



# The Capability Approach and Human Rights in Social Work.

## Two sides of a coin?



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# The Capability Approach and Human Rights in Social Work.

- CA: the basics
- Linking to social work core values.
- Human Rights and the CA: two sides of a coin?
- CA network

Analyse XL op Sociaal.net  
**De Capability Approach.**  
**Voeding voor het sociaal werk van morgen?**

Collin den Braber en Michel Tirions



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## The Capability Approach: the basics.



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# The Capability Approach: the basics.



## A THEORY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT



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The ambition of the Capability Approach is to focus on **quality of life** when determining social and political policies, and not on economic parameters such as production, growth and profitability.

The quality of life can be interpreted as **"the freedom of a person to live the life one has reason to value."**

**"Everyone is entitled to a high quality life."**

# The Capability Approach: the basics.



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**Quality of life** as central issue: happiness, human flourishing, wellbeing, the good life, a dignified life, a valued life, etc.

**Diversity:** every **individual** human being has a different and legitimate interpretation of the good life.

**Human Development** is the individual *freedom* to live the life one has reason to value

**Freedom** concerns the human **capability** to do what you want to do and to be who you want to be  
**(doings and beings)**

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Therefore policy makers and professionals should focus mainly on the quality of life by *creating opportunities / possibilities so all people can live the life they want with reason.*



# The Capability Approach: the basics.



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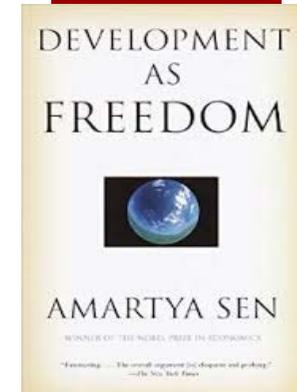
## Freedom

**Negative Freedom:** the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. (Freedom from....)

**Positive Freedom:** is the possibility of acting in such a way as to take control of one's life and to realize one's fundamental purposes. (Freedom to do...)

**Social Freedom:** human freedom is linked to **a collective and social responsibility** where everyone is also concerned with the freedom and development of others. (Den Braber & Tirions, 2016)

**"I am because we are" (Ubuntu)**



# The Capability Approach: the basics.



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## Freedom – in solidarity

Only in relation to other human beings and embedded in a community are people able to shape their existence. We can only be free in a society that allows and guarantees our freedoms, while everyone is also concerned about the freedom of others.

**"The CA calls for a socially involved society"**

This is a first important connection to social work.

*"the success of a society is to be evaluated primarily by the freedoms that members of society enjoy"*  
Amartya Sen

# The Capability Approach: the basics.



## Lexicon.

**Capabilities** are the chances and choices people have to live the life they want to lead.

**Functionings** are activities, states or situations that people spontaneously find important and worthwhile. (*realised capabilities*)

**Resources** are the resources that are important for achieving functionings.

**Conversion factors** are the issues that make people realize their choices.

## The Capability Approach: the basics.

### What makes the CA worthwhile?



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Focus on **STRENGTHS**, not on needs.

Focus on **QUALITY OF LIFE**.

Attention given to **OPPORTUNITIES**, but  
Also to **TRESHHOLDS** and **CONDITIONS**.

Focus is on the **INDIVIDUAL HUMAN BEING**  
in his/her context/ living world.

**NORMATIVE** : about how to define 'a good life'.

*Evaluative, normative & action framework.*



# The Capability Approach: the basics.

## Personalia

### Amartya Sen

Indian Nobel Prize winner, philosopher and economist.



### Martha Nussbaum

American philosopher and classicist.



### Ingrid Robeyns

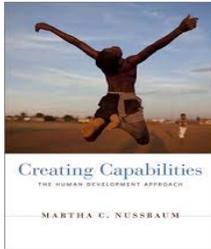
Flemish-Dutch philosopher and economist.



### Sabine Alkire

UK sociologist and economist.



