Poverty, Homelessness and Freedom : An Approach from the Capabilities Theory

Guillem Fernàndez Evangelista

Associació ProHabitatge, Autonomous University of Barcelona – IGOP

› **Abstract**_ *This paper makes a conceptual effort to apply Amartya Sen's 'capabilities theory' to the study of homelessness. This involves understanding the concept of social exclusion as a constituent part of poverty that incidentally highlights the relational roots of poverty. The paper first provides definitions of 'home', 'homeless people' and 'homelessness' in terms of capabilities, in order to show that in many cases government policies are assessed according to the budget allocated to the area, or the amount of specific assets offered, rather than according to the entitlements of people and the capabilities they generate. At this point the methodological approach of Enric Tello's 'well-being space' is proposed to help identify the origin of dysfunctions in people's capabilities. It also allows us to see the main steps in the complex mediation that ties together the capacitating social resources and the active and autonomous construction of well-being.*

› **Keywords**_ *Poverty ; capabilities ; freedom ; homeless ; well-being space*

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Approaches to Ending Homelessness

At European level, FEANTSA (2005), in the context of the European Strategy for Social Inclusion, tried to synthesise and channel a variety of approaches in the fight against homelessness based on the reports of the national action plans for social inclusion. These approaches were:

- Evidence-based approach
- Comprehensive approach
- Multidimensional approach
- Rights-based approach
- Participatory approach
- Statutory approach
- Sustainable approach
- Needs-based approach
- Pragmatic approach
- Bottom-up approach.

The intention was not to create a definitive proposal whose policies had to be applied to all European countries. Rather, the idea was that these approaches could be adapted to the national context according to each country's priorities and requirements and to the profile and needs of its homeless population, thus becoming an instrument to facilitate discussion on the development of relevant policies. In this regard, it is proposed that Amartya Sen's capabilities approach to the study of homelessness can offer an integrating framework for the different approaches currently existing in Europe, and provide new mechanisms for assessing homeless policies, since the adoption of Sen's approach involves a rethinking of capabilities in the relationship between poverty, social exclusion and homelessness.

Poverty as Lack of Freedom

The economist Amartya Sen, who won the Nobel Prize in 1998 for his contribution to the welfare economy, is a required reference when it comes to analysing poverty, due to his contributions in the area of conceptualising and measuring human development, amongst other things. Sen (2000) defines poverty as 'a capability deprivation (that is poverty seen as the lack of the capability to live a minimally decent life)',

thus going beyond the traditional concept of poverty as only a lack of income or commodities. In this regard the most important aspect of well-being is not what one has, but what one can achieve with what one has.

Sen focuses on the potential of individuals to achieve and expand on their capabilities. Poverty should therefore be viewed not only as an absence of income, but as an obstacle to the exercise of an individual's capabilities. The fundamental concepts in Sen's theory are thus capability and functioning. Capability refers to a person's ability to achieve something and the effective opportunities an individual possesses with regard to the type of life that that individual can lead. Functioning represents an individual's actions and 'states'; the things that a person can be or do in life such as eating well or participating in the community (Sen, 1999, p.75).

> A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they are different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead. (Sen, 1987, p.36)

This definition of poverty is based on the Aristotelian notion that an impoverished life is a life where one is not free to carry out the important activities one has reason to choose (Sen, 2000). In other words, poverty can be understood as a lack of freedom, as freedom allows people to increase the capabilities that enable them to live life the way they want to live it. In this sense freedom is an end, but Sen stresses the importance of understanding freedom also as a means.

In *Development as Freedom* (1999), Sen considers that freedom, as a means of achieving development, branches out into different instrumental freedoms that are reciprocally related to each other. He distinguishes five different types of freedom: economic opportunities, political freedoms, social facilities, transparency guarantees and protective security. Each of these rights and opportunities helps to advance the general capability of a person. While there is broad consensus that economic opportunities are decisive for development, the other freedoms have not received enough recognition. For example, when Sen refers to 'protective security', he says that this 'is needed to provide a social safety net for preventing the affected population from being reduced to abject misery, and in some cases even starvation and death' (p.40); however, as recently as the winter of 2009 we saw cold weather cause more than two hundred deaths among homeless people across Europe.

