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How can Sen's 'Capabilities Approach' Contribute to Understanding the Role for Social Innovations for the Marginalized?

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Creating Economic Space for Social Innovation

How can Sen's 'Capabilities Approach' Contribute to Understanding the Role for Social Innovations for the Marginalized?

D1.1 Chapter 3

By Enrica Chiappero-Martinetti and Nadia von Jacobi

Abstract

This study aims at investigating the role that social forces - as identified in institutionalist and sociological literature, in particular the Social Grid of Beckert (2010) - can play for human development achievements.¹ We compare the notions and conceptual elements of the Capability Approach with the 'irreducible social forces' of Beckert's framework: cognitive frames, social networks and both, formal and informal institutions.

Our aim is threefold: we first outline the perspective of the marginalized on hand of the conceptual framework of the Capability Approach. We then try to map Beckert's social forces against the capability process. Finally, we investigate which role social innovation can play for the marginalized.

The contribution is structured as follows: section 1 introduces to the Capability Approach as a people-centred perspective and provides a definition of marginalization by recurring to the notion of intersectionality. Section 2 outlines which role institutions and other social forces would typically play within the Capability Approach. In section 3 we trace possible mechanisms through which social innovation can exert pressure on existing institutions, while in section 4 we 'close the circle' by exploring how social innovation can possible loop back to marginalized groups and alter their conditions.

3.1 A Capability Approach driven definition of marginalization

While the Capability Approach provides a series of notions, concepts and frames for shaping the definition of well-being and, conversely of ill-being, it has not so far offered an ad-hoc definition of marginalization. Our contribution therefore aims at advancing this line of research.

Marginalized people or marginalized groups are usually defined as those who are at the margins of the social, economic, political arena and in many cases in all these spheres, as disadvantages habitually tend to cumulate. Differently from economic inequality (and poverty), but similarly to the notion of disadvantage (see Chiappero and Spreafico, 2014), the concept of economic marginalization is not clearly rooted in a theoretical framework and as such it does not have an autonomous and independent status in economics. It is rather a derivative notion often linked to other concepts (i.e inequality, poverty, social exclusion, etc.) or empirically derived by focusing the attention on the worst-off in the society. It is also frequently associated to the concept of vulnerability as it conveys an idea of systematic and persistent exposure to risk and adversity (Sumner and Mallett, 2013; Ligon and Schechter 2003, UNDP 2014).

As outlined by Kanbur (2007), marginalization is a relational statement that needs to be defined in relation to some other group or category in the society or with regards to an average standard. However, it is still an open issue on how to identify the comparison group and what should be the prevailing characteristics or identities to be considered for identifying the marginalized groups.

¹ This research forms Chapter 3 of: Houghton Budd, C., Naastepad, R. and van Beers C. (Eds.), *Report on Institutions, Social Innovation & System Dynamics from the Perspective of the Marginalised, CRESSI Project Deliverable D1.1*. Available at: <http://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/ideas-impact/cressi/publications-0>.

In principle, marginalized groups could be pre-defined ex-ante, on the basis of some assumption or presumption about the characteristics that make people more exposed to the risk of marginalization or ex-post, identifying marginalized groups through empirical findings. The former method tends to reinforce the stigmatization of certain groups while the latter can be subject to data bias due to over or under representation of specific groups in the data used and can dismiss groups who living at the margins are also excluded by official statistics (“invisible” groups such as homeless, people in jail, migrants without legal permission).

In addition, both methods usually consider single elements of specificity (i.e. either gender, or location or ethnicity) for categorizing groups or, at most, focus on the additive effect of categories (i.e. black women). However, individuals belong to multiple categories and marginalization is usually caused by a plurality of factors and, further, not all those belonging to a given group can be automatically and necessarily ascribed to the category of marginalized people. We cannot say, for example, that all immigrants, wherever they come from or whatever level of education they have, are by definition marginalized. As Sen emphasizes identities are multiple and every individual could be considered different from anyone else in many respects.

