

# 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.**

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### 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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**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.

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## Additional resources and readings

*See the course website*

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**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.