and democracy as instruments to enhance people's freedoms.

Some scholars, mostly from development studies, have explored theoretical debates between participatory approaches and the Capabilities Approach (Biggeri & Anich 2009; Clark, Biggeri & Frediani 2019; Duraiappah et al. 2005; Frediani 2006; 2007; 2010; Mink 2016; Negrini 2009; Pellisery & Bergh 2007; Robeyns 2006). Others have used participatory methods and methodologies in educational studies (Boni & Millan 2015; Boni & Walker 2016; Fertig 2012; Heather 2014; Lizzio & Wilson 2004; Ley 2013; Vanderkinderen & Rose 2014), or community

projects (Conradie 2013a; Conradie 2013b; Conradie & Robeyns 2013; Lavelle-Wijohn 2017; Mazigo 2017). In addition, some studies have focused on its application in environmental projects (Simpson 2018; Simpson & Basta 2018) or children's projects (Del Moral-Espin, Perez-Garcia & Galvez-Munoz 2017), among others.

However, there are three main challenges and a clear gap in the publications linking the Capabilities Approach and participatory approaches. Firstly, there is very limited literature about the interrelation of participatory approaches and the Capabilities Approach, which is especially deficient in the Southern and decolonial areas of research. The literature mostly focuses on development studies and the application of participatory methods. The use of participatory methodologies is residual, and almost non-existent. And, finally, there seems to be a diversity of terminologies in use among the community of scholars using participatory practices—Action Research, Participatory Action Research or Indigenous Research. However, despite the flourishing of new terminologies in the field of participatory approaches, this community has not agreed or attempted to understand or conceptualise their practices as informed and theorised under the Capabilities Approach, nor indeed through a decolonial lens.

Therefore, after exploring the limitations within the field of participatory approaches in Chapter Three, highlighting inconsistencies regarding participation and the need to move towards more critical and decolonial participatory approaches, this chapter conceptualises Democratic Capabilities Research (DCR). DCR acts as a capabilitarian theoretical ground, considering weaknesses within the participatory field. This tool is deliberately incomplete (Sen 1999) so it can be adapted to different research fields and contexts in debates of decoloniality and epistemic justice. Equally, it embraces the most critical commonalities between the diverse participatory families previously displayed, contributing to the extended family of participatory approaches. It adds a more suitable theoretical frame from a Southern perspective that moves beyond totalising theories and Western perspectives, as a way to understand justice broadly.

To explore the constitutive elements of Democratic Capabilities Research more deeply, and to answer the question of why these elements—'Democratic' and 'Capabilities'—were chosen above others, the following section will highlight each of them through a capabilities

lens. It links these concepts with decolonial and participatory debates, highlighting the theoretical and practical advantages of using this incomplete theoretical ground.

4.3.1 Democratic Capabilities Research

To understand DCR as a practice, firstly, it seems relevant to clarify the main elements of the Capabilities Approach within this proposed participatory research. DCR arises from two main terminologies within the Capabilities Approach, i.e. 'Democracy' and 'Capabilities'. Sen (2009) clearly states in his preface to *The Idea of Justice*:

Democracy is assessed in terms of public reasoning, which leads to an understanding of democracy as 'government by discussion'. But democracy must also be seen more generally in terms of the capacity to enrich reasoned engagement through enhancing informational availability and the feasibility of interactive discussions. Democracy has to be judged not just by the institutions that formally exist but by the extent to which different voices from diverse sections of the people can actually be heard. (2009, xii-xiii)

In this introduction, Sen (2009) not only provides a different perspective of democracy through the extended representative democratic system (Isakhan & Stockwell 2011; Bonvin, Laruffa & Rosenstein 2017) but equally dismantles the Eurocentric creation and appropriation of democracy. Sen (2009) highlights the erroneous dilemmas between groups, which argue for the imposition of democracy in non-Western territories, and groups, which argue against a Western-centric imposition of democracy. By framing democracy as public reasoning, it becomes much more than a Western creation, and represents elements found in different civilisations and time periods across history (Sen 2009). Therefore, if democracy is the platform for public discussion by individuals, as opposed to exclusively powerful and well-established institutions, these discussions should embrace all of the dimensions and cosmovisions prevailing in the world beyond regional and institutionalised logics. It is about promoting an alternative way to advance an inclusive system of pluriversal progress. Bonvin et al. (2017) clarify Sen's notion of democracy, stating that:

