



Sustainability tomorrow: Identifying challenges, analysing approaches and assessing future strategies

Video Transcript

Sustainability Today 3: The Capability Approach

[Prof. Dr. Paul Burger] Sustainability or sustainable development is a guiding idea. The idea supports humanity in overcoming various global challenges. It aims to help humanity realise «desirable futures». The central question is not so much how to manage the transition, but what to sustain or which part of the future we want.

Having a healthy biosphere, for example, is certainly a necessary precondition for «desirable futures». However, it is not sufficient for characterising them. We also need to understand which concepts of justice and well-being apply.

The Brundtland Report states that sustainability is about a good human life for every person living now and in the future. The demand for a more just world today is linked to justice for those who come after us. This means that we also need to consider justice between generations, or intergenerational justice.

The concept that justice can only be realised in today's world if it also takes intergenerational justice into account is new in the history of ideas. It is also quite tricky. If you want to translate the concept into policies, you have to move away from an abstract level and find ways to apply it practically. This requires developing an understanding of well-being on the one hand, and justice on the other.

Well-being refers to that which is essentially good for a person. Having healthy food, for example, contributes to a person's well-being. However, well-being does not contribute to anything else than well-being. It is an intrinsic good.

Justice, in turn, is about distribution. While well-being is an intrinsic value for an individual, justice is not about the well-being of particular individuals. Rather, it is about the distribution of well-being among all human beings. So, in the context of sustainability, it is about every person living today and in the future.

Up to this point, the scientific community is in agreement. However, there are different ideas about how well-being and distribution can be envisaged in concrete terms.

I will now briefly introduce the capability approach as an instrument for concretising sustainability.

What capabilities do people need to achieve lives that they value? The capability approach focuses on the opportunities for individuals to choose what they deem to be valuable for their lives.

The capability approach combines objective and subjective aspects of well-being. Happiness in this sense is not just related to a person's own desires or wishes. It is also related to a person's conduct within society at large.

In other words, individuals should be able to flourish, for instance by leading an active life. Ancient Greek philosophers called such a life «eudaemonic». Well-being as «Eudaemonia» means living a good life one has reasons to value. In contrast, hedonistic well-being aims at individual pleasure and at satisfying each person's own preferences.

To sum up, the capability approach focuses on the freedom of choice that people should have to accomplish the life that they value. To be able to choose freely, people must have so-called opportunity spaces.

For example, individuals should have the opportunity to make decisions about their diet or their relationships with other people. If there is not enough food or a person is not allowed to leave their house without the permission of their spouse, there is no freedom of choice. Capability advocates would say that such a person is deprived of basic capabilities. This means that this person is, objectively speaking, not well-off.

The Indian economist Amartya Sen developed the capability approach from 1979. The scheme attached to this step provides an overview on the different elements that interact in this approach.

This section shows how well-being is achieved: if people have the capability to choose, they achieve what are called «valuable functionings». The currency consists of objective capabilities and subjective functionings. Sen's scheme shows commodities and public goods as input factors.

What you are seeing now is an adaptation of Sen's scheme. It is relevant to the discussion of sustainability. Instead of public goods and commodities, this adapted scheme introduces five types of capitals that create capability spaces.

Looking now again at sustainability, the capability approach has several advantages for operationalising justice within sustainability.

First, it provides a general currency for the well-being of people living today and in the future. Every human being should have appropriate opportunity spaces to live a life that goes hand in hand with the



things that they value. This is an answer to the question of what should be sustained for a desirable human development: we need appropriate opportunity spaces to achieve well-being.

Second, by focusing on opportunity spaces, the capability approach avoids tricky problems relating to intergenerational justice. The duty to act or to avoid actions for future people carries a contradiction in itself. How can these duties exist if the existence of these people depends on these actions themselves? Philosophy calls this the «non-identity problem» or the «paradox of future individuals».

Third, the capability approach is strongly non-paternalistic. It does not prescribe how people should live their lives. It is open to cultural and other differences and does not presume to know how future generations will live.

Fourth, it suits the idea of sustainability well. As capability spaces are built using different capitals, the crucial question is how these capitals remain available over time. This means that the capability approach is able to include questions on resource scarcity and system vulnerability.

So, what is sustainable development? Based on our reasoning, we could conclude: sustainable development is any development that provides all human beings with appropriate capabilities to live the life that they value.

Sustainable development is any development that ensures different types of capitals over time, including the need to stay in a healthy global ecosystem.

In that sense, one could claim that it is possible to combine the capability approach with resilience and a capital approach. It does so by defining capability spaces as a currency for justice.