CHAPTER 11

(Cross-)Cultural Perspectives on the Capability Model

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Introduction

The capability approach (CA), as developed by Amartya Sen [1] and Martha Nussbaum [2], provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating and promoting human well-being. By emphasising the 'doings and beings' individuals have reason to value, the CA shifts the focus from traditional economic metrics to a more holistic understanding of human flourishing [1]. Central to this approach are the principles of diversity, customisation, and contextuality, which enable its application across varied cultural and institutional contexts [2]. While grounded in the universality of human values, the CA also respects the uniqueness of individual and collective experiences, making it particularly suited for cross-cultural and decolonial perspectives.

This chapter explores the universality and contextual applicability of the capability model from a cross-cultural perspective, emphasising the importance of tailoring its implementation to specific societal needs. It highlights how the CA addresses questions about whether a universal conception of 'decent work' is possible and demonstrates its relevance for policy applications aimed at fostering inclusivity and equity. Furthermore, classic theoretical distinctions (such as the etic-emic debate) within cross-cultural and cultural psychology are introduced and mapped onto the CA premises. By drawing from theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and practical applications, the chapter underscores the dynamic interplay between individual agency and cultural contexts, offering insights into how the CA can be a transformative tool in diverse settings and environments.

This chapter contributes to expanding the CA by presenting not only its foundational concepts but also weaving them together with indigenous philosophical traditions, cross-cultural psychological debates (notably the tension between universalism and cultural specificity), and methodological innovations. It seeks to demonstrate that the CA is not a static or

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prescriptive model but rather a hybrid, dynamic, decolonial, and context-sensitive framework capable of accommodating diverse cultural conceptions of well-being, justice, and human flourishing, particularly in contexts shaped by colonial histories, structural oppression, and collective world views (see also Chapter 12).

Theoretical Foundations of the Capability Approach

The CA originated in response to limitations in traditional welfare economics, which often reduce well-being to material resources or utility. Instead, Sen proposed that well-being should be measured in terms of individuals' capabilities, that is, their real freedoms to achieve the lives they value [1, 3, 4]. This groundbreaking shift highlighted the inadequacy of metrics such as GDP in capturing human development, advocating instead for an evaluative framework rooted in people's actual opportunities and choices [4].

Nussbaum expanded this theoretical framework by introducing a list of ten central capabilities, including life, bodily health, bodily integrity, practical reason, and affiliation [2, 5]. Her emphasis on dignity, autonomy, and agency underscored the importance of creating conditions that allow individuals to live a life they have reason to value [5]. This list served as a philosophical foundation for operationalising the CA in policy and practice, already demonstrating its versatility across different cultural and institutional contexts – a crucial point that we will return to later in this chapter.

The CA's focus on substantive freedoms distinguishes it from other models of well-being, such as utilitarianism or resource-based approaches. By prioritising individual agencies and the diversity of values, the CA addresses inequalities that arise from systemic barriers, such as social norms, institutional constraints, and cultural practices [1, 6]. This perspective has been instrumental in various applications, from assessing poverty to designing educational and workplace policies [5, 6, 7].

Additionally, the CA's emphasis on contextual sensitivity has made it a valuable tool in cross-cultural settings. By recognising that capabilities are shaped by local conditions, such as cultural norms and institutional structures, the CA provides a nuanced framework for understanding and addressing disparities in well-being [8, 9, 10]. This adaptability allows it to balance universal principles of human dignity and autonomy with respect to cultural diversity, making it particularly relevant for addressing global challenges such as inequality and social justice [11] (see Chapter 5).

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The Default (Cross-)Cultural Origin of the Capability Approach

As mentioned, Amartya Sen developed the concept of 'capability' out of dissatisfaction with existing concepts and theoretical frameworks for evaluating a society [4, 7, 12]. The capability concept has its roots in his work with Drèze on famines in India and China [13, 14], where they challenged the Malthusian notion that famines result solely from an imbalance between exponential population growth and food supply and, as such, were seen as an inevitable 'Darwinian' correction to overpopulation (see also Chapters 1 and 5).

Sen, however, demonstrated that factors other than food availability determined whether people experienced famine [3]. Specifically, he highlighted whether individuals had the freedom and opportunity to convert their labour into wages and their wages into food as the most crucial factor. This focus on the interplay between individual agency and systemic constraints became the foundation for the capability model. From this model, and initially within the context of development economics, the capability concept defined equality in terms of freedoms and opportunities rather than material wealth or subjective satisfaction (as in utilitarianism).

