



# Multidimensional disadvantage and conversion factors

## The example of political poverty

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# Introduction

This paper studies the multidimensional nature of social disadvantage taking the capability approach as the normative framework of reference. In the first part, we start by defining social disadvantage as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon. In the second part, we analyse the links between different dimensions of disadvantage and their evolution over time, referring to the notion of conversion factors. Finally, in the third section we apply this analytical framework to the issue of political exclusion.

# 1. The multidimensional and dynamic nature of disadvantage: social exclusion and social vulnerability

From a capability approach perspective, poverty is not chiefly defined as lack of income or as material deprivation but rather as lack of capability, that is as lack of freedom to lead the kind of life one has reason to value (e.g. Sen, 1999; Leßmann, 2011; Hick, 2012). Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) have convincingly argued that the definition of social disadvantage involves an irreducible plurality of dimensions, which are connected with one another through causal links. Furthermore, disadvantage may persist and even accumulate over time, involving both cases where a person accumulates disadvantages during his or her life course, and the reproduction of disadvantage over generations. Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) also introduce two relevant notions for interpreting the causal links between different dimensions of disadvantage: they call the sort of disadvantage that has negative effects on other dimensions ‘corrosive disadvantage’ whereas ‘fertile functionings’ are those functionings, which spread their good effects over several categories. These notions are especially relevant at policy level: public policies should focus on reducing corrosive disadvantage and on promoting fertile functionings.

Similar conclusions on the multidimensional and dynamic nature of disadvantage can be drawn from much of the empirical research concerning social exclusion, which has shown that deprivation is intrinsically multidimensional - involving many more aspects than the lack of material resources or monetary poverty - and that the different dimensions are linked together and may reinforce each other in a dynamic way (for an introduction to social exclusion theories, see e.g. Silver, 1994; Levitas, 1998; Burchardt et al., 1999). In particular, being poor and/or excluded should be considered as an event, a temporary situation, rather than a permanent status. There are also different theories of poverty and exclusion which use a dynamic approach (Biolcati-Rinaldi & Giampaglia, 2011):

1. The persistence theory suggests that the consequences of poverty are at the same time the causes of its persistence through a process of accumulation of disadvantages. In this framework, impoverishment is a self-reinforcing vicious circle.
2. According to the life course theories, poverty is not a permanent condition but a specific situation occurring in a particular life phase of individuals and families. From this perspective there are some phases of life in which risks of becoming poor are higher: for young people in the transition from education to work, at childbirth, in case of separation/divorce, during old age.
3. The individualisation theory argues that poverty depends to a large extent on the agency of individuals, that is, their choices and actions, which makes it difficult to explain poverty on the basis of the traditional social stratification frameworks.
4. The stratification theory suggests that poverty can still be largely explained by structural factors such as the social class, the status group, or the territory.

It seems that none of these theories alone holds the whole truth about poverty (since each theory tends to overemphasise one aspect of social disadvantage), and empirical research suggests that social reality lies in between the two extremes of the ‘individualisation’ and ‘cumulative disadvantage’ theses (Layte and Whelan, 2002): the first attaches disproportionate importance to individual agency and the latter suffers from exces-

sive social determinism. From our perspective, it is more useful to see these theories not as mutually exclusive but as complementary views on the complex issues of poverty and disadvantage. Thus, we can draw some important and more general conclusions:

1. Poverty is a temporary situation. Poverty experiences start, have a certain duration (continuous or discontinuous) and eventually stop.
2. Poor people have agency capacity: they can take actions against poverty through some coping strategies but their actions can also deepen their disadvantage.
3. The likelihood of being poor is increasingly democratised. Also the middle classes are at risk of impoverishment (e.g. Bagnasco, 2008).
4. Poverty consists in part of a self-reinforcing process where its consequences become causes of deeper poverty. Accumulation of disadvantages can make it difficult to break the vicious circle.
5. Biography matters. During some life phases and critical transition moments (e.g. divorce, birth of a child) there are higher risks of becoming poor than during others.
6. Structural factors matter too. Class, status, territory and social institutions have an important influence in constraining life chances through shaping aspirations, quality and quantity of (material and immaterial) available resources. These structural factors also influence the dynamics of coming out from poverty so that persistence will be more likely in some social contexts than in others.

From this perspective, rather than of social exclusion, one should speak of social vulnerability<sup>1</sup> for describing a situation that can be defined as an exposure to social risks, which may evolve into poverty and/or exclusion (but it can also be overcome), and thus generates a sense of insecurity among individuals. Poverty and/or exclusion can thus be understood as the results of the interaction between objective factors of vulnerability (like an insufficient or inconstant income, a low level of education, a large family to maintain, a lack of social capital and so on) and the occurrence of certain events or biographical ruptures, which are 'generating factors'. Although most of these are 'normal' events like the birth of a baby, the illness of the breadwinner or a divorce, they can break the precarious equilibrium of a vulnerable condition and bring about the fall into poverty and/or exclusion. Individuals' difficulties in developing coping strategies to face this situation are to some extent accounted for by their lack of resources. But they may also face problems in transforming their resources into functionings (that is, lack of conversion factors), as well as in maintaining the functionings they consider as valuable, without adjusting their aspirations to their deprived condition (i.e. adaptation of preferences). Social vulnerability may affect all functionings of people: from the more basic ones like having a roof or enough to eat up to the more sophisticated and complex ones like being a good mother, having a job coherent with one's personal skills, being capable of planning the future or having the possibility to fully participate in society. Social vulnerability may turn into poverty and/or exclusion through a circular and cumulative process. That means that the consequences of social vulnerability are often at the same time also generative events (i.e. they are sources of new vulnerabilities). For example the lack of psychophysical well-being (that may lead, e.g. to the abuse of alcohol) can be the consequence of the loss of a job while at the same time making it more difficult to find a new one. Hence, social vulnerability can be understood as a situation in which precarious or critical conditions in many life spheres can (potentially and not deterministically) lead to poverty and/or exclusion. In this process, all dimensions of social vulnerability are strongly connected and each one can be the cause and the effect of the others.