Therefore, it seems to us more promising from a Capability Approach perspective to refer to the notion of intersectionality, rather common in sociology, which is aimed to pay attention to those groups at the junction of two or more identity categories, which are typically demographic and social categories such as gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, religion, social class position, etc.. Some of these categories can generate advantages and others disadvantages but how they combine is what at the end will affect the final outcome. In this regard, the intersection of different elements goes above and beyond the effects produced by a single element (Hancock, 2007; Dubrow 2008; Walby et al 2012;).

The idea of intersectionality is quite close to the idea of conversion rates in the capability approach (see Chiappero and Salardi, 2008), which identifies the way in which different conversion factors interact and combine each other determining the rate of conversion of individual resources into achievements. Yet, the capability approach can contribute to this idea offering a clearer distinction between personal features (which roughly corresponds to the socio-demographic categories typically considered by the intersectionality theory) and the contextual characteristics, which are usually not included in the intersectionality account. Similar individuals in terms of personal traits living in different contexts can be in fact rather different individuals facing diverse sets of opportunities and a diverse exposure to risk of marginalization. Therefore, a distinction between personal and contextual factors allows differentiating internal and external causal factors of marginalization.

Therefore, we suggest here a conceptualization of marginalization that is coherent and consistent with Sen's approach. **Marginalization** is a *social process* through which *personal traits* are transformed into *potential factors of disadvantage*. The potential disadvantage may be confirmed and therefore empirically detectable in the form of inequalities. Yet, individual action - in combination with other social factors - might compensate the potential disadvantage, and therefore lead to a condition in which the disadvantage is not empirically confirmed. An important element of this definition that we would like to highlight is that personal traits are *different* among individuals. But while *difference* itself does not resemble any ethical problem, it is the process by which these differences are transformed into *inequalities* that needs to be addressed. Furthermore, the potential disadvantage that individuals suffer because of a particular personal trait (e.g. being a woman, being young, belonging to the Roma ethnic minority, etc.) could not be empirically confirmed when compensatory individual action is successful.

We consider **marginalized individuals** those that are located at the bottom of the distribution in a plurality of dimensions (e.g. health condition, educational achievements, employment security, social relations, etc...). **Factors of marginalization** are individual or contextual characteristics that

both, tend to be associated to a disadvantage and that in empirical investigations of the marginalized are found to be common.

Our definition of marginalization therefore is conceptually located at the individual level although it can be empirically investigated at group level, whereas the factors of marginalization can be found at different levels in the form of individual, family or contextual characteristics.

3.2 Institutions as contextual conversion factors

In the previous section we concluded that both, individual and contextual characteristics can play a role for marginalization. This section tries to investigate *which* contextual characteristics can exert an influence and how. Our particular focus is on institutions but other social forces are being considered. In this section we will try to argue that although social forces might play a role at different stages of the capability production process, a promising lens of interpretation is that of the contextual conversion factor.

3.2.1. Beckert's social forces and the CA

'Social forces' or 'social structures' have mainly been treated by the *institutionalist* literature and are meant to play a *deterministic* role for individuals that are exposed to them - at least for those that within the *structure-agency debate* opt for the influence of (social) structure on (individual) agency. We choose to refer to Beckert (2010) who reviews an extensive amount of institutionalist literature and comes to the conclusion that three types of structures are irreducible social forces. These are institutions, networks and cognitive frames. **Networks** typically call for a horizontal perspective, giving less weight to hierarchies, and less weight to individual agency. Relational and collective aspects are put at the centre of attention. They tend to be instruments for information transmission. **Network position** (intended as the position of the individual within the network) has a hierarchical meaning when the strategic positioning of certain individuals/ enterprises is taken into account, though. **Cognitive frames** tend to imply culturally shared meaning, or the 'mental organization of the social environment' (Beckert, 2010:610). They act as filters that make the difference between objective reality and perceived reality. **Institutions** imply a more vertical/hierarchical perspective. While they are typically meant to be formal, such as prevalent rules, in development economics the role of informal institutions is highly recognized. The World Development Report (2012) distinguishes between formal and informal institutions by posing emphasis on whether the structure "pertains to the functioning of the state" (formal) or whether the "mechanisms, rules and procedures that shape social interactions (...) do not pertain to the functioning of the state" (WDR 2012:8). No matter whether formal or informal, institutions tend to be interpreted as the cumulative outcome of slow-moving processes, so they are likely to incorporate past cognitive frames.