Sen further argued that it is not only about the resources available or how people subjectively perceive their situation, which is often influenced by "response shifts" ("adaptive preferences" in capability terms; adjustments in norms and expectations to align with one's situation) but also about the actual opportunities available to members of a society and how these opportunities are distributed [15]. At an individual level, 'capability' means having the freedom to do or be what one values, on the basis of the various combinations of opportunities at one's disposal. It then becomes clear that this framework was carefully developed from *within* a culture, meticulously describing the unique features of a context that can promote well-being and flourishing, even in the face of so-called objective hardship.

Where the cultural origin of the CA is evident, its cross-cultural roots are somewhat less apparent. Follow-up studies aimed at providing a universal definition of some of the model's key concepts, that is, classifications that would hold in *most or nearly every* context or cultural setting. For example, in consequent thinking [16, 17, 18], freedom was assumed to encompass two aspects: the process aspect, which refers to the ability to shape one's life and environment, and the opportunity aspect, which refers to the ability to achieve valued goals. Capability, then, represents the set of tasks and activities that are valuable and meaningful to individuals and lie within their reach. Owing to their importance in a specific context, these

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tasks should be accessible to everyone. This concept has since been successfully applied in various fields [16, 17, 18].

When applied to labour [19, 20], the capability concept can be clarified by comparing it with performance and capacity, familiar terms from the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health model by the World Health Organization [17]. Performance refers to what an individual actually does, whereas capacity refers to what they are capable of doing. Capability, in turn, relates to an individual's capacity (what they can do) in conjunction with the opportunities provided by their environment (what they are enabled to do). It is therefore essential that contexts, whether they represent organisations or (local, regional, and national) governments, offer opportunities that enable capacities to unfold.

Sabine Alkire illustrated this with a straightforward example involving cycling: even if someone has the ability to cycle, they[1] need access to a bike, suitable roads, and the absence of restrictive social conditions to do so [9]. Capability encompasses all these aspects: physical attributes, cycling skills, access to a bicycle, and an enabling physical (e.g., roads) and social environment (e.g., no curfew). This simple analogy may illustrate the universality of the CA's key premise. The core complexity of capability, however, lies in this concept of 'being able', which refers both to having the ability and to being provided with the means to exercise it. In the context of labour, this duality is equally important: individuals must be both capable and enabled to work. Capability reflects both the employee's skills and motivation and the organisational environment that is supportive and enables meaningful contributions. Thus, it is not enough for someone to have knowledge, skills, and the desire to develop them further; the organisational context must also support these efforts and create opportunities for valuable work to be performed [9, 19]. *Able individuals within enabling contexts* would be a good motto.

The Quest for Universals

In a similar vein, policymakers should be urged to deliver the necessary (pre) conditions for individuals to fulfil their basic needs, both physically (e.g., in Sen's view [3] of being able to afford food) and psychologically [e.g., in Maslow's view [21, 22] of self-actualisation, which later formed the basis of further developments within the framework of the self-determination theory [23–26]. As such, a preliminary conclusion could be that, owing to its grounding within cultural psychology, the cross-cultural validity of the CA

[1] For reasons of clarity and inclusivity, this chapter uses the singular "they" as a gender-neutral pronoun rather than "she," "he," or "s/he," following Cambridge University Press policy.

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stood the test of time. The argument we will develop in the next section is that one should not think of these universals as variables, concepts, or even processes that can be readily applied to any given context or in any situation. Rather, we propose that the universals in the CA can be viewed as principles that guide research and practice across various settings. The CA indeed offers a set of foundational principles that make it uniquely suited for addressing well-being in diverse contexts. These key features are as follows:

- *A focus on individual agency*: The CA prioritises what individuals are free to do and be rather than what they merely possess (see Chapter 3, quote of Sayer). This emphasis on agency aligns with the notion that true well-being stems from the ability to make choices and take actions that are meaningful to the individual [27]. It challenges deterministic or paternalistic models by centring on personal empowerment and the removal of barriers to choice.
- *An honest validation of pluralism*: By acknowledging the diversity of human aspirations, the CA avoids prescribing a singular notion of well-being. Instead, it respects the multiplicity of values and goals that individuals and communities may pursue [2, 5]. This pluralistic approach enables the CA to remain inclusive and adaptable across cultural, social, and economic contexts.
- *Context sensitivity*: Recognising that cultural, social, and institutional factors shape capabilities, the CA emphasises the importance of contextuality in capability formation. This feature ensures that the approach can be tailored to address the unique challenges and opportunities within specific environments [9]. It is particularly significant in cross-cultural applications, where historical, political, and cultural conditions profoundly influence individual freedoms and choices [19, 28].