Sen analyses the causes of poverty and considers policies for overcoming poverty from the point of view of freedom. The freedom of a person is understood as the ability to choose between different lifestyles, and development can mean being

capable of doing more things rather than buying more things, such that those who suffer from poverty suffer a restriction of freedom.

Sen also denies that the ownership of, or access to, commodities is the sole criterion for defining living standards. The ability to transform 'commodities' into 'functionings' varies, but each person has different initial endowments, defined as the initial set of possessions or properties that a person or family has (i.e. workforce, land, tools, commodities, money). This leads to the concept of entitlement (Sen, 1982), particularly in the study of famine, which tells us that rules of access are the set of commodities a person can potentially have in a society if the individual uses all the rights and opportunities available to him or her. There may be plentiful availability of food in a society without this necessarily implying any entitlement to it, which can lead to famine. This concept is perfectly applicable to the residential context, in that there may be a high volume of housing yet a large number of people sleeping on the streets. Living in a society with a social structure that offers entitlement to social resources (e.g. unemployment benefits, education, health care, social services) gives people a greater number of satisfiers than living in a society that does not offer such entitlements.

As noted by Max-Neef (1993), it is important to differentiate between needs and satisfiers. Needs are the same in all periods or contexts; what changes over time and from one culture to another is the way or the means used to satisfy these needs (satisfiers). In this regard it becomes clear that simply owning commodities or satisfiers cannot be a real indicator of well-being, since these represent only the means by which well-being can be achieved. Between the commodities and what can be achieved with them (the end result) will be found a multitude of personal and social factors that differ greatly from one person to another (Salcedo, 2008). This explains how and why some of those at risk become homeless while others do not. Therefore material means are not the only important thing; the promotion of a person's capabilities, functionings and entitlements also plays a key role.

In the context of homelessness, we can say that this is not a problem that can be solved simply by offering housing or increasing the number of beds in shelters. Instead it is necessary to adopt an integrated approach to the multiple problems that can lead to a person ending up on the street, including mental problems, drug addiction, alcoholism, traumatic losses or administrative difficulties such as a lack of documentation. A comprehensive approach must also include the development of people's capabilities.

This reflection is important because it leads us to perform the same reflective exercise (but in different terms) as FEANTSA in its proposed European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) based on the concept of 'home'.

Homelessness and Capabilities

The ETHOS classification seeks to provide a framework for mutual debate on the understanding and measurement of homelessness in European countries by providing a single language with which to collect data objectively and for policy-setting purposes. ETHOS uses four major categories: rooflessness, houselessness, insecure housing and inadequate housing. According to Doherty (2005), these categories are built on the conceptual definition of 'home', which encompasses three areas or domains: [1] the physical area, the social area and the legal area. If the three dimensions are satisfied, then a dwelling (or space) can be considered a 'home'. However, the absence, to a greater or lesser degree, of satisfaction in any of the three areas gives rise to one of the categories mentioned above, and it is from this point of view that thirteen operational categories are used to categorise different residential situations.

But what is a home in terms of capabilities?

From the viewpoint of capabilities, the concept of 'home' would be understood individually as comprising what each person 'inhabiting' the space contributes to it, as well as what the living space contributes to each person. In this sense the concept of a 'home' has different implications than the concept of a 'house'. Housing is a satisfier, and therefore there are entitlements or rules of access to housing.

Housing meets our need for shelter because it protects us from, for example, inclement weather. But at the same time it enables us to increase our capabilities by allowing us to rest; offering us somewhere to store our belongings and to clean ourselves; providing a space for personal and social relations, a space to foment creativity, a point of reference, a workplace or leisure space; and, as a symbol of belonging to a community, enabling our political participation. Housing therefore gives us the ability to achieve the functionings or states of well-being that we can understand as a 'home'.

This opens a rather interesting discussion on how to assess the capability-building strategies that can be offered by residential resources such as shelters. Can a shelter become a home? Is increasing the number of beds in emergency centres the best policy in achieving a situation where people can build their capabilities in the process of achieving a home?

When governments choose to create a network of emergency shelters in the traditional format of bunk-beds in communal spaces, gyms or sports pavilions, the conditions necessary to achieve a 'home' as a capacitating space are hardly being offered. A different approach would be to adopt a model for the eradication of homelessness

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1 www.feantsa.org/files/transnational_reports/EN_Stats_2005.pdf.

that offers housing along with services that are adapted to the problems identified among the affected population, and based on their intensity. In the United States, the development of the 'Housing First' model points in this direction.