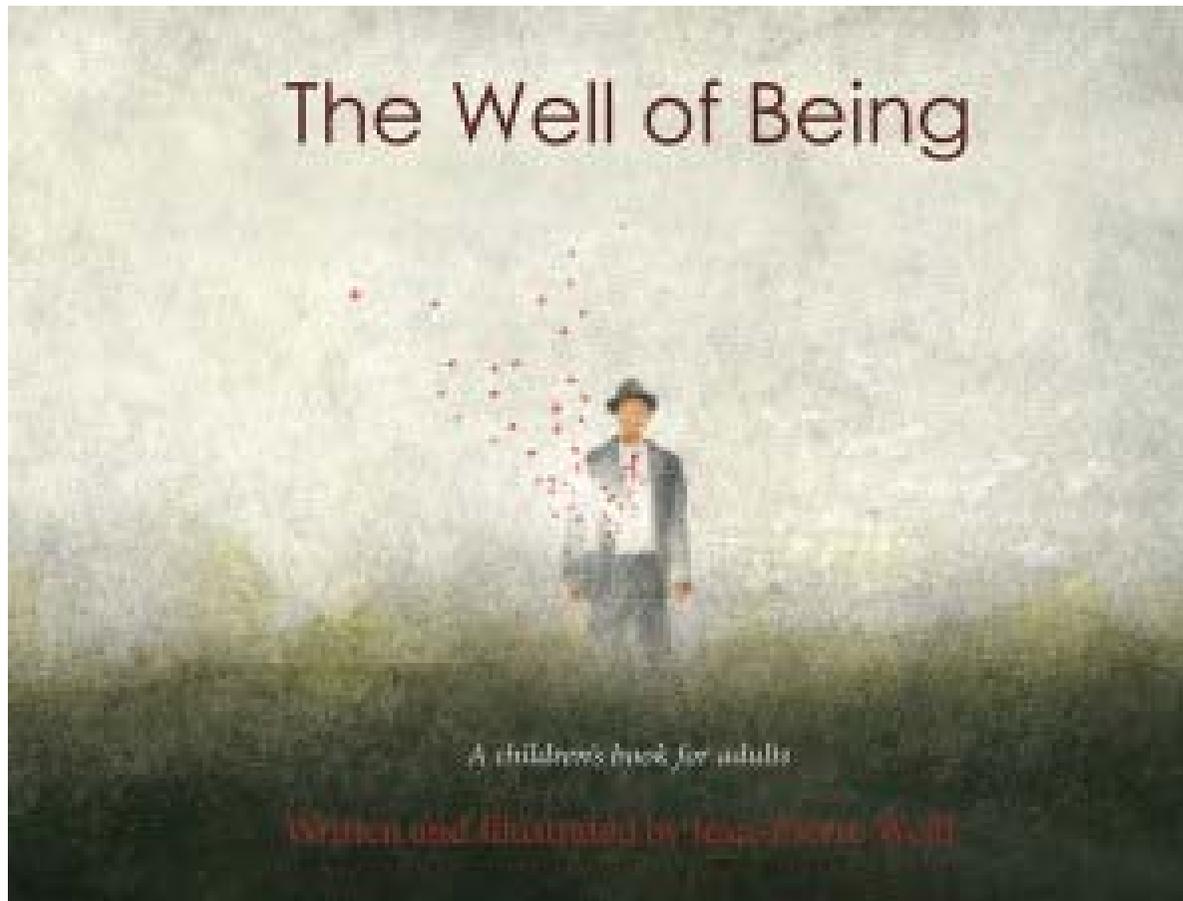


## 10 essential capabilities according to Martha Nussbaum (2012)



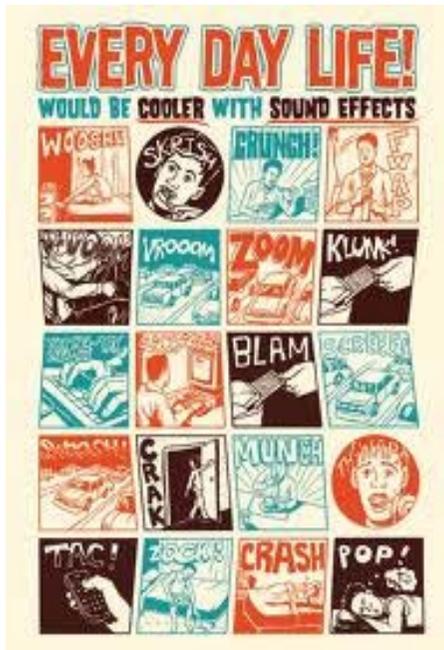
1. **Life** (being able to live a life of normal length)
2. **Bodily Health** (being able to live a healthy life)
3. **Bodily integrity** (being able to move freely – freedom of safe mobility)
4. **Senses, imagination and thought** (being able to use the senses, imagination and think)
5. **Emotions** (able to experience emotions like love and anger toward others and things)
6. **Practical reason** (able to reflect on a good life and how to get this)
7. **Affiliation** (being able to connect with other / being part of a community)
8. **Other species** (being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants and the world of nature)
9. **Play** (being able to laugh, to play and to enjoy recreational activities)
10. **Control over one's environment**: being able to political participation and material participation by property and work.