In cross-cultural contexts, these principles underscore the importance of understanding diverse value systems, cultural norms, and historical conditions that influence individual freedoms and choices. For example, studies on indigenous philosophies, such as Ubuntu and Buen Vivir, reveal how relational and ecological values can expand the conceptual scope of the CA [29, 30, 31]. These insights reinforce the CA's capacity to bridge universal principles with culturally specific applications, fostering both individual and collective well-being across the globe [32].

(Cross-)Cultural Applications of the Capability Approach

In this section, we briefly discuss what and how (cross-)cultural psychology is, and we highlight how the CA easily inscribes itself into this field.

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Cross-cultural psychology has been variously defined in the literature, the earliest ones stemming from the nineteenth century [33], when a relatively static view of culture as the social heredity of a society [34] or the man-made part of the environment [35] was commonplace. A consideration of some more recent operationalisations sheds light on how the field is currently more dynamically construed by its students. According to a definition provided in an advanced textbook of cross-cultural psychology [36], the aim of the field is to study similarities and differences in individual psychological functioning in various cultural and ethnic groups. Moreover, a vital mission should be to explore the relationships between psychological variables and sociocultural, ecological, and biological variables, as well as changes in these variables and their interrelationships. This is a comprehensive definition of the field, involving, on the one hand, a comparative focus on similarities and differences across cultures and, on the other hand, a focus on *relating* psychological variables to environmental and even biological ones.

This duality ultimately led to the creation of two independent yet related subdisciplines: 'cross-cultural psychology', which focuses on the comparison of cultures in terms of values, attitudes, roles, perceptions, and cognitions, and 'cultural psychology', which focuses on one culture as a complex and complicated unit that is worthy of proper examination [36]. Most researchers in the field focus on one approach rather than the other, resulting in variations in perspectives and emphases. Inherent in these characterisations is the issue of whether a universalistic (comparative, or 'etic') or a contextualistic (noncomparative, relativistic, or 'emic') perspective is preferred. This is essentially a methodological problem that will be addressed later. Notably, although often seen as conflicting [37], the two perspectives can rather be considered complementary.

Cultural psychology examines psychological phenomena within their cultural context, emphasising that all human psychology should inherently be cultural psychology, as no psychological processes occur in isolation from culture. However, since this ideal is far from reality, psychological studies that explicitly consider cultural contexts qualify as cultural psychology [38]. When such studies adopt a comparative approach involving at least two cultures, even implicitly, they fall within the domain of cross-cultural psychology. Hence, the title "(Cross-)Cultural Psychology" reflects the intentional inclusion of both perspectives. For this chapter, the term 'cross-cultural' will generally be used unless a specific distinction is being made to 'cultural psychology'.

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Etic and Emic Research within the Capability Approach

Cross-cultural psychology offers valuable insights into the applicability of the CA across diverse cultural settings. Two primary approaches, etic and emic, frame this discourse. This distinction originated in linguistics in the 1950s to designate two complementary standpoints for the analysis of human language and behaviour: phonetic (analysing sounds in speech) versus phon*emic* (concentrating on distinctive sounds of a language). It has been subject to debates in the humanities and social sciences ever since [39]. In the 1960s, the distinction was introduced into anthropology, where etic came to stand for an objective, scientific understanding of cultural phenomena, whereas emic arose as unique interpretations of the world through the subjective viewpoints of cultural insiders. Over time, both concepts have been adopted by several other disciplines and subfields, such as cross-cultural psychology. Although the division remains relevant, scholars currently agree that both approaches are complementary and can be beneficial for further developing existing theoretical frameworks, such as the CA. Galperin et al. propose a research cycle where one type of study is conducted after another, creating a self-nourishing loop [40].

- *Etic* approaches involve universal frameworks to analyse cultural phenomena. For example, Schwartz's values framework categorises universal values such as autonomy, benevolence, and tradition, which align with the CA's principles of human dignity and agency [41, 42]. Etic approaches aim to identify cross-culturally valid constructs that transcend specific cultural contexts, providing a basis for comparing diverse societies in common dimensions. Another example, as already discussed, is the framework of self-determination theory [23, 43]. While such frameworks offer valuable insights into shared human values and needs, critics argue that their focus on universality can sometimes oversimplify cultural differences and overlook unique contextual nuances [44, 45].
- In contrast, *emic* approaches prioritise culture-specific constructs, emphasising the importance of understanding values, behaviours, and beliefs within their cultural contexts. This perspective aligns closely with the CA's emphasis on contextuality, as it allows for tailored applications that respect cultural nuances and local priorities. For instance, the concept of Ubuntu in African societies highlights communal well-being and interconnectedness, offering a culturally grounded lens through which to understand relational capabilities [31].

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> Similarly, indigenous perspectives on sustainability and spirituality can inform localised applications of the CA in ways that universal frameworks might overlook [30]. Finally, in postconflict and postcolonial societies, context-sensitive approaches have also shown great promise in paving the way for peace and reconciliation [46, 47].