The fact that Beckert calls institutions, networks and cognitive frames 'irreducible' should be interpreted in the sense that none of the three can substitute the other two. He makes a stand for maintaining complexity in the analysis of how markets change. By choosing to refer to Beckert, we embrace a stand in which no single social structure is being given a primary role *ex ante*. On the contrary, Beckert's analysis and summary of diverse strands of literature shows that different social structures are likely to be at play contemporaneously, which means that their interconnections need to be taken seriously. The social structures or social forces in the 'social grid' (institutions, networks and cognitive frames) are a meta-framework: while these 'forces' are studied for the market in economic sociology, they are likely to play a role outside of the market, too.

Social structures are expected to exercise their influences simultaneously in Beckert's framework, and therefore to be studied jointly. Beckert investigates *market dynamics* by focusing on the interrelations (whether conflicting or complementary) between different social structures. The economic sociology framework simplifies the highly fragmented institutional literature and helps understanding how the three social forces contribute to economic outcomes including the stratification of opportunities. Apart from providing a useful framework for the conceptualization of

social forces, Beckert's hypotheses about *dynamics* seem to be relevant in order to identify the emergence of spaces (opportunities) for social innovation processes. The three social forces identified by Beckert can easily be located within the Capability Approach, especially when referring to the notion of contextual conversion factors.

3.2.2. Contextual conversion factors and the social forces

How can social forces be linked to the Capability Approach? Institutions, cognitive frames and networks can be conceived, within Sen's framework, as a sort of collective *endowment* on one hand. This implies seeing social structures as public/collective resources that individuals can use [besides private resources] for their desired life achievements. Social structures are likely to play a role in the provision of those 'prerequisites' or opportunities within which individual achievements can unfold.

On the other hand, social structures can also work as *conversion factors*, or factors that somehow affect the rate (efficiency) with which an individual is able to convert resources into desirable outcomes. This is likely to happen through their implicit working mechanism which favours certain behaviours or choices over others, and through their effect on reasons and beliefs.

If we accept that "higher levels typically influence lower levels in hierarchies" (Luke, 2004) the link between Beckert's and Sen's framework are likely to provide arguments *how* this happens: "Each of the three structuring forces contributes to the social organization (...) by shaping *opportunities and constraints* of agents as well as *perceptions* of legitimacy and illegitimacy." (Beckert, 2010:609, emphasis added). Within the capability approach a similar view prevails, namely that contextual factors can influence decision-making through their effect on *reasons and resources* (Longshore Smith and Seward, 2009). Each person *faces and interacts* with an environment made up of "material and non material circumstances that shape people's *opportunity sets*, and (...) circumstances that influence the *choices* that people make" (Robeyns 2005:99; emphasis added).

We do not intend to say that individuals are unable to change their surrounding environment (and therefore all of the three forces in the social grid). Indeed, agency and social innovation can be thought to exactly aim at changing the structures within which individuals are embedded. Yet, a crucial factor seems to be time: to some extent we can expect change to be a long-term phenomenon in the case of institutions, probably in most cases of cognitive frames, and at least a medium-term phenomenon in the case of networks. Provided we conceive change of the social forces in the correct time frame, we expect social innovation processes to alter the context in which they have been born.