Most recently, Spini et al. (2017) have provided a framework for studying vulnerability in a life course perspective. They suggest that vulnerability should not be seen as a precisely identifiable outcome but rather as a life-course process. In particular, vulnerability is a 'weakening process' which involves the lack of resources in one or more life domains and thus 'exposes individuals or groups to (1) negative consequences related to sources of stress, (2) an inability to cope effectively with stressors, and (3) an inability to recover from stressors or to take advantage of opportunities by a given deadline' (Spini et al., 2017: 8). Vulnerability thus emerges from a dynamic of stress and resources and may be caused 'by a critical event, or be preceded

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph on social vulnerability is largely based on a study conducted by Caritas in the city of Turin, Italy (Caritas, 2009).

by latent vulnerability, that is, a period of fragilisation, which affects the balance of resources and is often associated with growing exposure to risks and stressors' (Ibid.). The notion of vulnerability enables to study in an interdisciplinary way 'the strengths and weaknesses of individuals, how and why they are robust or frail, and how and why they suffer from and overcome difficulties over time' (Ibid.). However, one should be careful not to put excessive emphasis on individual factors when studying disadvantage and - as already noted - to consider the structural factors that strongly shape the opportunities and constraints that individuals face. Thus, like for other concepts such as 'resilience' and 'coping', the reference to 'social vulnerability' should not imply that it is only individuals' resources and agency that should be strengthened for overcoming it. On the contrary, social factors, institutions and collectivities play a crucial role in reducing or amplifying individuals' vulnerability (see also Lessmann's paper in Deliverable 4.1 of the RE-InVEST project).

Following the classification proposed by Paugam (2005), we could say that the condition of social vulnerability is close to the type of poverty he calls 'pauvreté disqualifiante'. This type of poverty is different from the 'pauvreté intégrée', typical of preindustrial societies in which the majority of the population lived in poverty, and from the 'pauvreté marginale', typical of the 'société salariale' where only a stigmatised and excluded minority was poor. The 'pauvreté disqualifiante' is typical of contemporary post-industrial societies and consists in a process of progressive accumulation of economic and social difficulties, so that its nature is multidimensional and dynamic and its perception is summarised in the image of falling. In this context, both individual agency and social institutions are important and interact with each other. In order to study in greater detail such interactions between individual and societal factors we now turn to the analysis of conversion factors.



## 2. Conversion Factors

### 2.1 The relevance of conversion factors

In the first section disadvantage has been presented in its multidimensionality but few words have been said concerning its dynamic nature and especially about the interactions between the different dimensions. This section fills this gap referring to the notion of conversion factors, which is one of the most important concepts in the capability approach. In fact, ‘conversion factors’ provide the central reason why in studying development, justice and quality of life one should focus on capabilities and functionings rather than on material resources or rights. Putting aside the normative motivation of focusing on ends and what intrinsically matters rather than on means, the reason for focusing on capabilities (and/or functionings) lies precisely in the presence of conversion factors (see also Hick 2016), which implies that:

- individuals differ in their ability to convert resources into capabilities and functionings and
- that individual capabilities may be enhanced in other ways than only through the increase of the material resources possessed by a given person (e.g. Sen 1999: 86-87).

From this perspective, it is not sufficient to know the material resources possessed by a person or his or her income, nor the rights that he or she enjoys, in order to be able to assess the freedom and quality of life of this person. For instance, if person A is disabled, he or she may well have control over fewer capabilities than person B who is able-bodied even if they both have the same income. This is why a direct focus on capabilities and functionings is more accurate than a focus on resources or rights. The notion of conversion thus plays a significant role in justifying the use of the capability approach rather than other approaches – especially those focused on resources and rights – for studying and addressing issues of poverty, social exclusion and deprivation.

Despite their importance, conversion factors remain empirically underdocumented (Hick 2016). In this section we analyse the role that conversion factors play in explaining social disadvantage. The importance of studying conversion factors in relation to social disadvantage is confirmed by the fact that in affluent societies people are often functioning poorly without being income poor (e.g. Balestrino 1996), which points to the problems that people face in converting their income into valuable functionings. The relevance of non-monetary aspects of disadvantage in affluent societies is also coherent with the notion of social exclusion and with the multidimensional understanding of disadvantage presented above.

### 2.2 Different kinds of conversion factors and the conversion rate

There are different kinds of conversion factors, some of which are material (such as roads and bridges) while others are immaterial (such as gender roles). They are usually grouped into three groups: individual, social and environmental (Robeyns 2005). Personal conversion factors are ‘internal’ to the person, such as sex, skills and physical condition. Social conversion factors include public policies, social norms, gender roles, or power relations related to class, gender, race, or caste. Environmental conversion factors emerge from the physical or built environment in which a person lives, such as climate but also roads and the means of transportation and communication. For purpose of simplification, it is possible to group together the social and environmental conversion factors into one group of ‘external’ conversion factors. Thus, the three kinds of conversion factors may be divided into two groups: the internal conversion factors (which are inherent to the person and consist in the individual conversion factors) and the external conversion factors

(which are external to the person and include both the social and environmental conversion factors). This distinction reflects the one proposed by Nussbaum (2000) between internal and external capabilities.