Integrating etic and emic approaches can significantly enhance CA's cross-cultural and cultural relevance. While etic approaches provide a foundational understanding of shared human values, emic approaches ensure that cultural specificity and diversity are not sacrificed in the pursuit of universality [48]. This integration fosters a balanced perspective that accommodates both global principles and local particularities, enabling the CA to address complex cultural dynamics effectively [49].

Moreover, recent developments in cultural psychology highlight the potential for bridging these approaches through 'cultural syndromes', which describe patterns of shared attitudes, beliefs, and norms within specific societies [50]. By incorporating such insights, the CA can better account for the interplay between universal human aspirations and culturally specific ways of achieving them [51]. In summary, the integration of etic and emic approaches provides a robust theoretical foundation for applying CA in cross-cultural settings. By balancing universal principles with cultural specificity, CA can effectively address the complexities of human well-being in a global yet diverse world.

We can see parallels here between the concepts of etic and emic with the differences between contract thinkers and outcome-realisation thinkers, 'Niti' and 'Nyaya', and ideographic and nomothetic perspectives, as discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 3. In Chapter 1, we observed Sen's preference for 'Nyaya'. Chapter 2 argues for integration and emphasises the complementarity between the ideographic and nomothetic perspectives, as is done earlier for etic and emic. Chapter 3 argues that adapting contributive justice as the guiding concept of justice transforms the CA into an integrative approach.

Pitfalls in the Literature, Bypassed by the Capability Approach

The CA operates at the intersection of universal values and cultural specificity, making it uniquely suited for applications across diverse settings. It champions human dignity and agency as universal principles while recognising the variability in how these principles manifest across cultures. Usually, a second type of differentiation that is often made in cross-cultural

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studies is that between the material aspects of a culture, such as the built environment, as well as customs and behaviours ('explicit culture'), on the one hand, and culture as a symbolic meaning system referring to shared ideas and meanings, such as beliefs and values ('implicit culture'), on the other hand [36, 49]. A first pitfall here is the risk of oversimplifying or dichotomising cultural phenomena, which are more often than not interconnected.

Implicitly, this differentiation could also reinforce a static view of culture [34], where explicit and implicit aspects are treated as fixed and separate. However, culture is dynamic, with explicit practices often reshaping implicit values and vice versa. A second pitfall is that explicit cultural elements are more readily observable and measurable, whereas implicit cultural aspects, such as beliefs and values, are harder to quantify [50]. This disparity can lead to an overemphasis on explicit culture in research, which neglects the critical influence of implicit factors. Third, this binary distinction might fail to account for how the material and symbolic aspects of culture vary across contexts and evolve over time [51]. For example, a physical structure (explicit culture) such as a temple has both material significance and deeply embedded symbolic meanings that vary by cultural and historical context.

Moreover, Binder and Binder argue that recognising the cultural and context-specific value of capabilities strengthens the CA's applicability in diverse settings [51]. This adaptability is particularly significant in addressing global challenges such as inequality, where universal principles must be reconciled with local realities. These contributions illustrate how in the CA universality and contextuality can coexist, fostering inclusivity while respecting cultural diversity. By bridging universal principles with specific cultural contexts, the CA provides a powerful framework for addressing disparities in well-being. Its emphasis on relational and collective dimensions [49], a universally diverse orientation [52] (see also Chapter 12, quote Cézare) and a particular focus on the role of norms [53] ensures that interventions are both contextually appropriate and aligned with broader humanistic values, making it a valuable tool for promoting global equity and justice.

Finally, Western cultures often assert a universalist claim, framing their ways of being, thinking, and acting as 'natural' and universally applicable. This perspective assumes the existence of a 'generic' individual – a theoretical, abstract model that is deemed representative of all humanity. Within this framework, culture is reduced to minor variations in a shared underlying theme, neglecting the diversity of lived experiences across the

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globe. This outlook is particularly evident in the prevalence of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) populations as the implicit standard for psychological, sociological, and cultural research [54]. Taking WEIRD theories as a frame of reference for cross-cultural comparisons also risks promoting an occidentalocentric world view, which imposes its cultural assumptions and values on other societies while marginalising non-Western perspectives.

This approach not only perpetuates cultural biases but also undermines efforts to understand and appreciate the full spectrum of human diversity, a pitfall that is bypassed by the CA. In the current politically and economically uncertain era [55, 56], such a framework offers a valuable basis for other research. By directly and indirectly addressing these pitfalls, the CA offers a holistic approach that acknowledges the interplay between explicit and implicit cultural dimensions, considers contextual, temporal, and cultural dynamics, and ensures methodological rigour to avoid bias or reductionism.