Let's depart from the fact that we accept that institutions - and other social forces - can act as contextual conversion factors. Within the capability function, we find both individual and contextual conversion factors:

$$Q_i(X_i) = \{b_i | b_i = f_i(c(x_i)|z_i, z_s, z_e)\}$$

where $Q_i(X_i)$ is the capability set, defined over the potential functionings b_i that result from the endowments x_i and the conversion function f_i which transforms the endowments into potential functionings and is constrained by individual (i), social (s) and environmental (e) conversion factors z_i, z_s, z_e .² While each of the conversion factors is likely to exert an own influence, their specific *combination* is likely to result in different results. Figure 1 depicts this. The single contextual factor (for example an institution) is isolated and intended to provide some sort of input (on the x-axis) for individuals in a given context.³ If we conceive of the social force as a contextual input for the

² For detailed treatment see Sen (1985:11), Kuklys (2005:11), Chiappero–Martinetti and Salardi (2008:5) in von Jacobi (2014a).

³ Note that the input provided by the social force is here conceived in quantitative terms, but this is not necessary. Further, conversion rates do not necessarily have to be linear - this is just a conceptual simplification.

capability function, then the framework suggests that the way in which personal traits *combine* with the social force will result in different conversion rates (or 'efficiencies') with which the contextual input is being transformed into achievements. We only consider two contexts in which the institution under analysis is different (for example different design of pension schemes) and group individuals along some characteristic (which might be a personal trait or a feature characterizing the environment in which they live, e.g old-aged mothers against old-aged male bankers, or elderly living in remote rural areas against elderly living in urban contexts).

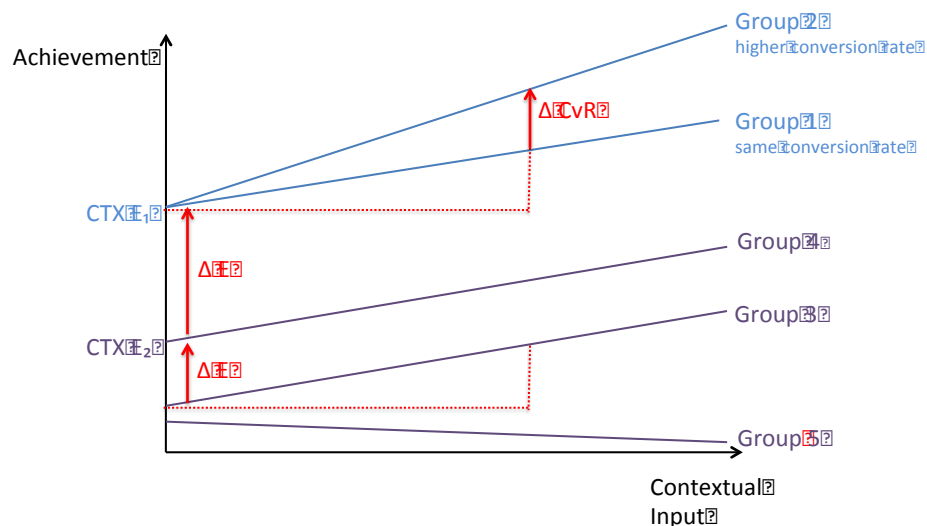


Figure 1: Contextual conversion factors and inequalities⁴

Source: Von Jacobi (2014b).

A different line represents each group: the intercept stands for the average achievement of the group without contextual input, the slope stands for the *conversion rate*, or the rate with which a given input is being transformed into achievement. Red arrows highlight sources of inequality: groups can be unequal across contexts,⁵ due to other structural/contextual variables. Yet, groups can also be unequal *within* contexts, either because their starting positions differ (intercepts) or because they convert the contextual input differently. While group 1, 3 and 4 'convert' the contextual input in a similar fashion, group 2 is taking greater advantage of the input and therefore improves its position and distance to the others. Group 5 might be considered as being *marginalized* as it starts from the lowest positions and the contextual input is further disadvantaging it.

Social structures are meant to "position actors in more or less powerful positions" (Beckert 2010: 606). This asymmetric positioning comes along with asymmetric distribution of resources, which means that individuals will be *differently endowed* with the resources provided by the social structure. In figure 1, such a different endowment would be visible from the different starting points (intercepts) that distinguish the groups. While it may be difficult to isolate the influence of one single social force, their combined influence on the individuals is likely to result in diversified endowments.