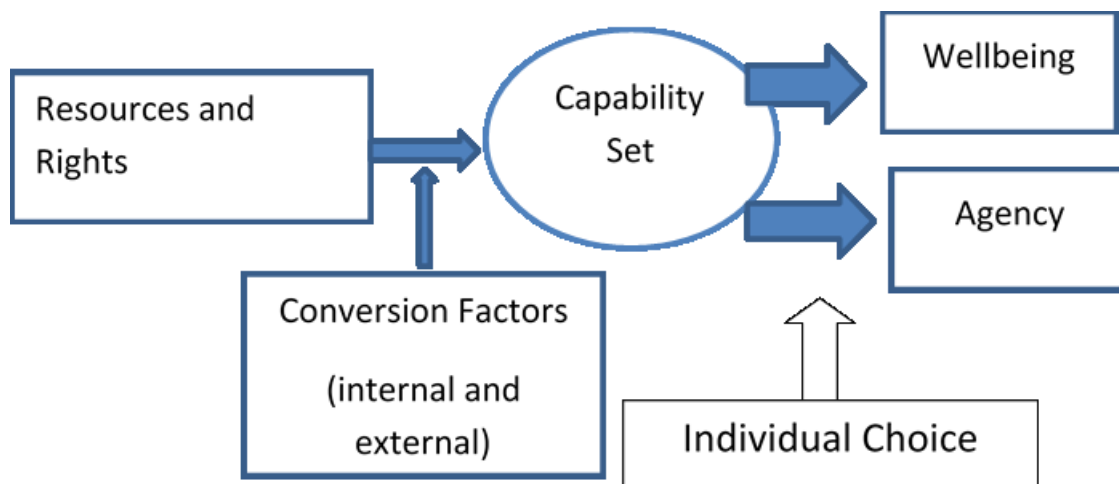
Because of internal and external conversion factors, individuals controlling exactly the same amount of resources will very rarely attain the same achievements in terms of capabilities. Thus, conversion factors are all those factors that influence the process of conversion of resources and rights (inputs) into capabilities and/or valuable functionings (outputs). For instance, in the case of nutritional achievements, conversion factors include: ‘(1) metabolic rates, (2) body size, (3) age, (4) sex (and if a woman, whether pregnant or lactating), (5) activity levels, (6) medical conditions (including the presence or absence of parasites), (7) access to medical services and the ability to use them, (8) nutritional knowledge and education, and (9) climatic conditions’ (Sen 1985: 26). Importantly, some conversion factors are difficult to change. For example, ‘a person cannot choose, or easily alter, his or her metabolic rate’ (Ibid: 27). However, while factors such as disability are difficult to influence, it is possible to intervene on other conversion factors such as discriminatory social norms against disabled people and lacking means of transportation accessible to them, thereby complementing or compensating those factors that cannot be changed in order to promote capabilities.

Hence it is the interaction among the different conversion factors that determines the conversion rate at which inputs (resources and rights) are transformed into outputs (capabilities). In particular, disaggregating the population into subgroups, it is possible to identify those groups that are more ‘inefficient’ (i.e. vulnerable) in converting inputs into outputs, that is, those groups that are characterised by low conversion rates (Chiappero-Martinetti and Salardi 2008). For instance it may be the case that women are ‘less efficient’ than men in transforming the skills they have acquired during their education into achievements in the labour market. Crucially, this lower conversion rate of women does not necessarily depend – and in this case the evidence shows that it does not – on internal conversion factors (in this case being women). Rather, the low conversion rate emerges from the interaction between internal and external conversion factors. Indeed, the difficulties faced by women in converting their education in labour market achievements may depend on employers' discrimination or on the difficulty to combine paid work with caring responsibilities that prevailing gender roles attribute to them. In other words, capabilities always emerge from the interaction between internal and external factors, so that they are never the outcome of individual responsibility alone. Thus, capabilities should not be confused with individual abilities since they are shaped – enhanced or constrained – by external factors.

This also means that even though disadvantaged social groups often present characteristics that they cannot easily change, such as their sex, ethnicity or the region they live in, all the same, since the conversion rate emerges from the interaction between internal and external conversion factors, it is possible to act upon other conversion factors in order to reduce the disadvantage of such groups. At the same time, it is also possible that the modifiable conversion factors are shaped in such a way that they reinforce the disadvantage generated by those factors that one cannot influence. From this perspective, conversion factors may facilitate the conversion process (they are then called ‘enabling conversion factors’) or undermine and hinder it (‘constraining conversion factors’).

Figure 2.1 offers a graphical representation of the theoretical framework of the capability approach, which shows the importance of conversion factors.

Figure 2.1 The capability framework



Source Own elaboration constructed on Robeyns (2005)

### 2.3 Conversion factors: do they really matter? The importance of time

In order to show the relevance of conversion factors some studies have looked at specific groups, such as disabled people. For instance, Kuklys (2005) and Zaidi and Burchardt (2005) calculated the additional costs of disability for attaining a certain level of wellbeing. Other studies have focused on the population in general. Thus, Lelli (2005) has shown that the differences in the achievement of the functioning 'being well sheltered' are only marginally explained by income differences (with characteristics such as the educational level playing a much more important role than income), whereas Binder and Broekel (2011, 2012) measured the efficiency level of different groups in transforming income into various functionings.

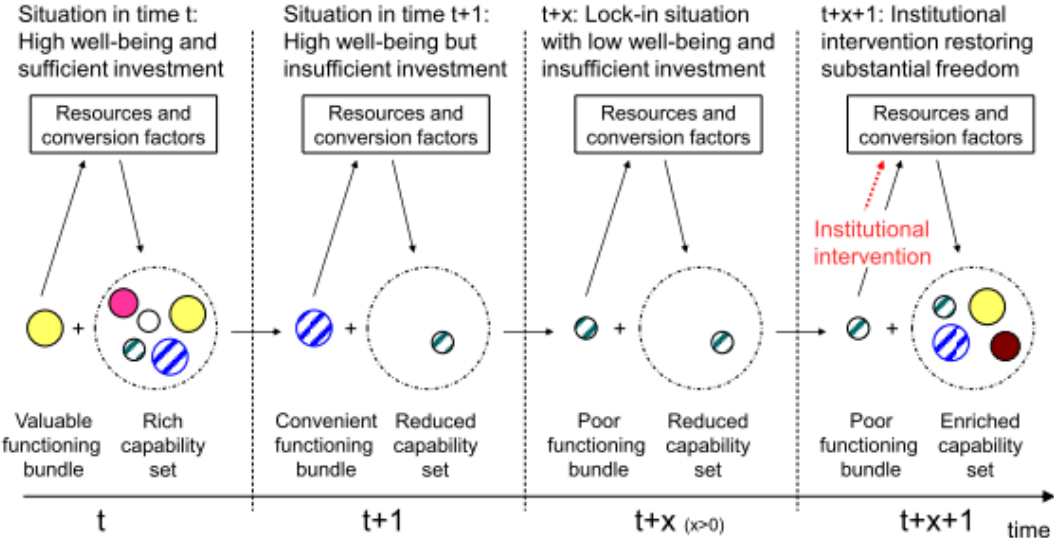
However, Nolan and Whelan (1996) have argued that - beyond the specific case of disability - it seems implausible to attribute to human heterogeneity and in particular to the variation in need the main reason for the mismatch between income poverty and material deprivation. In their analysis, which took into account individuals' long-term situation, they found little empirical evidence for the existence of conversion factors. In other words, the mismatch between income poverty and material deprivation is not chiefly explained by interpersonal variation in the ability to convert income into functionings but it rather reflected longer-term experiences, such as long-term labour market problems and disadvantaged educational background. In particular, persistent low income predicts much better material deprivation than current low income (Whelan et al., 2003). Hick (2016) also finds support for this thesis. When the relationship between income and deprivation is studied using a five-year average income measure instead of current income, the mismatch is much lower. In particular, when the impact of conversion factors is estimated using the five-year average income measure, it is up to 45% lower than when it is estimated based on current income. From this perspective, it seems that the importance of conversion factors is overestimated when the analysis is based on limited information. Once the individuals' long-term situation is considered, what was previously attributed to conversion factors is now simply the outcome of a better picture of the income situation emerging from better information.