Outstanding (Cross-)Cultural Questions within the Capability Approach

In the following section, we focus on three key debates: procedural versus contributive justice, resources versus capabilities, and capability sets versus well-being.

Procedural versus Contributive Justice

In cross-cultural settings, the CA's emphasis on procedural and contributive justice is particularly salient. Procedural justice focuses on the fairness of processes, ensuring that all individuals have equal opportunities to participate in decision-making and hence links to resources and opportunities [57]. Contributive justice, on the other hand, emphasises the active participation of individuals in creating just outcomes. This principle resonates with non-Western ethical frameworks, such as Ubuntu, which values mutual support, collective responsibility, and the intrinsic dignity of contributing to communal well-being [31]. By framing justice as a participatory process rather than merely an outcome, CA aligns with indigenous and collectivist perspectives that prioritise relational and community-oriented values (see also Chapter 3).

The integration of both of these justice principles into the CA underscores its transformative potential in addressing global inequities. For

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example, in indigenous contexts, contributive justice aligns with the recognition of self-determination and cultural preservation as fundamental capabilities [58]. Similarly, procedural justice ensures that marginalised groups have a voice in shaping policies and practices that affect their well-being. By embedding procedural and contributive justice within its framework, the CA not only advocates for equitable outcomes but also empowers individuals and communities to actively shape their futures.

This dual emphasis enhances its relevance in cross-cultural applications, fostering environments where justice is both experienced and enacted collaboratively. However, more work still needs to be done, especially in underrepresented contexts and among marginalised groups. Future studies should employ participatory research methods, such as community-based participatory research, to involve local communities in identifying and prioritising aspects of justice. This approach ensures that cultural specificities are respected and incorporated into the operationalisation process.

Resources versus Capabilities

A second key distinction in the CA lies in its differentiation between resources and capabilities. Resources refer to the material and non-material means that individuals have at their disposal, such as income, education, and healthcare. Capabilities, however, represent the real freedoms individuals have to achieve in terms of their valued functionings (i.e., the 'doings and beings' that constitute a fulfilling life [1]). This distinction is particularly significant in cross-cultural contexts, where access to resources and their conversion into capabilities can vary greatly owing to social norms, institutional structures, and cultural practices. For example, educational resources may be available in a given society, but cultural restrictions or gender norms may limit certain groups' ability to utilise these resources effectively [7].

Moreover, the CA recognises that individual and collective values influence how resources are converted into capabilities. In many indigenous communities, relational and ecological values shape priorities, leading to a focus on communal well-being and sustainability over individual material accumulation [30]. This perspective underscores the importance of understanding the broader sociocultural and institutional contexts in which capabilities are developed and exercised. The emphasis on capabilities over resources also highlights systemic inequalities. While resources are often distributed unequally, the CA shifts attention to the real freedoms that individuals have to utilise those resources, advocating for policies that

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address underlying conversion factors. These include social barriers, discriminatory practices, and institutional constraints that prevent individuals from achieving their potential [9].

By focusing on capabilities rather than merely resources, the CA provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing well-being disparities (see also Chapters 1 and 2). It underscores the need for inclusive policies and practices that not only distribute resources equitably but also ensure that individuals and communities have the freedoms to lead lives they value. A significant remaining question within the CA is as follows: How can the concept of 'freedoms to lead lives individuals value' be operationalised in diverse cultural contexts without imposing external value systems? While the CA emphasises individual freedoms and pluralism, translating these principles into concrete policies and interventions can be challenging, particularly in cross-cultural or multicultural settings. The CA responds to this challenge through its principles of normativity, contextuality, diversity, and openness (see Chapter 5).

Capability Sets versus Well-Being

The CA also posits that well-being arises not from singular achievements but from a comprehensive set of capabilities. This holistic perspective acknowledges that different dimensions of well-being (relational, material, and spiritual) may hold varying degrees of importance in culturally diverse societies. For example, in many indigenous communities, relational well-being, rooted in connections to family, community, and nature, is prioritised over individualistic measures of success [30].

This multidimensional view of well-being is particularly relevant in addressing global inequities, as it emphasises the interplay between personal freedoms and collective values. It challenges reductionist approaches that focus solely on economic indicators, advocating instead for a nuanced understanding of how diverse cultural, social, and historical contexts shape well-being [9]. By promoting a comprehensive set of capabilities, the CA enables individuals and communities to thrive across multiple dimensions, fostering both individual flourishing and collective resilience.

On the basis of the sustainable employability model of Van der Klink et al. [19] (see Chapter 2), we propose specific cultural practices, emphasising the role of supportive environments in enhancing individuals' real freedoms to achieve valued functionings. The three main principles are as follows:

- *Cultural adaptability*: Institutions should design flexible structures that reflect and respect diverse cultural norms, traditions, and values.