In addition to the focus on different resource endowment, the capability approach will further question whether the social structures really only distribute resources in asymmetric ways or

⁴ ΔE stands for differences in endowments, ΔCvR stands for differences in conversion rates.

⁵ Within inequality analysis this is typically known as *between* inequality.

whether their way of functioning (*mechanism*) also tends to advantage some personal traits over others. Some individuals might be subject to a disadvantageous position in the distribution of resources, but their individual capacities might be rewarded by the mechanism with which the social structure works.

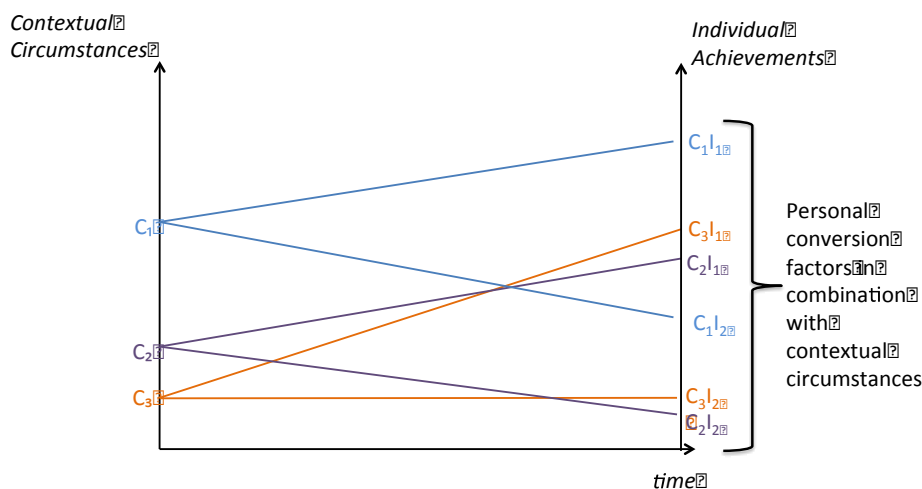


Figure 2: Contextual circumstances and different individual achievements

Source: elaboration by the authors.

As a result, individuals starting off with few resources might be able to catch-up and even to outrun other individuals that were initially better endowed. This can be seen by comparing for example individual 1 of context 3's final achievement with that of individual 2 in context 1 (figure 2).

Basically, in analyzing institutions, the capability approach will ask for a distinction between the provision of resources and the way that the structure interacts with personal characteristics of the individual. This links up partially with Beckert's understanding that "regulative institutional rules allow and support certain types of behaviour while discouraging others" (Beckert, 2010:610).

Characteristics that can be identified as conversion factors can in general be considered as potential factors of marginalization, as they may locate individuals or groups into a position where they enjoy fewer achievements, even when the resources are distributed in an equal way (von Jacobi, 2014a). For the scope of this study, we pay particular attention to contextual conversion factors, which can be modified by collective action or policy decision, even though neither by the single individual nor in the short term. (CRESSI project p.11 part B).

3.3 The possible role of social innovation for altering institutions and the context

We now turn our attention to social innovation as a bottom-up phenomenon that can change the shape and way of working of social forces. We devote special attention to the bidirectional link between agency and social innovation. We maintain a view that social forces may be subject to two different types of change, either policy-induced (top-down) or citizen-induced (bottom-up). We consider social innovation as relevant phenomenon of bottom-up change. Given that institutions - in the vest of a social structure - can display an influence on individual achievements, how can we frame the ability of individuals to change the social context in which they live through action? We expect social innovation to be a result of agency and therefore frame the social innovation process as one in which *collective action* alters existing social structures, such as institutions. Within the

capability approach, individual agency is intended as the ability to realize life plans. Through agency, personal freedom is increased, and through personal freedom the space for agency is enlarged.



Figure 3: Double circularity between agency and freedom in the CA and between social forces and the social innovation process in Beckert

Source: Von Jacobi (2014b).

While it is rare to find support for the concept of *collective agency*,⁶ in much of social research the role of group action or of collective action is recognized: when different individuals move into a certain direction they may be able to provoke change.