However, the conclusion to draw from these studies may be another one than that of considering conversion factors to be simply the consequence of the lack of long-term information. Rather, these studies may shed new light on the origins and nature of conversion factors. Indeed, these results point to the fact that conversion factors do not necessarily - and in fact often they do not - emerge from the interpersonal variation in needs but rather from the accumulation of (dis-)advantages over time. At the same time these studies do challenge the theoretical framework of the capability approach as represented in Figure 2.1 and require including the factor 'time' to make the analytical framework of the capability approach more

dynamic. When this is done, Figure 2.1 becomes much more complex with feedback loops involving arrows that go back from functionings and influence resources and conversion factors. Departing from this perspective, scholars started to study ‘evolving capabilities’ (e.g. Biggeri et al., 2011; Biggeri & Karkara, 2014; Liebel, 2014; Bonvin & Stoecklin, 2016) and ‘dynamic capabilities’ (Bartelheimer et al., 2011). In such a framework, one possibility is to maintain the static analytical grid and ‘reiterate’ it for each life stage. In this way it would be possible to separate analytically different life stages and study, e.g., how functionings achieved in childhood become resources and conversion factors that can be mobilised in later life stages such as adolescence, whereas the functionings achieved in the adolescence become in turn the resources and conversion factors for the adulthood (Peruzzi, 2012). Taking time into account in such a way allows overcoming the problems of circularity that affect the capability approach, whereby its components are interdependent and mutually endogenous (Ibid.). As Peruzzi (2012) shows, including the time dimension also contributes to understanding the processes of social exclusion and the transmission of the latter across generations. Furthermore, her analysis confirms that not only different kinds of disadvantage tend to cluster at one specific point in time but that they also cumulate through individuals’ life.

As Bartelheimer et al. 2011 argue, another important point is that wellbeing is constructed not only in the present but also through future-oriented investments (Figure 2.2). This is because human beings are not only ‘beings’ but also ‘becomings’ (see Bonvin & Stoecklin 2016 on the case of children), so that future wellbeing requires to be constructed in the present. Such ‘investments’ for the development of future capabilities are not necessarily individual investments; they may well involve public actors (in Figure 2.2, these are labelled as ‘institutional intervention’) and should constitute the normative core of ‘social investment’ when considered from a capability approach perspective.

**Figure 2.2 Dynamic capabilities and institutional intervention**



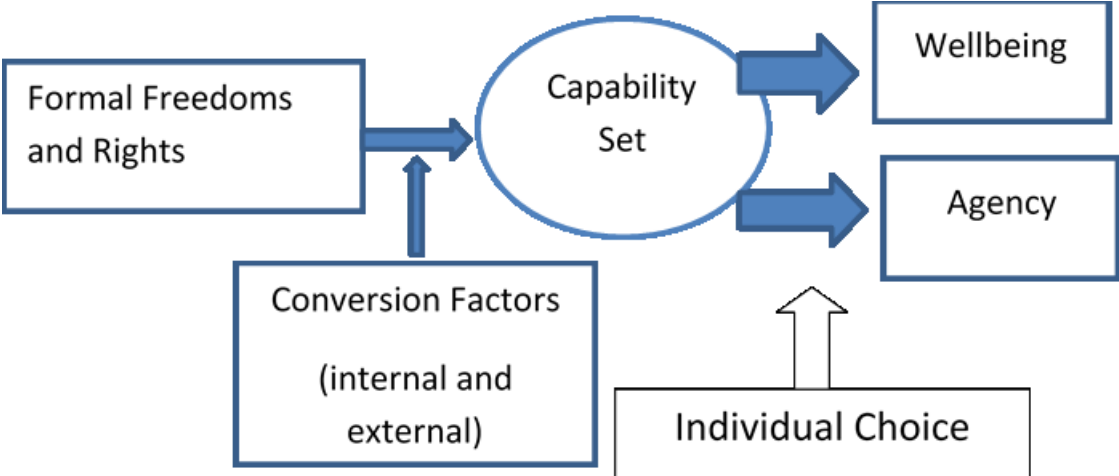
Source Bartelheimer et al. (2011)

Nevertheless, even in the static model, the nature of conversion factors is not always clear. For instance, public policies are generally considered social conversion factors (e.g. Robeyns 2005). However, public policies may also increase the resources available to individuals through social benefits. Chiappero-Martinetti and Salardi (2012) estimate the internal conversion factors of different groups measuring the conversion rate at which these groups are able to transform private and public resources into functionings. In this case, public policies are considered as intervening at the level of resources rather than that of conversion factors.

Furthermore, as already seen, individual conversion factors do not necessarily involve differences in needs (as in the case of disability) but often emerge from long-term processes of accumulation of (dis-)advantages. These disadvantages often imply a lack of resources so that the distinction between resources and conversion factors becomes weaker. Finally, some resources/conversion factors such as health can also be considered as functionings because they are valuable in themselves. Thus, the distinctions between conversion factors, resources and functionings - while remaining important at the analytical level - may be empirically weak. For instance, being well educated can be considered a functioning but it surely represents also a resource as well as a factor facilitating the conversion of income into other valuable functionings, such as health or political participation.