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Adaptability involves tailoring roles, workflows, and policies to align with culturally specific expectations, allowing individuals to navigate and balance communal and personal priorities effectively. For example, accommodating religious practices or family obligations can enhance engagement and cohesion in culturally diverse environments [59].

- *Individual and cultural agency*: Empowering individuals to make choices aligned with their personal values and cultural contexts is critical. By fostering autonomy while respecting cultural norms, organisations can enable individuals to take ownership of their paths and decisions. This approach enhances motivation and engagement, particularly in settings where collective values or community priorities significantly influence individual aspirations [23].
- *Holistic well-being within cultural frameworks*: Recognising the interplay between physical, mental, social, and cultural well-being is essential. Assessments of hedonic (happiness- and pleasure-related) and eudaimonic (meaning- and purpose-related) facets of well-being necessarily include multifaceted needs, including health, psychological resilience, relational connections, and alignment with cultural expectations [60]. By integrating cultural elements, such as communal values or traditional habits and customs, local institutions can support both professional success and personal fulfilment and flourishing.

These principles highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in creating environments that empower individuals and communities to thrive, bridging global frameworks with local realities. They are also particularly relevant in cross-cultural contexts. For example, in collectivist cultures, relational well-being and community engagement may take precedence over individual achievements, necessitating local policies that emphasise collaboration and mutual support. Similarly, in individualistic cultures, fostering autonomy and self-expression may be paramount [50]. By integrating these principles into policies and practices, our model provides a pathway for creating inclusive, adaptable, and empowering cities, neighbourhoods, and communities that align with the CA's emphasis on human dignity and agency – see, in this respect, the publication by Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi [61].

Indigenous Philosophies and the Capability Approach

Recent studies have further explored the interplay between indigenous philosophies and the CA.

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Illustrative Empirical Examples

Watene and Yap, for instance, argue that the Māori's holistic relationship with nature can enrich the CA's applications in areas such as sustainable development and environmental justice [30]. This perspective underscores the CA's ability to incorporate ecological and spiritual dimensions, expanding its relevance beyond conventional domains. Other non-Western philosophies, such as Ubuntu and Buen Vivir, likewise provide valuable perspectives on the CA's applicability in cross-cultural settings. Ubuntu,[2] a Southern African philosophy, emphasises community, interconnectedness, and mutual support, aligning closely with the CA's focus on relational capabilities. This perspective shifts the focus from individual achievements to collective well-being, advocating for practices that promote shared responsibility and mutual flourishing [3].

Similarly, Buen Vivir, rooted in indigenous Latin American world views, advocates for a harmonious living with nature. This philosophy challenges the CA to incorporate ecological and spiritual dimensions into its framework, recognising the interdependence between human well-being and environmental sustainability [62]. Buen Vivir critiques growth-oriented development models, instead emphasising the importance of balance, reciprocity, and respect for natural systems. In Ecuador and Bolivia, for example, national development plans, which draw upon community consultations, replaced GDP as the sole indicator of progress and now incorporate metrics such as ecological sustainability, relational harmony, and community participation [62]. Tying various philosophies together, Panzironi introduced the concept of "indigenous capability rights", highlighting collective capabilities and self-determination as essential components of indigenous well-being [58]. This framework demonstrates how the CA can be adapted to address the unique needs and aspirations of indigenous communities, emphasising their rights to autonomous self-governance and cultural preservation.

[2] It is important to recognise that Ubuntu does not operate outside of structural forces. In many postcolonial African contexts, community values are themselves shaped by histories of economic exclusion and political marginalisation. As such, a 'romanticised' reading of Ubuntu risks obscuring how structural inequality and hegemonic norms shape communal expectations and relations. For example, while Ubuntu promotes solidarity, in highly unequal societies it may inadvertently mask or legitimise enduring class hierarchies or patriarchal norms. Hence, integrating Ubuntu into the CA requires structural reflexivity, that is, an awareness of how relational values are embedded in broader political and historical systems [31].

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The integration of these philosophies into the CA enriches its theoretical and practical applications by highlighting values that transcend material well-being. Ubuntu's emphasis on communal harmony complements the CA's relational aspects, whereas Buen Vivir expands the approach to include environmental justice and the spiritual connections that many indigenous cultures prioritise [30]. Incorporating such perspectives requires a broader understanding of well-being that goes beyond individualistic or utilitarian metrics. By engaging with these philosophies, the CA becomes more inclusive, addressing the needs and aspirations of diverse cultural contexts while challenging dominant paradigms that often marginalise non-Western perspectives. This chapter is therefore inherently linked with Chapter 12 on decolonial perspectives within the CA.