> Housing First is an approach that centers on providing homeless people with housing quickly and then providing services as needed. What differentiates a Housing First approach from other strategies is that there is an immediate and primary focus on helping individuals and families quickly access and sustain permanent housing… A Housing First approach rests on the belief that helping people access and sustain permanent, affordable housing should be the central goal of our work with people experiencing homelessness. By providing housing assistance, case management and supportive services responsive to individual or family needs (time-limited or long-term) after an individual or family is housed, communities can significantly reduce the time people experience homelessness and prevent further episodes of homelessness… Housing First is an approach used for both homeless families and individuals and for people who are chronically homeless. Program models vary depending on the client population, availability of affordable rental housing and/or housing subsidies and services that can be provided. (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2006)

The model seeks to provide housing that enables the individual's capabilities to be developed (and in some cases rebuilt) by means of services adapted to the person's needs in achieving a 'home', and thereby developing the groundwork for a policy to eradicate homelessness. As noted by McNaughton (2010, p.37), 'The Housing First approach illustrates the possibilities of policy and practice fitting within a capabilities informed approach.'

This reciprocity between what we contribute and what it contributes to us, or the state of individuals created by satisfiers, is called 'midfare' by G. A. Cohen (Olsaretti, 2005). Commodities give people capabilities that each individual may or may not choose to use; they contribute to the performance of valuable activities and the achievement of desirable states, and they can produce other desirable states directly, without the beneficiaries exercising any capability whatsoever. In other words, what commodities give to people is not the same as what people can do with them, or what they actually do with them (Ortiz, 2004). In this regard 'housing' can be understood as a 'midfare'. Even so, Sen interprets midfare as part of functionings (Nussbaum and Sen, 1998, pp.17–18).

From a residential perspective, shelter is a basic and universal need. The series of entitlements that determine rules of access to the satisfier (the house or dwelling), along with a person's capabilities and ability to achieve effective opportunities will allow the individual to achieve a state of well-being that he or she can call 'home'. Failing this, different states of 'unwell-being' or homelessness can arise.

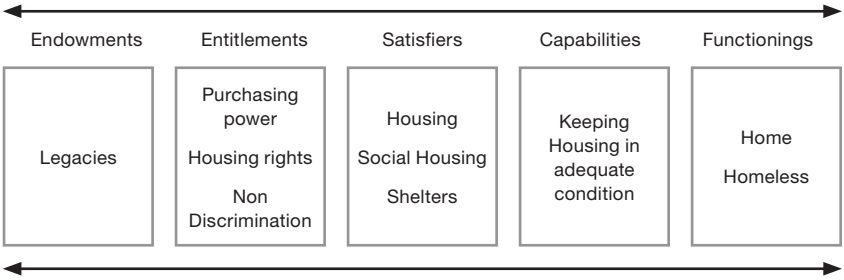
When does a home not exist in terms of capabilities?

People can find themselves in different homeless situations when obstacles to achieving the functionings that provide well-being (home) exist. For instance, very low initial endowments; problems with the rules of access to satisfiers; lack of satisfiers in terms of quantity (and/or lack of adequate satisfiers in terms of quality); lack of capabilities; lack of freedom.

From this perspective, homelessness is a process that can include situations in which the capabilities of an individual are affected by different issues. For example, the lack of adequate satisfiers (e.g. an inordinately small rental market or low levels of social housing) reduces the availability of choice and consequently the freedom to achieve a home. It affirms, for example, that roofless people are not free in terms of capabilities and their choice is based on the scarce opportunities available to them, if any.

Figure 1 illustrates the idea that people can achieve satisfiers, or that satisfiers are available to them (such as a dwelling or the opportunity to sleep in a shelter) based on their own endowments, how entitlements are structured in a specific social system (e.g. more or less a welfare state) and how they are used. The result is that a person can build a home or become homeless depending on his chances of living a decent life.

Figure 1: Home and capabilities



Source: Based on Schuldt, 1997.