The normative implication is that democratic processes should include as many positional objectivities as possible. Indeed, the more such

viewpoints are included and considered, the more collective decisions will be objectively informed. In this perspective, effective democratic participation is justified on epistemological grounds, as a prerequisite to reach informed decisions. It is not based simply on the normative superiority of collective discussion or public debate over unilateral imposition, but on the epistemological necessity to include all relevant information into the collective decision-making processes. (Bonvin et al. 2017, 8)

Therefore, the Capabilities Approach is able to promote a heterogeneous epistemic foundation, according to which it is no longer only one valid type of knowledge, but the promotion of a democratic dimension, which must be composed of different voices. As Bonvin et al. (2017) state:

The Capabilities Approach calls for re-politicising the production of knowledge—in contrast to contemporary tendencies that reduce the process of policy formulation to a technical matter based on scientific evidence. (2017, 11)

Thus, a participatory research project like DCR must include a conceptualisation of democracy, such as the one above, understanding the need to promote the diversification of voices and the enhancement of inclusivity within processes of knowledge creation.

On the other hand, capabilities are the real freedoms that a person enjoys (Sen 1999). They are ‘the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value’ (Sen 1999, 87). Thus, capabilities represent all those freedoms to do and to become the person that different individuals and collectives want to be, but equally to be able to lead their lives in the way they have reason to value (Sen 1999). Furthermore, this includes being able to live under a different cosmovision or being able to value one’s communal/cultural knowledge system. Therefore, capabilities are an incomplete unit of analysis, which can embrace a diversity of ways of living and respect Southern perspectives.

4.3.2 Contributions of a Capabilities-Based Perspective to Participatory Approaches

Despite the two main elements of the Capabilities Approach composing this DCR practice informed by decolonial debates, we must also explore this incomplete framework’s contribution to participatory approaches.

The decolonial debate and its Southern positionality calls for more inclusive means of knowledge production, and more flexible epistemic and ontological/cosmological frameworks. The use of participatory research is one way to overcome the Western-centric boundaries within higher-education institutions. However, these practices are at times pervasively used to mimic the very colonial logics they condemn, contributing towards the homogenisation of the field instead of its diversification. On the other hand, the Capabilities Approach can be a useful theoretical framework for understanding the implications of Western traditions in our work as participatory practitioners. In doing so, we are reinforcing the theoretical foundation of participatory practices from a Global South perspective and reversing some of the actual limitations, overcoming colonial challenges for justice and the democratisation of knowledge.

Why Democratic and Not Participatory?

‘Participation’ or ‘participatory’ is a highly contested word, as discussed in previous chapters (Hayward, Simpson & Wood 2004; Webb 1996; Frediani 2015). The divergent understandings of ‘participation’ represent an intricate theoretical space that is overestimated, with the aim of providing more or less space for an individual’s participation. Sen (1999; 2009) states that whilst individuals might participate in national elections, voting once every four years, this does not equate to democracy in a broad sense. It can be said that participation is one necessary component of democracy, but is not democracy in itself, or democracy in a broad sense, as the Capabilities Approach presents it. Do we want to create participatory spaces of knowledge production? Or do we want to create democratic spaces of knowledge production?

The term ‘democracy’, from a capabilities perspective, focuses on the micro-politics of everyday life, acting according to what we want to do and be from a critical perspective, taking conscious decisions over our political affairs and expressing them through our conscious agency (Sen 1999; Crocker 2008). Public interaction through dialogue is a necessary precondition of this aim, which requires us to accommodate as many perspectives (positional objectivities) as possible (Sen 1999), or an ecology of knowledges (De Sousa Santos 2014). This is

especially important, whether we approach participation in knowledge production through our own traditional frameworks, or offer space for more democratic knowledge creation, which extends beyond simple participation. Democracy represents a wider methodological understanding of participation. When individuals share a democratic space, members of the group are doing more than participating in something. They are creating a new intellectual space, which did not exist before they got together. They are raising their voices and knowledge in different ways and forms. Thus, democracy understood through a capabilities framework provides a wider-reaching concept, whose adequacy may be evaluated according to the voices being heard (positional objectivities) and scrutinised publicly.