In order to overcome these potential confusions, we propose to define conversion factors as those factors intervening in the process of conversion of formal freedoms and rights into real freedoms and rights. From this perspective, formal freedoms and rights are the ‘inputs’; material resources (both private and public) are part of the conversion factors; the capability set involves real freedoms (and real rights) and individuals can then choose how to make use of such freedoms and rights, and especially they can choose to use them for their own wellbeing or for achieving outcomes that are valuable in their eyes even if they go against their wellbeing. Figure 2.3 shows this modified framework.

**Figure 2.3 The modified capability framework**



Source Own elaboration

**2.4 Enabling and constraining conversion factors**

As already noted, conversion factors may have a positive or a negative impact on the process of transforming resources into capabilities. While disability may constrain the conversion process, good health facilitates it. The same is true for external conversion factors: public policies do not always play a positive role in the conversion process. In order to distinguish between enabling and constraining conversion factors and in particular between empowering and disabling social institutions there are at least three possibilities. First, it is possible to use two criteria based on Sen’s distinction between the process and the opportunity aspects of freedom (e.g. Sen, 2009). While process freedom refers to the respect of individual freedom during the process that leads to a certain decision, the opportunity aspect of freedom looks at the consequences of that decision for the quality of life of the people targeted by it. Accordingly, the two criteria used to determine whether a given social institution is empowering or not can be expressed through two questions: (a) Does this specific social institution rely upon a participatory process that guarantees equal participation of the people involved or targeted by that institution? (b) Does this institution improve the quality of life of the

people involved? In both cases, the underlying concern is to understand to what extent a given social institution helps convert resources and formal rights into capabilities and real rights, while at the same time controlling if it perpetuates or challenges existing inequalities.<sup>2</sup>

In a similar vein, also building on Sen's distinction between opportunity and process freedom, Burchardt and Vizard (2011) focus on three aspects of inequality and deprivation in their operationalisation of the capability and human rights approaches: functionings (beings and doings such as health status), treatment (immunity from arbitrary interference, discrimination, lack of dignity and respect) and autonomy (empowerment, choice and control in relation to critical decisions that affect a person's life). From this perspective, an enabling institution should a) improve people's situation in terms of functionings and life chances (at the level of outcomes) and b) guarantee a fair treatment and respect of autonomy (at the level of process).

A second important element to take into account when assessing the extent to which social institutions constitute enabling conversion factors is the issue of preferences formation. In particular, we consider the process of preference formation as intrinsically linked with the issue of social norms, which count as an external conversion factor and thus impact on the stage of the individual choice. Indeed, for a choice to be genuine, the problem of adaptive preferences must be addressed in advance, before the capability set is identified (Figure 2.3). In other words, if capabilities are defined as real freedoms, then they should not be contaminated by adaptive preferences: a real choice should not be motivated by adaptive preferences. In particular, the phenomenon of adaptive preferences can be considered as constraining individual capabilities, as in the case of discriminatory gender norms (see e.g. Nambiar, 2013 on the constraining role of institutions when routines and habits limit individual freedom).

In the context of social policy, a dominant individualistic culture and a discourse promoting self-help and individual responsibility or even generating a stigma for those on welfare may cause situations of non-take-up of social rights. Thus, even if individuals are entitled to certain rights they prefer not to claim them because they want to be an 'independent', a 'self-sufficient' or a 'responsible' citizen. In this case, the individualistic norm of taking care of oneself generates adaptive preferences since individuals do not feel entitled to their rights. By contrast, rights should bring no stigma precisely because they are not a matter of charity, generosity or benevolence, but a matter of rights. In this context, the contrary of adaptive preferences would be a diffuse 'sense of entitlement' (Hobson et al. 2011), whereby individuals are aware that they are entitled to certain rights and are not ashamed to make use of them. Hobson et al. (2011) introduce the notion of 'sense of entitlement' into the capability framework, to stress that 'the cognitive level of agency precedes the ability to exercise rights and strengthens the self-efficacy to make claims' (p. 173). Crucially, 'The cognitive dimension in capabilities is important for understanding not only what one does or would like to do, but also the ability to imagine alternatives' (Ibid: 174). From this perspective, the 'sense of entitlement' is inextricably linked to the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2004) and institutions fostering these are to be considered as enabling conversion factors.

A third way for distinguishing enabling from constraining public action is offered by Bifulco and Mozzana (2011), who propose an analytical framework based on three elements. First, referring to Nussbaum (2000) they use the notion of 'combined capabilities' to indicate a situation in which external factors successfully complement internal ones in the promotion of individual capabilities. Second, a capacitating intervention nourishes the 'capacity to aspire' and is thus oriented towards the future. Third, referring to the notion of 'situated State' introduced by Storper and Salais (1997) and further elaborated by Farvaque and Raveaud (2004), the State is interpreted as capacitating if it does not only rely on the market (in this case it would be an 'incentivizing' or 're-commodifying' State), but also on public deliberation in order to define the common good.

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2 A very similar approach is used by Ben-Ishai (2012). She offers two criteria for identifying autonomy-enhancing public interventions. First, she argues that public action is autonomy-enhancing when it challenges inequality and domination and it is paternalistic when it perpetuates them. Second, she stresses the importance of the process: if a certain public intervention opens up spaces for democracy and participatory politics then it is autonomy-enhancing.

Putting together (1) the elements introduced on the basis of the distinction between the opportunity and process aspects of freedom; (2) the issue of adaptive preferences; and (3) the dimensions included in the framework proposed by Bifulco and Mozzana (2011), it is possible to synthesise the differences between enabling and constraining conversion factors as follows. Enabling institutions (external conversion factors):

- successfully combine with internal conversion factors, complementing them or compensating possible individual deficits in order to promote capabilities and functionings (with a special focus on challenging rather than perpetuating patterns of inequality);
- nourish people's 'capacity to aspire' and 'sense of entitlement', thereby contrasting the phenomenon of adaptive preferences and creating a culture of rights;
- rely on public discussion rather than (solely) on the market or on 'experts' for defining the common good and the goals pursued by enabling institutions themselves;
- treat individuals with respect and recognition;
- promote autonomy both during the treatment and as an outcome of the treatment.

In order to illustrate how enabling/constraining conversion factors function, we briefly analyse in the next section the example of political poverty or exclusion.

