

Title: The Capability Approach and Human Rights in Social Work

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In this presentation we would like to argue that the Capability Approach (CA), a normative, evaluative and action paradigm based on the concepts of human freedom and human development, has the potential to offer an overarching framework for socially just policy and rights based social work practice that challenges the ascent of neo-liberalism and the individualization of risk. Its core argument is that people should have the right to lead the life they want with reason. Pivotal in the CA is that human wellbeing; quality of life or the good life should be the focus of human development instead of economic based factors like the GDP. Though this seems obvious, alas it is not the case in most present social policies in the EU. Present social policies put a strong emphasis on austerity measures and in many cases we see a de-construction of the welfare state and its 'vested' rights. In many member states human wellbeing seems no longer the ultimate goal of policy makers.

The presentation starts with the introduction of the founders and foundations of the Capability Approach. Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen and feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum created this human developmental theory of freedom based on the keyterms: capabilities, functionings, commodities, conversion factors and human agency. We will relate these concepts with the values, position and mission of social work as defined in the IFSW global definition of social work.

In the second part of the presentation we will focus on social work as a human rights profession because according to the IFSW global definition of social work principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Human rights emphasize the importance of freedoms, including freedom in the form of opportunities. In this way a Human Rights Approach share the purpose as the Capability Approach, though there is also a clear distinction between the two approaches. We will present a case of an integrated approach of the two approaches where social workers are trying to promote freedom and create opportunities of mentally disabled people by implementing human rights in practice.

We would like to end the presentation in a dialogue with the participants on possible applications of the Capability Approach in social work practice and ways of taking these ideas forward.

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