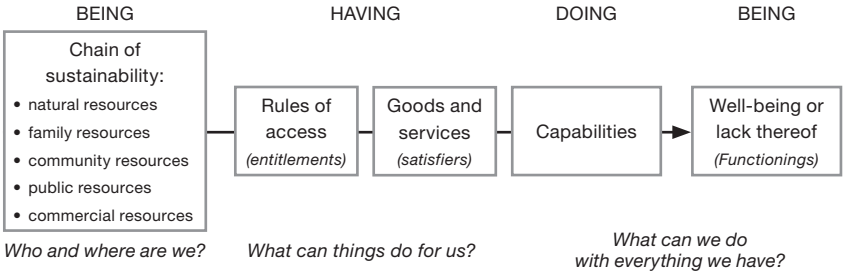
The Well-Being Space and Homelessness

Sen's capabilities theory has been criticised as being individualistic in nature, limiting the scope of the theory. In other words, functionings and capabilities are based on individuals, not on social states, and therefore do not convey (or disperse) the power relationships that form part of the social structure and dynamic (Cejudo, 2007).

The validity of this criticism is debatable, however, and a methodological approach could be used to analyse where capabilities and entitlements can be affected. People's full capabilities can be lost at any time throughout their life as a result of

different personal circumstances or for a reason related to the rules of access to satisfiers. For this reason we will take into account the methodological approach proposed by the economic and environmental historian Enric Tello (2005) involving the 'Cadena de Sosteniment de Necessitats Humanes' (CSNH or human needs sustainability chain).

Figure 2: The well-being space



Source: Tello, 2005.

The CSNH, which is also based on Sen's analysis, outlines the main steps in the complex mediation between capability-building social resources and the active and autonomous construction of well-being resulting in what is known as the 'well-being space' (Figure 2). The CSNH describes, in ascending order, five different but interrelated levels: natural systems, families, communities, states and markets. The first three levels are essential in meeting the most basic needs in any society, and the last two mainly characterise industrial societies. The choice of ascending order is thus no coincidence, as the market economy cannot function if it is not sustained by natural systems, family and community networks, public services and state infrastructures (Tello, 2005).

Natural systems, the source of sustenance for all forms of life, obviously form the base. The basic needs of the human species are not limited to food; humans also need a habitat and they need to maintain ecosystems and certain environmental conditions (e.g. temperature, rainfall, air composition) (Martinez and Roca Jusmet, 2001), which can generate situations of homelessness if they become extreme. It is estimated that between 1980 and 2002, in addition to the many casualties, 144.5 million people became homeless as a result of climate-related catastrophes. Bangladesh, China, Laos, Sudan, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Nigeria, Argentina and even the United States with Hurricane Katrina, are examples of countries where climate-related catastrophes have left thousands of people homeless (Lamba, 2008).

The second level is made up of cohabitation units; groups of people who regularly live under the same roof and who may have ties to each other based on kinship, affinity or friendship. It is at this level that human beings develop their identity, self-esteem and language, which prepares them (or not) for socialisation into a community.

The community is the third tier, and it is the level that will determine the process of social identity or sense of belonging, as well as the existence or non-existence of mutual support networks. Functionally it is characterised by the influence that it can have on people, by the emotional connections and shared history it engenders, and at the same by its determination of the way in which one enters or exits public goods and services as well as markets, which are located in the fourth and fifth tiers, respectively.

People can thus be seen to meet (or not) their needs for shelter and protection through interconnected and interdependent networks based on each of the tiers that make up the human needs sustainability chain. From a residential perspective, the market then becomes the 'dominant residential supply mechanism', understood as the set of mechanisms a society uses to provide housing (Cortés, 2005) that can be accessed (or not) by its inhabitants based on economic capability, understood as an entitlement. The state is responsible for putting in place the policies necessary to reduce difficulties of market access or to correct market imbalances, and is consequently responsible for offering satisfiers and services.

The community and cohabitation units offer residential alternatives and strategies where shelter and protection are not guaranteed by the last two tiers. Therefore, residential segregation and discrimination affect the community depending on how public services and market entry and exit are determined. In other words, they affect the entitlements and satisfiers of the well-being space, which suggests that residential segregation, being associated with violence and mistrust, deteriorates community life and the capability for collective action (Rodríguez and Arriagada, 2004).