This concept, thus, avoids current ambiguities in the use of participation, expanding its meaning from an instrumental idea to a communal dialogue. Participation is a component of democracy, thus democracy acquires a more solid normative meaning through the Capabilities Approach. It is not enough merely to involve individuals in the process of research; it is a necessary step forward to reverse the structures of power over the spaces of knowledge creation, returning democratic elements such as ecologies of knowledge (De Sousa Santos 2014). It is not only a question of participation, but also of more inclusive democratic knowledge networks, which can connect, particularly with the voiceless, beyond the individual academic research endeavour.

Why Capabilities and Not Action?

Equally, in participatory approaches and due to the dominant logics and practices of production and efficiency, most participatory projects—especially those focused on AR practices—are expected to have a tangible outcome which impacts the context and/or participants in different ways. One example of this might be behavioural changes in a community, which were explored in Chapter Three. This instrumental perspective can diminish a more critical perspective of such practices, narrowing the focus to a part of the whole. Certainly, a problematic and paternalistic approach is reproduced when researchers force community change under their own logics and assumptions. But what about communities' own aspirations of change? What about the

collective impact on research members during our joint work? And the impact on the lives that they, as individuals and groups, have reason to value independently of our research agendas?

This is well illustrated by the Capabilities Approach, as in the example displayed above. If we pay attention to, for instance, educational outcomes in terms of a qualification certificate, we miss the inequalities in the process of achievement, the freedoms that different individuals and groups have to reach a certain outcome. We can observe the same oversight in participatory practices, due to their pedagogical relevance. What about the freedoms that diverse individuals and the group enjoy and/or enhance during a participatory practice? What about enhancing the freedoms valued by oppressed groups and disadvantaged groups? Which capabilities are valuable for those individuals/groups, and is the participatory process able to expand them or not? These questions shift our attention from the concrete collective action expected by the researcher, as in traditional participatory projects, to the impact on the lives the participants have reason to value, having taken into consideration their context, cosmovisions and preferred ways of living.

Therefore, when groups are implementing participatory research projects, it is important to pay attention to the participants' valuable capabilities, the potential choices that the process enhances and/or constrains. Equally important are the functionings and tangible research outcomes for the individuals/group involved. DCR, thus switches 'Action' to 'Capabilities',² providing an alternative view for exploring collaborative research, which pays attention not only to the tangible outcomes desired by the researcher, but also to the co-researchers' and communities' valued freedoms.

In conclusion, the Capabilities Approach as a framework can greatly contribute to the theorisation and operationalisation of participatory practices. It provides an incomplete framework able to accommodate the challenges that participatory approaches must face in the twenty-first century in an increasingly complex and homogenising landscape. To do so, it redirects the knowledge creation process to the co-researchers' valuable lives, providing the evaluative and normative foundation to enhance their capabilities. It maintains a democratic space in which to

2 'Capabilities' are the real freedoms people have to be and to do the things they have reason to value, what people are able to do and to be (Sen 1999; Robeyns 2017).

share and enhance valuable capabilities and knowledges for the lives that the co-researchers involved have reason to value.

4.3.3 Foundational Principles

The following section justifies the foundational elements of this proposed DCR process, clarifying the challenges, when theoretical implications are brought down to earth, as real practices. Thus, Democratic Capabilities Research is here presented as a practical insight for imperfectly achieving and protecting communities' epistemic freedoms. It is necessary to recognise the incompleteness of the tool and to add it to the current compendium of participatory tools being used in efforts for justice according to a particular Southern understanding. Democratic Capabilities Research presents a participative research process as a pedagogical space, which is flexible enough to embrace different worldviews and knowledges through a critical analysis of the valuable freedoms of the team members, thus presenting a Southern viewpoint. Equally, it cannot be considered as a method, which follows one, two or three specific steps, or as a simple data collection tool, nor can it be considered a methodology. It is a tool, which should be developed in each individual context as a full research process by co-researchers.

