

## REPORT

### Workshop on Collective Agency & Institutions, Sustainability, and the Capability Approach 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of September 2012, UFZ, Leipzig, Germany<sup>1</sup>

In terms of space and time, sustainable development (SD) requires much more responsibility than an individual can cope with: it stretches to the global level and well into the future. An individual can try to comply with rules of SD, but it cannot alone achieve the goal of sustainability. This fact has drawn some authors to think of SD as a mere political concept to be addressed by collectives as far as the world community (e.g. Biermann et al. 2012). In contrast to initiatives aiming at sustainable consumption, some authors argue e.g. that moral overburden renders individual action improbable, that knowledge deficits make it ineffective, and that our socio-economic system is not geared towards achieving this normative aim (e.g. Grunwald 2010).

Others argue that only individuals can act. Individuals act as consumers and as citizens; governments cannot act against the interests of their electorates, and enterprises react to consumer choice. Therefore the transition to SD has to start on an individual level.

The capability approach (CA) focuses on the individual and is not fit to explain collective agency (Leßmann/Rauschmayer 2013). Yet, it acknowledges the influence of social affiliation, of groups and social norms on individual identity and individual goals. As a theory of justice the CA holds on to ethical individualism, i.e. the CA views individuals – and only individuals – as the units of moral concern (Robeyns 2005). Thus, the CA demands that SD should not hold for the generations on average, but for each single individual if it is to be judged just.

The aim of the workshop was to explore the role of collective agency & institutions both for SD and in the theoretical framework of the CA. The workshop gave a prominent role to plenary and group discussions, stimulated by talks from GeNECA members and by invited speakers. Overall, we had 21 interventions (between 5 and 60 minutes), but – overall – more time devoted to discussions than to one-way communication.

The workshop opened with presentations from the GeNECA project showing different links between the CA and collective aspects, from theoretical as well as practical aspects, including conceptual considerations and qualitative and quantitative results. Different, rather unrelated strands of literature exist around collective agency: (1) horizontal inequality and group capability (Stewart), (2) the questions of ethical/ontological/methodological individualism (Stewart/Déneulin 2002, Robeyns 2005) and social ontology (Martins 2006, 2007, 2009) as well as relational ontology (Smith/Seward 2009, Oosterlaken 2011), (3) questions about rationality, commitment and identity, in particular work on collective intentionality (Davis 2007) and the link between commitment and actions (Richardson forthcoming, Cudd forthcoming), and (4) the literature on collective capabilities (Ibrahim 2006, Evans 2002, Uyan-Semerici 2007) and the response by A. Sen on socially dependent individual capabilities (Sen 2002).

Applied to empirical work, this has been related to governance-related questions on whether participation in complementary currency-systems constitutes collective capability, the analysis of the

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influence of a collective actor (in this case, a global business) on individual capabilities and well-being, and the analysis of an environmental conflict, using the CA-model of humans for collective actors. On a more quantitative ground, a representative questionnaire (GSOEP) is being analysed on links between variables, based on the CA, environmental psychology, governance research, and life quality research.

In the following plenary discussion we identified three major issues to be discussed in brief break-out groups: collective capabilities, environmental justice, and CA's (non-?) individualism.

Three keynote talks followed with their respective discussions:

- **Christoph Görg** (UFZ) from a sociological perspective on global processes, the limits of individualistic methods in analysing sustainable development and procedural justice
- **David Schweikard** (University of Münster, Germany) as a philosopher on the structure and politics of group agency with regard to sustainable development
- **Solava Ibrahim** (University of Manchester, UK) as a CA scholar on collective agency in the Capability Approach and the links between sustainable and human development

Beforehand, we had called for papers that were to be presented in a specific way: all selected papers were to be sent in before so that everybody could read them. In each of the three groups a discussant identified points for discussions from three papers that only had 5 minutes to be presented each. In this way, we hoped to have much input and space for discussion (but we also regretted not to be able to listen to all presentations). We had the following presentations:

Group 1: 'social practice and motivation for SD',

- **Lieske Voget**: Employing the Capability Approach in assigning individual responsibility for collective sustainable development
- **Gordon Walker**: Inequalities and sustainable social practices: locating justice in capabilities
- **Felix Rauschmayer**: A nature-related conflict from a capability perspective
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Group 2: 'individual responsibility',

- **Peter Krause**: Measures of individual and collective capabilities with regards to sustainable development - Concepts and first empirical applications –
- **Wouter Peeters**: Sustainable Human Development, capabilities and responsibilities
- **Tuuli Hirvilammi**: how to restrict the natural resource use of individuals without contradicting their well-being freedom?

Group 3: 'linking the economic and civil realm - the role of trust',

- **Mirijam Mock**: Can Community Currencies increase Capability Sets for Sustainable Lifestyles
- **Jürgen Volkert**: Agency and Corporate Impacts on Sustainable Human Development
- **Dorothea Kleine**: Sustainable Public Procurement: a test case for CA and Sustainability thinking

In these discussions, many interesting side elements came into play:

- Sharing and voicing within collectives, what does the normativity of SD change for the CA?

- Does the size, level, and institutionalisation of the collective play a role (and which)?
- What is the role of power within the CA?
- What are the differences between human and sustainable development?
- How do the differences between ethical versus methodological individualism play out?

At the end, it is difficult to come up with a result, but all agreed that SD points to a specific flaw within the CA (besides e.g. the still underdeveloped integration of nature), namely the conceptualisation of the collective in its different forms. There was disagreement on whether CA notions should be extended to include collectives (such as collective agency, collective capability, collective freedom) or whether it would be more appropriate to identify interfaces where a methodologically individualistic CA could be combined with more collectivistic approaches, such as practice theory or work on collective actors. Or – from a CA perspective: What is the core of the CA that should not be changed?

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