### 3. The example of political poverty

While the majority of studies concerning conversion factors focus on the relationship between income (or other material resources) and deprivation in the space of functionings, the (non-)participation in political decision-making and choices provides an excellent opportunity to identify conversion factors in the political field. At the ‘input’ level, democracy involves political equality, that is, a perfectly equal formal right to participate in the government of public affairs. From this perspective, non-participation can derive from: (a) difficulties in converting a formal right into a real right (capability) or (b) a free choice. Yet, there are some important reasons for doubting that not to participate in political issues is the result of a free choice. On the one hand, a lot of empirical studies have shown that the distribution of non-participation is not even among social groups and is highly concentrated among vulnerable social groups. On the other hand, even when non-participation is less related to disadvantage than to disillusionment or cynicism about the relevance of democratic politics, it can still be interpreted as the result of adaptive preferences and/or lack of alternatives, and thus as a ‘non-choice’ rather than a free choice. Hence, it seems that non-participation is mostly the result of problems in converting a formal right into a real right, rather than of a genuine choice.

In order to study non-participation in democratic politics empirically one could start by looking at participation in political elections. The advantage of focusing on participation in elections is that, in terms of ‘outputs’, it is a functioning that is easy to identify (either an individual participates or he or she does not) and which is based on a formal right (‘input’), which is equally distributed so that inequalities in the outcome or functioning can be attributed to conversion issues; as a matter of fact, if formal equality is guaranteed and substantial inequalities can still be observed, then the process of conversion of formal rights into real ones becomes central. In the case of electoral non-participation the distinction between inputs, outputs and conversion factors is quite straightforward: the only input is the right to vote and the output is the act of voting, whereas all other resources, rules or institutions intervening in-between can be considered conversion factors. The purpose here is not to reduce democracy to participation in elections, a position that Sen himself has criticised (e.g. Sen, 2009). Rather, we use participation in elections as a proxy for political participation in a more general sense. Crucially, it can be assumed that inequalities in participation increase as we move from basic practices such as voting to more complex ones, such as participating in demonstrations or campaigning (Schäfer, 2010). Indeed, it seems that those who vote also participate in politics in less formal ways, whereas those who do not vote are also excluded from other forms of participation. Moreover, non-participation in the electoral processes represents a form of non-take-up of a guaranteed right and thus deserves closer scrutiny: what reasons push people not to make use of this right?

The lack of political participation of vulnerable groups is certainly one of the most neglected dimensions in the discourse on social exclusion as well as in the studies on social disadvantage. Yet, considering the instrumental role of politics, political poverty or exclusion appears to be one important cause of social disadvantage, so that ignoring this dimension can be detrimental both for advancing the knowledge on the processes of social marginalisation and for promoting political responses to them.

#### 3.1 Political poverty and the three roles of democracy

In this section, we argue that political participation is a crucial ‘fertile functioning’. It has indeed an intrinsic value and it is ‘fertile’ insofar that it generates other advantages beyond this intrinsic value. Symmetrically, the lack of political participation should be conceived as a form of ‘corrosive disadvantage’ with negative



consequences for other dimensions of wellbeing beyond the loss derived from non-participation itself. In particular, Sen (1999; 2009) identifies three reasons for valuing democracy (see also Crocker, 2006).

First, democratic participation is intrinsically valuable. In line with the importance attributed to human agency and to the act of choosing in Sen's capability approach (e.g. Sen, 1999) and coherently with his anthropological conception whereby human beings are conceived as actors, participating to a collective decision-making process is a good in itself even if the final decision would be the same as the one taken by a benevolent dictator.

Second, democracy is valued instrumentally because it allows those who participate to better defend their positions and claims. For example, Sen (1981) has shown the role of democracy and a free press in preventing famines. Not only democracy allows to inform politicians of a situation of disadvantage but also it encourages them to respond to this situation because of the incentives created by free elections.

Third, democratic participation is central in the construction of collective knowledge and of social reality. Indeed, in his 'Description as Choice', Sen (1980) underlines that even in the mere description of social reality (political) choices are already involved in the process of selecting the relevant information. Furthermore, there is not one single objective truth about social reality but a plurality of truths, which depend on individual viewpoints. Indeed, a plurality of 'positional objectivities' exists: each social actor has a specific conception of social reality deriving from his or her position in society, preferences and past experiences (Sen 1993). From this perspective, democratic participation is of fundamental importance in order to gain a pluralistic and as complete as possible account of social reality, reflecting its complexities and inherent contradictions. Hence, the production of knowledge itself and the definition of those collective problems that are to be considered socially relevant should be democratised. This implies involving the people who get knowledge from their experiences and daily lives in a process of 'deliberative enquiry' (Salais, 2009). In other words, the production of knowledge is not a prerogative of experts and scientists but of everybody. It seems necessary to re-politicise the production of knowledge – in contrast to tendencies to reduce the process of policy formulation to a technical matter based on scientific 'evidence' (Bonvin and Rosenstein, 2009; see also de Leonadis, 2009 and Bonvin et al., 2017 on the relationship between knowledge, democracy and social justice in the capability approach).

Overall, Sen argues that democracy 'has to be judged not just by the institutions that formally exist but by the extent to which different voices from diverse sections of the people can actually be heard' (Sen 2009: xiii). In this context, 'political poverty', defined as 'the inability of groups of citizens to participate effectively in the democratic process' (Bohman, 1997: 333), involves a multidimensional disadvantage, according to the three functions or values of democracy: politically poor people are deprived of participation as a functioning valuable in itself (intrinsic role) as well as of the possibility to make their voice count both in terms of the promotion of their interests (instrumental role) and of their values and worldviews (constructive role).

Importantly, political poverty is a capability deprivation. Thus, it does not emerge from individuals' failures or incapacities. Rather, as it is the case for any lack of capabilities, political poverty emerges from the interaction between individual and collective conversion factors. For instance, the impact of individual education on the probability to participate in political elections depends on the overall level of inequality in society: in unequal societies the impact of individual education on political participation is higher than in more equal societies (Segatti and Scervini 2012). Furthermore, the lower participation of vulnerable groups seems to be caused by the decline in the capacity of collective actors and especially of political parties to represent them. Thus, in the past, political parties attenuated the impact of individual education on the probability to participate in politics whereas today they no longer manage to play this intermediating role (Ibid.). In short, political poverty is the outcome of the interaction between individual factors (e.g. lack of education) and external factors, such as the level of inequality in society and the capacity of collective actors like political parties to represent vulnerable groups, reducing the impact of individual characteristics on the likelihood to participate.