# The Capability Approach: linking to social work.



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## The Capability Approach: linking to social work.



Strong affinity with the core values and the mission of social work.

- Global Definition
- Human Rights approach
- Emancipation and empowerment
- Diversities
- Participation, self-direction
- Social Justice
- Self determination

A strong context-oriented approach to human development.

## The Capability Approach: linking to social work.

### Building tomorrow's social work.

The Capability Approach stands for a new humanist ethics of human development based on the **universal right to freedom and happiness.**

The Capability Approach has the potential to provide a comprehensive **theoretical, ethical, but also empirical framework** for social work.

The Capability Approach connects individual capabilities of people with the **need for collective and public resources.**

The Capability Approach **captures the notion of social justice solidarity and wellbeing,** pivotal for social work.

The Capability Approach is based on **a long tradition of scientific research** in which intrinsically focuses on human well-being.

That makes the Capability Approach **reliable and involved.**

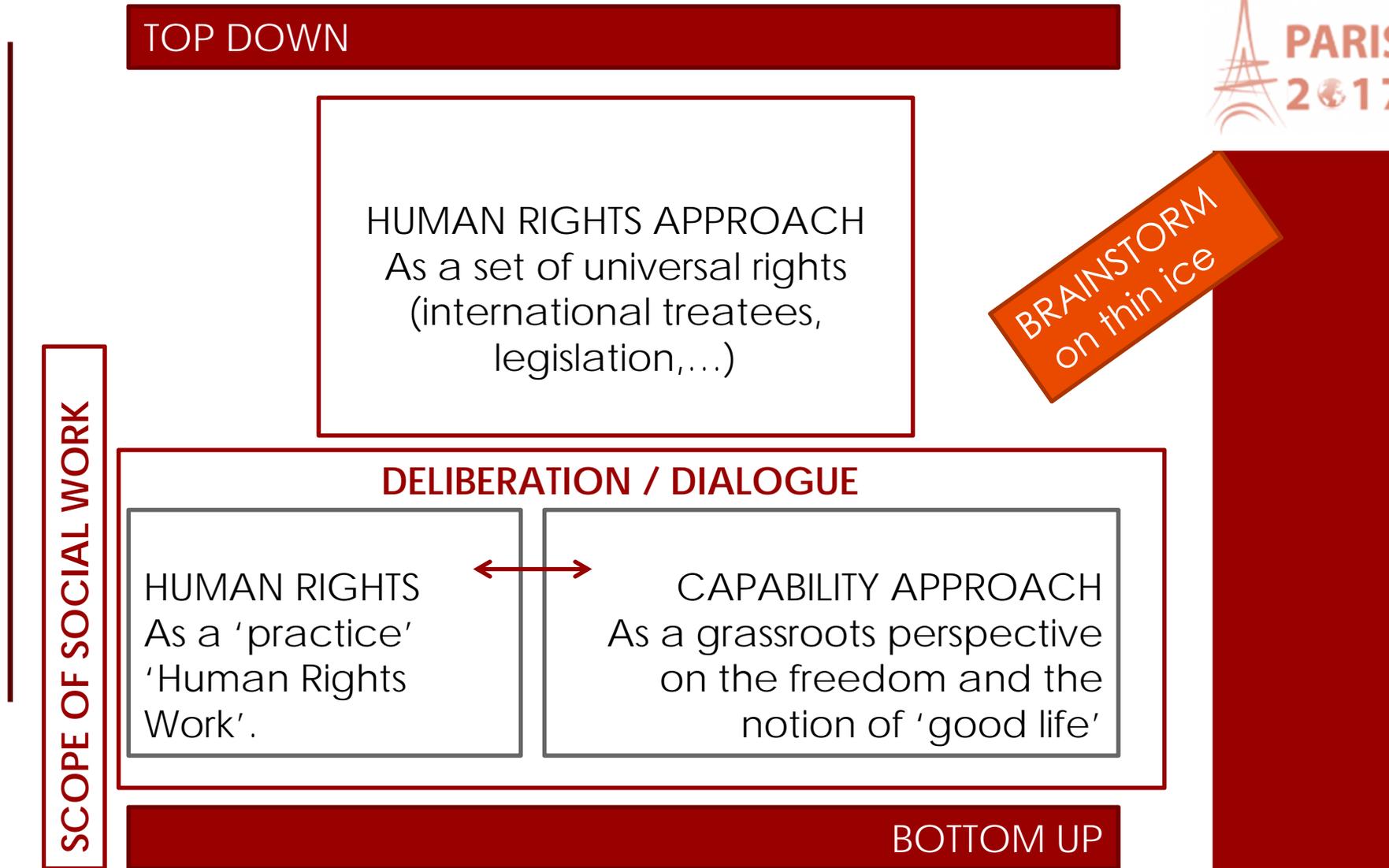
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# Human Rights perspective and The Capability Approach:



# Human Rights perspective and The Capability Approach:



# Two sides of a coin.

**HUMAN RIGHTS: a top-down perspective,**

## **Top down:**

Universal HR create an objective – juridical - universal framework for the right to have a dignified / good life with fundamental freedoms.

Necessity to address fundamental rights of each human being – universal.

## **LEGAL**

- Needs a legal framework for implementation - politics.
- HR are not necessarily claimable rights.

## **SOCIAL CONSTRUCT**

- Symbolic : contradictions between theory (law) and practice (politics).
- Need for deliberation. Doesn't always cover what people value in their life.



# Two sides of a coin.

HUMAN RIGHTS: but also a grassroots  
PRACTICE

Social Work 'practicing' human rights. Emerges in daily  
practice

-> HUMAN RIGHTS WORK

**CAPABILITY APPROACH: adds up to that:**

## A grassroots perspective.

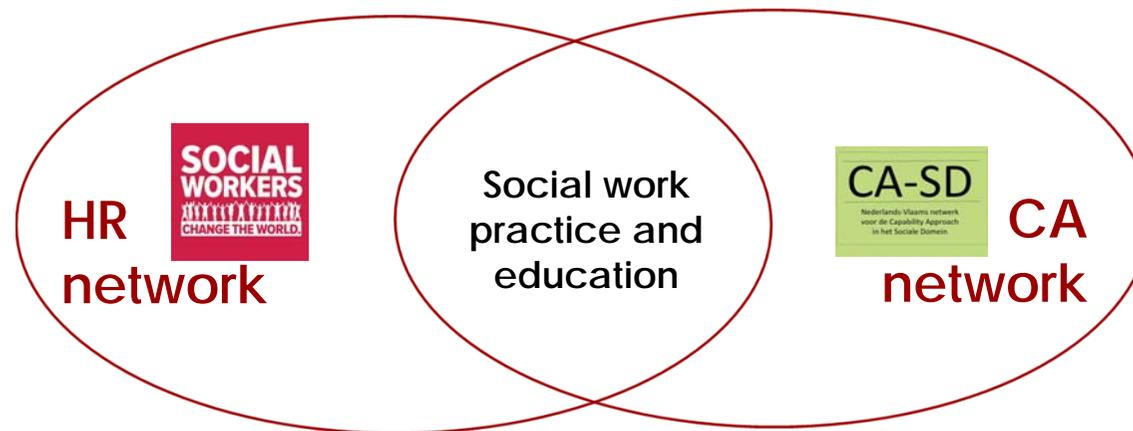
- Individual human beings decide on what they define as 'a good life'.
- Connects to the universal perspective of HR, but starts in the life context of people. (Nussbaum)
- Deliberation is a key issue in the CA (Sen) : **what do people value in their life and how can we achieve this?**
- Overarching approach: law, sociology, economy, development studies, philosophy, ... : scientific framework.
- Connects to real life... so does HR-Work



# Human Rights Work and the Capability Approach



- Complementarity
- Mutually reinforcing perspectives (UN)
- **Plee for bridging:** in social work education, research and practice.
- The Netherlands and Flanders:



Doe  
mee:



Je vindt ons op Linked-In en op  
Facebook

Announcement: book: **De Capability Approach in het sociale domein. Een introductie.** Verschijnt in januari 2018 , Bohn Stafleu van Loghum / Springer.