

Interactive Exercise: Building Your Capabilities List

Session 3: Human Development and the Capabilities Approach

Your Task

Imagine you are advising the **United Nations** on how to define and measure human development globally.

Your challenge: **Create a list of 5-7 capabilities or freedoms that you believe are essential for a dignified human life.**

Part 1: Individual Reflection (5 minutes)

Instructions

Think carefully about what makes a life truly human and dignified. What should every person be able to do or be?

As you create your list, consider:

- What does every person need to be able to do or be?
- Which capabilities are most fundamental to you?
- Are some capabilities more important than others?

For each capability you list, also indicate: Do you think this should be guaranteed everywhere as a universal right, or should different societies/cultures decide differently about this?

Your Capabilities List

List **5-7 capabilities** you consider essential:

1.
☐ Should be a universal right ☐ Might be culturally specific
 2.
☐ Should be a universal right ☐ Might be culturally specific
 3.
☐ Should be a universal right ☐ Might be culturally specific
 4.
☐ Should be a universal right ☐ Might be culturally specific
 5.
☐ Should be a universal right ☐ Might be culturally specific
 6.
☐ Should be a universal right ☐ Might be culturally specific
 7.
☐ Should be a universal right ☐ Might be culturally specific
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Part 2: Small Group Discussion (5 minutes)

Instructions

Form groups of **3-4 students** and share your individual lists.

Discussion Questions

Discuss the following in your group:

1. **Where do you agree?** Which capabilities appear on most or all lists?
2. **Where do you disagree?** Which capabilities are controversial in your group?
3. **The big question:** Should there be a **universal, mandatory list** that applies to all countries? Or should each society/country decide for itself which capabilities matter most?

Group Notes (optional)

Capabilities that appeared on multiple lists:

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Capabilities that were controversial or unique:

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-
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Our group's position on universalism:

- ☐ There should be a universal list for all countries
 - ☐ Each country/society should decide for itself
 - ☐ We couldn't agree / We're split
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Part 3: Plenary Discussion (5 minutes)

Be prepared to share with the class:

- One or two capabilities from your group's lists
 - The main disagreement or debate in your group
 - Your group's position on the universal list question
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Background: What are Capabilities?

Capabilities are the real freedoms or opportunities people have to achieve the lives they value.

Key distinction:

- **Functioning** = what a person actually does or is (e.g., being well-fed)
- **Capability** = what a person is able to do or be (e.g., having access to adequate food)

Example: Two people may both skip a meal (same functioning), but:

- Person A chooses to fast for religious reasons (has the capability to eat)
- Person B cannot afford food (lacks the capability to eat)

Development, according to the capabilities approach, is about expanding people's real freedoms to achieve the functionings they value.

Additional resources and readings

See the course website

Note: This exercise is designed to help you engage with the central debate in capabilities theory before we introduce the formal frameworks. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers - the goal is to think critically about what constitutes human development.