From this perspective, the notion of political poverty points to the political responsibility to find solutions. But how can political poverty emerge since in a democracy political equality is formally guaranteed? As Marx already noted, this is one of the fundamental contradictions of liberalism: while it formally promises

equality of rights, in real terms substantial inequalities persist in the use of such rights. Hence, the issue is that of converting formal rights into real rights. The next paragraphs study the factors that intervene in the process of conversion of formal freedoms (rights) into real freedoms (capabilities) in the case of political participation.

### 3.2 The conversion factors of democracy

While formal political rights are equally distributed among the population, many people do not participate in the political decision-making process. This is not necessarily problematic if it results from a free choice; however, this seems not to be the case. As we have shown above, non-participation rather results from the difficulty in converting a formal right into a real one. Thus, the notion of ‘conversion’ can help explaining why even in the presence of formal equality some individuals manage to participate whereas others remain excluded.

Internal or individual conversion factors that are relevant in this context include: the level of education and income, health conditions and community involvement. Many empirical studies have shown a clear relationship between socioeconomic status (and especially the educational level) and the participation to political elections. Thus, improving individuals’ educational resources is an important way for enhancing real political equality. It is important to emphasise here that ‘investing’ in democratic education is quite different from the discourses on ‘social investment’ where the focus is rather on investing in ‘human capital’ in order to make people fit for the labour market (see our paper for Deliverable 4.2 for an elaboration of this argument). Furthermore, if one goes beyond participation in elections to embrace a deliberative approach to democracy, then investing in democratic education is not enough. Indeed, taking part to deliberative processes is an activity that is costly in terms of time and energy and that does not generate any income: if participation should be open to all, one of the central conditions is the availability of material resources (e.g. Bonvin, 2013). From this perspective, reducing economic poverty is important for combating political poverty as well.

External conversion factors include (a) institutions; (b) social norms and (c) societal conditions.

- a) Collective organisations such as political parties, trade unions, associations, NGOs etc. are important insofar that they allow collective action to take place. Especially vulnerable individuals can substantially improve their ‘capability for voice’ if they can rely on collectives. Indeed, vulnerable groups have suffered most in terms of political participation of the individualisation process (Armingeon and Schädel, 2015). In this context, the importance of collective action cannot be underestimated from a capability approach perspective (Bonvin, 2013, see also Lessmann's contribution to Deliverable 4.1 of RE-InVEST). Then, political rules play a crucial role in converting formal rights to participation into real ones. For instance, abstention is higher in those countries where voting takes place on a working day than in those countries where it takes place during the weekend. Even more important is whether or not voting is compulsory. Finally, if one embraces the deliberative democracy approach, institutional conversion factors may compensate for inequalities in educational level and argumentative capacities, for instance through the establishment of alternative public arenas for debating (Bonvin, 2013; Bonvin et al., 2017).
- b) At the level of social norms, factors that facilitate political participation are the routine and the habitude of participating. A culture of participation involves once again the ‘sense of entitlement’ (Hobson et al., 2011) and the ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2004). In other words, participation is encouraged where there is a diffuse sense that it is worth participating, that participation can make a difference and that individuals are entitled to take part in collective decisions. In this context, education should enhance people’s awareness of their right to participate. However, social norms may also be constraining if they support discrimination against the political participation of certain social groups, such as women and migrants. Furthermore, even when a discriminated group is allowed to participate, it may face subtler

forms of discrimination: for instance during deliberation women's arguments may be taken less seriously than that of men's – Fraser (1997) reports empirical findings that confirm this.

- c) Among the societal conditions that facilitate political participation are low economic inequalities and high levels of trust and 'social capital'. One of the reasons why high levels of economic inequality damage political equality is that economic power can be easily transformed into political power. This process may lead to a situation of 'post-democracy' (Crouch, 2004) where the political elite is committed to protect financial and economic interests rather than those of the population (Solt, 2008, 2010; Schäfer 2010). In this context, poor people may well decide that it is not worth to participate since politicians fail even to listen to them or to discuss the subjects that are relevant for them. Thus, democracy - being based on political equality - needs that economic inequalities are kept low (Fraser, 1997; Anderson, 1999). This is also because members of a political community should enjoy equal respect and this objective is difficult to realise in the presence of great inequalities. Concerning 'social capital', values such as trust, solidarity and social cohesion facilitate the formation of collective identities that are indispensable for democratic life. Social capital thus potentially opposes the individualistic tendencies that undermine political equality (Armingeon & Schädel, 2015).

In short, it can be argued that three kinds of external conversion factors are relevant in the transformation of formal political rights into capabilities for political agency:

1. social conversion factors aim at establishing the socioeconomic preconditions of political equality, e.g. via redistribution and the provision of social services (i.e. social policies);
2. political conversion factors facilitate collective action, via political parties, unions, NGOs, etc.;
3. cultural conversion factors establish the sociocultural preconditions of political equality, such as mutual respect, anti-discriminatory social norms, diffused 'sense of entitlement' and 'capacity to aspire' or a participatory culture.