In terms of the family, the house not only provides shelter and allows for the home to be configured, but also relates to the care of the people that share it, along with their self-esteem, communication, identity, participation and, in effect, their fulfilment as people. This point of view is evident in feminist thinking that places human life and living standards at the core of existence as based on 'life experience'. This is fundamental in that, coinciding with Sen's and Nussbaum's reasoning, the home can thus build itself and 'true freedom is that which is exercised within its own limits' (Bosch et al., 2005). The home becomes a space in which the practices of freedom are defined and constructed. For their part, the natural systems provide us with shelter, land, water, electricity, gas and food, but, as we have seen, they can also become a threat.

Hence, we can speak of a residential needs sustainability chain formed by a series of environmental, social and economic networks that determine capabilities and functionings (and therefore the achievement of well-being or 'unwell-being') translating into the home. Consequently, homelessness can be defined as a process that depends on the degree to which the capability of human expression is blocked in different links of the chain: lack of buying power to express one's residential needs in the housing market; lack of citizens' (human) rights to express the shortage in the public sphere; lack of preventive public mechanisms; and in some cases the inability or non-existence of community and family networks to sustain their members. The roofless are more exposed to natural risk (or violence) and they can die from the cold or heat.

At this point it is interesting to note the definition adopted by FEANTSA of a homeless person, since it can implicitly be deduced that it refers to capabilities:

> Any person who cannot access or maintain adequate housing, adapted to his personal situation, which is permanent and provides a stable framework for cohabitation, whether due to experiencing personal or social difficulties in leading an autonomous life. (Avramov, 1995)

An autonomous person could be a person who has assured himself or herself of what Nussbaum (2000) proposed as the basic capabilities that must be assured to each person by virtue of their human dignity. Among these basic capabilities, having adequate shelter is included under bodily health.

It is also important to stress the dynamism of a methodological approach based on capabilities, which enables an understanding of homeless situations where the social resource structure is totally deficient and in situations where individual capabilities are affected and thus generate homelessness. Consequently, one of the main features of the well-being space is the ability to interconnect structural dynamics (macro level) with personal and everyday processes (micro level), as well as what Avramov (1999) considers to be an intermediate step (meso level) through which the essential factors operate, and which tells us which population subgroups are at greatest risk of experiencing homelessness. The well-being space includes the novel feature of contemplating the role of the natural environment (basic level) in the analysis of homelessness, as it can affect, for example, the forms of homelessness depending on the climate and the migratory movements of the roofless around Europe.

The well-being space also offers a framework for studying the causes of homelessness that is similar to the proposal made by Edgar and Meert (2005) based on structural, institutional, relational and personal causes.

Poverty and Social Exclusion in Terms of Capabilities

Homelessness is increasingly viewed as a dimension and expression of social exclusion rather than a situation of poverty (Edgar et al., 2001). Social exclusion is defined as a structural, dynamic, multifactor and multidimensional phenomenon (Gomà and Subirats, 2005). From this perspective, homelessness is a process characterised by the accumulation of problems related to poverty, the breakdown of the family and of social networks and/or social isolation and the separation of individuals. As a result, it is neither a group characteristic nor a static condition. Homelessness can be described as a continuum of exclusion from adequate shelter.

If we break with the conventional definition of poverty as a purely economic dimension and adopt Sen's capabilities approach to explain it, the main value of the social exclusion concept does not lie in its novelty, but rather in the fact that it highlights the relational roots of deprivation, understood as a failing of capabilities (Sen, 2000). The term 'social exclusion' expresses the failure of people and of groups to 'form part of community life' as the basic functioning of a 'decent life'. In other words, social exclusion represents a particular form of the deprivation of capabilities, specifically relational capabilities.

Conclusion

Understanding poverty as a lack of capabilities makes it possible to study homelessness from a perspective other than that of social exclusion. This paper has striven to apply Sen's capabilities approach by proposing the well-being space as a methodological approach that helps to identify where the capabilities and entitlements of people, and consequently their well-being and freedom, are affected.

Homeless people can suffer different degrees of the lack of freedom in terms of capabilities, and government policy should focus on increasing opportunities by offering capability-generating residential public services. The success of such services should be determined by measuring their effect on the freedom of individuals rather than their usefulness. In other words, at the basis of a policy seeking to eradicate homelessness should be a focus on providing housing in which the individual's capabilities can be developed (and in some cases rebuilt) based on services that are adapted to the person's needs in achieving a 'home'. These policies should assess the effect on the individual's freedom space, and not their usefulness. In this regard the experience of the US 'Housing First' approach is a model that should be taken into account.

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