While it is difficult to imagine that a single individual and her/his agency might be sufficient to change any social structure, a relevant amount of individuals that group together (form a network) and structure their goals (share a cognitive frame) can exert pressure for change at the social level (see figure 4).

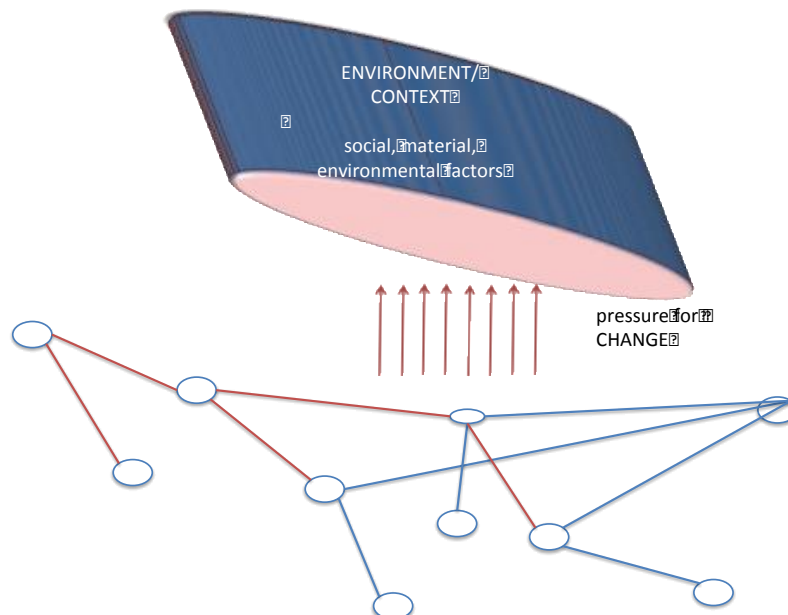


Figure 4: Individuals exert pressure for change on the context

Source: Von Jacobi (2014b).

⁶ In most of philosophical accounts, groups or collectivities are not understood to be capable of an own agency. Instead, collective action is always reduced to the sum of individual agencies. An exception is the strand of Social Ontology in which the dynamics of collective agency are studied.

This is in line with our CRESSI project working definition of social innovation which refers to "the development and delivery of new ideas (products, services, models, markets, processes) at different socio-structural levels that intentionally seek to improve human capabilities, social relations, and the processes in which these solutions are carried out" (CRESSI, p.6 part B). The definition comprises individual returns (human capabilities)⁷ and social returns (relations and processes) among the motivations that drive social innovation.⁸ Therefore, while individuals might on one hand participate in some type of social innovation action because of a personal interest, they also defend some sort of collective goal which aims at altering *relations and processes*, or in other words some element of some social structure. Such a view allows to link social innovation back to the *institutionalist* literature, according to which institutions are the outcome of struggles and usually temporary solutions to an allocation problem.⁹

Within Beckert's framework some sort of innovating action is the result of conflict or of frictions between different social structures. "Agency in social exchange markets is a product of the social forces and ties that enable and dis-empower key actors within a 'social grid' (...) the *formation and continuation of such grids is not a neutral process* but (re)enacts existing power relations and social structures." (CRESSI project, p.4 part B). In Beckert's view, there is an endogenous circle between social structures and the actions that modify or confirm them. This is in line with most *institutionalist* views, that interpret institutions as 'coral reefs that grow by slow accretions' (Sait, 1938 in Rhodes *et al.* 2006), or as 'idiosyncratic and endogenous' and that 'reflect the cumulative weight of past choices' (Rhodes *et al.* 2006), or - similarly - as being 'defended by insiders and validated by outsiders' (March and Olsen, 2006).

Figure 5 is a tentative draft of how Beckert's framework locates action and the innovation process within general change. "Changes in the social structuration of markets can emerge, I argue, from changes in one of the structures, which lead to an alteration of power relations between agents and subsequently to action that results in changes of the other structures." (Beckert 2010:608). Social innovation is therefore a contested process (a power struggle or a process of empowerment).