The following paragraphs highlight some of the practical implications of DCR. These key points are still in the process of being defined and refined and therefore are not complete or final. As already mentioned, the DCR project is only possible within wide networks of individuals who are connected by the shared aim of improving or creating differently. These principles are informed by the decolonial debate, participatory approaches and the Capabilities Approach. Hence, these principles have been assimilated into a coherent DCR framework to provide an alternative viewpoint capable of democratising participatory research while respecting its contextualisation. According to this conceptualisation, there are five original DCR foundational principles. These are not exhaustive but are intended to provide points of resistance that we might be able to navigate as researchers in academia:

- **Injustice as an initial issue:** Injustice/s should be the foundational issue/s, which means that 'injustice' is not framed by the 'facilitator', but embraces a multiplicity

of understandings of injustice according to the members involved, respecting cultural and context-based cosmovisions. This is the open-ended epistemological level, opening up to other cosmologies and bringing together a group of individuals and their knowledge systems in order to investigate an injustice that affects them and other individuals and therefore, which they have good reasons to research. The facilitator is here an ally to prompt and sustain collective agency, and their role is not to determine the research agenda of the group.

- **Internal and external epistemic diversity³ (ecology of knowledges):** In the sense of the promotion of the ecology of knowledges throughout the research process. This involves validating knowledge systems that are traditionally excluded and bringing them to the research process, in the way that is required by the team and the particular circumstances of the project. Hence, it involves including knowledges such as, but not limited to, scientific, conceptual, experiential, intuitive, local, Indigenous, cultural, spiritual and/or popular. The facilitator here has a substantial responsibility to demystify hegemonic knowledge, but also to discuss and create platforms for the assessment of other knowledge systems.
- **The voiceless as knowledge creators:** DCR is a space of democratic (to the extent that this is possible) knowledge creation for the excluded. The participants involved represent collectives excluded from 'validated knowledge production processes', which does not mean that they do not create knowledge in their own frameworks or use validated sources of knowledge. They are epistemic agents, but the point is to bring their epistemic materials to the validated knowledge system and to reduce their epistemic marginalisation and obstructions within the hegemonic system.

3 See Chapter Seven for more information.

- Uncertain horizon:** This involves flexibility in the sense that DCR is not a business plan, nor a sterile methodological intervention. Therefore, it is desirable to promote and conserve an 'uncertain horizon' able to transform what comes next through the constant democratic dialogue and decision-making of the research group. This approach seems especially difficult in scientific contexts, which are flooded with endless bureaucracy, efficiency drives, and results-orientated projects. These issues underscore the urgency and imperative need for the approach to discuss and debate every step taken by the research team.
- DCR as a platform to expand/achieve the participants' capabilities:** Capabilities expansion and achievement is placed under a critical lens; the facilitator should collectively investigate and promote the expansion of the capabilities that are deemed valuable for the members during the research project. This capabilities enhancement cannot be evaluated with an external checklist, but through an individual and collective exploration of the valued capabilities of the members of the group. This orients the practice towards the identified valued capabilities, as well as assessing the process by evaluating the extent to which these capabilities and related functionings have been expanded and achieved.

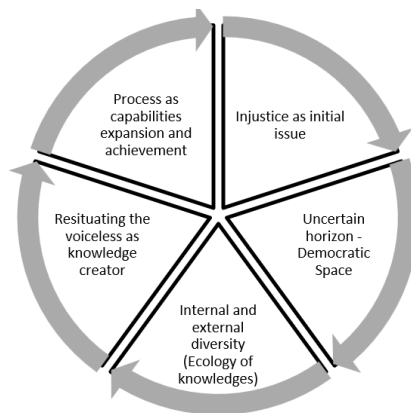


Figure 4: Principles of Democratic Capabilities Research (image by the author, 2021).

DCR does not represent a linear approach to research, nor does it constrain its 'partial phases' into timeframes. Spaces are complex and, therefore—in a DCR practice—a few phases can be implemented at the same time, some stages can be repeated at various points in the research, and so on. DCR not only represents an approach to research, it is a framework within which to understand a research process in itself. DCR is not separate from the daily life of the members; real life and DCR are in constant conversation as a space of questioning, reflection and learning. Therefore, DCR goes beyond a conventional research process, and it offers a way of co-constructing sense together, co-building reality and co-creating pluriversal knowledge imperfectly and within complex and convoluted social and political spaces of power, in which the group and the facilitators are situated.

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