Indeed, the legacies of colonialism continue to shape the sociopolitical and economic structures of many societies in the Global South, where collective identities and interdependent survival systems remain strong. In such settings, capability deprivation is not merely a matter of lacking individual freedoms but reflects broader histories of dispossession, epistemic marginalisation, and structural coercion [63]. For example, indigenous communities in South Africa and Latin America continue to face limited access to education, land, and healthcare, not only because of contemporary poverty but also because of settler colonial policies that erased traditional knowledge systems and undermined collective governance structures [58]. To fully understand and remedy such forms of deprivation, the CA must engage with these structural dynamics. Scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni have called for a decolonial CA that recognises collective trauma and institutionalised the injustice of historically oppressed communities [64].

The Individual–Collective Tension in the Capability Approach

At the same time, another friction emerges within the CA. While the CA traditionally centres on individual agency (the real freedom to do and be what one values), many indigenous world views emphasise relationality, collective responsibility, and interdependence as fundamental to well-being. This invites critical reflection and theoretical refinement of the CA. Ubuntu, for instance, is grounded in the notion that "a person is a person through other persons" [31, p. 97]. This challenges Western liberal models of agency as individualistic and self-contained. Within an Ubuntu framework, well-being is not merely a personal achievement but also a relational accomplishment embedded in community dynamics and mutual

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recognition. Similarly, Buen Vivir (*sumak kawsay*) centres on harmony between individuals, communities, and nature. Rather than prioritising personal achievement or autonomy, Buen Vivir emphasises collective well-being, reciprocity, and ecological balance. It thus pushes the CA to move beyond a human-centred, individual-rights-based framework towards a more eco-centric and communitarian model [62].

In the Māori world view, concepts such as *whanaungatanga* (kinship, belonging) and *manaakitanga* (hospitality, mutual care) stress the importance of maintaining social and spiritual relationships. These are not capabilities in the conventional CA sense but may instead be thought of as collective capabilities (i.e., functionings that depend on group cohesion and shared meaning, rather than individual choice alone [29]). Rather than viewing these as incompatible with the CA, recent scholars have argued for theoretical *expansions of agency* to include relational and collective dimensions [64]. One way forward is to reconceptualise agency not as the absence of external constraints but as the capacity to cocreate meaningful lives within a web of interdependence. Binder and Binder proposed a model that embeds self-determination and community control over health systems as *collective capabilities* [51]. This aligns with feminist critiques of autonomy and brings the CA closer to relational models of justice.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

A Framework for Balancing Universal Values with Cultural Specificity

To guide the practical application of the CA in culturally diverse contexts, we propose a three-pronged framework:

- *Dialogical universalism*: Instead of assuming a fixed, top-down list of universal values, dialogical universalism, as explored by thinkers such as Tong Shijun [66], proposes a way to navigate ethical and cultural differences through dialogue, aiming for shared understanding and universal principles. It moves beyond rigid universalism (which assumes a single set of universally applicable norms) and relativism (which emphasises cultural uniqueness). Instead, it stresses the importance of critical engagement, respect, and mutual understanding in the process of constructing shared norms and values [67]. This philosophy is anchored in structured dialogue with local communities to co-define that shared ethical ground is close to diverse ideologies such as interculturalism and polyculturalism [67, 68]. This universality without uniformity preserves

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the normative aspiration of the CA while accommodating cultural variation and allowing for local interpretations (Chapter 12).

- *Contextual thresholds*: Fundamental rights should be protected by setting moral thresholds below which no cultural justification is acceptable (e.g., practices violating bodily integrity or gender equality). Nussbaum has argued for a minimal list of central capabilities grounded in dignity while respecting implementation flexibility [2]. These red lines are aligned with international human rights standards and serve as ethical boundaries that prevent cultural relativism from legitimising harmful practices [70].
- *Participatory pluralism*: In the context of democratic theory, participatory research emphasises the importance of diverse citizen participation in shaping public policy and governance while also acknowledging the legitimacy of multiple perspectives and interests [71]. It moves beyond a simple aggregation of interests towards actively engaging with and understanding the nuances of different viewpoints. Empowering local actors to co-design capability lists could help ensure that cultural norms are not passively accepted or imposed but actively negotiated in ways that protect vulnerable groups (see, in this respect, Wolff and De-Shalit [72]). A prime example here is the two case studies conducted by Schischka et al. [73]. Across sixteen focus groups, participants in a community garden project in a low-income neighbourhood in New Zealand, as well as a self-help development project for women in a Samoan village, learned to define capabilities that were valuable in creating new opportunities for themselves.