To get back to the capability approach, the different distribution of resources of a particular social structure will make *action for change* more likely on behalf of some individuals/groups than on behalf of others. Marginalization is therefore likely to be a self-feeding (resilient) phenomenon, in similar fashion to the evolution of social structures themselves: where individuals or groups are being placed into disadvantageous positions by a particular social structure, their ability to *bring about change* in line with their goals and necessities is reduced. This is likely to reflect in the type of innovation/type of change that materializes, which again will place individuals in differently advantageous positions.

⁷ For detailed treatment on how innovation processes can be thought to affect capabilities, see Ziegler (2010, 2013).

⁸ See Ziegler (2010) for a discussion of how complex and multi-faceted 'the social' is, especially in a context of conflicts of interest, value diversity and exclusive public spheres.

⁹ Within mainstream economics, institutions are often considered as the equilibrium outcome of rational and utility maximizing individuals, who coordinate their actions in perfect markets. What standard economic views often neglect when conceptualizing institutions, however, is their implicitly redistributive character: institutions are not efficient by definition.

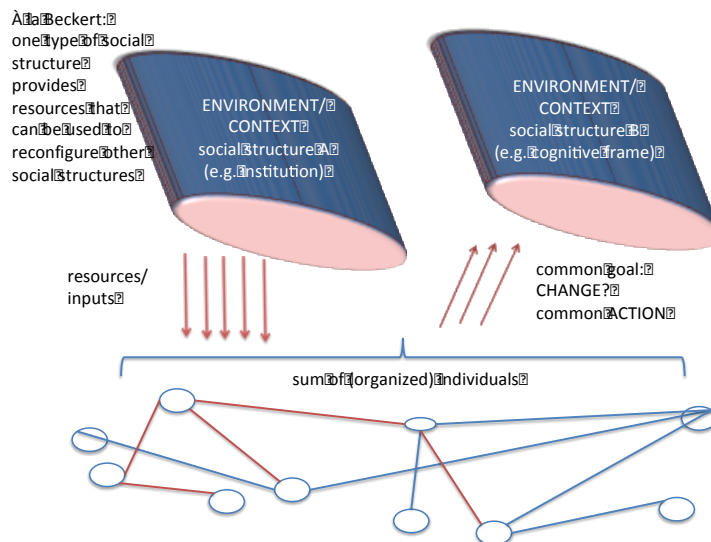


Figure 9: Action for change in Beckert's framework

Source: Von Jacobi (2014b).

3.4 Possible feedback-effects of social innovation: changes in agency, endowments and conversion factors among the marginalized

We conclude with a view on the relevance that social innovation processes can play for including marginalized groups, at different stages of the capability process. Building upon the previous sections, we theoretically explore which elements of the capability production process might change due to social innovation.

We depart from the consideration that social innovation can have two types of feedback-mechanisms: a micro-micro effect meaning that the change occurs within the boundaries of the individual. The simple participation in the innovation process is likely to enhance/change the agency of the individual, by activating personal skills through *motivation*, *sense of belonging* and the *taking on of responsibility for a broader cause*. An additional, more indirect micro-micro effect might go through the social network that is implementing the social innovation. Networks are the meta-structure within which participation, encounter and exchange between individuals take place. This is where common values and perspectives can evolve more easily. Within networks, common experience that promotes a common horizon in terms of expectations, beliefs and cognitive frames can happen. By joining the network, the individual gets access to personal contacts and increases her/his social interactions: these can be expected to have a feed-back effect on personal beliefs and choices. Social interactions are the vehicle through which social norms and informal institutions influence individual decision-making (von Jacobi 2014c). By interacting with others, individuals are subject to informational cascades (Bikhchandani et al. 1992), develop interdependent preferences (Postlewaite 1998) and assume herding behaviour (Banerjee 1992; Manski 1993 in von Jacobi 2014c) which can significantly shift a person's beliefs and parameters of choice. Social interaction promotes imitation and, possibly, innovation itself! A new social behaviour is observed on a peer, perceived as optimal, and imitated in disrespect of previous norms or habits (Conlisk 1980 in Manski 1993).

