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BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

How to apply the capability approach to housing policy? Concepts, theories and challenges

8. Housing and Social Theory

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This paper investigates to what extent the capability approach can contribute to housing studies and policy development. The capability approach, pioneered by economist-philosopher Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, is built upon critical reviews on the norms of welfarism and utilitarianism, and argues that social policy and its evaluative approach need to move beyond them. Social policies have largely focused on material means such as income and wealth or subjective categories such as satisfaction and preferences. In contrast, the capability approach emphasises that the focus should be placed at expanding people's opportunities and abilities to achieve the things – beings and doings – that they value, instead of limiting to resources or subjective feelings.

Traditionally, housing policy studies have deeply been rooted in the norms of the welfare state, welfare economics and its philosophical foundation of utilitarianism. What implications for housing studies can we draw from the capability approach? The paper explores this topic and presents a conceptual discussion on how the capability approach can be applied to the studies on housing policy and its evaluative framework. It will critically review mainstream evaluative approaches in housing policy, and commonly used informational bases, such as the total number of dwellings supplied, housing quality, housing satisfaction and housing affordability, which have been the core indicators to assess overall housing performance. According to the capability approach perspective, the mainstream evaluative approaches tend to ignore other important aspects, such as distribution matters, diversity of human beings and values, and non-utility concerns such as moral issues, rights, and justice. The central concerns of housing policy need to include to what extent a policy expands people's opportunities and abilities to pursue their housing process, by removing obstacles that people face in the process. In other words, it needs to examine what opportunity and ability deprivations a household has in her process towards achieving the housing – or state of well-dwelling – that she has reason to value. This may include not only the access to finance and land, but also, for instance, access to proper information, gender equality, real human rights, and opportunities for being a stakeholder in the decision-making process of residential area planning.

The paper discusses missing perspectives in housing policy studies and preliminary concludes that a capability-oriented housing policy framework could have an added value. The discussion in this paper remains at a theoretical and methodological level. The paper primarily aims to provide a theoretical foundation for further research on defining specific multi-dimensional deprivations in one's housing process, so that these can be used for evaluating the impact of housing policies. This clearly is a big challenge. However, we think there is great promise in adapting the methods that are used in other scholars' research in different domains such as health, education, employment and multi-dimensional poverty.

Keywords

Housing policy, utilitarianism, welfare economics, evaluative approach, capability approach