Application Strategies

The previous sections taught us the depth and breadth of the CA as a scientific framework. To effectively apply this approach in cross-cultural contexts, several strategies are recommended:

- *Engage local communities*: Top-down approaches should be complemented by grassroots engagement to understand and address community-specific needs. Engaging with local stakeholders ensures that interventions are grounded in the lived experiences and priorities of the community. Participatory methodologies, such as focus groups and codesign workshops, can facilitate meaningful dialogue and foster local ownership of initiatives [74].

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- *Promote cultural sensitivity*: Policymakers and practitioners must be attuned to cultural norms and values to ensure contextually appropriate interventions [53]. This involves understanding the historical, social, and cultural dynamics that shape communities' aspirations and constraints. For example, recognising the role of extended family networks in collectivist societies can help design programmes that leverage communal resources effectively [49].
- *Foster relational capabilities*: Building loving and respectful relationships within workplaces and communities can enhance collective well-being and individual flourishing. Relational capabilities emphasise the importance of mutual recognition, empathy, and cooperation. Practices such as (well thought-through) team-building activities, inclusive leadership, and conflict resolution training can strengthen interpersonal connections and foster a sense of belonging [2].
- *Incorporate indigenous knowledge*: Integrating indigenous philosophies and traditional knowledge systems can enrich the CA's theoretical and practical applications. This approach not only validates the wisdom of local communities but also promotes more inclusive and sustainable development. For example, indigenous ecological practices can inform environmental policies that prioritise sustainability and intergenerational equity [30].
- *Use measurable constructs*: abstract capabilities can be operationalised in culturally sensitive ways. For instance, Bockstael and Watene described the use of deliberative participatory methods to identify capabilities among Australian Aboriginal communities [32]. Instead of applying predefined metrics, these researchers held collective workshops where community members articulated locally relevant capabilities (e.g., connection to land, intergenerational knowledge transfer). These were later incorporated into regional development indicators, ensuring that cultural values were reflected in policy frameworks (see also Chapter 5).
- *Ensure flexibility in implementation*: Flexibility is crucial for adapting interventions to diverse cultural and institutional contexts. Policies should allow for iterative feedback and modifications on the basis of ongoing evaluation and community input. This adaptability can help address unforeseen challenges and ensure that initiatives remain responsive to the needs of their target populations [9].

By employing these strategies, the CA can serve as a transformative tool for addressing global disparities while respecting cultural diversity. These

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practices highlight the importance of inclusive, context-sensitive methodologies that empower individuals and communities to realise their potential in ways that are meaningful to them. By highlighting these easy-to-implement recommendations, we do not wish to ignore the remaining challenges within the CA and its (cross-)cultural nature. The emic-etic debate is prominent in many theoretical frameworks, and the question of cultural universality versus relativity also plays within the CA. For example, how can the CA balance universal human values, such as dignity and agency, with culturally specific understandings of well-being and valued functionings?

In terms of measurement – of implemented interventions – it also remains unclear how the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of capabilities can be effectively measured, especially when implicit cultural values shape what is considered desirable or achievable. Future studies should focus on creating adaptable and multidimensional metrics that reflect both individual and collective capabilities, allowing for more nuanced assessments that account for cultural variation. Finally, in both theory and practice, we should be aware of power dynamics. The main challenge for the CA will be to ensure that the voices of marginalised or underrepresented groups are authentically included in defining and prioritising capabilities. Addressing intersectional identities (such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status) can help unpack how systemic power barriers influence the realisation of capabilities differently for various groups, further refining the CA's applicability.

Conclusion

We can confidently conclude that the CA offers a robust and adaptable framework for promoting human well-being across diverse cultural contexts. By balancing universal principles, such as human dignity and agency, with cultural specificity, the CA provides a nuanced approach to addressing the complexities of cross-cultural and cultural applications. Its emphasis on relational capabilities, contextuality, and valuing pluralism ensures that interventions are inclusive and sensitive to the unique dynamics of local contexts.

Future research and practice should continue to explore the interplay between individual capabilities, cultural values, and structural factors. This includes examining how diverse cultural and institutional settings influence the formation of capabilities and identifying strategies to enhance their realisation in a sustainable and equitable manner. Efforts to integrate

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non-Western philosophies, such as Ubuntu and Buen Vivir, can further enrich the CA by broadening its theoretical and practical applications.

As global challenges such as political polarisation, economic inequality, environmental degradation, and cultural conflicts persist, the CA's transformative potential becomes increasingly vital. By fostering inclusivity, equity, and sustainability, the CA not only addresses disparities in well-being but also paves the way for a more just and harmonious global society. Through continued innovation and collaboration, the CA can serve as a guiding framework for building a world where all individuals have the freedom and opportunity to lead lives they value.

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