Apart from effects that are confined within the boundaries of the individual (private 'resources' such as contacts and friends, new beliefs and preferences due to imitation processes or newly acquired information), we can expect the social innovation process to further produce a meso-micro effect. If the social innovation process succeeds in altering some type of social structure, then also the quantity or quality of collective resource provided by the social structure may change. Compare this

with figure 1. The social innovation process might for example provoke a change that makes a context that first resembled CTX2 now look like CTX1: In this case, the innovation process has increased the average amount of collective resources available (for all groups).

Apart from changing collective endowments, the social innovation process is likely to trigger additional or different abilities to convert the resources into achievements. Again with reference to figure 1, we might observe that group 2 (group 4 in the previous situation) has now increased its conversion rate due to the particular change in mechanism of the social structure provoked by the innovation process. Both effects can play a role for changing the position of marginalized people, as can be seen by looking at figure 1: ΔE stands for differences in endowments, ΔCvR stands for differences in conversion rates and both effects are identified by thick arrows which indicate an improvement in individual/group achievements.

A crucial question remains, which is the exact scope of the innovation process. In the CRESSI project, we adopt the following working definition: social innovation is understood as "carrying out new ideas that intentionally seek to improve human capabilities, social relations and the process in which these solutions are carried out". Populations within society that are socially excluded, without voice or power in market exchange structures, might be de facto exiled from the innovation processes around institutional change. This can be expected to have important consequences. If it is true that institutions are 'defended by insiders and validated by outsiders' (March and Olsen, 2006) and that their shape and redistributive effect reflects a power struggle, then the participation in the innovating process is likely to imply future benefits. Similarly, if marginalized individuals tend to be excluded from innovating networks, their position and interests are likely not to be represented within the struggle for a new institutional setting. This might itself perpetuate marginalization of certain groups.

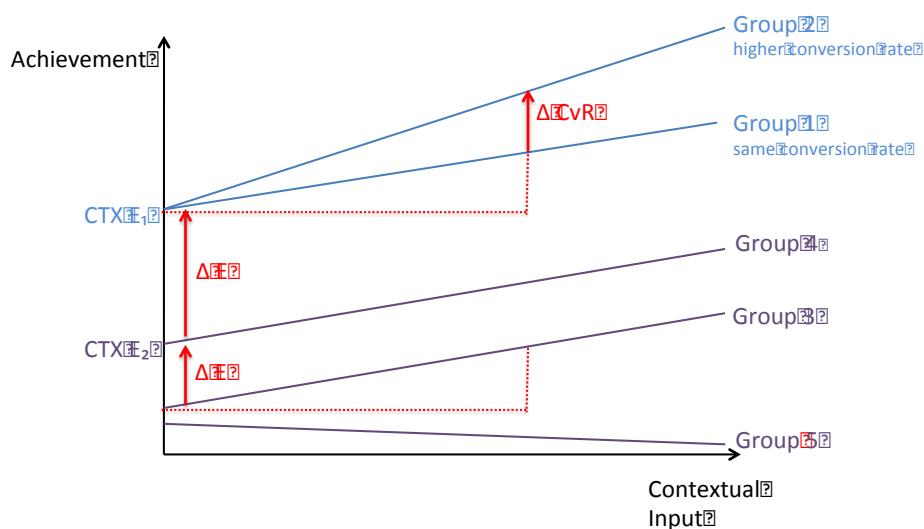


Figure 1: Contextual conversion factors and inequalities¹⁰

Source: von Jacobi (2014b).

However, if the social innovation process specifically aims at reintegrating the excluded into the

¹⁰ ΔE stands for differences in endowments, ΔCvR stands for differences in conversion rates.

processes of institutional design that define society and its allocative mechanisms, it might indeed resemble an important compensatory force.

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The CRESSI project explores the economic underpinnings of social innovation with a particular focus on how policy and practice can enhance the lives of the most marginalized and disempowered citizens in society.



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