### 3.3 The importance of social policies and the circularity issue

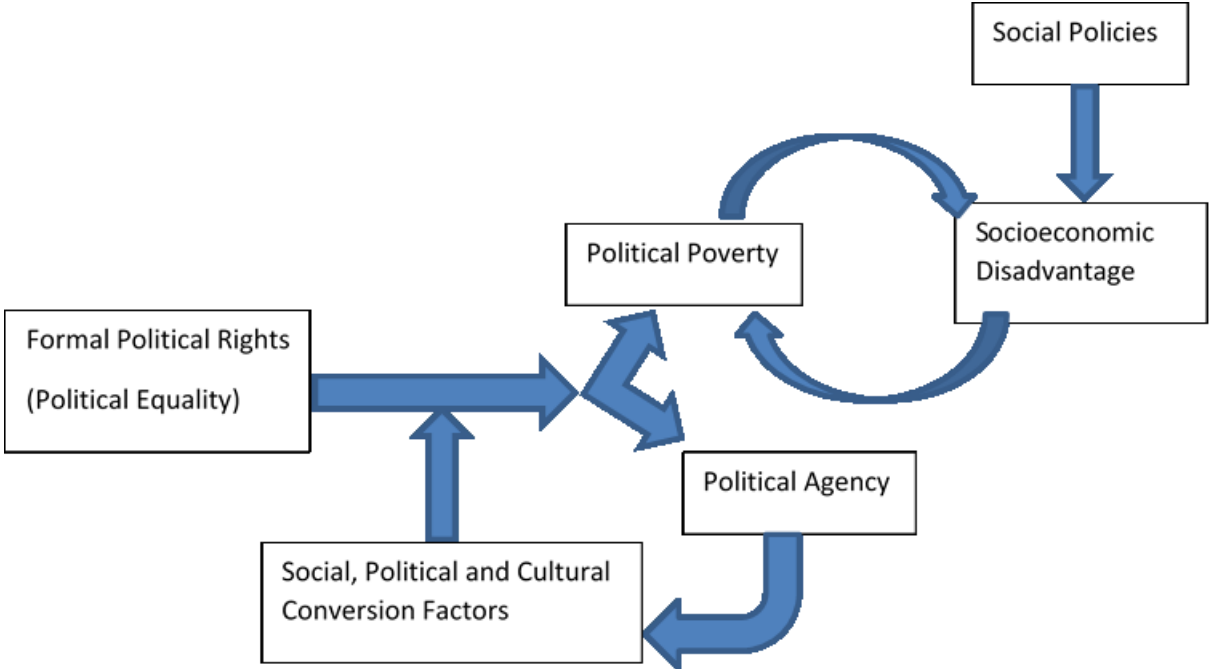
Stressing the role that social policies play in converting formal political rights into capabilities for political agency equals to interpret social rights as an inherent component of democratic citizenship. As Valastro (2010) notes, there is a link between a subordinate position of social rights vis-à-vis civil and political rights and the dominance of representative and formal democracy over deliberative and substantive democracy. Welfare states generate political inclusion through redistribution and reduction of income inequalities and through the creation of a political arena for the distribution of life chances, thus encouraging political participation also among lower socioeconomic groups (Alber & Kohler, 2010: 65). Especially generous and universal welfare states have a great potential in fostering political equality also because benefiting of such systems does not generally involve the stigma that characterises minimal and means-tested interventions. In this way, the welfare state promotes equal respect among citizens while reinforcing social cohesion, trust and solidarity. From this perspective, social rights give substance to civil and political rights and thus to political equality, which without them would remain an unrealised promise. Thus, whenever social rights are not met, democracy suffers and social inequalities rapidly translate into political inequalities (Solt, 2008; 2010).

Moreover, social policies can improve the social preconditions of deliberative democracy in at least two further aspects. First, since participation is costly in terms of time and money and vulnerable groups are particularly disadvantaged in these respects, social policies could (a) remunerate participation and (b) develop policies allowing to take time to participate in politics without suffering economic consequences (a kind of 'political leaves'). Second, citizens' cognitive capacities could be enhanced through investment in education, thereby reducing the cognitive barriers to participation. Civic and political education should not only educate to the fundamental values of political deliberation (e.g. respect of the other) and teach strategic competences – such as communicating and defending effectively one's arguments; it should also transmit the sense that it is worth participating, thereby creating a cultural climate that encourages participation

among unprivileged groups. Thus, social policies can play a crucial role in breaking the vicious circle linking political and economic poverty.

Indeed, as shown in Figure 3.1, social policies do not only intervene in the conversion process but also directly on other forms of social disadvantage, which are causally linked with political poverty. It is important here to stress the circular and self-reinforcing process that exists between different dimensions of disadvantage. Thus, in the context of political participation, the feedback loop implies that through political participation and agency individuals can modify the factors influencing the overall conversion of formal rights into capabilities. Symmetrically, political exclusion and/or marginalisation constitute a ‘corrosive disadvantage’ with negative consequences for other dimensions of social disadvantage. Hence, political poverty and other forms of poverty reinforce each other. Sen repeatedly stresses the importance of democracy in preventing social disadvantage. From this perspective, political exclusion is one of the most important, though largely overlooked, dimensions of social disadvantage. The relevance of this dimension cannot be underestimated. For some defenders of the capability perspective, it seems even that ‘democratic citizenship’ takes priority over social inclusion (Joyal, 2009).

**Figure 3.1 The conversion factors of democracy**



Source Own elaboration

## 4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to offer a contribution to the understanding of social disadvantage from a capability approach perspective. We have presented disadvantage as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon. Special emphasis has been put on the role of conversion factors and the possibility for public policies to act both upon internal conversion factors and external conversion factors in order to break the deepening of social disadvantage. In particular, we have provided a framework for distinguishing enabling from constraining conversion factors. Finally, we have focused on ‘political poverty’ as an example of ‘corrosive disadvantage’, that is, a dimension of disadvantage that has negative consequences for other dimensions. We have argued that the causes of political poverty have to be searched in problems of conversion of formal rights into real ones. In particular, political rights and political equality remain purely formal in the absence of ‘social conversion factors’ (i.e. social policies), ‘political conversion factors’ (e.g. political parties and other associations allowing collective action) and ‘cultural conversion factors’ (e.g. anti-discriminatory social norms, ‘sense of entitlement’ and ‘capacity to aspire’), which allow transforming formal political rights into real rights for participation. The reason for focusing on political poverty is that it is a dimension generally neglected in studies on poverty and social exclusion – and especially at the level of public policies addressing such exclusion. Yet, we have argued that the consequences of political poverty are far reaching since non-participation translates into inadequate policies, which further generate important disadvantages in socio-economic dimensions for the groups that do not participate (i.e. public policies do not address the issues of poverty and exclusion). In this context, stressing the role of both internal and external conversion factors is important because it implies that the real opportunity to participate (like all capabilities) emerges from the interplay between individual and collective factors thereby involving not only individual but also political responsibilities.

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